Success Factors in Collaborative Assets, Resources, and Knowledge Combination in Organizations

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Abstract

Collaborative strategies are pivotal to the manufacture of goods and the provision of services in the global environment of the 21st century. Such collaborative approaches are primarily essential when the components of the average product and services consist of globally-sourced material inputs and ubiquitous non-proprietary knowledge. The ever-increasing complexities of finished products and services, coupled with the ever-increasing and dynamic range of customers' demands, therefore, require that manufacturers and service providers forge successful collaborative partnerships. This multiple case study design utilized 12 participants who are senior business managers from three oil, gas, and energy companies in metropolitan Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. The resource-based view (RBV) and the relational view (RV) constituted the conceptual framework of this study. Data collections were through semistructured face-to-face interviews and organization documents. Member checking preceded the final data analysis process. The data analysis revealed nine critical success factors that are critical to the successful combination of collaborative assets, resources, and knowledge. These nine success factors contribute to organizations' quest to satisfy customers' demands, remain competitive, and profitable. In no particular order of importance, the success factors that emerged from data analysis are planning, organizing, and managing work, recombination and deployment strategies, aligned vision, purpose, and strategic direction, knowledge of the industry, and dealing with complexities. Others include effective communication and presentation, leadership, people, and relationship management strategies, managing conflicts, and decision-making strategies.

Background

Product designers, manufacturers, service providers, and knowledge managers in all spheres of the 21st-century marketplace are jostling and intensely competing to catch-up and to fulfill the rapid and insatiable demands of consumers for goods and services (Nagashima, Wehrle, Kerbache, & Lassagne, 2015). The prevailing interdependency between and among organizations is the result of the continually changing and extensive supply chains of organizations (Oluwi, 2018). Organizations are adopting different synergistic strategies that range from simple partnership arrangements to more complex forms of collaborative business initiatives. Such complex collaborative initiatives include, but not limited to, management contracts, joint ventures, strategic alliances, consortiums, and franchising. Following globalization, the modern global marketplace has had to contend with and manage events that include technological advancements, faster rates of innovation and times to market, and increased customer responsiveness (Oluwi, 2015; Saunila, 2014; Soosay & Hyland, 2015). Other critical occurrences that organizations currently encounter include the increased need for operational efficiency, faster decision-making, and increased competitiveness. Accordingly, the adoption of collaboration enabled the coming together of relevant participants with relevant skills, knowledge, and competencies in efforts aimed at solving common business challenges and reaping improved outcomes and benefits (Miller & Katz, 2014; Oluwi, 2015; Sahs, Nicasio, Storey, Guarnaccia, & Lewis-Fernández, 2017; Soosay & Hyland, 2015). Collaboration, therefore, enabled the generation of synergies among and between organizations who possess complementary competencies.

While entities that include alliances, networks, coalitions, joint ventures, cooperatives, clusters, and forums are synonymous with the initiative of collaboration, Roja and Nastase (2013), however, explicitly defined collaborative partnerships as initiatives in which two or more organizations exchange information, share resources, and conduct joint activities with the objective of reaping mutual benefits. The process of collaborative strategies also involves the sharing of risks and responsibilities. In another study, Kalowski (2015) established that the forging of collaborative partnerships has culminated in reduced barriers at both the inter and intra-organizational levels. Such reduced restrictions have, therefore, resulted in the creation of platforms and opportunities for companies to synergize their capabilities and resources for improved performance outcomes. Again, González-Benito, Muñoz-Gallego, and García-Zamora (2016) further reiterated the crucial role of collaboration in the 21st-century competitive marketplace. González-Benito et al. emphasized that the success or failure of organizations relate directly to the existence of the ongoing relationships they keep with other upstream or downstream entities.

The purpose of this qualitative and multiple case study research is to identify the success factors in collaborative assets, resources, and knowledge combination in organizations. According to Ro, Su, and Chen (2016) and Oluwi (2018), the ability of organizations to successfully forge and implement collaborative arrangements would significantly reduce the time-to-market process for goods and services. Therefore, collaboration among and between organizations would substantially reduce the total cycle time from conception, to design, to manufacturing, and ultimately delivery to the final consumer. Furthermore, collaborative initiatives are effective platforms for organizations to contribute and exchange idiosyncratic assets, resources, and knowledge to the benefit of the network partners (Ro et al., 2016). The quests to survive the bruising and corrosive race to competitiveness and profitability is, therefore, substantially easier and scalable as demonstrated by the positive outcomes emanating from well-forged and implemented collaborative partnerships.

In this paper, I explored how the diffusion of knowledge and the evolved trend of multicountry produced goods and services have triggered the need for organizations to collaborate. Furthermore, I identified the practices and factors that are necessary, and that contribute to the success of any collaborative arrangement. Specifically, factors that include planning, organizing and managing work; decision-making; leadership; people relationship management; and managing complexities are critical inputs to the success of collaborative initiatives. Finally, the findings of the study revealed that collaboration, through the exchange and the combination of inimitable and complementary skills, competencies, and resources, has a significant and positive relationship with organizational performance and competitiveness.

Theoretical considerations

The resource-based view (RBV) and the relational view (RV) constitute the theoretical framework of this paper. The RBV identifies and highlights that the differences in firms' performances flow from their respective strategic resources. Such resources include core competencies, dynamic capabilities, and absorptive capacities to identify, assimilate, recombine, and effectively apply the knowledge acquired externally (Shafeey & Trott, 2014). Furthermore, according to Bromiley and Rau (2016) and Kobayashi (2014), the significant tenet of the RBV is the accumulation of rare, valuable, and inimitable resources and capabilities by firms in collaborative relationships. On the other hand, in the RV, the critical resources of firms span their boundaries, and they earn, aside from normal profits, additional supernormal profits through the keeping and maintenance of exchange relationships. The maintenance of exchange relationships involves the pooling of skills and resources by collaborating organizations to solve common challenges to remain competitive and profitable (Miocevic, 2016; Ro et al., 2016). Finally, the supernormal profits enabled by the exchange relationships in collaborative partnerships are not possible if the organizations exist and operate in isolation. Subsequently, supernormal profits would flow only through joint investments, contributions, and the exchange of idiosyncratic assets and knowledge of the collaborating partners (Anatan, 2014; Kobayashi, 2014; Oluwi, 2018; Ro et al., 2016).

