

The internationalization challenge for Spanish Small and Medium Enterprises. An exploratory approach

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Abstract. While many studies have widely worked out on finding out the different relationships underlying the birth and prompt development of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), we argue that getting an in depth approach to the problematic scene that takes place once they are keen on having a successful internationalization plan may have been understudied. Therefore, the aim of this research is that of identifying critical challenges faced by Spanish SMEs during an internationalization process. We do so by taking a qualitative approach. The current research contributes to the literature by adding new and renewed perspectives to the field, thanks to the qualitative analysis carried out through four in-depth interviews made to internationalization experts. The results are of significant importance and value for the field as well as for practitioners of future SMEs keen on developing an internationalization plan in a competent manner. Finally, we detail a list of critical factors for SMEs, identifying success and failure determinants that should be highly taken into account by practitioners.

Keywords: Internationalization; Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs); Success; Failure; Factors.

[es] El reto de la internacionalización para las Pequeñas y Medianas Empresas españolas. Un enfoque exploratorio

Resumen. Mientras que un importante número de estudios ha analizado en diferentes ocasiones cuáles son las relaciones sobre las que se cimienta el nacimiento y el pronto desarrollo de las Pequeñas y Medianas Empresas (PYMES), el presente artículo señala que el estudio de cómo gestionar las diferentes problemáticas que se dan cuando estas deciden llevar a cabo un plan exitoso de internacionalización puede no haberse abordado con la suficiente claridad en la literatura. Por lo tanto, el objetivo de este estudio es el de identificar los retos críticos a los que se enfrentan las PYMES españolas durante el proceso de internacionalización. Ello se lleva a cabo a través de un diseño cualitativo de la investigación. El presente estudio contribuye a la literatura sumando perspectivas nuevas y renovadas al campo de estudio, gracias al análisis cualitativo llevado a cabo a través de cuatro entrevistas en profundidad realizadas a expertos en el ámbito de la internacionalización. Los resultados obtenidos son de especial relevancia para el ámbito de la Dirección de Empresas, así como para los directivos de PYMES que se encuentren en pos de un plan de internacionalización competente. Finalmente, detallamos una lista de los factores críticos para las PYMES, identificando aquellos ligados de una manera más recurrente al éxito o al fracaso y que, por lo tanto, deberían ser tomados en alta consideración por los directivos.

Palabras clave: Internacionalización; Pequeñas y Medianas Empresas (PYMES); Éxito; Fracaso; Factores.

Summary: 1. Introduction 2. Conceptual framework 3. Methodology 4. Conclusions, findings and future lines of research.

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1. Introduction

Likewise “genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration” (Edison, 1932), when a company aims to successfully carry out the internationalization process it should not leave nothing to chance, which means to analyse carefully all the potential factors and variables that could affect to the progress of the project.

Accordingly, during this article we will cover some of the most important aspects concerning the internationalization process. Internationalization literature has generally taken exports performance as the main reason for which a company crosses its national frontiers in order to expand its economic possibilities, irrespectively of its resources (Reid, 1983). In particular, between the range of most frequent reasoning applied when a company decides to go a step forward, we find as leitmotifs both, the market potential and the relationship between cost/benefits influencing Top Management Teams (TMTs) efforts to overcome potential difficulties (Calof and Beamish, 1995). Additionally, the gusher phenomenon has proved to influence firms’ behaviour with unexpected directions when they are in the internationalization process; phenomenon that can be offset by undertaking active learning approaches (Chetty and Campbell-Hunt, 2004). Remarkably in the field is to take into account the proposed redeveloped theoretical integrative conceptual model in international entrepreneurship (Ruzzier et al., 2006), which highlighted the need of continually assessing capabilities, skills and the entrepreneur management of know-how if a firm aims to succeed in its internationalization process. In the same sense, the relevance of experience should not be forgotten. In fact, its significance can permit the firm to gain a better understanding of foreign investment behaviour (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977).

Given these findings, we encounter many studies that still propose multiple factors that could affect indirectly to the internationalization process. In fact, some scholars find support to argue that firms’ strategic changes are likely to be pursued when members of the TMT possess some particular demographic variables such as: low age, high level of studies or specialization in sciences (Wiersema and Bantel, 1992). In fact, TMTs decision’s quality seem to be highly correlated with the cognitive dimension of conflict, since decision’s rightness is clearly enhanced when the cognitive part of conflict plays an important role in the development of a strategically managed change (Amason, 1996). Further, based on previous research on the field, we argue that debate between TMTs can significantly raise its heterogeneity trend, therefore bettering the performance of the team (Simons et al., 1999).

