

**THE ANTECEDENTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF UTILIZATION IN
INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIC ALLIANCES**

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ABSTRACT

In this conceptual paper, the authors examine the postinternational strategic alliance establishment process by focusing on the interrelationships surrounding utilization as a resource coordinating activity. As the antecedents of utilization, they have gleaned from the literature four communication variables (i.e., formal, informal, competitive, and cooperative communications). Employing as a theoretical foundation the resource-based view of the research stream on strategic alliances, they have developed a conceptual model that depicts the influences of the four communication variables on utilization and, subsequently, on international strategic alliance (ISA) performance. They have also constructed a 2x2 table to illustrate the impact of these variables on utilization when they interact. In this paper, the authors seek to fill a research gap that is rich in evaluating the beginning and the end of the ISA operation, yet is very poor in studying the post-ISA establishment process. Using the derived model, the authors generate propositions and discuss conclusions and future research directions.

INTRODUCTION

International strategic alliances (ISAs) have helped firms achieve numerous competitive advantages in the global business environment. Some of these benefits include (a) expanding the firm's market base by entering new markets, (b) acquiring unique and cheap resources (new technology or labor), developing new products, and improving overall operational effectiveness. These tangible advantages have prompted numerous firms to engage in these fruitful cross-border alliances (Inkpen & Beamish, 1997; Kang & Sakai, 2000; Kaufmann & O'Neill, 2007; Simonin, 2004; Voss, Johnson, Cullen, Sakano, & Takenouchi, 2006; Wahyuni, Ghauri, & Karsten, 2007), while scholars continue to explore ISA viability.

Diverse research streams have been explored to better understand design issues, operation factors, and their overall performance (Gulati, 1998; Reus & Ritchie III, 2004; Robson, Spyropoulou, & Al-Khalifa, 2006; Rodriguez, 2005; Wong, Tjosvold, & Zhang, 2005). However, the literature has focused on the beginning and ending operational stages of the ISA, neglecting to examine

fully the middle operational stages of the ISA (Dyer, Kale, & Singh, 2001; Reuer, 2000). Little attention has been given to how ISA partners should develop their relationship after the ISA is created, especially how they should cooperate to effectively manage resources contributed by each partner to achieve each partner's alliance objectives (Reuer, 2000). The current ISA research on the dynamics of the postformation, alliance process and how the process affects ISA performance are limited (Das & Teng, 2000; Doz, 1996; Reuer, Zollo, & Singh, 2002).

To fill the research gap addressed above, the authors first develop the concept of utilization, which presents the resource management process after an ISA is formed. Second, they examine a subsequent investigation of the effects of utilization on ISA performance. Third, they employ the concept of utilization as the focus variable in delineating the post-ISA formation processes. Fourth, they present the theoretical and conceptual model illustrating the antecedents (i.e. communication dimensions) and consequences (ISA performance) of utilization. Fifth, to explore the robustness of the concept of utilization, they address the impact of moderating variables (cultural sensitivity and technological turbulence) on the utilization and ISA performance relationship. Finally, they derive their propositions pertaining to the relationships between and address conclusions and future research directions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A strategic alliance is usually developed through cooperative and collaborative strategies between the partners after the alliance is initially formed (Arino & de la Torre, 1998; Teng & Das, 2008; Wong et al., 2005). A firm's primary motivation for engaging in a strategic alliance is to obtain the resources that it needs but lacks. Successful ISA partnerships allow the participating firms to capitalize on the resources that their partners bring to the table (Luo, Shenkar & Gurnani, 2008; Oliver, 1997; Simonin, 2004). To accomplish a successful ISA operation, ISA partners are required to recognize, share, exchange, and learn about each other's resources. The processes of sharing, exchanging, and learning require ISA partners to communicate effectively to successfully manage pooled resources to achieve their alliance objectives (Griffith & Harvey, 2001; Tucker, Meyer, & Westerman, 1996; Robson et al., 2006). However, the current ISA research lacks an investigation of the processes of resource aligning or coordinating between partners after an ISA initiation hinders the understanding of post-ISA formation process and its effects on ISA performance (Berdrow & Lane, 2003; Robson, Leondidou, & Katsikeas, 2002; Wahyuni et al., 2007). The resource-based view of strategic effectiveness provides a theoretical foundation for this phenomenon.

