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Article abstract

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La eficacia percibida de los programas de apoyo internacional: un estudio configuracional de las interacciones entre los tipos de conocimiento proporcionados por estos programas y el conocimiento heredado de los managers

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ABSTRACT

Studies on the effectiveness of internationalization support services (ISSs) tend to neglect the role of managerial cognition. Adopting a configurational approach, we thus focus on the interplay between the types of knowledge provided by ISSs and the managers' inherited knowledge to explain their perceived effectiveness. Results demonstrate that the acquisition of network knowledge from ISSs is a necessary condition, but not sufficient, to perceive them as effective. The need to acquire diversified knowledge through these services also depends on the managers' country-specific or non-specific international experience.

Keywords: configurational approach, internationalization support services, international knowledge, inherited knowledge.

Résumé

Les études qui portent sur l'efficacité des programmes d'accompagnement à l'international tendent à négliger le rôle de la cognition managériale. En mobilisant une approche configurationnelle, nous proposons ainsi d'étudier les interactions entre les types de connaissances fournies par ces programmes et les connaissances héritées des managers, pour expliquer leur efficacité perçue. Les résultats montrent que l'acquisition de la connaissance réseau via ces programmes est une condition nécessaire, mais non suffisante, pour les percevoir comme efficaces. Le besoin d'acquérir, grâce à ces programmes, des connaissances diversifiées dépend aussi de l'expérience internationale, non spécifique ou spécifique à un pays, des managers.

Mots-Clés : approche configurationnelle, accompagnement à l'international, connaissances internationales, connaissances héritées

Resumen

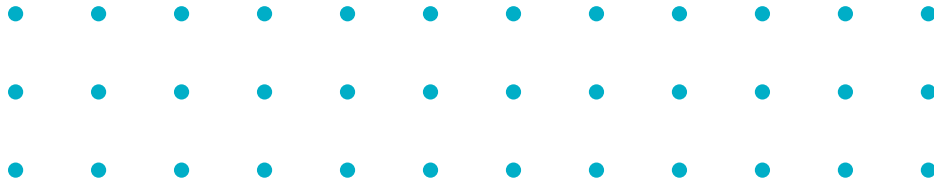
Los estudios sobre la eficacia de los programas de apoyo internacional tienden a descuidar el papel de la cognición gerencial. Al movilizar un enfoque configuracional, proponemos estudiar las interacciones entre los tipos de conocimiento proporcionados por estos programas y el conocimiento heredado de los managers, para explicar su efectividad percibida. Los resultados muestran que la adquisición de conocimiento de la red a través de estos programas es una condición necesaria, pero no suficiente, para percibirlos como efectivos. La necesidad de adquirir conocimientos diversificados también depende de la experiencia internacional, no específica o específica del país, de los managers.

Palabras Clave: enfoque configuracional, apoyo internacional, conocimiento internacional, conocimiento heredado

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Internationalization has long been recognized as an intensive learning process (Agustí *et al.*, 2022; Fletcher *et al.*, 2021; Vahlne & Johanson, 2017). In particular, international managers face numerous challenges due to a lack of knowledge, in comparison with domestic firms, and the need to mobilize specialized information for decision-making (Malca *et al.*, 2020). Definitively, they need to acquire foreign knowledge to succeed in the process of internationalization (González, 2019). Thus, the acquisition of such knowledge plays a central role in the international learning process and the development of international competence.

Accordingly, studies on internationalization support services (ISSs) have placed great emphasis on the knowledge they provide. By providing advice, contacts, training or support for international expansion (Belhoste *et al.*, 2019), ISSs have become important external sources of knowledge available to firms wishing to develop their activities abroad (Catanzaro *et al.*, 2015; Durmuşoğlu *et al.*, 2012). They are considered key to the success of internationalization, as their use can facilitate the process of organizational learning by providing different types of knowledge, namely experiential or objective knowledge (Durmuşoğlu *et al.*, 2012; Haddoud *et al.*, 2017). Nevertheless, results of previous studies are still considered equivocal about the impact of ISSs on knowledge (Catanzaro *et al.*, 2019) and, in turn, the impact of knowledge provided by ISSs on international performance (Durmuşoğlu *et al.*, 2012; Malca *et al.*, 2020). More generally, some studies have led to question the effectiveness of ISSs, showing that the relationship between ISSs and firm international performance is not clear, and that they do not always meet the firm needs according to managers' perceptions (Freixanet, 2012). The issues of targeting and meeting the firm's needs have thus been increasingly discussed in the literature on ISS effectiveness (e.g., Belhoste *et al.*, 2019; Catanzaro *et al.*, 2019).

By contrast, the needs of individuals in charge of internationalization, i.e., the international managers themselves, have been overlooked in this literature. As argued by Gray (1997), it is necessary to better understand the managers' needs given that, to be effective, ISSs “*should target the needs of the individuals who make market entry and penetration decisions, rather than the apparent needs of the organizations which employ these managers*” (p. 389). The rationale for shifting the focus from firms to individual managers is that ISSs can support firms going international, regardless of their stage of internationalization, by providing the knowledge their managers need (Francis & Collins-Dodd, 2004). Thus, the prior experience and knowledge level of managers are decisive in determining the type of international support needed (Fischer & Reuber, 2003; Gray, 1997). More than two decades after the call of Gray (1997), and despite the call for a sustained effort to adopt a managerial cognition perspective in international business studies (Maitland & Sammartino, 2015; Niittymies & Pajunen, 2020), studies still provide little insights on how international managers, as individuals with their own experience and knowledge, perceive the effectiveness of the ISSs they have used.

We address this gap by focusing on the interplay between the knowledge provided by ISSs and the international inherited knowledge, which relies on managers' prior international experience (De Pijcker *et al.*, 2012). Drawing from the managerial cognition perspective, we indeed suggest that it is this interplay that matters in the managers' perceptions of ISS effectiveness. More specifically, the objective of our study is to explore which configurations of different knowledge types, including types of knowledge provided by ISSs and types of inherited knowledge, are associated with the manager's perception of the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of ISSs.

