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**International New Ventures and Early Internationalization – relational
networks and workers specific skills as enhancing agents**

Carla Azevedo Lobo^{a*}, Isabel Maldonado^b, Carlos Pinho^c

*Corresponding author:

^a Universidade Portucalense, REMIT -Research on Economics, Management and Information Technologies; IJP;
cadsa@upt.pt

^b Universidade Portucalense, REMIT -Research on Economics, Management and Information Technologies; GOVCOPP
(PORTUGAL) ianm@upt.pt

^c Universidade de Aveiro, GOVCOPP (PORTUGAL) cpinho@ua.pt

Abstract

Based on the opinions of different entrepreneurs, this study seeks to determine the importance of several factors as inducers of the internationalization process by companies that have internationalized early in their life cycle. Factors such as the relational networks, entrepreneurs' specific skills and international experience of employees are considered. The empirical study was conducted on a sample of 320 Portuguese companies. Data Exploratory Analysis methodologies and Univariate Statistical Inference methodologies were used. Evidence was found for the importance of Relational Networks, for Specific skills of the employees, and for the International Experience of employees, in line with the chosen Theoretical Model.

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Keywords: International new ventures, skills, networks

1. Introduction

Literature on new firm's internationalization process have been dominated by two main theoretical models. The first model is the Internationalization Process Theory, initially developed in the works of Johanson and Wiedersheim - Paul (1975) (Uppsala Model), Johanson and Vahlne (1977) and Johanson and Mattson (1988). The second is the International New Ventures model (INV), first proposed by Oviatt and McDougall (1994) and McDougall et al. (1994).

According to the internationalization process theory, companies enter new markets gradually, slowly compromising their resources in the development of export activities. The process thus progresses in stages, as firms start to develop locally before expanding to foreign markets (Johanson and Vahlne, 1990).

The international new ventures model (INV), on the other hand, states that some young SME's rapidly internationalize, exporting to distant markets practically since birth. Thus, instead of following a gradual internationalization process, these firms enter international trade almost immediately, without waiting until they have acquired experience in the domestic market.

The growing popularity of this new perspective on international new ventures has created a body of literature on this issue of the beginning of internationalization.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework



A growing flow of research into international new ventures has sought to understand the causes, processes and outcomes of the decision to early enter foreign markets. A common thread concerns the role of learning and knowledge (McDougall and Oviatt, 2000; Cumming et al., 2009; Keupp and Gassmann, 2009; Duarte et al., 2012). Organizational knowledge or experience, or their absence, was a central explanation for internationalization in original stage-based models (Eriksson et al., 1997; Johanson and Vahlne, 1977, 1990). To this perspective, De Clercq et al. (2005: 409) call behavioural view of internationalization. However, Oviatt and McDougall (1994) recognized that individual factors, such as international experience, can also influence the pace and the beginning of internationalization. The perspective on international new ventures thus emphasizes the role of individual knowledge to argue that international ventures do not need organizational experiences, routines or capabilities to enter earlier in their first external market. On the contrary, the past experiences of founders and other key managers can replace such shortcomings (Oviatt and McDougall, 1994; Javalgi and Todd, 2011). Also Bai et al. (2017, p. 662) concluded that “international experience, conveyed by returnee entrepreneurs, and returnee firms’ international market knowledge act as driving mechanisms for these firms’ international expansion”. The individual organizational knowledge about outside markets can thus help the company to skip the incremental processes suggested by the Stages perspective (Oviatt and McDougall, 2005; Johanson and Vahlne, 2009; Vahlne et al., 2012; Vahlne and Johanson, 2013; Carlos and Pinho, 2013; Gerschewski et al., 2015; Oura et al., 2015; Rezvani et al., 2017). This approach is called strategic choice view by De Clercq et al. (2005). Empirical evidences from Bruneel et al. (2010) provides important insights on the internationalization of new business, showing that younger firms are able to compensate their limited experiential learning at company level, through learning based on previous experiences of the management team (congenital learning), and through inter-organizational relationships (vicarious learning). The most common type of vicarious learning discussed in conceptual and empirical works involves learning with a network.