Bearing this in mind, we have conducted a qualitative exploratory marketing research by contacting different professionals on the internationalization field, fact that has allowed us to gather qualified and non-biased primary data for bettering our understanding and insights in the field. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to identify critical challenges faced by Spanish SMEs during an internationalization process.

2. Conceptual framework

A firm's internationalization is highly dependent on the strategic positioning previously planned by the company (Lu and Beamish, 2001). Though the degree of importance of exporting and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the internationalization process for SMEs is still to be determined by scholars, it seems clear that low levels of FDI result in a diminishing international performance while an increase of it, is positively associated with a profitable cross-bordering execution.

Moreover, guanxi networks are increasingly being taken into account for the understanding of the internationalization process. They are typically defined as a concept that reaches to unify different network rapports such as relationships with local governments agencies, the use of local social networks or the reinforcement of local communities ties. In fact, Zhou et al. (2007) study found out its mediating role on exports and profitability increase during an internationalization process.

Though internationalization may seem a feasible process to well-established firms at the domestic level, it is, however, a complex one during which companies are required to overcome difficulties and constant challenges. The degree till which these situations are successfully managed will determine the near future of the companies in the chosen foreign markets. In fact, past experiences of entrepreneurs will be highly correlated with a properly execution of the process (Schulz et al., 2009).

2.1. The role played by internationalization among Spanish SMEs

During the previous section, we've seen how internationalization can become a source of benefits for SMEs. That said, we should now focus on how this phenomenon has been experienced by Spanish SMEs: where they late in entering into the global era? did they finally succeed when going abroad? if yes, how? and taking which specific forms of entry into foreign markets?

Regarding the internationalization history of Spanish SMEs, we may begin by saying that in the 80s exports were mostly directed to South America, United States and Arab states (Mora, 2000). However, after uncertainty and instability began to rise among some of these markets, many Spanish SMEs decided to redirect their internationalization efforts to closer European markets.

Literature has typically divided Spanish SMEs into six groups concerning their attitudes towards internationalization going from a majority of non-internationalized SMEs, which represent mostly the 40% of SMEs in conducted researches, to a 13% of fully established international companies (Table 1); firms that not only export and import from foreign markets but also invest commercially on these markets as well as establish affiliates and subsidiaries.

Table 1. Classification of Spanish SMEs regarding their attitude towards internationalization

Classification SMEs	Description in Figures
Non-internationalized SME	Around the 39% of the sampled SMEs solely developed their activity at a national level
Raw materials Importer	8% of the sample contacted foreign markets for importing commodities
Eventual Exporter	Only 7% of sampled SMEs have had sporadic contacts with international markets
Already established Exporter	An amount of 27% had effectively established cross-border activities
Investor SME	6% of SMEs had already penetrated foreign markets through investing activities
Internationalized	International companies that had subsidiaries or affiliates in markets, other than the domestic one, accounted for 13% of the sample

Source: Self-made from information gathered in González-Moralejo (2008)

Thanks to a case-based reasoning approach carried out with SMEs located in Alicante (Valencian Community, Spain), Mora (2000) demonstrates a common ground among sampled internationalized businesses: a gradual process takes place once the company decides to cross the borders. This, in turns, means that little actions that imply low levels of commitment and resources are first applied by SMEs, and only when primary objectives are achieved they increase the level of compromise with foreign markets. Furthermore, these successful internationalization approaches take into account a common set of variables. Some of them can be briefly described by considering the entrepreneur's attitude towards the process or the degree of investment in Research and Development (R&D) programmes for bettering the product attributes against international competitors. Additionally, we should point out till which point it is relevant to adapt your product to the specific market, which requires a deep analysis and study of the targeted population. To this extent, we would like to emphasize one successful internationalization process of a Spanish traditional SME: Inés Rosales (Cambra-Fierro and Vázquez-Carrasco, 2010). This familiar company born in 1910 and currently working at an international level, considers as success factors to be implemented by other Spanish companies pursuing internationalization, to give importance to consumers' ethnocentrism as well as the right election of channel distributors or the proper implementation of local promotions: *'think globally, act locally'* (Stravalue, 2016).

