Interorganizational learning through the cooperation between companies in a global age

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INTRODUCTION

The model of the existing economy is based on three main aspects, that are clearly interrelated, and which increase competitiveness levels world-wide. These are as BUENO (1993, pages 63-64) points out: an accelerated process of market globalization, an increasing deregulation of economy and dynamics of privatization of the economic activity. In fact, in the last decade of the XXth Century we can observe a new global economic scene, characterized, according to CANALS (1997, pages 25-57), by the following general factors: the collapse of American hegemony in favour of Europe and South-eastern Asia, mainly Japan (regionalization); the technological change and the substantial modification of the supply of productive values, especially concerning chronic unemployment in many countries; the crisis of the interventionist policies of the economic public sector; the increase of the production capacity in some sectors, with an increasingly stronger rivalry in prices; the increasing importance of the service sector in the advanced economies (tertiaryzation); increasing importance of international business (both in commercial and investing fields) and the international financial instability (volatility of the exchange and interest rates).

As a result of all of these factors, companies are continually facing an increasingly higher level of competitive intensity and should therefore constantly improve their competitiveness. The aim of this paper will therefore be, once the globalization phenomenon has been studied, to point out the importance of the internal factors as being the ones that determine competitiveness, and also to emphasize how the co-operation between companies can help accumulate competencies and knowledge through interorganizational learning.

In relation to this purpose, our paper has been structured in three sections. The first one introduces the globalization concept as well as its causes, obstacles and consequences. From the point of view of the Resource-Based View of the Firm, the second one analyzes the importance of accumulating and developing competencies. Finally, in the third section we analyze the factors that promote learning between organizations, as well as the consequences which arise from this learning.

GLOBALIZATION: CONCEPT, CAUSES, OBSTACLES AND CONSEQUENCES

There is no doubt that the word “globalization” as well as other terms such as “competitiveness”, has become a word of common use nowadays. In this sense, we talk alternatively about economic globalization, market globalization, competitive globalization, globalization of firm strategies, etc. Furthermore, “global” is sometimes used as a synonym of “world-wide”, in contrast to “local”, or to refer to the existence of interdependences between the different markets. But before analyzing the possible causes, obstacles and consequences of globalization in the entrepreneurial reality, it would be convenient to establish some previous ideas and in this way to recall what certain authors have contributed towards the present topic.

LEVITT (1983, pages 49-52), one of the classic authors, thinks that the markets are consolidated by the globalizing factors, due to the increasing tendency to homogenize needs all over the world. In respect to the offer, HILL and JONES (1996, pages 93-94) point out that, parallel to this market globalization, the world witnesses production globalization, since a large number of individual companies are dispersing parts of their productive processes to different places in the world in order to benefit from the national differences in cost and quality of the production factors. Among the authors who are trying to conceptualize global sectors and competitiveness are HOUT, PORTER and RUDDEN (1982, page 103), for whom “various country subsidiaries are highly interdependent in terms of operations and strategy” within a global industry. Therefore, it is, as PORTER (1986b, pages 18-19) points out “an industry in which a firm´s competitive position in one country is significantly affected by its position in other countries or vice versa”, and where “there is some competitive advantage to integrating activities on a world-wide basis”. In a similar way, SOLVELL (1988, pages 181-182) says that “global competitiveness implies ´competition covering the world´, i.e., an extreme case of international competition”.

If we discuss this last aspect of globalization, the strategy, we will begin by pointing out that the complexity inherent to developing a competitive strategy in a world-wide level makes it necessary to realize which variables have to be considered for designing the said strategy. These dimensions can be reduced to two, according to JARILLO and MARTINEZ (1991, pages 135-142): global efficiency (the search for a cost reduction by means of scale-economies, the use of economic inputs, etc.), and *local adaptation* (the need to pay attention to different local tastes, of learning something of each country, of diversifying risks, etc.). In this sense, as DURÁN and LAMOTHE (1984, page 35) point out, “the strategic direction of the multinational company has to be characterized by a process and structure of organization which co-ordinates the diversity and interdependence of their operations”. According to the relative importance of each of these dimensions a different strategic approach will be adopted. If diversity is the most important factor, each country will be treated specifically; if interdependence is the most important factor, the orientation will be more global. Both of these approaches underlie some strategic typologies, which are more relevant internationally.[1]

Since the sixties, several contributions have been made from multiple perspectives in relation to global strategy. The first steps were taken in the field of marketing where BUZZELL’S approach (1968, pages 103-113) is especially important. He defends a multinational standardization, which means “the offering of identical product lines at identical prices through identical distribution systems, supported by identical promotional programs, in several different countries”. In a similar way, LEVITT (1983, pages 50-53) discusses that due to the irrevocable homogenization of needs and wishes all over the world, companies should consider the world as a single entity; that is to say, they should sell “the same things, in the same way, everywhere”.

