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# Antecedents and Consequence of International Joint Venture Learning: the Case of Vietnam

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## **Abstract**

*This empirical study addresses factors associated with learning in international joint ventures with data collected in Vietnam. Drawing from the previous literature in learning through alliances, this research presents and tests a theoretical model linking IJV learning, its antecedents and consequence. Several organizational practices in the ventures appear as strong predictors of learning. Specifically, learning was associated with the venture's allocation of resources to training and level of joint participation, as well as the frequency of interaction between foreign and local venture employees. IJV learning was significantly related to the venture performance. Further, the ventures' investment in learning had a significant impact on performance that was not simply a function of knowledge learnt from the foreign partner.*

**Keywords:** International joint ventures (IJVs), learning, performance

**JEL Classification:** I20

## 1. Introduction

Increasingly, firms are finding that their most critical assets are knowledge-based. The development and management of knowledge assets constitutes a substantial basis for competitive advantage, and has been found to be a key determinant of firm performance (Grant, 1996, Nelson and Winter, 1982; Winter, 1987; Hedlund 1994).

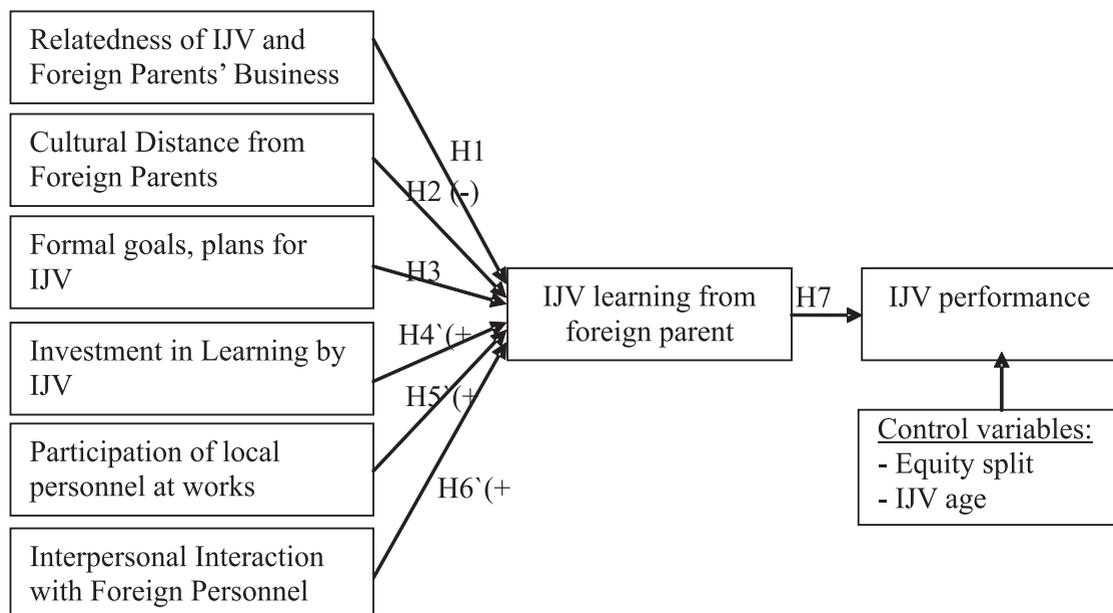
To survive and succeed, firms must continually expand and improve their knowledge base and the successful adaptation of the firm's knowledge base depends upon the capability to source and integrate external knowledge (Tripsas, 1997). One way of getting access to external knowledge is through collaboration with other parties. As emphasized by Grant (1996) and Kogut and Zander (1996), knowledge can be integrated externally through rela-

tional networks that span organizational boundaries.

The globalization and integration trend has resulted from and created a condition for firms to enter into alliances with each other. Alliances provide firms with “a window on their partners’ broad capabilities.” (Hamel, Doz, and Prahalad, 1989). Through this window, alliances create the potential for firms to acquire knowledge associated with partner skills and capabilities (Inkpen, 1996).

Despite the importance of alliance learning, the process has been found to be a difficult and misunderstood process, often coupled with considerable frustration (Crossan & Inkpen, 1995; Martin & Salomon, 2003). To contribute to our understanding of the field, in this research, a model linking international joint ventures (IJVs) learning, its antecedents and

**Figure 1: Theoretical framework**



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consequence is proposed and tested in the context of Vietnam. Learning through International alliances is particularly important for companies in transitional economies such as Vietnam since their experience with market economy and international competition is very limited. The results of this study help to draw some implications for Vietnamese firms in order to maximize the full benefits of IJV in light of learning.