Moreover, specialists on the field have discovered the potential advantages of carrying out an internationalization process by collaborating conjointly with other businesses (Agirre et al., 2011; Erburu and López, 2005). In fact, some of the benefits arising thanks to these alliances are the sharing of costs and risks, new opportunities for an exchange of resources in terms of information, technology or know-how or simply to take profit of the associates' partner relationships with other businesses, governments...etc.

Figures and data presented through this section make us conclude that Spanish SMEs, which represent the majority of businesses in our country, still have to work on the techniques and the proper methodology to be applied when going abroad. Spanish international presence can surely be reinforced if internationalization success cases of Spanish SMEs are taken as a reference.

2.2. Born-global firms: a theoretical conceptualization

Born-global firms have been referred to in literature as having managers with a more geocentric approach than traditional gradual internationalizing firms, as well as showing a more pro-active leaders with a significant cross-borders career (Harveston et al., 2000). Additionally, this sort of firms have proved to better put up with greater level of risks in comparison with the levels permitted by those firms that decide to internationalize gradually.

In fact, these so-called born-global firms internationalize their businesses extremely rapid, taking from 2 to 5 years to complete the process. On the one hand, as researchers have stated (e.g., Bell et al., 2001), the capability of constructing a knowledge-intensive firm reports many benefits for these firms, since taken decisions are based upon this approach, which has as a main consequence the increase in flexibility regarding diverse aspects, such as the entry mode in the foreign country.

On the other hand, Knight and Cavusgil (2004) enlarged the existing literature by pointing out the relevance of some organizational abilities that contribute in a critical manner to the successfulness of born-global firms process when going abroad. In fact, these capabilities are afterwards the driving forces able to '*support early internationalization and superior performance*' (Knight and Cavusgil, 2004, pp 135) when going international.

All in all, we should highlight the Knight et al. (2004) case-based reasoning approach built upon a comparison between Danish and US born global. Data observation from both countries allowed the researchers to reinforce the idea of how important has been internationalisation for the growth of these businesses. In fact, the marketing focus approach is described as the determinant factor for which born-global firms take the decision of going international, rather than a customer approach.

3. Methodology

3.1. A critical approach to the development of Spanish SMEs internationalization plan: an experts-based qualitative research

Going international implies to increase the level of risk for businesses. New requirements and exigencies related with this strategic step are implicitly attached to the internationalization process as well as new challenges. How to deal with them or how to cope with the targeted markets are all questions widely studied by researchers. In addition, scholars have made a great effort in explaining the actions underlying a good internationalization, as well as in finding out the factors that tend to affect negatively to the SMEs during the cross-boarding process.

Such issues have been studied by scholars in numerous ways and most of the times by carrying out a real case of study (e.g., Yip, 2004) or an empirical research. In other cases, investigators have reviewed the existing literature (e.g., Berzosa, 1992; Luque-Vílchez, 2015; Shepherd, 2003). However, we found out that there has been little research in terms of experts-based qualitative analysis. We argue that experts on the internationalization process are not sufficiently taken into consideration, though they can give to businesses new and profitable insights.

For the purpose of addressing this literature need, a qualitative marketing research has been made by taking traditional and telephonic interviews with professionals coming from both, the academics' side as well as from the practitioners' side. Regarding the methodology used, we are concerned about the limitations of this qualitative research, though we consider that benefits outweighed potential drawbacks, and that findings could become of major importance for recent born companies with little or null consultancy services.

3.2. Sample and Marketing Research Design

Our sample was composed of four practitioners and scholars who have recurrently get involved in internationalization issues during their careers. We have carried out an exploratory marketing research, since our purpose was that of examining and better understand how the internationalization process works according to the perspectives of sampled internationalization experts. Regarding the sampling technique used, we may highlight that a judgmental sampling has been applied, since our sample elements were selected based on the judgment of the researcher because he/she believes they are representative of the population of interest. This is an inexpensive, convenient and quick technique, though we are concern about its limitations regarding the generalizations of results, which will be commented on latter sections.