The following approaches are some of the most interesting contributions in relation to the topic of competitive strategy on an international level. The formulation of a co-ordinated strategy for all subsidiary companies, proposed by HOUT, PROTER and RUDDEN (1982, pages 18-106); the creation of flexibility which allows the company to exploit the uncertainty concerning the future changes, claimed by KOGUT (1985, pages 27-37); Hamel and Prahalad’s strategy (1986, page 85) of crossed subsidiarization; GHOSHAL’s proposal (1987, pages 427-428) of using three sources of competitive advantage (national differences, economies of scale and economies of scope) to optimize three strategic objectives simultaneously (efficiency, managing of risks and innovation/learning/adaptation); the development of an equidistant point of view in relation to clients according to OHMAE (1990, pages 27-38 and 1991a, pages 13-24), the consideration of five dimensions or levels (participation in the market, supply of products, location of activities, focus on marketing and competitive actions) to develop a global strategy, exposed by YIP (1993, pages 1-26 and 1997, pages 393-398) or BARTLETT and GHOSHAL’s consecutive works (1987a and b, 1988

[1] The pionnering works of Perlmutter (1969) and Wind, Douglas and Perlmutter (1973), Porter’s configuration-coordination frame (1986a and b) or Bartlett and Ghoshal’s (1991) distinction between global, multinational, international and transnational strategies are the most relevant approaches in this sense.

and 1991) which defend a transnational strategy aiming simultaneously at global efficiency, national sensitivity and world-wide learning.

Once the three main dimensions of globalization (markets, sectors and strategies) are defined, we will consider two approaches which agglutinate and summarize many of the ideas which have already been put forward. In this way YIP (1993, page 1) points out that "an industry is global depending on the existence of connections between countries; a strategy is global depending on the degree of integration between different countries". DURÁN HERRERA (1996, page 26) says that "globalization can be understood as the unification of the markets of two or more countries in the practical aspects of commercial exchange and firm location. (...) The economy of the said countries is integrated in such a way that it can be considered as a single market".

We will now continue to analyze more deeply the phenomenon of globalization through its determining factors, the possible obstacles which can make the globalizing process difficult and the consequences generated by it.

Factors which cause or motivate globalization

In order to help to interpret the elements that can explain the phenomenon of globalization, we have considered it convenient to divide these factors into groups, as CANALS (1994, page 2) does in relation to four main categories.

Technical-Economic factors

One of the triggering factors of globalization is certainly the *technological innovation* mainly in relation with transport, communications and information transfer. Its effects can be summarized in three fields: the allowance to increase and homogenize demand on a world-wide level (LEVITT, 1983, page 49; and OHMAE, 1990, page 28); the need to act in a large scale in order to amortize the big investments (PORTER, 1986b, pages 42-43; and JARILLO, 1992, page 119); and the possibility to improve the transport and communication systems (PORTER, 1986b, page 44). A second factor to consider focusses on financial aspects and on *capital internationalisation*. Since, as CANALS (1994, pages 8-9) points out, the globalization of the financial sector and markets has accelerated since the sixties [2]. A new explanatory factor refers to the *international opening and economic interdependence between countries*. Certainly, as JARILLO and MARTÍNEZ (1991, page 3) say, the interrelation between economies within Europe is evident. But, on the other hand, the success of countries such as Japan, Korea or Germany has been entirely based on an intrinsically international approach of their economies. Finally, as YIP (1993, pages 48-56; and 1997, pages 399-400) and PRAHALAD and DOZ (1987, pages 19-20) point out, there can be a number of *cost pressures in the sector* which help increase its globalization, such as the existence of: scale-economies, scope or experience economies, supply needs in certain places, favourable logistics, cost differences between countries or a high cost of production development.

Market factors or factors related to demand

[2] A clear-cut exponent of this, at least in the European context, can be found in the Euro, which will shorly replace the local currency.

First of all, the *unprecedented expansion of the international trade* since the end of the Second World War has also contributed to the market globalization, as CANALS reminds us (1994, page 10). Another factor, which is half way between the technical and market aspects, is the *reduction of the life cycle of many products* enhanced by the technological development of the last years [3]. Finally, in some cases globalization is improved by the existence of *certain market pressures linked to the sector*, as YIP (1993, pages 35-48) and PRAHALAD and DOZ (1987, pages 18-20) point out, for instance: the homogenization of consumption criteria, the importance of clients and of global distribution channels or the existence of a transferable marketing between countries.

Political and Government factors

The first factor to be taken into account within this field is *the process of deregulation in which the economy has been immersed* in the last years, together with the elimination of trade barriers and the economic liberalization of many important sectors. In this sense, we also find the *processes of economic integrations of large geographical areas*, such as the European Union or the agreement between Canada-USA and Mexico (NAFTA)[4].Finally, we can point out the existence of *government pressures linked to the sector* which cause its globalization. According to YIP (1993, pages 56-63; and 1997, pages 400-401), this would be the case of a favourable commercial policy for a particular sector, as well as the existence of technical or marketing rules, which are compatible between countries, the presence of official competitors, and the absence of official clients or interests in this sector on behalf of the hosting government's side.