In doing so, our study makes several contributions. First, by applying the managerial cognition perspective to ISS issue, it brings new insights on ISS effectiveness, in response to the mixed results of previous studies (Catanzaro *et al.*, 2019; Crick & Lindsay, 2015; Durmuşoğlu *et al.*, 2012). In particular, by recognizing that managers with different international knowledge and experience have different needs for ISSs (Fischer & Reuber, 2003; Francis & Collins-Dodd, 2004; Gray, 1997), our findings reveal the value of targeting the ISS offer according to individual managers themselves. Second, by focusing on the interplay between the different types of knowledge provided by ISSs, as well as the inherited knowledge of managers, our study constitutes an effort to better understand the interrelated nature of different kinds of knowledge. In this sense, our study highlights the major interest of combining different types of knowledge acquisition (Agustí *et al.*, 2022).

This paper is organized as follows. The next section presents the theoretical background that led to our conceptual framework. Then, we describe the research method, which was based on an interview-based study with 18 directors of Colombian subsidiaries of French firms (who have benefited from international support from the French Colombian Chamber of Commerce and Industry), and which involved a configurational analysis using the qualitative comparative approach (QCA). Finally, after presenting and discussing the findings, the conclusion addresses the implications for practice, limitations, and future research.

Theoretical background

Types of knowledge provided by ISSs

ISSs are provided by specialized organizations, ranging from public services (including Chambers of Commerce and Industry, BPI and Business France, as examples of French bodies) to private services (such as those provided by banks, private consulting firms and business law firms). Public and private services target firms of all sizes, including small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and large multinationals (Belhoste *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, different forms of support exist, ranging from export support services to other modes of international market entry¹, and providing different types of knowledge.

1. See Belhoste *et al.* (2019), for an extensive literature review on the variety of ISSs.

On this last point, several studies have proposed to distinguish two main categories of support, depending on whether they provide informational or experiential knowledge (e.g., Durmuşoğlu *et al.*, 2012; Haddoud *et al.*, 2017; Singer & Czinkota, 1994).

On the one hand, informational or objective knowledge “*can be taught*” or “*can be obtained from secondary or primary sources*” (Singer & Czinkota, 1994, p. 55). Such knowledge provided by ISSs can concern international procedures, such as export procedures and issues with transport and international payments (Catanzaro *et al.*, 2015), as well as information about industry and macroeconomic factors of the host country (Durmuşoğlu *et al.*, 2012). It is typically provided through seminars and workshops, publications or international market research, individual counselling, list of agents and distributors, etc. (e.g., Durmuşoğlu *et al.*, 2012; Haddoud *et al.*, 2017; Singer & Czinkota, 1994).

On the other hand, ISSs that provide experiential knowledge mainly focus on the acquisition of specific knowledge on target foreign markets, which “*encompasses knowledge of the foreign business environment and infrastructures, customer buying behaviors in foreign markets, and how to use these market factors for efficient interactions*” (Catanzaro *et al.*, 2015, p. 229). As this type of foreign knowledge requires direct involvement in activities abroad (González, 2019), ISSs here aim at providing hands-on exposure, typically through catalog shows abroad, trade and sales lead development, trade missions, credit insurance, overseas promotion of the firm’s products, financing, etc. (e.g., Durmuşoğlu *et al.*, 2012; Singer & Czinkota, 1994).

In addition, a growing number of studies have emphasized the key role of a particular type of experiential knowledge, namely network experiential knowledge (Blomstermo *et al.*, 2004; Hilmeresson, 2014; Hilmeresson & Johanson, 2020). Indeed, experiential knowledge can be accessed from others in networks (Hilmeresson & Johanson, 2020). Therefore, networks are commonly considered as a source of new information, which improves knowledge in international contexts (Prashantham & McNaughton, 2006; Yli-Renko *et al.*, 2002). This type of experiential knowledge, which is gained from network relationships, can be defined as a specific type of knowledge, resulting from the interactions with key actors in the host country, such as customers, competitors, and other network actors (Hilmeresson, 2014). Thus, certain ISSs that provide experiential knowledge focus on network development activities, through trade shows or export clubs for instance (Catanzaro *et al.*, 2019).

Therefore, we posit that support services can play a key role in managers’ knowledge development, by providing “objective” knowledge, “network” experiential knowledge and/or other experiential knowledge, the latter referring here to “operational” knowledge.

ISS effectiveness through a managerial cognition perspective

As international learning involves the acquisition of objective and experiential knowledge, the use of ISSs contributes to organizational learning through the different types of knowledge they provide (Durmuşoğlu *et al.*, 2012). We however argue that knowledge acquisition is primarily an individual activity (Grant, 1996), recognizing that “*all learning takes place inside individual human heads*” (Simon, 1991, p. 125). In accordance with Gray (1997), this suggests that the effectiveness of ISSs should be thought of in terms of their ability to meet the knowledge needs of the individual managers who use them. By giving international managers more knowledge and experience, effective ISSs might thus

contribute to the development of individual capabilities (Durmuşoğlu *et al.*, 2012) and, in particular, the development of managers’ knowledge structures.

