

**Does Success in International Business
Require Specific Capabilities:
An Australian Perspective**

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Adam Koch

(Serial No. 108)

Swinburne University of Technology
BUSINESS WORKING PAPERS



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DOES SUCCESS IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS REQUIRE SPECIFIC CAPABILITIES: AN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE

Abstract

An extensive transformation of the international business environment makes it mandatory to continually review and update the theory of **international** competition. This paper attempts to offer a way of complementing Porter's theory of competitive advantage by proposing to examine the significance of a number of capabilities in facilitating international success of contemporary companies.

INTRODUCTION

It is widely believed that every significant and sustainable success in business requires a certain set of capabilities, that differs between industries and individual companies, and depends on the state of business environment in which a company operates. Porter notices: *'The best strategy for a given firm is ultimately a unique construction reflecting its particular circumstances'* [1980, 34] and *'...the choice [of the strategy] is necessarily based on the ~~firm's~~ capabilities and limitations'* [ibid., 42]. Since the requirements for comparable domestic and international successes are usually dissimilar in their character **and/or** degree due to the disparity of the relevant business environments [eg: Paliwoda 1993; Porter 1990, 1996b], in this paper I will propound the existence of a **number of relationships between certain general capabilities and the likelihood and/or scope of an international success of a company.**

THE EVOLUTION OF GLOBAL BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

The last twenty years or so have seen the conditions of international competition very **significantly** altered by the following changes to the global business environment:

- much better access to the global business information due to the rapid development of market research services in many countries as well as efficient, computerised domestic and international business information systems,
better transparency of foreign markets and improved foreseeability of their changes, resulting in lower psychological barriers to the international expansion and an increased mobility of the capital and technical resources,
- a considerable growth in customer awareness of the competing product and service offers worldwide,

slowing growth of the global economy as a whole that increases the interest in geographic expansion to regions likely to experience quickest growth (eg new large scale opportunities in Russia, China and India,

- strengthening competition from the newly **industrialised** economies (NIES),
- more aggressive national industrial policies,
- national conservation of environment resources,
- relative decrease of transportation and communication costs (ie their falling share in cif prices of exported goods) and an increased efficiency of related services,
- continuing global convergence of customers wants and tastes in most product markets,
- substantial progress in the global **unification** of technical standards, trade customs and trade documentation,
- freer global flow of technology,
- a further progress in the unification of national legislative norms, pertaining to the conduct of various **forms** of international **business**¹,
- **globalisation** of various service industries, such as banking, business consultancy, advertising, transport **etc.**,
- increasing concentration of capital in some industries (eg **carmaking**, air industry, shipbuilding, computer industry) with many companies aiming to obtain further economies of scale, and achieve competitive advantages from mergers **and/or** from **globalising** their strategies,
- lowering **barriers** between countries and product markets that make **competing on capabilities** (see eg: *Stalk et al* 1992), a proposition that can be readily, and very profitably, employed in the areas outside the traditional interest of a company, that would otherwise follow the more orthodox recipe of continuing to seek competitive advantage in resource usage efficiency over the traditional competitors,
- augmenting rewards for those involved in **sur-petition** (*'choosing a company's own race, rather than running in the same race with all competitors'*) and **valufacture** (*'the creation and formation of new values for customers by an industry'*)(De Bono 1992)

Competing on capabilities becomes more common in a global business environment that is characterised by lower overall growth and lower market entry barriers (product- and areawise)². This approach to business planning and management helps offset stagnation and develop value-added activities, but requires a very substantial shift in the business philosophy as well as a substantial upgrading of the analytical capacity of a company. A threat to the very existence of an entire industry (eg compressor refrigeration industry facing now total ban on the traditional coolants, ie chlorofluorocarbons), or a dramatic, and irreversible, slump in the domestic demand has often been seen to spur many companies to try and employ their resources and skills in some new geographic and product areas, sometimes quite disparate from the traditional ones.³

Despite the obvious long-term benefits resulting from increasing the share of international business in a national economy, as well as individual industries, and the consequent need to accordingly re-orient the macro- and micropolicies, the international, rather than domestic, benchmarking in evaluating a company's strengths and weaknesses does not yet seem to have become a standard approach, even in developed Western countries. A broader psychological context of this enduring inward focus and the resultant inability to develop strong international business positions have been examined in many countries. A report prepared by the British Institute of Export [1987] explains: *'Too many companies, too many directors and managers still think that selling their products and services outside the United Kingdom is something for someone else. Undoubtedly, the reason for this attitude is the failure of our education and training system, which in many instances does not include automatically the international dimension in the teaching of each management subject in business studies and management courses'*.

Not unlike their British counterparts, many an Australian company still needs to modify their business attitudes and increase their commitment to match the requirements and expectations of

international markets. Even the industries that show high export propensities and low import penetration ratios in part only consist of strong international performers [Bureau of Economics 1989]. Excellence in Australia rests rather with individual companies than entire industries, which I believe results both from the recency of the measures that reduce the protection **from** foreign competition, and from the absence of some factors that are needed for an industry to achieve and sustain a prominent international competitive standing (see below).