THE RESOURCE-BASED VIEW

According to the Resource-Based View (RBV), each firm has a bundle of idiosyncratic and heterogeneous resources that bring the maximum value to it through their optimal deployment (Das & Teng, 2000; Hoskisson, Hitt, Wan, & Yiu, 1999; Wernerfelt, 1984). However, these resources and their subsequent deployment might not be sufficient to achieve a competitive advantage in global markets. Therefore, each firm will attempt to form ISAs to acquire the resources it lacks by which unique resources of each firm can be combined, resulting in above-average economic returns and a sustainable competitive advantage to the firm (Ireland, Hitt, & Vaidyanath, 2002; Oliver, 1997; Wahyuni et al., 2007).

After an alliance is formed, each partner firm should continuously contribute its tangible or intangible resources to the alliance to achieve its alliance objectives. The coordinated pooling, deployment, and use of the resources provided by each partner become essential in fully utilizing the resources available within the alliance (Das & Teng, 2000; Oliver, 1997). To obtain the maximum benefits of the alliance, partner firms should effectively combine, share, transfer, and exchange resources (Barringer & Harrison, 2000). In other words, alliance partners need to develop the processes of effectively utilizing the resources contributed by each partner to achieve their alliance objectives. Therefore, the effective utilization processes of the resources will provide resource-constrained partners with chances to create value-development activities and to improve their strength against the impact of the uncertain external environment (Varadarajan & Cunningham, 1995). This is accomplished through the utilization of resources contributed by each partner firm.

UTILIZATION

Applying the above arguments about the RBV, utilization is defined as the extent to which alliance partners undertake coordinating activities to capitalize on the resources contributed by each partner to accomplish the strategic objectives of the alliance in the target markets (Choi, 2004). Utilization comes from one partner understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the other partner, thereby allowing the partnership to maximize its pooled resources effectively. The knowledge and skills of each partner are used to exploit market opportunities, carry out various alliance strategies, and generate a substantial profit. Utilization is not merely the retrieval of integrated resources to take advantage of new opportunities. It is the ability of an alliance to effectively harness and deploy resources to implement successfully its market strategy (Moorman, 1995). Moreover, the execution of new strategies sustains the competitive edge that these opportunities present.

The importance of utilization in the ISA cannot be understated. When alliances effectively utilize the partnership's resources, they can execute efficient strategies that lead to increased performance. Thus, utilization becomes one of the key indicators of alliance capabilities that help an alliance remain competitive in the marketplace (Das & Teng, 2000; Majumdar, 1998). Thus, utilization is employed as the key variable in the ISA resource utilization model.

THE ISA RESOURCE UTILIZATION MODEL

International strategic alliances are formed to take advantage of resource sharing. Together, the allies enjoy a truly symbiotic relationship while projecting a more synergistic existence. Significant increases in the chance of mutual survival, performance, and profitability underscore the importance of these alliances to the international landscape. Thus, we have now delineated a conceptual model to guide future empirical inquiry of the interrelationships of many important factors of this paradigm (see Figure 1).

COMMUNICATION FACTORS AS ANTECEDENTS OF UTILIZATION

Communication has been recognized as one of influential factors that can be effectively employed to strengthen the bond of interorganizational partner relationships (Anderson & Narus,

1990; Gassenheimer, Baucus, & Baucus, 1996; Tucker et al., 1996; Walker & Reukert, 1987). Communication is the key variable that allows interorganizational partners to facilitate mutual interactions, and information sharing and gathering (Harrison & Doerfel, 2006). In other words, communication provides opportunities for alliance partners to learn from each other and to coordinate their activities to develop and maintain a viable relationship (Yavaş, Eroğlu, & Eroğlu, 1994; Robson, Leonidou, & Katsikeas, 2006). Thus, ISA partners can accomplish and sustain a satisfactory alliance relationship through developing effective communication strategies (Griffith & Harvey, 2001; Mohr, Fisher, & Nevin, 1996). To demonstrate the possible impact of communication on utilization, we introduce two distinctive communication dimensions—frequency (formal and informal) and type (cooperative and competitive)—with four communication variables. We then explore how the four variables influence utilization.