Surprisingly, the role of ISSs in managerial cognition has been overlooked in previous work. Yet, the managerial cognition perspective finds growing interest in international business research (Niittymies & Pajunen, 2020), as decision-making related to internationalization is known to be highly dependent on managerial thinking (Maitland & Sammartino, 2015; Niittymies & Pajunen, 2020). Recognizing that human decision-making is rationally bounded, this perspective assumes that managers, as information workers, employ their knowledge structures to facilitate information processing and ultimately decision-making (Walsh, 1995). Such knowledge structures or cognitive representations are defined as “*mental templates consisting of organized knowledge about an information environment that enables interpretation and action in that environment*” (Walsh, 1995, p. 286). By functioning both as knowledge and as a filter to absorb new information, they allow managers to cope with complexity and uncertainty, in that they provide a framework for understanding and acting (Maitland & Sammartino, 2015). For instance, managerial knowledge structures are known to play a key role in evaluating foreign environments (Maitland & Sammartino, 2015), and in recognizing and implementing new opportunities in international contexts (Niittymies & Pajunen, 2020). Thus, several empirical studies have focused on the impact of managerial cognition on internationalization decisions and firm outcomes (e.g., Acedo & Jones, 2007; Cui *et al.*, 2013; Mostafiz *et al.*, 2019).

By contrast, there are still few studies that have focused on the development of managers’ knowledge structures during internationalization (Niittymies & Pajunen, 2020). Most international business research on cognitive processes has rather focused on the organizational level, thus emphasizing organizational learning at the expense of a managerial cognition perspective. Yet, this would help understand in greater depth the complex phenomenon of firm internationalization (Niittymies & Pajunen, 2020). Drawing from this perspective, we consider that knowledge acquisition contributes to the development of individual knowledge structures, and that the role of ISSs is precisely to provide new knowledge (Durmuşoğlu *et al.*, 2012; Singer & Czinkota, 1994). Therefore, our premise is that ISSs are perceived as effective by individual managers when the knowledge provided matches their own knowledge needs. This suggests that ISS effectiveness in providing knowledge depends on who benefits from these services, i.e., the individual managers as “*storsers of knowledge*” (Casillas *et al.*, 2009, p. 214).

Applying a managerial cognition perspective to the issue of ISS effectiveness implies to take into account the “stored” or prior knowledge of individual managers. Such prior knowledge “*is acquired by the individual from his/her general and professional experience in the different organizational and social environments that he/she experiences during life*” (Casillas *et al.*, 2009, p. 314). In international business literature, the focus has been primarily put on prior knowledge that managers have inherited from previous international experience (e.g., Cui *et al.*, 2013; Hashai & Zahra, 2022; Li, 2018), the so-called international inherited knowledge. For instance, such a knowledge is known to contribute to a global mindset, cultivate an open attitude (Li, 2018) and increase managers’ familiarity with the host country (De Priijcker *et al.*, 2012). It has also been suggested that managers with substantive international experience may have developed patterns for dealing with information asymmetries, and may be more aggressive in seeking relevant knowledge (De Priijcker *et al.*, 2012). Such an individual-level experience can encompass both

nonspecific international experience and country-specific experience (Ambos *et al.*, 2019; Takeuchi *et al.*, 2005).

However, the role of the managers' inherited knowledge, acquired through international work experience and prior country-specific experience, has been overlooked in ISS studies. The contrasting and equivocal results on ISS effectiveness (Catanzaro *et al.*, 2019; Durmuşoğlu *et al.*, 2012; Freixanet, 2012) may come from ignoring the way in which managers receive and perceive this assistance according to their inherited knowledge. To fill this gap, we propose to study to what extent the interplay between the managers' inherited knowledge and the different types of knowledge provided by ISSs matters in the perceived effectiveness of ISSs.

Towards a configurational approach to ISS effectiveness

The rationale for focusing on the interplay between different types of knowledge, when examining the perceived effectiveness of ISSs, stems from the key role of interacting effects among various knowledge sources in international learning processes. For instance, Åkerman (2015) recognized that an interplay between experiential and objective knowledge exists. Also, Bruneel *et al.* (2010) discussed the joint and interactive effects of learning from experience and learning from others. In the same vein, De Priijcker *et al.* (2012) precisely emphasized the importance in future research of studying the substitutable or complementary role of service providers' knowledge.

Drawing from previous work, we thus consider that the perceived effectiveness of ISSs by international managers can be explained by different combinations of knowledge types. This involves recognizing that each manager may have a singular way of perceiving the ISS offer, depending on how the knowledge provided by the ISS is articulated with his/her inherited knowledge. As we suggest that the different explanatory factors (i.e., those related to knowledge) and their interplay simultaneously determine the outcomes of interest (i.e., ISS effectiveness or non-effectiveness), a configurational approach is particularly suitable here (Fainshmidt *et al.*, 2020).

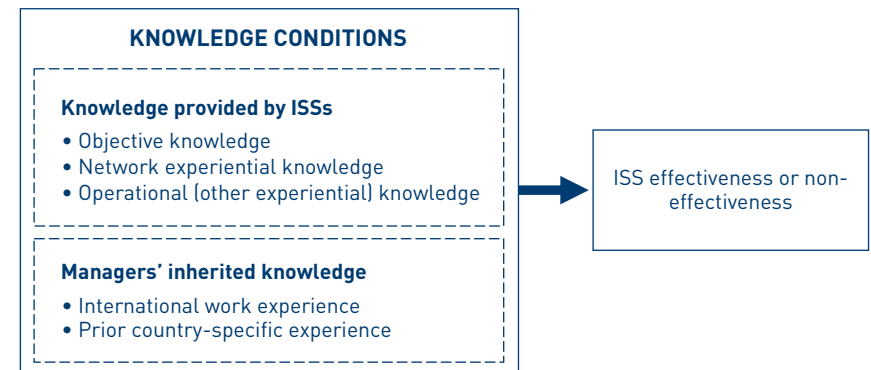
To summarize, Fig. 1 displays the knowledge conditions considered in our study, to explore the configurations that lead managers to perceive ISSs as effective or not.