Despite we cannot provide professional names due to privacy issues, the sample characteristics are presented in Table 2. They emphasize the importance we have given during our marketing research to interview scholars from both, the practitioner's and the academic's side, in order to obtain different and renewed approaches to the field. The sample selection process has been determined by the relevance of internationalization for each of the elected experts. In fact, two of them have an enriching background in internationalization terms due to its belongingness to the academic world as well as to their role in the creation of their own businesses. Moreover, regarding the selection of the other two experts, we appreciated their fully academic path, since they brought theoretical based perspectives to the research. That said, we should be aware of the access limitation to other profiles that could have further nurtured the investigation.

The research design was based upon an interview form configured by asking the following questions: *'Do all businesses have the same need of going international regardless of their life cycle?'*, *'Is the internationalization process getting increasingly complex due to the globalization era?'*, *'What are some of the most important success factor when going international?'*, *'What are the most frequently errors businesses incurred in during an internationalization process?'*, *'What are the recommendations you would make to a recent born start-up?'*, *'Does internationalization have the same relevance for an early business than for a traditional/fa-*

miliar one?’, ‘*Does the Spanish economic crisis encourage Spanish SMEs to going cross-borders?*’ or ‘*Is there a standard strategy applicable to any kind of market that allows businesses to adapt their products/services as much as possible?*’

Table 2. Sample characteristics

Profile	Items treated for the Qualitative research
Assistant Professor in Applied Economics	-SMEs in Spain -Global financial crisis
Internationalization consultant and founder at a consulting firm with a robust academic background	-Success and failures factors when internationalizing a business -Spanish SMEs internationalization
Assistant Professor in Financial Economy and Accounting	-Success and failures factors when internationalizing a business -Internationalization in Spain by SMEs
Senior consultant as well as Assistant Professor in International Strategic Management	-Success and failures factors when internationalizing a business -Internationalization strategy

Moreover, as proposed by Graneheim and Lundman (2004), in order to analyse the interviews, a content analysis was developed, which means that we have selected the most relevant words and expressions from the interviews taken.

The following sections will be structured as follows. Firstly, we will review the existent literature in terms of business failures and success factors when internationalizing their firms, for afterwards deploy the main conclusions extracted from our experts-based qualitative research.

3.3. Keys to failure: determinants of an internationalization business failure

Before going further with the understanding of which factors lead a business to effectively close, we should distinguish between two terms frequently misunderstood: business ‘*closure*’ and business ‘*failure*’.

A closure is typically associated with a business failure, though it has been proved that there is a relevant proportion of companies that close while being successful (Headd, 2003). In this sense, we recommend businesses to not take as a failure, cases of companies that simply closed, since by taking those closures as automatic failures they could be missing relevant information and consequently applying that knowledge in an incorrect manner.

Regarding those elements classified as highly related with a business failure, we may point out several facts. Firstly, the lack of both, experience and tangible resources such as financial capital, seem to play an essential role when deciding whether to close or not the company. In order to avoid this sort of risks, a business should ensure as much as possible its financial sources by participating into public hold initiatives such as *ICEX Next*. In addition, starting a business for personal reasons has proved to be negatively correlated with a successful future of the company. Even if being per-

sonally engaged to the project may result in a positive mediator role for its survival, it frequently ends up by having a negative effect (Headd, 2003). What's more, scholars have found out that there's a clear underestimation of the degree of challenge required to copy with a new context; businesses tend to incorrectly analyse those critical factors that will be determinant for successfully addressing the new business challenge, either at a commencement of an internationalization process or at a diversification stage of the company, among others (Bertels et al., 2015). Unfortunately, this situation has proved to further damage the business as long as it provokes the so-called *ripple effect* on the organization as a whole.

Moreover, high levels of seniority and low degrees of both, support and flexibility from the CEO's (Chief Executive Officers) of the company, could be detrimental when it comes to the decision making process of a strategic change, since past assumptions may be taken as still valid, despite the fact that the marketplace evolution has already taken place (Headd, 2003). As a final failure factor, we may mention the need for companies to hire *ambidextrous* employees. Not possessing an ambidextrous workforce could result in a loss of two basic forms of searching and learning: '*exploitation*' and '*exploration*', different from each other but critical for the system's survival and its prosperity (O'Reilly and Tushman, 2008).

Concerning some of the empirical and case-based reasoning approaches carried out by researchers, we would like to highlight the Yip (2004) model of predicting a business failure. Through the usage of a real case of study, this research demonstrates that companies could anticipate the consequences of a hypothetical failure by applying a problem-solving model. Similarly, businesses could be aware of potential damages for their stockholders by forecasting probable outcomes.