## **2. Literature review and hypotheses**

The conceptual foundation for this research is the organizational learning and knowledge-based theory of the firm developed by Argyris and Schön (1978), Fiol and Lyles (1985), Nelson and Winter (1982), Kogut and Zander (1992), Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) and Grant (1996). This theory considers learning/knowledge as the most important strategic resource and the ability to acquire, integrate, store, share and apply it the most important capability for building and sustaining competitive advantage.

Several studies have attempted to empirically examine the factors influencing knowledge acquisition/ learning in international alliances such as studies by Hamel (1991), Lyles and Salk (1996), Lane and Lubatkin (1998), Simonin (1999), and Lyles and Barden (2000). These researches, however, are either discrete or reflect only a part of the problem. Therefore, a new theoretical framework (figure 1) is proposed to be used in this research. This framework builds on the works of previously mentioned studies by synthesizing, grouping, refining and extending selected determinants and their content.

### ***2.1 Antecedents of IJV learning***

*Relatedness of IJV and foreign parent's business.* Based on observations of R&D alliances among pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies, Lane and Lubatkin (1998) found that knowledge transfer/acquisition is dependent on measures of distance or dissimilarity to the partner firm. Kogut (1989) found a positive relationship between relatedness and IJV survival. Simonin's (1999) research on knowledge transfer in alliances executed by U.S. multinationals showed that organizational distance between the participating firms contributed to knowledge ambiguity, lowering knowledge transfer. Therefore:

*H1: Relatedness between an IJV and its foreign parent business is positively associated with IJV learning.*

*Cultural distance.* Cultural differences can create various problems in IJVs, including communication difficulties, unsuccessful negotiations, and time-consuming problem solving. In many cases, such incompatibilities can lead to JV instability, reduced ability to benefit from knowledge spillovers, and IJV failures (Parkhe 1991, 1993). The sharing of information and learning may be inhibited by such cultural boundaries (Salk, 1996). Lyles and Salk (1996) found that cultural differences had a negative impact on knowledge acquisition, but only for those alliances in their study which were two-party ventures with 50-50 equity splits. Thus:

*H2: Cultural distance is negatively associated with IJV learning.*

*Formal goals, plans for the IJV.* Drawing upon a number of studies, Lyles and Salk (1996) note that articulated goals and plans can facilitate the development of commonly

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understood goals, allowing employees in an organization to focus learning resources on a common vision and mission. These goals and plans can also serve as benchmarks in evaluating the effectiveness of learning structures. Having learning goals clearly set when establishing the IJVs could obligate employees in learning activities, and promote the allocation of resources to learning. While support for the goals-learning relationship was found in the Lyles & Salk (1996) study, the finding was not supported in the subsequent (Lane et al. 2001) research. This study will test the hypothesis in a different country context.

*H3: IJV written goals & plans are positively associated with its learning.*

*Investment in learning by the IJV.* Cao (2000) notes that the cost of transferring knowledge is not only function of a common platform for understanding (addressed above in the “ability to understand external information” component) but also consists of the transferee’s and the transferor’s learning costs. Investments in technical supports, training and instructions will be needed for the IJV to associate, assimilate and apply the target knowledge. As noted by Simonin (1999), committing financial and other resources to support the acquisition and sharing of information can build a learning capacity which may help to overcome barriers to knowledge transfer. Such investments may be especially important for knowledge transfer to developing countries, reflecting greater needs for technical support and adaptation (Contractor, 1980). Thus,

*H4: An IJV’s allocation of resources to training is positively associated with its learning from foreign partner(s).*

*Participation.* The structuring of tasks, decision-making authority and interaction patterns devised for the IJV may enlarge or limit the window of opportunity for knowledge flow. The alliance may be crafted to facilitate high levels of joint collaboration and extensive exchange of information. At the other extreme, alliances may involve a more modularized approach, in which certain activities or component production by one party are “walled off” from the other (Hladik, 1988; Moxon, Roehl, & Truitt, 1988). As noted by Cohen & Levinthal (1990) pushing specialization too far may undermine communication and learning. If the host country members of the IJV are simply following the directives of the foreign parents, they may not be exposed to the diverse information, new perspectives, or opportunity to assimilate and practice new patterns and associations.