In a report on the export **performance** of Australian industries, the Committee for Review of Export Market Development Assistance [1989, p.XVIII] writes: *'Major policy changes in the second half of the 1980s have made a significant contribution to turning the inward oriented, protected Australian economy toward international competitiveness...[and]... One of the most serious costs of Australia's past inward orientation is the absence of a strong export culture'*. Further they notice however that despite the continuing dominance of primary products in Australian exports *'...new sources of competitiveness have emerged in technological innovation and in management'*.

Bearing in mind the evidence offered by the Australian (and **non-Australian**) industries that have been sheltered **from** international competition for very long periods of time⁴, one would think that even though an international competitive advantage can be attained by protected industries (particularly if they enjoy favourable domestic demand conditions, **and** the industry then gradually increases its involvement in international **business**)⁵, it would be **impossible under contemporary global business conditions for any company to sustain a significant and meaningful international competitive advantage over a long period of time without competing internationally.**⁶

Developing and maintaining internationally superior capabilities in business requires an ongoing and comprehensive access to information about global technological and market environments,

An international business consultant's recent experience in advising a large Australian construction company typifies a certain kind of approach to export rather emphatically. Severely affected by the protracted and continuing slump in the domestic market and having suffered substantial losses for a number of years, this company seemed to have had few options left outside the international market.

With their patented computerised design and manufacturing technology that provides a substantial comparative cost (up to 30 %) and construction duration advantage (2-5 times shorter) they could for instance attempt to cut out for themselves a fair-sized piece of the increasingly enticing Central European cake, perhaps through joint venturing with local construction companies, building materials producers and banks. Relevant risks were estimated to be minimal, return on investment was likely to be several times higher than it ever was in their domestic business. A number of meetings between two parties were held in Australia with the advantages of the technology thoroughly explained to the consultant and the possible benefits of the international business proposition presented to the construction company. All necessary Central European contacts have been established and a pre-feasibility study completed by the consultant with a very positive outcome, and at no charge to the Australian construction company. Yet, when asked to join him in the pre-arranged market tour, the company answered, much to his amazement: *'At this stage we do not see how [we] could consider entering the (...) market... We simply are not in a position to invest in any joint-venture arrangements no matter how attractive the markets might be...[sic!] We will now be exploring the export of [our] skills, technology and services...'*

Whatever particular concerns of the executives involved might have actually been, it would seem that their unwillingness to explore the market potential and assess the benefits of this particular market entry at a negligible cost, most likely had its roots in their relative inexperience, deficient analytical skills, an evident uneasiness in handling more complex international business matters and their reluctance to verify their opinions and judgments. This case exemplifies very well, I am afraid, the malaise still suffered by some Australian companies.

and not less importantly - constant exposure to the international competition, an influence strong enough to cause a company to seek a steady improvement of its efficiency and effectiveness in all

Porter proposes that '*a sustainable and significant national advantage can only be achieved when accompanied by an appropriate combination of some if not all following categories of elements: factor conditions, demand conditions, related' and supporting industries, appropriate strategy, organisational structure and rivalry*' [1990, 72].⁷ In dealing with the notion of national comparative advantage, the theory of international competition distinguishes between several categories of factors that **affect** an industry's international business capacities: basic versus advanced and generalised versus specialised ones. If over a long period of time, an industry in a country consistently deploys some of those factors more productively than their competitors **from** other countries, and also **performs** stronger as an innovator in offsetting its relative weaknesses, it is likely to achieve and sustain a strong international competitive position.

A competitive advantage is more likely to be attained, and then sustained, by companies that adopt at least some of the following measures [Porter 1986a]:

- encouraging constant upgrading of the acquired advantage,
- selling to the most **demanding** and sophisticated customers (even though it might be in conflict with short **term** goals and is often more important in this context **than** its mere volume,
- finding the right location at the centre of the greatest concentration of factors promoting international competitiveness,
- building the competitive advantage on the home basis (and avoiding globalisation strategies in the early stages of the business development),
- getting involved in factor creation, eg. through training.

As Porter proves in his book, nations gain advantage because of differences, and not similarities, in their factor endowment; it usually takes a decade or more to create a sustainable, international competitive advantage. He shows [1990, passim] that the commonly asked question:

Why do some nations succeed and others fail in international competition ?

is misconceived in that it tacitly assumes that it is only **generalised factors** (basic and advanced), and not - **specialised ones**, that **determine** the ability of a company to successfully compete internationally. He proves this question incapable of providing an answer that would be both **meaningful** and reliable and proposes that a different question be asked, namely:

Why does a nation become the home base for successful international competitors in an industry ?

in order for us to be able to explain the origins of the sustainable competitive **advantage(s)** of individual industries and companies and help formulate sounder **international** competitive strategies.

He further suggests [1990, 67-8] that countries succeed in international competition when:

- country circumstances support the pursuit of the proper strategy for a particular industry or segment,
- products and processes are relentlessly upgraded because of an environment that supports this sort of behaviour.
- the national environment uniquely enables firms to perceive new strategies for competing in an industry and causes them to pursue such strategies early and aggressively,
- the conception of advantage is perceived as dynamic, not static,
- their home base advantages are valuable to other nations,
- their innovations and improvements foreshadow international needs.

From the Australian perspective, it appears that deficiencies in, or absence of, the three conditions underlined above would dominate among the reasons for the unsatisfactory performance of many industries and companies (see results of author's recent research presented later in this paper).

