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## **Critical success factors in exports: evidence from technical consultants in a Brazilian export support program**

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**Abstract:** This study analyses the consultant perspective on Critical Success Factors (CSFs) in exporting among small and medium-sized enterprises in an emerging market context. Based on six consultants supporting firms in Southern Brazil through a national export promotion program, the study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach using in-depth interviews, which were recorded, transcribed, and subjected to content analysis. The results indicate that accumulated international market knowledge and experience, long-term commitment to exporting, export strategy, management capabilities, qualification of managers and employees, product quality, and government export support programs are perceived as the main CSFs in the export process. From a practical standpoint, the study identifies actionable priorities that may support SMEs, program consultants, and policy makers in structuring export activities and designing targeted support initiatives to improve export performance. Theoretically, it contributes to an underexplored research stream by incorporating intermediary perspectives and context-specific evidence from an emerging economy.

**Keywords:** critical success factors; CSFs; export performance; small and medium enterprises; SMEs; consultants' perspective.

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## **1 Introduction**

In the contemporary business environment, the internationalisation of companies stands out as an essential strategy for economic development (Silva, 2024). In this context, exports play a crucial role in strengthening national economies, serving as one of the main pathways to internationalisation.

Export performance can be significantly influenced by a specific set of critical success factors (CSFs). These factors represent essential organisational elements that, when systematically identified and managed, support effective business development and guide firms toward the achievement of strategic objectives, thereby enhancing overall business success (Silva, 2018). CSFs support performance achievement by identifying the key areas in which an organisation or project must perform effectively to attain its objectives (Schaefer et al., 2022).

Despite extensive research on export performance determinants at the firm level (Beleska-Spasova et al., 2012; Adu-Gyamfi and Korneliussen, 2013; Freeman and Styles, 2014; Jahiel et al., 2014; Maldifassi and Caorsi, 2014; Dressler, 2018; Handoyo et al., 2021; Safari et al., 2022), scholarly attention to CSFs in exports from the perspective of export support intermediaries remains limited, particularly with respect to actors involved in public support programs (Efrat and Øyna, 2021). While research on intermediaries in international business has accumulated over several decades, it remains fragmented and has predominantly focused on trading companies, agents, and commercial intermediaries, rather than on export support consultants or public-sector intermediaries whose primary role is to facilitate SME capability development (Efrat and Øyna, 2021).

In response to this gap, examining CSFs through the perspectives of export support consultants offers distinct theoretical value. Export consultants accumulate extensive longitudinal experience by supporting firms at different stages of internationalisation. Unlike individual firm managers, who typically experience a single internationalisation trajectory, consultants observe multiple firms across varying levels of maturity. This accumulated exposure enables them to identify recurring patterns, common pitfalls, and effective practices that extend beyond individual case idiosyncrasies. Moreover, consultants typically work with large and diverse portfolios of firms that differ in size, sector and capabilities, providing a basis for comparative insights that are not easily accessible to individual firms and are difficult to achieve in firm-level academic studies constrained by limited samples.

In addition, consultants' intermediary position between policy makers and exporting firms allows them to contrast managerial intentions with execution constraints. In this mediating role, research on export support programs highlights that intermediaries, consultants, and institutions provide resources, knowledge, and skills that can contribute to the upgrading of SME behaviour in exporting activities (Madsen et al., 2012). This positioning enables consultants to observe gaps between strategic intentions and operational realities, between prescribed best practices and implementable solutions, and between policy objectives and firm-level outcomes – insights that may be difficult for firms or policy makers to fully identify on their own.

Therefore, this intermediary-based perspective complements existing firm-level evidence and offers a distinct and relevant contribution to the literature. While firm-level studies capture managerial perceptions and strategies within organisations, and policy-level research examines aggregate outcomes and institutional factors, consultant

perspectives bridge these levels by synthesising cross-case patterns grounded in direct support relationships. Furthermore, as Efrat and Øyna (2021) conclude in their systematic literature review, there is a clear need for additional research examining the roles and impacts of different types of intermediaries in international business contexts.

Given the scenario outlined above, this article examines critical success factors in exports from the perceptual perspective of six technical consultants affiliated with Brazil's Programa de Qualificação para Exportação (PEIEX), a national public export support program, operating in the south of Brazil. The research was guided by the following question: what is the perception of PEIEX consultants regarding the critical success factors that shape export performance?

To address this question, the study aims to analyse critical success factors in the exports of companies located in the northeast region of Rio Grande do Sul (Southern Brazil), drawing on the perceptions of six PEIEX consultants. Specifically, the research involved:

- 1 identifying the main export-related CSFs discussed in the literature
- 2 examining consultants' perceptions of these factors
- 3 comparing these insights with existing academic findings
- 4 exploring perceived links between CSFs and export performance indicators.

Due to commercial and fiscal confidentiality constraints, export performance is examined from a perceptual perspective rather than through objective indicators. Accordingly, performance-related evidence reflects consultants' assessments based on their professional experience working with exporting firms.

This article is structured as follows. Section 1 introduces the research topic, outlines the research problem and objectives, and justifies the relevance of the study. Section 2 presents the theoretical background, reviewing the literature on critical success factors in exports, export performance, and the relationship between these two constructs. Section 3 describes the methodological procedures adopted, detailing the exploratory qualitative approach and the use of in-depth interviews with consultants affiliated with the PEIEX program operating in the south of Brazil. Section 4 presents the empirical results, organised into thematic categories that capture consultants' perceptions regarding the importance of CSFs for export performance, the identification of the main CSFs in exporting, how these factors are managed by firms, their variation across different scenarios, the criteria used to evaluate export performance, and the perceived influence of CSFs on export outcomes. Section 5 discusses these findings by comparing areas of convergence and divergence between consultant perceptions and the systematic literature review, drawing on resource-based view and institutional theory perspectives. Finally, Section 6 concludes the article by summarising the main findings, outlining managerial implications, acknowledging limitations, and suggesting directions for future research.