Method

Research setting and data collection

As part of a broader project carried out in collaboration with the French Colombian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, we conducted a qualitative interview-based study with international managers, who were responsible for the development of a Colombian subsidiary of a French firm, and who have benefited from the assistance of this Chamber. Two main reasons justify the choice of this research context. First, the French Chambers of Commerce and Industry Abroad support French firms in their internationalization, by offering a wide range of services. They include informational, relational and operational supports (Mira-Bonnardel, 2015), respectively focused on objective, network experiential and other experiential knowledge. The various services offered by these Chambers thus cover all possible types of knowledge provided by ISSs. Second, the establishment of French firms in Colombia constitutes a particularly interesting context, because the high cultural and institutional distance between these two countries requires new

FIGURE 1
Conceptual framework



knowledge acquisition. For example, Godinez and Liu (2015) argued that firms from a home country with a low level of corruption have little knowledge to deal with corruption, and are not familiar with the formal and informal institutions associated with corruption in Latin American countries. More generally, Couper (2019) recognized the need, for firms seeking to internationalize in distant countries, to acquire social and cultural knowledge and to develop networks.

We conducted 18 individual interviews with international managers, who were hence supported for the development of a Colombian subsidiary of a French firm (see the sample description in Appendix). The interviews were based on an interview guide composed mainly of open questions. The questions focused on the firm's history in Colombia, the internationalization support offered to the respondent to develop the subsidiary in Colombia, and the individual characteristics of the respondent. An expert, who was at that time an assistant for the French Colombian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, actively participated in the data collection process, by selecting the respondents, initiating the first contacts with them and validating the interview guide.

Configurational analysis using crisp-set QCA

We used qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) as a set-based approach (Chen & Lin, 2019), to explore the configurations of knowledge conditions that lead to ISS effectiveness and non-effectiveness. Such a configurational approach is increasingly employed in international business research (e.g., Aluko *et al.*, 2022; Chen & Lin, 2019; Ciravegna *et al.*, 2018; Haddoud *et al.*, 2021), as it can better capture the complexity of firm internationalization than traditional linear methods (Fainshmidt *et al.*, 2020). Indeed, by relying on set theory and Boolean algebra, QCA makes it possible to identify "the patterns (i.e., configurations) leading to the outcome in question [...] by examining different combinations of causal conditions

associated with membership of the outcome set” (Chen & Lin, 2019, p. 523). Three main reasons led us to use QCA. First, it is particularly suitable for studying how an outcome is produced by the conjunctural causation of multiple causal conditions (Chen & Lin, 2019; Fainshmidt *et al.*, 2020). It allowed us to consider that ISS effectiveness is explained by the combination of knowledge conditions, rather than by a single knowledge condition. Second, according to the principle of equifinality, QCA allows discovering several configurations that lead to the same outcome. Third, it authorizes the exploration of asymmetric solutions for the absence and presence of a given outcome (Campbell *et al.*, 2016; Fainshmidt *et al.*, 2020). This means that we considered that the knowledge conditions leading to ISS non-effectiveness do not need to be the inverse of those that lead to ISS effectiveness.

More specifically, we relied on a crisp-set approach (csQCA), which is the initial version of QCA developed by Ragin (1987) and was originally designed to analyze small samples (Aluko *et al.*, 2022; Greckhamer *et al.*, 2018). To do that, we first calibrated the data collected during the interviews, and then performed a crisp-set analysis using a QCA software.

Data calibration

csQCA leads to distinguish full membership and full non-membership of cases into sets (Greckhamer *et al.*, 2018). It therefore requires that causal conditions and outcomes are coded as dichotomous variables, either as absent or present (Fainshmidt *et al.*, 2020). Accordingly, the knowledge conditions and the outcome under study were treated as binary variables for each “case”, i.e., for each manager interviewed. Table 1 describes the cases according to this data calibration.

For each type of knowledge that can be provided by ISSs (*objective, network experiential or operational knowledge*), the value ‘1’ (present) was assigned when the manager has benefited from this type of knowledge; otherwise the value ‘0’ (absent) was assigned. We considered that he/she has benefited from a type of knowledge if at least one of the services relating to this type was used. Services related to objective knowledge, offered by the French Colombian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, focus on supporting information research and can include studies and reports on macroeconomic factors and the Colombian market, seminars, etc.; those related to network experiential knowledge focus on relational support and can include organizing events, trade shows, etc.; and those related to other experiential knowledge focus on operational support, such as logistic support, financial issues, etc.

Drawing from Schmid and Baldermann (2021), the number of years in which the manager reported working in international assignments was used to measure inherited knowledge related to *international work experience*. In our sample, all respondents had at least two years of experience. Since both the mean and median of the number of years of experience of respondents approached the value of 10, this variable was coded as ‘1’ (strong experience) if the respondent had more than 10 years of experience as an international manager; otherwise it was coded as ‘0’ (low experience).

Conversely, several respondents had no prior experience in Colombia, before taking responsibility for the subsidiary. Thus, inherited knowledge related to *prior country-specific experience* was coded as ‘1’ (present) when the respondent had already had professional or personal experience in Colombia before developing the subsidiary in this country; otherwise it was coded as ‘0’ (absent). Note that in case of prior experience in Colombia, our respondents had quite substantial experience (over one year).

TABLE 1
Cases overview according to data calibration

| Case | Objective knowledge | Network knowledge | Operational knowledge | International managerial experience | Previous experience in Colombia | Outcome: ISS effectiveness |
|------|---------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| 3 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 4 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 6 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| 7 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| 8 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| 9 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| 10 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| 11 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| 12 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| 13 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| 14 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 15 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| 16 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 17 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| 18 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Finally, the outcome of interest, i.e., the managers’ perception of *ISS effectiveness*, was assessed on the basis of what was lacking in the support provided based on their own account. In cases where managers did not express a lack of support, we considered the support to be effective and coded the outcome as ‘1’ (present). Conversely, in cases where managers expressed a lack of support, we considered that the support was not effective enough and coded the outcome as ‘0’ (absent). However, two respondents claimed to have received no real support. For them, the support was perceived as ineffective, and therefore the outcome was also coded as ‘0’ (absent). Remark that among the 18 respondents, eight managers perceived international support as effective, while ten managers perceived it as ineffective.