A requirement for assimilating complex organizational knowledge may be the active engagement of both parties (Lane et al., 2001). The involvement of local joint venture personnel in shared activities and decisions with the foreign partners should provide a larger window into the knowledge and understandings held by the foreign parent organization. Therefore,

*H5: Participation of local personnel at works is positively associated with IJV learning.*

*Interaction with foreign partner personnel.* The interactions of individuals who “stand at the interface” between the firm and its environment or between subunits of the firm are critical (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990, p. 132). Alliances may involve several contact points

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between the collaborating firms, as information may need to be exchanged at different organizational levels. The personnel comprising the alliance serve both as gatekeepers and as potential receptors of partner skills (Doz 1988). As noted by Inkpen (2000), knowledge connections in joint ventures occur through both formal and informal relationships, and serve as the conduit for knowledge transfer across groups, organizational levels, and firms. The following hypothesis is proposed:

*H6: Interaction with personnel from the foreign parent is positively associated with IJV learning.*

## **2.2. Consequence of IJV learning**

Knowledge/ learning has been seen as a key determinant of firm performance (Nelson and Winter, 1982; Winter, 1987; Hedlund, 1994). Learning is not, however synonymous with performance. The impact of new knowledge on performance may be constrained by the joint venture's strategy or organization. Nevertheless, it is anticipated that learning by the IJV would provide a valuable resource that could support the performance of the venture, and empirical research is now beginning to confirm the relationship between IJV learning and performance (Lane et al., 2001; Lyles and Salk, 1996; Si and Bruton, 1999; Steensma & Lyles, 2000). Therefore,

*H7: Learning by an IJV is positively associated with its performance.*

## **3. Methods**

### **3.1. Sample**

The sample for this study was drawn from a population of more than 1000 international joint ventures provided in a listing by the

Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), the government authority managing all Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) activities in Vietnam. The study focused only on Ho Chi Minh city and Hanoi, where most IJVs are located. The actual sample was drawn from a list of all IJVs (674) in both locations.

Selection criteria for the sample included location, industrial categories grouped by the MPI, and country of origins of foreign partners. The companies selected to be interviewed had been in operation for 3 years or more to allow for the learning to come into effect.

### **3.2. Variables and measures**

Most of the measures used in this study were drawn from the literature and used or adapted for the Vietnamese context. Where measures for variables were not available, they were developed for this study. The first version of the questionnaire was developed in English and reviewed by four academic experts. Several items were then reworded for clarity. The questionnaire was then translated into Vietnamese and back-translated to English by a separate translator. Some differences in wordings between the original version and the back-translated version led to minor revisions, followed by pre-testing and preliminary item analysis before final revisions and administration in the joint ventures.

All dependent and independent variables were measured by multiple items using a Likert-type (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree) format. All of the items in the scales, as well as the source of the items and scale reliabilities are found in Appendix 1.

Control variables included (1) JV age, calculated as the number of years in operation up to the time the respondents were interviewed, and (2) the proportion of equity in the venture held by the Vietnamese parent. Lyles and Salk's (1996) study of Hungarian IJV's found that the proportion of equity held by the Hungarian parent was (inversely) related to learning. The possible relationship between equity split and the ability to draw knowledge from the foreign parent argues for the inclusion of this variable.

### 3.3. Data Collection

Data collection was conducted using structured interviews. Following Lyles and Salk (1996) and Simonin (1999), in each targeted JV we tried to interview the person in the highest position representing host country

(Vietnamese) side. In almost all cases, these are directors or vice directors of the JVs who are responsible for the companies' overall performance and for the success of the alliances. These top executives are in the best positions to observe and evaluate knowledge acquisition in their JVs, or can direct the questionnaires to other individuals within the companies who may know the subject better (Simonin, 1999).

The interviewers contacted targeted interviewees based on the list of all IJVs in studied areas. In total, 223 appointments were made, 181 of which turned out to be successful. Eight surveys were eliminated due to missing data, yielding a final sample size of 173.