According to Oluwi (2018), the applicability of the RBV and the RV concepts to this paper flow from the competitive advantages derived from the collaborating organizations' accumulation of resources and capabilities. Besides, the supernormal profits that accrue from the relationship between the partners would create additional values and benefits over what an individual organization would generate if operating in isolation (Oluwi, 2018: Ralston, Richey, & Scott, 2017). Collaborating firms would, therefore, be able to leverage their combined assets, expertise, and capabilities to produce and deliver goods and services more efficiently. Additionally, inter-organizational collaboration would allow partners to share responsibilities, risks, and benefits (Anatan, 2014; Kobayashi, 2014; Oluwi, 2018).

Literature Review

The increasing globalization of industrial operations and the subsequent fallout of increased competition between organizations are among the principal factors responsible for the growing adoption of collaborative strategies and partnerships (HakemZadeh & Baba, 2016; Li et al., 2018; Oluwi, 2018). HakemZadeh and Baba (2016) and Nagashima et al. (2015) emphasized that the challenges that organizations encounter and that continue to negatively affect their productivity and profitability include shorter product life cycles and the incorporation of multiple technologies into the design of new products. Other challenges include the creation of goods and services in conjunction with customers and partners, and on the leveraging of the growth of scientific and technical knowledge of numerous individuals who work for different organizations and in various sectors (HakemZadeh & Baba, 2016; Oluwi, 2018).

Following the increasingly complex nature of global industrial operations, inter-organizational collaboration has continued to witness dramatic recognition and growth since the turn of the 21st century. Specifically, knowledge, which is the locus of innovation, now extends beyond any individual firm's capability (Saunila, 2014; Oluwi, 2018). Therefore, to leverage and to avail of such nonproprietary knowledge, many businesses would have to open their value creation processes using various types of multi-party collaborative strategies and initiatives. Furthermore, HakemZadeh and Baba (2016) and Saunila (2014) showed that collaborative strategies reduce the burden of risk that each partner bears. Collaborative partnerships, therefore, through initiatives that include the early involvements of suppliers, would reduce the time of product development while simultaneously increasing the speed of products to the markets (Nagashima et al., 2015; Oluwi, 2018). The adoption, application, and the proper implementation of collaborative strategies will significantly decrease the cost of product development, process improvement, and considerably increase and provide access to new markets and technologies (HakemZadeh & Baba, 2016; Oluwi, 2018; Saunila, 2014).

Authors and practitioners that include Li, Nguyen, Yu, and Han (2018), Oluwi (2018), and Srivastava et al. (2017) posited that the adoption and proper implementation of collaborative strategies portend immense advantages for organizational performance and profitability. The studies by these authors also showed that collaborative strategies and partnerships allow enterprises to meet customer demands in real-time. Furthermore, collaborative strategies and partnerships help organizations develop tailor-made solutions offered cost-efficiently in close collaboration with partners in the value creation chain (Arora, Arora, & Sivakumar, 2016; HakemZadeh & Baba, 2016; Oluwi, 2018). On another note, the need to collaborate has become more urgent and challenging, given the increasing complexities of the global workplace (Miller & Katz, 2014).

Fjeldstad, Snow, Miles, and Lettl (2012), and Oluwi (2018) cited two examples of collaborative partnership relationships that existed within The Blade organization and Accenture. The authors described the positive outcomes of collaborative partnerships that flowed through the fusion of core competencies of different organizations and that accrued to the network partners in each of these examples. First, The Blade organization is a collaborative community of more than 200 firms and 70 complimentary firms that possess different capabilities required to develop solutions for the blade server market and its customer base of 180 companies. With differing unique capabilities, the network partners of The Blade organization leveraged on each others' core competencies to develop, manufacture, market, and distribute over 60 information technology solutions and products that use the blade server technology of IBM. Such lofty results, achieved in its first 2 years, showed that a well-implemented and managed collaborative partnership would have a positive and significant impact on productivity and profitability. In this case, rather than exploiting the Blade IP through its business units, IBM and the other complement or firms chose to form a collaborative community of companies focused on accelerating the development and adoption of the Blade server solutions. The founding companies, therefore, created an organizational design that enabled relevant firms to collaborate, develop, and deliver bespoke information technology solutions to customers (Fjeldstad et al., 2012; Oluwi. 2018).

As in The Blade case, similar positive outcomes also resulted in the collaborative partnership existing within Accenture (Fjeldstad et al., 2012). Specifically, Accenture leveraged on its vast and diverse network of co-located and virtual team consultants to solve complex and multiple numbers of organizational problems within relatively short time frames. Besides its well-trained and knowledgeable consultants, Accenture also relied on its embedded organizational protocols, infrastructures, and software applications to deploy human assets and resources and to coordinate all its ongoing activities and projects throughout the world (Fjeldstad et al., 2012; Oluwi, 2018).

The positive outcomes of the above-cited collaborative cases by the Blade organization and Accenture confirm its relevance to the operational and profitability performance of organizations. Specifically, the adoption and the proper implementation of collaborative strategies would significantly contribute to early product development and faster time to market. Moreover, the ability to share knowledge and information among and between the collaborating organizations would confirm that resources and capabilities genuinely transcend the boundaries of individual participating organizations (Keast & Mandell, 2014; Moon, Lee, & Lai, 2017; Nagashima et al., 2015; Oluwi, 2018).