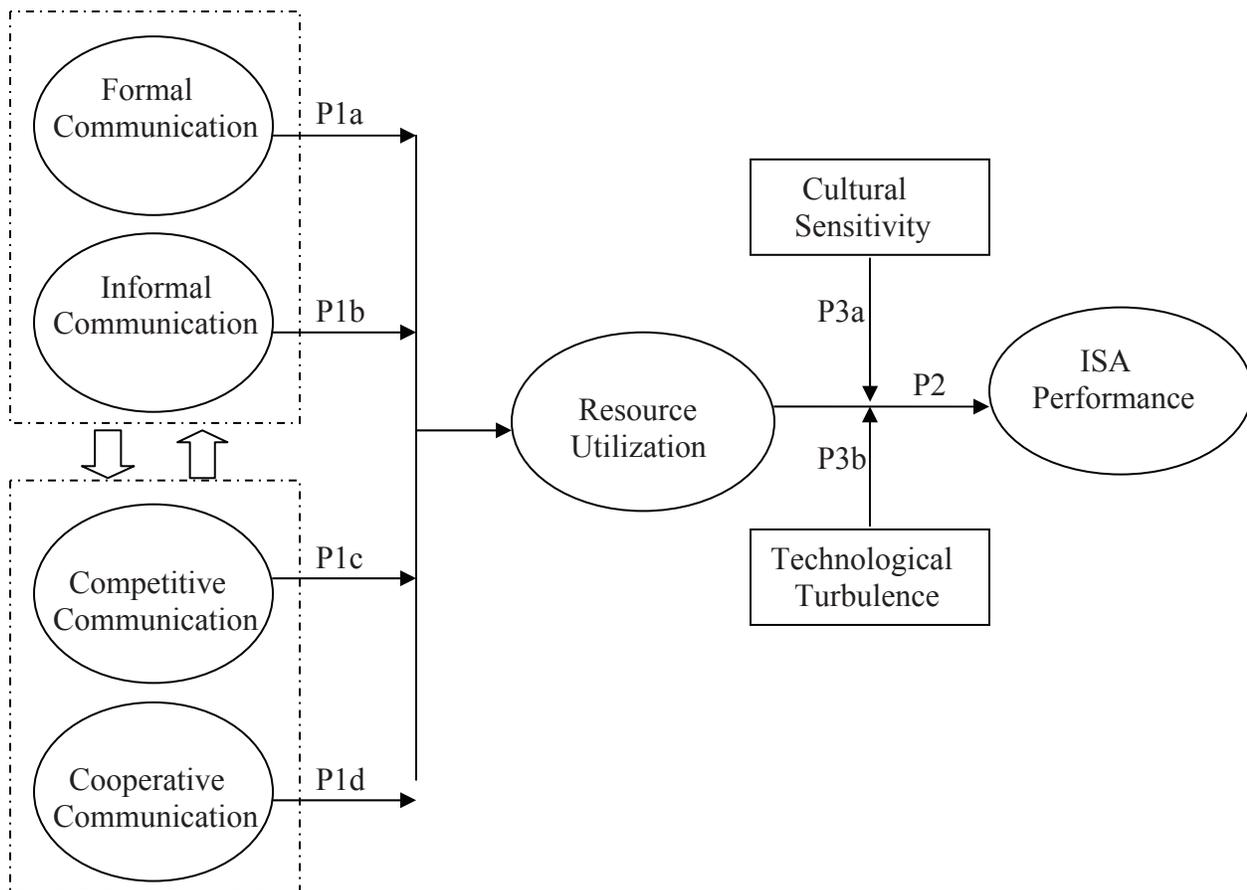


FIGURE 1: THE ISA RESOURCE UTILIZATION MODEL

Formal communication is the extent to which communication flows through written, formal rules and standardized procedures between alliance partners (Walker & Ruekert, 1987). Formal communication reduces role conflict and the ambiguity of channel members (Mohr & Nevin, 1990) and guards against alliance partner opportunism (Dahlstrom & Nygaard, 1999). Thus, it results in a higher bonding between the partners through which the exchange and sharing of knowledge can be facilitated (Tucker et al., 1996). Formal communication also provides opportunities for alliance partners to align their perceptions and expectations and to promote integrative argument, which builds a trusting alliance atmosphere (Li, Zhou, Lam, & Tse, 2006).