In terms of foreign partners' country of origin, 26 of the foreign partners were headquartered in Japan. Twenty-four were from

**Table 1: Relationships Among Variables**

	Mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Learning	3.78	.57									
2. IJV Performance	3.57	.90	.32**								
3. Relatedness	3.51	.80	.25**	.17*							
4. Cultural Distance	3.23	.73	.05	.06	.06						
5. Formal goals, Plans	4.20	.66	.28**	.09	.24**	.13					
6. Investment in Learning	3.48	.80	.52**	.35**	.36**	.18*	.28**				
7. Participation	3.82	.60	.38**	.21**	.17*	.07	.26**	.31**			
8. Interaction with Foreign	3.33	.56	.41**	.19*	.18*	.05	.20**	.39**	.37**		
9. Equity Split (local) <sup>a</sup>	5.98	.98	-.10	.05	.01	-.05	-.05	-.03	.08	-.14	
10. IJV Age	7.56	2.72	-.08	.05	-.15*	.04	-.06	-.06	-.05	-.06	.01

n = 173, \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01

<sup>a</sup> means and s.d for transformed variable. Actual mean for equity split of the Vietnamese parent is 36.71

Singapore, 20 from South Korea, 21 from Taiwan, 14 from Hong Kong, and 11 from other Asian countries. Twelve of the alliance partners were headquartered in France, and 16 in other European countries. Eight were from Australia, and 7 from the United States. The remaining 14 alliances involved partners from other countries or with multiple partners from more than one foreign country. The high proportion of Asian joint ventures reflects the pattern of FDI in Vietnam. The interviewed IJVs had been in operation from 3 to 14 years, with an average of 7.6 years. In most IJVs, foreign partners held a substantially larger share of equity than the Vietnamese counterparts.

### 3.4. Statistical Techniques

Principal component factor analysis was initially used to assess the extent to which the data evidenced problems with common method variance. Followed were correlation analyses. Hypothesis testing was conducted using multiple regression technique. All analyses were performed using SPSS.

### 4. Results

Principal component factor analysis was run for all of the items included in this study. The analysis yielded ten factors, consistent with the ten scales discussed above, with eigenvalues greater than 1.0. These factors accounted for

**Table 2: Hypothesis Testing**

	Dependent Variables			
	Learning	Performance model 1	Performance model 2	Performance model 3
Independent Variables <sup>a</sup>				
Relatedness	.04		.06	.05
Cultural Distance	-.05		.00	.01
Formal goals, plans	.09		-.04	-.06
Investment in learning	.37**		.29**	.23*
Participation	.19**		.10	.06
Interaction with Foreign	.16*		.05	.03
Equity Split	-.09		.05	.07
IVJ Age	-.02		.08	.09
Learning		.32**		.18*
R <sup>2</sup>	.37**	.10**	.15**	.17**
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	.34**	.10**	.11**	.12**

<sup>a</sup> Standardized regression coefficients are tabled for each independent variable

n = 173, \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01

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71.5 percent of the total variance, with the first factor accounting for 23.8 percent. The first factor consisted of the seven items measuring learning. The identification of ten factors, coupled with the finding that the first factor did not account for the majority of the variance, indicates that a substantial amount of common method variance does not appear to be a problem (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986; Simonin, 1999).

Table 1 presents the correlation matrix assessing the means, standard deviations, and bi-variate relationships among the variables in this study. The variable regarding equity held by the Vietnamese parent showed substantial positive skewness. Following Tabachnick and Fidel (1983), a square root transformation of the variable was performed to address normality assumptions.

As can be seen in this table, the learning variable is significantly related to joint venture performance ( $r = .32, p < .01$ ). Learning is also associated with the relatedness of the joint venture and foreign parent business ( $r = .25, p < .01$ ), use of formal goals and plans ( $r = .28, p < .01$ ), investments in learning ( $r = .52, p < .01$ ), participation and interpersonal interaction ( $r = .38$  and  $.41$ , respectively,  $p < .01$ ). Cultural distance was related to neither joint venture learning nor performance. In fact, the only significant association with cultural distance found in this study was some tendency for higher investments in learning to occur in ventures with partners from more disparate cultures ( $r = .18, p < .05$ ).

In addition to the learning-performance relationship noted above, joint venture performance was also associated with the related-

ness of the joint venture and foreign parent business ( $r = .17, p < .05$ ), investments in learning ( $r = .35, p < .01$ ), participation ( $r = .21, p < .01$ ), and interpersonal interaction ( $r = .19, p < .05$ ).

