

Knowledge Acquisition and Learning in Dutch and Belgian SMEs: The Role of Strategic Alliances

ANITA VAN GILS, *Maastricht University*

PETER ZWART, *University of Groningen*

Knowledge-based activities are at the basis of sustainable competitive advantage in today's economy. Resource- and knowledge-based theorists claim that firms should focus on the creation and accumulation of knowledge-based competencies in order to yield long-term survival. For SMEs, this can be a difficult task as their characteristics often hamper the leverage of the required competencies. This paper focuses on the role strategic alliances can fulfil within the knowledge acquisition and learning processes of SMEs. The empirical findings indicate that only a limited number of SMEs is involved in strategic 'knowledge-sharing' alliances. Several entrepreneurs do not cooperate because they fear transferring their know-how and losing their competitive advantage. However, SMEs involvement in strategic alliances resulted in improved firm performance.

© 2004 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: SME, Knowledge acquisition, Strategic alliance, Learning

Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and entrepreneurial companies operating in today's knowledge-based society face new strategic challenges. Entrepreneurs have to deal with issues of knowledge acquisition and should be able to find a

balance between exploitation and exploration activities (March, 1991; Koza and Lewin, 2000). Moreover, SMEs' performance can improve if they adopt a more active learning orientation (Sadler-Smith *et al.*, 2001). However, for a large group of SMEs, adapting organizational routines within the perspective of knowledge-based competition is a major problem. According to Nooteboom (1994), SME characteristics often hamper the identification and leverage of resources and competencies needed within the organization in order to yield new opportunities.

Within the academic literature, alliances and networks are presented as viable development options to compensate for internal knowledge deficiencies. These co-operative agreements provide opportunities for knowledge acquisition (Mothe and Quélin, 2000; George *et al.*, 2001; Soekijad and Andriessen, 2003), knowledge access (Grant and Baden-Fuller, 2004) and learning (Simonin, 1997; Inkpen, 1998; Larsson *et al.*, 1998). To date, however, little is known about the importance of alliances in the context of knowledge acquisition and learning in SMEs. Our research contributes to the scientific SME literature by investigating if SMEs are involved in cooperative agreements, and if these relationships are used to access or acquire additional knowledge, and as such, to learn from their alliance partners.

This article proceeds as follows. First, the requirements to effectively compete in a knowledge-based economy are described, as well as the major

problems SMEs face in this context. Next, we discuss the role alliances and networks can fulfil in acquiring complementary knowledge and in stimulating the learning orientation of a firm. Then, the research design is discussed, followed by a presentation of the empirical findings. The article concludes with a discussion of the results.

Competing in a Knowledge-based Economy

Recent contributions within the resource-based strategy perspective, also labeled competence-based or knowledge-based perspectives (Hamel and Heene, 1994; Grant, 1996; Spender, 1996), discuss how firms can remain competitive in a knowledge-based society. Research focuses on the creation and accumulation of some aggregates of resource named competencies (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990) or capabilities (Chandler, 1992). The theoretical insights are based on the evolutionary thinking of Nelson and Winter (1982); Penrose (1959) ideas on accumulated knowledge and organizational learning theory (Argyris and Schon, 1978; Huber, 1991; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995).

Central to the creation of competencies or capabilities is the knowledge accumulation process. Essential to the utilization of knowledge within the value creating process of a firm are the characteristics of transferability, aggregation and appropriability (Grant, 1996). The first critical determinant is the transferability of a firm's resources and capabilities, both between firms and within the firm (Barney, 1986). Within this context, a distinction has to be made between explicit and implicit (tacit) knowledge (Polanyi, 1966). Explicit knowledge is 'knowledge about' and can be communicated with ease. Tacit knowledge is 'knowing how' and is often embedded in organizational routines (Nelson and Winter, 1982). If tacit knowledge cannot be codified it should be internalized by observation and practice, but its transfer is slow, costly and uncertain (Kogut and Zander, 1992). Secondly, and also critical to the knowledge transfer process, is knowledge's potential for aggregation and the absorptive capacity of the recipient (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990). Knowledge absorption, at both the individual and firm level, depends upon the recipient's ability to add new knowledge to existing knowledge. Finally, appropriability refers to the ability of the owner of the resource to receive a return equal to the value created by that resource (Tece, 1987).

Only those firms that succeed in developing organizational routines that co-ordinate the learning process and transform the diverse individual and organizational knowledge resources into strategic capabilities or core competencies, will be able to use knowledge as a source of sustainable competitive advantage.

The Challenge for SMEs Operating in a Knowledge-based Economy

As the literature on knowledge has tended to focus on large companies, so far, little theory is available related to knowledge and knowing in small businesses (Atherton, 2003). Nevertheless, available research does stress the disadvantages SMEs encounter in a knowledge-based economy. According to Nooteboom (1994) a major problem within SMEs is that their characteristics (small scale, lack of functional expertise and limitations in investment capital) often hamper the identification and leverage of resources and competencies needed within the SME in order to yield new opportunities. Moreover, the level of tacit knowledge and the importance of craftsmanship within SMEs result in a limited capacity for absorption of new knowledge/technology as well as in technological myopia. Chrisman and McMullan (2004) argue that a knowledge gap exists between the knowledge possessed by entrepreneurs and the knowledge required for successful venturing. Atherton (2003) agrees on this subject, a determinant of knowledge in the small business is its personalization within the owner-manager. Furthermore, several authors discuss the problem of uncertainty and information asymmetry (Gibb, 1997; Audretsch and Feldman, 2003; Atherton, 2003).

Although SMEs face several challenges within the knowledge-based economy, those firms that are able to manage their knowledge processes do benefit from it. Growth-oriented SMEs that develop capabilities in external knowledge acquisition and intra-firm knowledge dissemination do improve their organizational responsiveness (Liao *et al.*, 2003). A more active learning orientation and a greater use of knowledge assets is linked to higher growth for small manufacturing firms (Sadler-Smith *et al.*, 2001). Moreover, knowledge-based resources are also positively linked to performance in SMEs (Wiklund and Shepard, 2003). Given these conclusions, small and medium-sized firms should be motivated to improve their knowledge management process in order to create those competencies that guarantee long-term survival. A first step within this process is getting access to the required knowledge. Selecting alliance partners in order to learn from them could be a suitable strategic development option.¹

The Role of Alliances within the Knowledge Acquisition and Learning Processes of SMEs

Several authors (Simonin, 1997; Inkpen, 1998; Larson *et al.*, 1998; Mothe and Quélin, 2000; George *et al.*, 2001; Soekijad and Andriessen, 2003) have emphasized the added value of alliance relationships

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

ISIArticles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات