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# ‘Soft’ human resource management in small international joint ventures

Cases from the Danish – Vietnamese context

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**Abstract—** This paper examines the value creation aspects of HRM in international joint ventures of a relatively small size and their implications for strategic management. We assume that HRM in this context is rather a process than a function, and a ‘soft’ – humanistic rather than a ‘hard’, instrumentalist managerial approach. Using cases from a modest sample of Danish – Vietnamese joint ventures, we propose that HRM is significantly associated with creating a healthy and adaptive environment for mutual learning and socializing as well as a flexible empowerment mechanism in the condition of a certain extent of joint venture autonomy. A conceptual framework developed from these empirical insights invites further generalizing efforts, and more importantly, contributes to a dynamic understanding of HRM in small IJVs.

**Keywords-** *International joint venture, human resource management, expatriate manager, local manager, mutual learning, empowerment, socializing.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Research on international human resource management pays relatively little attention to the case of international joint ventures (IJVs) and in particular those of a small size. Most of what we know about HRM practices in this inter-firm context seems to be a part of the overall focus on MNCs and their management of overseas subsidiaries [5] [21]. Meanwhile, certain scholars have evidenced that IJVs present a particularly challenging context for HRM due to the degree of diversity in their human resources and multiple layers of managerial control embedded in the nature of this inter-firm mode [26]. Such challenge becomes particularly critical in the post-formation phase of an IJV where formal arrangements have been made and the managing task becomes subject to emergent circumstances and adjustment needs [1][23][24]. There is a corresponding need for a dynamic HRM approach responding and foreseeing the joint venture’s ongoing personnel-related needs. This paper sets out with the aim of investigating dynamic aspects of HRM in small IJVs. It is assumed that IJVs of a relatively small size in general do not have a formal, strategic HRM function; thus demanding a more flexible approach to managing their international teams. A small IJV here belongs to the category of small and

medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which according to most definitions often have no more than 100 employees, allowing room for other relative criteria [13].

The paper is structured in five sections. The present introduction section continues with a discussion of the relevance of HRM in small IJVs. The second section presents contributions and limitations of existing literature in understanding HRM dynamics in small IJVs, identifying important conceptual gaps to be initially filled. The third section discusses the research design of the paper, including an introduction to the research context and the five joint ventures selected for investigation. In the next section, findings are discussed as an empirical base for proposing a dynamic conceptualization of HRM in small IJVs, with implications for similar settings. A concluding note focuses on limitations of the study and draws on future research work to capture HRM even more relevant in small inter-firm settings, particularly in an emerging economy environment like the one of Vietnam.

### *The relevance of HRM in small IJVs*

HRM in practice embraces both a functional and a strategic role. Even though when firms do not have separate resources for HRM, e.g. in form of a functional HRM department and HR personnel, which is often the case of small firms, then HRM should still be integrated into the strategic management task. A relatively small IJV setting presents some unique characteristics that require a careful application of the HRM notion if it is to be relevant and useful. These concern the double layers of control representing the parents and the joint venture respectively, the diversity of cultural membership among employee groups, and the likelihood for informal managerial flows given the size of the involved firms.

In the conceptual debate, HRM is often distinguished between a hard version and a soft version [7] [11] [29] [30]. The general distinction between the hard model and soft model lies in whether emphasis is placed on the human or the resource. ‘Hard’ HRM emphasizes the resource side and adopts a rather rational, instrumentalist approach to managing

employees, i.e. treating people like any other economic factor that needs to be controlled. Whereas, 'soft' HRM focuses on the human side and shows commitment in the development of employees in terms of training and personnel care. Any HRM strategy must embrace both the human side and the resource side [29]. However, in the investigated firm setting, emphasis on hard HRM rather than on soft HRM would pose a number of challenges to management. One critical challenge is that the complexity of social embeddedness in an environment of employees of diverse cultural backgrounds often cannot be translated adequately into economic calculations. Moreover, adopting an instrumentalist HRM approach in IJVs appears fragile considering that the performance of expatriate managers is critically influenced by their psychological adjustment [4] and that the local employees in the IJV might feel the pressure of being exploited in the foreign parent(s)' interests. The latter proposition is particularly significant when put in an emerging economy context like the one studied here, i.e. Vietnam, where most critical resources and knowledge transferred to the joint venture are from the foreign parent firm and local labor is employed at a relatively cheap cost [19]. Whereas efficiency and economic motives in general have been evidenced to be among the strongest motivations of foreign firms when collaborating with emerging economy partners, they are not necessarily the rationale for the collaborating process.