Finally, Porter believes that an analysis of the phenomenon of national advantage should be founded on the following premises [1990, 69-70]:

- the nature of competition and the sources of competitive advantage **differ** widely **among** industries and even industry segments,
- global competitors often perform some activities in the value chain outside their country,
- advantage is gained through improvement, innovation and **upgrading** (initially - through altering the basis of competition),
- the above-mentioned behaviour is unnatural to many companies, and
- firms that gain competitive advantage in an industry are often those that not only perceive a new market need or the potential of a new technology but move early and most aggressively to exploit it.

Again, lack of confidence and of persistence in pursuing international business objectives, proclivity toward complacency, as well as following old, inadequate recipes rather than developing **customised**, unorthodox strategies are among the worst enemies of many an Australian industry and company in their international efforts.

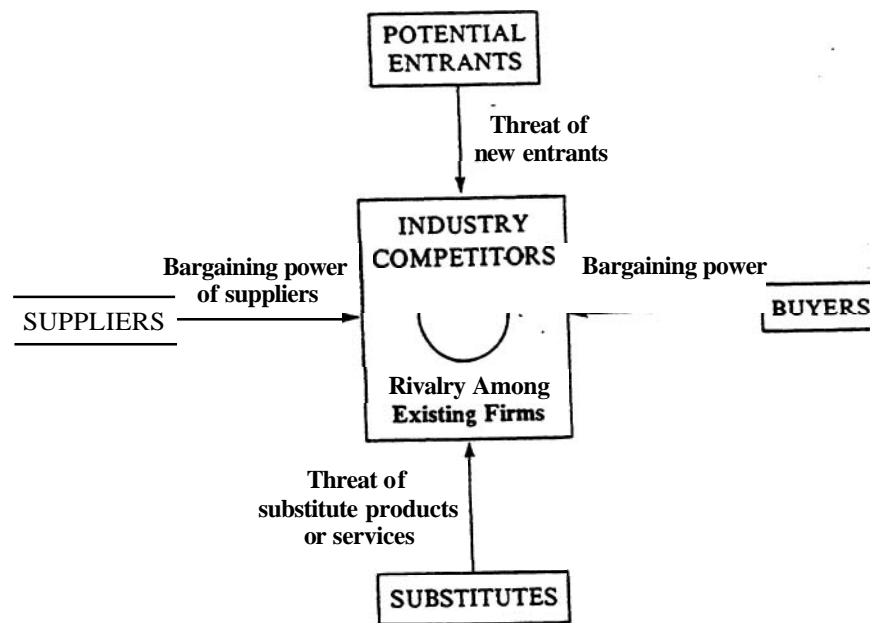
Modelling Industry Competition

In **characterising** a competitive situation Porter looks at the following five elements:

- degree of rivalry (in the industry),

- suppliers,
- potential entrants,
- buyers, and
- substitutes of products and services [Porter, 1990].

FIGURE 2 Porter's model of industry competition



(source: Porter, 1980)

In the context of this paper it is appropriate to emphasise that Porter's theory offers an explanation as to why particular industries and companies have developed significant and sustainable advantage over their competitors, but it does not attempt to examine systematically such **capabilities** that might be assumed to be helpful in achieving a considerable, sustainable success in international business, both in general, and specific **terms**.⁸ To fill in this apparent gap in theory, but even more importantly due to the practical significance of a proper understanding of the meaning of those capabilities, a befitting examination of the relevant area needs to be undertaken.

ACHIEVING AN INTERNATIONAL COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

For a sustainable and **meaningful** international competitive advantage (ICA) to be ascertained as such, a reliable examination procedure needs to be established. Relevant methods could either be general or specific. Each category would have some disadvantages, in that general methods would not necessarily embrace properly all **significant dimensions** of a particular case of a presumed ICA investigated, while the specific ones in **turn** may not always be verifiable for their validity thus making the task of interindustry or intercompany comparisons quite difficult. In an attempt to operationalise the notion of an international competitive advantage, Porter proposes the following quantitative measures:

- the presence of substantial and sustained exports to a wide array of other nations **and/or**
- significant outbound foreign investment based on skills and assets created in the home country.

As the presence of a company's **products/services** in a wide array of other country markets may be linked not only to their competitiveness but also to the kind of generic strategy pursued by the company (say, a focus strategy), and the market shares are influenced by eg legislative and political barriers, some degree of customisation of this measure in individual **industries/cases** might **turn** out to be necessary.

In supporting the hypotheses concerning the capabilities influencing the likelihood and scope of an international success, a brief review of some relevant research results will be **helpful**. Let us commence with examples of three large transnational corporations: Matsushita, **Philips** and **Ericsson** [**Bartlett** and Ghoshal 1988].

In case of **Matsushita**, their international successes are believed to have been conducted to by *'...strong input of subsidiaries in the corporate management process, allowing for different perspectives to be preserved, close linking of **R&D** to market needs and responsibility transfer from **R&D** to manufacturing to **marketing** as the new product development progresses!*

According to **Bartlett** and **Ghoshal**, **Philips'** strength would lie in the innovativeness and entrepreneurial drive of this corporation. *Use of a cadre of entrepreneurial **expatriates**, forcing tight functional integration within a subsidiary and a dispersion of responsibilities along with the **decentralised** assets* would be among the most pertinent characteristics of this company.