3.4. Keys to succeed: determinants of an internationalization business success

Success in business is commonly known as the ability of companies to maintain an appropriate level of profits, which allows them to obtain benefits regardless of the economic cycle (Beaver, 2003). In order to avoid business failure when internationalizing, enterprises should highly take into account some important remarks that, if achieved, will ensure the process.

Firstly, firms should not only be based on market trends, since if its *raison d'être* is that of satisfying a temporal need, once it finishes the company won't be able to continue operating; long-term strategic management is required, not only short-term. Moreover, the degree of product/service innovation together with a productive and competitive approach will help the company on building a strong competitive advantage against its competitors. Likewise, Song et al. (2004) carried out a quantitative research of 115 negotiators in order to find out the factors that contributed to the enlargement of new businesses relationships. To some extent, the worthy findings obtained from this study can be extrapolated to the successful development of internationalization.

As structured in Table 3, four different factors were identified as crucial. Firstly, the fact of presenting an **active attitude and good product/services attributes** was found to be of great importance when it came to show faithful and honest intentions to the counterpart. Secondly, having a **multicultural background**, which allowed parts to better understand each other, was established as a fundamental characteristic. In fact, this topic has been accurately treated by the literature since Hofstede (1980) set the main standards.

Table 3. Critical Internationalization Success Factors

Success Factors	Description
Attitude and product characteristics	‘Sincerity, good faith, honesty demonstrated by the counterpart and by my company’
Cultural awareness	‘Familiarity with business practices and customs’
The counterparts’ attitude	‘Preparedness and patience of the counterpart’
Past experience	‘A good, old business relationship with a company is more likely to lead to another deal’

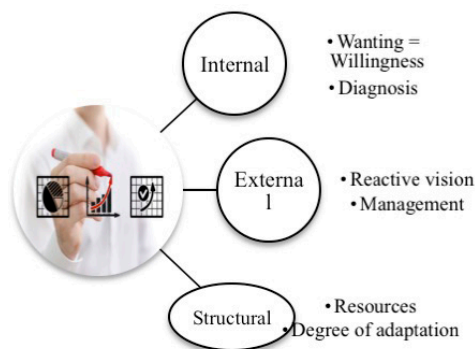
Source: Self-made from information gathered in Song et al. (2004)

Furthermore, the **readiness and preparation** of the counterpart when business were having their very first meetings, became critical, since a poor first impression could lead to a sudden interruption of the deal. Finally, **previous experiences** with that counterpart (directly or indirectly) were proved to clearly benefit both parts’ relationships.

We should not end up with this section without stating that though it could seem somehow paradoxical, in order to build up a successful business and internationalization plan, it is highly recommendable for companies to have experienced previous failures: only through failing are business able to fully internalise the learning process: *‘people (businesses) learn using the outcome of action (feedback) to revise their belief systems’* (Shepherd, 2003, pp.320).

3.5. Keys to business success and failure: findings obtained from the experts-based qualitative research

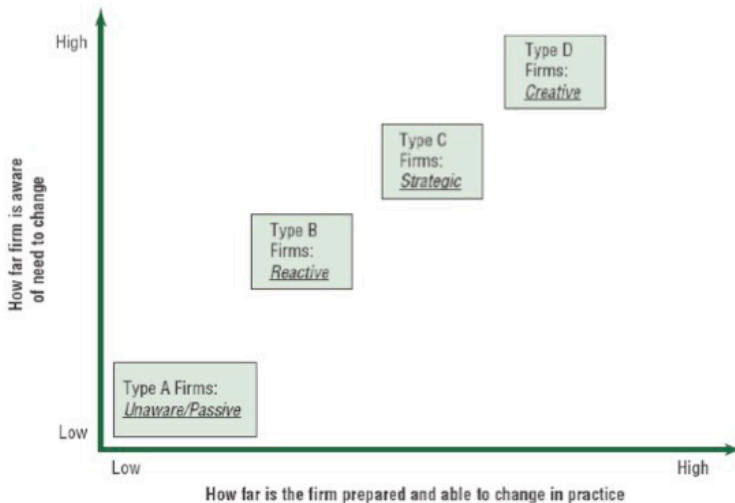
After the interviews with internationalization experts were conducted, we summarized and unified the different responses gathered in terms of failure (presented in Table 4) and success factors businesses tend to experience.

