

# Revisiting Strategic Learning in International Joint Ventures: A Knowledge Creation Perspective

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*Strategic learning is one of the best ways for international joint ventures to be more competitive. It is a long process involving vicarious learning through know-how acquisition on one hand, and creative learning through know-how transformation and joint experimentations on the other hand. Strategic learning favors the development of new competencies that are difficult to imitate by competitors. However, it is still an organizational phenomenon that is not well known, especially when it takes place in international joint ventures. The purpose of this research is to shed light on this particular type of learning. We propose a knowledge creation oriented model which explains how learning can help to develop strategic competencies in international joint ventures. This theoretical model paves the path for further research on strategic learning within joint ventures.*

## Introduction

Learning has always been considered by the scientific literature as one of the main motivations of joint venture creation (Lane, Salk and Lyles, 2001). Joint ventures permit acquisition of new know-how and consequently present a good setting for the development of strategic competencies. Nevertheless, joint ventures are not always a perfect solution for know-how acquisition. On one hand, joint ventures have effectively been an excellent setting for successful learning; however, on the other hand, the expected learning may not take place and the collaboration between the joint venture partners may result in several conflicts related to power, cultural differences or personal interests (Beamish, 1988). This point of view is consistent with observation of other researchers like Lewis (1990) and Makino, Chan, Isobe and Beamish (2007), who noticed that the failure or termination rate of joint ventures is by far higher than the success rate. Learning within International Joint Ventures (IJVs) is still a difficult adventure because of cultural, institutional and geographical distances. The existing literature remains limited although there are some significant contributions such as (Hitt, Li and Worthington, 2005; Ingham, 1994; Dodgson, 1993b). Consequently, the purpose of this research is to provide a better understanding of learning within IJVs. We propose a knowledge creation based model that can help for a better understanding of strategic learning between IJV partners. In order to reach our goal, we will present a critical analysis of the existing literature, focusing on learning. Further, we will focus on the mechanisms of learning within IJVs and propose a theoretical model that explains how the mechanisms of learning can help for the development of strategic competencies.

## Organizational learning: state of art

In this section, we will firstly propose a definition of organizational learning in the light of the existing literature. This will be followed by an analysis of the mechanisms through which individual learning can lead to organizational learning.

### Towards a better definition of learning in organizations

Learning is one of the organizational phenomena which has drawn the attention of many researchers and this explains why there are many studies focusing on learning in the existing literature. Yet, learning is still a phenomenon that is not well known, given its complexity (Miller, 1996; Dodgson, 1993a). In fact, learning is a dynamic process that can take various forms depending on the context of its realization. Hence, it is not surprising to notice that there are various definitions in the literature, each focusing on some specific aspects that are considered important by their respective authors.

Authors have classified their research works on learning in different steams. For example, Ulrich and Jick (1993), proposed a classification based on a chronological view. They proposed the Carnegie Mellon stream for the years 1950's with Simon's work as the leading component, the Harvard University stream for the years 1980's with Argyris Schon's work as the bridgehead, and finally the MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) stream for the years 1990s with Senge's work as the leading contribution. Dodgson (1993b) proposed another perspective. He made a difference between the conception of learning that is based on the learning results, and the conception of learning that perceives it as a process. Another perspective of learning presented in this research is the evolutionary perspective that is dominated by the work of Doz (1996). The main idea of Doz (1996) which is based on interorganizational alliance is that learning is a cyclic process that evolves along the alliance and in which success or failure depends on the adjustments made at the end of each cycle. Accordingly, learning will allow a reassessment of the collaboration and will lead to an adjustment of the initial conditions, and then the cycle will restart with an improved learning.

The above discussed studies have a positive point in common. They all focus on important aspects of learning. However, their weakness is that they are limited to their different academic fields. The existence of such different conceptions of learning is an irrefutable evidence of the ambiguity of the concept of learning, and it proves how difficult it is to provide a definition of learning that would be precise and satisfying for everybody (Fiol and Lyles, 1985; Dodgson, 1993a; Dodgson, 1993b).