Ericsson in **turn** is believed to owe their international successes to their superior transnational management capabilities, as exemplified by:

- *interdependence of resources and responsibilities among **organisational** units,*
- *a set of strong cross-unit **integrating** devices,*
- *strong corporate **identification** and a well developed **worldwide** management perspective,*
- *a clearly defined and tightly controlled set of operating systems,*
- *a people-linking process employing **eg** temporary assignments and joint teams, and*
- *interunit decision forums, particularly subsidiary **boards**.*

Thomson's secret of success would lie [**McCormick** and Stone 1990] in adopting a *very long-term view in measuring their **return** on investments*, many of them being very substantial acquisitions to build their market shares rapidly; having the objective of ***attaining** an in-house capacity in **strategic** technologies* (such as gallium **arsenide** semiconductors); using three criteria in ***deciding** which key components to make rather than buy: *choosing those representing critical parts in terms of final product **performance**; avoiding dependence on competitors; opting for those components that provide most **freedom** in deciding about product and **market portfolios**.**

They equally consider their top managers' openmindedness, little reliance on structured management processes (hence also relative unpredictability to their competitors) and an effective blending of several national management styles brought in by highly committed executives from a number of countries, as their strengths.⁹

The outcomes of a recent survey of Australian export award winners will add to the empirical basis of this paper.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES IN AUSTRALIAN EXPORTING

The survey of the recent Australian federal and state export award winners was undertaken to help establish what were the factors that, according to the respondents, were most typical and significant in their and their industries' international successes; at the same time, an attempt was made to enquire about typical weaknesses in the approach to international business as demonstrated by some Australian examples known to the respondents.¹⁰ The survey was based on the following assumptions:

- that the award winners and finalists will be competent in determining the factors that have contributed to their successes, as well in evaluating their relative importance,
- that the award winners and finalists will be able to evaluate the importance of the same factors to the industry in general (thus indirectly admitting some **specificity** of their company's situation)
- that they will be able to differentiate between universal relevance of the factors and their relevance with regard to individual countries and specific situations,
- that they will have an opinion on the weaknesses in the approach to international business that has traditionally prevailed with Australian companies,

- that the length of the questionnaire, the character of questions and the criterion used in selecting the respondents will not necessitate follow-up phone calls.¹¹

The questionnaire (see Appendix A) was mailed in November 1993 to 73 Federal and State award winners and finalists from the period 1989-1992, the list of which was obtained from the Canberra office of the Australian Trade Commission (Austrade).

What the Survey Showed

Due to a very low response rate (14%), which might be partly attributed to the timing of this survey (mid November to Christmas), partly to the resource limitations (no follow-up was possible) and lastly - to the traditionally low interest of Australian companies in participating in surveys - no standard inferential techniques could in effect be applied in evaluating the survey results. An approach was instead adopted to concentrate on those alternatives that dominate in the **answers**¹², and attempt limited qualitative analysis.

In general, the respondents have been closer to unanimity when answering Q. 2 (concerning the factors believed to be critically important for international success in respondents' industry) than when answering Q.1 (that sought analogous answers with regard to their company). Most likely it was due to the **dissimilarity** of the competitive situations and success requirements for every participating **company**¹³ and, perhaps, a tacit assumption made by respondents while answering Q. 2 that whenever they feel that the prevailing situation would be "Yes" - they ought select the "Yes" option¹⁴.

While no clear domination of any option with regard to company-specific factors has been demonstrated, the respondents seem to have agreed that the following factors would be particularly important for a variety of Australian exporting industries:

- *the higher efficiency of a company's strategic analysis and strategy formulation efforts than that of its **competitors**,*
- *the superior cultural empathy skills,*
- *the strength of the desire to **excel**,*
the length of the delivery periods,
- *the consistency **of the** product quality, and*
*the level of commitment to international **business from** a company's top executives*

Not unexpectedly, the importance of *perseverance* for an international success has been stressed by 3 respondents (Q. 3); respondents **choosing superior quality** (3 answers as well) have only reinforced the relative significance of the '*consistency of the quality of a company's products*', a related "listed" factor **from** questions 1 and 2.

As far as the evaluation of weaknesses is concerned in the approach to international business that could be considered characteristic of a substantial percentage of Australian companies, the respondents believed that

- *the myopic focus of the business,*
- ***insufficient** knowledge of foreign markets, customs and regulations, and*
- *dearth of adequately qualified and skilled international business professionals,*

are among the more typical weaknesses in the approach to international business observed in our country. At the same time they were **almost** unanimous in rejecting the suggestion that Australian products **often** show inferior quality due to the relative lack of sophistication of local customers.

All in all, with the exception of the single case of disconfirmation (see above), all other literature and experience based suppositions that were used in designing the questionnaire, would have been

corroborated by the survey results. This notwithstanding, due to the scarcity of data and the simplified character of this particular research, other attempts would be required to obtain more reliable evidence of a wider array of opinions concerning the issues of international competitiveness of Australian industries.

What Impedes Achieving ICA by Australian Companies ?