Entrepreneurial factors: globalization reinforcement

This section analyzes the influence of the company itself in the globalizing process. The *increasing tendency towards internationalisation carried out by companies*, which may have different interests, plays an important role in the aforementioned process. In a parallel way, the spatial *development of multinational companies* (companies which expand internationally by investing directly abroad and establishing subsidiary companies) is also an evident cause of globalization when connecting different geographical markets[5]. In third place, the operation strategy followed by a company in the international sphere can also contribute to reinforce all the process. As mentioned above, there exists an outstanding generic dilemma/difference between a multidomestic approach (whose main objective is to adapt itself to the individual characteristics of each country) and a global approach (which mainly aims at global scale efficiency by considering the world as a whole and the supply of a standardized product on a world-wide scale). It is obvious that the *follow-up of a global strategy* will contribute towards the globalizing process. Therefore, we can agree with PORTER (1986b, page 44) when he says that "the forces underlying

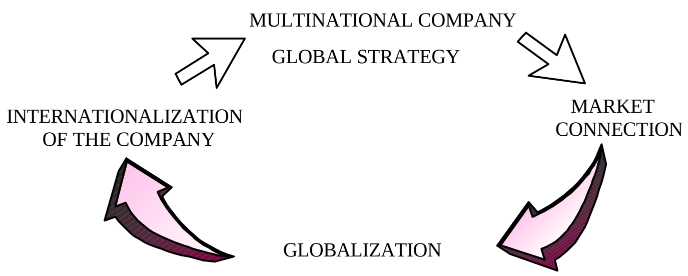
[3] According to STRATEGOR (1995, page 158), the reduction mentioned will be more perceptible in the high technological sectors and where the percentage of resources set aside for R&D is important. The so-called "technological race" is forcing many companies to look for markets which are big enough to assure the necessary competitive advantages.

[4] As BUENO (1993, page 69) points out, subglobal or intermediate markets arise from the creation of new spaces. In these markets trade is carried out not between countries but between economic regions. The "Triad power", as it is called by OHMAE (1991b), is located in this context. It refers to the triple epicentre of the worldwide economy: USA, Europe and Japan.

[5] The massive appearance of such companies after World War II and its consolidation as the main agent in the international trade and economic development, according to NAVAS and GUERRAS (1996, page 421), set out the irreversibility of a typical present phenomenon of the world-wide economic system: its interrelation in a world-wide scale.

globalization have been self-reinforcing. The globalization of firm´s strategies has contributed to the homogenization of buyer needs and business practices”. A representation of this phenomenon is illustrated in figure 1.

Figure 1.- The company reinforcing globalization



SOURCE: Made on the premises

Finally, and in connection with the previous idea, the competitive actions of the companies in a sector can also influence their globalization. These *competitive pressures linked to the sector*, according to YIP (1993, pages 63-68; and 1997, page 401) and PRAHALAD and DOZ (1987, page 19) can be: either high level of imports and exports within the sector, the presence of competitors from different countries or competitors who are multinational companies and follow global strategies.

Obstacles or factors which stop globalization

The motor forces of globalization are not universally valid, but they are sometimes counteracted by opposite forces which can make the process difficult. In this sense, and following through CANALS’ proposal (1991, pages 5-6 and 1994, page 5), we are going to write another classification, identical to the one aforementioned, by dividing the factors that restrain globalization into four categories.

Technical-economic factors

A first factor to be emphasized in this respect refers to the possible existence of *small scale economies or those economies that are difficult to achieve.* In fact, in certain functions, as, for instance, marketing, there can be an incapacity to benefit from these economies, due to the fact that the needs of the various national markets may be different. The technological development can even stop globalization, since *new technologies are highly variable* and make it difficult, according to CANALS (1991, page 6) , to build large-scale plants, because of the risk of becoming quickly out-of-date. According to PORTER (1982, page 294), a new factor linked to costs becomes an obstacle in those sectors where *transport and storage costs* are higher than the benefits coming from scale economies derived from the centralization of their production.

Market factors or factors related to demand

As we have already stated, the *own needs of consumers from different countries* can sometimes not always represent such a high degree of convergence so as to promote globalization. In actual fact, although tastes are in a generalised process of convergence, due to cultural, economic, climatological, etc. differences, there are still changes in many areas and, according to JARILLO and MARTÍNEZ (1991, page 11), this gives a competitive advantage to local companies which are very familiar with the environment where they work. However, the development of flexible production techniques improves the simultaneous achievement of scale economies and national differentiation. A new important factor refers to the *existence of distribution channels already established*.[6] PORTER (1982, pages 295-296) adds to the former *obstacles, a number of new ones for the global competitiveness* in respect to certain products, such as: the delivery times; the segmentation of geographical markets; the lack of demand in a significant number of important countries, the need of different commercial tasks within each geographical location, etc.

Political and government factors

In this field, we also find balancing factors for globalization. They are a number of institutional obstacles based on *protectionism* wich aim to improve companies and local employment. In this sense, there is a wide range of obstacles which, as PORTER points out (1982, pages 297-298), run from the establishment of import quotas to the requirement of using local components on a product, as well as the establishment of tax or work treatment which are more beneficial for local companies. On the other hand, the *exchange rate variability* and the possible actions of the local governments to protect their respective currency can also become a restraint on globalization. This factor will obviously be avoided in Europe because of the Eurocurrency.