According to Gadman and Cooper (2014), economic and business analysts often attribute improved organizational performance to advancements in technology. However, collaborative business partnerships, initiatives, tools, and strategies are now credible alternatives to technological advancements (Arthur, 2017; Dey, 2016; Oluwi, 2018). Collaborative partnerships, therefore, equally contribute to improved organizational performance (Arora et al., 2016; Oluwi, 2018; Srivastava et al., 2017). Specifically, firms now meet increasing performance requirements in competitive markets through their active engagement in new forms of business partnerships (Arthur, 2017; Dey, 2016; Oluwi, 2018).

Recent practices in various sectors of the world economy showed that organization leaders have started to incorporate external resources from other companies for the growth and success of their businesses (Gadman & Cooper, 2014; Saunila, 2014). Furthermore, research findings by Gadman and Cooper (2014), and Saunila (2014) showed that an increasing number of multinational firms now pursue innovation activities in partnership with other organizations because of the abundance of external ideas in the global markets. The diffusion and ubiquitousness of knowledge, skills, and expertise, therefore, requires that organizations collaborate to leverage their operations and to cope with rapid market changes (Oluwi, 2018). Besides, the collaboration between and among organizations enables increased innovation, access to new markets, and the development of new growth engines (Gadman & Cooper, 2014). The authors further established that collaborative strategies by Research and Development firms have led to the concept of open innovation. Explicitly, open innovation embraces the strategic intent behind the use of both internal and external resources for increased performance and profitability (Gadman & Cooper, 2014; Saunila, 2014). Finally, the increasing complexities of the global workplace have accelerated the adoption of collaborative partnerships in efforts aimed at solving the myriad of manufacturing and service delivery problems of the 21st century (Miller & Katz, 2014; Oluwi, 2018).

Despite the laudable benefits accruable from a collaborative partnership arrangement, the differences in the partners’ internal task routines could, however, undermine relational mechanisms, which could in turn, adversely affect the alliance performance (Lavie, Haunschild, & Khana, 2012). In their study, Lavie et al. (2012) focused on the integration of two different perspectives that examined the resultant alliance performance after the establishment of a collaborative partnership arrangement. With a sample size of 420 non-equity firms in the information technology industry, Lavie et al. integrated the alignment of partners' characteristics with the relational mechanisms of mutual trust, relational embedding, and relational commitment. Furthermore, the authors examined how the congruence of partners' cultures and organizational routines facilitate the emergence of relational mechanisms in non-equity alliances. The results of Lavie et al.'s study, however, showed that while the similarities in partners' organizational routines are essential, they do not guarantee the success of the alliance. Therefore, collaborative partnerships might fail, not because of misaligned business objectives or cultural legacies of the partners, but as a result of operational differences in respective organizational routines (Anastassiu, Santoro, Recker, & Rosemann, 2016; Klein, 2017; Lavie et al., 2012). Besides, while the differences in internal domains and management styles constitute significant factors that may impair mutual trust and encourage opportunistic behaviours in the partnership, González-Benito et al. (2016) and Oluwi (2018) emphasized the crucial role of collaboration in the 21st-century competitive marketplace. According to González-Benito et al., the success or failure of collaborative partnerships has a direct correlation to the existence of the ongoing relationships between and among the network partners. In another study, Salam (2017) posited that the development and evolvement of trust among the network partners is a competitive advantage that might be difficult for competitors to replicate.

The preference and usage of hierarchical mechanisms by traditional organizational forms as the primary means of control and coordination can constrain extensive collaboration both within and across firms (Fjeldstad et al., 2012). In contrast, however, according to Chakkol, Selviaridis, and Finne (2018), and Fjeldstad et al. (2012), complex and dynamic environments should explore alternative ways of organizing that are much less reliant on hierarchy. The exploration of such alternatives, therefore, provides a departure from traditional models in areas that include incentives, governance, coordination, and leadership. Besides, the goals of a collaborative initiative should primarily flow from the respective organizational objectives and aspirations of the collaborating partners (Chakkol et al., 2018; Oluwi, 2018). To the authors, organizations frequently collaborate with other firms to better address existing strategic and tactical competitiveness, operational inefficiencies, and profitability goals. Organizational goals that relate to a particular collaborative arrangement are, therefore, subsets of individual organization's overall strategic intent and align closely with their respective functions, responsibilities, and spheres of activities.

According to Iyer, Srivastava, & Rawwas, (2014) and Li et al. (2018), competition and product complexity-driven collaborative efforts are likely to influence firms' performance. Similarly, according to Oluwi (2018) and Srivastava et al. (2017), the significant impact of competition and product complexity-driven collaborative efforts on firms' performance has allowed interfirm partnerships to emerge as an essential component of organizations' strategy for generating differential performance outcomes. Collaborative partnerships, therefore, fill critical resource and competency inadequacies in individual partners' operations and produce a greater share of an incrementally larger pie that contributes to the mutual performance gains of the partners (Fawcett et al., 2015; Li et al., 2018; Oluwi, 2018).

Such mutual performance gains were the critical success factors in a Unilever-led collaborative and strategic distribution initiative. The strategic distribution initiative provided the network partners with coordinated interfirm value-generating processes and business flows platforms. The Unilever-led collaborative strategic distribution initiative builds on the unique partnership capabilities that maximize customer value and enhances the collaborating firms' performance (Iyer et al., 2014). Iyer et al. (2014) also established that, in addition to the enormous transportation savings, the accrued benefits of the collaborative relationship included shortened delivery cycle time, reduced retail store inventories (30%), out-of-stock incidents (30%), and decreased material handling costs (16%). Again, the authors highlighted that other notable firms such as Hewlett–Packard, IBM, Dell, Procter & Gamble had forged long-term, collaborative relationships with their suppliers to reduce transaction costs. The forging of such collaborative partnerships has enabled the achievement of stronger competitive positions for the network. Finally, collaborative partnerships help firms, over time, through the sharing of risks, accessing complementary resources, reducing transaction costs, enhancing productivity, improving profit performance and competitive advantage (Fawcett et al., 2015).