Table 4. Failure factors arising during an internationalization process

Source: Self-made from information gathered from Personal Interviews

Three issues are found to have a determinant impact on a company's internationalization success. **Internally** speaking, experts pointed out that there was an indoors problem arising from the company's management: most of the times the corporative body was not truly keen on going international, and as a consequence neither the company's mission nor its value or its strategy functioned together in unison. This kind of error seems to be generally associated with traditional companies, which are much more used to the domestic market. If the entity as a whole is not convinced about crossing the borders and does not see the internationalization as a feasible option for the business, a management failure could easily arise. Additionally, businesses tend to carry out an incorrect diagnosis when it comes to decide which is the country that better fits the company's needs. In fact, regardless of the sector, companies follow the market trends without even considering that the market may be wrong or not in line with the company's corporative strategy. In order to avoid potential damages from applying this approach, businesses should not automatically take as a reference repetitive or mistaken diagnosis. In terms of the **external** environment, we shall mention the importance risen from academics interviewed on the reactive vision of internationalization from Spanish SMEs. In fact, these companies have been widely studied by the literature, classified by Hobday et al. (2005) as Type B firms (as presented in Figure 1). These companies are described as economic entities that do correctly analyse their environment, identifying future potential challenges, though they are not clear about how to carry out the associated processes.

Figure 1. Groups of firms according to innovation capabilities



Source: Hobday et al., 2005

In general, these companies wait till the demand requires a change on their strategic approach to the market, not being aware, as a consequence, that this situation leaves them in an obsolete context against their competitors. This situation is a direct consequence of the previous mentioned characteristics that we typically found on the corporate body of these traditional companies. Even if a company follows correctly all the steps for becoming international, the internationalization process have a high

likelihood of failing in the meanwhile if the company does not experience a change in terms of its management basis.

Finally, in terms of **structural** needs, we argue that Spanish SMEs may be dealing with two potential challenges. Firstly, there is a clear lack of financial means, fact that refrain businesses from carrying out a well-developed internationalization plan. Their workforce is frequently underskilled in terms of human resources capabilities related with both the remuneration and qualifications. All this, coupled with the already named difficulties attached to the internationalization process, makes the going abroad procedures even more challenging.

On the one hand, companies require quick responses from the markets as well as high margins. On the other hand, however, businesses should take into account till which extent it is relevant for the success of the internationalization the fact of being both constant and persistent. Internationalization experts pointed out the need for Spanish companies of bettering their adaptability skills in order to better response to the international customers' needs. Companies should be aware of the fact that a successful business plan already developed at a national level may not work in a new international context.

Regarding the contributions obtained after the already named interviews took place, conclusive and worthy findings for both, practitioners and academics, were found out in terms of success factors. The very first factor considered by experts was the need for a company to clearly identify its competitive advantage for afterwards exploit it in order to discover whether it could be valuable or not for economic agents in the marketplace. Secondly, the company should invest not only sufficient resources, but also devote time and means for obtaining a deep analysis of their targeted markets. Companies will only be able to focus on these markets if they have carried out a well-done diagnosis.

Consequently, experts pointed out the need for enterprises of being aware of the importance attached to choosing the right form of penetration in the market. In fact, it should be as direct as possible in order to avoid a loss of both, time and efforts. Indirect channels seem to be not recommendable at all since they could provoke adverse effects, such as those related with a mixed of the main objectives of the internationalization plan.

Furthermore, we found out two key elements businesses should not forget when aiming to have profitable results from internationalization. The first one emphasizes the need of having a competitive offer, being able to cope with potential pressures from the international competition. Similarly, the company should act as a professional strategist, which means that it should demonstrate a constant compromise as well as a high levels of efficiency when *playing* in the international marketplace. A correct implementation of these factors will result in a correct development of the internationalization process, since globalization has truly increased the degree of competitiveness.

4. Conclusions, findings and future lines of research

At this point of the paper, we would like to emphasize the characteristic feature that reached to unify and give sense to the internationalization process as a whole:

resilience. Organizations possessing such particularity are frequently described as being quick in responding to its reality requirements as well as fully capable of appreciating the opportunities brought by the context. Additionally, they somehow have the capacity of using their resources in the right manner, even if there is not a pre-established planning (Coutu, 2002).

