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Relationship learning : a conduit to internationalisation

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Relationship Learning: A Conduit for Internationalization

ABSTRACT

Internationalization opportunities can emerge through inter-organizational sharing, yet research on why and how organizations learn through relationship interactions is underdeveloped. We explore how learning in supplier-customer relationships contributes to organizational offerings through the knowledge development process. We identify relationship learning as an organizational dynamic capability by thematic analysis of qualitative longitudinal data from large as well as small and medium-sized organizations. Our case study of organizations demonstrates that nurturing personal relationships and paying attention to customer communication is core in knowledge sharing. Customer input is valuable in solution offerings, strengthening mutual work, and growth in internationalization within an existing relationship or in new ones. The results endorse that the knowledge development processes and commitments transpire at both ends of the relationship. The findings provide practical managerial implications for ensuring the development of open and transparent communication conduits in relationships. The process of providing a solution that addresses customers' needs must begin with understanding their work, issues, and the intended jobs they will perform.

Keywords: Dynamic Capability, Customer Needs, Opportunity, Microfoundations, Internationalization Process.

1. Introduction

Inter-organizational networks and the relationships in them are formal, significant and strategic sources of possibilities. Their interactions are conduits of relationship building. Knowledge sharing in the inter-organizational relationships is often not available to the public, but only to those in the relationship. This knowledge is invaluable as the opportunity, if discovered or created, is often available to only those within the sharing relationship. The internationalizing organizations are engaged in dispersed activities through various relationships wherein individuals coordinate and build an organizational network.

Internationalization relies on organizational ability to recognize opportunities through its resources, especially capabilities. There is a continuous decision making in organizations on, acquiring new knowledge, its usage, and creating value from it. Technology has changed the business operations to a large extent (Banalieva & Dhanaraj, 2019; Moncrief, 2017). Hence, what is crucial is the organizational capability helping it to learn, understand, and offer a value proposition enabling it to generate revenues and profits.

In a rapidly changing international environment, as organizations address new opportunities with solution-based offerings, it is not only appropriate but timely as well to embrace

the dynamic capabilities viewpoint (Vahlne & Jonsson, 2017). Cano-Kollman, Cantwell, Hannigan, Mudambi, and Song, (2016, p. 257; 259) raise questions, “How is knowledge carried and inter-connected across space? How effective are these conduits?” The “conduits through which knowledge travels remain unexplored.” Hence, Jonsson (2015) stresses the need for more evidence on how an organization learns, acquires knowledge as well as opportunity identification. Are the firms able to capitalize on a network [relationship] opportunity? (Banalieva & Dhanaraj, 2019). The emphasis should be on learning and knowledge sharing in interactions. Researchers (Contractor, Foss, Kundu, & Lahiri 2019; Coviello, Kano, & Liesch, 2017) recommend exploring individual behavior, as the persons link the environment with the firm and help convert conceivable opportunities into commitments [Uppsala model terminology].

We address the above-identified research gaps in literature (see Table 1), studying supplier learning in relationship interactions. Our inter-organizational study theoretically builds on the Uppsala Model of Internationalization (2017), focusing on how relationship learning influences value creation through offering? Individuals integrate the acquired information through relationship interactions into firms’ existing knowledge base. The use, interpretation, and sense-making of knowledge are through a process helping firms with decision making. This study attempts to explain the process underlying the phenomenon.

This study firstly contributes theoretically, to the international business and entrepreneurship literature by addressing how individual-level learning influences the firm-level outcome, hence studying micro foundation level influence on macro foundations. We respond to Coviello et al. (2017), focusing on micro-foundations level inter-organizational exchanges, intending to explain how relationship learning is a means of building dynamic capability that influences firms’ internationalization process. Our study explains this by employing qualitative thematic analysis studying relationship learning in large multinational organizations and small and medium enterprises (SME). Although learning and knowledge, acquisition takes place at both ends of the interacting relationship (Vahlne and Bhatti, 2019); however, we focus on supplier side learning, to understand how they react to it. We concentrate on respondent firms’ learning as supplier firms were sensitive to sharing customer details. The organization acquires learning through parallel ongoing relationships. By studying supplier organization learning in a supplier-

customer relationship, we broaden understanding of how a supplier organization grows through relationship learning.

Secondly, it contributes by underscoring the customer as the focal source of knowledge and learning in organizational network, helping address the customer needs through their offering. The interactions with the customer are an essential instrument for the supplier organization at the micro-level, providing knowledge and learning that consequently influence an organizations' macro-level factors. The success lies in the effective integration of new learning and taking care of it according to their business model and addressing unmet customer needs. Our qualitative longitudinal data collection highlights the process of how individual learning adds to organizations' knowledge of customer needs as an opportunity.

Our study thirdly contributes by contending that relationship learning is an inherent dynamic capability with which organizations can expedite the process of change in commitments through opportunity identification leading to growth in the new or existing market/s. Utilizing this conduit facilitates the organization in understanding customer needs, as well as the purpose the customer consumes the offering to satisfy. In this study, we explain how interacting individuals through knowledge development processes and managements' timely decision making based on identified opportunities can influence performance. This work contributes to a broader comprehension of organizational learning taking place in inter-organizational relationship interactions, envisioned by the seminal work of Granovetter (1985). This acquired knowledge provides learning which consequently, influences resource commitments in the marketplace (Johnson, Yin & Tsai, 2009). In their latest works, Vahlne and Jonsson (2017; 2019) assert that market knowledge stimulates the gradual growth of organizations. Inter-organizational learning highlights customers' existing and future needs (Christensen, Dillon, Hall, & Duncan. 2016) along with the pattern of offering consumption. The influence on organizational growth is by experiential knowledge gained through inter-organizational relationships and market operations.

The remainder of the paper is organized into four parts; theoretical background, methods, and data collection, empirical analysis and discussion, and conclusion.

2. Literature Review

Vahlne and Johanson (2017: p.9) assert that “what happens in a firm happens in relationships”, accepting the existence of the market and acknowledging that “firms expand predominantly in markets similar—or adjacent—to the home market” (Vahlne & Johanson, 2017: p.8). The relationship interaction is a useful antecedent in the organizational value chain. Vahlne and Johanson (2013, p.195) explain opportunity development through interactions in relationships as two intertwined sub-processes in organizations’ internationalization: “learning, mainly experiential learning, and commitment building.” Emphasizing change, the seminal work of Teece, Pisano, and Shuen (1997) focused on the organization’s capabilities in a rapidly evolving market environment, while Eisenhardt and Martin (2000) viewed dynamic capabilities from a different perspective—how organizations active in a stable environment could integrate and reconfigure their competence into opportunities.

More recently, Baden-Fuller and Teece (2019) advise organizations to nurture their capabilities by following the market as well as technological and environmental changes. Organizations with efficient and effective dynamic capabilities demonstrate market and technological agility. These dynamic capabilities will help organizations stay alert to evolving customer needs, technological changes, and market opportunities. The key to it lies in adopting an integrated approach. Dynamic managerial thinking is required to map out a strategic vision that facilitates all organizational units. The organizational goal should be to plan efficient functionality.

Vahlne and Jonsson (2017) confirm that the explanatory power of dynamic capabilities has increased due to the inclusion of ambidexterity in the Uppsala model. However, ambidexterity is difficult to apply here because each relationship is different (Petersen & Pedersen, 2001). Teece's (2007) framework explains the dynamic capabilities as sensing, seizing, and transformation in the organizational process of identifying growth opportunities. All organizations work in a web of interwoven relationships, wherein they find opportunities for learning and mutual trust-building as well as consolidating commitment (Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). The network wherein they operate is a knowledge-sharing ecosystem consisting of an extensive web of interconnected relationships. They gain knowledge and acquire experience through relationship learning (Vahlne & Bhatti, 2019).

