
Know How? Challenges in knowledge and innovation management in alliances: an introduction

Tyrone Pitsis and Siegfried Gudergan

Faculty of Business,
University of Technology, Sydney,
PO Box 123, Broadway NSW 2007,
Australia
Email: Tyrone.Pitsis@uts.edu.au
Email: Siggie.Gudergan@uts.edu.au

Biographical notes: Tyrone S. Pitsis is Faculty Reader in Organisational Behaviour at the University of Technology, Sydney and Co-Director of the Centre for Management & Organisation Studies (CMOS). His research is on the positive psychology of project-based organising and how organisational innovation and creativity is fostered as and through alliances. He has published in leading journals (*Organization Science*, *Organization Studies*, *Management*, *Management Learning*) and has several award-winning publications. His latest books are Pitsis, T.S. (2011) *The Handbook of Managerial and Organizational Innovation*, Edward-Elgar, London and New York, and Clegg, S.R., Kornberger, M., and Pitsis, T.S. (2010) *Managing and Organizations*, Sage, London.

Siegfried Gudergan is a Professor at the School of Marketing at the University of Technology, Sydney, and the Executive Director of the UTS Centre for Management & Organization Studies (CMOS). His research focuses on managerial and strategic decision-making as it relates to employees working with customers and managers working with internal and external business partners. This work is used to examine strategic performance, innovation and governance in alliances and service organisations, with a focus on the dynamic capabilities view. His research integrates the microeconomic and behavioural research paradigms in explaining managerial decision-making.

As organisations find themselves in increasingly complex, ambiguous and uncertain environments, they seek a range of organisational arrangements in order to share risk, costs and rewards, as well as to ensure more adaptable and flexible organisational structures to cope with such unstable environments. The shift towards business relationships such as joint ventures, strategic alliances and private–public partnerships, to name but a few, presents a great challenge in how organisations manage and utilise knowledge and innovation in inter-organisational relationships. While the coordination of such collaborative relationships presents several opportunities for growth and innovation (Bucic and Gudergan, 2004; Carlsen and Pitsis, 2008), the management of knowledge and organisational and managerial innovation within them in order to facilitate learning – and, ultimately, innovation – becomes much more problematic.

In this special issue of the *International Journal of Knowledge Management Studies*, our aim is to highlight the complexity and various ways of thinking about the nature of knowledge and learning in alliances. This is necessary because we believe the tensions

and opportunities inherent in the processes of knowledge and learning are amplified in alliance contexts. Primarily, this is due to the fact that alliances involve two or more organisations working together to share or complement each other's knowledge, resources, skills, capabilities and competencies in order to provide a service, deliver, create or innovate a product, infrastructure, a solution to a problem, or an idea (Pitsis et al., 2003; Pitsis et al., 2004; Josserand and Pitsis, 2007). As this definition of alliances is purposefully somewhat broad, this special issue includes papers on many forms of alliance, network and inter-organisational collaboration; the most important element is that all the empirical papers selected involve the study of two or more independent organisations collaborating and sharing knowledge for innovation and value creation. As such, there is a great deal of complexity and uncertainty associated with alliances because they typically involve multiple stakeholders, each with its own history, interests, values, culture, practices and processes. Alliance organisations must learn to work with and relate to each other, while simultaneously learning from what they do and how they do it. They must innovate in relation to their parent organisations' ways of learning and managing knowledge, as well as trying to innovate their parent organisations' procedures for the unique learning and knowledge that emerge within alliances as a mode of organisational and managerial practices (e.g. Gudergan et al., 2002; Pitsis et al., 2004; Lyles and Gudergan, 2008).

Importantly, the dynamics within alliances are unique in that the intensity and level of inter-organisational relationships require partners to innovate their processes and practices beyond those levels stipulated in any traditional contractual arrangement. Indeed, alliance relationships are typically less commonly governed by black-letter contractual bonds than are other forms of organisational collaboration, such as outsourcing, joint ventures and syndicates (Clegg and Pitsis, 2006). Our research has shown that alliances often involve generative organisational processes and practices that evolve as they are practised, leading to innovation in organisational capabilities and practices (Carlsen and Clegg, 2008; Bjorkeng et al., 2009; Clegg et al., 2010), and require leadership and managerial capabilities and competencies that enable the partners to negotiate order and practice beyond traditional forms of contractual governance systems and structures (Clegg et al., 2002; Pitsis et al., 2004; Clegg et al., 2010). Indeed, innovation in managerial and organisational practices, processes, systems and routines is arguably the most critical aspect of innovation in organisations (see Birkinshaw et al., 2008; Bjorkeng et al., 2009).