A human-oriented HRM approach defines the relevant scope of HRM in IJVs studied in this paper. It fits well with the complexity of joint venture governance, the small size of involved firms, the assumedly goodwill of collaboration in an emerging economy context. This emphasis requires an appropriate conception of HRM, theoretical ground as well as data collection, as will be discussed in the following sections.

For this paper, HRM is understood as a managerial framework and the attached managerial processes of assisting employees in developing their organization-based competence and capabilities. The focal organization here is the IJV rather than the parent organizations, yet apparently in relation to parent motives and expectations. An IJV is understood as a separate legal organizational entity representing the partial holdings of two or more independent parent firms, in which the headquarters of at least one firm is located outside the country of operation the joint [28].

## II. WHAT WE ALREADY KNOW

An IJV is a complex form of organization with human resources representing distinct yet intertwined organizational layers and linkages. Literature on HRM in IJVs reflects by and large a planning (or structural/ structure-driven) approach concerning how to structure HRM practices through the different phases of joint venture [26]. A large part of literature places its focus on the transfer of HRM practices from the MNC parent, i.e. the foreign parent, to the local subsidiary [27]. This transfer mindset is perhaps related to a conventional

view of HRM practices in an MNC perspective. In the following review, we discuss the extent to which the conventional literature is helpful in understanding 'soft' HRM issues in small IJVs, drawing on their limitations and argue for an inside-out sensemaking approach given the complex and emergent nature of such issues in the post-formation joint venture process.

Human resources in an IJV can be seen in two large groups: expatriates and locals. Expatriates can be foreign parent nationals or third-country nationals appointed by the foreign parent or the host country parent or employed by the joint venture. Locals can be transferees from the host parent or newly-employed nationals. Reference [28] also included two sub-groups, foreign headquarters and host headquarters executives who are key decision makers of the joint venture. For HRM to be first and foremost relevant from the IJV's perspective, this paper excludes these two sub-groups as subjects of HRM but involve them as strategic decision makers relating to HRM issues of the joint venture. Expatriates and locals have primarily been treated separately in literature, with far greater focus on the former group, particularly those appointed by the MNC parent. Typically, expatriates are seen taking a three-fold mission in the overseas subsidiary that is composed of a control role, a coordination role, and a knowledge transfer role [5]. Managing expatriates effectively requires joint venture decision makers to be aware of the necessary degree of control [18], and similarly the necessary degree of coordination and knowledge transfer, respectively. IJV scholars have implicated that control, coordination and knowledge transfer needs in an IJV change over time [3]. Moreover, the dynamic nature of expatriate performance is also subject to perceptions of the involved expatriates in terms of how they should take on these roles, seen from a sensemaking perspective; and their perceptions over time as they learn and experience the joint venture life. On the part of host country nationals, a similar role playing can be logically argued in the case of those appointed by the host country parent, such as transferees. Seen from the perspective of the joint venture rather than any single parent perspective, as endorsed in this paper, it is important to address possible linkages between expatriates and locals in relation to their performance of interdependent roles. The following review therefore follows the role scenario of expatriates and managers in IJVs and discusses inter-personal linkages in each of the three key roles: control, coordination, and knowledge transfer.

### A. *Expatriate-local linkage and control*

One of the important mechanisms for management control from the MNC perspective is expatriation [18] [32]. Two types of expatriates in IJVs can be distinguished: functional expatriates and executive expatriates. Functional expatriates are appointed by the foreign parent as functional gatekeepers following the transfer of specific assets in any of the key functions, including R&D, production, and marketing and sales [18]. An executive expatriate fills a position in the

general management of the given subsidiary. From the IJV perspective, management control is rather dependent upon the bargaining power of IJV partners [32].

Control in IJVs can be seen in three forms: output control, process control, and social control. Most dynamics of control lies in the two latter forms of control, where relational ties such as trust and learning are seen as critical facilitating factors [15] [18]. Few studies have addressed the issue of learning from the individual level in IJVs [8] [14]. Effective control in short depends on whether managers are capable of establishing a trustworthy and understanding relationship with employees. Studies on IJVs in Vietnam have suggested that mistrust is the most likely problem area, and hinted at the development of trust as relying significantly on personal relationships and networking [22]. In HRM research, reference [29] marked an increasing shift of emphasis away from personnel procedures and rules as the basis of good (control) practice, in favor of a new accent on the management of (organizational) culture. Research in intercultural interaction [6] has developed an interesting perspective of the joint venture collaborative process as the process of cultural negotiation between participating members representing different and multiple cultural memberships in search for an emergent common culture. Over time as relational ties emerge and competences are developed, control needs to be continually re-assessed to meet with actual needs in a given IJV.