Entrepreneurial factors

CANALS (1991, page 6) states that the *managerial capacities* are possibly one of the most scarce resources in order to put an internationalization strategy into practice. This factor refers to the managers' difficulty to understand the characteristics of internationalization processes and the ways of competition in an international sphere. PORTER (1982, page 298) talks about perception or resource obstacles. In the first case, he says that perceiving the opportunity of competing globally is in itself an innovation and we are likely to lack the vision necessary for this purpose. Furthermore, information, research and establishment costs may be too high for the company's possibilities.

Globalization consequences

All the sections analyzed so far expose a number of challenges and impacts both for the economy in general and particularly for the sectors and companies involved. CANALS (1994, pages 2-5) points out four consequences. First of all, globalization generates a *higher intensity of competitive rivalry*, since it increases the presence of foreign companies in local markets, by means of export and of direct investment[7]. Globalization also implies a *higher complexity* in the management of companies which act in different geographical markets, with different clients and with higher political, economic and financial risks. Thirdly, governments are also affected by globalization, since they *lose discretionality* when designing their economic policy in aspects such as the balance of payments or the exchange rates. Finally, there is an enormous *social and cultural impact* shown by the availability of a wider range of goods and services, an increasing acceptance

[6] According to PORTER (1982, page 295). "when there is a large amount of clients and when the total amount of individual purchases is small, the company may need to gain access to independent distribution channels, already established, in order to compete successfully". Moreover, the distribution channels may prefer selling national products rather than foreign ones.

[7] This makes HILL and JONES (1996, page 95) believe that "the present and potential competitors do not only exist in the domestic market of a company, but also in other national markets".

of foreign initiatives, a favourable reception of foreign investment, the increasing flexibility of learning and improving what is being done in other countries, etc.

According to HILL and JONES (1996, page 96), another important aspect is that the fall of the trade barriers has caused certain national markets, which were protected before, to become more vulnerable in respect to the foreign competitiveness, however it has also changed them into *potential destination places of considerable foreign investment*; this is the case of areas such as Latin America, Eastern Europe or South-eastern Asia. JARILLO and MARTÍNEZ (1991, page 6) discuss that the internationalization process of world-wide economy, due to which what happens in one particular country, significantly affects the rest of the companies elsewhere, has just started and affects *practically all businessmen*, whether local ones or managers of multinational subsidiary companies. On the other hand, KOBRIN (1996, page 14) exposes that the progressive fall of economic borders which leads to globalization causes a clear asymmetry in respect to the *political activity*, which is still organized geographically in terms of lands and borders. This last fact has made OHMAE (1996) question the traditional role of the world-wide economy motor carried out by the nation-states, created in relation to historical, arbitrary and artificial borders. Instead, he suggests that the operative units in the present world-wide economy will be those region-states which have the adequate dimension and scale, regardless to their political borders.

As a conclusion to what has been previously stated about globalization, we will examine the following three interesting proposals exposed by PERLMUTTER (1996, page 12), since they illustrate the nature of the world-wide tendency towards the emergence of what he calls a “global civilization”. In the first place, the motor forces which increase the emergence of a global civilization are more powerful than those which impede it. However there are many paradoxes, since in certain countries, such as Asia, Africa and Latin America, a westernization of tastes and a reaffirmation of the ethnic, religious and cultural differences can be observed. Finally, the enormous scale of these global social changes makes it necessary to have a process of transformation of the majority of institutions and, in particular, of States and companies.

INTERNAL FACTORS OF FIRM COMPETITIVENESS

As we have already discussed, one of the consequences of the globalization phenomenon on the actions of companies is the increase of the competitive intensity that they are facing, this being the main reason why they should consider to constantly improve their competitiveness as a prime survival objective.

We can also point out, in the same way as other authors, that the firm competitiveness is influenced by a high number of variables which can be divided into three categories: country factors, industrial factors and intrapreneurial factors[8]. Competitiveness is certainly a complex phenomenon, since the great number of factors on which it depends have heterogeneous characteristics and between them there are a number of interrelations which are not always easy to define. We are in the same way aware of the importance of country factors (educational level,

[8] Some works which explain these three dimensions are those of CANALS (1991), HILL and JONES (1996), SALAS (1993) and VIEDMA (1992).

technological level, infrastructures, macroeconomic variables...), especially due to the increasing internationalization of economies and of industrial factors (rivalry, fragmentation, negotiating capacity with clients and suppliers, ...). We are also conscientious of the fact that the intrapreneurial factors (strategies, resources, and company capabilities) are just as relevant or even more so than the other ones. As FERNÁNDEZ (1992, page 139) states “the capacity of a company to succeed in increasingly bigger, more open and more competitive markets depends above all on itself”.

The increasing importance given to the internal factors in the explanation of company competitiveness is justified by the fact that the external factors of firm competitiveness (country and industry) do not necessarily explain the empirical evidence that within the same country and the same industrial sector different companies which are more competitive than others can co-exist. This situation can be explained when considering the internal factors of each organization. In this way, companies that have a better quantity of resources are more prepared to achieve a higher competitive success.

