

**THE EFFECT OF CONSULTING IN
INTERNATIONALIZATION PROCESS OF SMALL
AND MEDIUM SIZED AGRICULTURAL ENTERPRISES**

**Jyväskylä University
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**Author: Sami Koivisto
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Supervisor: Christian Stutz**

ABSTRACT

Author Sami Koivisto	
Title The effect of consulting in internationalization process of small and medium sized agricultural enterprises	
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<p>Abstract</p> <p>This Master's Thesis studies the use of consulting and its effects on internationalization process of Finnish agricultural sector small and medium sized enterprises. The study was planned on the theoretical basis of the resource-based theory, with focus on networks and international experience as resources for internationalization, and on management consulting theory. The study was conducted using non-structured interviews, with entrepreneurs, consultants, and association members in the agricultural sector. The analysis was conducted in a qualitative style using thematic analysis based on the Gioia methodology. The findings of the research were shown through a comparison of the qualitative findings in three phases of internationalization, which are customer search, negotiation, and implementation. The study found consulting, and external sources of knowledge, to be a viable substitute for the internal knowledge in small and medium sized enterprise internationalization. As an additional finding the study found a link between the usefulness of consulting in internationalization and the commitment of the entrepreneur to the internationalization process.</p>	
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<p>Tiivistelmä</p> <p>Tässä pro gradussa tutkitaan konsultointia ja sen vaikutusta kansainvälistymiseen suomalaisten pienten ja keskisuurten maatalousalan yritysten keskuudessa. Tutkimus perustui resurssipohjaiseen teoriaan, jonka kohteena tarkastellaan verkostoja ja kansainvälistä kokemusta resursseina kansainvälistymisessä, ja liikkeenjohdon konsultointi teoriaan. Tutkimus tehtiin käyttämällä rakenteettomia haastatteluja suomalaisen maataloussektorin yrittäjien, konsulttien ja järjestöväen, haastatteluihin. Analyysissä käytettiin laadullista analysointi metodia, joka tarkasti oli temaattinen analyysi perustuen Gioia metodologiaan. Löydökset esiteltiin laadullisten löydösten vertailuna kolmessa kansainvälistymisen vaiheessa, jotka olivat asiakkaiden etsintä, neuvottelu ja toimeenpano. Tutkimuksen löydösten perusteella voidaan todeta, että konsultoinnin, ja ulkopuolisten tiedonlähteiden, käyttö on toimiva vaihtoehto yritysten sisäiselle tiedolle pienten ja keskisuurten yritysten kansainvälistymisessä. Tämän lisäksi tutkimuksessa ilmeni yhteys konsultoinnin hyödyllisyyden ja yrittäjän kansainvälistymisprosessiin sitoutumisen välillä.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

The topic of this Master's Thesis is the effect of consulting in the internationalization of Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), studied in the context of the Finnish agricultural sector. In essence, this research aims to analyze the effect consulting has in the implementation of internationalization in SMEs. As the importance of international experience and international networks has been established in prior research to affect the success of the internationalizing process, the substitutability of the management team experience, and networks, through consulting, especially for SMEs, is of interest in this Master's Thesis as it could affect the success of the internationalization in the SMEs.

The practical relevance for this research stems from a need to look at the agricultural sector in Finland and the global agricultural market. Finland is a country with a small domestic market, which constrains the growth of many SMEs. This is to an extent alleviated by the access to the European Union internal market, which offers the member countries freedom to trade within the Union with no trade barriers. However, it is not enough in all industries, as in certain industries there is European Union wide overproduction, one such industry is the agricultural industry in which we face over production on the European Union scale. Lately events such as the abandonment of European Union-wide production quotas on milk production, and other such efforts to liberate the agricultural market, which is heavily reliant on subsidization and, in part due to this, heavily regulated.

Due to these factors, there has been a push for internationalization among the Finnish agricultural sector, with examples such as Valio operation internationally with subsidiaries around the world in countries such as Russia and the United States, and export activities in around 60 countries. Apart from already established companies, there have been many cooperatives founded to export their products. In Finland, most of the €1,5 Billion in agricultural exports in 2018 were exported to other European Union countries, while Russia was the only non-EU member in the top 4 export destinations. At the same time, there were over €5.3 Billion in food imports to Finland again mostly from the other European Union countries. When considering the nature of imports to Finland and exports from Finland among the imports 24% of the food imports were processed foods, while processed food and milk products made up 44% of Finnish food exports. (Luonnonvarakeskus, 2019).

However, European Union is suffering from overproduction around the world, in emerging countries and developing countries, there is an increasing demand for agricultural produce and as an example China is not just the most populous country in the world, but also one of the leading importers of agricultural produce, importing food for \$105 Billion in 2017, and has been involved in acquiring agricultural land around the world to get enough food imports to feed

the country's population. This global imbalance of food production and consumption combined with the situation in the Finnish agricultural sector, where farmers are suffering from the effects of overproduction and are struggling to avoid bankruptcy creates a fertile ground for internationalization. (ChinaPower, 2017; European Commission, 2019; Luonnonvarakeskus, 2019; Politico, 2016; Valio, n.d.).

This research aims to answer the question of whether consulting affects the success of internationalization efforts. This question is important as the availability of information, and access to networks, through consulting could have an impact on the internationalization process. The role of consulting in internationalization may be more pronounced in the SME setting as compared to larger companies the likelihood of not having internal expertise available in the field of internationalization is higher in SMEs, due to the resource constraints. The role of consulting in internationalization is a topic, which has not seen much research in the past while answering the question could help companies to decide whether to involve consultants in the formulation and implementation of their internationalization. Examination of this topic could allow the SMEs to evaluate their decision of involving consultants in internationalization by analyzing the effects it has had on the internationalization efforts of other similar companies. Apart from general SME internationalization benefits, the research can also help the SMEs, and consulting agencies, in the agricultural sector to succeed in their internationalization efforts.

The way this research aims to answer the question over the possible effect consulting has on the internationalization of an SME is through conducting a qualitative study among Finnish agricultural exports SMEs by conducting interviews with the entrepreneurs to establish whether the companies used consulting or not and gathering information about the problems faced during the internationalization process. This data will then be analyzed to find out whether consulting had an impact on the performance of the case companies. Although the best-case scenario would involve both successful and unsuccessful internationalization attempts, the focus should be on identifying the problems faced by the companies and considering those in establishing the success of the internationalization. This requires a framework to evaluate the relative success of the case companies. The companies involved in the research should share as similar products as possible, which is why raw materials such as unprocessed grain would offer a good setting for the study, as the differences in the product would not be a major factor for the success of the internationalization effort. However, as the availability of the agricultural SMEs for interview purposes might be limited the companies might have to vary in their product offering, which would not affect the study's results directly as the focus is on comparing their internationalization as processes. This is done by identifying different phases in the internationalization process the companies share and comparing their approaches to those phases.

The literature streams concerning the topic are the consulting literature and the internationalization literature. As a basis for understanding the effect of consulting on internationalization, there is a need to define and understand consulting and internationalization literature. The internationalization literature articles by Gerschewski et al. (2020), and Masiello and Izzo (2019) focus on the effect of networking and international experience on internationalization. On the other hand articles by Ang and Buttle (2006), Uzo and Adigwe (2016), Caputo, Fiorentino, and Garzella (2018), and Morgan, Katsikeas, and Vorhies (2012) focus on the different phases of the internationalization process found in the data collection. For consulting theory, the focus is on understanding the consulting practices and management consulting as a field with sources such as Elaine Biech (2007), Calvert Markham (2019), and Anthony F. Buono (2009).

There appears to be a gap in research when reviewing the prior theory on the possibilities of consulting concerning the internationalization process, as the theory does cover the resource-based notion of the importance of prior international experience and networks and seems to not answer the question of whether consulting could be used to improve the chances of success when it comes to internationalization. As prior research has established the importance of prior international experience in the success of the internationalization process the possibility of using consulting towards fulfilling the same goal is a question, which seems to have been left unanswered. The resource-based theory of internationalization seems to be the theory, which could be used in connecting consulting theory to internationalization by considering consulting, as a resource such as the existing international experience amongst the management team, company networks, or knowledge of market entry strategies. As the focus in the research has been in establishing the importance of these factors in the successful internationalization, the substitution through consulting has remained overlooked while it might be able to supplement these factors in a way similar to knowledge grafting though in a way which would be more accessible to Small and medium-sized enterprises with limited resources for hiring and onboarding new employees.

The research question in this study is, does consulting affect the internationalization of a company, compared to the use of internal networks and experience on internationalization?

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This topic belongs to two theoretical categories, which are international business and consultation. The main theoretical background for the research is in the international business with the focus on the resource-based view theory on internationalization, with the factors of networking and international experience as the factors influencing the process to achieve successful internationalization. Internationalization is a field of study focusing on the processes and factors influencing the ability of companies to expand into markets outside of their own home country. As successful internationalization requires access to networks and information of the target market, in the SMEs the limited resources of the companies can impose restrictions on their ability to maintain these resources internally. This is where the management consultation comes in, as consultation is an external source of knowledge and other sources such as knowledge grafting require more resources, as a way of acquiring networks, networking knowledge, and international experience, both in general and of the specific target country.

2.1 Resource-based model of internationalization

2.1.1 Introduction

The resource-based model of internationalization is based on the resource-based theory of the firm. Therefore, as an introduction to the resource-based theory of internationalization, we are going to cover the resource-based view, in general, using three articles “Resource-based theories of competitive advantage: A ten-year retrospective on the resource-based view” by Barney (2001), “The Resource-Based View and Learning Theory: Overlaps, Differences, and a Shared Future” by Greve (2020) and “The Resource-Based View: A Review and Assessment of Its Critiques” by Kraaijenbrink et al (2010), which has combined the most often met critiques of the resource-based view. This will help to raise some of the main objections to the usefulness of the resource-based view as well as give arguments for the usefulness of the resource-based view. (Arend & Lévesque, 2010; Barney, 2001; Greve, 2020).

First, there is a need to take a general overview on the resource-based theory as it is set forward by Barney’s (2001) article “Resource-based theories of competitive advantage: A ten-year retrospective on the resource-based view” in which he brings forth alternatives for positioning the resource-based view theory in contrast with his original positioning of it relative to the structure-conduct-

performance (SCP)- based theories of competitive advantage. The other two perspectives were relative to neo-classical microeconomics and relative to evolutionary economics. With the chance of positioning the resulting theories could have been viewed as three separate resource-based theories, however, they all have the same assumption at the core of heterogeneity of resources and capabilities among companies and the assumption of the lasting nature of those differences. Apart from these assumptions also the focus of the theories would remain as striving to understand the basis upon which some companies can consistently surpass their peers in performance. Based on these features Barney (2001) posits them as different views on the same overarching resource-based view on company performance. Based on these assumptions and this focus the resource-based view of company competitiveness, the resources and capabilities companies have, can develop, or acquire are pivotal for the performance differential between different companies. These resources and capabilities are required to be distinct and substitutable from the resources and capabilities of other companies to affect the performance, as resources that do not fulfill these conditions are available for other companies operating on the field and provide at most a fleeting competitive advantage for the company in question. (Barney, 2001).

Another view on the resource-based view theory is offered by Greve (2020) in the article "The Resource-Based View and Learning Theory: Overlaps, Differences, and a Shared Future", which describes the resource-based view by contrasting it with learning theory. In the article Greve (2020) starts by going over similarities between the resource-based view and the learning theory. The theories are similar in the topics of organizational differences, path dependence, and complex social technologies. Both theories value difference between the organizations as a source of differentiation between companies' performance, while accepting that total uniqueness will not be sustainable as other organizations can learn or build similar capabilities or resources over time. On the other hand, there are barriers to adopting these beneficial resources and capabilities, which can sustain the competitive advantage for an amount of time while not indefinitely. This notion of adopting or learning, as would be seen in the learning theory, barriers are reinforced by path dependence, which is another trait shared by the theories. In resource-based view, this path dependency manifests in the uniqueness and highly inimitable nature of a resource, as the development of the resource through a certain development path has built up a foundation for the resource to be the most beneficial and making sure the resource even if acquired by a competitor would be unable to manifest the same benefits. The third similarity, which also enforces the uniqueness of the resource or capability, is the nature of a resource or capability as a complex social technology. As an example, you can read all the theories of internationalization, get the product, study the laws and regulations and acquire other information needed, but without practical experience to tie them all together, you will not have international experience as a resource sense. So, you have the ingredients of success but do not know how to apply them to your benefit. The complexity makes the resources more unique and valuable again by increasing the barriers to imitation. (Greve, 2020).

As for the differences between the resource-based view and the learning theory those according to the article "The Resource-Based View and Learning Theory: Overlaps, Differences, and a Shared Future" by Greve (2020) spring from the theories approach to four elements, which are resource or behavior, learning from own experience, vicarious learning, and environmental change. On the topic of resource vs behavior, the difference between the theories is the conceptual source of the organizational competitiveness, which in resource-based view is the organizational resource or capability while in learning theory the source of competitiveness is organizational behavior. In the learning theory, the organization learns a certain beneficial behavior leading to competitive advantage, while in the resource-based view the organization cultivates resources and capabilities which are the source of competitive advantage. In the case of learning from own experience, the learning theory focuses on how the companies learning is influenced by the signals of performance acquired through measuring performance against set goals. While in the resource-based view the main point when it comes to learning from company experience is the effect it has on maintaining competitive advantage due to non-unique resources staying outside the perception of the competition. Beneficial resource or capability cannot be imitated if it is not seen as one by the competitors. Vicarious learning is a part of knowledge diffusion research focused on the learning theory. The focus is on studying how knowledge diffusion works between organizations as a learning process. Diffusion research would be, according to the article, important for the resource-based view as it can be considered a factor of resource or capability sustainability, as through diffusion the uniqueness of the resource or capability can be eroded. However, as the studies of diffusion have not been focused on the resource-based view there has not been deep enough focus on studying the effect of diffusion on the sustainability of organizational resources. As for the environmental change, it does not take an important role in the resource-based view as the sustainability of the organizational resources and capabilities is viewed in contrast to the competition instead of the environment. This leads to inbuilt unsustainability to the organizational resources as the change in the operating environment often leads to a need to reconfigure resources and capabilities to take on the new environment, which can lead to resource obsolescence due to the new environment making them lose their benefits. In the learning theory change of environment is more central in comparison. (Greve, 2020).