P1a: Formal communication is related positively to the utilization of resources in the international strategic alliance.

Informal communication is defined as personalized and spontaneous communication between alliance partners, commonly called “hall talk,” “word-of-mouth” news, or news heard “through the grapevine,” or forms of ad hoc communication (Mohr et al., 1996). Informal communication can provide more opportunities for each interfirm partner to adjust to the needs of its counterpart (Heide & Miner, 1992; Walker & Ruekert, 1987). However, this type of communication often leads to misperceptions and misunderstandings between ISA partners. Informal communication is filled with “culture-specific” sayings, jargon, and clichés. It might reduce the credibility of any knowledge communicated between interorganizational partners (Maltz, 2000). When different business practices, distinctive cultures, and varying alliance objectives exist (Rodriguez, 2005), informal communication can create an environment in which one partner demonstrates that it has the knowledge to operate in a particular cultural environment, while the other partner might feel culturally isolated. Informal communication is necessary, but it is not necessarily a sufficient condition for promoting a reliable atmosphere in the ISA (Fisher, Maltz, & Jaworski, 1997). Therefore, although informal communication might increase the understanding of the partners, its undesirable effects might outweigh its benefits in ISA operations.

P1b: Informal communication is related negatively to the utilization of the resources in the international strategic alliance.

Competitive communication is the extent to which alliance partners express or interchange ideas with each other (Harrison & Doerfel, 2006; Wong et al., 2005). Therefore, to achieve its own goals first at the expense of others, an alliance partner might not provide relevant and necessary information or resources to its partners (Tjosvold, Morishima, & Belsheim, 1999). When alliance partners employ a competitive communication strategy, they put the achievement of their personal goals as a priority, which discourages positive interactions with their partners (Harrison & Doerfel, 2006). Such communicative behavior does not support the development of quality relationships and might cause conflict among alliance partners (Wong et al., 2005). Thus, competitive communication is likely to set a tone of deceit, suspicion, and mistrust among alliance partners (Tjosvold & Wong, 2000).

P1c: Competitive communication will be related negatively to the utilization of the resources in the international strategic alliance.

Cooperative communication is the extent to which alliance partners jointly engage in sharing goals and efforts (Harrison & Doerfel, 2006). This communication strategy involves reliance on mutual support and respect to promote integrative solutions using open and accurate information and resource exchange (Alexander, Schul, & McCorkle, 1994; Tjosvold et al., 1999). In cooperative communication atmospheres, alliance partners feel that their goals are connected with each other; thus, they can enhance interactions because doing so is in their own self-interest (Wong et al., 2005). Cooperative communication facilitates their mutual efforts to reach their goals and begets supportive and empathetic communication interactions between alliance partners (Harrison and Doerfel, 2006). Cooperative communication helps to build a more reliable and trusting environment for ISA partners.

P1d: Cooperative communication will be related positively to the utilization of the resources in the international strategic alliance.

INTERACTIVE EFFECTS OF COMMUNICATION FACTORS

One of the major criticisms of conceptual academic models is that they do not realistically illustrate the full effect of interactive independent variables on the outcome. In the ISA resource utilization model, we give the individual effects of the independent variables and provide predictions regarding these impacts. However, scholars understand that, in a field as dynamic as communication, these variables interact on a daily basis and that, by ignoring the interactions, the applicability of the model to “real life” situations becomes very limited.

Table 1 examines the communication interactions that could occur in ISA partnerships. Employing the competitive–cooperative and formal–informal dimensions of communication, a 2x2 diagram is created to illustrate the interactive effects of these variables on utilization. We adequately addressed the individual influences of the communication variables in the ISA resource utilization model; nevertheless, to omit no scenario, Table 1 focuses on the interactive nature of these variables. This framework will also provide a strong, applicable foundation for future empirical inquiry.