Kano and Verbeke (2019) state that microfoundations are interconnected and *prima facie*, and acquiring market knowledge is an essential ingredient in the internationalization process. A fundamental assumption is that the international environment is context-specific, fragmented, and difficult to understand unless actors are not embedded in specific relationships and networks. They propose expanding the business network theory proposition to include possible internationalization patterns driven by network linkages that do not follow a gradual process of building on stage-wide expansion, as pointed out by Pedersen and Shaver (2011).

We focus on the supplier-buyer relationship, as the customer is a primary source of acquiring host-country market knowledge. This interaction plays a dual role, as a conduit to local market knowledge and through insidership enabling supplier firms to create a knowledge spillover barrier from competitors. It is pertinent to focus on interacting with organizational individuals who bring in the information. As, Contractor, Foss, Kundu, and Lahiri (2019) point out for a long time, studies have focused on the organization as the unit of analysis when studying strategy formulation but neglect the individuals involved in decision making — therefore we build on their work, to identify more explanations by digging below the organization level. The decomposition of organizational level concepts to understand how individual-level factors influence organizations. This understanding highlights how processes driven by individual actions convert into resulting outcomes. It is carried out by exploring employee characteristics and dispositions and focusing on decision-makers in departments or groups as the unit of analysis.

Organizational microfoundations include capabilities and routines, whose aggregation contributes to the development of the organization's operational model (Felin Foss, Heimeriks, & Madsen, 2012). Routines are extensively recognized as “repetitive, recognizable patterns of interdependent actions, carried out by multiple actors” (Feldman and Pentland, 2003, p. 95). They are carried out collectively instead of individually (Pentland, 2011); the attention is positioned on interactions instead of interacting individuals (Felin and Hesterly, 2007). The interaction of the operational factor of routines illuminates our understanding of outcomes and any change (Feldman and Pentland, 2003). The interactions between organizational processes and individuals nurture the organizations' capabilities and routines in fundamental ways.

Studies have found that both informal and formal forms of coupling have chronological influence on interdependent actions or events (Becker, 2004). Szulanski and Jensen (2006) identify interaction taking place among individuals and processes involving a firm's environment and technology. The studies discussed to clarify the routines and capabilities relationship. The individuals being unique may influence one another through social interaction. These interactions may surprisingly reveal unforeseen or potential embryonic knowledge. The interactional outcomes can be positive or negative as evidenced in research. However, as Felin et al. (2012, p.1355) suggest focusing on "microfoundations of routines and capabilities" can be productive subject to rigorously defining the research design. This research approach helps better explain the outcomes by focusing on individuals and how their actions aggregate to outcomes is necessary.

Rooted in the assumption that by integrating unique resources, organizations configure their competitive advantage. The dynamic capabilities framework views sustainable competitive advantage as the organization's capacity to create, change, and extend its precious resources and capabilities over time (Helfat, Finkelstein, Mitchell, Peteraf, Singh, Teece, 2007). Analytically, such organizational capabilities can be categorized into three unique processes: seizing, sensing, and reconfiguring resources (Teece, 2007). Prasnikar, Lisjak, Buhovac, and Stembergar (2008) recommend the need for organizations to understand their cornerstone capabilities and decide which capabilities to nurture further and which to discontinue. Teece (2007) defines sensing as acquiring relevant marketing intelligence. Therefore, it is crucial to monitor the market environment, study the requirements of customers, and integrate acquired and employee knowledge in order to gain potential competitive advantage (Teece, 2007). Many organizations face a challenge in identifying necessary microfoundations as well as implementing them to sustain the organization in the evolving market environment.

The conceptualization of relationship learning, explained by Selnes and Sallis (2003), provides the means of measuring the learning taking place in a given relationship. More specifically, relationship-level learning gauges the shared change through knowledge sharing. It is sensemaking and knowledge integration into organizations' existing knowledge database. The knowledge shared in a buyer-supplier relationship enhances supplier understanding concerning customer needs during the process of interaction (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Scholars recognize that inter-organizational relationship learning is vital to competitive success, underscoring that

organizations learn by collaborating with other organizations as well as by observing and incorporating their routines (March and Simon, 1958; Levinson and Asahi, 1995).

Von Hippel (1988) finds that an organization's suppliers and customers are its primary sources of innovative ideas. Opportunity identification and exploitation are the lifeblood for businesses. How do they originate, research (Dutta & Crossan, 2005) splits them in Kirznerian vs. Schumpeterian perspective. The interacting individuals who are organizations' learning agents acquire knowledge of needs, services or products, potential market developments, and evolving trends. The integration and sense-making of acquired knowledge bring potential opportunities into perspective. Therefore the role of the learning agent needs to be carefully elaborated to understand the influencing phenomenon of individual actions aggregating the organizational outcome.

Håkansson and Johanson (2001) classify learning into three types in a supplier-customer relationship. The first is learning an organizations' way of operating, which supports comprehending an organization and strengthening the relationship with the organization. The second type of learning is relationship interactions, which provide an opportunity to learn new skills that can assist in strengthening existing or nurturing new competence for utilization in the same or other relationships. The third type is learning about the coordination of activities in relationships. Chen (2000), keeping in view the types of learning mentioned above, states that organizations could develop relationship networks and interconnections. Jarvis (2009) is right of the view that interacting individuals who learn are the product of relationship learning as these individuals can trigger numerous social ramifications.

The interacting individuals consciously or unconsciously take into account three learning types identified by Håkansson and Johanson (2001). The knowledge exchange grows with the strengthening of trust and time. The interactions not only raise potential growth areas but identify trouble spots, product, service issues, compatible options, and user identified improvement suggestions. The treatment of acquired knowledge and response to it varies across organizations; however, in an era of knowledge and technology evolution paying attention to new knowledge is imperative.

Johanson and Vahlne (2003) underscore internationalization as an interactive process of acquired experiential knowledge and commitment, although neither of the two requires country borders, only an organizations' ongoing and any potential relationships. Sometimes the supplier may not have a sufficient understanding of the customer needs, and the customer may not be fully aware of the supplier's capabilities and resources (Kohtamäki, Partanen & Möller, 2013). The shared sensemaking prepares the ground for a customized offering solution that answers customer needs, although shared knowledge is focal in explaining knowledge integration in relationships (Kindström, Kowalkowski, & Sandberg, 2013; Medlin & Törnroos, 2014). Weick (1995, p.13) highlights the concept of sense-making as “the action, activity, and creating that lays down the traces that are interpreted and then reinterpreted.” In a relationship sense-making can develop during the interactional exchange facilitating the regular routines that provide an organizational platform for discussions. Knowledge integration has an essential responsibility of embedding acquired learning not only into an existing knowledge base but also modifying it as per organizational need. This is pivotal in acquired knowledge utilization and helps achieve the planned goals or performance objectives (Ballantyne, 2004).