The learning and knowledge-management processes in alliances are therefore complex and not fully explained in the traditional literature on alliances, which is based solely on economic perspectives such as resource-dependence, agency and transaction-cost theories (Clegg et al., 2010). As intimated by Gulati (2007), the potential of alliances as dynamic contexts of organisational behaviour is that they open up opportunities for *silo busting* through careful coordination of collaboration, a well-developed culture of collaboration – especially the softer components of culture – and through capability development. In so doing, collaborative arrangements such as alliances can foster and facilitate innovations because they instil unique organisational capabilities learned through collaboration. However, for all the value that alliance relationships offer, they also pose several serious challenges to the processes of learning and knowledge management, a condition pertinent to alliances that is well established and researched (e.g. Mody, 1993; Inkpen, 1998; Kale and Perlmutter, 2000; Muthusamy and White, 2005).

We believe that each paper chosen for this special issue not only makes an important contribution to the understanding of the above tensions in alliance learning and knowledge, but also in offering possible avenues for future research, theory and practice in the study of knowledge, learning and innovation in alliances. First, Emberson and Storey examine the re-configuration of practical knowledge in competitive alliances. They use a micro-political change lens to reveal the nature of inter-organisational learning and practical knowledge transformation. Drawing upon two case studies of competitive alliances in the retail sector, their findings suggest that inter-organisational learning and practical organisational knowledge transfer is uneven at an operational level. They investigate the relationship between value creation and inter-organisational information system use in competitive collaboration processes and argue that further development of competitive alliance theory at the sub-organisational level is required.

Continuing with the theme of value creation, Höck and Ringle carry out an empirical analysis of the value continuum in order to provide a framework for better understanding value creation in strategic networks. They explore long-term partnership benefits of local strategic alliances in knowledge-intensive industries and develop a structural model of the value continuum, which they test on small- and mid-size enterprises in the software industry. Their results show that the innovation value of localised inter-firm networks originates from costs savings and quality improvements. Conversely, alliance-induced 'speed' benefits (measured by the acceleration of the R&D process), which improve flexibility and/or shorten delivery time, have no significant impact on market-based performance. They conclude that an alliance's time-related benefits may be important to maintain competitive parity but that those do not significantly support competitive advantage, market development and market penetration. Instead, they suggest that value is created via, for example, an exchange of tacit knowledge and a reduction in transaction costs, and particularly by a reduction in customer service costs.

Knudsen and Nielsen take an alternative route by incorporating the dynamic capabilities perspective of the firm. Their study examines the role of collaborative capability in R&D alliances, with a focus on the interplay between organisational- and individual-level mechanisms. They show how individual-level factors, such as competence development, work in concert with organisational-level strategic and structural mechanisms in creating collaborative capability. Based on an in-depth case study and a synthesis of the literature, they propose a framework to explain the multi-dimensional nature of collaborative capabilities in R&D alliances. Their study shows how firms may benefit from increased attention to the interaction between individual- and organisational-level issues, captured via a partnering mindset, when designing R&D alliances.

On a variation, but continuation, of the dynamic capability theme, Schweitzer and Gudergan focus on knowledge and innovation capabilities in alliances and depict the role of leadership behaviours that they frame as ongoing negotiations. They integrate the leadership literature with the dynamic capability view of the firm to explain the effects of different leadership behaviours on the development of knowledge and innovation capabilities in strategic alliances. In their paper they propose that transformational and servant leadership behaviour supports the development of dynamic capabilities, whereas transactional leadership behaviour supports the maintenance of operational capabilities. They conclude with propositions reflecting theoretical relationships between transformational, transactional and servant leadership behaviours and entrepreneurship as the antecedents of dynamic and operational capabilities within alliance teams.

Culture, be it at the national or organisational level, and its interaction with knowledge, learning and innovation, is one of the most fruitful domains of future research. The final two papers offer insights about both the positive and less positive cultural aspects of alliances and knowledge. Narteh focuses on international issues concerning learning and knowledge transfer and performance in Danish-Ghanaian strategic alliances. Specifically, he explores the knowledge-transfer process, the type of knowledge transferred, and the impact of the transferred knowledge on alliance performance where the strategic alliances involve a partner from a developed and one from a developing country. Using a knowledge transfer and performance model, his paper investigates how Danish companies transfer knowledge to their Ghanaian counterparts, the type of knowledge transferred, and the impact of the transferred knowledge on the performance of the alliances. They argue that Danish partners transferred mostly technical or coded knowledge through on-the-job training, a method unsuitable for transferring tacit or management knowledge. Moreover, the transferred knowledge did not positively affect the performance of most of the alliances.

Offering an anthropological perspective, Veenswijk, van Marrewijk and Boersma study the development of new knowledge in collaborative relationships in megaproject alliances. They describe the development of new forms of public-private collaboration by members of a project-based organisation as a Community of Practice (CoP) in the Dutch construction sector. They discuss power relations and show how public and private partners, together with the researchers, develop an innovative tendering process. They show how temporal organisational settings can enable new forms of learning, and how power is key in shaping the nature and form of public-private collaboration.

Ultimately after receiving many submissions to this special issue, we believe we have chosen six articles that offer unique and interesting insights into the interplay between alliances, knowledge, learning and innovation. We believe and hope that this special issue will engage the readers and inspire them to pursue their work on alliances from the perspective of knowledge management studies.

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