When ISA partners exhibit both formal and competitive communication styles, one can expect only moderate utilization of the ISA’s resources (A). Formal communication has been linked positively to utilization and competitive communication has been negatively so linked; thus, a professional, but untrustworthy environment is created that leads to moderate utilization. Moderate utilization is also the byproduct of ISA partners who exhibit cooperative, informal communication styles (D). Although this communication interaction will lead to a more helpful and trusting environment, the environment will include constant misperceptions and miscommunications throughout the ISA’s processes. Over time, these misunderstandings will erode the feelings of trust and commitment that might have been fostered by a previously cooperative environment. Therefore, these two sets of communication interactions lead to moderate utilization of ISA resources.

The final two communication interactions produce environments that are at opposite sides of the utilization spectrum. When ISA partners engage in an informal, competitive communication (B), they will exhibit low utilization of the ISA’s resources. This result is due to the negative impact that both communication styles have on utilization. Alternatively, a formal, cooperative communication style (D) will create a professional, trusting, committed relationship that will lead to a high utilization of ISA resources. This ISA relationship should find the most success, be the most profitable, positively affect ISA performance at the highest level, and stand the test of time.

In summary, Table 1 provides a practitioner-oriented view of communication interactions. Visualizing and understanding how these interactions influence resource utilization and how they subsequently influence ISA performance is the first step that scholars must take in a research area where these studies are truly lacking. Of more importance to the current authors, is the

application of this paradigm to the numerous postformation ISA processes. In this fruitful area of operations, we believe practitioners will find this proposed view extremely helpful.

TABLE 1: THE LEVEL OF UTILIZATION AND COMMUNICATIONS

	Formal Communication	Informal Communication
Competitive Communication	(A) Moderate Utilization	(B) Low Utilization
Cooperative Communication	(C) High Utilization	(D) Moderate Utilization

RESOURCE UTILIZATION AND ISA PERFORMANCE

The heart of the theoretical model and its central tenet is resource utilization. The influence of utilization on ISA performance is the main effect of this model. Utilization comes from collective learning processes between alliance partners and helps them effectively and efficiently share the mutual resources available in the alliance (Muthusamy & White, 2005; Jian & Li, 2008). Utilization is the coordinated processes of transforming the mutual, heterogeneous, and unique resources into alliance resources upon which members can capitalize to accomplish their objectives. Thus, utilization is the efficient deployment and alignment of alliance resources for the successful accomplishment of alliance objectives (Das & Teng, 2000). Therefore, utilization becomes an important factor for alliance success because it allows the partners to take optimal advantage of the resources they each contribute (Dyer et al., 2001). In sum, ISAs that are proficient in their resource utilization will be more globally competitive than those that squander their resources by not maximizing their utility.

P2: The utilization of resources in an international strategic alliance is related positively to ISA performance.

The Moderators: Cultural Sensitivity and Technological Turbulence on the Relationship Between Utilization and ISA Performance

International environments where ISAs operate present unique challenges that domestic alliances do not easily encounter. Unique cultural idiosyncrasies that foreign firms face and the technological turbulence in the market generally are two frequent obstacles that ISAs should overcome to be successful in accomplishing their objectives. Such obstacles can help or constrain their mutual sharing and learning and can positively or negatively affect partnership development (Sarkar, Echambadi, Cavusgil, & Aulakh, 2001; Robson et al., 2002; Rodriguez, 2005; Voss et al., 2006). To illustrate how these obstacles can influence the utilization process and ISA performance, we present cultural sensitivity and technology turbulence and discuss their moderating effects on the relationship between utilization and ISA performance.