Szulanski (1996) emphasizes that the integration of acquired knowledge can be a complicated process; hence, this process should be dealt with carefully. Simultaneously, the sharing organization must have the absorptive capacity to acquire the anticipated knowledge in order to share it. This entails intra-organisational sharing capability if the integration of the knowledge shared is to be carried out effectively and efficiently. The intra-organisation absorptive capacity and its sharing capability are interrelated so that a firm that is good at acquired knowledge absorption will also be competent at integrating it properly within its boundary. Although sharing knowledge is at the heart of the interpretation and explanation of knowledge in the supplier-customer relationship, sensemaking is also necessary in order to understand and develop the solutions to be offered (Medlin & Törnroos, 2014). The knowledge integration role involves embedding the acquired learning within existing routines and processes and modifying existing knowledge structures accordingly. This attribute is essential for utilizing acquired knowledge to meet the performance objectives (Ballantyne, 2004).

Based on the above discussion, the study extends the literature by addressing research gaps in academic works (Table 1), identifying future research paths on the influence and role of

knowledge and learning in the internationalization process of organizations. These studies are empirically analyzed using quantitative and qualitative methods. The studies recommend and identify exploration and advancement opportunities for future research.

Table 1
Recent Studies on Knowledge and Learning in International Business

Author	Research Focus	Relationship Examination	Sample	Data Collection Method	Analysis Method	Future Research Recommendations
Kano and Verbeke, 2019	Multinational firm theories and	International business frameworks & microfoundations	Six core international business strategy frameworks	Theoretical framework	Analysis of six main international business strategy theories	Investigate how specific IB theories' features influence the role of microfoundations
Contractor et al., 2019	Global strategy through a microfoundations lens	Individual actors and macro concepts and outcomes	Global strategy literature	Primary and secondary data	Multiple methods	Digging below firm level; individual dispositions, decision-makers, groups, departments unit of analysis
Vahlne and Bhatti, 2019	Knowledge development process	Interfirm interactions and learning	Large and SME case firms	Qualitative	Thematic analysis	Product /service traded within a relationship may affect the nature of knowledge exchange
Vahlne and Jonsson, 2017	Ambidexterity as a dynamic capability in the globalization of the multinational business enterprise (MBE): Case studies of AB Volvo and IKEA	Adding dynamic capability of ambidexterity Uppsala globalization process model capabilities	Swedish case studies	Qualitative	Comparison of case study results	How ambidexterity approaches (structural and contextual) are essential for a firm to become a sustainable global firm. What roles are pivotal to each ambidexterity type?
Coviello et al., 2017	Adapting the Uppsala model to a modern world: Macro-context and microfoundations	Macro-context and microfoundations	Uppsala Model 2017	The counterpoint to Vahlne and Jonsson (2017)	Uppsala Model of Internationalisation 2017	The role of the individual as a core micro-foundation of the internationalization process
Cano-Kollmann et al., 2016	Knowledge connectivity: An agenda for innovation research in international business	Knowledge and innovation conduits	Analysis of recent research	Literature review	Based on existing research identification of future research paths	Knowledge interconnection across space and effectiveness of knowledge conduits
Jonsson 2015	Knowledge sharing through practice and logic	Knowledge sharing in practice	Swedish case study	Qualitative	Ethnography	Focus on three logics to explain how knowledge sharing takes place and motivating employees to share knowledge.

3. Methodology and Data Analysis

This study explores relationship learning as an organizational dynamic capability that conceivably can be seen as a process that evolves. This shifts the focus to the micro-foundations level in order to comprehend the commitment change mechanism in the internationalization process. The inter-organizational relationship interactions bring to light customer needs that enable opportunity recognition and exploitation for growth in the international market, which by definition, is a phenomenon that evolves. Our study explains the process that underlies the aforementioned phenomenon.

We employ an explorative approach to study how suppliers learn customer needs through interaction in relationships and address them through their offering (Lehrer, Ordanini, De Fillippi, & Miozzo, 2012; Tuli, Kohli, & Bharadwaj, 2007). Furthermore, organizations based in northern Europe from different industries are used (manufacturing, and service industry) to acquire generalizability beyond that from a single case, hence providing better understanding and subtle differences of how the learning in organizations can vary in diverse conditions (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2014). Marshall (1996) suggests, “appropriate sample size for a qualitative study is one that adequately answers the research question” (p.523). While there is no “ideal” number of cases organizations, Eisenhardt (1989) recommends, “a number between 4 and 10 cases usually works well” (p. 545). He cautions researchers against including ten or more cases, as “it quickly becomes difficult to cope with the complexity and volume of the data” (p. 545).

Following his advice, we chose eight case study organizations. The study cases are selected based on the criterion as being in the process of internationalization. The study adopts the official definition of the European Commission, according to which an SME is a firm that employs fewer than 250 people and a balance sheet total of below €43 million, or its annual turnover is less than €50 million. (European Commission 2019 Retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/growth/smes/business-friendly-environment/sme-definition_en). The main features deciding if an organization is an SME is balance sheet or turnover and number of employees. Our large firms' sample consists of managers from four multinational firms operating in different industries (manufacturing and services) with international market growth. Our firms have a robust global presence and are well established. Therefore can provide a valuable input of inter-firm learning through knowledge sharing.

Yin (2014) advises to employ a qualitative method to examine a somewhat less explored area, to answer the research question, and provides detailed descriptions. Flick (2014) used episodic interviews as a data collection approach, and according to Flick, the episodic interview is not an effort to artificially stylize respondent experiences as the narrative whole. It begins with the experiential knowledge of episodic-situational practices. This study is in line with Flick (2014) because authors collect data through episodic interviews. The episodic interview produces context-related details that appear as a narrative as they are closer to the generative context and experiences than other forms of presentations. Episodic knowledge is acquired in the process of data collection

by asking the respondents to recall as well as share those situations of their routine professional lives that illustrate answers to the interview questions.

In this study, we use an explorative approach, utilizing a purposive sampling methodology to recruit respondents with customer interaction experience (Tuli, Kohli, & Bharadwaj, 2007). We approached managers with substantial customer interaction experience (Töllner, Blut, & Holz Müller, 2011; Tuli et al., 2007), employing personal contacts and connecting through the LinkedIn professional network platform. The respondents had a minimum of five years of interaction experience with international customers; this is desirable so that we can study their knowledge acquisition and learning through communication (Tuli et al., 2007). The respondents are experienced in sales as well as development and solution offering. Our study respondents regularly interact with the external network of their organizations and can contribute to our study by sharing their experiential knowledge. They are at different career stages and have acquired diverse exposure and experience through their responsibilities and interactions.

Coviello (2005) recommends using an interview guide to avoid any academic jargon, hence enabling the respondents to share experiences in their words, guided our interviews. The interviews last 52 minutes to 112 minutes with an average of 76 minutes were recorded and transcribed verbatim immediately after each meeting (20 pages on average). Thirty-six in-depth interviews were conducted for the study with senior and middle managers (Table 2). Thirty interviews were completed in 2016, and six follow up interviews in 2017 with one firm from each group. The respondents answered the same questions, which asked about their background, ongoing responsibilities, and experience concerning knowledge sharing in customer interactions. They were emailed the questions before the interview, hence giving them time to prepare answers that are experience-based and provide relevant examples.

The interviews with experienced managers provided the opportunity to acquire information on their interactional learning —knowledge sharing, integration, and development process that takes place over a period. We conducted the interviews in two phases. We carried out the first phase of interviews in 2016, exploring their learning through knowledge sharing, which took place in customer interactions. The acquired knowledge internalization and integration and its subsequent sense-making helped understanding potential opportunities and aligning customer need with the

offering. The second phase follows up by inquiring how [if, and if not why not] they pursued the identified opportunities.