Crisp-set analysis using a QCA software

To apply csQCA, three main steps were carried out and executed through the fsQCA 3.0 software developed by Charles Ragin and Sean Davey². These steps were performed for each outcome, that is, ISS effectiveness and non-effectiveness.

An analysis of necessary conditions was at first performed, to assess whether the presence or absence of the individual causal conditions was necessary for each outcome. Second, a truth table was generated for each outcome. A truth table displays all logically possible combinations and thus includes 2^k lines, where k is the number of the causal conditions studied (Campbell *et al.*, 2016; Chen & Lin, 2019; Greckhamer *et al.*, 2018). At this point, each truth table was reduced by keeping only the rows having at least one

2. Software available at this website: <http://www.socsci.uci.edu/~cragin/fsQCA/software.shtml>

case, as it is usually done when the sample is relatively small (e.g., Ciravegna *et al.*, 2018), and by using 0.80 as the minimum threshold for consistency consideration (e.g., Campbell *et al.*, 2016). In csQCA, consistency consideration refers to the “*proportion of cases exhibiting the configuration that exhibit the outcome*” (Greckhamer *et al.*, 2018, p. 489). Finally, standard crisp-set analysis was performed to identify the configurations that lead to the outcome under study. Results are reported based on the intermediate solution, which lies between complexity and parsimony (Campbell *et al.*, 2016).

Results

The csQCA analysis yielded a solution covering three configurations for ISS effectiveness, and another solution covering six configurations for ISS non-effectiveness (see Table 2). The overall solution consistency is highly satisfactory for each solution, reaching the maximum value of 1. The overall coverage of each solution (88% for ISS effectiveness and 90% for ISS non-effectiveness) indicates that two cases should be considered “deviant” (one case for each solution). These two cases were not included in the following configurational analysis.

Configurations leading to ISS effectiveness

The three configurations that lead to ISS effectiveness can be summarized as follows. On the one hand, the condition of “network knowledge” is present in all configurations (E1, E2, E3). This is in accordance with the results of necessity analysis (see Table 3), which led us to consider that the acquisition of network experiential knowledge, as provided by ISSs, is a necessary condition for perceiving ISSs as effective. Indeed, this condition reaches a consistency value that is very close to the 0.90 threshold, generally recommended to establish the existence of a necessary condition (Greckhamer *et al.*, 2018), while having a relatively satisfactory coverage (0.70). Although coverage values are not directly used to identify necessary conditions, high values are needed to prove that the potential necessary conditions are empirically relevant (Greckhamer *et al.*, 2018).

On the other hand, the condition of “network knowledge” is not sufficient to lead to ISS effectiveness, since it has to be combined with other knowledge conditions. First, it can be combined with the two other types of knowledge provided by ISSs, meaning that all types of knowledge provided by ISSs must be present (E1). Second, in case of little international work experience, it must be combined with both the objective knowledge provided by ISSs and the existence of prior experience in Colombia (E2). Third, given the lack of prior experience in Colombia and the lack of operational knowledge provided, it must be combined with a solid international work experience (E3).

Configurations leading to ISS non-effectiveness

Concerning ISS non-effectiveness, the necessity and configurational analyses reveal two major points. First, no individual knowledge condition is, alone, necessary to explain ISS non-effectiveness (see Table 4). Indeed, all causal conditions have a consistency value below the 0.90 threshold, generally used to identify the necessary conditions (Greckhamer *et al.*, 2018).

Second, all the configurations leading to ISS non-effectiveness are characterized by the absence of several knowledge conditions. Indeed, N-E1 implies the absence of four of the five conditions, when the other configurations involve the absence of three conditions

TABLE 2

Configurations of knowledge conditions leading to ISS effectiveness and non-effectiveness

| Outcome | ISS effectiveness | | | ISS non-effectiveness | | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------|----|----|-----------------------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Configurations | E1 | E2 | E3 | N-E1 | N-E2 | N-E3 | N-E4 | N-E5 | N-E6 |
| Knowledge provided by ISSs | | | | | | | | | |
| Objective knowledge | 1 | 1 | | 0 | 0 | | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Network knowledge | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Operational knowledge | 1 | | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Managers' inherited knowledge | | | | | | | | | |
| International work experience | | 0 | 1 | | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Prior country-specific experience | | 1 | 0 | 0 | | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Overall solution coverage | 0.88 | | | 0.90 | | | | | |
| Overall solution consistency | 1 | | | 1 | | | | | |

Note: ‘1’ indicates the presence of the condition; ‘0’ indicates the absence of the condition; an empty cell indicates “don’t care” and thus indicates that the condition is not relevant to that particular configuration.

TABLE 3

Analysis of necessary conditions for ISS effectiveness

| Presence or absence (~) of the condition | Consistency | Coverage |
|--|-------------|----------|
| Objective knowledge | 0.88 | 0.58 |
| ~ Objective knowledge | 0.12 | 0.17 |
| Network knowledge | 0.88 | 0.70 |
| ~ Network knowledge | 0.13 | 0.15 |
| Operational knowledge | 0.63 | 0.63 |
| ~ Operational knowledge | 0.38 | 0.30 |
| International work experience | 0.50 | 0.57 |
| ~ International work experience | 0.50 | 0.36 |
| Prior country-specific experience | 0.50 | 0.50 |
| ~ Prior country-specific experience | 0.50 | 0.40 |

(N-E2, N-E3, N-E4, N-E5, N-E6). In particular, no configuration implies the simultaneous presence of all types of knowledge provided by ISSs. Two configurations even imply the total absence of knowledge provided by ISSs (N-E1, N-E2). When two of the three knowledge conditions related to ISSs are however present (N-E5, N-E6), the two types of experience related to inherited knowledge are absent. These results suggest that the absence of many types of knowledge and the lack of diversified knowledge explain ISS non-effectiveness.