The definition that is proposed in this research came from the works of Fiol and Lyles (1985), Dodgson (1993) Ingham (1994) and Miller (1996). It considers learning as a process to acquire or create knowledge through interactions between individuals in order to develop new abilities to face the changes in the environment and to improve the efficiency of the organization.

### Learning mechanisms in joint ventures

The literature on learning in IJV is relatively recent compared to the literature on

organizational learning. The authors provided various conceptions of learning, each conception focusing on a specific dimension. Some of the dimensions pointed out by these conceptions are: interaction between partners (Hamel, 1991; Ingham, 1994; Fang and Zou, 2009), internalization of knowledge (Hamel, 1991), knowledge creation (Dodgson, 1993b), experiences sharing (Inkpen, 1996), knowledge transfer and knowledge transformation (Lyles, 1988), innovation in emerging countries (Zhou and Li, 2008). All these dimensions are important and help for a better understanding of the phenomenon of learning. However, each dimension reflects only a part of the phenomenon of learning and doesn't allow a complete understanding of it. This is why we suggest in this article an integration of these dimensions through two important learning modes, namely knowledge acquisition and joint creation of knowledge.

### **The acquisition of knowledge**

The acquisition of new knowledge in IJVs has been recently addressed by several researchers. In particular, (Park, 2011) has insisted on the level of acquisition of knowledge as a critical step in the learning process. It takes place through a process of experience sharing (Huber, 1991). This process is influenced by the history of the IJV and in particular by its previous learning experiences. The acquisition of new knowledge within IJV does not happen automatically even if the IJV is known as a favorable context to knowledge transfer and diffusion. In fact, the acquisition of knowledge requires an appropriate absorption capacity from the joint venture. Such absorption capacity allows the transfer of knowledge from the parent companies to the joint venture (Lyles and Salk, 1996). Minbaeva et al. (2003) argue that even if joint venture partners have employees with high ability to learn, its ability to have substantial knowledge acquisition will be low if employees' intent to learn is low. Other factors such as the nationality of the parent companies (Child and Markoczy, 1993), their active commitment in the IJV, the mechanisms of control of the joint venture, the organizational structure of the IJV and a clear definition of its objectives (Lyles and Salk, 1996) are some of the factors that may affect the acquisition of knowledge. For instance, an IJV with one dominant partner is not a favorable context for knowledge acquisition, particularly when the dominant partner is the local parent company (Lyles and Salk, 1996) that in many cases is looking for an opportunity to acquire new knowledge from the foreign parent company. Conversely the shared management of the IJV is a favorable context for knowledge acquisition because decisions are jointly made by partners and are the result of intense negotiations. However, in the shared management, the risk of cultural conflicts is higher than in a dominant partner joint venture and may affect the process of knowledge acquisition (Lyles and Salk, 1996). The learning process may be sometimes time consuming. There are different types of knowledge acquisition.

### **The joint creation of knowledge**

The joint creation of new knowledge represents the second critical mode of learning within joint ventures. Such mode of learning is of great importance for joint ventures because the new knowledge developed represents a fundamental asset that influences their performance and their competitive advantages (Inkpen, 1996). Unfortunately,

the phenomenon of organizational knowledge creation remains relatively unknown despite all the interest that researchers have shown. However, it is known that social interactions between members of the organization play a critical role in the creation of new knowledge (Nonaka, 1994; Inkpen, 1996). Particularly in joint ventures where these interactions take place between individuals coming from different parent companies, they represent an important learning mechanism (Miller, 1996). Interactions between learning partners in the IJV allow experience sharing that can result in development of new knowledge. In other words, the knowledge creation is the result of experiences sharing within a community of social interactions. These social interactions take place during joint experimentations in joint ventures (Nonaka, 1994). In many cases, these joint experimentations are opportunistic and take place when parent companies technicians assigned to the joint ventures are trying different possible solutions to solve the problems they are facing in the joint venture. By doing so, they disseminate knowledge at different levels of the joint venture that are internalized and transformed, a process that results in the creation of new knowledge. In other words, the process of joint experimentations in joint ventures is a process of trial-errors through which some adaptations and transformations take place and result in the development of new knowledge.