In the last years, there is a resurgence of a research approach, Resource-Based View of the Firm[9], which considers the company as a group of resources and capacities used to achieve its purposes. In this way the essential characteristics of each company in relation to their competitors are emphasized, while trying to investigate which are the true roots of the competitive advantage. In this sense, VENTURA (1994, page 271) states that “the Resource-Based View of the Firm”[10] is to analyze the differential fact between companies as a starting point, and the imperfect mobility of resources as sources of supported and appropriable incomes by the companies”. The importance of this theory derives from its interest in understanding in depth how companies work internally and it tries to solve the considered “black box” of the Microeconomic Theory and analyze the basis, the creation and the maintaining of the competitive advantage. This is BUENO’s opinion (1996, page 191) when he states that “the concept and the theoretical approach about the competitive advantage is essential in order to understand the concept of the strategic direction, but also this advantage would not have a positive support, if the present theories about resources and company capacities had not been developed in the last few years”.

The establishment of the relationship between the company’s internal factors and its competitive advantage can be carried out by trying to answer to the following three questions: what are the roots of the competitive advantage?; what characteristics should the internal factors have in order to create and maintain competitive advantages?; and what kind of resources best fulfil the function of creating and maintaining competitive advantages?.

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[9] This theory has important antecedents, amongst which we can point out SELZNICK (1957), PENROSE (1962) and all other works which refer to the classic ideas of strength and weakness in relation to the internal strategic analysis. Some approaches which highlight this theory are the following: WERNERFELT (1984), AAKER (1989), BARNEY (1991), GRANT (1991), PRAHALAD and HAMEL(1991), MAHONEY and PANDIAN (1992), PETERAF (1993), AMIT and SCHOEMAKER (1993).

[10] Its Anglo-Saxon denomination is "Resource-Based View of the Firm" which does not make a distinction between resources and capacities. "Resource" can be understood in a wide sense as any kind of means which can be used to achieve what one needs. In this sense, the capacities of a company are also available resources. BARNEY (1991, page 101) includes in the term "resource" all the assets, capacities, organizational processes, information, knowledge, etc., controlled by a company, which enables it to conceive and to put into practice strategies which improve its efficiency and effectiveness. But it is also possible to distinguish between resources and capacities. Thus, in a strict sense, resources can be defined as the stock of available factors a company owns or controls (physical, financial, human, technological, commercial ones), whereas a capacity is the power of a group of combined and coordinated resources which can carry out a task or activity.

The creation of a competitive advantage requires, on one hand, the existence of imperfections and opportunities in the environment (external requirement) and, on the other hand, the company's possession of resources and capacity, which enable it to satisfy these opportunities. However the existence of imperfections and external opportunities permits, but does not assure, the possibility to obtain a competitive advantage. In this sense, the company must be able, in the first place, to detect them (and in this sense, there are companies which are more sensitive to their environment), and in second place, to exploit them. In order to do this, as we have already pointed out, the company must have the necessary resources and capacities. Furthermore, we can point out that when the resources of a company are combined, the capacities enabling it to carry out certain tasks or activities are obtained,and these capacities will be distinctive, when they are carried out better than the competitors. Furthermore, they will create competitive advantages, when they are allowed to obtain products or services which satisfy the clients' needs more advantageously. Therefore, the origin of competitive advantage is mainly found within a company's internal factors. As CLAVER, GASCÓ and LLOPIS (1996, page 45) say "competitiveness is evaluated in the market but its origin comes from the organisation and management of the company".

Nevertheless, not all resources arise from sustainable competitive advantage. The qualities that the resources and the capacities must have in order to be a source of sustainable competitive advantage[11] are the following:

- *To be valuable*: In the sense that they must exploit opportunities in the competitive environment.
- *To be rare or those that are scarce:* The resources owned by a great number of competitors cannot be a source of competitive advantage, although they can be a pre-requirement to compete.
- *Those which can be imperfectly imitated*: The resources which have the two previous characteristics enable a company to obtain a competitive advantage, however it is also necessary that these resources cannot be imitated by the competitors, so that this can be sustained. The imitation requires that the competitor overcomes two problems: in the first place, an information problem, since the competitor must discover which is the competitive advantage of the successful company and how it is being obtained. Here there is a new characteristic of the resources which would be the *imperfect transparency*, in the sense that there may be a causal ambiguity, so that the combination between resources controlled by the company and its sustainable competitive advantages may not be understood or it may be understood imperfectly. A competitive advantage which requires the co-ordination of a great number of different resources and capacities is more difficult to identify and understand; in second place, once the former problem has been overcome, the competitor should accumulate the required resources in order to imitate his rival. The competitor can obtain these resources in two ways: either by acquiring them in the resource markets or by means of internal investments. There are two new attributes, which appear so that those resources can maintain competitive advantage: *imperfect transferability* (the difficulty to acquire them externally) and *replicability* (the difficulty to reply to them internally). In this sense, the capacities established on highly complex organisational routines are less replicable. Moreover, the company should legally protect its own resources in order to avoid any imitations.