Cultural sensitivity refers to a partner firm's openness to other cultures and its willingness to tailor itself to the cultural differences of its partner firms (Voss et al., 2006). The willingness to accommodate cultural differences between ISA partners underscores the fundamental tenet of cultural sensitivity. Diverse business and cultural practices can easily complicate the understanding of their mutual, genuine intentions and actions, which can insert unexpected

misunderstandings, misperceptions, or suspicions between ISA partners. These situations will not promote “a healthy third culture” in which ISA partners are fully aware and appreciate each other’s cultures (Rodriguez, 2005; Skarmeas, Katsikeas, & Schlegelmilch, 2002). Therefore, a low level of cultural sensitivity between ISA partners cultivates conflicts, fosters opportunistic tendencies, and creates impediments to knowledge transfer between the partners (Johnson, Cullen, Sakano, & Takeonuchi, 1996; Simonin, 1999). However, when a high level of cultural sensitivity exists between partners, it generates high-quality information change, eases the handling of managerial and strategic discrepancies, and increases the level of more meaningful and intimate trust between ISA partners (Sarkar et al, 2001; Shapiro, Ozanne, & Saatcioglu, 2008).

P3a: Cultural sensitivity among ISA partners will moderate the relationship between the utilization of the resources and the performance of the alliance.

Technology turbulence is the change of technology in the market (Calantone, Garcia, & Dröge, 2003). A turbulent technology market is one in which the market changes over time (i.e., dynamic), market conditions are volatile (i.e., not easy to predict), and ISA firms have difficulty conducting orderly business because of changing market technologies (Chakravarthy, 1997).

When technology in the market is changing, these changes require alliance partners to cooperate to accommodate the operational changes in the alliance (Calantone et al., 2003). An alliance should monitor technology advances or innovations and react effectively to these changes to provide enhanced value to its customers. If not, the alliance cannot remain competitive in the market (Sarkar et al., 2001). An alliance that can deal with hanging technologies can also provide novel products and services to continue to be competitive in the market; therefore, monitoring technology turbulence and adjusting to it is essential if the alliance plans to develop appropriate strategies to utilize effectively their resources to achieve alliance objectives. Therefore, technological changes necessitate coordination among alliance partners to create closer and stronger links to cope with the changes (Jap, 1999). These changes are necessary for the alliance to deploy its resources effectively and to capitalize on the resources to achieve successfully the alliance objectives.

P3b: Technology turbulence in the market where an ISA operates will moderate the relationship between the utilization of the resources and the performance of the alliance.

FUTURE RESEARCH AND CONCLUSION

The primary objective of this direction in future research is to test empirically the derived propositions and the proposed interactions. This testing should give us tremendous insight to the relative influences of the important factors in the conceptual model. The comparison between equity and nonequity ISAs in terms of their resource utilization and the impact of communication styles relevant to utilization is another area of research. Equity and nonequity ISAs differ in their resource commitment to the operation of the alliances; therefore, investigation of the levels of resource utilization and the impact of communication factors on utilization, depending on the two different types of communication, will significantly increase the understanding of the overall ISA operation processes. One further inquiry lies in exploring the relationship between the

much-developed constructs (i.e., trust and commitment) in the literature on interorganizational utilization. Trust and commitment are known factors affecting interorganizational partnership development (Aulakh, Kotabe, & Sahay, 1996; Johnson et al., 1996); therefore, future research on the relationships between these factors and utilization might be meaningful and fruitful, for the research will provide an additional theoretical development to the understanding of the operation of post-ISA formation.

The lack of research on the processes of post-ISA establishment demonstrates the need for the theoretical development of the middle-ground operation of ISAs and its impact on ISA performance. To address this conceptual objective and that we might make a significant contribution to the field, we have introduced utilization, presented the four communication factors as antecedents of utilization, discussed their potential interactions, and revealed the performance implications of utilization. Therefore, we lay a theoretical foundation to better understand the process of ISA operations and, as such, emphasize the importance of after-alliance formation dynamics. We expect the theoretical foundation to enhance the understanding of the processes of the post-ISA initiation operations, thus, enabling ISA partners better to direct their success.

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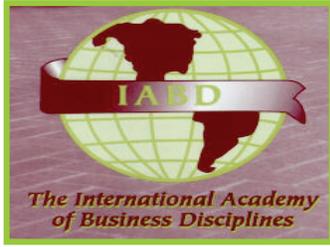
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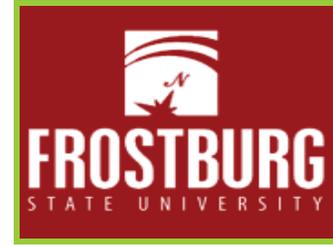
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