All conversations were conducted either in person or on Skype. The permission is taken from the respondent to record interviews in advance. Notes taken during the interview, are all written the same day or following day (if traveling). The recorded interviews were transcribed using a professional service to ensure proper transfer of responses to text form for analysis. To maintain ethical integrity and to protect each participating firms' interest (Kirkup & Carrigan, 2000), the direct quotes are disguised in respondent and firm names. The agreement with the case firms was that their identities would be anonymized. This was essential because few of the case firms were initially unwilling to participate or to elaborate on the learning experiences through interactions with customers until they were guaranteed complete anonymity.

Table 2
Overview of Case Study Firms

	Large Firms				SME Firms			
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
Industry	manufacturing	manufacturing	manufacturing	services	manufacturing	manufacturing	manufacturing	services
Revenue (2018)	25,000 M	8,000 M	5,000 M	400 M	7,00 M	10,00 M	5,0 M	5,0 M
Employees	100,000+	50,000	15,000+	2,000+	200+	150+	60+	20+
% of global sales 2018	90%	90%	80%	80%	60%	25%	70%	25%
Markets	Australia, NZ, North America, Asia, Europe & Rest of the world	Australia, NZ, North America, Asia, Europe & Rest of the world	Australia, NZ, North America, Asia, Europe & Rest of the world	Europe, Asia	Scandinavia, China	Scandinavia, UK	Europe, China	Europe
Job Title	Senior manager, Middle manager				Senior manager, Middle manager			
Experience industry	10 to 25 years in the industry				8 to 20+ years in the industry			
with the firm	8 to 20+ years				6 to 12+ years			
Customer interaction	Five years (minimum)				Five years (minimum)			
Interviews	4+3	4	4	3	4+3	3	4	4

We employ an inductive process (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) for the application of thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). Transcripts of the interviews are initially coded to explore themes and draw possible interpretations from them. The analysis is carried out by reading and rereading the transcripts and taking notes; repeating this process permitted the emergence of core themes (Spiggle, 1994). The identified themes are afterward refined by placing similar themes in a group. This identification process assisted in an orderly arrangement of the text in order to describe “categories, types, and relationships of meaning” (Guest et al., 2012, p. 52). The validity

of the research process is indicated by the extent to which the respondent experiences and their learning are revealed (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2012), the degree to which the question is communicated successfully through this research method, and by the analysis that can be done using the data. The research face validity is strengthened by the inclusion of respondents with diverse experience and rich expertise as well as the inclusion of organizations that contribute to the credibility of the results while falling within the limits of the study (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012).

Our narration shows the process as it progressed, and, as a result, we begin with thematic labeling. The completion of the entire coding process is followed by combining codes in a manner employed by previous studies (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Frith & Gleeson, 2004; Pollio & Ursiak, 2006). These works combine codes or meanings according to specific kinds, which define their commonalities. This process is decided by a careful code combination which addresses or refers them to similar issue or activity.

Following that, we group the codes from respondents' interaction experience in emerging category patterns. The physical process of generating themes involves taking all codes, spreading them out, sorting them into piles, and matching them with one or more similar ones. This process was repeated, and then a preliminary theme was allocated to a group. We now explain this first thematizing process from the example of a set of codes (Appendix 1) that compose the first-order theme documentation. The respondents shared their acquired knowledge, and the learning reporting process consisted of observation, any experience, discussions, feedback, memos, notes, updating the firms' internal reporting system. This process, however, varied between firms, on how to whom, and where they reported.

These illustrations are not all code sheets examples resembling "documentation," nor did we cluster them all, indicating the same first-order theme. A code about "service experience" on offering experience, for example, was grouped with "business development." Also, where documentation suggested "extra work," we gathered these code sheets with two more significant code set, "experience" and "job description." Though, after further analysis, "documentation" presented a quality of experience intersecting numerous characteristics regarding our topic and consequently providing meaning, and that constituted a first-order theme.

The process of allocating and reallocating code sheets and sorting them into piles constituting new emerging themes, i.e., each new emerging pile means reconsidering existing piles as they may be revised into potential new themes. Consequently, bundling and unbundling existing piles, separating and differently rebundling them. Careful placement indicates a probable interlink of these piles, a potentiality that they are related, the nature of that may, later on, appear in the process. The accuracy in the process came through examining identified code with the text of transcribed interviews. This helped avert any associative process of theme generation to emerge, so to speak, by remaining confined to the respondent statements' interpretation.

The analysis proceeds with first-order themes grouped into a higher, more encompassing theme. The theme clustering is according to an activity or relation, which links them. The emerging clusters consist of several code sheets—some small, others, large—and few consist of a single or only two cards. This process brings forth some general codes and others that are specific. The developing groups demonstrate connections among the clusters' meanings because they are placed carefully. Cayne and Loewenthal's (2007) recommend to explore the unknown by introspection is inspiring. However, we followed the linkages as they arose, clustering and reclustered the codes without looking at the overall analysis process as a problem to solve, instead of visualizing the emerging interlinked events through the process.

First-order themes written on the sheets have a history, as they present the generating interactional visualizations. Next, guided by Attride-Stirling's (2001) process, the first-order theme clusters are mapped out as a diagram. This step is followed by mapping them into deeper clusters and interrelationships. A similar approach is employed for analyzing second- and third-order themes through the same clustering process rather than separating and subsequently organizing them into scales or pyramids of theme levels. This process helped us see coinciding theme features, and we identified the next order themes on those grounds.

The coding process involves identification of the meaning emerging from the respondent responses and has not been predetermined by relying on theory or any conceptualization. These data generated codes are drawn together and then reapplied and defined in a second theme through a systematic step. In this step, we record the identified codes independently, supplemented by a reference to the text segment wherein we identify the said meaning. This, in many instances,

involves a quotation or even a paraphrase that provides a code or the context of the meaning we recorded. Braun and Clarke (2006) state when coding is part of the thematic analysis, the actual units of analysis are not yet codes or meanings (those will be the themes); actually, they help organize the study data into meaningful units. In this approach, simultaneously all similar codes are compared, helping to bring forth a broader theme development.

During the process of data analysis, the identified themes are revised and reviewed in order to unpack the key concepts and focal themes found across our data set. Overall, we identified through thematic analysis of eleven major or final-order themes. In the final review of the final-order themes emerging from our careful analysis, we agreed on two groups of identified themes. The breakdown of the two groups—differentiating them into major themes and subthemes—consists of three dynamic themes and eight concepts. An interrelated network of inferences or subthemes hence constitutes the study's major themes.

The three dynamic themes and eight concepts are separately grouped. We name the subthemes *concepts* for differentiation and clarity, whereas we set apart the dynamic themes as our major themes because of their qualities and dynamic character. All in all, our analysis brings forth relationship learning, knowledge integration, and value creation as the major themes. Listening, understanding, customer need identification, evaluation, sensemaking, opportunity identification, management decisions, and satisfying customer need are the eight significant concepts. These concepts and themes form the structural and discursive foundation for presenting our study findings.

The results of this research, described in the section below, depict how each theme emerged, capturing the relationship-related learning experiences through interactions with the participating respondents.

4. Results of the Study

The thematic analysis of data provides an interpretation of respondent sharing transforming into a narrative, while 'providing sufficient evidence of the themes within the data—i.e., enough data extracts to demonstrate the prevalence of the theme' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93). Similarly, Joffe advised, 'In the name of transparency, researchers need to present systematically a sufficient

portion of the original evidence in the written account to satisfy the skeptical reader of the relation between the interpretation and the evidence' (2012, p. 219). The thematic analysis carried out by Meier, Boivin, and Meier (2006) presented a single theme, supporting it by direct quotes from the data text to support different levels of relevant subthemes. In the subsections, we describe each major theme, include a figure showing the concepts constituting the theme, and provide relevant quotes from respondents.