2.1.2 Critiques of Resource-based view

The article "The Resource-Based View: A Review and Assessment of Its Critiques" by Kraaijenbrink et al. (2010) has gathered eight of the most common critiques of the resource-based view. These are: the lack of managerial implications, Resource-Based View's (RBV) implied infinite regress, the limited scope of applicability, sustainable competitive advantage (SCA) is unachievable, RBV not being a theory of the firm, valuable rare inimitable and unsubstitutable (VRIN) is not

sufficient nor necessary for SCA, the value of the resource is not determinable enough to fulfill the criteria for a theory and lastly the definition of the resource being unusable. (Kraaijenbrink et al., 2010).

From the article "The Resource-Based View: A Review and Assessment of Its Critiques" by Kraaijenbrink et al. (2010) the eight critiques and their counter-arguments are as follows. The critique of lack of managerial implication is based on the lack of managerial actions it could prescribe apart from a vague notion of developing unique organizational resources and capabilities to gain sustained competitive advantage for the company, which is a common critique, according to the article, leveled against many theories throughout the field of management research, making it a common critique on the field. (Kraaijenbrink et al., 2010).

Another critique of the resource-based view is the implied infinite regress, which comes about from the theory valuing second-order capabilities more than first-order capabilities as according to the theory company with superiority in the context of developing new capabilities, for example, product innovation, is going to inevitably surpass its competition no matter the starting situation. However, as the second and first-order capabilities are firmly based in operational realities and going deeper into third order and further capabilities are not possible without it turning from practical to the theoretical realm, the implied infinite regress can only happen in the theoretical frame and does not happen in practice. (Kraaijenbrink et al., 2010).

The third critique is the limited nature of the scope of applicability of the resource-based view, which comes down to three versions of the generalizability critique. One of these is the generalization of uniqueness being definitionally impossible as unique is not generalizable, which as in the critique concerning implied infinite regress is an academic critique and in practice, it can be possible to gain insights from the uniqueness of resources. Another incarnation of the critique is it only fitting large firms as small firms could not operate upon static resources to generate their SCA. However small firms can have nontangible resources helping them to gain SCA, such as unique structures beneficial for the creation of capabilities. The third incarnation of this is whether the SCA providing resources are attainable in the first place as they are hard to come by as a requirement of being sustainable. This can often be attributed to the path dependency of SCA providing resources. Like in the implied infinite regression this does not become too problematic, according to the article, when not followed to the ultimate origin resource creating the SCA. However, there does exist an applicability limit for the RBV, which is the requirement for a mostly static environment. (Kraaijenbrink et al., 2010).

The fourth critique is the inability to achieve sustained competitive advantage due to no advantage being sustainable to the indefinite future. The counter-argument is based on the head start the original company has in improving the capability they base their SCA on, however there indeed is no way of keeping a competitive advantage going on indefinitely in practice due to among other factors the changes in the operating environment. The fifth critique is RBV not

being a theory of the Firm. This is based on the lack of answers in the theory to questions such as why firms exist, and why they exist in the forms they exist in? This is a critique, which the theory is not able to answer, but seeks to argue it focuses instead of being a theory of a firm to be theory on rents and sustainable competitive advantage. The sixth critique is the inability to VRIN and an organization being unable to be criteria to explain SCA. This critique is based on the lack of empirical support for the sufficiency of the theory to explain SCA as the mere possession of certain resources seems to be not enough to generate SCA. The second portion of this critique is the lacking role for role of the managers and entrepreneurs in making the resources into SCAs. The seventh critique is the inability to in a nontautological way to define the value of the resource. Eight critiques are upon the definition of resource in RBV, which is highly inclusive and causes the resources to be diverse and have different avenues for creating SCA. (Kraaijenbrink et al., 2010).

2.1.3 Resource-based view in the internationalization of SME

To apply the resource-based view into internationalization in this thesis we must define resources, which are essential to SME internationalization. For this purpose, the prior international experience and networking were chosen due to their influence on the success of SME internationalization found in prior research. Networking as a resource-based view resource is valuable, rare, and unique as it helps the companies to gain access to the target market and companies have distinct networks not only due to differences in the network building process but also on the role of chance in network building. As an example, two companies can both attend the same trade fair while coming out with completely different networks due to the people they met in the fair being different. While longer the company is in interaction with the market the more extensive and overlapping the networks become, the more value they offer for the success of the internationalization is at the beginning where the sustainability of the international venture is decided. As for the prior international experience, it is similarly valuable, rare, and unique to the SME in the scale it affects the internationalization.

2.2 Internationalization factors

2.2.1 Networking

Networking is a factor affecting the internationalization efforts of companies. Gerschewski et al. (2020) in their article "Trade Shows and SME Internationalisation: Networking for Performance" (Gerschewski et al., 2020) surveyed and analyzed Australian and New Zealand SMEs on the influence of the trade shows on their international performance. According to Gerschewski et al. (2020), SMEs

rely on networking to gain market knowledge and resources in their internationalization efforts, which leads to networking performance being one of the factors in forecasting the success of the SME internationalization as the SMEs themselves may lack the necessary resources and knowledge to be able to survive in the foreign market they aim to enter. In the article, trade shows are the target for analyzing networking performance due to their recognized importance as a platform for SME networking as they offer SMEs a chance to meet and interact with companies outside their normal sphere of activities. As successful networking can be the difference between success and failure of the SME it is important to pay attention to the main ways of conducting networking and the factors, which can affect the success of these efforts. (Gerschewski et al., 2020).

In their research Gerschewski et al. (2020) found proactiveness to be a key aspect in developing networks through trade shows. This is in line with prior studies on the topic where international SMEs are actively seeking market intelligence through networking in trade shows. Other hypotheses of the research by Gerschewski et al. (2020) regarding the performance effects of networking in SME internationalization found support in their study of Australian and New Zealand international SMEs on the side of operational development while the effects on financial performance were found to be insignificant. As for their last hypothesis, they found SMEs in the service industry to benefit more from networking than non-service SMEs. These findings support the notion that networking is important for SME internationalization, while the effect on financial performance was negligible in their research the operational benefits from networking would allow the SMEs to enter new markets with fewer problems due to the network knowledge they have access to. (Gerschewski et al., 2020).

2.2.2 International experience

International experience is the second contributing factor for successful internationalization. In the article "Knowledge grafting during internationalization: utilizing localized professionals in the foreign market" by Johanson et al. (2020) the issue of acquiring international experience is considered from the point of view of knowledge grafting, which is a practice of hiring new managers and other employees and integrating them to the company to make use of their existing knowledge. Johanson et al. (2020) in their article look at the knowledge grafting done by acquiring personnel from the foreign country to acquire experience of operating in the local market the company aims to enter. In literature knowledge grafting is seen as indirect learning as through the process of grafting the company aims to supplement its organizational learning through the acquisition of new personnel and disseminating their knowledge to the organization. In internationalization, the practice of knowledge grafting is used to overcome the issues of uncertainty related to the liability of foreignness and lack of international experience. (Johanson et al., 2020).

2.3 Management consulting

2.3.1 Introduction

According to the article “Explaining national variation in the use of management consulting knowledge: A framework” by Sturdy and O’Mahoney (2018) management consultancies are the main source of external knowledge in developed countries. However, according to them the main source of this consulting, in the western setting, are management consulting organizations instead of lone management consultants. According to Sturdy and O’Mahoney (2018), 70% of all management consultancy revenue comes from five countries, which are United States, Canada, France, United Kingdoms, and Germany, showing the imbalance in the usage of management consultancy on the global scale. While some of this imbalance is based on exporting management consulting with most of the big international companies being based in the United States and operating globally, there is, according to the article, variation in the overall usage of management consultancy. As the main source of outside organization knowledge and expertise management consulting could serve to supplement the organizational experience and help in SME internationalization. (Sturdy & O’Mahoney, 2018).

Consulting firms are at the apex of management consulting and the article “Knowledge-based innovation: emergence and embedding of new practice areas in management consulting firms” by Anand et al. (2007), which covers practice innovation in the field of management consulting with the focus on management consulting firms. However, the content of the article applies to management consulting in the larger context apart from the organizational elements. Such the definition of management consulting’s main asset as the expertise and competence of their personnel applies to the individual consultants and other practitioners in management consulting, as the individual differences in expertise and competence are not only the basis of management consulting service, but they also lead to the requirement of maintaining and gaining expertise in the chosen field. It is in the best interest of the management consulting field to make sure the knowledge transfer between the consultants and the customers is as effective as it can be. (Anand et al., 2007)

2.3.2 Critiques of management consultancy

According to the article “Management Consultancy: Issues, Perspectives, and Agendas” by Fincham and Clark (2002) a view of consultancy as an occupation is narrow and leads to problems due to the limited scope of the term consul-

tancy as understood in a professional setting. Instead, they see focusing on consultancy as a part of the business services industry and covering different professions with the common position compared to the market in knowledge, as a source of knowledge to the companies in the market, instead of a static criterion. The range of consultancies is wide and reaches from the biggest consultancy organizations in the world to the smallest independent consultants, while the focus of the studies is on the large consultancies it is not the whole picture. While in respects of the overall share of consulting income the large organizations come up ahead, in raw numbers the small-scale consultancies and single consultants make up a large portion of the consultancy industry. As mentioned before consultancy involves a large scope of different activities, ranging from very formalized fields such as accounting to less formal managerial consulting such as change management where the required skills are most often managerial rather than professional skills and rarely have an established accreditation system found in, for example, accounting. Internationalization consulting would fall into the informal consultation end of the spectrum where the skills the consultants bring to the table are related to their international experience, knowledge of different market entry modes, networks, and the ability to apply these skills to the company they are consulting. (Fincham & Clark, 2002).

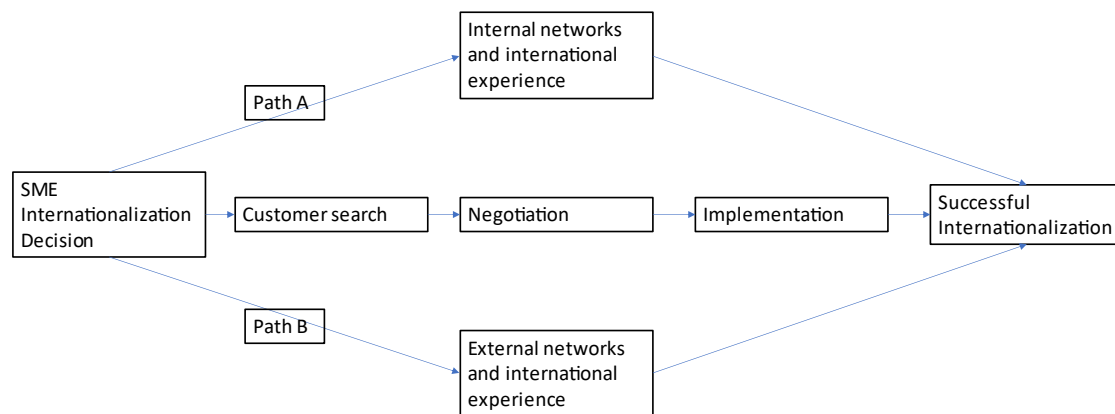
According to Sturdy (2009) in the article "Popular Critiques of Consultancy and a Politics of Management Learning?" consultants are knowledge mediators with the role of disseminating knowledge to the companies operating in each market. On the other hand, the article "Management Consultancy: Issues, Perspectives, and Agendas" by Fincham and Clark identified two distinctive views in the management consulting literature with the organizational development view of consulting having been dominant up to the mid-'80s, while newer research focuses on the "critical perspective". Organizational development research of consulting was mainly focused on the identification of problems and offering of solutions, in line with a more traditional view of consulting. On the other hand, the newer research or "critical perspective" argues against the organizational development notion of a consultancy profession on the basis, as they claim, of lacking consultant specific unique knowledge base, in comparison to for example medical professionals who have a clear professionally defined knowledge base they have, as consultants derive their knowledge from a variety of sources which relate to their specific area of expertise. For example, an accountant has accounting knowledge and an internationalization consultant has internationalization-specific knowledge, while both are consultants in their relation to the knowledge in the market. One of the most impactful differences is in the view the newer research has in the demand for consultants, as in the organizational development literature companies requiring consultants help is taken as given, while in the "critical perspective" the demand for consultants is dependent on their ability to communicate their usefulness to their potential customers. In this regard, the article by Sturdy (2009) about the critiques of consultancy is important due to highlighting the practices in the industry-leading to a negative reception on the customer side. With questioning of cost and value of consulting

being prevalent amongst the critique, it is important for consultancies, both big and small, to focus on what they can offer to their customers not to forget the growing importance of building lasting customer relationships, which are not only important due to increasing the customer life-time value but also through offering a base of references to offer when searching for new customers. (Fincham & Clark, 2002; Sturdy, 2009).

2.4 Framework

Figure 1 Theoretical framework

Visualization of the theoretical framework.



Proposition 1: SME consultation leads to a difference in the internationalization process.

The proposition of SME consultation leading to an improved internationalization process is the target of inquiry in this study, which seeks to identify differences in the internationalization processes between SMEs, in the agricultural sector, which engaged an outside consultation and those which internationalized on their own.

The framework is based on the resource-based view theory with its focus on the resources and capabilities of the company. International experience and networking are viewed as relevant resources for the success of SME internationalization according to prior research about SME internationalization. Consultation's importance in the framework is in establishing the basis for using external

knowledge as a substitute for the companies internally acquired networking and international experience as SMEs due to resource constraints are less likely to engage in knowledge grafting or other more resource-intensive processes of knowledge acquisition. This is represented by figure 1, by the division of the internationalization into two distinct paths, A and B, based on the source of knowledge used, external or internal.

There were three phases identified in the data gathering process, which were customer search, negotiation, and implementation. These phases are going to be covered in their theoretical basis in the following subsections.

2.4.1 Customer search

Customer search or better known in the theoretical literature customer acquisition is the process through which companies acquire new customers. Often customer acquisition, in the theoretical literature, is accompanied by customer retention, and these two concepts are indeed linked as customer acquisition is the side of acquiring new customers, while customer retention is focused on the side of maintaining existing customers and keeping them from changing to other companies' offerings. Customer acquisition is important to every company as it directly affects the survival of the company, as no company can survive if they are unable to attract customers.

According to Ang and Buttle (2006), customer acquisition is especially important to consider for the companies pursuing growth or new markets, whether domestically or internationally. Considering this it is clear that companies formulating internationalization strategies need to take into specific consideration how they gain access to prospective customers and acquire new customers, especially concerning the first customer in business to business industries where the acquisition of the first customer can make or break the market entry effort. (Ang & Buttle, 2006).