TABLE 4
Analysis of necessary conditions for ISS non-effectiveness

| Presence or absence (–) of the condition | Consistency | Coverage |
|--|-------------|----------|
| Objective knowledge | 0.50 | 0.42 |
| ~ Objective knowledge | 0.50 | 0.83 |
| Network knowledge | 0.30 | 0.30 |
| ~ Network knowledge | 0.70 | 0.88 |
| Operational knowledge | 0.30 | 0.38 |
| ~ Operational knowledge | 0.70 | 0.70 |
| International work experience | 0.30 | 0.43 |
| ~ International work experience | 0.70 | 0.64 |
| Prior country-specific experience | 0.40 | 0.50 |
| ~ Prior country-specific experience | 0.60 | 0.60 |

Analysis of deviant cases

As mentioned, the analysis revealed two deviant cases, one for ISS effectiveness (case 11) and another one for ISS non-effectiveness (case 7). It is interesting to note that these two deviant cases exhibit the same configuration of knowledge conditions. In both cases, objective and operational knowledge was provided by ISSs, but not network experiential knowledge. Also, both are characterized by the existence of prior experience in Colombia, but without strong international work experience. The two managers have also the particularity of being the only ones in our sample to hold only Colombian nationality without speaking French.

Discussion

In international contexts, there is undoubtedly a need for managers to acquire network experiential knowledge from ISSs, whatever the type of their inherited knowledge. Indeed, our findings reveal that network knowledge is a necessary condition for perceiving ISSs as effective (see Table 2). This illustrates the interest for ISSs to offer this particular type of knowledge, which has been considered of great importance in international business research (Blomstermo *et al.*, 2004; Hilmersson, 2014; Hilmersson & Johanson, 2020), to overcome the liability of outsidership (Aluko *et al.*, 2022; Johanson & Vahlne, 2009). Our results thus underline the relevance of putting a strong emphasis on network development activities in ISSs (Catanzaro *et al.*, 2015), especially in countries like Colombian where “relationships are very important [...], as still local relationships matter a lot in Latin America” (Case 11). In fact, some of the interviewees, who perceived the support as effective, chose the French Colombian Chamber of Commerce and Industry above all “to be able to benefit from networking, through the Chamber’s networking activities” (Case 13). Interestingly, even if the manager has a solid nonspecific and country-specific experience, he/she may appreciate being supported “in terms of networking, meeting more people and more firms” (case 14). Therefore, international managers seem to need network experiential knowledge, whether or not they have extensive international work experience and/or extensive experience in the host country.

For managers with extensive international work experience, our findings even suggest that the acquisition of experiential network knowledge through ISSs is sufficient to perceive them as effective (see Config. E3). These results are in line with the study of Blomstermo *et al.* (2004) conducted at the firm level, which suggested that firms having experience from establishment in different countries may actually use network experiential knowledge more effectively than others lacking it. We can thus suggest that managers with extensive international work experience are able to find other external sources of objective and operational knowledge (other than ISSs), due to their own experience and effective use of network knowledge acquired through ISSs.

On the contrary, the configurations leading to ISS effectiveness, in which international work experience plays a neutral role (see Config. E1) or is not extensive (see Config. E2), reveal the need for ISSs to provide diversified knowledge that goes beyond network knowledge. This need is also highlighted in the only two configurations leading to ISS non-effectiveness that include network knowledge (see Config. N-E4 and N-E5), and in which international work experience is actually weak. Thus, the analysis of these particular configurations confirms the usefulness for ISSs to offer several types of programs (Francis & Collins-Dodd, 2004). On the one hand, providing all types of knowledge through ISSs (network knowledge, but also objective and operational knowledge) seems necessary when it is not possible to segment the managers according to their inherited knowledge (i.e., when international work and country-specific experiences are not relevant to the configuration concerned) or when international managers are “novices” (little international work experience and no prior specific-country experience). On the other hand, in cases where managers have little international work experience but have specific-country experience, both network knowledge and objective knowledge are still necessary. The socialization of individuals through their own experience in the host country may thus not be sufficient to acquire the required network and objective knowledge. This can be explained by the “tortuous role of culture” evoked by Tung and Stahl (2018). As an international manager told us, despite his strong experience in Columbia, “you have to prepare culturally because it is a market with many opportunities, but you have to know how to enter it” (case 1). This challenge is accentuated by the fact that “the cultural difference [with France] is strong” (Case 3) and that “regarding culture, Colombia is a very heterogeneous country” (Case 9). Moreover, the distinction proposed by Frascquet *et al.* (2018) between network embeddedness and territorial embeddedness could explain the need to acquire network knowledge through ISSs, even when managers have accumulated experience in the host country. Indeed, according to these authors, network embeddedness “is a dynamic dimension and is not restricted to a territorial perspective although there is often an overlap with territorial embeddedness” (p. 905), the latter referring to particular territories or places, rather than to the structure of relationships between individuals and organizations.

Thus, our findings draw a contrast regarding the attitude of managers towards ISS effectiveness between those who have prior country-specific experience and those who have international work experience. This is in accordance with previous studies that have differentiated between context-specific or location-specific knowledge, which is more temporal and factual, and worldwide learning or context-generic knowledge, which has broader transferability and applicability (Hocking *et al.*, 2007). Interestingly, the simultaneous presence of these two kinds of experience is not necessary in any of the

configurations leading to ISS effectiveness or non-effectiveness. Thus, the main segmentation criterion, which truly discriminates between managers targeted by the knowledge offer of ISSs, may be their possession of specific *versus* generic knowledge. The managers' inherited knowledge, which is considered crucial in learning in international contexts (Ahmed & Brennan, 2019; Casillas *et al.*, 2015; De Pijcker *et al.*, 2012), appears to be a multidimensional variable whose complexity must be taken into account in research to understand what international managers can expect from ISSs, whether they are novices or experts or whether they have only specific knowledge or only generic knowledge.