#### *B. Expatriate – local and competence development*

Expatriate managers often play a key role in the setting of knowledge transfer from the foreign partner in an emerging economy IJV. Literature distinguishes between two learning flows: learning in IJVs and learning from IJVs, with a likely greater focus on the latter flow from an MNC perspective. Both flows considered, expatriate managers, as well as host national transferees function as knowledge centers to be tapped into the joint venture and back to the respective parent organization in return. Effective HRM should therefore deal with the challenge of how to create an environment for learning in both ways, i.e. from expatriate managers to local employees and vice versa. Learning in IJVs may occur on three interdependent levels: individual, group, and organization [14]. If HRM is to create a learning organization [26], then learning at lower levels should be paid appropriate attention to. Reference [8] suggests that learning in an alliance context is a cyclical process where initial conditions such as task definitions, partners' routines, interface structure and expectations, are subject to re-evaluations and readjustments; in other words, subject to 'joint sensemaking'. Whereas the typical learning-related role setting in emerging economy IJVs comprises expatriate(s) as knowledge providers and local employees as knowledge receivers, reverse learning has recently been captured as an issue of concern in emerging contexts [20].

#### *C. Expatriate – local and coordination issues*

Coordination in IJVs is often associated with the issue of integration among interdependent units from the MNC perspective [5]. Little attention has been drawn to the integration among units within the IJV organization, i.e. internal coordination. Whereas parent-joint venture coordination varies depending on the degree of interdependence between the joint venture's and the respective parent's activities, within-joint venture coordination is always critical for the transparent operation of joint venture activities. In such a context, not only expatriates but also local key managers are to take on coordinating roles, i.e. as boundary spanners. Information exchange and communication are central in the performance of these roles [31]. In that regard, boundary spanners or coordinators must be those individuals well linked to coordination units. Whereas most literature has associated boundary spanning with expatriates [16] [2], host country employees are likely to have a boundary spanning advantage when it comes to linkages with the local environment with embedded local cultural and social norms.

The three role domains as discussed above are initially inspired from the MNC-based strategic agenda by means of expatriation [5]. But drawing in on a holistic view of joint venture management using various streams of research, this paper argues for an extended framework of these strategic domains to include host country employees and linkages between them and expatriates in search for an effective ongoing HRM.

Research explicitly addressing HRM issues in IJVs is likely to be considerably missing, but existing knowledge from various streams of IJV research can be pooled together to provide a better understanding of personnel-related aspects of joint venture management. The research gap has become evident, i.e. the expatriate – local dynamics in the course of performing organizational roles particular to IJV settings – from the IJV perspective. The following section is dedicated to making sense of empirical evidence from the five selected Danish - Vietnamese joint ventures. Each case is unique in its own rights, yet altogether they offer generalizable insights that are worth a conceptualization effort to fill the mentioned research gap.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a qualitative case-based approach to investigation [33] [10] and draws on empirical evidence from five cases of joint ventures between Danish and Vietnamese firms. The context of Vietnam as an emerging economy has recently captured international scholarly interest, yet has still been under-researched. With an average economic growth of 7-8% (5.3% in 2009), Vietnam has the second highest growth in Asia, (just behind China). The government's major renovation reform since 1986 has gradually opened up Vietnamese economy for foreign investors in search for efficiency, i.e. low labor costs, and market alternatives. In the last decade, FDI has been among the major drivers of

economic development in Vietnam, contributing more than 15 % of GDP (2005). By 2005, joint venture projects accounted for 18% of the total number of FDI projects and 33% of the total FDI registered capital. In recent years, the joint venture mode has lost its dominance to the fully-owned mode due to a more open FDI policy, but its steady increase in number of projects and registered capital still ensures its importance in the Vietnamese context. The situation is similar with particularly Danish FDI into Vietnam, except that this is a relatively young FDI domain in which Danish firms have mainly been active since the beginning of 2000s. The five cases used in this paper are joint ventures established between 2001 and 2004. They are not deemed representative for the whole sample of IJVs in Vietnam; however, still expected to capture to a large extent the common issues in the early collaborative process between the local joint venture and the foreign parent, as well as divergence in management arrangements across joint ventures. The choice of cases can be argued in accordance with the information content criterion [10] which allows the researcher to maximize the utility of information from small samples. In the sense that the cases involve both majority and equal ownerships, both privately-owned and state-owned local partners, they are at least representative of major structural characteristics of IJVs in an emerging economy context (see e.g. Nguyen & Meyer, 2004). A relatively unique feature of most Danish – Vietnamese joint venture concerns the facilitating role of Danish government aid in form of business-to-business financial support in a number of categories, including training and technical assistance activities [25].