It is not incidental in this paper to raise again the so popular question of the **impediments** and disincentives that are believed to preclude many Australian companies from either engaging themselves in some kind of international business, or from obtaining **and/or** sustaining an ICA. Many of them have been documented recently [eg the study of Committee for Review of EMDA **1989**; Barrett and Wilkinson **1985**; an analysis of the **1988** Export Award finalists commissioned by Austrade]. Let us enumerate some of those impediments that are most **frequently** referred to. To properly assess the relative significance of individual **capabilities** for international success of an Australian company, **all** its environmental context needs to be well understood.

Inefficiency of Australia's transport system and *export apathy* (ie failure to react to international opportunities) are named by White as the most significant handicaps **affecting** the international business success rates of Australian companies [White 1990]. The problem is compounded by comparatively high costs of power and other utilities. *Fragmentation of markets, low capital utilisation* and *high level of regulation* in Australia are among other important impediments. Further, productivity levels of many Australian manufacturing firms are too low for them to be able to compete internationally; Australian standards and regulations are **often** very idiosyncratic and, consequently, hinder exports [Committee for Review of EMDA 1989]. Another area of concern relates to Australian exporters' **eligibility** for rebates of sales tax that disadvantages them against their foreign competitors eligible for rebates of value added tax. *'Macroeconomic policy in Australia is* [largely budget related, hence] *focussed on short term* [and thus] *does not*

*adequately support efforts aimed at **lifting** the **competitiveness** of **industries** [in that] all those efforts require long, sustained perspective for their effectiveness'.*

It is believed however, that notwithstanding some degree of success in eliminating rigidities that caused low productivity (due to the award restructuring and a new approach to skill creation), much would still need to be changed in the management practice and work regulation for the reform to see its **full** results. The **export** culture needs to be inculcated in the Australian community to ensure the importance of international **competitiveness** in the production of goods and **services** for Australian living standards is well understood [Committee for Review of EMDA 1989].

GENERAL CAPABILITIES REQUIRED IN ATTAINING AN ICA

An overview of some relevant **literature**, this author's international business **experience**¹⁵, and the outcomes of the survey presented above will lead to a number of hypotheses that specify the following capabilities as those believed to be commonly needed by a company that seeks to achieve and sustain **an** ICA in a contemporary business environment.

Some authors believe that *knowledge development, communication networks and top management commitment* are among the factors that are most critical for a company's ability to carry out efficiently international activities [Welch and Luostarinen 1988]. Porter stresses the importance of **efficient** coordination in international marketing, overcoming the tyranny of distance, appropriate language and cultural empathy skills, up- and **downstream** value chain activities and **promptness** of response to the international market changes [Porter 1986b].

A major research results published by Weichmann and Pringle in 1979 showed the prevalence at that time of following key problems amongst multinational marketers:

- lack of qualified international personnel,
- lack of strategic thinking and long range planning,
- lack of marketing expertise at the subsidiary level,
- excessive and ineffective headoffice control procedures,
- excessive financial and marketing constraints,
- insufficient participation of subsidiaries in product decisions and insensitivity of headoffice to local market differences,
- too little relevant communication between headoffice and subsidiaries and a shortage of **useful** information **from** headoffice,
- lack of a multinational orientation.

Even though some of the above-mentioned impediments might have since become less common (eg. those related to the communication and control problems), most would continue to play a major part in international business failures. Many companies, for instance, would still appear to be oblivious to *'the need to look beyond.. national boundaries to potential international competition and beyond the ranks of one's competitors today to those that may become competitors tomorrow'* in defining their business properly [Porter 1980,321.

Some authors suggest [Albaum *et al* 1989] that:

- *technical competence in marketing,*
- *specialised knowledge of the factors in the international environment,*
- *the ability to utilise such knowledge in working with others* and, perhaps most of all,
- *cultural empathy ('the ability to practise it well'),*

are among the most important prerequisites for successful export marketing management. They point out that an adequate level of cultural empathy is most often achieved by a thorough development of language skill to the point where a person can think, feel, reason and experience emotions in a language other than their mother tongue. Involving foreign nationals in international planning and management is another worthwhile practice.

Superior market intelligence, appropriate human resources and their adequate use, productive logistics and flexible game plans are, according to Wiklund, the four most effective weapons of creative, and **successful** international marketing [Wiklund 1987, 8]. In his book, he emphasises the importance of *possessing a competitive advantage in finding active sources of international business intelligence. An inquisitive mind of an intelligence manager, his persistence, patience, initiative, imagination, a sharp analytical mind, ability to quickly absorb the information, organisational talents, tact and self-sufficiency* make it much more likely for a company to attain this advantage. The **power of a company's sales force** almost always counts more in the international marketing effort than the domestic one [Wiklund 1987, 67]. It depends on their *numbers, mobility, geographic concentration, quality and ability to work as a global team*. Its strength may be increased by so-called **nakodos**¹⁶, ie independent individuals alert to international business opportunities and communicating those to the companies that they believe might be interested in pursuing them.

In his opinion, **successful** international businesses follow certain general guidelines, such as:

- intelligence is enhanced when you emphasise the *importance of people rather than of countries and companies*,
- *keep your intelligence databank entries brief, constantly cut and edit*,
- *don't apply the same formula everywhere*: there may be a worldwide demand for your product, but the reasons for which people buy it are not always the same,

- *freezing* people into jobs perpetuates a cubbyhole mentality that results in poor communications and poor teamwork,
- keep trying to win good employees, agents and **nakodos away from** the competition,
- do not ever allow anything to become totally and completely **organised**.