As for the core issues to consider in the customer acquisition process, according to Ang and Buttle (2006), there are three distinct considerations to make. The first one is who are the customers we want to go after? This is a core consideration as the company will have an easier time acquiring new customers when they are targeting the correct customer segment, which is interested in their product offering. This can have even more significance in the business-to-business context, as finding the correct customers can be the distinction between a company growing or failing. Especially influential this decision is when it comes to international market entry, as choosing the right customers to target first can be the reason the internationalization turns out to be successful while picking a wrong customer can lead to failure of the internationalization effort or even to the failure of the company. (Ang & Buttle, 2006).

The second consideration is how to reach the customers? This can concern the use of company networks, or just cold contacting the prospective customers. In the business-to-business context, the importance of networks is even more

prevalent as the number of people deciding upon the sales decisions is more limited, and finding the correct contacts can be the breakthrough the company requires to be able to acquire a new customer. In internationalization this concern is more prevalent as the networks the companies require to reach the prospective customer need to have been developed in the target market, while most of the companies have the main networks in their own country where they operate and participate in the sector. (Ang & Buttle, 2006).

The last consideration is what you offer to your customers? This consideration is focused on the product offering itself and whether it is interesting for the prospective customers. Even if you get in contact with the right customers, if your product offering does not meet their needs and requirements the customer relationship would fail to be established. (Ang & Buttle, 2006).

2.4.2 Negotiation

According to Uzo and Adigwe (2016), negotiation is a process through which the parties enter wishing they can reach a mutually beneficial agreement on shared issues they currently have no agreement on. This definition of negotiation helps describe it as a phase in the internationalization process. As customer search, negotiation can also be considered part of customer acquisition, but it is not limited to customer acquisition as negotiations happen between sellers and prospective buyers as well as within established customer relationships. (Uzo & Adigwe, 2016).

Three basic elements of negotiation, according to Caputo, Fiorentino, and Garzella (2018), are who and how many parties are involved, what the negotiations are concerning, and what are the goals of the parties. Who and how many parties are involved affect the negotiation dynamics, as negotiations between two parties have to only reach a mutual understanding between the two parties, while when you add more parties to the negotiation the number of required compromises increases exponentially. As an example, when you have two parties negotiating there is only a need for a compromise or mutually beneficial conclusion between parties A and B, so there is only one gap to bridge, while if you add party C to the negotiations you need to reach an agreement along three separate, but possibly overlapping, lines between A and B, B and C and C and A. However concerning business-to-business negotiations those usually happen between two parties, especially when concerning customer negotiations. (Caputo et al., 2018).

The second element is what the negotiations are concerning, whether the negotiations are focused on the price, amounts, or some other issues. What the negotiations about affect the negotiation strategies of the parties involved, as price negotiation is very different from negotiations on the required amounts or delivery schedule, while these can be and often are all involved in the first negotiations when the customer relationship is established, especially later on in the relationship the negotiations can be focused more on singular issues at hand such

as when and how the products are delivered or price adjustment negotiations. (Caputo et al., 2018).

As for the last element of the negotiations, which is the goals of the parties, it is often split between win-win and win-lose goals regarding whether the party seeks mutually satisfactory results or looks to gain an advantage at the expense of the other party. As an example of win-win negotiations, negotiations on the number of products to be delivered can be mutually beneficial especially if they concern the issue from the point of increasing demand for the product, for example, a mill requiring more grain for their business operations. As for win-lose negotiations, negotiations initiated by the buyer concerning price are often win-lose due to the goal often being to lower the cost of raw materials the company buys, which is a lose situation for the seller of the raw material. As an example, cheesemakers wanting to improve their profits by negotiating a lower price for the milk they buy. (Caputo et al., 2018).

2.4.3 Implementation

Implementation in internationalization can be concerning a wide variety of different specific issues such as logistics of delivery, building customer relations, or setting up payments, depending on the industry and the type of international trade they conduct. In very basic exporting logistics of delivery are one of the more important factors in implementation as delivering the product to an international market is distinctly different from delivery at the domestic market. Another important aspect to consider is how the payments can be received and what kind of documentation, regulations, and laws are affecting the business interaction in question.

According to the study conducted by Morgan, Katsikeas, and Vorhies (2012) commitment to the implementation of the export strategy is important for the success of the implementation. As they also noted it seems logical, but it is, however, an aspect often overlooked by entrepreneurs and managers, who are more interested in extensive planning of the exporting strategy than following through to make sure the plan is properly implemented. This can be seen in the failure to create lasting customer relationships and building a solid foundation for internationalization. Especially in exporting operations, it is easy to forget to build the customer relationships needed to maintain the customer base in the target country due to a lack of commitment to the internationalization implementation. While business-to-business exporting differs from business-to-customer the role of commitment to internationalization still affects the internationalization's success. In a business-to-business environment, the focus in implementation should be more on cultivating the relationships, in comparison to the marketing focus, which the Morgan et al. (2012) had, as business-to-business markets rely on relationships instead of marketing campaigns due to the low number of individuals deciding whether the sale is made and whether the company continues to buy from the seller. (Morgan et al., 2012).

3 DATA AND METHODOLOGY

To answer the question of the effect of consultation in the internationalization of SMEs, the research aims to analyze and evaluate the number of problems and issues faced by the agricultural SMEs in their prior international market entry efforts. The research is conducted through unstructured interviews, where the SME entrepreneurs are asked questions about their internationalization experiences, the aim is to get a retrospective narration of the issues and experiences the entrepreneur faced in their first international project. Through comparative analysis of the issues faced by the case companies, the research aims to identify differences caused by the presence of consultation, whether paid or arranged through membership in an industry association, to analyze whether consultation has a positive effect in avoiding common issues and substituting management and entrepreneur international experience. This leads to the first hypothesis, which is that consultation helps SMEs perform better in internationalization by helping to avoid key issues.

The strategy focusing on the experienced issues in internationalization was chosen to be able to compare SMEs in the context of issues they faced and through identifying key issues in the industry to create a pool of common issues against which the companies and their successfulness in internationalization can be compared to identify possible differences between companies with consultation and without consultation affecting the results. This approach allows companies to be compared without a requirement of having a different result of their internationalization, namely whether the companies were able to establish and maintain their international operations or not.

The data needed for this analysis is concerned with the issues faced during the internationalization process, whether the company entrepreneur or management has prior international experience, did the company receive consultation concerning their internationalization efforts, and what kind of networks they had built for their internationalization. The issues are of interest to evaluate the differences in the success. Prior international experience including foreign market experience and general knowledge of market entry strategies is of interest to establish the differences between the companies due to prior international experience, which has been found to influence internationalization in prior research. The presence of consultation is important to establish due to the study concerning the effect of consultation in the success of the internationalization, which makes this one of the main data points with the issues faced during the internationalization to establish the differences between companies that used consultation and those which did not. The extent and usage of networks are of interest due to the prior research, like prior international experience, which has found networking to be a contributor to the success of SME internationalization.

3.1 Research strategy

The research strategy used in this study is based on a collection of data from non-structured interviews and supporting secondary data. The research itself is based on a case study approach which starts from setting up a non-consulting and a consulting case company, on their approaches to internationalization, the findings from the case companies data are then collaborated by data gathered from consultants and managers in the consulting companies working with the internationalization of agricultural companies, farmers association managers and secondary data sources to strengthen the credibility and generalizability of the findings by using this more general data. The data analysis was conducted as a thematic analysis, where the data is categorized, and overarching themes are drawn from the data.

3.1.1 Research questions

The non-structured interviews were based on two different sets of guiding questions for the interviews, which were divided based on the interviewee groupings with entrepreneurs and company personnel having one set, and the consultants and third-party interviewee's having another one. The questions for the entrepreneurs were aimed to establish the process the company takes in their international trade from the beginning to the normalization of the trade relations with their international trading partners. On the other hand, the questions for the consultant and third-party interviewee's were focused on the general picture of the agricultural internationalization amongst the small and medium-sized agricultural companies in general, including for example questions of common issues faced in internationalization and reasons why small and medium-sized agricultural companies seek assistance in their internationalization.

The questions are delved into in-depth, with the following tables 1, 2, 3, and 4. The questions and their reasons are explained in detail in this section. Understanding the questions helps in interpreting the findings from the data collection by showing the themes the questions were based around.

Table 1 Table of questions 1

Questions for the entrepreneurial interviewees part 1.

Question group	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4
Pre- questions	Was consulting used in the internationalization process (paid or free, for example from association sources)?	What was the target country?	In which countries you operated presently?	
Starting questions	When was the company founded?	How many employees?	Role in the company (of the interviewee)?	When the project was started?
Group 1	How they decided to embark on the process of internationalization?	Where the idea came from?	Who were involved in the decision making?	
Group 2	What options were considered for the internationalization?	Use of consulting? Relying on own prior experience and networks?	Why they decided to go with the chosen option?	
Group 3	Was there prior experience of international markets (general or the target market specific)?	Networks in the target market?		

These pre-questions were used to gather information about the case companies before the interview to allow the interviewer to establish whether the company was in the category of consulting user or non-consulting company. Apart from this, the questions were used to gain information on the area of operations of the company during the internationalization and currently.

Then for the questions, which were asked during the interview and why they were used in data collection. The starting questions: these questions were used to establish the basic information of the case companies, such as size, founding, and when the internationalization project was started. Apart from the company questions, there was also the question of the position of the interviewee to establish the viewpoint the interview was made from.

The first question group for the interview: these questions were asked to gain information on the process through which the case companies decided to start their internationalization process and who was involved in the decision-making process.

The second question group was included for the following reasons. These questions were used to get information on the process through which the case companies decided upon their chosen internationalization approach, which in this research were one using consulting and one not using consulting in consolidating their internationalization process.

The third question group was used for the following reasons. These questions aimed to gather information on the pre-existing experience and extent of pre-existing networks the company could use in their internationalization process.

Table 2 Table of questions 2

Questions for the entrepreneurial interviewees part 2.

Question group	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4
Group 4 (Consulting)	How long was the market entry project? Was the schedule kept?	How long did the consulting last (start to finish or certain phase)?	Was the consulting paid or not (for example, through chambers of commerce or industry association)?	What was included in consulting? Single or multiple sources of consulting?
Group 4 (Non-consulting)	How long was the market entry project? Was the schedule kept?	How did you deal with emergent issues?	What issues emerged during the internationalization?	
Group 5	How did the information gathering happen?	How was the networking done?	For buyers, information of the local regulations, business traditions and so on?	
Group 6 (Consulting)	How did the consulting affect the project (in your opinion)? Positive or negative (perceived impact)?	Would you, or have you, used consulting after the project?	What was the primary benefit of consulting?	
Group 6 (Non-consulting)	What were the main issues with the project?	Were there points where more information or help would have been needed?		

The fourth question group is split into two separate versions due to the differences in interviewing the consulting and non-consulting case companies, following are the reasonings for the questions for the consulting case company: First there are general questions to gather information of the duration of the initial market entry process and whether the pre-planned timetable was kept or whether there were delays and unexpected issues in the process. Then the second part of the question group focuses on gathering information about the consulting used in the process, the length of consulting, whether it was paid for or free, through associations or government funding for example, and whether the case company used a singular source of consulting or multiple sources of consulting.

As for the fourth question group for the non-consulting case company. These questions were used, as with the consulting case company, to gather information on the duration and possible delays in the internationalization process. The second part was focused on the issues and how the case company dealt with them.

The fifth question group was used for the following reasons. This question group focused on the gathering of information regarding how the case companies approached their internationalization regarding information gathering on the target market and the other hand how the case companies approached their networking and customer search in the target market.

The sixth question group is again divided between the consulting and non-consulting variants. The consulting questions are reasoned as follows. These questions aim to gather information on the perception of the case company on the usefulness of the consulting they received, the benefits, and whether the consulting was seen as a positive impact on the internationalization process.

As for the questions for the non-consulting case company, those were reasoned as follows. Through these questions the aim was to gather information on the issues the non-consulting case company faced, and, on the topics, they would have needed help during their internationalization.

Table 3 Table of questions 3

Questions for the non-entrepreneurial interviewees part 1.

Question group	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3
Starting questions	In which organisation do you work in?	What is your role in the organisation?	
Group 1	What type of reasons are behind the decisions of the entrepreneurs to internationalize?	Do the entrepreneurs usually contact you themselves for consultation or do they receive consultation as part of a wider internationalization project?	
Group 2	What are the reasons for entrepreneurs to participate in internationalization projects?	What are the common issues they require help in?	For example documentation, or cultural differences?
Group 3	Do the participating entrepreneurs usually have own prior experience of international markets?	How well established the international networks of the participating entrepreneurs usually are?	

The non-entrepreneurial questions used for the association and consultation interviewees were decided upon as follows. Starting questions: these questions were meant to establish the point of view of the interviewee. Though gathering information of their organization and their position in the organization they are part of.

As for the first question group, it was reasoned as follows. These questions aim to gather information from the outside view on the reasons behind why entrepreneurs contact the consultants, do they usually do it individually or through participation in a larger project group. And whether the entrepreneurs who participate in the consulting are taking the initiative to seek consultancy for themselves or whether they are sought after or encouraged by the consulting parties to take part in different consulting projects or other consulting opportunities.

The reasons for the second question group were: these questions aim to search the reasons behind the desire to use consulting from the participants, whether they have certain common issues they most often require consultation and assistance on. As examples of whether the common issues concern documentation, cultural issues, or implementation-related issues.

The third question group was reasoned as follows. These questions aim to get information on the prior experience or pre-existing established networks among the common participant on the international markets. This is meant to gauge the underlying level of internationalization abilities the participants have before they participated in the consulting.

Table 4 Table of questions 4

Questions for the non-entrepreneurial interviewees part 2.

Question group	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4
Group 4	How long the consultations usually last, through the duration of the internationalisation?	Do the projects usually stay in their schedule? What is the common timeframe of the consultation?	What type of services are usually included in you consultation?	Is the consultation you offer usually paid, free, or using some governmental project funding?
Group 5	How satisfied the participants usually are?	Does the consultation usually lead to a successful internationalization?		
Group 6	What countries the participants usually want to do a market entry in?	Are there favoured markets?		

The fourth question group was reasoned as follows. These questions aim to gather information on the consultations themselves, for example on the duration of, is it common the internationalization projects usually keep on schedule, the types of services offered by the consultants for their customers, and whether they offer free consulting or are paid to consult or is the consulting usually in part or completely funded by use of different governmental project funding schemes.

The Fifth question group includes the following reasons. These questions are aimed at gathering information on the common feedback from the participants regarding the consulting offered, and whether the consultation usually leads to a successful international entry.