According to the network theory, depending on the position of a company in the network, this will define its range of opportunities and constraints and thus develop its strategies. Rezvani et al. (2017) finds that “the greater the power (knowledge, financial resources, etc.) of people and enterprises in the network, the more information is granted them about business opportunities, potential markets, etc., and the more possibilities for them to make use of such information”. Johanson and Vahlne (2009) report that these relationships have a strong impact on market selection as well as on entry mode because they easily identify and exploit new opportunities. According to Rebocho (2010), cooperation networks undoubtedly favour the competitiveness of companies and have become an important tool to support SME’s internationalization. Henriques (2000) states that potentially conflictive relationships and divergent interests are seen as collaborative partnerships around a common goal: internationalization. Santos et al. (2012) and Ibeh and Kasem (2011) argue that networks are even more important for SME’s due to their lack of human, technical and financial resources, in order to be able to internationalize their operations on their own. Integration into a network is likely to strengthen the competitiveness of these companies in the international market. Being a member of a network provides a variety of technical, financial, and perhaps even more important, knowledge about the external market enabling a reduction in the risks of psychological distance.

Fernhaber and Li (2013) make another approach to the importance of knowledge in Network Theory. These authors give us a different perspective on this theory and that fits into the so-called Attention Based View. The established networks contribute effectively to build the knowledge base of a company, which in turn establishes the bases to recognize and value international opportunities (Casillas et al., 2009; Fernhaber and Li, 2013; Bai and Johnson, 2017). Although several international exposure sources may be present in the external environment, according to the so-called "limited rationality" of Attention-based View (Ocasio, 1997, 2011) the different network relations can thus provide entrepreneurs with support in order to direct their attention to the

international opportunities most appropriate to the situation of each company. This perspective is confirmed in Bai and Johnson (2017).

Another perspective is the motivation that an entrepreneur directs towards the internationalization that has also been attributed, as we have seen, to external forces. Proponents of the Population Ecology approach argue that external forces such as competition and also specific personality traits lead the entrepreneur to seek other opportunities in foreign markets (Westhead et al., 1998). According to Ibrahim (2004) to get a better understanding of the entrepreneur's decision to internationalize, we must understand his mind and its entrepreneurial characteristics. In fact, many schools of thought portray the entrepreneur as an individual driven by a number of environmental factors and also by personality traits. Research on entrepreneurship has identified a number of traits associated with entrepreneurs, such as the need for achievement, the propensity to take risks, the locus of control or self-confidence, and tolerance to contexts of uncertainty (Ibrahim and Ellis, 2002). It has also been argued that the choice of an entrepreneurial career is related to external factors such as culture (Dana, 1993).

Evidence from some empirical studies also reveals that the company's own size has an impact on the internationalization decision, namely on the entry mode. Smaller companies, lacking the resources and experience to venture into foreign markets, prefer entry modes with shared solutions (Breda, 2010; Fletcher and Harris, 2012). Therefore, the constraints faced by small companies (Cuervo-Cazzura and Un, 2007) oblige them to seek solutions that minimize risks and the degree of commitment and to use partnerships to internationalize (Acs et al., 1997).

Based on the theoretical review, it was established the theoretical model on which this empirical study will be based. We decided to focus our attention on the following driving factors entrepreneurial internationalization: Relational networks (Johanson and Mattsson, 1988; Leiblein and Reuer, 2004; Breda, 2010; De Clercq et al., 2012; Fernhaber and Li, 2013; Bai and Johnson, 2017; Rezvani et al., 2017) and variables related to Experience/Skills: Specific skills of the collaborators/employees (Westhead et al., 1998; Ibrahim, 2004; Gerschewski et al., 2015; Oura et al., 2015; Rezvani et al., 2017), and International Experience (Eriksson et al., 1997; Johanson and Vahlne, 1977, 1990; Oviatt and McDougall, 1994; De Clercq et al., 2005; Bai et al., 2017), which we will consider as the first group of Endogenous Variables.