[11] We are basing our argument on BARNEY (1991) and GRANT (1991 and 1995).

Another main feature of the competitive advantage, together with its sustainability, is that the company can appropriate the incomes it generates. The property limits of the resources and the workers' negotiating power concerning the company will influence this.

In short, "the most important resources and capabilities are those which are durable, difficult to identify and understand, imperfectly transferable, not easily replicated and in which the firm possesses clear ownership and control" (GRANT, 1991, page 129).

The last question to be solved is to determine which kind of resources allow a higher sustainability of the competitive advantage. If we follow our line of argument, they will be those which have the former attributes in a higher degree. In order to answer this question, it is interesting to divide all the resources and capacities the company has into two kinds of factors: tangible and intangible ones. The tangible resources are the easiest ones to identify and value and possibly for this reason they have been paid more attention. However due to the fact that they possess these characteristics, they are the less suitable to improve the creation and the maintainance of a competitive advantage. In this way, we agree with TARRAGÓ (1994, page 7) when pointing out that the tangible or "hard" factors, that belong to the visible part of an iceberg, with which we can compare the entrepreneurial elements, are more easily transfered or imitated and for this reason, although they are still necessary, they are not sufficient to succeed. Furthermore, Tarragó points out that the intangible or "soft" factors are the less visible components. The distinctive capacities or competencies acquired throughout the time, internalised by the company and collectively matured due to repeatedly successful experiences, are those which offer more possibilities to survive. Physical and financial resources mainly make up the tangible factors. Among the intangible ones can be found the rest of the company's resources and capabilities, i.e. human capital (skills, experience, training, loyalty), technological capital (know how), commercial capital (trade mark, prestige, reputation) and organisational capital (system and management style, culture).

Furthermore, the globalization phenomenon which we have previously analysed reinforces the importance of the intangible factors. Increasing market globalization and segmentation is certainly making the scales tip towards the competitiveness through differentiation and this is based mainly on intangible factors, since it requires advanced techniques and capacities such as specialised staff with a high background, internal technical capacity, accumulated investments in marketing and an adequate organisational structure which makes it possible and easy to develop the former aspects both within the company and through the setting-up of close relationships with suppliers and clients.

However, as well as considering the important competitive value of these intangible resources in relation to the company which owns them due to the difficulty of imitation by other companies, we must also point out certain negative aspects which are mainly related to the accumulation problems of these kinds of resources. The following intangible aspects can be highlighted according to SALAS (1992, pages 236-237): the necessity of a long accumulation period; its character of being public benefit, which can create appropriablity problems (particularly in the case of the human capital); its difficult transferability, and the high degree of specificity with the consequent low residual value. One of the most important problems among these, especially due to the fact that the external environment is dynamic and fast, is the long accumulation period that these assets require.

In conclusion, the company, as well as trying to exploit the present opportunities with its stock of resources, must develop and accumulate new competences and knowledge enabling it to face the future successfully, becoming in this way the so-called “intelligent organisation” or the *learning organisation.*

TRAINING AND OBTAINING OF COMPETENCES THROUGH INTERCOMPANY COOPERATION

As we have emphasized throughout this paper, one of the consequences of globalization is the higher intensity of competitiveness. However, companies, instead of individually facing this situation, are using intermediate organization ways or cooperation agreements. Among multiple definitions, we can highlight CANALS's (1994, page 165) who defines the strategic alliances as "agreements between companies to share resources, capacities or activities, with the purpose of mutual learning and the improvement of both companies competitive position". In this sense, we can point out that according to INGHAM (1994, page 106) the organizational learning is one of the main reasons for the establisment of cooperation agreements. In fact, in an alliance, even though it has been designed for a specific activity (production, marketing, etc.), there is always a great transfer of knowledge especially of the implicit kind which is difficult to conceal with patents and licences. As HENZLER (1993, page 267) acknowledges, "*the daily contact is the best way to acquire knowledge which cannot be learnt either manually or through long-distance observation*". KOGUT (1988, page 184) also agrees when he says that the *joint-ventures* are vehicles through which knowledge is transferred and companies learn from each other.

Although from a theoretical point of view the *management* of the *learning corporations* is the less investigated issue (VICARI et al., 1996, page 191), we are now going to try and summarize some of the most studied aspects. In this sense, there is no doubt that the formalization of a process can enable a company to learn from its partners.

A systematic analysis of the company strategic intent, in which it is analyzed which are the activities of the value chain where the company has or can get a competitive advantage, and which are the available skills and those needed to be obtained through an alliance, is essential (LEI, 1993, page 37). But, moreover, the interorganizational learning depends on a number of factors (LEVINSON and ASAHI, 1995): culture, structure, technology and the absorptiveness. In relation to these factors, some important considerations are the following:

- There are several cultural levels which can affect the interorganizational learning: national, organizational, occupational and that of small groups.
- Furthermore, in relation to learning it is essential to establish good communication channels inside the company, so that the acquired knowledge does not belong only to the people involved in the cooperation, but can be transferred to the rest of the people in the organization[12]. In this sense, a horizontal organization structured through multifunctional work teams, which encourages the information influx in all the company, is preferable rather than the typically vertical structure (the functional one) which makes it difficult to transfer knowledge (LEI and SLOCUM, 1992, page 95; MOSS KANTER, 1994, page 107). This is MINTZBERG's adhocratic or organic structure (1990).