The questions of the sixth question group on the other hand are focused on gathering information on the most common countries of interest regarding internationalization from the viewpoint of the association and consultant interviewees.

3.1.2 Research goal and scope

The objectives of this research are to establish the process of internationalization for both case companies, evaluate the success of the case companies, and establish the generalizability of the findings.

Establishing the process of internationalization for both case companies through the interviews with the case companies is an objective in the research as it is needed for the comparisons to be made between the process of internationalization in consulting and non-consulting cases. As internationalization is a process it is beneficial for the research to gain information of the process of internationalization of the case companies, to be able to make comparisons between them in different sections of the internationalization process. For example, to compare the customer search between the case companies, there is a need to gather information on how the process of customer search proceeded in the consulting and non-consulting companies. For this research, it is beneficial to be able to create a visualization of the process the case companies went through in the international market entry, to use in concert with the quotations from the interviews and secondary data to clarify the timeline of the internationalization and highlight the differences between the case companies.

Another objective in this research is to evaluate the success of the internationalization of the case companies to establish whether there were differences in the outcomes between the consulting and non-consulting case companies. This will be done using three categories created for evaluating the differences between the successfulness of two successful international entries, which are the continuation, expansion, and profitability vectors of successfulness. If the international trade the company has been conducting is continuous in comparison to one time or repeated exporting if the company has expanded to different international markets from the first internationalization and then whether the international trade is profitable for the company.

As for the last objective it is to establish generalizability through the interviews with the association and consulting interviewees, with their perceptions on the general situation concerning the agricultural small and medium-sized enterprise internationalization in the context of the Finnish agricultural sector.

The research was conducted within a year, research was non-funded and the resources at the disposal of the researcher were limited to those accessible through the educational institute.

The span of the research was limited to a period of one year, which created difficulties regarding the extent of gathering interview data, as the interviewee

search could have used a long time to get more entrepreneurs, consultants, association, and government officials to be interviewed for a wider range of different sources for the research.

3.1.3 Case study method

The research method used in this research is the non-structured interview method, which is used to establish the empirical basis for this research through gathering and analyzing data from the non-structured interviews conducted during the research. The non-structured interviews were chosen to allow for emergent themes in the gathered data, as rigidly structured interviews would stifle the interviewee's in their answers and could lead to important information being left out. As non-structured interviews allow for more fluent telling on topics such as the process of internationalization and as the research aims to create a picture of the overall internationalization from the viewpoint of the case companies it is beneficial to let the interviewees answer the general guiding questions on at their own pace and allow the interview conversation to raise topics, which might not have been noted prior by the interviewer. The interview data was used to create, with secondary data of the companies, two cases for the comparison of consulting and non-consulting approaches to internationalization.

The case study approach used in this qualitative study is the method Denny Gioia is attributed for creating. Also known as the Gioia methodology, it is based on the data structure to show the relationships between the first-order codes, the second-order themes, and the overarching dimensions. However, the data structure is not in itself enough as a representation of the data analysis. To get from the data to the grounded theory the relationships between the emergent concepts need to be shown. (Gehman et al., 2018; Gioia et al., 2013).

The Gioia methodology starts with the process of creating the interview questions and preparing for the interviews. The idea is to create the questions in a way in which they are not leading the interviewee but guiding the interviewee in a way in which they can tell the story, so to speak, in their own words allowing for emergent topics which the interviewer might not otherwise have thought of. This leads to one of the basic ideas in the Gioia methodology, which is to let the data speak for itself instead of creating theories before the data collection which could bias the interview and data collection through the search for specific answers. Of course, there should be a research question, and it is important to make sure the research stays on focus and the interviews gather data of the research question and some assumptions of what might be important. It is also important to make sure those assumptions do not bias the results. An open mind is key for making findings using this method. You collect all the data available to get an as extensive picture as possible, absorbing all the information possible. (Gioia et al., 2013).

When it comes to coding of the data it is important to start as close to the interviewee terminology, phrasing, and point of view as possible and leave worrying about overarching dimensions and second-order themes to their phase. However, there is a risk of setting oneself in the point of view of the interviewee, which should be avoided to maintain the point of view of a researcher to be able to conduct informed theory building from the data. For this reason, it would be beneficial to have someone, in the case of a multiple-member researcher team, who would be able to critique the findings which might be too much of a reach to make. It is however not always possible to have a multi researcher team, so keeping a critical mind is important when using the method to not get carried away by the “story”. The analysis of the data, which started with the coding of the first order codes started close to the interview material starts moving towards categorization based on similarities and differences as the second-order themes start to emerge and bring the multitude of first-order codes created in the first phase towards some sense of order. After, and during this, as analysis and coding are hard to keep separate, the second-order themes are starting to emerge the search for the processes and overarching dimensions working behind the data starts. This brings the data closer to theory as possible explanations start to emerge for the phenomena which are being observed. (Gioia et al., 2013).

The next step is seen as being of particular importance in representing the findings in Gioia methodology according to Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2013) is the building of a data structure. The data structure helps to visualize the data and think of it in more theoretical form, as it allows the researcher to view the data from a big picture point of view showing how the first order codes connect to the second-order themes and come together as overarching dimensions. This comes to the mantra of the Gioia methodology, which is “No data structure; know nothing” (Gioia et al., 2013).

Another important point brought up by the authors in the article about the Gioia methodology is the constant cycle between different levels of analysis and the relevant literature to look for possible precedents in the prior research. This process of perspective cycling helps in making discoveries from the data, which they point out must be done in a way in which the prior research is known to an extent as to not reinvent the wheel while still not getting held back by the previous assumptions in the field. (Gioia et al., 2013).

Then comes the stage of moving from a static representation of the data in the data structure to turning it into a presentation of the theory, which was derived from the empirical research data. As the researchers say in the article about Gioia methodology, the resulting theoretical model should present the relationship dynamics between the concepts, which emerged from the analyzing of the data and explain the phenomenon, which is of interest in the study. (Gioia et al., 2013).

3.2 Research Setting

The research setting is the agricultural small and medium-sized enterprise field, with two agricultural companies chosen as case companies to compare the differences between consulting and non-consulting approaches to internationalization.

The case companies for this research are in the category of small and medium-sized agricultural enterprises.

The first case company is a grain exporting cooperative, founded by farmers to further their profitability through internationalization. The company did not rely on consulting in their internationalization, instead of relying on the prior experience of international trade and networks they had through their chief executive. The chief executive of the company had been working in farmers association circles both domestically and by Europewide, which allowed the company to have access to a network in their target markets to find buyers and partners for cooperation. As for the prior international experience, the chief executive had been working on exporting projects similar to the ones conducted by the company, and the company was able to rely on this experience in dealing with the practicalities and issues arising during the internationalization process of the company.

The second case company is a reindeer and agricultural tourism company, which has existed for generations. The company relied on accessible consulting services in consolidating its internationalization. The company originally got involved with international customers through a cooperation with a domestic partner, which wanted to add their offerings to their catalog of products offered to international customers. After this initial contact with the international customer base, the entrepreneurs decided to initiate their internationalization process and started taking part in association-organized networking projects, in different education courses, and searching for international partners for customer acquisition. The research environment is in the Finnish small and medium-sized agricultural company sector, and regarding the target markets, they are within the European Union internal market zone.

The Finnish small and medium-sized agricultural sector is divided into many small and medium-sized companies, most of which are family-owned or single entrepreneur-owned companies. There are also cooperatives among the small and medium-sized agricultural companies, while most of the larger companies operating in the agricultural sector are also cooperatives.

3.3 Data collection

Data gathering for this research was conducted through interviewing entrepreneurs, from small and medium-sized agricultural companies, consultants and

managers from consulting organizations, and members of agricultural and governmental organizations working on internationalization efforts in the agricultural sector. The conducted interviews are non-structured interviews focused on gathering information about the process and issues of internationalization in the agricultural sector. Non-structured interviews were chosen as the method of conducting the interviews to enable emergent topics to arise from the interview data, as the research aims to gain an understanding of the processual differences between consulting and non-consulting small and medium-sized agricultural companies. Apart from interviews in this research, there were existing data sources used, such as project reports from international consulting projects in which the interviewed consulting organizations had taken part in the specific projects.

Sample selection for the research was based on the categorization of the interviewees into entrepreneur, consultant, and third-party interview candidates, which were then approached through email and, to an extent, LinkedIn to gather the necessary interviews for the research.

In practice, this sample selection resulted in a variety of interviewees, which can be seen in the following table covering the interviewees and their naming for the clarity of explaining the findings of this study.

Table 5 Interviewee table

Interviewee table.

Source	Length	Role in internationalization	Interviewee	Identification
Interview	83 minutes	Non-consulting company	Entrepreneur	Non-consulting company
Interview	66 minutes	Consulting company	Entrepreneur	Consulting company
Interview	56 minutes	Consultant	Consultant	Education consultant
Interview	60 minutes	Consultant	Consultant	Agricultural consultant
Interview	45 minutes	Consultant	Manager	Consultant manager
Interview	72 minutes	Association	Head of an association	Association head
Secondary	75 pages	Catalog of experiences	Publication of specific project experiences	Catalog of project experiences

As can be seen from table 5 there were two entrepreneurs, three consultants, and one association personnel interviewed. The entrepreneurs interviewed were from the two case companies and their interviews were the basis of the consulting and non-consulting company cases in this study, complemented with secondary data collected from their companies' webpages. Among the consultants interviewed there were three different viewpoints for consultation included, with

the education consultant coming from the educational sector and working on the internationalization projects from educating and internationalization project side, the agricultural consultant comes from the background of working directly with the agricultural producers with issues such as business development, which includes possibilities of internationalization, and then lastly the consultant manager who works on a managerial role in a company offering agricultural consulting, in the role leading the company's business services which deal with among domestic agricultural consulting with the considerations of internationalization as part of business development. The association interviewee is among other roles a head of an agricultural association, a member of European agricultural organizations, and an expert for an official European governmental body. The secondary source is a project report publication of an internationalization project, which was conducted to promote Finnish agricultural internationalization and includes experiences from the participating entrepreneurs.

The identification factor mentioned in table 5 is the naming, which will be used in this study in explaining the findings, as for clarity reasons just numbering the interviewees would be a source of confusion and as it is possible to make the findings clearer using this strategy of presenting the data sources with specified identifiers.

3.4 Data analysis

The data analysis in this study is based on thematic analysis. The themes emerging from the data are used to establish patterns in the observable behavior of the case companies when it comes to their internationalization. The analysis also aims to set up cases around the interviewed companies, to create two cases to compare and make distinctions between.

The coding for the thematic analysis consisted of three stages. The first stage was the coding of the source data, using first-order codes close to the quotations, the second stage was grouping the first-order codes into second-order codes, and the last stage was connecting the second-order codes into overarching themes for the analysis. Coding was done using the Atlas. ti program as a tool, as it offers easier access to the quotations and makes managing the coding and the overall analysis easier due to ease of maintaining order in the coding.

Before the coding itself, the interviews had to be conducted and transcribed to be usable as a source of data for the study. The interviews were conducted, as mentioned prior, using non-structured interviews, which allowed the interviewees to tell their experiences of the internationalization in the agricultural small and medium-sized enterprise context in their own words giving room for emergent data to be included. The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes in length and were conducted using digital conferencing tools such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom, due to the unfortunate circumstances preventing the conducting of interviews in person. The interviews were conducted

within one month, and the interviewee prospecting had been started half a year before the conducting of the interviews. The interviews were conducted in Finnish as it was the language the interviewees were most comfortable with and able to answer the questions in. The interviews were recorded on a handheld recorder, which stores the data on its memory and does not share data to any internet networks, which was chosen as the method of recording the interviews to maintain the security of the interview data. After the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed, omitting private and identifying information to maintain anonymity in the collected data. The transcription of the data was done in Finnish as had the conducting of the interviews. The transcribed data was then imported into the Atlas.ti for the coding process.

The first stage of coding was conducted after the data was transcribed. The first order codes used in the first stage are codes, which are close to the original quotation in their wording. As the data was gathered and transcribed in Finnish this was the stage where the language of the data analysis was changed from Finnish to English as the first order codes are used in the data structures and affect the presentation of the data. The decision to change the language in this point was influenced by the amount of content to be included in the data representation, as most of the textual data gathered and transcribed will not be directly used in the paper, and the language of the textual data does not affect the coding effort in a major way, it was a reasonable decision to leave the change in analyzing language on the coding of first-order codes.

The second stage of the coding process was the coding of the second order themes and assigning the first-order codes into the corresponding higher-order theme for analyzing purposes. The second-order themes used in the categorization of the first-order codes revolved around the stages of customer search, negotiation, and implementation, which were found to stage the case companies went through in their internationalization process. The second-order themes included examples such as logistics, customer source, and partner interaction.

The third stage in the coding process was to find the overarching dimensions prevalent in the codes and divided the second-order themes based on those distinctions. The dimensions concerning this study were such as customer search, negotiation, and implementation, which were found to be relevant stages in the internationalization of the case companies. This dimensional division emerged from the data and was the basis for the finalized structuring of the data. The case companies had distinct differences in their dealing with these stages as will be shown in the findings section. In the case of this study, the overarching dimensions tie the two different approaches to internationalization, from the analysis and coding of the data, together in a structural view.

The fourth stage of the analysis process was to organize the findings into a data structure for clarifying the relationships between the emergent data points found during the coding process. The data structures were built based on dividing the codes, themes into the overarching dimensions of customer search, nego-

tiation, and implantation, which were found to be phased in the internationalization process with different approaches adopted for each by the two case companies.

The type of consulting used in the consulting case company included consulting received from the local travel association, peer networks, marketing company, and the educational courses provided by the educational institutions and associations in the region. These constitute different types of consulting sources, contrary to the traditional view held of consulting as a well-defined, paid, and one-directional, in this research the consulting also includes unpaid consulting from sources such as peer networks, associations, and to extent partner companies.