We also decided to include some important variables, taken from the previous theoretical review, which could contribute to differentiate the companies into different groups. In order to do this, we include the company age (Oviatt and McDougall, 1994; De Clercq et al., 2012; Fernhaber and Li, 2013; Milanov and Fernhaber, 2013) and the company size (Lorga, 2003; Tulder et al. 2011; Dess et al. 2008; Breda, 2010). This will be the second group of Endogenous Variables.

3. Research Method

Based on the opinions of different Portuguese entrepreneurs, this study seeks to determine the importance attributed to several factors considered as inducers of the internationalization process by companies that are internationalized early in their life cycle. For example, factors such as a relational network, personal characteristics and acquired skills of entrepreneurs and employee's international experience can act as empowering or inducing agents for the company internationalization process.

In order to achieve the propose objectives, we decided to test the following investigation hypotheses, which we extract from our theoretical model:

HA: The degree of importance attributed by the entrepreneurs to the variables presented depends on the degree of International Maturity of the Company (early internationalization (≤ 6 years) vs. later internationalization (> 6 years)).

And more concretely:

HA.1: The degree of importance attributed to Employees International Experience depends on the degree of International Maturity of the Company (early internationalization (≤ 6 years) vs. later internationalization (> 6 years));

HA.2: The degree of importance attributed to Employees Specific Skills depends on the degree of International Maturity of the Company (early internationalization (≤ 6 years) vs. later internationalization (> 6 years));

HA.3: The degree of importance attributed to Relational Networks depends on the degree of International Maturity of the Company (early internationalization (≤ 6 years) vs. later internationalization (> 6 years));

HA.4: Companies with an early internationalization assign greater importance to International Experience of Employees than companies that have a later internationalization;

HA.5: Companies with an early internationalization assign greater importance to Employees Specific Skills of Employees, than companies that have a later internationalization;

HA.6: Companies with an early internationalization assign greater importance to relational networks than companies that have a later internationalization;

HA.7: The degree of importance attributed by the entrepreneurs to the other variables (in particular Company age) depends on the degree of International Maturity of the Company (early internationalization (≤ 6 years) vs. later internationalization (> 6 years)).

HB: Companies that consider Employees International Experience as an important factor also consider Relational Networks (formal/informal) as important for their internationalization.

To reach these objectives, we choose a quantitative approach and use as a research instrument a questionnaire survey entitled: "Factors that contribute to the effectiveness of a company's internationalization". In structural terms, the questionnaire was divided into two parts:

- i) Questions about the general characteristics of the company and also about its insertion in the international market;
- ii) Questions about the factors with the greatest impact on internationalization.

In the second part all variables were chosen based on the review of the literature and already and referenced in the theoretical model. The questionnaire was sent by e-mail to the exporting companies and/or interested in exporting (study population) of the AICEP-Portugal Global Database. The survey was publicized from April 15 to December 31, 2013. We were able to collect a total of 320 valid answers (sample), in a total of 8103 companies (study population), or approximately 4% response rate. Based on the obtained answers, we verified that almost 50% of respondents can be considered as early internationals, since they have internationalized at most with 6 years of age (less than 7 years).

In the survey, an ordinal scale was used for the respondents to assign a classification to the different items according to the 5-point Likert scale (importance scale), consistent with studies by Cordeiro (2009), Honório (2006) and Blomstermo et al. (2004). The classification categories are: "not important", "unimportant", "moderately important", "very important" and "extremely important". The type of ordinal scale used in our questionnaire is classified by Hill and Hill (2008), as a rating scale.

The data collected from April to December 2013 was analysed using a combination of simple statistical techniques with multivariate statistical techniques. Given the nature of the database to be explored and the research objectives, we used Univariate Statistical Inference methodologies (here confirmatory inferential analyses were performed with hypothesis tests appropriate to the variables in study and multiple comparisons of means, according to Marôco (2011)).

4. Inferential analysis - contingency tables - association between variables

4.1. International maturity of the company vs. Employers international experience

In order to assess whether the degree of importance assigned to the Employee International Experience depends on the degree of International Company Maturity (early internationalization (≤ 6 years) vs. later internationalization (> 6 years)), we used the Chi-square independence test (X^2), followed by Fisher test. A probability of type I error (α) of .05 was considered.