## **2 Theoretical background**

According to Albertin (2009), CSFs are areas or aspects of a company that contribute significantly and decisively to its success. The term 'critical success factors' was coined by Daniel (1961) and later refined by Rockart (1979). According to Rockart (1979), CSFs

can be understood as a method for structuring managerial information and decision making, articulated around three core principles. First, factors identified as critical require focused managerial attention and adequate resource allocation to support organisational performance. Second, once resources are directed toward a given CSF, its performance should be systematically monitored through information that enables control, corrective actions, and continuous improvement. Third, CSFs are closely linked to the organisation's core business and should be defined by those responsible for managerial decision making, including their measurement criteria, performance standards, and information requirements.

Complementarily, according to Grunert and Ellegaard (1992), CSFs can be understood as the skills and resources that exert the greatest leverage on value creation and cost structures. From this perspective, CSFs may represent critical organisational resources – both tangible, such as financial resources and technological infrastructure, and intangible, such as accumulated knowledge, managerial competence, and brand reputation – that firms must possess or develop to compete successfully in export markets. However, not all resources qualify as CSFs; only those that demonstrate a substantial impact on export performance outcomes can be considered critical (Grunert and Ellegaard, 1992).

In this study, critical success factors in exports are conceptualised as export-related capabilities and institutional enablers that shape firms' export development processes and, consequently, influence export performance outcomes. This analytical construct encompasses organisational resources, managerial and operational routines, and institutional conditions – such as export support programs, regulatory frameworks, and policy mechanisms – that enable firms to develop, sustain, or upgrade their export activities, including the mitigation of common export barriers.

More specifically, CSFs refer to resources, routines, and contextual conditions that support export development and condition firms' ability to achieve favourable export performance. Consistent with the literature, CSFs are identified both inductively, as recurring themes across empirical studies and practitioner accounts, and analytically, as high-impact enablers or necessary conditions perceived to exert a meaningful influence on export outcomes. This conceptualisation provides a clear analytical framework that distinguishes CSFs from adjacent constructs – such as performance indicators, export barriers, or policy instruments – while acknowledging their multidimensional nature, spanning firm-level capabilities and institutional support mechanisms.

To move beyond definitional clarification and provide analytical depth, this study draws on two complementary theoretical perspectives widely employed in export performance research: the resource-based view (RBV) and institutional theory. The RBV offers a lens to interpret firm-level resources, capabilities, and routines as critical success factors that shape export development and performance, while institutional theory helps explain how external conditions – such as export support programs, regulatory frameworks, and policy environments – enable or constrain firms' export activities. Together, these perspectives enable an examination of convergence and divergence between theoretical insights and the perceptions articulated by export support consultants.

The RBV posits that a firm's competitive advantage derives from its bundle of valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources and capabilities (Barney, 1991). In export contexts, the RBV emphasises the role of internal factors – such as managerial capabilities, human resources, technological competencies, and knowledge

accumulation – in shaping export performance (Elia et al., 2021; Zou and Stan, 1998). This framework is particularly relevant for SMEs in emerging markets, where resource constraints heighten the importance of strategic resource deployment and capability development (He et al., 2011). Empirical evidence further indicates that financial resources, human capital, and managerial competence are especially critical for export success among resource-constrained firms (Celec and Globocnik, 2017).

Institutional theory examines how regulatory frameworks and governance arrangements shape business transactions, strategic choices, and subsequent performance outcomes, including internationalisation processes (North, 1990; Scott, 2008). This perspective is particularly relevant in emerging economies, where governance structures and institutional environments are important elements for competitive performance (Peng et al., 2008; Wu and Deng, 2020). Prior research shows that both formal institutions – such as regulatory frameworks, government policies, and certification requirements – and informal institutional arrangements – such as social networks and cultural norms – shape SME internationalisation strategies and influence export outcomes (Manolopoulos et al., 2018; Haddoud et al., 2018).

Taken together, these two theoretical perspectives offer complementary explanatory power for understanding CSFs in exports. While RBV emphasises internal determinants such as managerial capabilities and knowledge resources, institutional theory accounts for external influences, including government support programs and regulatory environments, that shape firms' export development and performance.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the role of critical success factors in exports, and acknowledging the relevance of a more recent timeframe, Dorneles et al. (2026) conducted a systematic literature review covering the period from 2000 to 2024 with the aim of identifying the main critical success factors in exports, the most frequently employed export performance indicators, and the relationships examined between CSFs and export performance outcomes. The authors searched for articles in the EBSCOhost®, Emerald Insight®, ScienceDirect®, and Web of Science® databases, chosen for their relevance and credibility in the academic field. The search terms were 'critical success factors', 'exports' and 'export success factors'. The first two terms were chosen to limit the number of studies to be analysed, thereby enabling a more focused review. The term 'export success factor', in turn, was included to capture articles that addressed the topic but did not explicitly use the word 'critical' in their titles, abstracts, or keywords. This complementary search strategy was intended to minimise the risk of excluding potentially relevant articles identified during the initial exploratory stage.

At the end of their systematic literature review, Dorneles et al. (2026) identified 32 CSFs in exports. Using Pareto analysis, with the number of citations as the variable of interest, the authors then identified 14 CSFs mentioned in approximately 80% of the reviewed literature, which can be considered a synthesis of the factors presented in previous studies and classified as the most representative. Among these, the factors 'knowledge and/or accumulated experience in the international market and long-term commitment to exports', 'networking', and 'export strategy' stood out as being consistently identified by multiple researchers as critical to export success.

According to Dressler (2018), in his study on German brewery exports, export knowledge was the most important factor for export success. Complementarily, the studies by Handoyo et al. (2021) and Safari et al. (2022), which examined CSFs for the internationalisation of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Indonesia and Qatar respectively, also identified international market knowledge as a CSF in exports.

Freeman and Styles (2014) found that information and networking are critical success factors for the strategic export performance of Australian SMEs. Similarly, Maldifassi and Caorsi (2014), in their study of Chilean SMEs, identified the presence of strategic allies in the destination market as a CSF. Furthermore, according to Evrosimovska et al. (2019), SMEs from developing countries must invest in international networking to successfully enter foreign markets. In summary, several scholars have recognised networking as a key determinant of successful internationalisation. As discussed in the literature, networking extends beyond mere contact accumulation to encompass trust-based relationships and social capital (Al Sayah et al., 2020).