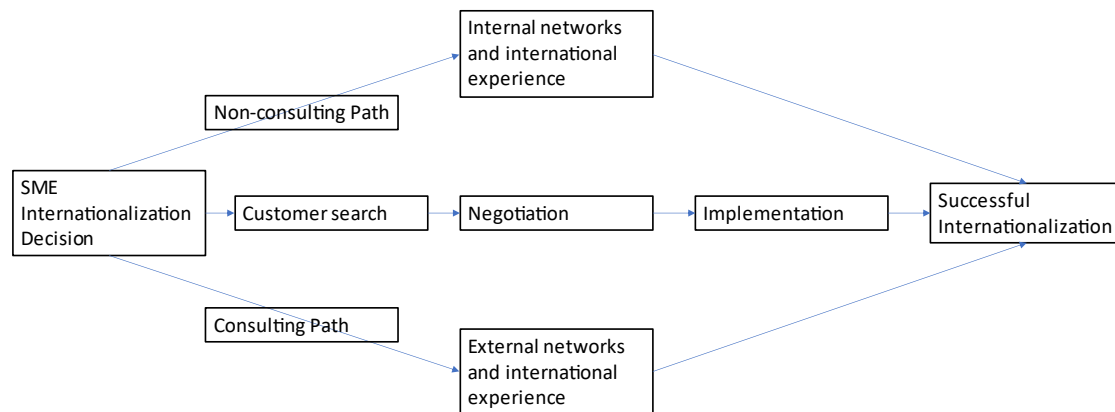
4 FINDINGS

Based on the analysis of the data of the non-consulting case company, there are relevant differences in the process of internationalization of the case companies. During the analysis, there was established a process of internationalization both companies used. This process followed a three-step sequence of customer search, negotiation, and implementation. As the following figure shows the differences spring from the source of knowledge used in the implementation of the different portions of the internationalization process.

As Figure 2 shows, there are differences between consulting and non-consulting case companies in the stages of customer search and implementation, while in the negotiation phase the case companies were following similar patterns in their processes. The figure shows the different sources of knowledge used in the stages of internationalization between the consulting and non-consulting companies to clarify the found processual flow of internationalization in the case companies.

Figure 2 Processual differences between consulting and non-consulting case companies

Processual differences between consulting and non-consulting companies.



Note. The consulting company relied on external knowledge from consulting partners, while non-consulting relied on internal company knowledge.

As can be seen in figure 2 the consulting case company used external sources derived from the consulting partners' expertise in the stages of customer search and implementation. In the customer search phase, the consulting case company used the available international networking events offered by the local

association to create contacts and search for partners and customers abroad for their business.

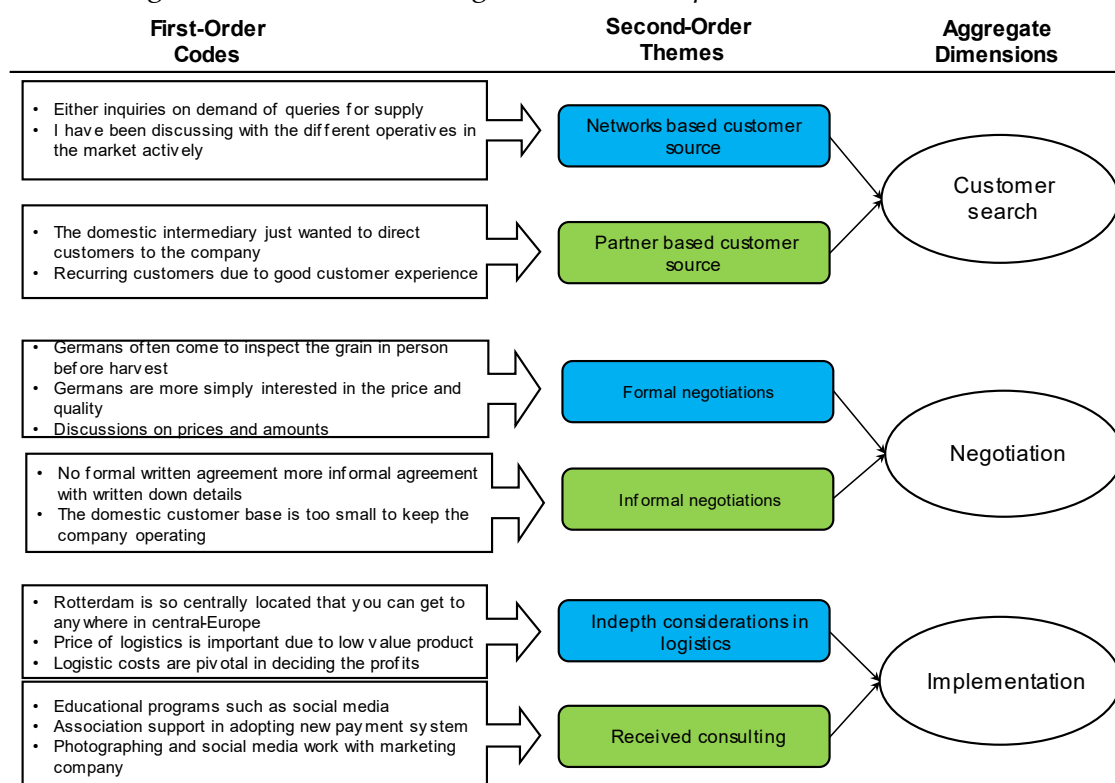
“As for our customer acquisition we started in a way, as there is an agricultural tourism association which promotes, so we have been members since the beginning, but we started to take a more active part when there started to be these farm trips for foreign customers and agencies.” -Consulting case company

As can be seen from the interview quotation once the consulting case company wanted to start their customer acquisition, they went to their local association to partake in the networking possibilities they offered for their members, as the consulting case company lacked their international networks to rely on in their customer search.

Following is figure 3 where the differences between the consulting and non-consulting companies in their internationalization process. The data structure is split into the three phases for internationalization both case companies experienced in their internationalization as aggregate dimensions.

Figure 3 General data structure

Data structure concerning the customer search, negotiation, and implementation.



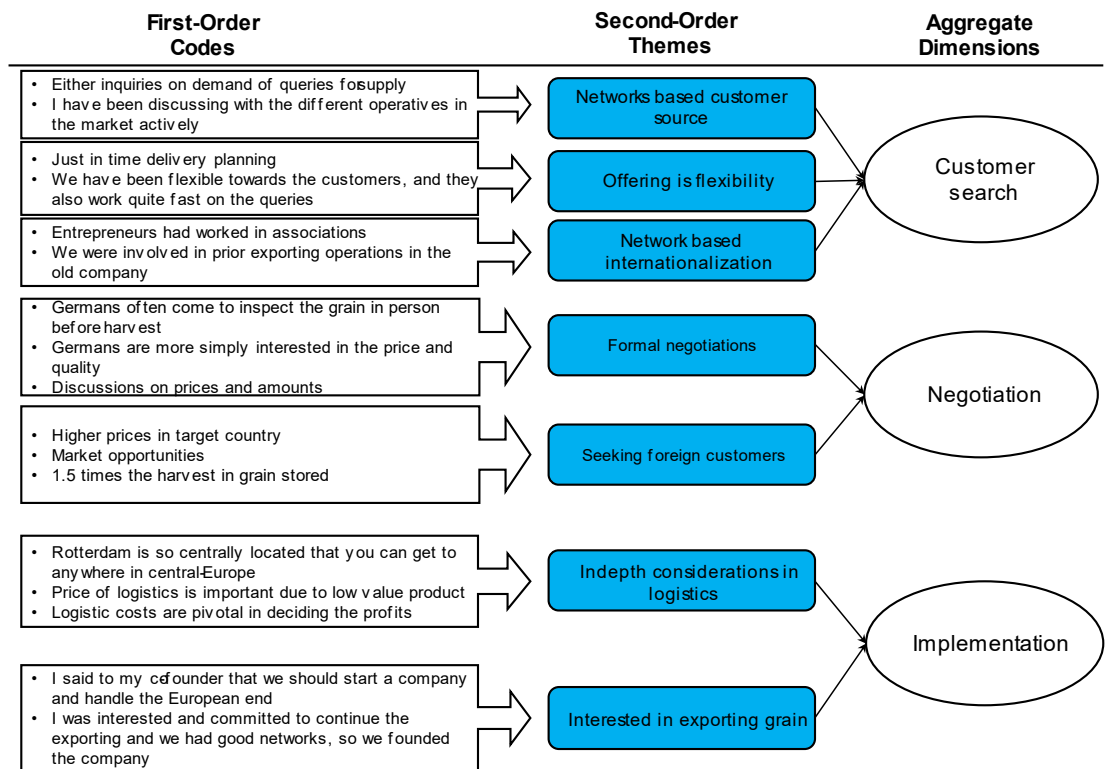
Note. The First and Second-order codes/themes are color-coded. The light blue color refers to codes and themes related to the non-consulting company and the light green color refers to the consulting company.

This data structure in figure 3 highlights the differences between the consulting and non-consulting case companies in their approach to the internationalization process. These differences are looked at more in-depth by splitting them into the two different paths and then comparing the points of difference through the use of outside the cases data to generalize upon the findings.

4.1 Path 1: Internationalization without consulting

Figure 4 Non-consulting data structure

Data structure concerning the customer search, negotiation, and implementation in the non-consulting case company.



4.1.1 Reasons for internationalization

The first case company can be labeled born global as they pursued international markets from the beginning and the cooperation aimed to access international sales channels.

“Yeah, it (the company) was founded in 2017. Actually, there is such background that I was involved in a similar company as a CEO, and there we had issues with one exporting project in China.” -Non-consulting case company

“Both of us had our own strong contacts to the European markets and I had an interest in continuing with the exporting and trade, as we had good farmer networks in Finland, so we founded the new company.” – Non-consulting case company

As can be seen from the interview quote the co-founder and the CEO of the new company had been involved in international trade in their prior work as a CEO of a similar company, which had faced issues with a particular trade and led to the founders moving on to the new company and starting over with their networks and prior experience as a basis. As can be seen from the second quote the founders also had strong networks in Europe and Finland and were in a good position to continue with their new company after the old one, they had been involved in had run into trouble due to issues with an exporting project. The networks both on the international stage and amongst the Finnish farmers allowed them from the founding of the company to access international markets quickly, and the company itself was founded for exporting purposes. These quotes are both of the situations when founding the company, and of the background of the founders, one of which was interviewed for this research. In short, the non-consulting case company started as a sort of successor to the previous company, which had ended tied up in a single failed project and had no resources to keep their operations running. Apart from these experiences and networks from the prior company, the founders had also been working on the farmers' association and were familiar with the European umbrella organization and people from the other countries' farmers associations through this.

4.1.2 Customer search

The background of having networks and prior experience working in a company with international agricultural exporting operations affected the way the non-consulting company conducted its customer search in the following ways.

On the topic of choosing the customers, in the case of the non-consulting company. One big source of customers and prospects for the non-consulting company comes from the commitments made by the prior company, which it was unable to fulfill due to the issues it ran into in a specific exporting project to a country where the payments are not always met. While it might not be correct to state that the non-consulting company inherited customers from the company its founders were involved in, as the prior company still exists in a dormant state, in practice the non-consulting company took over the exporting business of the old one in the European market. This however is not a source of customers that exist in a vacuum as the customers the non-consulting and the prior company service have been found, contacted, and gained as customers using the networks the co-founders had in the European agricultural sector. The quotations concerning the inherited commitments are in the following section.

“We had contracts in the prior company for a long-time span, and the company was not able to meet those commitments”-Non-consulting

“Yeah, in practice it went so, we might not have inherited, but we actually saved the (prior)company from ending up in trouble with their trade partners as it would have

led to contract violations, but there we only maybe a year left in the contracts, so we made sure the contracts got fulfilled. So, in that way.” -Non-consulting

As the quotations show the prior company, which the founders were involved in, but not as full owners, had ended up in a situation where it was unable to fulfill its contractual obligations. This led to the non-consulting company upholding the existing contracts and starting to operate in the European market. This is one way the company gained customers and ties into the basis of the customer search conducted by the non-consulting company, which is the use of their networks.

The main avenue of customer search in the non-consulting company is through the networking and networks of the founders of the company, both in their prior networks and their current involvements in the agricultural associations in Finland and Europe.

“The co-founder is a good talker and a great marketer, so he has been getting us other contracts.” -Non-consulting

“We have contacts, and in a way, we know both the agricultural field in Finland and of course then in the exporting side we have good contacts.” -Non-consulting

“ We have also had this Agricultural exporting project, which in a way does not really belong to our company’s operations, although I am involved in both, but this is kind of agricultural association project, which we aim to promote exporting amongst the producers.” -Non-consulting

The prior quotations are an example of the network basis the founders have, which they use to search for prospective customers. The networks the company has relied on for its international customer search have been built by the founders who work in the agricultural association in Finland and companies operating in the agricultural sector and have exporting operations. Both the interviewee and the co-founder have worked in companies in the agricultural sector outside of the one they were involved in before the founding of the non-consulting company. Apart, from the experience and networks forged working on the agricultural sector the interviewee and the co-founder, as mentioned, both had worked on the Finnish agricultural association in the past, and as the networks in the European agricultural associations and the sector overall are tight-knit, this has allowed them to create networks, which include many prospective customers and opportunities for exporting contracts.

When it comes to reaching the customers, this was done using the networks in line with the prior step of choosing the right customers. In the case of reaching the customers the non-consulting company’s networks were used extensively to gain access to new customers and spread the information over the company’s offering to new prospective customers. The importance of the networks created by the non-consulting company and its founders is highlighted in the case as the customer search is conducted based on the networks the entrepreneurs are part of and through which they have access to a large portion of the European grain-producing and processing sector. The contacting of customers based on these existing networks is, as can be seen from the following quotations

from the non-consulting interview, working in two different ways, which are either the customers contacting the company asking for prices and amounts of the grain they could offer for the customers or through their interactions within the networks the non-consulting company has. As an example, in the German market, the company is actively in contact with the different prospective customers and already acquired customers, not only on the topic of whether they have demand for the product the company is offering but also on another topic, as the founders maintain their networks. This leads to both found customers and customers finding the non-consulting company as a prospective supplier.

" From the part of Germany, it was pretty much either me asking 'hey how does it look, is there a need for grain' and then on the other hand there often are queries from them"-Non-consulting

" From Germany there are many, and we get plenty of queries, of course, I am also in contact with different actors within a year and we talk plenty of other things also"-Non-consulting

What the company offers for the customers for them to be interested in their offering. The main offering of the non-consulting company offers to the prospective customers, as it is a small and medium-sized company, is the flexibility in delivery for the needs of the customer company. As can be seen from the following quotations the customers usually cannot take all the stock in at once due to warehousing constraints, leading to them favoring the flexibility offered by the non-consulting company, which is ready to deliver the products in the agreed schedules. On top of which the non-consulting company also offers the possibility of fulfilling orders, which were not agreed upon in the contract when the customer company finds themselves lacking a certain kind of raw material. As the small and medium-sized companies are not able to compete on the economies of scale it is, as shown in the quotations important to find a specific advantage they can cultivate for their company to compete with, which in this non-consulting case company is the flexibility in delivery. This also allows for building a deeper customer relationship with the customers they have helping the non-consulting company in maintaining its customer base. In achieving this level of flexibility, the extensive networks of the founders are also able to help as they have deep ties in the Finnish agricultural field and can gain access to extra products through these networks if the customers require a more or different type of grain than the company and its contract farmers can provide from their warehouses and grain silos.