Despite the laudable economic benefits, the absence of strategic fits, among partners, in collaborative partnerships could have catastrophic implications for the collective and individual businesses of the partners. According to Fawcett et al. (2015), some of the issues that impede collaborations include inter-functional and inter-firm conflicts (75%), and non-aligned goals (68%). Other issues are the opportunistic behaviours of individual companies, diminishing (or diminished) trust (53%), and an inability or unwillingness to share information (53%). Fawcett et al. (2015) emphasized that these factors impede the integration of firms' resources required to avail of the competitive advantages inherent in collaboration. The authors supported their research findings with Lewin’s Force Field (FF) Analysis. The FF Analysis argued that environmental forces drive organizations to build new capabilities. Specifically, the evolved environmental forces of globalization established entirely new production and manufactured models for products and the delivery of services (Aldakhil & Nataraja, 2014; Jakada, 2014). According to Jakada (2014), other environmental forces that propelled the need for organizations to build new capabilities include the dispersal of knowledge and the evolvement of virtual teams. Flowing from the above findings, organizations, therefore, need to identify and employ the right and enabling mechanisms if they want to keep pace with the continually changing environmental forces shaping the marketplace (Aldakhil & Nataraja, 2014). According to Aldakhil and Nataraja, there exists a positive correlation between managements’ ability to identify and employ the right and enabling mechanisms and the success of collaborative partnerships.

Methodology

This research is a qualitative study with a semistructured interview and the open-ended face-to-face questioning methods. According to Gentles and Vilches (2017), the adoption of the qualitative study with a case study design yields in-depth responses about the participants’ lived experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings, and knowledge of the subject matter. In comparison to the other qualitative research designs, the case study approach derived its benefits from its capability to act as a tool for making data-driven comparisons between different scenarios (Yin, 2016). Furthermore, and in contrast to other research designs, the case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events (Yin, 2016). Such real-life events include individual life cycles, organizational and managerial processes, neighbourhood change, international relations, and the maturation of industries. Besides, according to Patton (2015) and Yin (2016), the case study research accommodates both qualitative and quantitative data, therefore, allowing researchers to get a rich mix of data for their studies. Specifically, the case study approach yields in-depth responses about the experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings, and knowledge of the participants on the subject matter (Patton, 2015).

The follow-up questions in this study clarified the responses of the participants. Such follow-up questions to the participants enabled the attainment of data saturation. According to Gentles and Vilches (2017), data saturation occurs when the further collection of evidence provided little or no additional information that would significantly affect the themes, insights, or perspectives of a study. Specifically, the attainment of data saturation in this study occurred when the further collection of evidence provided little or no additional information that would significantly affect the themes, insights, or perspectives of the study. According to Gentles and Vilches (2017) and Yin (2016), data saturation involves the continuous task of identifying and co-opting new and additional sample population to participate in a study until the data set is complete. The attainment of data saturation was through prolonged engagement with the participants and the use of methodological triangulation.

The interview was for a total of 12 individuals who work at the senior management levels of three corporate organizations in the oil, gas, and energy sector of the metropolitan Edmonton, Alberta, Canada for this purposive qualitative study. Specifically, the selected participants consisted of four senior business managers from each of the organizations. Besides, the senior business managers I selected also work in organizations that have ongoing collaborative partnerships with varying numbers of firms within and outside of Edmonton. Again, it is pertinent to state that the use of purposeful sampling in this qualitative study was a conscious option that enabled the selection of participants who are available, who have experienced the phenomenon, and who have relevant information that pertains to the phenomenon under study.

Findings

The purpose of this qualitative and multiple case study research was to identify the success factors in collaborative assets, resources, and knowledge combination in organizations that operate in metropolitan Edmonton, Canada. Following exhaustive semistructured interview sessions with the participants, the review of documents, and the organization of data, the data analysis revealed the emergence of nine common themes of varying magnitude and importance. According to the participants, the emerged themes were critical success factors in collaborative assets, resources, and knowledge combination. In no particular order of importance or superiority, the common themes revealed in this study are:

- Planning, organizing, and managing work
- Recombination and deployment strategies
- Aligned vision, purpose, and strategic direction
- Knowledge of the industry
- Dealing with complexities
- Effective communication and presentation
- Leadership, people, and relationship management strategies
- Managing conflicts
- Decision-making strategies

It is pertinent to emphasize that the fusion of the emerged success factors, with the recombined knowledge, expertise, capabilities, and inimitable resources and skills of the network partners represent critical ingredients necessary for forging successful collaborative business partnerships. Furthermore, the platform created through such fusion enabled the network partners to achieve higher competitive advantages and performance levels similar to those identified in the conceptual framework of the RBV and RV. According to the 12 participants in the study, the ability of senior business managers to implement the nine success factors that emerged was critical to achieving successful collaborative business partnerships. Specifically, and in tandem with the RBV and the RV conceptual framework, collaboration would only succeed if, and when, the collaborating partners, with unique and inimitable competences and capabilities, work together in exchange relationships (Oluwi, 2018). It is the seamless fusion of the emerged success factors with the unique and inimitable competences and capabilities of the network partners, in mutually beneficial relationships, that yield competitive advantages for forged partnerships. Furthermore, a critical analysis of the graphic representations of the overall data, collected from the multiple sources, revealed that all participants were generally of similar views in their responses. However, the intensity and enthusiasm with which each participant addressed each of the themes that emerged from their responses were markedly different and reflected the unique experiences of the participants (Oluwi, 2018). Specifically, while a participant might rate planning, organizing, and managing work as the most crucial success factor in collaborative partnerships, another participant might rate the same theme as the least crucial. For clarity, the pre-exploration word cloud used depicted the varying intensity with which the participants discussed their responses to generate a word-bubble and to examine the words with the highest volume of usage as depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Preexploration keywords

Planning, organizing, and managing work. Although referenced with varying degrees of intensity, all the participants, however, agreed that the planning, organizing, and the effective management of work schedules among and between the collaborating partners is a crucial success factor necessary for the successful implementation of collaborative partnerships (Oluwi, 2018). Specifically, the majority of the participants confirmed that planning, organizing, and the management of work schedules by the appointed team and project leaders of the collaborating organizations would significantly reduce work complexities and scopes of decision-making necessary to achieve set goals and objectives. Specifically, and as referenced in the findings of Gandolfi and Stone (2017) and Pittz and Adler (2016), the achievement of set goals and objectives are achievable when leaders equip, train, and influence groups of people who possess varying degrees of skills and capabilities. Besides, the proactiveness embedded in the planning, organizing, and the effective management of work would enable the identification of constraints that might impede the achievement of set goal and objectives (Oluwi, 2018). The identification of constraints would, in turn, enhance the ability of managers and team leaders to initiate and rollout cost-efficient and workable alternatives and solutions.