The empirical data collection was carried out as part of the present author's doctoral study, which examined intercultural interaction processes in IJVs where the three conceptualized domains of interaction (competence building and learning, power negotiating and influencing, and socializing) proposed important implications for HRM. A total of 25 interviews were conducted in the period between December 2007 and January 2008. Informants ranged from involved CEOs from the parent firms to middle managers in the joint ventures (See Table I). Additional data include previous research – based interview transcripts related to the selected cases, traineeship-based participant observation in one of the cases, and information from news articles and company homepages. Although secondary, such data were treated valuable in this type of somewhat theory-building case-based research, where the investigator would try to understand each case individually and in as much depth as is feasible [9]. The data analysis was assisted with Nvivo qualitative analysis software [12].

Table I: A profile of the five joint ventures

	<b>Boiler</b>	<b>Fruit</b>	<b>Design</b>	<b>Mould</b>	<b>GIS</b>
Industry	Marine equipment	Food processing	Industrial design	Engineering	Design
Year	2004	2001	2004	2003	2003
DK shares	75%	50%	50%	50%	49%
No. of employees	100	100+	19	70	35
No. of informants	8	5	3	3	3

The five cases are named after their products: Boiler, Fruit, Design, Mould and GIS. An overview of the cases is provided in Table I. Boiler is the only joint venture in the sample having a majority ownership by the Danish parent. This case is to be treated carefully in the sense that although the size of the joint venture is relatively small, both the Danish parent and the Vietnamese parent are well-established large firms with thousands of employees, and particularly the Danish parent is a multinational firm with production and sales subsidiaries in 13 countries worldwide. The pressure from the Danish parent on the joint venture in terms of global integration might be greater, thus demanding a higher degree of control on the joint venture operations.

In general, all the five Danish partners have many years of experience respectively in the product/service area subject for the joint venture project in Vietnam. The rationale behind joint venturing across the cases is a combination of three motives: efficiency seeking, market expansion, and donor support (i.e. B-2-B program). An expatriate manager was appointed as soon as the joint venture company was formed in order to take charge of the setup process and the know-how transfer process. This early phase was generally characterized by intensive interaction between joint venture members and visiting experts from the Danish parent in various training and technical assistance activities. The expatriate managers played a central role in this setting as 'long-term technical advisor', to use the term of the B-2-B program. They were mainly in charge of the coordination of training activities as well as production-related activities at the related joint venture. The later phase of the joint venture features typically a higher degree of local adaptation through the re-filling of the expatriate position or localization of joint venture management. As shall be discussed in the section to follow, the restructuring from expatriate-driven control to localization at varying degrees has an impact on the joint venture process and important implications for effective HRM.

#### IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the main findings from a cross-analysis of the five studied cases.

##### A. *Expatriate and control*

In all the five cases, a long-term expatriate manager was assigned to the joint venture in the start-up phase of one to two years. The general mission of these expatriates was to 'copy and paste' the Danish product-related procedures and standards to the new local venture organization for reasons of control. The copy and paste rationale faced two challenges: the challenge of training the local employees to become capable of operating such a system and the challenge of local conditions that are non-favorable for the operation of the Danish parent system. The former challenge was handled with an intensive training agenda while the latter was confronted with different interpretations and even ignorance.

The Danish system in focus for 'copy and paste' here entails a management culture and a professional culture. The management culture is known as consensus-based in form of a flat organizational structure where employees are expected to

participate actively in the decision making process. That culture failed to consensus-management model e.g. in the GIS and Design cases but this model does not appear to work in the Vietnamese context. In two cases, GIS & Design, the early expatriate managers tried to adopt the consensus-based approach but it was then interrupted by the new management who felt some sense of disorganization among the local employees as a consequence. For instance, the later Vietnamese MD of GIS explained: "Take a Dane and a Vietnamese. The Dane is independent, self-responsible and well-disciplined, while the Vietnamese needs supervising, watching, at times nursing, and a little pushing to do his job. Therefore applying the Danish management model here won't work for sure. The Vietnamese cannot handle it." As a result, the new management phase in the respective joint venture started out with restructuring the organization into a functional structure.

In the other cases, the control-related issues in the startup period related to the expatriate manager making sense of the local context and acting upon it. In this regard, we have an extreme case, i.e. Boiler, where the expatriate manager's sensemaking was driven by his preconception of western superiority and thus disregard of the local context, as well as his negative preconception of Vietnamese behavior and accordingly top-down control approach. In another case, i.e. Fruit, the expatriate manager was seen trying to make sense of what she described as "This is Vietnam" as a 'pattern' of how things are done differently here compared to Denmark. Contextual awareness apparently plays a role in facilitating the control process.