" Usually, it goes so that as they do not have the possibility of taking all the product into their warehouses at once, so because of that they probably want us to work with shipping containers, so they take the products kind of just in time, maybe 4 containers, 2 containers at a time"-Non-consulting

" Yes, we can. I have to say, that we, of course, have always been flexible towards them, as they send surprisingly fast queries of needing to get the product delivered as fast as possible"-Non-consulting

" Yes, we can handle them somehow, even if they suddenly tell us that they now need this and this quality, even if it is not specified in the contract, we as a small operator

can find them the shipments for the need they have, so we can also be flexible”-Non-consulting

The customer search of the non-consulting company was overall based around the use of their networks to search for and acquire new customers and spread the word of their offerings to new prospects.

4.1.3 Negotiation

After the customer search has been conducted comes to the phase of negotiation in which the parties involved aim to reach their negotiation goals.

Parties involved in the non-consulting case were limited to two, with the customer prospect and the company being the only parties involved. As the non-consulting company operates in the business-to-business sector its customer negotiations are done directly between two companies, the non-consulting case company, and the customer company, while the number of customers in a market is not limited to one customer there were no multilateral negotiations the non-consulting company would have been taking part in.

What the negotiations were concerning were the amounts, the pricing, the delivery timing, and the quality offered. As the following quotations show the negotiations followed the seasonal cycle, which is common to the agricultural sector as the production of the product from sowing to the harvest takes months and in this case, in Finland, there is only one harvest per year for grain crops. The negotiations start in the spring when the companies start to discuss the amounts they might require in the following year, with a preliminary agreement reached before the crops are sown, to make sure the non-consulting company can offer the required amounts of the product to the customers, due to the long production cycle it is required to get the right amounts of the demanded products sown in the spring for them to be deliverable later in the year. Then in the summer and fall periods before the harvest, especially the German customers like to visit the fields to inspect the product before reaching the contract for the year, specifying the amounts to be delivered. In this stage, there are also the preliminary negotiations on the pricing of the product, while the prices are not yet locked there is a preliminary price decided upon which can change if the demand and supply situation changes in between the preliminary agreement and the delivery as grain price are floating in the market instead of being a fixed price item. As a German specific point, the negotiations also include in this phase the considerations of the product quality, as it can affect the pricing and the supplier choice, as the customers require a certain quality of grain for their products. There are also the preliminary schedules for delivery agreed upon at this point in the negotiations, while those can vary depending on the demand by the customer company, so the non-consulting company can start planning the deliveries. Then the prices are set when the time of delivery is reached and are influenced by the global market prices of grain at the point of time. As mentioned before in the customer search section the amounts are not fixed however, even though the nature of the sector

is not beneficial for flexibility, the company uses flexibility as its competitive advantage and aims to create good customer relationships through this.

" Usually this time of year (Spring), there have been some issues due to Covid, but before the farmers make their final sowing decisions, we kind of have a discussion over the amounts" -Non-consulting

" Then they (Germans) usually discuss with the sellers and in a way, there is this kind of probing over the pricing, but most importantly the discussions are over the amounts at that point" -Non-consulting

" Then again when we go to Germany, it is much simpler, as the Germans are more interested in the price and quality" -Non-consulting

The goal of the non-consulting case company in the negotiations was to acquire new customers on terms that were fulfillable by the non-consulting company's production capabilities. The basis for the non-consulting case company in their negotiations is to reach a mutually beneficial agreement, in which the participating parties both benefit, the customer company through getting the grain they require for their operations and the non-consulting case company by gaining a customer, which can pay a price for the product making the company a profit after the exporting costs have been deducted compared to the domestic prices. The Finnish grain market operates under the surplus of supply, which leads to suppressed prices domestically and makes exporting beneficial to grain companies as a source of improved profitability. As can be seen from the following quotations one of the main goals of the non-consulting company in their exporting negotiations is to negotiate a profitable price for their product, which could be seen as a win-lose goal if the continental prices were not higher but while higher prices persist the price negotiations do not lead to win-lose negotiations, but to win-win negotiations where the Finnish overproduction is eased through exporting while the customer gets competitively priced and high-quality product.

" If they keep, storage is after all 1,5 times(harvest), sometimes even one harvest in the storage when the next harvest starts, so the market (in Finland) can work any better than it works" -Non-consulting

" Price level is of course, in Central Europe and elsewhere in Europe, higher continental price than we have in here" -Non-consulting

" Yes, there are possibilities, and it is just that you have to find the markets yourself so to speak" -Non-consulting

The approach of the non-consulting case company is formal and well structured, partially due to the seasonal nature of the production cycle. Apart from the formality of the negotiations, another defining feature of the non-consulting case company's negotiations is the beneficial nature of the exporting due to the Finnish overproduction on the grain sector depressing prices and making exporting comparatively more profitable than domestic sales. As the prices in the target markets are overall higher mutually beneficial outcomes are easier to come to due to differences in the starting points on the pricing, which is often one of the main issues in negotiations due to grain being a high volume, low price product.

4.1.4 Implementation

In the end, the implementation of internationalization is one of the main sources of issues for companies, and the non-consulting company was not excluded from this even though they had prior experiences to rely on.

In the case of the non-consulting company, one of the main issues concerning the implementation of their internationalization was the practical logistics of exporting grain. Delivery of grain was the main issue the non-consulting case company faced in its internationalization as can be seen in the following quotations concerning the importance of managing the logistics costs in maintaining the profitability of the exporting operations. Due to the grain being low value, high quantity export how to keep the delivery costs under control was an issue the non-consulting case company spent lots of effort planning, including comparing the prices between different forms transportation and ending with the shipping being a most cost-effective way of exporting grain from Finland, especially as the target markets were relatively easily reachable from Rotterdam in the Netherlands which is one of the largest harbors in the world. Transportation costs are not only incurred in the end stretch of the delivery but are also accumulated while gathering grain from the contract farmers to the harbor for shipping to the customers, as Finland is a large country, and the producers might be located further away from the coast having their truckers to work with to deliver the grain to the ports is an important way of keeping the costs under control. Once the grain is delivered to the harbor it is shipped to the port of delivery from where it is distributed to the customers using trains and trucks. As the non-consulting case company is a small company it is not as an interesting customer to the shipping companies as the larger companies operating in the grain exporting business, which however was alleviated by the mode of shipping being shipping containers which can be included in the container ships without requiring large quantities to be delivered at a time. Apart from being an important consideration cost-wise, the logistics are also important to the chosen mode of exporting, which was just in time exporting where the small numbers of containers are delivered at a relatively fast schedule. Overall, the importance of logistics in exporting is highlighted in the non-consulting case.

" As we work with so tight margins here, and the logistics costs and they are so big portion of the price, that the role the logistics play is really big in these grain sales"- Non-consulting

" Then when you consider grain, it would not matter if we were exporting some high-value products, in which the delivery expenses would be such a small portion, but when you think of grain exporting then the delivery and logistics portion of the price is so high that if you end up running into any small increases in costs it directly affects your profitability in a negative way"- Non-consulting

" Rotterdam is so centrally located that if you drive 200-150 kilometers one direction or other you can reach almost any part of (Central)Europe"- Non-consulting

Commitment is important in the successful implementation of internationalization strategy and being able to create lasting customer relationships to

maintain international trade in the future. In the case of the non-consulting company, the entrepreneurs were committed to the implementation of their internationalization and were eager to found a new company to keep working on the grain exporting business once the previous company had failed due to an unfortunate exporting project which had left the old company unable to fulfill its contractual obligations. As can be seen from the following quotations the entrepreneurs were willing to keep on working using their networks as a basis for founding a company to operate in the European market, while also assuming the obligations of the prior company in fulfilling those contracts which had been left due to the issues. One main strength they had for the realization of their plans of starting their own company was their networks, which allowed them to relatively easily find contract farmers to work with especially as the contract farmers who had been working with the prior company were now free to work with the non-consulting company.

" I had an interest in and commitment to continue exporting grain and continue trading, after all, we had great existing farmer networks here in Finland and then we founded this new company" -Non-consulting

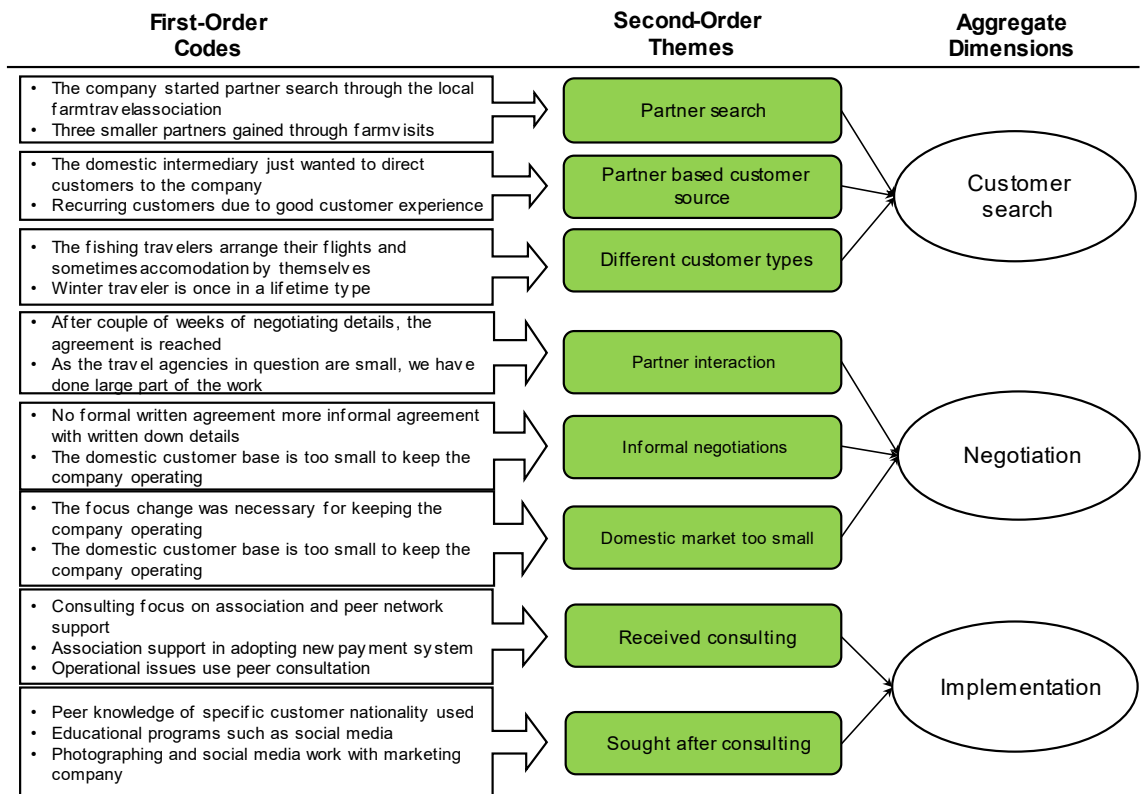
" I said to my co-founder, what is keeping us back, let's found a company and handle the European market" -Non-consulting

The non-consulting company used their networks, both professional and personal, and prior experience from working with the logistics of grain exporting to accomplish the successful implementation of their internationalization.

4.2 Path 2: Internationalization with consulting

Figure 5 Consulting data structure

Data structure concerning the customer search, negotiation, and implementation in the consulting case company.



4.2.1 Reasons for internationalization

Among the first experiences about the international trade for the consulting company was when they were involved in another company's international marketing efforts, in the role of offering their services for the other company's potential customers to choose. The second case company, which used available consulting in their internationalization, only started their internationalization after meeting a domestic partner interested in their product offering. The company had existed for generations in the agricultural sector and is still owned by the descendants of the founding family. While the consulting case company had been planning on extending their product offering to the international markets the push for actively seeking internationalization came from the domestic safari company contacting them to include them in the product offering the safari companies have for their foreign customer base. As the following quotations show the consulting case company had been seeing the internationalization as a necessary route for their business development, which had been lying dormant with only a few foreign customers being served until the contact with the foreign customers came to them through their involvement as the safari companies wanted to work with them by directing their customer flow also to the consulting case company. This kind of division is clear in the quotations where the consulting case company had been interested in the foreign customers for an extended period, while not actively pursuing those customers themselves. After the safari companies contacted the

consulting case company, they started taking a more active approach to their search for foreign customers.

" There was kind of no other choice and then, on the other hand, we did not, we were contacted by the bigger safari companies, that they want to start offering our services and their main customer base is from the foreign markets, so that kind of led to it" -Consulting

" From the beginning, we have been meaning to start offering our services to the foreign customers, and then the shift kind of why we changed the customer focus, it was due to the domestic customer base being too small to run the company" -Consulting

As a basis for their decision to seek international markets is the limited capabilities of the domestic market in sustaining the company, and keeping the entrepreneurial family employed full time with the consulting company.

4.2.2 Customer search

Customer search in the consulting company was conducted through involvement in the local associations' international networking projects, events, and farm visitations organized for the potential partner travel agencies through the efforts of the local association.

Choosing the customer in the consulting case was based on the available customers they could reach using the networks and projects offered by the local association. The customer acquisition in the consulting case company was based on their cooperation with their partners, which leads to this custom search turning into partner search as the partners are the customer source for the consulting case company. As can be seen from the following quotation, the consulting company's search of customers, or as said partners, started after the domestic safari companies had involved the consulting company in their foreign customer flow, and the internationalization had become more familiar and achievable to the company. When the consulting company started its customer acquisition, and partner search, on the foreign markets it started by getting more active in their local travel association as their networks were lacking in this regard. The consulting company had been a member of the association, but once they decided to start looking for foreign travel agencies as partners, they started participating actively in the associations networking events and farm visitations, to find customers interested in their offering. The term farm visitation means an event where foreign prospective customers visit the local region, and the companies operating in the region, looking for possible partners to promote in their offering for their customers. This networking through the use of the association's help and contacts did lead to successful partnerships with the consulting company, as an example, they gained three partners from the farm visitations directly and were able to create valuable networks for finding other partners.

