



Information, knowledge and collaboration management in the internationalisation of SMEs: A systematic literature review



Eric Costa*, António Lucas Soares, Jorge Pinho de Sousa

INESC TEC—INESC Technology and Science and FEUP—Faculty of Engineering, University of Porto, Campus da FEUP, Rua Dr. Roberto Frias 378, 4200-465 Porto, Portugal

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ABSTRACT

Information and knowledge can be seen as key resources for improving the internationalisation processes of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Collaboration has also been considered as an important facilitator of these processes, particularly by nurturing information and knowledge sharing. However, the current literature is unclear about the way SMEs can access information and assimilate knowledge in a collaborative network context, to support decision-making. This paper systematically reviews the literature, examining the role of information, knowledge and collaboration in internationalisation decisions of SMEs. To this end, 38 relevant journal articles were analysed, with the identification of some important issues, as well as gaps in the existing empirical knowledge. This analysis provided valuable input for the development of research suggestions and directions for future work in this area.

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1. Introduction

There is growing evidence that internationalisation has become a key requirement for SMEs to gain competitive advantage which results in an increasing effort in managing the companies' internationalisation processes (Dutot, Bergeron, & Raymond, 2014; Schweizer, 2012). The effectiveness of those processes is directly related with the way companies manage internationalisation related information (Benito, Solberg, & Welch, 1993; Child & Hsieh, 2014; Knight & Liesch, 2002), establish collaborative networks (Ciravegna, Lopez, & Kundu, 2014; Musteen, Francis, & Datta, 2010; Spence, Manning, & Crick, 2008) and learn and use internationalisation related knowledge (Basly, 2007; Fletcher & Harris, 2012; Rodríguez, Barcos, & Álvarez, 2010).

Information of greater explicitness and broader scope allows for a more rational decision-making (Child & Hsieh, 2014), but the decision-makers capability for identifying, seeking and processing information is also essential for more effective internationalisation decisions (Hsu, Chen, & Cheng, 2013). Information and knowledge are recognised as crucial to manage international complexity and ambiguity (Hsu et al., 2013), to reduce risks and uncertainty (Nguyen, Barrett, & Fletcher, 2006), and to stimulate

awareness of foreign market opportunities (Zhou, Wu, & Luo, 2007). From another perspective, it has been found that collaboration, in particular when it unfolds in the context of networks, is an important facilitator in the internationalisation of SMEs (Hutchinson, Alexander, Quinn, & Doherty, 2007). In making part of collaborative networks, SMEs' internationalisation processes benefit in ways such as: (i) providing decision-makers with important channels of information and knowledge (Musteen et al., 2010); (ii) influencing the approach adopted by SMEs' leaders (Child & Hsieh, 2014); (iii) influencing decisions on foreign market selection and entry mode (Ibeh & Kasem, 2011); (iv) allowing to increase rapidly international commitment (Kalinic, Sarasvathy, & Forza, 2013); and (v) overcoming resource constraints (Ciravegna et al., 2014). However, many SMEs still face major challenges and obstacles in obtaining the right information and manage it effectively to support the internationalisation processes, thus limiting the creation and accumulation of knowledge about those processes (Hsu et al., 2013; Nguyen et al., 2006). In addition, in the current literature, it is not clear how SMEs assimilate information from their networks and collaboration activities for making better decisions in terms of internationalisation.

The main objective of this paper is to analyse, synthesise and present a comprehensive systematic literature review (SLR) of the role of information, knowledge and collaboration in internationalisation decisions of SMEs. With this literature review, that is predominantly descriptive and inductive in nature, the authors intended to identify the big challenges for information

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: eric.m.costa@inesctec.pt (E. Costa), als@fe.up.pt (A.L. Soares), jsousa@inescporto.pt (J.P. de Sousa).