Overall, our study highlights the necessary fit between the types of knowledge provided by ISSs and the types of managers' inherited knowledge. In fact, "not all individuals would learn equally from their international assignments" (Yildiz *et al.*, 2019, p. 95), and certainly from ISSs. This confirms the interest of adopting a microfoundations approach in international management research (Foss & Pedersen, 2019), when studying the effectiveness of ISSs. This suggests in particular looking at the microfoundations of dynamic capabilities, such as absorptive capacity (Lowik *et al.*, 2017; Tian & Soo, 2018). Since dynamic capabilities arise in part from individual-level cognition (Salvato & Vassolo, 2018), there is great interest in investigating how ISSs can interact with individual managers from a knowledge perspective. More specifically, the absorptive capacity of international managers, i.e. their capacity to recognize, assimilate and exploit new external knowledge (provided here by ISSs), may depend on their inherited knowledge. This is consistent with research that has addressed the roles of prior experience (Ojo & Raman, 2016) and exposure to diverse country contexts (Yildiz *et al.*, 2019) in individual absorptive capacity.

Conclusion

Our study highlights the interest to use ISSs for firms wishing to develop the international knowledge of their managers and, more generally, their international competence. ISSs can indeed contribute to the development of such competence by responding to the need for "interweaving" (Gallego *et al.*, 2020, p. 48) between human capital (held by the managers' inherited knowledge) and relational capital (provided by ISSs through network knowledge). However, developing international competence is extremely complicated, and the role that the ISSs can actually play in this development depends on the specific experiences of each individual manager, and in particular their international background. Faced with limited budgets, firms should therefore favor the most targeted services according to the profile of their international managers, whether or not they have international work experience and/or country-specific experience.

For actors providing ISSs, this suggests the need to develop segmentation and targeting practices based on the international experience of the managers who plan to use them. As argued, segmentation should be based on whether managers have international work experience or country-specific experience. Indeed, while international business literature has suggested the need for ISSs to target their offer according to the different types of firms (e.g., Belhoste *et al.*, 2019; Catanzaro *et al.*, 2019) and to be more consistent with the firm needs (Crick & Lindsay, 2015), our findings rather confirm the need to be more consistent with the knowledge needs of individual managers (Fischer & Reuber, 2003; Gray, 1997). This is all the more important since the effectiveness of ISSs does not always

seem to be perceived by managers (Crick & Lindsay, 2015). In our own study, recall that ten of the 18 managers interviewed did not consider them to be effective.

In addition, our results on the necessary but not sufficient role of network knowledge led us to discuss the importance of a more territorially anchored network knowledge. This suggests that it would probably be useful, for public and private actors offering ISSs, to differentiate international competence (based on the different types of knowledge acquired) from "intercultural competence" (Zhang & Zhou, 2019), which goes beyond mere knowledge. The knowledge base, acquired through the ISSs and the experience inherited at the international level, should not hide the need to work on intercultural attitudes and skills. Indeed, not only knowledge, but also attitudes (such as respect, openness, curiosity, discovery) and skills (such as listening, observing, evaluating, analyzing, interpreting, critical thinking), form the basis of intercultural competence (Zhang & Zhou, 2019). This could shape the basis for thinking about the creation of new ISSs, which would be more focused on intercultural competence, and would better meet the needs of managers who do not have international experience and those who have not found ISSs to be effective so far.

This study has however some limitations, which provide opportunities for future research. First, we recognize that our study does not cover all possible knowledge conditions that could explain ISS effectiveness. In fact, we were limited in the number of causal conditions studied, as this number depends on the sample size in QCA studies (Fainshmidt *et al.*, 2020). Nevertheless, beyond international work experience and prior specific-country experience, other knowledge conditions related to individual managers may matter. For instance, the literature has highlighted the key role of managers' international orientation (e.g., Acedo & Jones, 2007; Haddoud *et al.*, 2021; Piaskowska & Trojanowski, 2014), as it can be associated with a source of experiential knowledge (Dominguez, 2018). It would therefore be interesting to include the concept of international orientation, by considering individual characteristics such as language expertise (Acedo & Jones, 2007; Haddoud *et al.*, 2021) or nationality (Piaskowska & Trojanowski, 2014). This seems all the more important since our analysis of deviant cases raises questions about the role of these characteristics. It would also be useful to distinguish prior same-industry international experience from other-industry experience, as these two types of prior experience may have differentiated effects on international expansion (Hashai & Zahra, 2022).

Second, as we focused on the individual level in our study based on a managerial cognition perspective, firm characteristics (such as firm size, activities, stages and modes of internationalization) were not taken into account. However, and for example, the role of the individual manager as a key decision-maker in an international context, and especially the role of his/her prior experience, would be more important in SMEs than in large multinationals (Elbanna *et al.*, 2020; Peschken *et al.*, 2016). In fact, research emphasizing the micro level of individuals would benefit from not neglecting the organizational context. It could influence, for instance, the opportunities and incentives for knowledge sharing between firm units or within teams (Foss & Pedersen, 2019). This argues in favor of a multi-level approach in international management research (Foss & Pedersen, 2019; Loufrani-Fedida *et al.*, 2019), and especially in ISS research, to consider individual, team and organizational levels.

Third, we relied on a csQCA approach, which is restricted to dichotomous variables, rather than a fuzzy-set QCA approach, which accepts any continuous value from 0 to 1 (Fainshmidt *et al.*, 2020) and captures more information (Rohlfing, 2020). Yet csQCA poses two specific issues, which are related to its sensitivity to individual cases and its assumption that no relevant condition is excluded from the analysis (Marx *et al.*, 2013). The fact remains that csQCA is particularly suitable when the variables of interest are generally binary (Rohlfing, 2020). In our study, the choice to rely on csQCA is also justified by the difficulty of fixing the cutoff points, which are necessary to calibrate the data in a fuzzy set approach (Fainshmidt *et al.*, 2020). Indeed, for the variables studied, little theoretical reasoning can guide the fixing of these points. Nonetheless, further studies are encouraged to apply a fuzzy set approach to the issue of ISS effectiveness. They could be based on large samples, to make it possible to fix the cutoff points thanks to the statistical distribution of the data (e.g., Campbell *et al.*, 2016), in the absence of theoretical reasoning.