All this, makes of a resilient company an invaluable set of assets for economic agents. When a crisis arrives, a resilient organization won't give up as easy as a less resistant company. It is not only about the short-term benefits market agents can obtain from a company like this, but also this means that challenging contexts will turn into opportunities for this sort of businesses. Spanish SMEs have truly demonstrated it: *'where there's a will, there's a way'*. Most of the banking sector together with the industrial one, have been seriously affected due to the instability context. Notwithstanding these facts, there are still many more questions that remain in the air, but they are an example of how persistency on overcoming these obstacles and bettering oneself in the meanwhile can effectively lead to business success.

There is still place for innovation and economic renewal in the Spanish economy. Once the storm is over, Spanish agents (both public and private), should start an apprenticeship process in order to learn as much as possible from this context, since this experience will only make sense as long as we obtain meaningful conclusions from it.

We may finish up by highlighting the importance of failure. Typically, in terms of economic welfare, mass media is good at remarking how extreme can become a situation, though they do not devote so much time the other way round. Unfortunately, this kind of behavior further accentuates the automatic view of failure as a non-desirable situation, whilst scholars have proved that a good management process of failing and trying is one of the best alternatives for enhancing technological capabilities and economic resilience (Hayek, 1945). Remember Edison's quotation: *'I have not failed; I've just found 10,000 ways that don't work'*.

4.1. Results and managerial implications

Our findings can be classified according to two major groups. The first one is related to managerial implications for SMEs, whilst the second group is linked with the methods applied.

With regards to the first field of enquiry, the results obtained provided new factors to be taken into account by practitioners when going international. On the one hand, at a firm's internal level, experts have pointed out the need to change the company's strategy as a whole by involving all firm's departments during the process. On the other hand, at a firm's external level, the organization itself should redevelop the basis of the corporation, which may imply the creation of international departments.

In what respects to the second type of conclusions, the review of the literature on the internationalization concept among SMEs provides a substantial theoretical base from where scholars can extrapolate the needs and lacks of the field. Similarly, the qualitative research based upon internationalization experts' interviews permitted us to approach the cross-border process in an enriching manner, which refreshed and highlighted the actual necessities of SMEs. Among these, it is noteworthy the need for SMEs of not only obtaining public funding from public promotion programs, but also of being continually assessed by experts on the field.

Organizational performance has been analysed in the field as one of the most relevant indicators when measuring a firm success amongst its rivals when dealing with challenging situations. Whereas the former concept has been widely studied, the latter has been more modestly researched (e.g., Cohen, 2015; Strohmeier, 2013; Zafar, 2013). Therefore, after having carried out a literature review, we argue that there is a gap in the organizational behaviour field regarding how firms may face future challenges related with the internationalization process and how it may need to be managed in order to adapt the organization to current requirements.

This study may have relevant implications for both, practitioners and academics. In fact, this research may shed light into the possible measures to be taken by managers when deciding how to adjust their resources to their sector. For companies to survive, they may need to redesign their structures and put forward potential solutions to their employees' distinctive capabilities, since, increasingly, they are demanding a renewal and update in the way they can carry out their tasks while being correctly assessed. Moreover, in the light of covering a gap in the literature, this research could aid academics in that future lines of qualitative research may arise from its conclusions.

4.2. Future lines of research and limitations

As far as we are concerned, certain limitations from where future researches may arise should be taken into account, since we consider that there is enough evidence from the contributions to warrant a much deeper diagnosis into the Spanish SMEs internationalization process. Firstly, regarding our sample size, as it occurs frequently when carrying out an exploratory research (Bell et al., 2001), the experts-based interviews resulted in further discoveries, which has been positive for the research purpose, but significantly limited the process due to both its size and the accessibility constraints for further enlarging it. Additionally, the fact that our sample was comprised of internationalization experts allowed us to get more insights from the academics' and practitioners' side, but did not take into account SMEs, which should be increased in order to enhance the reliability and carefulness of the obtained data. Finally, results should be tested, checked and compared with other SMEs case of studies in order to enrich them and capture new valuable insights.

In a complex environmental situation, the adoption of new measures to face new challenges becomes crucial for those firms keen on performing well in an uncertainty context. That said, future studies could shed light in some specific issues in order to further address current literature calls on the organizational behaviour area. In this respect, the carry out of a Delphi study where experts are taken into account could result in bettering our approach to the internationalization process. In fact, we argue that if analysed in-depth, it could bring fruitful contributions to the field and open new directions of future lines of research.

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