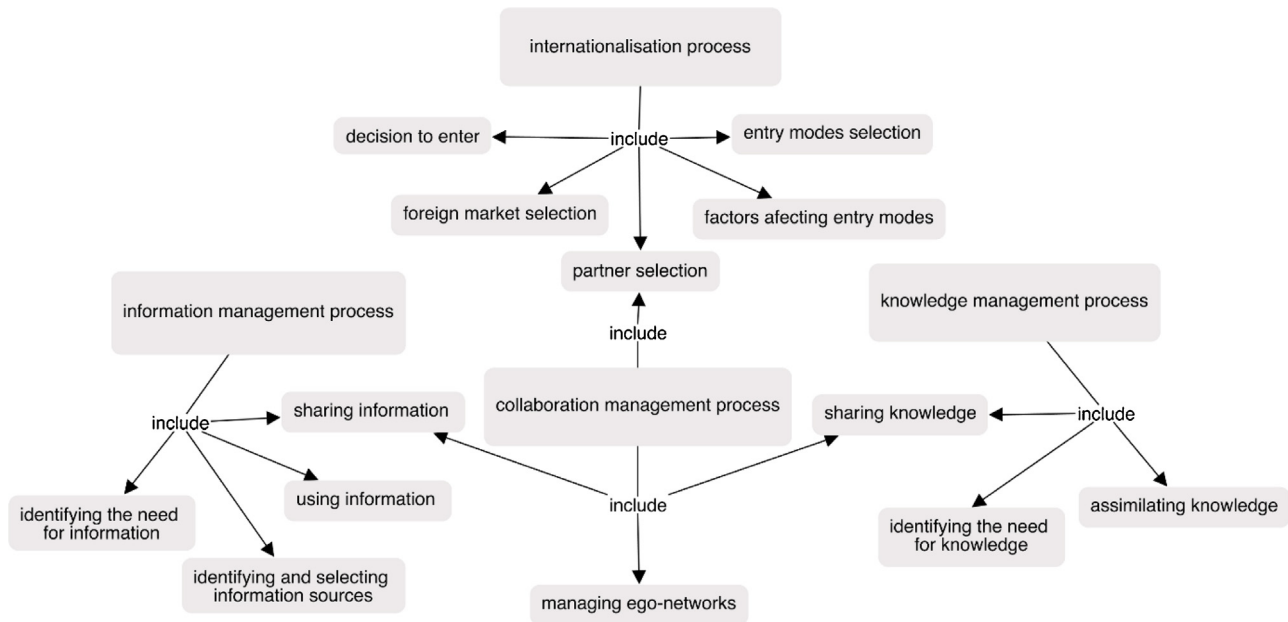


Fig. 1. Main topics related with information, collaboration and knowledge considered in the literature addressing the internationalisation of SMEs.

management as applied to internationalisation processes and the decisions involved in those processes. The review also aimed at analysing how information and knowledge are used and managed for decision-making, as well as how SMEs manage collaboration activities. Thus, the research questions for this SLR are:

RQ1: what is the role of information, collaboration and knowledge in the effectiveness of the SMEs' internationalisation processes?

RQ2: what topics and issues related with information, collaboration and knowledge are considered when SMEs manage their internationalisation processes?

Accordingly, this paper uncovers challenges for researchers in information and knowledge management in designing new artifacts such as collaborative information management platforms fostering innovative models for decision-making and knowledge creation and dissemination as a way to achieve more rational, less uncertain internationalisation processes. Additionally, this SLR contributes to the scientific knowledge on business management and internationalisation by: (i) studying in detail the influence of the above referred thematic areas in the internationalisation of SMEs, with specific focus on decision-making processes; (ii) identifying some of the research gaps in the existing literature; (iii) suggesting directions for future research.

In a preliminary analysis of the selected literature (38 papers) an overarching conceptualisation (a kind of basic ontology) was developed (see Fig. 1). It is this conceptualisation that will be used to organise the findings (Section 3) and it will be referred to in the discussion and future research section (Section 4).

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2 describes the research methodology applied for this paper, which follows a SLR five-step approach. Section 3 presents the findings of the SLR, organised according to the conceptualisation described in Fig. 1. Section 4 discusses the obtained results, presenting meaningful research suggestions and directions for future work. Section 5 and Section 6 provide some limitations and conclusions of the paper.

2. Research methodology

This research followed the systematic literature review (SLR) methodology (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003) as opposed to tra-

ditional narrative or descriptive reviews. Using a SLR approach it is possible to create a basic framework for a more in-depth analysis of the literature, adopting a replicable, scientific and transparent process (Tranfield et al., 2003). As suggested by Denyer and Tranfield (2009), a scoping study (exploratory review) of the field was produced prior to the SLR, in order to: (i) clarify the existing basis for the work to be developed; (ii) specify the fit of the proposed SLR into the current body of knowledge; (iii) define concepts; (iv) determine the research questions to be addressed.

Therefore, this paper systematically reviews relevant literature on the role of information, knowledge and collaboration in the effectiveness of making decisions in internationalisation processes of SMEs. The underlying adopted SLR followed a five-step approach, as outlined by Denyer and Tranfield (2009) and Wong, Skipworth, Godsell, and Achimugu (2012):

- 1) question formulation;
- 2) locating studies;
- 3) study selection and evaluation;
- 4) analysis and synthesis;
- 5) reporting and using the results.

The following research questions were defined for this study (Step 1): what is the role of information, collaboration and knowledge in the effectiveness of the SMEs' internationalisation processes? what topics and issues related with information, collaboration and knowledge are considered when SMEs manage their internationalisation processes?

The Step 2 concerns the selection of the bibliographic database or search engine, as well as the definition of the search criteria or search strings. The search was tightly aligned with the research questions. Following similar literature reviews (Camargo-Pérez, Carrillo, & Montoya-Torres, 2014; Hassini, Surti, & Searcy, 2012; Kamal & Irani, 2014) two bibliographic databases were used: Web of Science and Scopus. These databases cover a significant proportion of the published material on internationalisation, including the most relevant peer-reviewed journals on the area. Table 1 presents the search strings applied and the number of results obtained.

The initial search strings using the two bibliographic databases resulted in the identification of 1.361 articles, i.e. 655 for Web of

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