Recombination and deployment strategies. A second success factor identified in this study was the ability of managers and team leaders to successfully recombine and deploy strategies for the mutual benefit of the network partners. As was discussed in the RBV section of the literature, one of the critical and basic tenets of collaborative partnerships was the possession of unique and inimitable skills, competencies, and resources by the collaborating organizations and the individuals that work in the organizations. All the participants, during the interview sessions and the subsequent data analysis phase of the study, consistently expressed and touted the need for the effective rollout, deployment, and implementation of recombined functional and technical skills and resources. Firstly, all the participants concurred that there would not be a need for collaboration (ab initio) without the possession of unique and inimitable skills and resources by organizations and individuals (Oluwi, 2018). Secondly, the participants confirmed that the possession of unique and inimitable skills and resources by organizations and individuals was not a sufficient criterion for a successful collaborative partnership. Albeit expressed and communicated with varying degrees of intensity, Participants 1-12, all maintained that the harnessing and the deployment of the skills and resources available to collaborative partnerships require the involvement of experienced managers of human, material, and financial resources. The majority of the participants agreed that the task of harnessing, deploying, and managing the abundant skills, human, material, and financial resources of the partnership be exclusively reserved for the most experienced manager within the partnership. Furthermore, the participants were unanimous in their response to the formation of teams, the appointment of team leaders, and the allocation of roles.

Flowing from the above, and according to all 12 participants, the formation of teams, choosing an overall team and sub-team leaders, and the allocation of roles is crucial to the success of partnerships. Specifically, while sequentially coordinating and managing the day-to-day activities of team members, the sub-team leaders, in turn, report to the most experienced manager responsible for managing the overall partnership. Following the unanimous adoption, the participants agreed that the concept of teaming in collaborative partnerships contributes immensely to disaggregating a supposedly unwieldy operation into a better-managed operation. Accordingly, the agreement to choose an experienced overall leader and the formation of teams would enhance the efficient deployment and utilization of human, material, and financial resources. Furthermore, the strategy enhances a more unobstructed viewof project timelines and proactive planning activities aimed at the successful implementation of collaborative partnerships. The possession of the skill necessary to effectively recombine and deploy strategies is, therefore, a critical success factor for the successful implementation of collaborative partnerships (Oluwi, 2018).

Aligned vision, purpose, and strategic direction. All 12 participants unanimously adopted the strategy of aligned vision, purpose, and strategic direction. In tandem with the views on the possession of unique and inimitable skills and resources by organizations and individuals, the participants admitted that there would be no reason for collaboration (ab initio) without the alignment of vision, purpose, and strategic direction on the part of the network partners (Oluwi, 2018). Specifically, for successful collaborative partnerships, the collaborating organizations and individuals must share similar goals and objectives. The relevance of this strategy to the forging of successful collaborative partnerships tallies with findings in the literature review section of the study. According to Chakkol et al. (2018) and Randolph (2016), the objectives of a collaborative partnership would remain unattainable without a congruence of goals of the network partners. Besides, while the existence of goal congruence would facilitate greater alignment between the individual partners' goals and the overall goals of the entire network of firms, it would also promote and encourage interfirm affinity and the strategic convergence of competencies and capabilities required for successful partnerships (Oluwi, 2018).

While reiterating the crucial role of the strategy of aligned vision, purpose, and strategic direction, the majority of the participants, however, emphasized the need for would-be collaborating organizations and individuals to carry out due diligence on all would-be members. Such due diligence exercise would aim to confirm, among others, the existence or absence of strategic fits between vision, mission, and strategic focus of each the would-be network members. The participants also stated that the due diligence exercise should review the organizational structure and culture in determining and understanding the ethos of would-be collaborating organizations. Finally, Participant 6, notably maintained and stated that "the strategy of aligned vision, purpose, and strategic direction trumps all other strategies." Participant 6 further identified various calamitous events and outcomes that could develop when, and if, organizations with unaligned vision, purpose, and strategic direction forge collaborative partnerships. Such catastrophic outcomes, according to Participant 6, "could involve colossal loss of revenue, damage to reputation, and, in extreme situations, the collapse of entire businesses."

The analysis of the participants' responses and the observed body languages displayed while discussing and explaining the strategy of goal congruence lend credence to its significance as a strategy required for forging successful collaborative partnerships. As earlier expressed in the literature review section of this study, and in tandem with the findings of Anatan (2014), Iyer et al. (2014), and Moon et al. (2017), the success of any collaborative partnership is dependent on successfully implementing the strategy of vision and goal congruence. Specifically, the identification, the confirmation, and the unification of visions, goals, and objectives, coupled with aligned organizational structures and cultures promote and encourage interfirm affinity and the strategic convergence of competencies and capabilities required to yield competitive advantages for the network partners (Oluwi, 2018).

Knowledge of the industry. Although not the most prominent of the themes that emanated from the data analysis, however, approximately 42% of the participants identified the need for extensive knowledge of the industry in which a partnership operates as a necessary strategy that would enhance success. According to Participants 1, 2, 7, 11, and 12, the complexities that exist in the oil, energy, and gas sector, and the uniqueness of the Canadian oil sand mining techniques makes it paramount that the individual leading the collaborative partnership possesses a thorough knowledge of the industry. Specifically, Participant 11 linked the strategy of the possession of thorough knowledge of the industry to activities that involve strategic investment decisions in innovation, research and development, finance, and human resources. According to Participant 11, "the peculiarities of the oil, gas, and energy sector, the fluctuating price of oil in the international market, and other market dynamics of demand and supply, should make this strategy the exclusive preserve of a leader with deep insights of the industry and market."