HYPOTHESES

Earlier in this paper, I quoted Porter's proposition that '*a sustainable and **significant** national advantage can only be achieved [by an industry] when accompanied by an appropriate combination of some **if not all** [of the] following categories of elements: factor conditions, demand conditions, related and supporting industries, appropriate strategy, organisational structure and rivalry*' [Porter 1990, 72]. Those factors I believe may both conceive, and be reinforced by, certain **capabilities that increase the chances of achieving and sustaining an ICA by a company**. Whilst the appropriate **combination** of the elements mentioned by Porter could be regarded as a *conditio sine qua non* for any ICA, **the capabilities I have in mind might explain both the success rates and amount of time needed to arrive at an ICA in certain states of the business environment**. I will therefore attempt here to formulate a number of relevant hypotheses I intend to verify separately:

H₁: The more efficient is its global market research and intelligence effort, the more likely it becomes for the company to achieve and sustain an ICA.

An easier access to a substantial part of market information (there continue however to be critical relevant **differences** between some countries) and diminishing costs of its procurement make it even more **significant** for a company to ensure superior efficiency in its global market research and intelligence efforts. Their relative efficiency could be measured by comparing the lengths of

periods needed to obtain and **verify** certain **kinds** of information by the company with those of competitors (domestic and foreign).

H₂: The more efficient its strategic analysis of global market opportunities and threats, the more likely it becomes for the company to achieve and sustain an ICA.

As impediments to international business get fewer and less **meaningful**, and market research and intelligence efforts become more efficient (for the major part, due to the tremendous progress in the provision of relevant services), the efficiency of strategic analysis itself acquires a paramount importance as a an important possible source of ICA in a rapidly changing business environment that requires **frequent** modifications of strategy.

I would propose that this particular relative efficiency be measured by comparing the lengths of the same standard analytical processes carried out in approximately the same period by competing companies.

H₃: The higher the employees' cultural empathy skills, the more likely it becomes for the company to achieve and sustain an ICA.

The capability to demonstrate cultural empathy in international business may be measured indirectly by comparing the intensity and scope of involvement of expatriates employed by the company in the decision making processes relating to the international business with the countries of those employers' birth. It is reasonable to expect that there exist some causal relationships between cultural empathy demonstrated by the quality of the decisions and the intensity and scope of that involvement.

H4: The stronger is the motivation among the employees of a company to excel in their jobs, the more likely it becomes for the company to achieve and sustain an ICA.

International rather than domestic **benchmarking**, the comparatively longer time it usually takes to attain a desirable international market position (than a domestic one), the discrepancy between requirements of foreign and domestic markets and higher, or **different**, foreign customers expectations **often** demand a stronger and sustained commitment among employees for international expansion goals to be achieved.

The strength of the motivation to excel could be graded separately for various groups of employees and different **assignments** by eg:

- comparing the technical reliability parameters of products made by the company with those offered by competitors in the same market, provided all of them use the same technology,
- comparing the number of certain process innovations introduced by the company with those of competitors,
- comparing the lengths of warranty periods offered by competing companies,
- comparing the relative gains in market share over a period of time by the brands competing for the same segments of the market in the same geographic area.

H5: The shorter the reaction time to customer inquiries/claims, the more likely it becomes for the company to achieve and sustain an ICA.

Bringing the reaction time to one third of the initial one (mainly, through appropriate reorganisational arrangements) has resulted in obtaining a very significant ICA in mid eighties by a major paper making machinery plant. This advantage was particularly meaningful in selling spare parts, many of which were needed urgently due to breakdowns. The same applied to the services

of highly effective trouble-shooters that were helping at that time some of the less technically sophisticated paper mills in remedying their **frequent** technological and maintenance problems. Many of their visits went beyond the **contractual** obligations of the seller, yet the efforts were well worth **expending** in that they in time resulted in a strong preference towards this supplier with many customers.

To enable valid assessment in that respect, some **specific** business situations might be selected (such as: providing a customer with an individualised offer, answering to the invitation to tender, typical transaction cycle, answering to customer claims, resupplying a customer with spare parts etc.) and their average duration under 'normal' circumstances compared between companies. Adequate confidentiality procedures would however need to be used for most of the genuine information to be revealed to the researcher.

H₆: The shorter the comparable delivery periods, the more likely it becomes for the company to achieve and sustain an ICA.

For many industries and companies, being able to complete **delivery/deliver** products more promptly than their competitors might become a basis for a very **meaningful** ICA, due to a variety of reasons. For instance,

- those selling entire plants on a "turn-key" basis aim to lower costs of **frozen** investment to their clients, a very important element in their evaluation of **offers**,
- those manufacturing and selling spare parts for technological lines want to **minimise** the losses to their clients caused by down-time, or

- those dealing in **non-customised** consumer goods that for any reason (such as, for instance high price and seasonal demand or them being fashion goods) are unlikely to be ordered and/or bought much in advance.

To draw appropriate comparisons in this respect, some products and business conditions would need to be selected and the duration of the relevant delivery periods compared between competitors.

H7: The more consistent is the quality of company's products, the more likely it becomes for the company to achieve and sustain an ICA.