Process control and social control had much to do with adjusting one's managerial approach to the setting of local joint venture employees. Again, we have at the one end of the flexibility continuum an expatriate manager who believed in western civilization and chose rather to employ young Vietnamese who would be "eager to learn western ways of doing things". At the other end of the continuum, we can mention a new-phase expatriate manager of Design taking on the 'father figure' role to get closer to the local employees by meeting their demand for solving private issues through work relationships. In relation to the choice of managerial approach, the managers' role perceptions became an emergent issue. An interesting example was that of the Boiler expatriate manager who was known to consider the local white-collar workers as (simply) "the link between the people who know and the people who do it", whereas his appreciation of having two Danish technical supervisors on site was giving them too much authority in their involvement in the joint venture matters and in disregard of the local managers' feedback. The later phase of Boiler featured a contrasting attitude of the new expatriate who chose to cut down the Danish supervisors from one to two, bringing them back to the supervising role and letting the joint venture company run by the Vietnamese people. Similarly, other cases saw gradual empowerment of local staff by involving them in coordinating groups and granting varying degrees of decision making authority. In one case, i.e. Mould, empowerment seemed to be the approach right from the start as the employees were involved on a continual basis of

competence development, i.e. "everybody is updated", as explained the Danish expatriate project manager.

Trust is an emergent tie on an interpersonal level as observed from the cases. There is evidence that empowerment is associated with trust, but the relationship between control and trust appears far more complex than suggested by the literature. It is subject to continuous re-assessment. As the Vietnamese are used to work under supervision, control in process and social forms still maintain despite the presence of a certain degree of trust. Control was indeed much about being visible.

#### *B. Expatriate – local learning*

The atmosphere of learning varied from one case to another; even from one phase to another depending on the learning attitude of the acting joint venture management. At the one end, the Boiler expatriate kept consistent with his belief in western superiority and endorsed one-way learning. Reverse learning from the expatriate side, though informal and either expressed or not, was seen to occur early as the expatriates started to identify discrepancies in the local context and local behavior, and adjusted the training agenda accordingly. A blockage in the learning process could occur as a consequence of the top management's failure to handle employee feedback or to value learning opportunities. For instance, whereas training in Denmark was highly evaluated as a learning experience by the trainees (local managers), it was regarded by the Boiler expatriate director as a waste of costs since he argued that the given local manager "was not in a position where he can actually influence so many people" (with his learnt knowledge). There was an underestimated opportunity for disseminating knowledge which would require an appropriate managerial attitude toward learning and some empowerment.

#### *C. Expatriate – local coordination*

In the early phase, the expatriate managers all functioned as a central link between the corresponding Danish parent and joint venture. But over time there was a likely shift in boundary spanning role from expatriate managers to the local managers. The problem of coordination lied in discrepancies in communication styles and underlying mentalities. The expatriates in the coordinating role were seen to be somehow bound by their personal and

Coordination over time saw a gradual shift from exclusively taken by the expatriate character to being shared or transferred to one or a few key local managerial personnel. The context of 'This-is-Vietnam' seems to require either a certain degree of expatriate adaptation, as observed in e.g. the Design and Mould cases, or a localized management, as seen in the GIS case. The Fruit case was a case highlighting the problem of internal coordination among the functional units and consequently significant effort in restructuring the organization, including bringing in an overseas Vietnamese young professional in the position of coordination manager.

The above three roles prove not only belong to expatriate managers but also involve local managers at a growing extent

as they become competent and develop various relational ties with their expatriate counterparts (or superiors).

## V. CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to address a topic of depth yet within a limited space of writing. However, it has been worth an effort. To claim its contributions, the paper has empirically evidenced the dynamic, socially-constructed aspects of role playing in small IJVs, demanding a flexible, 'soft' – human-oriented HRM approach. That is, HRM in this context is not about managing each group of employees, e.g. expatriates vs. locals, with a particular top-down parent-driven policy, but more critically about managing the ongoing relationship between the involved groups of employees as well as between individual employees. Considering HRM is today like a buzzword in emerging economy markets and overwhelmingly driven by the MNC perspective, studies like this one helps render HRM relevant to the organization in focus, i.e. the IJV and adaptive to the flexible and emergent nature of issues in small organizations. Future research developing a dynamic conceptualization of HRM in small IJV settings should be based on more selective sampling of data and on a larger scale.

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