As a strategy, according to Participants 2 and 7, the possession of relevant industry experience and knowledge of the market would allow for proactiveness on the part of the individual leading the partnership. Furthermore, knowledge of the industry would ensure the availability of realistic forecasts and actionable plans aimed at addressing both internal and external resource constraints. Such forecasts and plans, developed with the knowledge of the industry are, therefore, necessary for the success of collaborative partnerships.

Dealing with complexities. Extreme complexities exist in the world's oil, gas, and energy markets. More so in the unique oil sand environment of Canada oil industry. The data analysis revealed the participants' awareness, and the negative impacts that such complexities have on the operations, and ultimately, the success of partnerships. Specifically, there was an overwhelming consensus from all 12 participants on the need for the evolvement of strategies uniquely focused on dealing with the hydra-headed complexities of the oil sand industry of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. The 12 participants concurred that the existence and the ability to implement strategies that deal with solving complex problems, some operational, and others emanating from the forged collaborative partnerships between organizations with different structures and cultures, is crucial to the success of collaborative partnerships.

According to Participants 1, 2, 7, 11, and 12, there exists a direct and complementary relationship between the strategies of knowledge of the industry and dealing with complexities. In buttressing their reasons, the participants emphasized, albeit with different level of enthusiasm, that the strategy of dealing with complexities would be difficult to implement efficiently and effectively without a deep and thorough knowledge of the industry and the markets in which members of the partnership operate. Specifically, while alluding to the accruable benefits of collaborative partnerships, Participants 1, 2, 7, 11, and 12 emphasized that the agreement to collaborate usually involve agreements between two or more organizations with different but compatible structures and cultures. The organizations in a collaborative partnership, therefore, agree to work together for the mutual benefit of the members. However, to Participant 1, despite the benefits accruable from collaborative partnerships, the agreements to work together represent the first contact with multifaceted complexities that require the full-time attention and dedication of experienced and well-knowledgeable managers. Therefore, according to Participant 1, and to enhance the success of the partnership, "such managers must possess sound analytical and problem-solving skills to steer and direct the daily operations of the forged partnerships." Besides, with contending jostling for resource allocations amid tight project deliverable timelines, the supervising manager of the partnership must be able to understand the intricacies of the operation and proffer appropriate and cost-effective strategies, solutions, and action plans aimed at achieving set goals and objectives (Oluwi, 2018).

In tandem to the findings of Yang, Hung-Yi, Shang-Chia, and Chen, (2014), the analysis of the interview responses similarly showed that all 12 participants agreed that the possession of inimitable skills, technical competences, and complementary resources are critical to the forging of successful collaborative partnerships. However, there was an unwavering consensus among the participants that the possession of skills, competencies, and resources are not, themselves, sufficient to guarantee the success of collaborative partnerships. Specifically, all 12 participants acknowledged the need for the role of experienced and knowledgeable managers of human, financial, material, and technical resources to coordinate and manage the complex operations of the partnership.

Effective communication and presentation. A strategy aimed at effectively communicating and presenting objectives, facts, figures, and plans to varied numbers of people from different organizations, and most probably different cultures and ethnic backgrounds was another strategy identified by the participants. Authors such as Ioanid (2015), Iyer et al. (2014), and Kenyon, Meixell, and Westfall (2016) alluded to the need for effective communication strategies to support and enhance the success of collaborative partnerships. Specifically, the interdependent relationships, among a complex mix of individuals from different cultural backgrounds, which developed after the forging of collaborative partnerships by organizations requires a strategy that would clearly and effectively communicate and present the vision, mission, and objectives of the coalition (Oluwi, 2018). The implementation of robust communication strategies by the management team of the coalition of organizations would, therefore, expectedly contribute significantly to the timely completion of tasks, decision-making, the reduction in, and the resolution of conflicts and disputes.

On the average, Participants 2, 5, 6, 8, 9, and 11, confirmed the existence of about 16 different nationals from 5 continents in the workforce that make up the collaborative partnerships in which they work. The multicultural nature of these partnerships and the subsequent workplace environment that evolved from the forged partnerships required multi-pronged modes and means of communicating. Such multi-pronged modes and means of communication consider factors that include, amongst others, language barriers, ideologies, and cultural beliefs. While evoking respect for the different nationals, the consideration for language barriers, ideologies, and cultural beliefs makes for peaceful coexistence among the workers and a peaceful work environment. Furthermore, while emphasizing the need for coherent and effective communication strategies, Participants 6 and 9 made references to the remote and isolated oil wells, living hostels, and camps that house the multifunctional teams working in and under harsh weather and climatic conditions. According to Participant 9, the operation managers, camp managers, and team leaders must implement the strict communication rules and guidelines that emanated from the overall communication strategies adopted by the coalition of organizations that made up the partnership. While reiterating the importance of communication strategy to the success of collaborative partnerships, Participant 6 advised the need to include sensitivity and diversity training under communication strategies. On this point, Participant 6 said, “I recalled how an offhand comment in one of the camps I worked in nearly turned into a free-for-all fight between two groups from, apparently, different cultures.”

On a final note, and although sparingly discussed and mentioned by the participants, the communication strategy of collaborative partnerships should also inform and enlighten both internal and external stakeholders on ongoing and prospective projects and relevant ethical and environmental issues. Such issues should be appropriately presented using different mediums and platforms accessible to the targeted audience. According to Participant 2, to guarantee the continuous buy-in to the ethos of the partnership, the communication strategy should include weekly operational meetings and briefings at the team levels. Besides, Participant 2 advised top-level monthly meetings and briefings for the respective team leaders and managers of the various components of ongoing and prospective projects.