The length of the process depends on the number of trial-errors necessary to find an effective knowledge. In joint ventures, joint experimentations can take two forms. First, the one that the present research identifies as empirico-inductive, in which the creation of knowledge is based on the exchange of experiences that take place during social interactions between individuals from parent companies (Nonaka & Konno, 1998; Nonaka, 2005). This knowledge creation form prioritizes action and efficiency over deep reflection and logical thinking that may result in universally applicable concepts (Nonaka, 1994). This form of creation increases the quality of tacit knowledge. The second form of joint experimentation is the one identified as rational-deductive in which the creation of knowledge is based on a rational logic and results in the creation of new explicit knowledge. This form of creation of knowledge is widely spread in the western countries and is possible through a combination of existing knowledge (Nonaka, 1994). The empirico-inductive and the rationally deductive experimentations aren't knowledge creation methods that exclude one another. On the contrary, these two methods can operate simultaneously by interacting with one another.

### **From learning to strategic competencies in IJVs: a knowledge creation perspective**

Organizational learning is useless if it doesn't result in any outcome that can have a positive impact on the performance of the organization. Especially in IJVs the partners expect to learn from their counterparts and to develop strategic competencies in order to improve their competitiveness. In this section we propose in the first sub-section a definition for the concept of strategic competency after taking a glance of the literature. In the second and third sub-section we propose a model that explains how organization learning can translate into knowledge creation in order to help IJV to develop strategic competencies that they need to continuously improve their competitive position.

### **The concept of strategic competencies**

The concept of strategic competency stems from the theory of resources that was originally proposed by Penrose (1979) and was later improved and elaborated during years 1980s by Wernerfelt (1984) and Rumelt (1984). There are numerous definitions in the literature about the concept of strategic competency. However they can be grouped in two main conceptions. First, the conception based on the key activities of the main functions of the organization with the works of Snow and Hrebreniak (1980) and Hitt and Ireland (1985), and second, the conception based on resources. Two streams can be identified in the second conception: the stream that stipulates that the strategic competencies are based on tangible resources (Wernerfelt, 1984) and the one that stipulates that those resources are intangible (Arègle, 1995). This last stream inspired the definition of strategic competency provided in this research.

Strategic competency is a complex combination of abilities which are specific to the organization and enables it to provide to its customers better satisfaction than the competitor. Therefore, strategic competency refers to abilities which are difficult for competitors to reproduce because they are rare, difficult to transfer or to substitute (Boguslauskas and Kvedaraviciene, 2009). They are deeply embedded in a complex network of relationships between the resources of the organization and its history. Therefore they are not the privilege of any particular individual member of the organization, but rather a collective property of the organization. This definition points out several elements that are usually considered as key characteristics of the strategic competencies. They are difficult to imitate, relatively difficult to transfer, scarce and difficult to substitute (Arègle, 1995). There are other characteristics of the strategic competencies that are sometimes mentioned by some researchers. They are among others the opacity (difficult imitation and substitution) the strategic utility of value creation and the longevity of the strategic abilities (Hamel, 1991).

Strategic competencies are necessary for organizations that are looking for a better competitive position. However, this necessity should not mislead organizations about the perverted effects of strategic competencies. In fact, the continuous improvement and deepening of the same strategic competencies, their diffusion and their exploitation may increase the risk of inertia in the organization and may obstruct its innovation capacity. Doz (1994) identified that phenomenon as the *trap of over competency*.

### **The acquisition of new know-how as a source of strategic competencies**

The acquisition of new know-how from the parent companies by the IJV is the first step of the knowledge creation process of learning. It takes place through two key components namely the transfer of know-how and the internalization of know how.