Finally, our study focused on a particular context, that is, the internationalization of French firms in Colombia. Yet, it would be interesting to include other contexts that involve other culturally distant countries.

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APPENDIX

Sample — Characteristics of French groups and Colombian subsidiaries

| Case | Sector | Group size* | Beginning of the internationalization | Turnover outside France (%) | Establishment in Colombia | Turnover in Colombia (% of total turnover) | Colombian subsidiary's activities | Export to Colombia before implantation | Colombian subsidiary size (employees) |
|------|-------------------|-------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|--|--|--|---------------------------------------|
| 1 | Tourism | Large | ≈50 years ago | 60% | 20 years ago | < 2% | Service production and distribution | No | ≈1,000 |
| 2 | Business services | Large | >50 years ago | 82% | >40 years ago | 2% | Consulting, training, and outsourcing | No | ≈800 |
| 3 | Industry | Large | >50 years ago | 87% | 4 years ago | <1% | Production, logistics, distribution | No | ≈400 |
| 4 | Industry | Large | ≈50 years ago | 63% outside Europe | 3 years ago | <2% in Latin America | Commercial activities | Yes | ≈10 |
| 5 | Business services | Large | ≈50 years ago | 85% | 7 years ago | <1% | Service production and distribution | Non | ≈100 |
| 6 | Healthcare | Large | >50 years ago | 83% | 23 years ago | 6% in Latin America | Commercial activities | Yes | ≈60 |
| 7 | Distribution | Large | ≈20 years ago | 80% | 30 years ago | 1% | R&D, technical control | Yes | ≈3,000 |
| 8 | Healthcare | Large | ≈20 years ago | 90% | 8 years ago | <1% | Sales activities | Yes | ≈30 |
| 9 | Distribution | Large | >30 years ago | 60% | 5 years ago | "very small" | Logistics and distribution | No | ≈450 |
| 10 | Tourism | SME | ≈5 years ago | Almost 100% | 5 years ago | ≈85%-90% | Sales activities | No | 2 |
| 11 | Healthcare | Large | >50 years ago | 84% outside Europe | 7 years ago | 7% in Latin America | Production, distribution and marketing | Yes | ≈1,000 |
| 12 | Business services | SME | ≈5 years ago | 30% | 5 years ago | 25% | Production and sales | No | ≈10 |
| 13 | Consulting | SME | ≈10 years ago | Unknown | 6 years ago | Unknown | Consulting | No | ≈10 |
| 14 | Business services | Large | ≈50 years ago | 75% | 3 years ago | <1% | Financial services, audit, consulting | No | ≈20 |
| 15 | Distribution | SME | ≈20 years ago | 100% | 18 years ago | 100% | Distribution | No | ≈100 |
| 16 | Distribution | Large | ≈40 years ago | 83% | 3 years ago | < 1% | Logistics and marketing | Yes | ≈20 |
| 17 | Healthcare | Large | >50 years ago | 70% | 5 years ago | <1% | Registration, importation, distribution and promotion of medicines | Yes | ≈60 |
| 18 | Consulting | SME | ≈10 years ago | 80% | 5 years ago | 80% in Latin America | Consulting | No | ≈10 |

* SMEs: less than 250 employees; large enterprises: more than 5,000 employees.

APPENDIX

Sample — Characteristics of respondents

| Case | Already employed by the firm before taking responsibility for the Colombian subsidiary | Gender | Nationality | Languages spoken | Education |
|------|--|--------|-----------------------|---|---|
| 1 | Yes | Female | French | French, Spanish, English | Master degree in management |
| 2 | Yes | Male | Colombian | French, Spanish, English | Industrial engineering degree |
| 3 | Yes | Female | Argentinian | French, Spanish, English | Master degree, and MBA in finance |
| 4 | Yes | Male | French | French, Spanish, English, Portuguese | Engineering degree in the electronic field, Master degree, and MBA |
| 5 | Yes | Male | French | French, Spanish, English, German | Master degree in business |
| 6 | Yes | Male | Spanish | French, Spanish, English, Italian | Masters degrees in human resource and law |
| 7 | Yes | Male | Colombian | Spanish, English, Portuguese | Chemical engineering degree, and Masters degrees in administration |
| 8 | Yes | Male | French | French, English (beginner in Spanish) | Master degree in quality management for animal production |
| 9 | Yes | Male | French | French, Spanish, English (beginner in German) | Master degree of management |
| 10 | No | Male | French | French, Spanish, English | Master degree in economics |
| 11 | Yes | Male | Colombian | Spanish, English (beginner in German) | Chemical engineering degree, and executive program in management |
| 12 | No | Male | French | French, Spanish, English | Masters degrees in international business and entrepreneurship |
| 13 | No | Male | French and Spanish | French, Spanish, English (beginner in Arabic) | Masters degrees, and engineering degree |
| 14 | Yes | Male | Colombian and Spanish | Spanish, English, Chinese | MBA in audit |
| 15 | No | Male | French and Colombian | French, Spanish, English, Portuguese | MBA, and degree (<i>unknown level</i>) in food management |
| 16 | No | Female | Venezuelan | Spanish, English | MBA, and master degree in finance |
| 17 | Yes | Male | French | French, Spanish, English | Ph.D. in medicine, and MBA |
| 18 | No | Male | French | French, Spanish, English | Degree (<i>unknown level</i>) in political sciences, and training at the National Gendarmerie Officers' Academy |