Leadership, people, and relationship management strategies. The need for leadership competencies and strategies was another factor to which the participants unanimously subscribed. In their research findings, Pittz and Adler (2016) established that the availability of competent leadership is critical to managing the myriad of factors and requirements necessary to facilitate the forging and the successful operation of collaborative partnerships. In tandem with the findings of Pittz and Adler, the data analysis carried out on the responses of the entire 12 participants revealed significantly high correlations between the need for, the deployment of leadership strategies, and the success of forged collaborative partnerships.

In the words of Participant 4, “leadership strategies and competencies are everything.” When asked to expound, Participant 4 said that all his previous comments would “come to naught without the corralling functions of an experienced leader, who has a 360-degree overview of the entire operations, and who can formulate relevant strategies aimed at ensuring that the partnership functions seamlessly and successfully.” On another hand, Participants 3, 4, and 5 made sparing references to the leadership styles most suitable to the unique type of partnerships that exist in the Canadian oil sand industry. While Participants 3, 4, and 5 specifically mentioned the need for an inspirational leader, further explanations, during the follow-up question sessions, revealed the need for a second leadership style. Specifically, Participants 3, 4, and 5 identified the situational leadership style as relevant to managing collaborative partnerships. To the participants, the leadership styles of the chosen individuals responsible for managing the operations of partnerships would reflect the kinds of strategies and policies they formulate and propose and that guide the partnerships.

Using a different choice of words to differentiate between transformational and situational leadership styles, and the strategies and policies that flow from the respective styles, Participants 3, 4, and 5 affirmed that both leadership styles perform unique but equally essential functions in the quest for the success of collaborative partnerships. To Participants 3, 4, and 5, transformational leadership style and its resultant strategies are responsible for investment, innovation, and financial decisions. Contrarily, Participants 3, 4, and 5 explained that situational leadership style and strategies are more relevant to the day-to-day operational and human resource activities of partnerships.

In addition to the functions of transformational and situational leadership styles expressed by Participants 3, 4, and 5, the analysis of Participant's 8 responses uniquely identified an additional layer of leadership strategy in the quest for successful collaborative strategies. Accordingly, and in sync with transformational leadership functions, Participant 8 identified people and relationship management strategies as very crucial to the success of multifunctional, multicultural, multi-language, and multi-religious teams. Exhibiting vast knowledge and experience, Participant 8 stated that "collaborative partnerships are relationships between two or more organizations who have agreed to work together for the common benefit of the members." Therefore, according to Participant 8, "the supervising manager of the collaborative relationship must demonstrate capabilities, through relevant leadership strategies, that aim to motivate team members and employees to perform above expectations." Specifically, to reaffirm the need for appropriate leadership strategies, Participant 8 stated "the success or otherwise of collaborative partnerships depend on the relationship building and management skills of the supervising manager. Also, excellent relationship building, and management capabilities would enhance the level of influence the supervising manager can wield on the entire members of the partnership." However, irrespective of whether transformational or situational, the review of data collected from all 12 participants revealed that leadership strategies and competencies (inclusive of relationship and people management) are critical to the successful formation of collaborative partnerships.

Managing conflicts. The need for strategies aimed at proactively preventing the occurrence of, and reactively managing the existence of conflicts, featured prominently in the analyzed data of the study. The crucial requirement for strategies targeted at conflict prevention and management in collaborative partnerships are in tandem with findings in the works Chakkol et al. (2018) and Randolph (2016). Specifically, Chakkol et al. and Randolph emphasized the need for congruence of goals among and between the network partners. Similarly, and in close comparison, Islam, Jasimuddin, and Hasan (2015) and Salam (2017) respectively established the need for compatibility and flexibility of organizational structures and the cultivation of trust. Finally, Ioanid (2015) and Kenyon et al. (2016) discussed the need for cultural affinity and flexibility by collaborating organizations.

Similar to previously proffered strategies, the review of the participants' responses and relevant organizational documents overwhelmingly concluded that the existence of conflict prevention and management strategies are critical to the forging of successful collaborative strategies. With comparable high levels of enthusiasm in speech and body language, all the participants had a point or two to make on the strategy of conflict resolution. In the words of Participant's 7, "there is just no way conflict would not break out in a multifunctional, multicultural, multi-language, and multi-religious team of over 75 people – and that is just a team out of probably a dozen others." Participant 7 was, however, quick to note that the majority of conflicts are easily manageable interpersonal skirmishes. On the contrary, Participant 9 (who works in the same organization as Participant 7) agreed with the cause of conflicts but emphasized that the timely detection of tension and conflict makes the difference between easily manageable skirmishes and out-of-control disagreements and fights. Participant 9 continued "although the manageable skirmishes have insignificant impacts on operations, the reverse is, however, the case with the out-of-control disagreements and fights that can grind entire operations to a halt and cause irreparable damages to partnerships.

Participant's 1 approach to conflict prevention and management strategies was somewhat unique compared to the other participants. Participant 1 identified and differentiated between operational conflicts (occurring among and between team members in the day-to-day work activities) and strategic conflicts (occurring at the project coordinating and management levels) in partnership organizations. According to Participant 1, "day-to-day operational conflicts, while not desirable, can be effectively managed through robust human resources policies and guidelines. On the other hand, however, strategic conflicts are significantly more destructive and could spell doom for partnerships."

In different words and with different levels of enthusiasm, the entire 12 participants agreed that the success of forged collaborative partnerships would require the formulation of appropriate conflict prevention and management strategies. Such strategies should focus on solving and managing conflicts that can emanate from factors that impede the successful implementation of collaborative partnerships discussed in the literature review section of this study. Specifically, appropriate strategies are required to address conflicts emanating from the diverse goals of the partners (Fawcett, McCarter, Fawcett, Webb, & Magnan, 2015; Li & Nguyen, 2017; Vangen & Huxham, 2013) and trust challenge (Randolph, 2016; Vangen & Huxham, 2013). Other factors include power imbalances (Michalski, Montes-Botella, & Guevara Piedra, 2017; Soosay & Hyland, 2015; Vangen & Huxham, 2013), culture paradox (Islam et al., 2015; Vangen & Huxham, 2013), and territoriality and turf protection (Byrne & Power, 2014; Fawcett et al., 2015).