### **The transfer of the know-how and strategic competencies development**

The transfer of know-how plays a key role in the development of strategic competencies. In fact, the transfer of know-how or information transfer according to Lei, Hitt and Bettis (1996) allows the learning partner of the IJV to have access to the know-how of

the counterpart through sharing experiences. Thus, the transfer of know-how allows the learning partner to accumulate the know-how that will contribute to develop new skills that will translate into better organizational performance. There are two types of know-how that can be transferred, namely the tacit know-how and the explicit know-how (Evangelista and Hau, 2009). The explicit know-how are not difficult to imitate by the competitors and therefore don't result in sustainable competitive advantages. It's better for the learning partner not to limit the know-how acquired to the explicit ones. In fact, acquiring tacit know-how can help to develop strategic abilities because they are not easy to understand or to imitate by competitors. It is knowledge that can only be demonstrated but not captured (McAdam, Mason and McCrory, 2007). The most important question that crosses the mind while addressing tacit know-how transfer in IJV is how such a transfer really takes place, given tacit knowledge is not codified like explicit knowledge and therefore difficult to transfer. There are two possible ways to transfer tacit know-how. The first is transfer through metaphors and the second is non language transfer. The transfer through metaphors requires from the IJV partner a mastery of the metaphor's language in which the tacit know-how are stored. The metaphor's language creates a causal ambiguity that makes the tacit know-how difficult for imitation by competitors since they don't understand the language. The non language transfer takes place through experiences sharing in which the learning partner observes and replicates the technical gestures of the counterparts (Nonaka, 1994). In summary, the transfer of know-how represents an important learning tool in IJVs.

Proposition No. 1: The transfer of know-how to the IJV by parent companies can contribute on one hand to a competitive production, and on the other hand to a continuous improvement and innovation.

### **Internalization of know-how and development of strategic competencies**

Internalization is a critical step in the learning process and therefore a sine qua non condition for the development of strategic competencies. In fact, in the IJV the simple exposure of a partner to the know-how of the counterpart is not sufficient to master the know-how. It's necessary to internalize them. The internalization refers to an effective appropriation of the know-how of the partner (Hamel, 1991). The internalization translates into a development or a renewal of the organizational memory (Nonaka, 1994; Inkpen, 1996). The development of the organizational memory represents an important asset for the development of new knowledge that can help the organization to improve its competitiveness (Wahab et al, 2009). In fact, the development or renewal of the organizational memory helps the organization to take advantage of new knowledge opportunities through a synergy between its existing knowledge and the knowledge learned from the partners. In the IJV, the intention to internalize the know-how of the partners should be openly expressed in order to avoid conflicts. The degree of the intention to internalize depends of the degree of strategic nature of the know-how targeted by the learning process. Thus, the intention to internalize a specific know-how of the IJV partner would be stronger if that know-how is perceived of high strategic impact.

Proposition No. 2: The internalization of know-how of the parent companies by the IJV can contribute on one hand to a competitive production, and on the other hand to a continuous improvement and innovation.

### **The creation of new knowledge as a source of strategic competencies**

The joint creation of knowledge as a source of strategic competencies represents the second and the most important component of the theoretical framework proposed in this research. In this component we propose how joint creation of knowledge by the IJV partners can contribute to the development of strategic competencies within the IJV through transformation of know-how acquired from the parent companies and joint experimentations.