" When we started our own customer acquisition, there is a local travel association, which promotes, so we have been members since the beginning, but we became more active

in participation when there started to be these so-called farm trips or farm visitations”-Consulting

“ I am talking of the three small ones, which have practically have been gained through exactly these farm visits that have been arranged in the local region”-Consulting

“ And then we started to make ourselves better known to the foreign travel agencies and of course we gained some contacts from those visitations (the farm visits)”-Consulting

Reaching the end customers of the product the consulting company offers was done using the partner travel agencies, with which the consulting company had been able to create a partner relationship. As has been mentioned prior the volume of the customers for the consulting company comes through their travel agency partners, who are the ones dealing with the end customer acquisition in their specific domestic markets. While some customers do approach the consulting company directly as can be seen in some of the quotations concerning the offering the company has for the customers, the main source of customers is through the partnerships, which is one reason why the consulting company has not been building their marketing networks and customer acquisition capabilities in the foreign markets. This is of course a common thing in the chosen market entry mode, partnership, in which the company finds a partner in the target market and operates through its channels and networks in acquiring customers to its product. As the last following quotation mentions even the repeat customers tend to book their visits through the partner travel agencies, as it is easier and as is gone into more detail in the company offering a section of the customer search the type of customers making up the majority of the customer base are looking for a once in a lifetime experience and are less keen to build their trip than using the partner agencies.

“ Exactly, specifically the volume comes from the travel agencies”-Consulting

“ The domestic safari companies approach us only because they wanted to direct some of their customer flow to us, while the customers were still in a way theirs”-Consulting

“We have some customers who have visited two to three times, through the specific travel agency, as they have enjoyed their visit so much and they then have decided to revisit”-Consulting

What the consulting company offers for the customers is their services in the destination country, which is Finland. As the customer search is conducted through the partner travel agencies most of the customers who come to enjoy the company’s offering is looking to get a once in a lifetime winter experience, in the vein of the one marketed for tourists by the Finnish government and a plethora of other organizations promoting Finland as a travel destination. The winter customers are coming for the experience which a reindeer farm can offer, of course including reindeer-related activities and a proper winter they might not have in their home countries. The consulting company deals with the arrangements for their customers in Finland, which may or may not include accommodation and related services. In short, the winter customers come to the company for a lifetime

experience of the Finnish winter and reindeer which are seen as a cornerstone of the winter experience. On the other hand, some direct customers are mostly coming during the summer and most of whom are looking to go on a fishing trip. These kinds of travelers are more self-sufficient in their traveling and arrange their flights, while the consulting company handles the accommodation and the fishing-related considerations. While the consulting company is a reindeer farm, its main source of income is in the farm travel sector, however, there are still differences between the reindeer products the foreign customers want to be compared to the domestic ones. The foreign customers most often buy processed reindeer products such as sausages and salami, while the domestic customers make the largest portion of reindeer meat buyers.

" To many foreigners, the trip to the north is kind of like once in a lifetime experience trip, so we focus more on giving them a great experience" -Consulting

" They basically arrange their own flights, and unfortunately sometimes even their own accommodation, there are some practicalities which are, but they arrange their own flights, and they reserve a certain time for their visit, and I handle everything in my end for the visit, so the fishing travelers are more active themselves in setting their travels" -Consulting

" Most of the sales (of meat) goes to domestic customers, so the foreigners do not buy meat specifically, but something like reindeer sausage, reindeer salami and these kinds of processed products" -Consulting

The customer search in the consulting case company is based on the partnership strategy, where the company acquires customers through their partners in the target markets and then provides the service needed in the destination. In the partner search, the consulting case company used the help of the local travel association to reach prospects and forge networks with foreign travel agencies.

4.2.3 Negotiation

Negotiation conducted by the consulting company was informal and based on interactions with the prospective partner companies.

Parties involved in the negotiations were the consulting company and the partner travel agency in the target market. The negotiations were conducted between the consulting company and the prospective partners. The negotiations were conducted in an informal way where the two parties exchanged communications to reach a preliminary agreement and then through a face-to-face meeting the details are agreed upon with a verbal agreement between the two parties. The two-party negotiations are a suitable environment for this type of informal negotiation style, as it would be harder to reach a multilateral agreement using informal negotiations compared to reaching an agreement between two parties as is the case in the negotiations between the consulting case company and its foreign partner travel agencies.

" We do not exactly have the kind of formal written 'agreement' agreement with these agencies, it has been more agreeing on the details through email exchanges, so we

do have black and white on the agreements and the reservations, payments, and prices”-Consulting

“In this kind of traditional Finnish style, just by shaking hands and the agreement has been reached, this was the principle we went with and the travel agencies we work with share the same principle, that when you make a face to face agreement, with the prior email exchanges as the basis, so when we met them live and made an agreement on the continuation and all and shook hands, so that was kind of it for them also, that the agreement had been made”-Consulting

What the negotiations were concerned with was the pricing, the offering, and the division of work between the parties, which as stated are the consulting case company and the foreign travel agency, partner. The negotiations concerning the details are made in the communications leading to the face-to-face meeting, through email communications, which are then agreed upon. The negotiations while informal had the specifics of the arrangement negotiated, as mentioned these included the pricing, what the consulting case company is offering for the end customers, and what is the division of work between the consulting case company and the foreign travel agency. As the consulting case company is not directly dealing with the customer acquisition in the foreign market the responsibility for marketing and product promotion in the target market was an example left to the partner travel agency to handle.

As the following quotations show the negotiations usually lasted, according to the consulting company entrepreneur, for a couple of weeks until the agreement was reached and the customer flow from the partner was agreed upon. While the negotiations lasted for a couple of weeks, usually the end customers started to come to the consulting company in the next winter season.

“ Let’s say a couple of weeks, depending on the response time of the receiving party to the emails, so when we get the query and the specifications have been made and agreed upon, and we respond, in the next couple of days the agreement has been reached about them sending customers and so on”-Consulting

“ When we deal with the smaller travel agencies for our region, the volume is not so big, so we have been doing part of the work ourselves and part have come through the travel agencies”-Consulting

The goal of the consulting company in the negotiations was to reach an agreement with the travel agencies over the arrangement of the customer flow. The negotiations were conducted on a mutually beneficial basis as the consulting company gained customers, from the partner travel agency, it needed to maintain its operational profitability as the domestic customer base was not enough to ensure full-time employment. As for the partner travel agency, they gained a new destination to offer for their customer base, and benefit from the wider selection provided by the addition in their customer acquisition.

“ So maybe one person could survive on it, the domestic customers, but for it to be full time and somewhat reasonable, the company won’t survive on the domestic customers only”-Consulting

“ It has been the idea from the start to offer services to the foreign customers, and then why the change in the customer source happened, was because we could not run the

company with only domestic customers, it's just not enough to keep the company working"-Consulting

As can be seen from the quotations the study found the consulting case company's negotiations to be based on informality and mutual beneficially.

4.2.4 Implementation

Implementation of the internationalization strategy of the consulting company was based on forging partnerships with the travel agencies operating in the customer markets.

Commitment level in the consulting case company was high, once the internationalization process was started, and this can be seen from the active search for consulting help from their peer networks, the association they were a member in, from a marketing company, they have used in the production of their promotional materials, and from their partners, whom they used as a source of the end customer information. As an example of taking advantage of available consulting, there are the reservation and payments system set up, and taking part in the networking events and projects arranged by the travel association.

" We have for example over the last winter adopted a new reservations and payments software, and for doing that we have gained know-how, support and advisement from the local travel association"-Consulting

" So, we use the local travel association and our networks to their fullest potential"-Consulting

" We get kind of from the local travel association and elsewhere, the kind of support and knowledge for those activities and issues"-Consulting

" So, not so much for the day-to-day activities, or well what we gain from discussions with the other reindeer entrepreneurs, but maybe you cannot think of it that way (as consulting)"-Consulting

The consulting case company also sought after consulting themselves. As examples of this, they had hired a marketing company to do photoshoots. This is another show of the commitment the consulting case company had to their internationalization, as they were actively seeking information and consulting to improve their business operations and solve issues.

" Then there are these kinds of Instagram and marketing material things, as we have a marketing company, which we use to do photographing and marketing photograph related advisement, and they have given tips and taught how to take good marketing photographs, for the website"-Consulting

" These kinds of, in practice we talk of education courses, there have been some over the years, and years ago, for example, we took part on a Facebook course just after it had landed in Finland sometime in 2009, we were practically the first ones around who even had Facebook pages in here"-Consulting

" And then even if they do not want to sell it, at least we get feedback from the partners on whether there might even be interest among the customers and whether it would be profitable to continue developing specific new service"-Consulting

The different kinds of consulting they used in the implementation of the internationalization plan were in short marketing, system implementation, and cultural consulting. The marketing consulting was focused on the practical side, with photographing sessions and social media courses being used to gain experience in producing good marketing material for the use in social media and by the partner travel agencies in their promotion. Even though the consulting case company does not do the end customer acquisition, for the most part, directly they have social media accounts and are promoting a word-of-mouth marketing strategy with the promotion pictures and focus on providing high-quality customer service during the visits. The system implementation was hands-on consulting in which the consulting company got direct support in adopting the new system from their association. This is a specific example of how the company gained support in its implementation efforts. Cultural consulting is akin to the direct support in the system implementation, however, the method of information transfer is different, as the cultural consulting is based on the consulting company's peer networks helping them in specific issues, or possible issues, they face when having customers from specific cultural backgrounds or cultural groups.

Apart from the basic expertise the company had from operating in the Finnish market, they sought after and received consulting, and conducted their information search, through educational courses and such, to consolidate the implementation of their internationalization.

4.3 Comparison of the paths

4.3.1 Customer search

The consulting case company used their local association to help in their customer search, and their end customers were gained through their partner travel agencies. On the other hand, the non-consulting company used the professional and personal networks forged in the company's founders' prior work in the field of grain exporting and in the agricultural association.

When comparing the non-consulting case company's approach to the approach of the consulting case company's approach the main source of difference is where the networks used originated from. The non-consulting case company had gained its networks from the prior careers and personal interactions, of their founders, which were useful in getting started in finding the possible customers for the company. Of course, the inherited commitments from the prior company they had been working in were helpful, but the main source for their customer acquisition is the pre-existing networks. On the other hand, the consulting case company did not have prior networks in the international markets, so they had

to start from scratch in their customer search, which is why they used the networks and efforts of their local travel association in building networks with potential customers and acquiring their first customers.

" It is kind of a first step, so you kind of get the group support and this kind of support, that we deal with the travel arrangements and accommodations so probably, if there is any interest to internationalization, then these kinds of trade fairs are a good opportunity to get to test their products with the German and other foreign customers" - Education consultant

" Connected to the internationalization there is the issue that, if you do not know where to start from then it is easy to think that 'well maybe we get a consultant', but then as it has costs and there is no, if there is no certainty of what you are going to be doing then there is no willingness to directly invest into it" -Education consultant

" Couple of years ago there was this Grüne Woche, it was organized by the Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners (MTK), where there were large numbers of small and medium-sized agricultural companies involved, and it was very successful, but as for how many contacts it kind of produced to the Finnish companies well the numbers were low, as there are plenty of similar producers in Central Europe" - Agricultural consultant

In a more general sense of how the customer search is done within the Finnish small and medium-size agricultural company sector, the quotations from the consultants shown prior show a picture of the Finnish agricultural sector, from the perspective of the consultants as focused on the agricultural production. This leads to as the education consultant mentioned in the interview to a situation where the entrepreneurs might not even know where to start with their internationalization. Consequently, this is also one of the reasons why the focus in the Finnish agricultural internationalization sector seems to be on group-based networking projects where the companies involved are trying to create networks with the prospective customers with the help of consulting organizations, of course, the consulting also involves practical education preparing the entrepreneurs for the issues they would have to take into consideration when doing their internationalization.

" Often, we also use translators when there is lots of certain kind of language, but of course to certain countries, we have our own language know-how and cultural understanding, all the way from 'Do not shake hands like this or nod like this and use these colors of clothing'" -Consultant manager

Apart from just getting started and accessing the networks, one of the issues the consulting is aimed at are the cultural differences, both business and interaction-related differences. Usually, the bigger consulting organizations have their in-house language and cultural understanding related know-how, which helps the entrepreneurs in dealing with the communication issues related to reaching the prospective customers and conduct their customer acquisition successfully when the cultural distance between the target market and the domestic market differ in their business culture or communication culture.

" Some entrepreneurs have found specific suitably sized sales channels, for their use, in the international markets and it's not only in organic products, but overall, in

processed products, more specialized products, and in these German Christmas Fairs, can you imagine, and to my knowledge, it is just a farmer who has done small scale production”-Association head

Some entrepreneurs do have their networks and can find their own sales channels, as this example from the association head interview shows, where they have found their specific customer base without participating in consulting-driven internationalization. This could be due to differences in viewpoint as the consultants work with those needing consulting and associations to have a wider range of interactions in the field.

4.3.2 Negotiation

The consulting case company used informal negotiation tactics in their negotiations with the prospective partners, while the non-consulting case company had formal negotiations. In the case of the consulting case company, they did not use any formal negotiation strategies, and overall, the negotiations were made in an informal manner, which included the lack of a formal written agreement as the agreement was committed to by the parties verbally and in a traditional Finnish manner, the agreement was sealed by shaking hands. The negotiations were also shorter than in the non-consulting case company and as an example, given by the consulting company’s entrepreneur, the negotiations were often over within a couple of weeks. On the other hand, in the non-consulting case company, the negotiations were more formal with multiple stages, queries, and preliminary agreements involved. The negotiations in the non-consulting company lasted for months and as mentioned were split into stages, which included such as preliminary negotiations on the quantities during the spring, and preliminary agreement on the pricing around the harvesting season once the quality of the product had been checked.

” Yeah and of course the cultural issues also, when you start to go beyond Europe, as in Europe the business culture is at least kind of similar. Well, Southern Europe has a bit more unique culture, but to Germany or such in Europe. It’s much easier as the things such as documentation are simpler as we have the common market and so on, compared to when you go further away”-Education consultant

” If there was like a single brand with multiple producers it could help to increase the willingness of the small company entrepreneurs to head to the international markets, at least somewhat. Then one important factor is language skills, and they do not want to complicate the business operations. International marketing is always challenging and there have been some examples, in Finland, of how, of certain consultants who have been going fast to China and done trade there, but then the project has failed, like completely failed, and those have caused quite high economic losses to the entrepreneurs”-Agricultural consultant

In more general terms the negotiations, in the Finnish agricultural small and medium-sized company sector, issues such as lack of cultural understanding, especially when trying to enter more distant markets. Cultural issues are one of

the main problems when it comes to negotiations across cultural lines, as differences in business culture and communication culture can lead to unfavorable situations in the negotiation, which can even lead to the complete failure of the negotiations. In the cultural issues, there are, apart from cultural issues such as how the people negotiate in different cultures and what type of actions are considered rude, the language issues which can make negotiations difficult when there is no common language to use, which can be alleviated using translators or by having a person with the proper language skills in the team. Of course, the first target market is often chosen from close by to the domestic market where the cultural issues are smaller, and language skills might be in a better supply. As the above quotations from the interviews show the difficulties increase with the distance, cultural and physical, between the markets, which has led to many failures in entering appealing markets, such as China which has caused problems to many companies, operating in Finland, in their internationalization.