4.1 Relationship Learning

The interaction builds the foundation for knowledge sharing that will help generate new knowledge that can be beneficial for both interacting partners. This knowledge may concern upcoming trends in the market, evolving customer needs or competitor positioning, or new services/products. Speaking about this experience, the respondent manager of organization-B says, *"I write down what they are using and the status of the products at the moment, are they satisfied [with our products/ services], or if any new needs are coming up."* Our analytical findings are in agreement with Easterby-Smith, Lyles, and Tsang (2008), which highlighted evidence of organizational learning and knowledge development processes facilitating an organization's competitive advantage. The organization-C director says interacting individuals should be alert to absorbing beneficial information from communication exchanges, saying, *"Sometimes in sharing, the customer's intention is not to tell you something, but they happen to only mention something...wherein we find a business opportunity."* We *'keep an eye on our competitor's activities too'*, said the director of organization-D. This director advises vigilance concerning market changes, especially from competitors. Organizations should pay attention to *"what are they working on if they are developing some new products or services."*

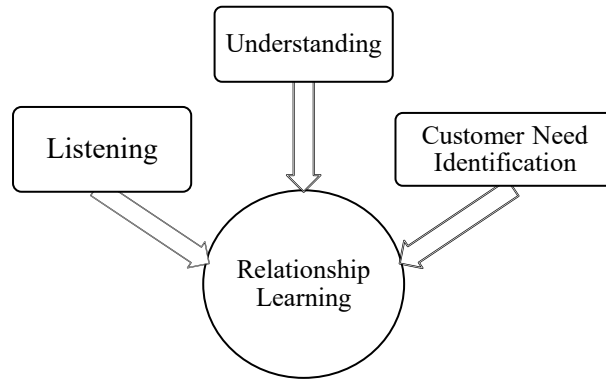


Figure 1: Relationship Learning Theme 1

The sales manager of SME-E stressed the significance of personal relationships in acquiring new knowledge and learning as he shared his experience, *“It is crucial in markets like Scandinavia because that allows people to open up and be more honest and straightforward in their communication.”* The director of SME-F further elaborates by saying, *“Evaluate what your competitor is doing, both in daily business and what you see them test and play around within the market. Look at the competition; get some cues from the competition.”* The manager of SME-G emphasizes the essence of *“customer caring.”* The SME-H manager said he recommends, *“Start with listening to customers and understanding what their needs and wants are and concerns about your product.”* Argote, McEvily, and Reagans (2003) find information sharing to be a critical factor in relationships as it facilitates knowledge management context mapping. Our findings that interactive communications not only generate new knowledge but strengthen relationship trust are in agreement with the findings of Ballantyne and Varey (2006). Figure 1 depicts the identified concepts—listening, understanding, and customer needs identification—as constituting the theme of relationship learning (appendix 2). Selnes and Sallis (2003) found that communication exchange in relationships positively influences performance.

4.2 Knowledge Integration

Absorptive capacity is the ability to recognize, integrate, and effectively utilize by integrating acquired knowledge in order to benefit from its value (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). An organization's culture, specifically its capability of retaining knowledge and experiential learning,

influences its absorptive capacity (Lane & Lubatkin, 1998). The organization-A director, emphasizing the evolving role of the manager, says, “*He should be a partner and colleague to the customer.*” The manager has become a business developer instead of being a mere salesman. This is crucial in helping identify growth opportunities as sometimes a customer may not be aware that he is a potential customer, according to the director of organization-B. “*He [manager] can go to the client and say, “Listen, we have an idea we wish to discuss with you, and you are sitting on a valuable opportunity that we could develop together.”*” The organization-C general manager of marketing said, “*Using analytics in big data*” is the successful way forward in the existing business environment. The data analytics provide interesting insight, including insights into customer behavior and purchasing behavior, hence helping identify relationship profitability. These analytics assist in gauging how well-identified customer needs are being met. Based on the findings, a plan of action can be redeveloped to meet organizational goals.

In addition to the large organization sharing discussed above, the SME-E manager says by listening carefully and understanding the customer issues, “*we can listen to the customer’s needs, and then we can make some amendments.*” This helps in offering a solution that better addresses the customer's needs. Van Wijk, Jansen, and Lyles (2008) highlighted intra-firm sharing as having a strong influence on performance results as compared to interfirm sharing. The SME-F director illustrates the importance of intra-firm sharing when he says that “*we review market updates, progress, and feedback. We have meetings scheduled where we discuss changes and amendments required; change is not natural, and technical people resist and argue against it. We have good sharing, and then we decide on the latest happenings and customer’s feedback.*” Experiential learning involving sharing within organizational units is not only pertinent but productive and able to produce the desired outcome. The results of Mason and Leek (2008) maintain that intra-organizational knowledge flows are predominantly vertical, whereas knowledge flows are primarily horizontal in inter-organizational contexts.

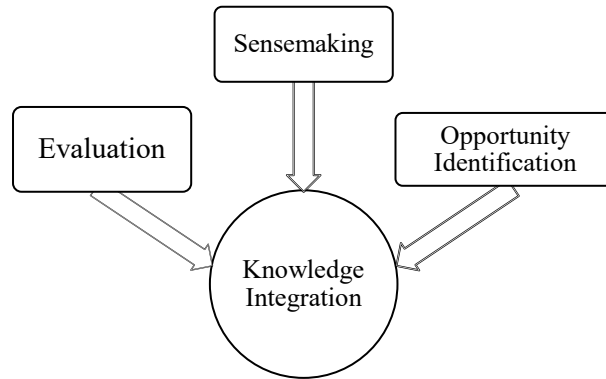


Figure 2: Knowledge Integration Theme 2

Figure 2 depicts the concepts of evaluation, sensemaking, and opportunity identification as constituting the theme of knowledge integration (appendix 3). The analysis indicates that internal discussions help review the existing scenario and evaluate acquired knowledge about customers, competitors, and offerings performance. Sense making is crucial in these meetings because it allows an evaluation of addressing customer needs, competitor positioning, and unit and organizational goals achievement. Data analytics explain relationship behavior and provide insight into developing trends and areas requiring attention. Evaluation of these performance indicators helps when revisiting the plan to address customer needs.

4.3 Value Creation

Gupta and Lehman (2005) bifurcate value into two groups: one group consisting of value for the supplier (i.e., value appropriation) and the other group consisting of value for the customer (i.e., value creation). Vargo and Lusch (2008) highlight a characteristic of value creation, saying that it can take place during supplier-buyer interactions where ‘the core of interaction is a physical, virtual, or mental contact’ (Grönroos and Voima, 2013: 140). Our findings confirm these study results. Organizations need to nurture flexible internal development mechanisms, which will enable them to consistently offer solutions to keep pace with evolving market changes. The Organization-A manager explains the internal processes, “*we have a matrix for every department, which lead us to achieve the target that we had set.*” The manager described these processes into three subparts, pre-processes, product involvement processes, and product development processes.

They integrate the learning from the suppliers and customers, besides including old ideas into it as well. Their management along with managers have been doing systematical work to break down barriers and develop sub-optimization in departments through key performance indicators. However, all these processes provide information requiring decision making on which opportunity to use and which ones to leave out. Hence, requiring active management role in decision making.