The study on British exporters by Beleska-Spasova et al. (2012) indicated that management and planning resources have the strongest direct effect on export performance. Similarly, the research by Adu-Gyamfi and Korneliussen (2013) on emerging export markets in Ghana indicated that a solid internationalisation strategy is a significant CSF and is considered one of the most effective strategic options for improving the export performance of companies. Finally, Jahiel et al. (2014) concluded that, within the lychee export market in Madagascar, choosing a niche market as an export strategy is a significant CSF for export success. The three CSFs mentioned above, along with the other eleven identified in the Pareto analysis and their respective number of citations, are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1** Pareto analysis of CSFs in exports

<i>CSF</i>		<i>Number of citations</i>	<i>Cumulative citations</i>	<i>Cumulative %</i>
1	Knowledge and/or accumulated experience in the international market and long-term commitment to exports	15	15	15.5%
2	Networking	12	27	27.8%
3	Export strategy	7	34	35.1%
4	Competent management	6	40	41.2%
5	Product quality	6	46	47.4%
6	Government policies and export support programs	5	51	52.6%
7	Private external investment in the exporting company	5	56	57.7%
8	Company size	5	61	61.9%
9	Product innovation	5	66	66.0%
10	Level of competition in the domestic market	4	70	70.1%
11	Cost leadership and competitive pricing	3	73	73.2%
12	Quality assurance certifications	3	76	76.3%
13	Qualification of managers and employees	2	78	78.4%
14	Advanced technology	2	80	80.4%
15–32	Other CSFs	19	97	100%

*Source:* Dorneles et al. (2026)

**Table 2** Relationship between the most representative CSFs and export performance indicators

<i>Most representative CSFs</i>	<i>Type of relationship identified</i>	<i>Percentage of studies by relationship type</i>	<i>Export performance indicators</i>
1 Knowledge and/or accumulated experience in the international market and long-term commitment to exports	PS	93.3%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Export revenue</li> <li>• Foreign market presence</li> <li>• Time operating in the international market</li> <li>• Export growth</li> </ul>
	P	6.7%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Export growth</li> </ul>
2 Networking	PS	75%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Export revenue</li> <li>• Foreign market presence</li> <li>• Export growth</li> <li>• Time operating in the international market</li> </ul>
	P	25%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Export growth</li> <li>• Export revenue</li> <li>• Foreign market presence</li> <li>• Time operating in the international market</li> </ul>
3 Export strategy	PS	100%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time operating in the international market</li> <li>• Export revenue</li> <li>• Export growth</li> </ul>
4 Competent management	PS	100%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foreign market presence</li> <li>• Export revenue</li> <li>• Time operating in the international market</li> </ul>
5 Product quality	PS	83.3%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foreign market presence</li> <li>• Export growth</li> <li>• Export revenue</li> <li>• Time operating in the international market</li> </ul>
	P	16.7%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Export growth</li> <li>• Foreign market presence</li> </ul>
6 Government policies and export support programs	PS	80%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Export revenue</li> <li>• Export growth</li> </ul>
	P	20%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Export revenue</li> </ul>

Note: P – positive relationship identified qualitatively; PS – positive and statistically significant relationship.

Source: Dorneles et al. (2026)

**Table 2** Relationship between the most representative CSFs and export performance indicators (continued)

<i>Most representative CSFs</i>	<i>Type of relationship identified</i>	<i>Percentage of studies by relationship type</i>	<i>Export performance indicators</i>
7 Private external investment in the exporting company	PS	80%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Export revenue</li> <li>• Export growth</li> <li>• Time operating in the international market</li> </ul>
	P	20%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Export growth</li> </ul>
8 Company size	PS	100%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Export revenue</li> <li>• Foreign market presence</li> </ul>
9 Product innovation	PS	100%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foreign market presence</li> <li>• Export revenue</li> <li>• Time operating in the international market</li> <li>• Export growth</li> </ul>
10 Level of competition in the domestic market	PS	100%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Export revenue</li> </ul>
11 Cost leadership and competitive pricing	PS	67%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Export revenue</li> </ul>
	P	33%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Export growth</li> </ul>
12 Quality assurance certifications	PS	67%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Export revenue</li> <li>• Export growth</li> </ul>
	P	33%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Export growth</li> </ul>
13 Qualification of managers and employees	PS	100%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Export revenue</li> <li>• Export growth</li> </ul>
14 Advanced technology	PS	100%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Export revenue</li> </ul>
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Export growth</li> </ul>

Note: P – positive relationship identified qualitatively; PS – positive and statistically significant relationship.

Source: Dorneles et al. (2026)

Based on the information presented in Table 1, it is observed that the CSFs listed exhibit different types of relationships with export performance, identified by Dorneles et al. (2026) through four main indicators:

- 1 export revenue
- 2 foreign market presence
- 3 time operating in the international market
- 4 export growth.

Based on the information presented in Table 1, Dorneles et al. (2026) examined the association between the 14 CSFs classified as most representative and export performance. In the reviewed studies, these relationships were analysed using four primary export performance indicators:

- 1 export revenue
- 2 foreign market presence
- 3 time operating in international markets
- 4 export growth.

The results of the systematic literature review indicate that all 14 CSFs present a positive and statistically significant impact (PS) on at least one export performance indicator – namely export revenue, foreign market presence, time operating in international markets, or export growth. These findings are summarised in Table 2.

Based on these results, Dorneles et al. (2026) developed an explanatory model of export performance grounded in the identified CSFs (Figure 1). In this model, export performance – measured using the four indicators presented above – is explained by 14 key CSFs, comprising ten internal factors, two external factors, and two mixed or inter-organisational factors.