" I have, myself, felt that when the participant has to pay or gets to pay when they receive good consulting, then the entrepreneur commits to the meetings and situations differently than if they get the consulting completely for free. Too often when the consulting is completely free the entrepreneurs tend to be doing multiple things at the same time instead of focusing on the internationalization" -Consultant manager

" Niche products and then they find a target customer base for them, so this kind of expertise, what is the product missing? What can we do? And what can we add? How can we improve the product, that is kind of the starting point, and then what would be the target customer base, so do you go with some product and start looking? That okay I have this kind of product where would it fit, where would the market be?" -Association head

Another big issue, which while it is possibly more focused on the implementation phase of the internationalization process, is the level of commitment the entrepreneurs have in the internationalization. It is not conducive for negotiations if the entrepreneur is not committed to internationalization as it could lead to the entrepreneur not taking into consideration the differences in negotiation styles and cultural differences, which might cause the negotiations to fail and hamper the internationalization overall. Apart, from the negotiations themselves, the product offering is one issue that also requires a commitment as the product you have for sale in the Finnish market is not always, or most of the time, a good fit for the target market's customer preferences. So, the entrepreneur has to commit to the internationalization process to make the chances of success better by really making the effort to make the product offering fit the market and by understanding how the negotiation process differs from the one you are used to in the domestic market.

4.3.3 Implementation

The consulting case company used consulting in consolidating their implementation, while the non-consulting case company relied on prior experience in going through the implementation considerations. The consulting case company used consulting in matters such as marketing, cultural issues, and system implementation, which they gained through their association membership, their peer networks, from their partners, and as a paid consulting from a marketing company, they conducted photoshoots with. On the other hand, the non-consulting case company used their prior international expertise in dealing with delivery-related issues, as they had been working in a similar environment in their prior professional life and dealing with the same issues. Both case companies were committed to their internationalization, which might have helped them to succeed.

"What if we don't have delivery capabilities, so where do I start? How do I do the pricing? What is involved when I ship products to the EU, what if they are shipped to the USA or Asia. And what kind of services are available overall and support for know-how or know-how itself. And then there is the availability of monetary support, so basically these kinds of practical issues" -Education consultant

"Then we, of course, have this kind of, well kind of company-specific consulting in which the companies could focus on their own separate issues, to develop those in their operations, as for example basic expertise development and on the other hand these kinds of marketing materials, for the trade fair flyers or something like that" -Education consultant

In a more general sense of the implementation of internationalization in the Finnish agricultural small and medium-sized company sector, the issues in implementation concern such as delivery capabilities, product development, and what they aim to do in internationalization. As the quotations above show the issues the agricultural companies need consulting in include basic concerns of delivery capabilities, from the quantities to delivery logistics. Things such as what does it require in practice to get the product to the target market, documentation, and what they need to know to be able to implement their internationalization plans. What kind of marketing they need to expand their customer base for example, and what issues might arise when exporting to a specific market, relating for example to getting the payments from the customer in the target market on time, or at all.

"Well maybe the part where they need the most help in, is the product development. In specifying the products to the target market, for the regulations and overall suitability. Some products, such as herbal products cannot, for example, be sold in Finland but can be sold in the foreign markets, as our food regulations prevent it, so sorting out such information and overall information search" -Agricultural consultant

Concerning the product development in implementing the internationalization, its importance stems from the different tastes of the customers in different markets, as the same style of packaging and other product specifications need to

be taken into account in internationalization, again to ensure the product succeeds in the market and the company gains a customer base, which is not only continuous, in their purchases, but also expanding as expanding customer base is a key to increasing profitability due to economies of scale affecting exporting.

" But I see it in the way that the first thing to do with the entrepreneur customer is to have a conversation over what the internationalization is going to concretely mean to them. After all, we talk about internationalization with so many different specs. For an agricultural entrepreneur, it could mean that they internationalize, that they want to maybe expand their own product sales to the international markets. Some think it means cooperation in regard to delivery or agricultural land" - Consultant manager

The aims the companies choose for their internationalization are an important part of the success of the implementation of the internationalization, even though it is mainly done in the beginning phases of the consulting, according to the consultant manager interviewee, it is still a factor, which should not be overlooked as if the goals are not clear throughout the process. Whether the goals are to expand production cross-borders or to seek new markets in another country, knowing the goal helps in choosing the right strategy for internationalization. If for example, the company seeks new markets they need to consider, what is they can offer to the target market, which would make their product interesting.

" The reasons are clear; I have research information on the topic. Internationalization is based on this kind of simple factor, which is in Finland the grain market is such, that to get profitability into your farm, your business, internationalization, and especially the cooperative internationalization is always, comes into question when the prices in the Finnish market go really low. And this is often driven by the MTK and assortment of different parties, this exporting. So especially in the organic grain market where there is a lack of grain or there is at least not too much of it available, there is this buyer party who tries to keep the prices low, this is one of the main reasons (the lack of competition on the buyer side)" -Association head

As was visited concerning the negotiation phase, commitment is important in achieving successful internationalization. As the quotation by the association head shows, the reason for internationalization often stems from the low prices available in the domestic market, which is despite the common market still isolated from the price fluctuations in Central Europe. However, seeking better prices might not be the source of long-term commitment to internationalization, especially when they seek to alleviate temporary periods of lower prices and the exporting must compete with the domestic prices, should those for some reason rise. During the interviews with the consultant and association members, one consistent theme was the need for commitment to internationalization, as the process takes years to lead to established customer relationships and lasting internationalization, if the entrepreneurs do not commit to the internationalization, they often fail to keep working for it over the years.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Theoretical implications

The research gap, which was the basis for this study, was the effectiveness of consulting, and external knowledge, in the process of internationalization in SME agricultural companies in the Finnish agricultural sector. As there were no studies done on this topic in the prior research, the effect of internationalization in comparison to internationalization in a company relying on their internal sources of knowledge and networks to internationalize.

Regarding the resources of networking and international experience, chosen as the resources of interest in the internationalization processes successfulness, both companies used networks and international experience for their benefit in their internationalization process as the prior research had suggested networking and international experience play a role in successful internationalization. However according to the findings, the source of the networks and international experiences did not seem to matter, while this does not directly contradict previous research as it has not been a consideration in prior research, it does imply external sources of networks and international experience can, at least in the context of this study, substitute for the internal sources of networks and international experience in consolidating the internationalization process.

Consulting as a source of external knowledge seems to have contributed to the successful internationalization of the consulting case company, as they used the networks of their association and the peer network international experience to substitute for the lack of in their company's internal networks and prior international experience, and overall used consulting to supplement their international experience gain and to help with extending their networks. However, compared to the prior research suggesting management consultancies as the main source of external knowledge, the main source of external knowledge used in the consulting company, and many of the companies which the consultants and association interviewee knew of, were either sourced from their peer networks, association or from consulting parties which were not specifically founded for consulting purposes. This is not to say the consulting companies are not an important part of the consulting scene even in the small and medium-sized agricultural enterprise sector, however, there are only a few consulting companies specifically focused on the sector, which leads to associations, peer networks, and non-consultancy companies dominating the sector as sources of consulting. According to the study consulting can substitute for the existing internal sources of networks and prior experience in helping a company to overcome issues in their internationalization, such as cultural, technical, or reach issues.

The main theoretical finding of the study however was the role of commitment in the usefulness of consulting in helping with successful internationalization. Analyzing the gathered data the theme of commitment was prevalent in the descriptions on the successfulness of the internationalization efforts of the companies participating in the internationalization consulting, which suggests a link between commitment and successfulness of internationalization, in comparison the source of networks and international experience seemed to be less relevant for the success of internationalization, possibly due to the nature of networks and international experience, as accumulative, which leads to accumulation of networks and international experience over time as the entrepreneurs are engaged in internationalization. As internationalization often takes years to successfully achieve, due to building customer relationships being a long-term project, and the honing of the delivery and other capabilities, commitment to internationalization seems to be more important than just having access to international experience and networks in internationalization. As the internationalization process progresses the benefits from having internal sources of prior experience and networks diminishes in comparison to starting without, as the previously stated accumulation of networks and first-hand experience turns external sources of knowledge into acquired knowledge, so the usefulness of external sources of knowledge in internationalization is at its highest at the beginning where it can be used to avoid possibly process ending mistakes and issues, in the same way as prior internal knowledge and networks can be used to avoid these issues. The aspect of commitment seems to be more important, as both case companies exhibited a commitment to the internationalization process, which could be seen from the consulting company's entrepreneurs actively seeking to gain the needed knowledge and in the non-consulting company's entrepreneurs persisting through the failure of the previous company to found their own in the same sector.

The use of consulting in internationalization does affect the process of internationalization, as it helps substitute for the differences in networks and company internal international experience. This could be seen in the similar results between the consulting case company and non-consulting case company, while they used different strategies to reach their internationalization goals, they both were able to reach their customers, successfully negotiate, and implement their internationalization.

5.2 Practical implications

Practical implications of these findings are two-fold, on one side there is the usefulness of consulting as a source of knowledge in the internationalization process, and on the other hand, the importance of commitment by the entrepreneurs is of

particular importance for the entrepreneurs, and to an extent the consulting parties to consider in their internationalization efforts.

As the study shows consulting is a beneficial source of external networks and international experience in helping, the companies lacking their networks and international experience, in succeeding in their internationalization. According to the study, consulting can help companies in reaching their prospective customers in a new market, as a kind of intermediary in a network connecting their customer to consultants established networks in the target market. However, for the networks to be useful they need to be the correct networks, so if you are looking to sell your products to wholesalers a consultant or consultancy with extensive contacts with the local mill for example is not useful for internationalization, while extensive networks on the part of the consultant can be useful the usefulness depends on the goals. As an example, from the findings, if the consulting case company had looked to establish their international marketing in the target market instead of looking for a partner travel agency the networks of their local travel association might not have been useful for their internationalization plan, and maybe if it was the case, they could have benefited more from networks of a marketing agency. The same goes with the international experience, so to be useful the consulting needs to have a correct focus and access to the needed networks. Overall consulting is according to the study useful source of external knowledge for companies lacking international networks and prior international experience as it helps the company to avoid issues they might face, with the use of collective experiences gathered by the consultants, peer networks, and associations, were they to try to internationalize independently, which according to the consultant interviews would more often lead to not even starting the internationalization project due to not knowing where to start from.

As for the subject of commitment. The study's suggestion of the importance of commitment in internationalization has entrepreneurial implications, as success is the goal in pursuing a goal, in this case, internationalization. In a sense, internationalization should be approached with a similar commitment as founding the company, as it will take an extended period to internationalize and it most likely will not produce a profit in the short term, instead of accumulating costs relating to product development and other required investments, of if nothing else time. When the enthusiasm to enter an international market fades, those who are not committed are prone to fail, as in any customer relationship that takes time to build, and one shipment is not yet a customer relationship but a purchase. It is important to keep in mind internationalization is a long-term process, not a short-term project. This does not mean the entrepreneur should keep going on an unsuccessful platform, but success and failure are not always instant and can take a while to achieve. It can even take a tactical retreat and change in the internationalization plan to succeed, but commitment is what is needed the most for success.

As for consultancy parties an implication of this study is on the length of the consulting projects. As was mentioned in the importance of commitment, in-

ternationalization is a long-term process and due to this having internationalization projects of a short timespan can work against the purpose of helping companies internationalize, as a networking project does not secure internationalization but is just a start of it. Once a company has created networks and gained possible customers they need to still negotiate and implement their internationalization. So longer internationalization projects, which would cover the networking, or customer search, negotiation, and the implementation phases, and some customer relationship building-related issues could be more useful in promoting internationalization.

5.3 Study's limitations

The study was limited in its sample, the amount of time, which was used, and the number of companies interviewed.

The sample size of this study was limited, in part due to the limited time conducting the study was allocated. The sample of 2 companies, 3 consultants and one association member is very limited for the establishment of the effect of consulting in the internationalization process. However, as a guiding sample, it can highlight possible propositions for future research, and it can be a basis for a deeper understanding of the subject. The limitations of time in conducting the study were a factor, which caused the sample size to be limited as there was not enough time to reach a variety of companies, consultants, and association members for the study. Again, this is a basis for future research to deepen the understanding of the topic.

Limiting the number of companies involved, allowed for a deeper look into the two case companies, but can cause problems for the generalizability of the findings. Another limitation related to the sample of companies in the study is the differences between the case companies, in their choice of the internationalization strategy, their specific agricultural field, and their products, as one was exporting grain, and another was importing tourists. However, these differences were small enough to allow for comparing the phases of internationalization and showing differences that could be attributable to the source of knowledge, whether it was internal or external.

5.4 Future research

Future research should focus on strengthening the study on consulting as a source of external knowledge in consolidating the internationalization successfulness, and on the other hand, the role of commitment in the internationalization successfulness should be researched.

The first part of strengthening the findings of this study is regarding the limited scope of this study, and the findings would benefit from a wider array of different case companies and more association and consultant interviews in establishing the substitutability of the internal knowledge with the external knowledge in achieving successful internationalization. Deeper research into this topic should be done to consolidate the findings in their generalizability and reliability, as mentioned in the limitations section the sample size was small, with more company cases and a wider array of industries in which to study the effects of consulting on internationalization.

As for the role of commitment in the internationalization successfulness, it should also see more research into it as while commitment being beneficial seems a common-sense assumption it has not been researched concerning the usefulness of consulting and in the companies' ability to achieve successful internationalization.

6 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study found the consulting to be able to substitute for the internal company networks and international experience in the internationalization process of the Finnish agricultural SME sector. Apart, from finding the results of the use of consulting, and relying on consulting in internationalization, it be successful in the same way as the use of internal experience and networks. The study found the commitment of the entrepreneurs to the internationalization process to be of importance as the internationalization process is a long-term process it requires the focus from the entrepreneurs on the long-term to maintain their commitment if they want to successfully operate on the international markets and create lasting customer relationships.

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