Our study respondents emphasize the role of senior management, and the manager of SME-F explains that “*senior management is influential in achieving success by leading the way to address and prioritize solutions.*” The manager of R&D at SME-G validates that “*senior management usually reacts more positively. They see the information as a possibility. In product or service development, they may see it as something that will take resources, so then they sometimes may be quite critical of the change.*” Sawhney (2006) explains that a custom-made product and service-integrated offering is an organizational solution to satisfy identified customer needs. The director of SME-H says, “*The customer-focused strategy is the key. If we are not able to do that, our offerings will not be aligned with the customer needs.*” The evaluation of acquired knowledge, integration into organizational knowledge, sensemaking, and careful deliberations help an organization plan solutions that align with identified needs.

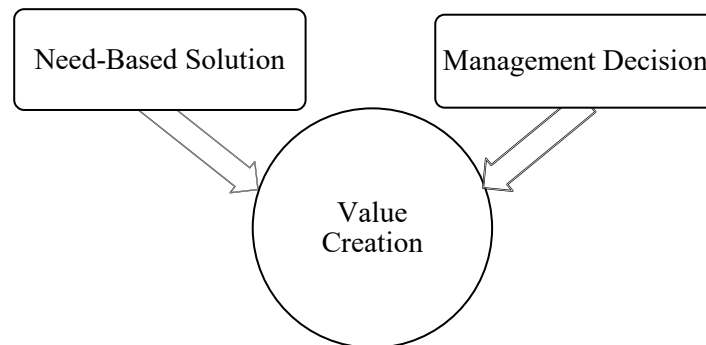


Figure 3: Value Creation Theme 3

Figure 3 depicts that the identified concepts of management decisions and satisfying customer needs constitute the theme of value creation (appendix 4). Inter-organizational relationships have various interaction levels, and how a specific relationship contributes to the

cumulative learning rooted in experiential knowledge differs. The internalization of learning is bottom-up, and its integration process follows a pattern. However, sensemaking-based decision making is top-down.

4.4 Relationship Learning Knowledge Development Process

Our work explores “micro-processes of internationalization and breaks down the phenomenon into more finely grained processes. Micro-processes that have been investigated include inward–outward connections, which allow firms to use relationships and knowledge gained through importing, for example, to be used for exporting within mode changes” (c.f. Welch & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2014, p. 14). Buckley and Chapman (1997) also suggest that this idea of a micro-process is essential because internationalizing, for some firms, may only comprise a single product, function, or division rather than a whole firm. Welch and Paavilainen-Mäntymäki (2014) advised future researchers not to treat the organization as a single unit. Our study follows their recommendation that future researchers can identify various internationalization conduits ongoing in various time frames with several organizational relationships or markets following a different entry mode and pace.

We present a conceptualization in Figure 4 below that conceptualizes how relationship learning can identify growth opportunities for internationalizing organizations. The opportunity realization or growth commitment offers an attractive way forward. The thematic results in the relationship learning knowledge development process model (see Figure 4) provide valuable insight into understanding consumer preferences and supplier decision making, changing market trends, and acquired knowledge integration for value creation. Our analysis identifies organizational learning through relationship interactions as a significant source of insights that enable effective and efficient decision making.

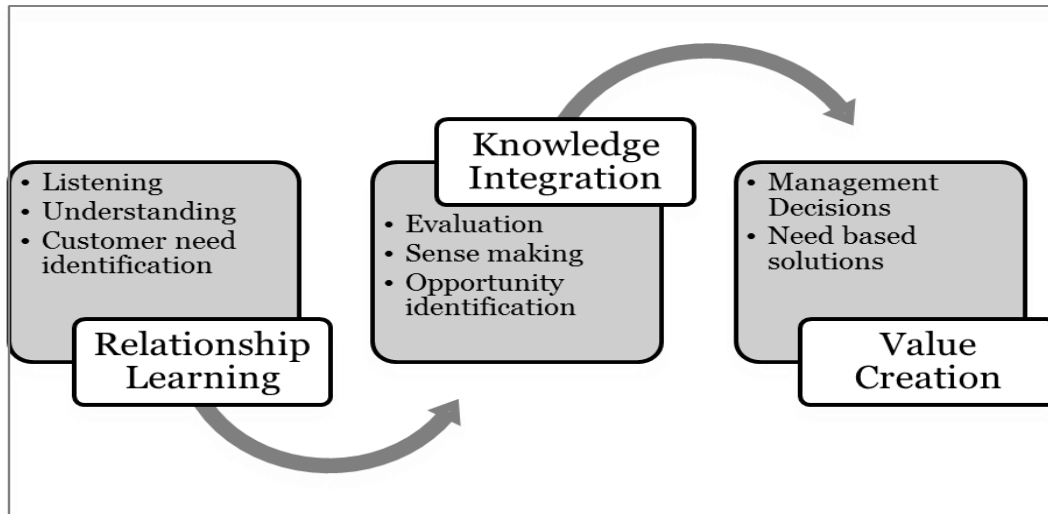


Figure 4: Relationship Learning Knowledge Development Process Model

This study links to Day (1994, p. 9), who raised the following questions: “Why do firms lose touch with their markets? Why are they surprised by shifts in customer requirements, slow to react to emerging competitors, and unprepared to use innovative channel arrangements?” These critical questions help advance the discussion on learning, and as Day (1994, p. 9) stated, learning is not merely “taking in information.” Our findings are in line with Chini (2004), who suggests that in order to conceptualize organizations' knowledge sharing process, it is essential to study the circumstances in which knowledge is shared. Our study explains how knowledge sharing takes place in inter-organizational interactions, how acquired learning integration occurs, and how an organizations’ decision making about growth opportunities takes place. Figure 4 explains the relationship knowledge development process through learning in an inter-organizational relationship in which interacting firms may identify growth opportunities. Internationalizing organizations should continuously nurture their relationship development capability. The exploitation of identified opportunities through commitment(s) in line with the Uppsala model (2017) presents a productive advancement.

Organizations should stay updated on their customers' needs and their markets’ evolving trends. Failing to do so means they will not only miss out on opportunities but lose market share. The rapid advancements in the global market require constant knowledge updating and vigilance to stay competitive. Those organizations that actively pursue learning and integrate acquired knowledge perform better than others. They are prepared to address the required changes and put

in place updated routines and processes. The findings show that successful growing organizations have a system of addressing opportunities through effective decision making for opportunity exploitation. The sustainability of any organization lies in creating value for its customers as well as deriving profit for itself from the created value (Kumar & Reinartz, 2016). This study explores inter-organizational relationship learning as a dynamic organizational capability that influences identification of growth opportunities. Change in commitment is expanding existing or new relationships and or markets as explained in the Uppsala model by Vahlne and Johanson (2017).