**Figure 1** Explanatory model of the relationship between CSFs and export performance



Source: Dorneles et al. (2026)

The systematic literature review on critical success factors in exporting conducted by Dorneles et al. (2026) identified 14 CSFs as the most frequently examined in prior studies (Figure 1). These factors were found to demonstrate positive and statistically significant relationships with key export performance indicators, including export revenue, foreign market presence, time operating in foreign markets, and export growth.

Building on this synthesis, the present study positions itself as the first exploratory qualitative empirical examination of the framework proposed by Dorneles et al. (2026). While their systematic review consolidates evidence across prior studies to identify which CSFs are most strongly associated with export performance, the present research investigates how these CSFs are perceived by export support consultants working directly with exporting firms. In doing so, the study complements the review’s findings by

confronting them with practice-based insights and by identifying areas of convergence, divergence, and contextualised insights.

By examining CSFs from the perspective of export support consultants who work directly with exporting firms through the PEIEX Program, rather than replicating the synthesis proposed by Dorneles et al. (2026), this research refines and contextualises it by:

- 1 confronting literature-identified CSFs with practice-based insights from intermediaries
- 2 identifying areas of convergence where consultant perspectives align with the literature synthesis, thereby suggesting practitioner validation of theoretically established CSFs
- 3 identifying areas of divergence where factors prominent in the literature are absent from consultant accounts, or where practice-based factors receive limited attention in the literature
- 4 examining how CSFs are perceived to relate to export performance from the consultant standpoint, complementing the literature's statistical analyses with qualitative insights.

### **3 Materials and method**

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative design. Haven and van Grootel (2019) define qualitative research as a methodological approach that relies on linguistic and behavioural data to uncover the perspectives of individuals directly involved in the phenomenon under investigation. Such an approach is particularly appropriate when the objective is to explore meanings, interpretations, and experiential knowledge that are not readily captured through quantitative methods (Kalu and Bwalya, 2017).

Accordingly, this study is classified as qualitative because it relies on non-statistical procedures to generate results and seeks to capture how export-related critical success factors are perceived and interpreted by export support consultants. It is considered exploratory insofar as it aims to generate insights into an underexplored analytical perspective – namely, the intermediary viewpoint – rather than to test or replicate existing quantitative relationships (Heigham and Croker, 2009; Thomas and Lawal, 2020). This approach facilitates the identification of relationships, interpretations, and contextual elements, while also providing a foundation for future investigations that may further integrate qualitative and quantitative evidence (Creswell and Creswell, 2005).

The flexible nature of qualitative research does not impose rigid requirements on sample composition; instead, it emphasises achieving the research objectives through in-depth exploration of the phenomenon (Subedi, 2021). Accordingly, Sim et al. (2018) argue that sampling in qualitative studies should be guided by the researcher's ongoing process of interpretation, a critical decision that depends on the specific context under analysis.

In this study, the sample comprised six PEIEX consultants with formal education in business administration, foreign trade, and related fields, including postgraduate and master's-level qualifications. Overall, the group is characterised by extensive

professional experience in export-related activities, with most consultants reporting more than 15 years of practice and several exceeding 20 years. Collectively, the consultants have supported a substantial number of micro and small enterprises at pre-export and early export stages – each having assisted between 22 and 158 SMEs – providing broad and cumulative exposure to firms initiating internationalisation processes.

This sample corresponds to the full population of export support consultants operating in the selected region of Serra Gaucha (southern Brazil) within the PEIEX program, a national public export support program. Because all consultants active in the region were interviewed, no additional sampling was required, as all eligible consultants in the region were interviewed. The region analysed is the most representative exporting area in the state of Rio Grande do Sul and falls within the primary area of influence of the university where the study was conducted.

An open-ended interview script was employed as the data collection instrument, structured to guide a progressive and in-depth exploration of CSFs in exporting. The script comprised one introductory question, six core questions, and two complementary questions. The introductory question aimed to establish a shared understanding of the CSF concept and to engage interviewees with the topic. The core questions addressed:

- 1 the identification of the main CSFs in exporting
- 2 how these factors are managed by organisations
- 3 whether and how CSFs vary across different scenarios
- 4 the variables influencing such variation
- 5 the ways in which CSFs are adapted to specific company and market contexts
- 6 the criteria used to evaluate export performance
- 7 the perceived mechanisms through which CSFs influence export outcomes.

The closing question focused on eliciting practical recommendations to improve export performance based on CSFs. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the expert profile of the interviewees, the interview script was not formally pre-validated; however, it was reviewed by the research team to ensure clarity, coherence, and alignment with the theoretical foundations of the study.

The interviews were conducted in January 2025 via videoconferencing tools and lasted an average of 32 minutes each, with a range from 24 to 41 minutes. Interviews were conducted in Portuguese, the native language of both interviewer and interviewees. Analytical categories were subsequently translated into English during the reporting phase, with translations focused on conceptual equivalence rather than literal wording to preserve meaning across languages.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using content analysis. Coding was conducted by the primary researcher and guided by the theoretical framework proposed by Dorneles et al. (2026). To mitigate single-researcher bias, coding decisions and category definitions were systematically checked against the theoretical framework and refined through iterative coding cycles until stability was achieved (Armstrong et al., 1997; Campbell et al., 2013). Following coding stabilisation, the results were organised and interpreted by considering not only the frequency of mentions, but also the depth and specificity of consultants' narratives, as well as their alignment with the theoretical background.

## 4 Results

This chapter presents the results of the content analysis of interviews with export consultants participating in the PEIEX program. The analysis examines consultants' perceptions regarding the importance, identification, management, and adaptation of critical success factors (CSFs) in exporting, as well as the criteria used to evaluate export performance and the mechanisms through which CSFs influence export outcomes. The results are organised into thematic subsections, combining frequency patterns with qualitative interpretation of interview excerpts to highlight not only the prevalence of CSFs, but also their underlying meanings and practical implications.

### 4.1 Importance of critical success factors for export performance

In the first stage of the analysis, interviewees were invited to reflect on the importance of critical success factors for export performance. As is common in exploratory qualitative interviews, not all participants addressed every question explicitly, as the discussions unfolded flexibly in line with interviewees' professional experiences and areas of emphasis. Accordingly, interviewees A and F did not provide direct responses to this question, whereas interviewees B, C, D, and E offered substantive reflections on the role of CSFs in export performance.