Our statistical hypotheses are H0: The importance assigned to the Employees International Experience is independent of the degree of Company International Maturity vs. H1: The emphasis on International Experience of employees is not independent of the degree of International Enterprise Maturity.

In order to strictly implement the Chi-square independence test (X^2) we have to check the three following conditions: i) $N > 20$; ii) all E_{ij} is greater than 1; iii) at least 80% of E_{ij} are greater than 5 (Maroco 2011, p. 104).

The "minimum expected E_{ij} is 0.98" which violates the 2nd condition. For this reason, was then performed the Fisher test. The Fisher's exact test is a nonparametric test that can be used to compare two or more independent samples of small dimension as a qualitative variable. This test can be used instead of the X^2 test when this one should not be applied (Maroco 2011, p. 108).

Table 01. Chi-square independence test – International maturity of the company vs. Employers international experience

Chi-Square Tests						
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)	Point Probability
Pearson Chi-Square	20.345 ^a	4	.000	.000		
Likelihood Ratio	21.511	4	.000	.000		
Fisher's Exact Test	20.133			.000		
Linear-by-Linear Association	7.906 ^b	1	.005	.005	.003	.001
N of Valid Cases	319					

a. 2 cells (20,0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is ,98.

b. The standardized statistic is -2,812.

Elaborated by the authors.

As we want to test the same hypothesis as the ones on X^2 test, and as the probability of significance to the bilateral Fisher test ("Exact Sig. 2-sided") is = 0.000, we reject the H0 hypothesis that the importance attached to the Employees international experience is independent of the degree of International Maturity of the Company, so we conclude that the importance attributed to the Employees International Experience depends on the degree of International Maturity of the Company.

In point 5, when analysing the non-parametric tests, we will test the hypothesis that companies with an early internationalization (group 1) attribute greater importance to the Employees International Experience than companies with later internationalization (group 2).

4.2. International maturity of the company vs. Employees specific competencies

To evaluate if the degree of importance attributed to the employees' specific skills depends on the degree of International maturity of the company we apply the Chi-square independence test (X^2), followed by Fisher test. A probability of type I error (α) of .05 was considered.

Our statistical hypotheses are H0: The importance attached to the Employees Specific Skills is independent of the degree of International Maturity of the Company vs. H1: The importance attached to the specific skills of the employees is not independent of the degree of International Maturity of the Company.

One of the results was that there are "3- cell (30%) with less than 5 E_{ij} " which violates the 3rd condition of applicability of the X^2 test. For this reason, we performed then the Fisher test.

Since the probability of significance to the bilateral Fisher test ("Exact Sig.2-sided") is = .015, we reject H0 hypothesis that the importance attached to the Employees Specific Skills is independent of the degree of

International Maturity of the Company, that is, the importance attributed to the Specific Skills of Employees depends on the degree of International Maturity of the Company.

Table 02. Chi-square independence test – International maturity of the company vs. Employees specific competencies

Chi-Square Tests						
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)	Point Probability
Pearson Chi-Square	11.198 ^a	4	.024	.016		
Likelihood Ratio	11.648	4	.020	.018		
Fisher's Exact Test	11.184			.015		
Linear-by-Linear Association	3.914 ^b	1	.048	.055	.028	.008
N of Valid Cases	320					

a. 3 cells (30.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .49.

b. The standardized statistic is -1.978.

Elaborated by the authors.

Later on, when analysing non-parametric tests, we will test the hypothesis that companies with an early internationalization (group 1) attribute greater importance to the Employees Specific Skills than companies with later internationalization (group 2).

4.3. International maturity of the company vs. Relational network in the host country

To evaluate the degree of importance attributed to the Relational network in the Host Country depends on the degree of International Maturity of the Company we apply the Chi-square independence test (X^2). A probability of type I error (α) of .05 was considered.

Our statistical hypotheses are H0: The importance attributed to the Relational network in the Host Country is independent of the degree of Company International Maturity vs. H1: The importance attributed to the Relational network in the Host Country is not independent of the degree of Company International Maturity.