Growing competition, commoditization, and price erosion offer innovative ways for an organization to reap higher profits and create product differentiation by presenting value-based solutions. Respondents of the study affirm that, along with the varying level of trust in a relationship, the level of sharing relevant information by customers also varies. Some proactive firms are involved in strategic development programs continuously in order to guide and train their employees about the change process, and the firm's top management supports these programs. Customer involvement through information sharing and the contribution of the right individuals and their expertise in the firm processes can nurture value creation. Our results show that interacting individuals are the learning agents that act as repositories for a firm's critical knowledge. The whole learning process is influenced by how interpersonal interactions between the sharing and acquiring firms take place. Continuous change in the market environment demands steady growth, which can be achieved when a firm pursues a growth strategy that adds services to its products.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

To sum up, we address the call for research by studies identified in Table 1 and explore relationship learning in inter-organizational relationships. Supplier-customer interactions over time strengthen the organizations' mutual trust and lay the foundation for conduits ensuring open, frank generation and sharing of knowledge. The interacting individuals in relationships are the actual learning agents of the organization, and they carry the acquired knowledge. Therefore, relationship interactions are decisive in terms of communications as they eventually influence the organizational learning process. Personal relationships are developed through open communication, enabling the communicating individuals to discuss future opportunities and

commitment possibilities confidently. Sense making is integral in this process as it enables acquisition of knowledge that can lead to opportunities to deal with unmet needs of customers or shortcomings of the offering. An intimate supplier-customer working relationship encourages activities for value creation or co-creation based on feedback or expert opinion in order to develop a need-based solution. The management prioritization of which solution options or opportunities to undertake and which to drop precedes the value creation activities.

Coviello et al. (2017) signify an individual's role as decision-maker central in the interpretation of organizations' internationalization process, i.e., "core micro foundation in the internationalization process" (pg. 1151). As a result, better understanding of individuating by opportunity creation and exploitation and transacting to push required relationship exchanges to benefit from those opportunities. Firstly our work theoretically contributes to the literature on international business and entrepreneurship by responding to the call (Contractor et al., 2019; Coviello et al. 2017), focusing on micro-foundations level inter-organizational exchanges, and explaining how relationship learning is a means of building dynamic capability influencing the firms' internationalization process. We address the role of individual in acquiring knowledge through interactions that may contain exploitable opportunities. We explain this learning through individual interactions by employing qualitative thematic analysis studying relationship learning in large multinational organizations and small and medium enterprises. The research explores how inter-organizational learning evolves in supplier relationships. The acquired learning provides knowledge of the customers' pattern of consumption of the offering and awareness of their current and future needs.

Our results identify that improved customer need understanding facilitates organizations to identify business opportunities. They arise from close association with customers. The results confirm that knowledge sharing and level of relationship trust are directly proportional. The findings indicate that the organizational manager's experiential learning contributes to bridging the organizations' knowledge gap. Individuals' ability to listen attentively, be responsive, and understand customers' operational process helps find offering solutions to address customer needs. Organizations have several ongoing relationships in their value chain, and organizations' opportunity-seeking motivation can be internal or external. Opportunities and resources must be provided for interaction and employee relationship building in an organizations' networks. The

closeness of these relationships brings forth better understanding of needs, leading to fulfilment of organizational goals through efficient decision making.

Secondly, the study contributes by identifying the customer as a primary source of learning in the organizational value chain, helping align offerings with identified needs. The results highlight how organizations learn through individual-level interactional processes, contributing to an organizations' customer need comprehension. These interactions are an essential instrument at the micro-level, providing knowledge and learning that consequently influence an organizations' macro-level factors. The outcomes of individual actions eventually are transformative by connecting identified opportunities into organizational growth. The results depict that successful organizations effectively explore and deeply analyze their consumer data to identify the change in behavior, trends and emerging needs. The data mining sense-making provides consumer preferences and behavior insight leading to revisiting strategy (if required) and future action plan. In-depth analytics identify consumer segments that are not profitable, and hence approaching them differently — in-depth analytics aid in planning a strategy for non-consumer segments as well.

The third contribution of this work is identifying how learning through relationships in the knowledge development process (Vahlne and Bhatti, 2019) influences changes in commitments through opportunity exploitation, leading to growth in the existing or a new market. This study is unique in the sense that it is centered on individual learning in supplier-customer relationships and aids in understanding customer needs and translation of the attained knowledge into organizational processes for value creation. Understanding these associations are of great substance as micro-level organizational relations influence macro foundation factors. For instance, international growth is an outcome of individual actions that connect and transform opportunities into international growth. Relationship learning as an organizational competence can lay the foundation for organizational signature processes, hence aiding in the implementation of an efficient strategy and business model. The organizations that develop stronger competence display effective technological and market responsiveness. These competencies drive an organizational performance that is shaped and supported by internal resources (Teece, 2017). The knowledge acquired through relationships is experiential and learned physically. This knowledge acquired through interactions in relationships can influence organizational market competitiveness.

Our study respondents explain how they acquired knowledge by learning through customers' sharing. Open communications strengthened the relationship, leading to better understanding and improved learning of the customer requirements. This knowledge helps in planning the offering. Also, this experience provides confidence to reach out to non-customers and experiment with the organizations' offering, which enables expansion in the organizations' international customer base. One of the case study organizations learned to provide a solution to a customer along with their competitors; this learning not only changed perspective but also their competitiveness. The experiential learning opened new growth options for the organization. One of our large case study organizations identified an opportunity in the international market, and instead of pursuing it independently, the organization approached an established host country client for collaboration and has now successfully executed the solution. The SME's reliance on owner/founder knowledge focused on learning, which strengthened its product development. The organization's reputation for customer care, customized solutions, and professional attitude has created global growth opportunities for this internationalizing SME. Now customers approach the organization directly, and the organization is expecting more revenue generation from the global market than the Nordic market.

The supplier-customer interactions over time, fortify mutual trust, opening a fluid conduit for sharing and knowledge exchange. Interacting actors are the integral agents of organizational learning as well as knowledge carriers; hence, it is essential to realize how these interactions take place as this influences the long-term learning process. We found relationship learning is a standard process among both groups (large and SME organizations) through interactions with managers and staff members, or by visiting distributors, markets, exhibitions, seminars, workshops, training, or any such internationalization-related activity. A commonality among both groups is a structural, proactive, and systematic sense-making of acquired learning to evaluate potential trends and identified opportunities in existing and new markets.

We expect those organizations whose leadership can discover through exploring new disruptive business models instead of focusing on existing ones to thrive in the future, hence ensuring growth and longevity. This requires top management to foresee the future, employing a sense-making mechanism in the knowledge development process and envisioning evolving

changes so that decision making results in an offering that addresses the changes. However, this is not easy as most managers are focused on smooth quarterly or short-term gains.

Our study provides several practical implications for management. Our conceptualization in figure 4 can guide organizations in knowledge development process. Interacting managers must be encouraged to establish transparent and open communication channels as they are vital in order to interact with customers. An understanding of customers' operations, their issues, and the jobs they have to perform are essential prerequisites for offering a solution to customers' needs. In an evolving business environment, management shall get customers involved in offering solution. In offering solutions, customer involvement is a source of valuable input and drives the motivation to work more closely, which consequently results in an increased commitment to relationships. Value creation by providing customized solutions aids in fostering a supplier's economic returns in the form of value appropriation. Those firms that follow such steps have successfully exploited market opportunities identified through relationship learning and, as a result, have grown internationally.

Our findings offer valuable insight for interacting managers [individuals]. Firstly, a manager's ability to amass and share with sources outside their organizations enhances their industry and professional knowledge. The higher is the participation level of management as leaders in prioritizing solutions, the higher is the smoothness and efficiency in delivering offerings. Furthermore, providing employees regular educational and technical training can polish their skills in identifying market opportunities and customer needs. Second, it is essential to understand that the critical components of practical knowledge sharing include coherence among organizations in terms of learning, establishing a strong personal relationship with clients, giving importance to their communication, and understanding their work. Third, the alignment of a customer's needs with an organization's offerings is highly dependent upon the precision of acquired knowledge communication, practical assessment, and the sensemaking process.