Other things being equal, the expectations in this respect will in many countries be most likely higher in the case of foreign sources of supplies, partly due the transactional costs and risk being usually higher than in comparable domestic terms and, also, because of the cultural idiosyncrasies: people in some countries may expect more of most foreign goods or services than of their domestic **equivalents**.¹⁷ Some longitudinal and crossmarket study of the technical parameters commonly used in evaluating a product's quality would help establish relative consistency of the quality (or, conversely, relative volatility of the quality) of competing brands and models.

H8: The higher is the level of top management commitment to international business, the more likely it becomes for the company to achieve and sustain an ICA.

There is a substantial evidence in the subject's literature [eg **Wiklund** 1987; Porter 1990] pointing at the **significance** of top management commitment to the international business for the rate and degree of relevant success. The level of commitment could be measured by examining the involvement of the top level of management in the decision making processes leading to their

company's geographic expansion, determining market entry modes and choosing international alliance partners.

Hg: The higher the level of linguistic skills with the employees involved in international business, the more likely it becomes for the company to achieve and sustain an ICA.

Even though some languages are in wide use in the international business, with **English** having acquired the status of *lingua franca*, it would still be an advantage for a company exporting to, say, Denmark (where over 90% of people involved in international business are said to have a working knowledge of that language) to employ staff that speaks Danish, as the demands of market research, contractual efficiency, effective advertising and image **building** might require such an appreciation.

Some authors (see above) claim that a high level of cultural empathy, itself a prerequisite for a sustained success in the international expansion, is impossible without mastering the languages of the countries with which a company does some business. The participation of people with relevant linguistic **skills** in eg:

- * acquisition of orders,
- * after sales service, and
- * foreign market research and intelligence

could be measured as a ratio of those people to all employees involved in these tasks.

H₁₀: The higher the degree of intimacy of the sales, marketing, finance and other relevant personnel with foreign business law, customs and habits, the more likely it becomes for the company to achieve and sustain an ICA.

Comparisons between competing companies might in this case entail:

- the duration of a contract formulation and negotiation process,
- the **frequency** of external consulting in some specific types of situations and,
- the size of the negotiating teams in some specific types of international contracts.

The relationships hypothesised here will need to be verified in separate research projects.

CONCLUSION

Achieving a sustainable and **meaningful** ICA by a company is not possible if the configuration **and** strength of factors mentioned by Porter does not meet the requirements of a particular situation. On the other hand, this configuration is nothing more but a necessary condition of success and will not suffice unless a company attempting to build a sustainable ICA responds to its particular situation by choosing the strategy that puts the emphasis on the development and use of individually appropriate capabilities.

By coming up with a list of capabilities that would have universal or quasi-universal significance, the theory of international competition may help form business education and management practices that would competently address particular situations and stages of the business development. **As** a unique construction that reflects a company's particular circumstances, the best business strategy is necessarily based on the firm's particular **capabilities** and limitations.

An awareness of the general capabilities that facilitate the international success of a company **and/or** increase its scope helps create a nation's advantage in a industry and attain ICA by a company. It also enhances the relevant strategic planning processes and thus increases the effectiveness of an entire economy, as evidenced by those nations that have been most **successful**

in international business since the world business environment entered its current stage of rapid and dramatic transformation.

NOTES

- 1 The unification and **harmonisation** of the business regulations within EC **has** certainly been the most spectacular relevant achievement so far in **that** not only did it result in substantial changes to previous regulations concerning the **intracommunity** movements of goods, services, capital and people but it has also encouraged a number of other **European** countries interested in joining EC (eg Poland, Hungary, Czech and Slovak Republics) to adopt **harmonised** if not identical legal norms.
- 2 The agreement reached in Uruguay Round of GATT negotiations concluded in Geneva in December 1993 is expected to provide **further**, long awaited boost to, and shifts in, the global trade in commodities.
- 3 It should come **as** no surprise that many international joint ventures are highly **successful** in competing on capabilities, as at the very core of their existence lies the desire to create new **meaningful** capabilities.
- 4 Apart from Porter 1990, reports by the Bureau of Industry of Economics 1989, by the Committee for Review of Export Market Development Assistance 1989, and other sources (**Barrett**, N.J. and I.F. **Wilkinson**; **Hitiris**, T. and A. **Bedrossian** 1987) supply ample body of relevant evidence.
- 5 Japanese car manufacturing, consumer electronics and computer **industries**, to name just a few, provide perhaps the most convincing examples supporting this claim.
- 6 This claim could only be refuted by producing examples to the contrary of the industries that have attained such a position over the last two decades without the benefit of prior exposure to international competition.
- 7 These elements constitute jointly **the necessary condition for a sustainable competitive advantage**.
- 8 There is little doubt though that some extra research and application of induction to the cases he examines would have produced some relevant propositions.
- 9 Even though claims such **as** these shown above may not have always been properly verified for their validity and a measure of caution would therefore be appropriate in treating every individual case, yet taken together these key success factors represent an interesting array of choices other companies seeking an ICA might want to contemplate.
- 10 Obviously, in designing the questionnaire the results of prior research carried out in Australia and overseas were widely used.
- 11 A brief letter explaining the character of interest and mentioning support obtained **from Austrade** accompanied questionnaires mailed in mid November 1993; after 4 weeks a further 37 letters were sent to finalists; 10 responses have been obtained so far (7 January 1994), in itself a telling rate indeed. Three companies have declined the invitation to participate in the survey.