Among the interviewees who addressed this topic (Table 3), there was unanimous recognition of the relevance of CSFs for export planning and management. Beyond this shared view, some respondents emphasised the role of CSFs in supporting managerial prioritisation and highlighted the greater relevance of internal CSFs, given their controllability from a managerial standpoint.

**Table 3** Importance of CSFs for export performance

<i>Importance of CSFs</i>	<i>Interviewees</i>						<i>Total</i>
	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>F</i>	
Influence of CSFs on export planning and management performance		X	X	X	X		4
Prioritisation of actions based on the analysis of CSFs					X		1
Greater relevance of internal CSFs, as they involve controllable variables			X				1
Total		1	2	1	2		6

*Source:* Prepared by the authors (2026)

Regarding the most frequently cited dimension – the influence of CSFs on export planning and management – an illustrative example is provided in the following excerpt:

“These factors are necessary and indispensable for export activities to function. Companies that incorporate them into their planning processes tend to achieve success in the medium and long term.” (Interviewee B, translated)

This statement reinforces the interpretation that CSFs are perceived not merely as optional best practices, but as necessary conditions for effective export planning and management. It also highlights the centrality of planning as a foundational element in

export development, as emphasised by consultants drawing on their practical experience with exporting firms.

#### 4.2 Main CSFs IN exporting

The second question in the interview script aimed to identify the perspectives of the consultants regarding the main CSFs in exporting. Eleven distinct CSFs emerged from the interviews. While Table 4 presents the frequency distribution of the factors mentioned, the analysis does not treat frequency as a direct proxy for importance. Rather, frequency is used as a descriptive organising criterion, while analytical emphasis is placed on how consultants characterise and contextualise these CSFs in practice, as well as how they relate them to export success based on their professional experience.

**Table 4** Main CSFs in exporting

CSFs in exporting	Interviewees						Total
	A	B	C	D	E	F	
Strategic export planning			X	X	X		3
International knowledge	X		X		X		3
Market research and competitor analysis	X		X		X		3
Differentiated product				X	X	X	3
Management capacity				X	X	X	3
Internal integration			X	X			2
Cost knowledge	X	X					2
Knowledge of export processes		X			X		2
Export culture	X						1
Tax optimisation opportunities	X						1
Financial resources					X		1
Total	5	2	4	4	7	2	24

Source: Prepared by the authors (2026)

Of the 11 CSFs presented in Table 4, five were mentioned by three interviewees, three by two interviewees, and the remaining three by only one interviewee. Although frequency of mention provides an initial descriptive indication of which factors recur more often in consultants’ accounts, it does not fully capture the relevance attributed to each CSF. Accordingly, interpretive emphasis is placed on how these factors are discussed, contextualised, and connected to managerial challenges faced by exporting firms. Overall, the first eight CSFs listed in Table 4 can be considered particularly salient, as they were recurrently associated with core managerial challenges faced by firms during the early stages of export activity.

Consultants consistently positioned planning as a foundational CSF, although they diverged in their interpretations of what constitutes adequate planning for micro and small enterprises initiating export activities. Interviewee C articulated planning as the first step in an ordered and cumulative process:

“The first factor is planning, followed by knowledge of foreign markets. Companies need to organize themselves internally, define a plan, conduct market research, and proceed step by step.” (Interviewee C, translated)

This perspective frames export planning not as a formalised strategic exercise, but as a progressive process of internal organisation and learning. Complementing this view, interviewees D and E emphasised basic organisational readiness and the prioritisation of target markets as critical initial conditions for export engagement. These differing emphases – internal organisational readiness versus strategic market prioritisation – appear to reflect variations in the maturity profiles of the firms supported by each consultant.

Overall, the findings indicate that consultants do not perceive CSFs in exporting as isolated or independent elements. Rather, they describe CSFs as interrelated capabilities that jointly structure firms’ initial export efforts. The prominence attributed to planning- and knowledge-related factors reflects a shared understanding that export success depends on the sequencing of actions and the organisation of internal conditions, particularly for firms at early stages of internationalisation. Differences in emphasis across consultants further suggest that the relevance of specific CSFs may vary according to firms’ levels of readiness and organisational maturity.

#### 4.3 How the main CSFs in exporting are managed by organisations

The third question in the interview script examined how organisations manage CSFs in exporting, from the perspective of the consultants. The responses summarised in Table 5 reveal two predominant approaches to CSF management. Consultants emphasised that these approaches tend to vary according to firms’ levels of export experience and organisational maturity, reflecting different capacities to internalise export-related knowledge and practices.

**Table 5** How companies manage CSFs

Ways of managing CSFs	Interviewees						Total
	A	B	C	D	E	F	
Hiring specialised professionals	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
In-house development based on internal export knowledge	X	X		X	X		4
Total	2	2	1	2	2	1	10

*Source:* Prepared by the authors (2026)

As shown in Table 5, two primary approaches to CSF management emerged from the interviews. One approach – mentioned by all six consultants – involves hiring specialised professionals, particularly in firms that lack prior export experience or internal export-related knowledge. In such cases, external expertise is perceived as essential to compensate for organisational knowledge gaps and to support the structuring of export activities.

The second approach, cited by four interviewees, refers to the in-house development of CSFs based on accumulated internal knowledge. This strategy was associated with firms that already possess some degree of export experience and an established export culture. According to the consultants, these firms are better positioned to manage CSFs internally, allowing them to respond more autonomously to operational challenges,

mitigate risks, and identify export opportunities. Overall, the findings suggest that the management of CSFs evolves with firm maturity, shifting from reliance on external expertise toward greater internal capability development.

4.4 Variation of CSFs depending on the type of scenario encountered

The fourth question examined consultants’ perceptions regarding whether CSFs in exporting vary across different scenarios. The responses indicate that such variation is influenced by a limited set of contextual variables and by how firms adapt their CSFs to specific situations. In particular, interviewees identified three key variables that condition the relevance of CSFs across scenarios. These variables are summarised in Table 6.