Table 03. Chi-square independence test – International maturity of the company vs. Relational network in the host country

Chi-Square Tests						
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)	Point Probability
Pearson Chi-Square	3.197 ^a	4	.525	.530		
Likelihood Ratio	3.201	4	.525	.536		
Fisher's Exact Test	3.234			.522		
Linear-by-Linear Association	.020 ^b	1	.889	.915	.466	.042
N of Valid Cases	319					

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 5.34.

b. The standardized statistic is -.140.

Elaborated by the authors.

The applicability conditions of X^2 test are ensured. However, as the probability of significance for the X^2 test bilateral ("Exact Sig. 2-sided") is =.530, we retain hypothesis H0 and concluded that the importance attached to Contacts in the Host Country is independent of the degree of International Maturity of the Company.

5. Non-parametric tests for mean comparison (Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test)

The Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test, or simply Mann-Whitney's test, is a nonparametric test appropriate to compare the distribution of functions of at least one ordinal variable measured in two independent samples (Maroco, 2011, p. 307). This test can also be used as an alternative to the t- Student test (used to test whether the mean of two populations are not significantly different (Maroco 2011, p. 199)), namely when the assumptions of this test are not valid (for example, heterogeneous variances and biased).

To study the effect of International Maturity of companies (early internationalization (≤ 6 years) vs later internationalization (> 6 years), according to De Clercq et al., 2012)) on the classification of the importance of

the dependent variables that we are studying, companies were separated into 2 groups (1 early-internationals; 2 No early-internationals). In order to assess whether the international maturity significantly affected the opinion of entrepreneurs on the importance of different variables we proceeded to Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test (nonparametric test) as described in Maroco (2011). Group 1 and 2 will be needed later to compare the means of orders. It was considered an error probability of type I (α) of .05.

The Mann-Whitney test indicates that there are significant differences between the two groups of companies (Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)), for the variables Company size ($p = .006$), Company Age ($p = .006$), Employees specific skills ($p = .024$) and Employees international experience ($p = .001$).

In the following step we compared the average of orders for comparison the two groups of companies.

Average of Orders Comparison

The hypothesis that companies with early Internationalization (X1) attribute less importance (measured on an ordinal scale of 1-nothing important 5 - extremely important) to variables such as Company Age and Company Size, and most important variables such as Employees Specific Skills and Employees International Experience compared with companies with later Internationalization (X2) was evaluated by nonparametric Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test, followed by comparison of the means of orders. All hypotheses were confirmed, as can be verified by the following analyses.

Table 04. Average of Orders Comparison

Ranks				
	International Experience Classification	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Company Age	1	154	145.02	22332.50
	2	163	172.21	28070.50
	Total	317		
Company size	1	152	143.68	21840.00
	2	162	170.46	27615.00
	Total	314		
Employees Specific Skills	1	156	171.54	26760.50
	2	164	150.00	24599.50
	Total	320		
Employees International Experience	1	156	176.38	27514.50
	2	163	144.33	23525.50
	Total	319		

Elaborated by the authors.

Once the differences are statistically significant the comparison of the means of orders shows the following results:

Company Age: Since the average of the orders for the sample of companies with early internationalization (145.02) is lower than the average of the orders for the sample of companies with later internationalization (172.21), Exact Sig. (Exact Sig. (1-tailed)) is for the unilateral test left with $H1: F(X1) < F(X2)$. Being $p_{EU} = .003 < \alpha = .05$ reject $H0: F(X1) \geq F(X2)$, concluding that the degree of importance attributed to the Company Age by companies with early internationalization is lower than assigned by companies with later internationalization, which seems quite logical.

Company size: Also for this variable is true that the average of the orders for the sample of companies with early internationalization (143.68) is lower than the average of the orders for the sample of companies with later internationalization (170.46), Exact Sig. (Exact Sig. (1-tailed)) then is for the unilateral left test with $H1: F(X1) < F(X2)$. Being $p_{EU} = .003 < \alpha = .05$ reject $H0: F(X1) \geq F(X2)$, concluding that the degree of importance attributed to the Company's size by companies with early internationalization is lower than assigned by companies later internationalization, which seems also quite acceptable.