Hypothesis testing included examination of multiple regression analyses in predicting learning and joint venture performance. For each of the independent variables in the regression models, the square root of the variable inflation factor (VIF) was calculated (Fox, 1991). All of the variables in the analyses fell well within the accepted limits, indicating no problems with multicollinearity. Table 2 presents the results of the regression analyses employed in this study.

As can be seen, in the prediction of learning, the eight independent variables accounted for a significant proportion of variance ( $\text{Adj. } R^2 = .34, p < .01$ ). Three of the independent variables appeared to contribute unique variance in the regression equation—investment in learning, participation, and interpersonal interaction. Hypotheses 4, 5, and 6 are supported.

The final three columns in Table 2 address the prediction of joint venture performance. The column labeled “model 1” simply addresses the ability of joint venture learning from the parents to predict the performance measure. The learning variable contributes to 10% of the variance in the performance measure, and is statistically significant, supporting hypothesis 7. It can be seen in model 2, that the eight variables which had predicted learning also contribute a significant variance in the prediction of joint venture performance ( $\text{Adj. } R^2 = .11, p < .01$ ). Of these eight, the measure of investment in learning contributes unique

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variance in the equation ( $p < .01$ ). In model 3, the measure of joint venture learning is included with the other eight independent variables in predicting performance. The model appears significant with Adj.  $R^2 = .12$ ,  $p < .01$ . In this model, both learning and investment in learning are significantly associated with performance. Taken together, all three performance models suggest that although learning is a strong predictor of performance, it does not completely mediate the relationships between its antecedents and joint venture performance (Baron and Kenny, 1986).

### 5. Discussion

Consistent with previous studies, it was found in this research that investment in learning, participation, and interaction with foreign partners are significantly associated with IJV learning from its foreign partner(s).

It is not a surprise to see that the allocation of resources to educating and training Vietnamese personnel showed a substantial relationship to learning but what is more surprising is that this variable was also found to have an impact on joint venture performance beyond the impact of learning from the foreign partner itself. IJVs which invest strongly in learning may become more adept at learning from sources other than its foreign parents. This capacity helps the IJV adapt better to environmental demands, increasing the venture's performance.

This study also identifies two organizational characteristics as direct contributors to IJV learning. The more Vietnamese employees were accorded a level of equal collaboration in the JVs' activities, the more knowledge they acquired. Given that the vast majority of JVs

in this study were foreign-dominated from an equity standpoint, it appears that this level of joint participation and collaboration can be achieved regardless of ownership control. In fact, there was no significant relationship between equity split and joint participation evident in this study. The frequency and intensity of interaction between foreign and local members of the IJV (as well as between the IJV and the foreign partner) also provide a rich interface through which information can flow. The findings also suggest that an enabling environment in which people have as many chances as possible to interact with each other enhances learning. Joint participation and rich interaction patterns could be seen as specific components of IJV flexibility and adaptability, (see Lane et al., 2001) which was found by these authors as directly related to learning.

Although relatedness and formal goals & plans were significantly related with IJV learning in correlation analyses, they were not found to be predictors of learning in the regression analysis. It is possible that the effect of relatedness and formal goals & plans may already be counted in other relationships such as those between participation and learning or between investment in learning and the IJV learning level. Ventures formed with foreign partners having a similar background tended to allocate more resources to learning from their partner ( $r = .36$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and to let the venture personnel participate more in joint activities ( $r = .17$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Similarly, ventures with more formal goals and plans also have higher level of investment in learning, participation and

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interaction with foreign parents.

This study found no association between cultural dissimilarity and learning. The inability of the cultural distance measure to predict learning or performance does not seem to be a function of range restriction, lack of variance, or normality problems in the measure itself. The ventures studied here were certainly not without cultural difficulties. This study indicates that such misunderstandings need not translate into lower levels of learning over time. In fact, research by Phan Thuc Anh (2011) found that the attractiveness of the foreign partner culture to the local party is more important in explaining IJV learning than the culture differences between two sides.