[12] According to LYLES et al. (1996, page 88), the organizational learning depends on how much the employees spread their individual learning by means of discussion, information, and teaching to others and therefore on how much this individual learning is institutionalized in rules and organizational routines.

- From the structural point of view in relation to the same cooperation agreement, whenever the filtering risk is limited, it is better to choose the joint management, which is the organizational form of the partners' greatest mutual exposure (BIDAULT and CUMMINGS, 1996, page 3).
- In relation to the structure, the number of organizations taking part in the cooperation agreement is also influential, in the sense that the more companies taking part, the easier it will be to identify new ideas and knowledge.
- Information technologies make it easy to communicate between organizations and, therefore, their mutual learning. However, the means of interaction used is also determining in the transfer of knowledge. In this way, it is not the same for the interaction to be carried out "face-to-face", or on the phone or by e-mail; in the first case, it is easier to observe our partners willingness to transfer all that s/he may know or if s/he hides her/his intentions (WATHNE, ROOS and KROGH, 1996, page 62).
- Perhaps the most critical function for the organizational learning is that of human resources. In other words, the main obstacles for the interorganizational learning are usually related to the human resources strategy and its intervention in the cooperation *management* and design, that is to say, with the planning of human resources, staff recruitment, training and development, assessment and rewards, and organizational design and control (PUCIK, 1988, page 83) .
- The company should maintain the managers and technicians in the strategic alliance for long term periods, in order to assure an uninterrupted learning. Cooperation certainly implies a longer permanence in their jobs, since the implicit knowledge can be transferred through experience and through a continuous interaction process between employees, so that each time they are replaced, the new staff does not have enough confidence to have an adequate contact with the partners, and therefore loses an opportunity to acquire knowledge (LEI, 1993, page 39). However, there is a certain contradiction present here, since it is also essential that the employees and the managers who take part in the alliance rotate in their posts, so that the greatest number of people possible are allowed to be exposed to the challenge every alliance represents for an organization (BIDAULT and CUMMINGS, 1996, page 3). Obviously therefore an adequate balance has to be obviously found.
- According to HAMEL (1991, page 90), what one partner can learn from another is determined by three factors: the initial *intention* of a company to consider an alliance as a way of learning, extended throughout the organization; the *transparency* or openness of the partners that the company must learn from, and the *receptiveness* or learning capacity. Each of these factors also depends in turn upon a number of aspects: the *intention* to learn is greater when the company sees its partners as future competitors, when it has few resources compared to its partners and other competitors, when it perceives the possibility of applying acquired knowledge to multiple business and activities to be high and, finally, if it believes that if the power and control of the partners in an alliance are balanced, instability is generated. On the other hand the partner companies will be less transparent, if their habits and language becomes a strong barrier, if there is a "clan spirit" between the employees , which prevents them from revealing their knowledge to the partners, if their resources are mainly their employees' tacit knowledge, and if they absorbe

knowledge at a greater speed than their partners[13]. Finally, an organization will be more *receptive* when the confidence in its own capacities is neither low nor high, and when it has been recently created or has few successful memories to forget, so that the *gap* between their capacities and those of their partners and competitors is small, and it is possible to integrate the acquired knowledge by each member in order to transfer it to all the people in the organization who may need it.

In relation to the factors which make it easy to generate knowledge through cooperation, other authors state the following: flexibility in the learning purposes, a high level commitment, a good atmosphere of trust between the partners, tolerance of the information redundancies, creation of a chaos sensation, and concern about long-term results (INKPEN, 1996); transparency, interaction channel, trust and previous experience in the *management*[14] of strategic alliances, which allows a better exploitation of the benefits derived from these (WATHNE, ROOG and KROGH, 1996).

A last factor is the stock of previous knowledge available in the company. The more previous knowledge in relation to that about to be acquired that the company may have, the easier it will be to recognize the value of the new knowledge, to assimilate it and to apply it to new uses (WATHNE KORS and KROGH, 1996, page 65). In relation to the last factor, INGHAM (1994, page 114) points out that both too large a distance as well as one too small bases of the co-operating parts between the knowledge will limit the possibilities of learning. Therefore in the first case, the motivation to learn can be high, but the capacity can be weak, whereas in the second case the knowledge similarity does not motivate the partners to learn. Therefore, a balance between the specific knowledge bases of each company is needed.