**Table 6** Variables determining the CSFs

<i>Variables determining CSFs in exporting</i>	<i>Interviewees</i>						<i>Total</i>
	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>F</i>	
Individualised export diagnosis and strategy		X	X	X	X		4
Target market			X	X	X	X	4
Financial resources		X		X			2
<b>Total</b>		2	2	3	2	1	10

*Source:* Prepared by the authors (2026)

As shown in Table 6, consultants most frequently pointed to individualised export diagnosis and strategy, along with target market characteristics, as the main variables shaping CSFs in exporting across different scenarios. These findings highlight the primacy of strategic alignment and market-specific considerations in determining which factors become critical. Table 7 builds on this discussion by examining how CSFs are adapted to different scenarios.

**Table 7** Types of factors that determine CSFs adaptation

<i>Types of factors that determine CSFs adaptation</i>	<i>Interviewees</i>						<i>Total</i>
	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>F</i>	
External factors such as specificities of foreign markets and tariff and non-tariff barriers			X	X		X	3
Internal factors such as adjustments to the organisational structure and the hiring of professionals trained in foreign trade	X						1
Commercial strategy		X					1
Individualised export process					X		1
<b>Total</b>	1	1	1	1	1	1	6

*Source:* Prepared by the authors (2026)

As shown in Table 7, consultants identified a limited set of factors guiding the adaptation of CSFs across scenarios. External factors – such as foreign market specificities and tariff and non-tariff barriers – were the most frequently cited, while other elements, including internal organisational adjustments, commercial strategy, and individualised export processes, were mentioned more sporadically. This pattern suggests that external

environmental conditions play a particularly salient role in shaping how CSFs are adapted in practice.

When considered alongside the results presented in Table 6, these findings reinforce the importance of individualised export diagnosis and market-oriented strategies in contexts where CSFs are perceived to vary across scenarios. Together, the results indicate that consultants emphasise the need to align internal organisational arrangements with external market requirements when adapting CSFs.

Overall, the findings suggest that consultants view CSFs in exporting as context-dependent rather than uniform across firms or markets. The emphasis on individualised diagnosis, target market characteristics, and external environmental conditions underscores the importance of adapting CSFs to specific scenarios, reinforcing a context-sensitive approach to export planning and management.

#### 4.5 Criteria for evaluating export performance

The fifth question examined consultants' perceptions of how companies evaluate export performance. Not all consultants reported explicit performance criteria, reflecting the informal or early-stage monitoring practices commonly observed among the firms they support. Interviewees A, C, and F did not identify specific criteria. Overall, six evaluation criteria emerged, as summarised in Table 8.

**Table 8** Criteria for evaluating export performance

Criteria for evaluating export performance	Interviewees						Total
	A	B	C	D	E	F	
Export revenue		X		X	X		3
Growth of export revenue					X		1
Export revenue as a percentage of total turnover					X		1
Number of countries served		X					1
Profit from operations					X		1
Number of quotations submitted				X			1
Total		2		2	4		8

*Source:* Prepared by the authors (2026)

Among the criteria presented in Table 8, export revenue emerged as the most frequently cited indicator. Most other measures are closely related to this metric, while the number of quotations reflects a process-oriented or effort-related measure rather than a direct performance outcome. Overall, the findings indicate that export performance assessment is largely revenue-oriented, with limited use of diversified indicators.

#### 4.6 Influence of CSFs on export performance

The penultimate question in the interview script aimed to identify the influence of CSFs on export performance, according to the consultants' perception. In total, seven critical success factors were mentioned as influencing export performance. Table 9 presents the distribution, but rather than privileging frequency, the analysis examines the mechanisms consultants described linking CSFs to performance outcomes.

**Table 9** Influence of CSFs on export performance

CSFs influencing export performance	Interviewees						Total
	A	B	C	D	E	F	
Planning, organisation, and management	X	X	X		X		4
Knowledge of the export process			X	X		X	3
Qualified and competent employees		X			X		2
Financial resources					X		1
Development and dissemination of export culture				X			1
Market research	X						1
Quality products adapted to foreign markets						X	1
Total	2	2	2	2	3	2	13

*Source:* Prepared by the authors (2026)

Regarding the CSFs influencing export performance (Table 9), managerial capabilities – encompassing planning, organisation, and management – emerged as the most salient factor in consultants’ accounts. This CSF was mentioned by four interviewees, suggesting that consultants view effective managerial coordination as a central mechanism through which export performance is achieved, particularly among smaller and less mature firms supported by the PEIEX program.

Beyond these core managerial capabilities, consultants also emphasised export process knowledge and the presence of qualified and competent employees as key enablers of export performance. These factors were associated with firms’ ability to operationalise strategic intentions and translate them into concrete export outcomes, especially in contexts where prior exporting experience is limited. The remaining CSFs – each cited by a single interviewee – complement this core set and point to more specific or situational influences on export performance.

#### 4.7 Recommendations to improve export performance based on CSFs

The final question in the interview script sought to identify recommendations for improving companies’ export performance based on CSFs. This question encouraged consultants to translate their experience with exporting firms into actionable recommendations. In total, eight distinct recommendations were identified, reflecting both strategic and operational dimensions of export management, as summarised in Table 10.

Among the eight recommendations presented in Table 10, two were mentioned by three interviewees, while the remaining recommendations were cited less frequently. Although frequency allows the identification of more recurrent recommendations, consultants generally emphasised that these actions should be understood as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Taken together, the recommendations point to a coherent set of actions aimed at strengthening firms’ export capabilities.

**Table 10** Recommendations to improve companies' export performance based on CSFs

Recommendations to improve export performance	Interviewees						Total
	A	B	C	D	E	F	
Hiring qualified professionals		X		X		X	3
Market research			X	X	X		3
Export financing	X					X	2
Company self-analysis/self-monitoring		X					1
Evaluation of export capacity				X			1
Monitoring of organisational operations					X		1
Cost verification	X						1
Investment in branding/brand value	X						1
Total	3	2	1	3	2	2	13

*Source:* Prepared by the authors (2026)

Rather than merely listing improvement actions, consultants articulated concrete mechanisms through which these recommendations are expected to enhance export performance. Hiring qualified professionals, for instance, was described as a way to address internal competency gaps and to professionalise export-related decision making, as highlighted by interviewee B.