To conclude, despite the contributions our study makes to the literature, it has limitations. First, we believe the findings can be further enriched by including customer learning. Second, other factors influencing relationship-learning may also be explored. Third, it would be interesting to investigate the learning through relationship interactions using quantitative methods. We

recommend that future researchers investigate the learning processes across markets and industries instead of organizations. One question is exploring similarity and comparability of such processes across the emerging markets. A probable future research opportunity lies in exploring whether organizational knowledge sharing and learning vary among ones with a few years of experience operating internationally and a new entrant. What other antecedents play a role in knowledge stickiness or discourage knowledge sharing between different size firms across markets and industries?

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Appendix 1 Alphabetical List of First-Order Themes

The identified codes are combined into 81 first-order themes

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyze market, Company Widgets; • Ask how to improve it; • Based on market intelligence review offerings and correcting our product errors; • Be Communicative and lead the way; • Be flexible to meet the needs; • Be patient; • Be Receptive, be a partner to customer, not a salesman; • Being concerned and attentive to client; • Client challenges and goals to achieve; • Client focused strategy; • Client working process understanding helps identify challenges and how we can address them; • Co-involvement; • Collaborate with them; • Communication is key; • Compare offerings, and customer needs to highlight difference. • Customer caring; • Customer feedback issues based; • Data mining; • Deal negative response with positive approach and see how to address it; • Decisions based on customer sharing /feedback and market activities; • Departmental cooperation; • Develop and present a solution like a consultant; • Develop growth plan to address needs; • Develop institutional knowledge through clients; • Develop integration systems to address needs; • Develop market intelligence; • Direct Interaction is key; • Employee education plan; • Evaluating need and how to meet it; • Focus on shared information; • Follow the internal system; • Gather field information; What should we do?; • Get involved with customer to provide solution; • Get involved with them, develop market intelligence; • Hard look at company and addressing identified gaps, Prioritizing Solutions; • Highlight client challenges and goals to achieve through problem-solving; • How to address it?; correcting our product errors; • How to align offerings with client needs; • How to benefit from client need through revised or improved offering? • How to correct the product design issues / learn from mistakes; • How well you are meeting customer needs; • Identify and understand client market segment; • Identify cases and present in training, workshops as example; • Identify trend; • Identifying customer product utility process & market changes; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying market trend; • Identifying product relationships and behavioral patterns of customers; • Important to share and involve the team; • Innovation is continuous activity; • Innovation is everyone's business; • Integrate learning from suppliers and customers into existing knowledge; • Interact with the client. Ask Questions, Simple; • Internal brainstorming after sharing; • Involve clients in prototype process; • Involve R&D with client for solutions; • Involve the customer and then do your homework; • Know your product and Listen to them; • Leadership role of management in change and going forward • Learn and understand customer working; • Management involvement in meetings; • Market research with customers and prospects, Resonate customer feedback with your offering; • Most opportunities are found in client sharing; • Must be well versed about own product to know client issues with it; • Must understand client usage of our products to know the client issues with it. • None (information) unless you are in close working with them; • Nothing possible without management understanding; • Open approach to ideas and needs prioritizing implementations; • Openness in relationship; • Pay attention to what he says and not says; • Prioritise them; • Problem-solving; • Products, process improvements changes; • Resonate customer feedback with your offering; • Share feedback, their needs, new upcoming needs; • Share information and views openly; • Strong decision making required on what and why of prioritizing • Strong internal system is key; • the Customer, is always the priority; • Understanding of the customer's needs; • Update internally on meetings and identify means of solutions; • We need to think differently, and out of comfort zone; • What are needs not met?
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Appendix 2 First, Second and Third-Order Relationship Learning Theme

First-order	Concepts	Theme
<p>Be patient; Communication is key; Prioritise them; Develop institutional knowledge through clients; understanding of the customer's needs; Learn and understand customer working; Interact with client; Being concerned and attentive to client; Know your product and Listen to them; Customer caring; Be Receptive, be a partner to customer, not a salesman; Being concerned and attentive to client; Pay attention to what he says and not says; Direct Interaction is key; Pay attention; Interact with the client. Ask Questions, Simple; Customer care.</p>	<p>Listening</p>	<p>Relationship Learning</p>
<p>Develop institutional knowledge through clients; Involve with them; Must be well versed about own product to know client issues with it; Being concerned and attentive to client; Customer caring; Know your product and Listen to them; Collaborate with them; Openness in relationship; Direct Interaction is key; Must understand client usage of our products to know the client issues with it.</p>	<p>Understanding</p>	
<p>Resonate customer feedback with your offering; Identifying market trend; What are needs not met?; Problem-solving; Client challenges and goals to achieve; None unless you are in close working with them; Get involved with them; Develop market intelligence; Market research with customers and prospects, Resonate customer feedback with your offering; Highlight client challenges and goals to achieve through problem-solving; Get involved with them, develop market intelligence; Focus on shared information; Most opportunities are found in client sharing; Identifying customer product utility process & market changes; Ask how to improve it; co-involvement; Client working process understanding helps identify challenges and how we can address them; Compare offerings, and customer needs to highlight difference.</p>	<p>Customer Need Identification</p>	

Appendix 3 First, Second and Third-Order Knowledge Integration Theme

First-order	Concepts	Theme
Develop integration systems to address needs; Share information and views openly; Integrate learning from suppliers and customers into existing knowledge; How well you are meeting customer needs; Gather field information; What should we do?; Analyse market, Company Widgets; Data mining; Internal brainstorming after sharing; How to correct the design/ learn from mistakes; Evaluating need and how to meet it; Identify cases and present in training, workshops as example; Strong internal system is key; Departmental cooperation;	Evaluation	Knowledge Integration
share feedback, their needs, new upcoming needs; Deal negative response with positive approach and see how to address it; Update internally on meetings and identify means of solutions; Product design or specification issues; Analyse market, Company Widgets; Data mining; Identifying product relationships and behavioural patterns of customers; How to correct the design/ learn from mistakes?; Evaluating need and how to meet it; Identify cases and present in training, workshops as example; Departmental cooperation; Identify trend; How to correct the product design issues / learn from mistakes; Based on market intelligence review offerings and correcting our product errors; Evaluating need and how to meet it;	Sense-making	
Involve R&D with client for solutions; Identify and understand client market segment; How to benefit from client need through revised or improved offering?; How to address it?; correcting our product errors; Based on market intelligence we review our offerings; Develop growth plan to address needs; Be flexible to meet the needs; Follow the internal system; Develop growth plan to address needs;	Opportunity Identification	

Appendix 4 First, Second and Third-Order Value Creation Theme

First-order	Concepts	Theme
<p>Employee education plan; Products, process improvements changes; How to align offerings with client needs; Innovation is everyone's business; Innovation is continuous activity; Important to share and involve the team; Nothing possible without management understanding; Open approach to ideas and needs prioritising implementations; Decisions based on customer sharing /feedback and market activities; Develop and present a solution like a consultant; Management involvement in meetings; Hard look at company and addressing identified gaps, Prioritising Solutions; We need to think differently, and out of comfort zone; Be Communicative and lead the way; Leadership role of management in change and going forward</p>	<p>Management Decisions</p>	<p>Value Creation</p>
<p>Nothing possible without management understanding; Get involved with customer to provide solution; Involve clients in prototype process; Customer feedback issues based; Involve the customer and then do your homework; the Customer, is always the priority; Client focused strategy; Strong decision making required on what and why of prioritising</p>	<p>Need Based Solution</p>	