### **The transformation of know-how and developing strategic competencies**

Transfer and internalization of know-how are not the only learning practices that allow the development of strategic competencies. Transformation of know-how is one of the learning practices that allow the development of strategic competencies since it allows the creation of new specific abilities (Lei, Hitt and Bettis, 1996). In fact, the organization's constant worry of satisfying the needs of the market engages it in an adaptation process of its know-how so that they best fit the customers' demands. This process can allow an enterprise to improve its fabrication aptitudes and procedures, or even, in some cases, allow it to engage itself in an incremental innovation process. Such a process contributes to the development of new specific abilities that can improve the competitive position of the organization. It is the specific nature of these abilities that make them difficult to imitate and gives them a strategic status. According to Lei, Hitt and Bettis (1996), these abilities are dynamic organizational routines – as opposed to static organizational routines – and it is very difficult for competitors to imitate them because they contribute to the creation of an ambiguity (Dosi, 1988, Reed and DeFillippi, 1990). For Nonaka (1994), the transformation of know-how takes the form of one or several of the following modes of knowledge conversion: socialization, combination, internalization and externalization. Therefore, an organization which intends to learn in a joint venture will have to undertake a transformation of knowledge either through socialization, better known as the conversion of tacit knowledge into tacit knowledge, or through combination, better known as the conversion of explicit knowledge into explicit knowledge (Nonaka, 2005). It can also proceed to a transformation of knowledge either through internalization, better known as the conversion of explicit knowledge into tacit knowledge, or through externalization, better known as the conversion of tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge. All these different knowledge conversion modes are not isolated from one another when they take place in an organization. On the contrary, they take place simultaneously, which enriches learning. In fact, promoting various organizational knowledge and more specifically promoting diversity in the sources of organizational learning supports a fast development of new specific abilities (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990).

Proposition No. 3: The transformation of know-how provided to the IJV by parent

companies can contribute on one hand to a competitive production, and on the other hand to a continuous improvement and innovation.

### **Joint experimentations and development of strategic competencies**

Experimentations represent a fundamental learning mode (Fiol and Lyles, 1985; Prahalad and Hamel, 1990; Huber, 1991) for the development of strategic competencies (Lei, Hitt and Bettis, 1996). In joint ventures in particular, experimentations are joint initiatives of the partners who most of the times are the technicians and engineers assigned to the joint ventures by the parent companies. Joint experimentations within joint ventures usually take the form of trials and errors that may result in the development of new specific know-how that can contribute to the continuous improvement of the existing know-how (Zhou and Li, 2008) or innovation within the IJV. In fact, trials and errors help the organization to identify the best way to do things (Lei, Hitt and Bettis, 1996) and to accumulate experiences that can help it to create its own incremental process of know-how development (Hamel, 1991) in order to continuously improve its products and procedures. Such a process which is based on close relationships between employees can result in a causal ambiguity that will make the know-how developed very hard for competitors to imitate (Lei, Hitt and Bettis, 1996). Thus the IJV develops new strategic competencies. The trials and errors may take the form of know-how combination and in this case the success of the joint experimentations will require an integration of various specific skills from the technicians assigned to the IJV by parent companies (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990). For that purpose, the IJV will have to redesign its cognitive framework in order to adjust to the new specific know-how (Lei, Hitt and Bettis, 1996). Joint experimentations through trials and errors and especially through know-how combination contribute to a quick development of innovation capacity (Lei, Hitt and Bettis, 1996) in the IJV.

Proposition No. 4: Joint experimentations within IJV by parent companies can contribute on one hand to competitive production, on the other hand to continuous improvement and innovation.

### **Conclusions**

Strategic learning is one of the means for IJVs to become competitive. In fact, it helps developing new competencies that are difficult for competitors to imitate. However, it remains a phenomenon that is not yet well researched, even though IJVs have proliferated with more often learning as the motive of their creation. The context of learning within IJVs is very particular context since the learning partners (parent companies) are engaged in a conflict/cooperation relationship. In fact, the learning dynamic is characterized by the fact that the willingness to cooperate and learn from the partner coexists with various divergences that are unfortunately sources of conflicts. Some of those conflicts originate from socio-cultural differences or from the differences in the goals pursued by the partners. The purpose of this research is to shed light on this particular type of learning. We propose a knowledge creation oriented theoretical model which explains how learning can help to develop strategic competencies in IJV. This theoretical model

is the major scientific contribution of this research. It paves the path for further research on strategic learning within joint ventures. Some of the future research projects that can be considered are: 1) an exploratory multiple cases study to recalibrate the theoretical model; 2) a formal survey using a large sample in order to test the empirical validity of the model.

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