Market research also received particular attention, not as a one-off activity, but as a continuous process that supports strategic decision making in foreign markets. This process may be facilitated by public support mechanisms, as emphasised by interviewee D:

“The Rio Grande do Sul state government provides free market research through the PEIEX program. While firms do not need to bear these costs, they must first conduct a basic internal assessment to organize their export efforts effectively.” (Interviewee D, translated)

Overall, the recommendations indicate that improvements in export performance depend on the progressive alignment between internal capabilities, access to information, and organisational readiness. This highlights the importance of tailoring CSF-based actions to firms' specific conditions and stages of export development.

## 5 Discussion

This section presents a discussion of the results, exploring the points of convergence and divergence between the interviews and the literature. Table 11 presents the CSFs that have a positive and significant relationship with export performance evaluation indicators, according to Dorneles et al. (2026), and compares them with the results from the interviews. In addition, CSFs mentioned by consultants but not emphasised in the reviewed literature are also identified.

**Table 11** Convergence between the literature and the interviews regarding CSFs in exporting

<i>Critical success factors (CSFs) in exporting</i>	<i>Not mentioned in interviews</i>	<i>Mentioned in interviews</i>	<i>Reference authors</i>
Identified by Dorneles et al. (2026)	1 Networking 2 Private foreign investment in the exporting company 3 Company size 4 Product innovation 5 Level of competition in the domestic market 6 Cost leadership and competitive pricing 7 Quality assurance certifications 8 Advanced technology	1 Knowledge and/or accumulated experience in the international market and long-term commitment to exports 2 Export strategy 3 Competent management 4 Product quality 5 Government policies and export support programs 6 Qualification of managers and employees	Hill (2000), Gumede and Rasmussen (2002), Ibeh (2004), Babakus et al. (2006), Cabral and Silva (2006), Doole et al. (2006), Kingsbury and Mabbett (2007), Huang et al. (2008), Moreno et al. (2008), Rock and Ahmed (2008), Parhizkar et al. (2010), Beleska-Spasova et al. (2012), Adu-Gyamfi and Korneliussen (2013), Jahiel et al. (2014), Freeman and Styles (2014), Litvin and Coser (2014), Maldifassi and Caorsi (2014), Dressler (2015), Gjekanovikj et al. (2015), Erdil and Özdemir (2016), Gajewski and Tchorek (2017), Galati et al. (2017), Rwehumbiza (2017), Dressler (2018), Evrosimovska et al. (2019), Karipidis et al. (2020), Handoyo et al. (2021), Safari et al. (2022) and Arun and Ozmütlu (2023)
Not identified in the literature	-	1 Market research and competitor analysis 2 Internal integration 3 Cost knowledge 4 Financial resources 5 Planning and organisation	-

*Source:* Prepared by the authors (2026)

As shown in Table 11, the CSFs that converge between the literature and the experts interviewed were:

- 1 knowledge and/or accumulated experience in the international market and long-term commitment to exports
- 2 export strategy
- 3 competent management
- 4 product quality
- 5 government policies and export support programs
- 6 the qualification of managers and employees.

According to Cabral and Silva (2006), the set of factors composed of accumulated experience in the international market, export strategy, and competent management led to successful export performance in the group of organisations they studied – small and medium-sized companies from Ceará, Brazil. Litvin and Coser (2014), who investigated the key factors for the successful export of agri-food products in Moldova, found that product quality is directly related to good export sales performance. Similarly, Safari et al. (2022), after analysing small and medium-sized Qatari companies, concluded that export support programs and government policies improve export performance. Finally, according to Maldifassi and Caorsi (2014), companies with qualified managers and employees achieve better results in their sales processes to foreign markets. These authors reached this conclusion after studying the successful export performance of small and medium-sized Chilean companies. The presence of qualified managers and employees is also associated with the development of effective customer relationships, a factor identified by Chong et al. (2011) as a key CSF for SMEs operating in B2B markets.

From a RBV perspective, these convergent factors represent fundamental organisational capabilities and resources (Barney, 1991; Celec and Globocnik, 2017). Management competence, accumulated knowledge, and personnel qualification constitute intangible resources that enable firms to navigate export complexities and sustain competitive advantages regardless of specific market conditions.

From an institutional theory perspective, the identification of government policies and export support programs as a convergent CSF reflects how formal institutions actively shape export success (North, 1990; Peng et al., 2008). This finding suggests that in emerging market contexts, where institutional voids and market failures constrain SME internationalisation, structured support mechanisms, such as PEIEX itself, function as critical institutional enablers that compensate for resource scarcities and knowledge gaps (Scott, 2008).

On the other hand, factors such as networking, external private investment in the exporting company, company size, product innovation, level of competition in the domestic market, cost leadership and competitive pricing, quality assurance certifications, and advanced technology – although frequently cited in the literature – were not mentioned in the interviews.

According to Gumedde and Rasmussen (2002), networking and external private investment in exporting companies were among the CSFs responsible for the strong export performance of small South African companies. For Huang et al. (2008), company size, product innovation, domestic market competition, and advanced technology were some of the critical factors determining the export success of Chinese companies. Lastly, according to Gjekanovikj et al. (2015), cost leadership and competitive prices, as well as quality assurance certifications, were some of the CSFs that influenced the good export performance of Greek olive oil producers.

In addition, the interviews revealed operational and managerial factors – such as market research and competitor analysis, internal integration, cost knowledge, financial resources, and planning and organisation – that are not emphasised in the literature. This divergence appears to reflect differences in analytical focus, as prior studies tend to concentrate on structural and externally oriented CSFs, whereas consultants emphasise internally controllable and actionable factors that are particularly salient for the SMEs supported by the PEIEX program.