Employees Specific Skills: Since the average of the orders for the sample of companies with early internationalization (171.54) is in the case of this variable greater than the average of the orders for the sample of companies with later internationalization (150.00), the Exact Sig. (Exact Sig. (1-tailed)) is to the unilateral

right test to $H_1: F(X_1) > F(X_2)$. Being $p_{EU} = .012 < \alpha = .05$ reject $H_0: F(X_1) \leq F(X_2)$, concluding that the degree of importance attributed to specific skills of employees by companies with early internationalization is greater than that allocated by companies with later internationalization, as we predicted.

Employees International Experience: Regarding employees' international experience, as the average of the orders for the sample of companies with early internationalization (176.38) is also in this case, higher than the average of the orders for the sample of companies with later internationalization (144.33), Exact Sig. (Exact Sig (1-tailed)) is also for the unilateral right test with $H_1: F(X_1) > F(X_2)$. Being $p_{EU} = .000 < \alpha = .05$ reject $H_0: F(X_1) \leq F(X_2)$, concluding that the degree of importance assigned to the Employees International Experience by companies with early internationalization is greater than that allocated by companies with later internationalization, as originally supposed.

6. Conclusion and Discussions

Based on the research hypotheses derived from our theoretical model, we analyse the results of the survey in order to confirm that the most important factors considered as inducers of the internationalization process are within the chosen theoretical model (with special emphasis on the variables related to the Relational Networks and the variables related to the Experience/Skills) and try to ascertain if the importance assigned to the chosen variables depends on the Company International Maturity.

With respect to H_A , "The degree of importance assigned by the entrepreneurs to the presented variables depends on the degree of International Maturity of the Company (early internationalization (≤ 6 years) vs. later internationalization (> 6 years)), results indicate that Companies with an early internationalization attribute a greater degree of importance to the Employees International Experience relatively to companies with a later internationalization. Our results confirm those obtained by Johanson and Mattsson (1988), De Clercq et al. (2012) and Rezvani et al. (2017), among others.

We also note that companies with early internationalization assign a superior degree of importance to the Employees Specific Skills when compared to companies with later internationalization, in line with the conclusions of Westhead et al. (1998), Gerschewski et al. (2015) and Rezvani et al. (2017).

The importance attributed to the Relational networks in the Host Country is independent of the degree of International Maturity of the Company, so we can, along with the descriptive analysis of the data, state that regardless of the degree of International Maturity of the company, all companies attach large importance to the Relational networks in the Host Country. This result is also supported by the researches of several authors focus in the study of Network Theory in internationalization as well by our theoretical framework. However, it contradicts the results obtained by Casillas, et al. (2009) and De Clercq, et al. (2012).

As for H_B , "Companies that consider Employees International Experience as an important factor also consider Relational Networks (formal/informal) as important for their internationalization", our conclusions point in the same direction as Bruneel et al. (2010), stating that those companies that attach greater importance to the Employees International Experience are also those that consider the Network of Contacts in the Host Country more important.

Most of the empirical work tries to relate the determinants of internationalization with its results, treating the company as a "black box", as a set of factors that will lead to a certain result. In this work, on the other hand, we present the perspective of the entrepreneur and the manager of the company, their opinions on the factors that contribute the most to make their companies internationalization possible, as well as its entrepreneurial initiatives for early internationalization. It is for the entrepreneur and for the characteristics of the company and its employees that the majority of our analysis is directed.

This study allows a better understanding of the role of employees' international experience, employees specific skills and relational networks in the internationalization process and presents added value for managers in the design and management of the internationalization process. This knowledge will allow entrepreneurs to

optimize their resources and consider the establishment of alliances and relational networks in order to leverage their internationalization process.

Based on the results presented here, future work will seek to study a larger sample and most representatives of all sectors of activity, which will analyse more clearly the opinions of entrepreneurs in specific sectors and even compare them with the entrepreneurs from other sectors.

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