While, for privacy reasons, access was not granted to review the human resource (HR) incident report books in organizations where I collected data, the three organizations, however, allowed a review of their relevant Code of Conduct booklets. A review of the code of conduct booklets revealed that organizations had identified an array of offences, misdemeanors, and violations that employees are likely to contravene. Employees that violate such offences, misdemeanors, and violations would trigger a range of HR actions aimed at managing the incidences and meting out appropriate sanctions.

Decision-making strategies. In dissimilar terms, conviction, intensity, and body language, the majority of the 12 participants expressed the dual-linkage of experiences in the oil sand environment and in collaborative working relationships with the required strategy that deals with the ability to make and implement sound decisions. Participants 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 10, 11, and 12 were more vocal and enthusiastic on the need for supervising managers of collaborative partnerships to be analytical in approaches to making decisions that enhance the continued existence and profitability of the partnership. Participant 2 quipped, "the forging of collaborative partnerships by previously competing organizations is, in itself, a strategic decision by leaders of the organizations to work together." Chatterjee (2016) succinctly captured the views expressed by Participant 2, who established that the practice of collaborative partnership itself evolved from the strategic decision by organizations to manage the consequences of globalization better. Furthermore, the adoption of collaborative partnerships also enabled the fusion of financial, material, human, and knowledge-based resources by organizations in efforts aimed at remaining competitive and profitable.

Similarly, and while emphasizing the crucial role of decision-making strategies for the success of collaborative partnerships, Participant 12 stated, “collaboration breathes and lives decision-making.” Asked to explain, Participant 12 said that, “strategic decisions by proponents of collaboration is responsible for the existence of collaborative partnerships. Only continuous and sound strategic decisions would ensure the partnerships remain viable and successful. Poor decision-making would result in failure and collapse.”

The analysis of the responses of Participant 6 revealed a unique term in support of the need for timely decision-making processes within collaborative partnerships. Participant 6 used the term “the urgency of now” to indicate the rapid nature of decision-making in a dynamic, complex, and competitive environment of the oil, gas, and energy industry. Participant 6 further explained: “in a globalized world, developments in information technology and technologically-propelled initiatives in supply chain management have necessitated quick responses and decision-making by relevant supervising managers of collaborative partnerships.” It is pertinent to note that Participant’s 6 views tally with the findings of Chi, Zhao, and George (2015) and Pittz and Adler (2016). Specifically, Chi et al. and Pittz and Adler found that the availability and the efficient usage of information technology within the network of firms enabled and ensured timely access and the exchange of information and decision-making requirements within the partnership.

According to Participant 7, the need for timely and sound decision-making strategies is relevant to the team and people management functions of the supervising manager of the partnership. To Participant 7, agile and sound decision-making strategies would enhance the implementation of the strategy necessary to prevent and manage conflicts. Therefore, whether in the strategic or tactical areas of collaborative partnerships, or the transformational and situational leadership styles, the review and analysis of the responses of the 12 participants revealed significant correlations between the existence of sound decision-making strategies and the success of the forged partnership.

Recommendations

The collaborative success factors identified in this study are critical to the intra and interdependent functions and activities that occur between employees and organizations involved in the joint-manufacture of good and the provision of services in the 21st century. Based on the experiential and time-tested responses of the participants, it becomes evident that a well-implemented collaborative strategy would enable the network partners to unlock the intrinsic benefits of collaborative assets, resources, and knowledge combination. Additionally, the competitive advantages that flow from the joint accumulation of resources and capabilities of the network partners translate into increased technological development, faster product development, faster time to market, and improved customer service. Besides, the adoption of collaborative partnership enables the earning of supernormal profits by the network partners. Specifically, supernormal profits, accruing from the relationship between the partners, are additional values and benefits over what an individual organization would generate if operating in isolation.

From the above, would-be adopters of collaborative partnership are advised to adhere and implement the experiential and time-tested strategies culled from the participants in this study. Implementers of collaborative partnerships should, therefore, adopt the nine strategies of (a) planning, organizing, and managing work; (b) recombination and deployment strategies; and (c) aligned vision, purpose, and strategic direction. Other strategies that would enhance the success of collaborative partnerships include (d) knowledge of the industry; (e) dealing with complexities; (f) effective communication and presentation; (g) leadership, people, and relationship management; (h) managing conflicts; and (i) decision-making.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the implementation strategies senior business managers used to forge successful and profitable collaborative business partnerships. To fulfill the purpose of this study, I interviewed a total of 12 qualified participants who worked in organizations that presently have ongoing collaborative partnership agreements and working relationships with other organizations within and outside of Edmonton. Nine success factors crucial to the forging of, and the implementation of, collaborative business partnerships emerged from the extensive face-to-face semistructured interviews. The themes that emerged are (a) planning, organizing, and managing work; (b) recombination and deployment strategies; and (c) aligned vision, purpose, and strategic direction. Other themes included (d) knowledge of the industry; (e) dealing with complexities; (f) effective communication and presentation; (g) leadership, people, and relationship management strategies; (h) managing conflicts; and (i) decision-making strategies.

The data analysis of this study showed that the 12 business managers that participated in this study agreed, albeit with different levels of enthusiasm, intensity, and body language, that it is possible to forge effective and successful collaborative business partnerships through the implementation of the enumerated strategies. The adoption of the nine success factors becomes more imperative in a globalized, complex, and increasingly competitive environment with constantly changing customer demands and preferences. Accordingly, the adoption of collaborative assets, resources, and knowledge combination strategies, and the implementation of the nine success factors by practitioners and would-be adopters of the initiative would herald increased productivity and profitability for the network partners.

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