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- 12 ie those selected by either **at least 213** in the case of **questions 1 and 4**, where four options were available, or **at least 314** in the case of **questions 2 and 5**, where three options were offered; answers to question **3** were **analysed** together with **question 4**.
- 13 The respondents represented the food processing industry, mineral industry, metal processing industry, computer industry, and producers of medical equipment.
- 14 Indeed, **some** of them were explicit in this respect by mentioning their hesitation to choose any of the three options provided in question 2.
- 15 The author's international business experience spans seventeen years and encompasses establishing and working for **international** divisions of three industrial companies in Europe: a large manufacturer of white industry products, a large paper making machinery producer, and a medium-size international joint venture involved in manufacturing and trading various products; their dependence on exports for their sales revenue varied between **20** and 75 %.
- 16 **Nakodo** is 'the Japanese description for a go-between or matchmaker, they are remunerated for their services' (**Wiklund, 1987, p.80**).
- 17 eg this would probably go for many buyers of foreign cars or fashion clothing in Australia, would not however be typical of eg Japanese buyers of domestic minicomputers.

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Questionnaire

PART A: (CONFIDENTIAL)

1. The name of the company:
2. The postal address of the **company**.....
3. Contact person (for **survey** purposes):
4. Contact person's position:
5. Phone:....., **fax**:.....

All information provided to me by the respondents **will** be treated as confidential and included in the research report that does not **identify** individual respondents or **organisations**.

(Dr Adam **Koch**)

On completion please **return** this questionnaire **to**:

Dr Adam Koch
Swinburne University of Technology
Faculty of Business
John Street
Hawthorn, Vic., 3122

(contact numbers: tel.: (03) 819 8056; fax (03) 819 0949)

PART B:

1. In your opinion, have any of the below-mentioned factors contributed to the international **successes** of your company for which in the period from 1989 to 1993 it obtained federal **or/and** state export **awards** ?

	Factor	Yes, greatly	Yes, moderately	I do not think so	I do not know
1.	Superiority of your company's global market research and market intelligence effort over your competitors (domestic and foreign)				
2.	Higher efficiency of your company's strategic analysis and strategy formulation effort than that of your competitors				
3.	Superior cultural empathy skills of your company's employees involved in international business				
4.	The desire to excel has been stronger with your company's employees than with most of your competitors				
5.	The response time of your company to customers inquiries and complaints is shorter than that of most of your competitors in comparative situations				
6.	The delivery periods are as a rule shorter than those provided by your competitors				
7.	The quality of your company's products has been more consistent (less volatile) than that of your competitors' products				
8.	The level of commitment to international business has been with your company's top executives usually higher than with their counterparts in competing firms				
9.	Linguistic skills of your employees involved in international contacts are higher than those of their counterparts with most of our competitors				
10.	Your international business personnel has been more knowledgeable of the foreign legislation, foreign trade customs and habits than their counterparts in competing firms				

2. Have some of the factors below been in your opinion **critically** important for international **success** in your **industry** in the past several years ?

	Factor	Yes	No	I do not know
1.	Superiority of global market research and market intelligence effort over the competitors (domestic and foreign)			
2.	Higher efficiency of a company's strategic analysis and strategy formulation effort than that of its competitors			
3.	Superior cultural empathy skills of a company's employees involved in international business			
4.	The strength of the desire to excel amongst a company's employees			
5.	The response time to customers inquiries and complaints			
6.	The delivery periods compared with a company's competitors			
7.	The consistency of the quality of a company's products			
8.	The level of commitment to international business with a company's top executives			
9.	linguistic skills of a company's employees involved in international contacts			
10.	International business personnel's intimacy with the foreign legislation , foreign trade customs and habits			

3. Name please key **success** factors other than those listed in Question 2 above that in your opinion have contributed **significantly** to your company's international successes in the period **from** 1989 to 1993 ? Provide clarifying comments, when appropriate.

	Factor	Comments
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		

4. Have any of the factors mentioned in **answering** Question 3 been

	Factor	universally relevant for your industry ?	country specific only ?	situation specific only ?	Do not know
1.					
2.					
3.					
4.					
5.					
6.					

(Tick off **affirmative answers** in the relevant **cells** provided).

5. Are there, in **your** opinion, any **weaknesses** in the approach to international **business** that you would regard as characteristic of a substantial percentage of Australian companies ? In answering *this* question please use and/or add items to the **list** provided below.

	Source of weakness	Yes	No	Do not know
1	Low level of top management commitment			
2	Myopic focus of the business			
3.	Insufficient knowledge of foreign markets, customs and regulations			

4.	Inadequate strategic analysis skills			
5.	Dearth of adequately qualified and skilled international business professionals			
6.	Low quality of products due to relative unsophistication of local customers			
7.	Long response time to foreign customers' enquiries and complaints			
8.	Management complacency and inertia			
9.	Low cultural empathy			
10.	Remoteness of our country			
11.				
12.				
13.				
14.				
15.				

Thank you very much indeed for your effort and giving us some of your valuable time.

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