On the other hand, acquiring the partner's skills, in the sense of having access to them, is different from internalizing them[15], in such a way that they can later be applied to new products, geographical markets or businesses. In this sense, LEVINSON and ASAHI (1995, page 61) identify four stages in the interorganizational learning:

- Analyzing the environment and identifying new possible knowledge to be acquired.
- Acquiring (transferring) that knowledge and interpreting it, that is to say, finding out how they can be used to improve the entrepreneurial results.
- The organization uses the acquired knowledge, by adapting its behaviour to achieve its purposes.
- Institutionalisation of the new acquired knowledge.

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[13] The transparency of a company can be understood as its desire of "laying its cards on the table", of not having "hidden agendas" and, in short, of sharing its knowledge with other companies. The more they confide in their partners, the more a company will "open up" (WATHNE, ROOS and KROGH, 1996, page 65).

[14] It is not only the experience acquired in certain cooperation agreements that is important, but also that of working with a partner specifically.

[15] According to the economic logic, the interfirm cooperation aims at gaining access to certain assets to enjoy them during the cooperation period and to develop the activity that was the target of the agreement. However, according to the organizational logic (learning) the real purpose of cooperation is to acquire and internationalize knowledge in a definite manner, not only for its utility in the cooperation field but in every otheractivity beyond it (MENGUZZATO, 1995, page 515).

Putting these ideas in a different way, it is also important to know which are the consequences of this mutual learning. Among them, we have highlighted the following:

- First of all, the strategic alliances, since, due to their important international component, they contribute to the progress of worldwide economy, as they encourage the balance of knowledge worldwide. In this sense, according to HENZLER (1993, page 268), one of the main benefits of the strategic alliances is the destruction of the “knowledge cartels”.

- From a competitive point of view, a reciprocal and asymmetric learning between the partners can increase the competitive position of one of them in respect to the other and for this reason in an alliance the partners are considered to be competitors as well as collaborators (HAMEL, 1991, page 87). In this sense, according to HERMOSILLA and SOLÁ (1989, page 121), “*cooperation must be inserted in the global strategy of the company and can be used as a weapon of the company, by becoming an instrument of development of its own strategic capacity*”. In conclusion, a alliance is another form of competing.

- The asymmetric learning means that one of the partners can improve his own position, both inside the market, as well as inside the alliance. Therefore the relative variation in the partners’ negotiating power is related to the speed with which the partners learn from each other (PUCIK, 1988, page 80). As this author points out, “the capacity of a company to learn is the key to protect and increase its comparative advantage and to control the strategic direction of the alliance”. And vice versa so that not to acquire the partners’ skills means that the company can become too dependent on them and can have a very vulnerable competitive position in the market. According to HAMEL (1991, page 89), the power and the control in an alliance are determined, in a decreasing order, by the following cases: the speed in which partners can internally build new capacities, the partners’ learning skills, the contribution to the alliance of idiosyncratic inputs, the functional employees’ position in the alliance, the managing structure (managers who represent the company in the management of the alliance), and finally the legal structure.

Therefore, preventing an asymmetric learning between the partners or creating it in favour of the organization is an essential task for a company integrated in a strategic alliance. But should this not be achieved, another way of keeping control and power is by creating new competences and maintaining the interest of the partners (HAMEL, 1991, page 89), since otherwise, once the partners have accumulated enough knowledge, they will not have any reasons to remain in the alliance (LEI and SLOCUM, 1992, page 87). In this sense JONES and SHILL (1993, page 126) add that the resources given by each partner have a limited “life” span and so it is necessary to renew them in order to keep the alliance alive.

Finally, it is important to point out that collaboration does not always give the opportunity of completely absorbing the partner’s technics. However, the simple fact of acquiring reference points, new and more accurate ones, can be extremely valuable in relation to a partner’s performance. (HAMEL, DOZ and PRAHALAD, 1989, page 27).

CONCLUSIONS

The importance of the internal factors in creating and maintaining competitive advantages and therefore, in the explanation of the firm competitiveness, has made the interest and the study of the company resources and capacities reappear. In this sense, this paper has analysed first of all the importance of the present globalization process with its different dimensions for the companies competitive actions. In second place, the importance of the accumulation and development of resources, competences and knowledge through the organizational learning has been emphasized. Finally, we have focused on the analysis of cooperation between companies as a learning instrument to improve the obtaining of new capacities.

Globalization sets up a number of challenges and opportunities for companies. On the one hand, competitive threats can arise from all over the world. On the other hand, potential business opportunities appear in new countries. In view of this one solution would be the cooperation between companies in order to cope with the danger created by multinational companies which can invade the domestic market as well as to profit from internationalization opportunities. In this sense the cooperation with a foreign partner or a national one already working abroad, could provide valuable knowledge about the foreign markets making the access to them much easier and faster, as well as accelerating the process of becoming involved in internationalization.

Apart from the former advantages from an international point of view, cooperation enables us to learn a partner’s competencies and knowledge (technological, managing, organizational, etc.), which reinforces the stock or resources and so improves the company competitiveness.

All of these aspects are particularly important in our entrepreneurial fabric, mainly controlled by small and medium-sized companies. In this sense the key aspects to be promoted, through the entrepreneur’s training would be the understanding of knowing how to manage these agreements and the over coming of distrust in respect to the use of this strategic instrument.

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