Before examining the convergence and divergence between the literature and the interview findings regarding export performance indicators, it is important to note that prior research conceptualises export performance as a multidimensional construct. This assessment of export performance using multiple criteria has been widely discussed in the literature, with contemporary studies offering frameworks that go beyond single financial measures to capture different dimensions of export success (Rabaia et al., 2025).

Consistent with this multidimensional perspective, Table 12 presents the export performance indicators identified in the systematic literature review conducted by Dorneles et al. (2026) and compares them with those reported in the interviews. The indicators that converge between the literature and the interviewees include export revenue – along with variations such as its growth over time and its share of total revenue – and the number of foreign markets served.

**Table 12** Convergence between the literature and the interviews regarding export performance indicators

<i>Export performance indicators</i>	<i>Not mentioned in interviews</i>	<i>Mentioned in interviews</i>
Not identified in the literature	-	1 Number of quotations submitted 2 Profit from export operations
Identified in the literature	1 Time operating in the international market	1 Export revenue and its variations (export growth and share in total revenue) 2 Number of foreign markets served

*Source:* Prepared by the authors (2026)

Huang et al. (2008) used export revenue as the main criterion for assessing the performance of Chinese exporting companies. Similarly, export growth was one of the main indicators in the study by Rock and Ahmed (2008), which examined the relationship between CSFs and the export performance of Chilean companies. Finally, the number of foreign markets served was an indicator used by Beleska-Spasova et al. (2012) in their study of British exporters.

On the other hand, the indicator ‘time operating in the international market’, although frequently cited in the literature by authors such as Galati et al. (2017) and Safari et al. (2022), was not mentioned in the interviews. This omission may be due to the profile of the companies assisted by the PEIEX program, which are predominantly SMEs seeking to begin their export processes and therefore have little experience in international markets.

Additionally, two indicators emerged from the interviews that were not identified as prominent in the systematic literature review:

- 1 the number of quotations submitted
- 2 the profit from export operations.

The first indicator warrants caution, as submitting quotations reflects an intermediate activity rather than an export outcome and is more indicative of early export engagement than actual performance. Similarly, although profitability from export operations is conceptually linked to export revenue, its limited presence in the literature likely reflects data sensitivity and restricted access to detailed financial information.

## 6 Conclusions

This article examined critical success factors in exporting from the perspective of export support consultants affiliated with a Brazilian public export support program (PEIEX), operating in southern Brazil. Drawing on insights from both the literature and the qualitative interviews, the findings point to convergence around a core set of CSFs, including accumulated international market knowledge and experience, long-term commitment to exports, export strategy, management capability, qualification of managers and employees, product quality, and government policies and export support programs.

Overall, the results suggest that export success is less a function of isolated factors and more the outcome of firms' ability to coordinate internal capabilities, structure managerial decision making, and strategically leverage available institutional support mechanisms. In particular, managerial and knowledge-based CSFs emerged as central elements shaping export performance, especially among small and early-stage exporters.

Interpreted through an integrated theoretical lens, these findings reinforce the complementary roles of the RBV and institutional theory. Firm-level resources and capabilities – such as managerial competence, accumulated knowledge, and qualified human capital – constitute essential internal drivers of export performance, while institutional mechanisms – most notably public export support programs and policy frameworks – operate as critical external enablers. Rather than acting independently, these dimensions interact to shape firms' export trajectories, particularly in contexts characterised by resource constraints.

Methodologically, this study contributes to the export literature by:

- 1 providing an exploratory qualitative empirical examination of CSFs in exporting from the perspective of consultants operating within a national public export support program
- 2 presenting the perspective of export support consultants, which complements firm-level and policy-oriented research and helps connect micro (firm) and macro (institutional) viewpoints
- 3 illustrating the value of qualitative approaches in refining and contextualising findings from systematic literature reviews.

Theoretically, the study contributes to the export CSF literature by interpreting consultants' perceptions through the lenses of the RBV and institutional theory, highlighting the joint influence of firm-level capabilities and institutional support conditions on the relevance attributed to different success factors. Rather than proposing an integrated theoretical model, the findings suggest that divergence between literature-identified CSFs and practice-based observations reflects context- and stage-specific applicability, particularly across different levels of export readiness.

### 6.1 Managerial implications

The findings of this study offer actionable managerial implications for firm managers, consultants, and policy makers, grounded in the CSFs emphasised by experienced export consultants. For firm managers, the results highlight the importance of prioritising

managerial capabilities and structured planning to guide export decision making, particularly at the early stages of internationalisation. Simple monitoring tools, adapted to firms' resource constraints, can support this process by tracking key indicators of export activity and readiness.

For consultants, effectiveness can be enhanced through the adoption of structured diagnostic frameworks tailored to early-stage exporters, integrating assessments of both organisational readiness and product-market fit. For policy makers, the findings point to the need to strengthen support mechanisms in areas such as industry-specific market intelligence, simplified access to export financing, and technical assistance for product adaptation. Overall, these implications highlight priority areas where managerial attention and export support initiatives can be most effectively directed, particularly in contexts involving early-stage exporters.

## *6.2 Study's limitations and future research directions*

Despite its contributions, this study has some limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The results are based on interviews with six consultants from a single export support program and region, and should therefore be understood as exploratory, requiring caution in their extension to other contexts. The findings also reflect the characteristics of SMEs at early stages of internationalisation, which may limit their applicability to larger or more experienced exporters. In addition, export performance was assessed based on consultant perceptions rather than objective firm-level data, due to confidentiality constraints.

Future research could build on these findings through quantitative surveys with exporting firms in this and other regions, enabling a broader assessment of the relevance and salience of CSFs across different contexts. Comparative qualitative studies between consultants and entrepreneurs may also provide deeper insights into how perceptions, priorities, and decision-making processes differ across roles. In addition, linking CSFs to objective export performance indicators in future studies would allow for systematic testing of the relationships identified in this study.

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## **Declarations**

Informed consent was obtained from all interviewees who participated in this study. Participation was voluntary, confidentiality was assured, and the data were anonymised and used exclusively for academic purposes.

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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