Learning was found to predict joint venture performance, supporting the findings of Lyles and Salk (1996), Crossan and Inkpen (1995), and Si and Bruton (1999). The fact that learning itself only accounted for 10% of the total variance in performance clearly suggests that learning from the foreign partner should be considered as only one of the factors contributing to the JVs' performance. As noted above, we found that the venture's allocation of resources to learning was also directly related to performance. The development of the venture's own learning capacity may allow the firm to access other environmental sources of knowledge and perhaps be better able to alter its routines to exploit new information. Such a capacity may be critical in vying for competitive advantage. Joint venture managers may

find a larger return on investment for their allocation of resources to learning than had been anticipated.

## **6. Conclusion**

The study's results build on and extend several previous findings regarding the relationships between learning, its antecedents and consequence with data from Vietnam – an economy in transition. The results contribute to the growing body of literature in IJV learning and provide some practical implications for managers working in IJVs.

Future research could address a weakness seen in this and many other studies of organizational learning. Information provided by one person was used to characterize learning in the whole venture. Organizational members representing different levels and functions may well have unique contributions to make in assessing learning by the venture. Moreover, assessing learning over time would certainly yield better insights.

The development and impact of the IJV's own learning capacity was found to be of critical importance in understanding IJV performance. Further inquiry into the allocation of resources to learning, the assessment of learning capacity, and the means by which such capacity is translated into competitive performance was strongly recommended.

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## APPENDIX 1: Measures

### **IJV learning** (from Lyles & Salk, 1996) Alpha = .88

- Vietnamese have learned a great deal of *technological expertise* from the partner(s).
- Vietnamese have learned a great deal of *marketing expertise* from the partner(s).
- Vietnamese have learned a great deal of new knowledge about *foreign culture and tastes* from the partner(s).
- Vietnamese have learned a great deal of *managerial techniques* from the partner(s).
- Vietnamese have learned a great deal of *manufacturing processes* from the partner(s).
- Vietnamese have learned a great deal of new knowledge about *product development expertise* from the partner(s).
- Overall*, Vietnamese have learned a great deal from the partner(s).

### **IJV Performance** (Previous Year) (from Lyles & Salk, 1996) Alpha = .94

- The venture achieved its target *sales volume*.
- The venture achieved its target *market share*.
- The venture achieved its target *profits*.
- Overall, the venture achieved its *planned goals*.

### **Relatedness** (from Lyles & Salk, 1996) Alpha = .80

- Our *technology* was highly related to that of the partner(s).
- Our *products* were highly related to that of the partner(s).
- Our *industry* was highly related to that of the partner(s).
- Our *customers* were highly related to that of the partner(s).
- Our *skill base* was very similar to that of the partner(s).

### **Cultural Distance** (from Simonin, 1999) Alpha = .68

- Our *national culture* is very different from the partner's.
- Language differences* are a major obstacle in communicating with, and understanding the partner.
- Our *problem solving methods* are very different from that of the partner(s).
- Our *management style* is very different from that of the partner's.

### **Formal Goals and Plans** (from Lyles & Salk, 1996) Alpha = .77

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The venture has very detailed written *business objectives*

The venture has very detailed written *business plans*

**Investment in Learning** (from Cao, 2000)

Alpha = . 86

Every year the venture commits significant resources to educating and training Vietnamese personnel to master the *technology* brought by the foreign partner(s).

Every year the venture commits significant resources to educating and training Vietnamese managers to master the *managerial skills* brought by the foreign partner(s).

In general, before a new person can achieve a satisfactory performance level, the venture has committed significant resources for his/her education and training.

*Vietnamese* personnel in the venture have been provided with training in cross-cultural skills.

**Participation** (developed for this study)

Alpha = . 83

Vietnamese personnel have been expected to contribute their ideas when they work with the foreign counterparts.

Vietnamese personnel have been assigned to activities of equal importance when they work with the foreign counterparts.

Vietnamese personnel have had equal opportunities to make decisions when they work with the foreign counterparts.

Overall, Vietnamese personnel have been deeply involved in shared activities between partners

**Interpersonal Interaction** (developed for this study)

Alpha = .71

Vietnamese personnel in the venture frequently interact with the foreign partner's headquarters/regional office.

Vietnamese personnel in the venture frequently interact with the foreign partner's personnel in Vietnam through *work related* activities.

Vietnamese personnel in the venture frequently interact with foreign partner's personnel in Vietnam through *non-work related* activities.

Vietnamese personnel in the venture closely work with the foreign partner's personnel in Vietnam.

Vietnamese personnel in the venture have friendly relationship with the foreign partner's personnel.

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