



Opportunism in the R&D alliances of SMES: The roles of the institutional environment and SME size

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Abstract

SME leaders with R&D alliances face significant challenges in balancing the need for resource acquisition in the innovation process and the potential for opportunistic behavior by alliance partners. This study, utilizing a sample of 456 SMEs from eight countries, examines how the resource capacity of the SME and the institutional environment are related to the perceptions that owners and managers have about the opportunistic behavior of alliance partners. The results suggest that firm size moderates the relationship between the technological munificence and the predominant culture of the domestic market of the SME and concerns about the opportunistic behavior of an SME alliance partner.

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1. Executive summary

Strategic alliance formation has been touted as one of the most critical strategic actions that small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) must undertake for survival and success.

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Alliances are seen as effective mechanisms for resource acquisition, technology transfer, market entry and internationalization among other activities. Yet in spite of the central role proposed for strategic alliances in the growth and development process of SMEs, both scientific and anecdotal reports suggest that the failure rate for all types of alliances is quite high. Opportunistic behavior on the part of one or more partners to an alliance is often suggested as a primary cause for the failure of an alliance to achieve the goals and purposes of the partners. Research aimed at determining the causes of opportunistic behavior in alliances has primarily taken as its focus the structures chosen to govern the alliance. This governance-based research, while acknowledging the role of the external environment in motivating the choice of an SME to form an alliance, has rarely explored the relationship between environmental factors and behaviors within alliances. In this study, we explore the relationship between specific attributes of the institutional environment of the SME and concerns about opportunistic behavior within the R&D alliance of the SME when the resource capacity of the SME is considered.

The potential for opportunistic behavior in the alliances of SMEs is significant and when those alliances are formed for the purposes of research and development (R&D), the potential is particularly acute. SMEs involved in R&D, unlike larger enterprises, often do not have the specialized and co-specialized assets necessary to take technological developments to the product and market stages. SME research suggests that smaller SMEs involved in R&D are typically focused on exploratory research while larger SMEs tend to be more focused on manufacturing and commercialization. This suggests that even across groups of SMEs, in this study, we define an SME as a firm with between 6 and 500 employees, there are widespread differences both in the quantity and types of resources needed. In order to survive and create competitive advantage, SMEs of all sizes must reach out into their external environment for necessary resources. When the requisite resources cannot be readily obtained from the external environment, both theory and research tell us that SMEs and firms of all sizes form strategic alliances with firms with complementary resources.

Theory suggests, and in this case theory based on the Resource-based View (RBV) of the firm, that since alliances are entered as part of an SME's quest for requisite resources for survival and advantage to the extent that the resource exchanges within alliances are considered appropriated there will be a high level of satisfaction with the alliance. When resource exchanges are considered to be out of balance with contributions or expectations, there is the potential for perceptions of opportunistic behavior. Opportunistic behavior, from an RBV perspective, is seen as behavior that while designed to maximize the resources derived from an alliance by a participant to the alliance is not necessarily in the best interest of the alliance. Based on these understandings, it is a reasonable intuitive leap to assume that perceptions of opportunism may be linked both to the internal resources of the SME as well as to the resource attributes of the SME's external environment.

In this study, we test the relationship between specific attributes of the institutional environment of the SME and perceptions of opportunistic behavior in the SME's R&D alliance as moderated by the internal resource capacity, reflected by size, of the SME. Our test utilized a survey sample comprised of the R&D alliances of 456 SMEs from 8 countries. The results tend to confirm the significant role of SME size in moderating the relationship between the external environment and concerns about the behavior of alliance

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