

# ATTAINMENT OF MARKET KNOWLEDGE THROUGH ALLIANCES: POTENTIAL PITFALLS OF COLLABORATION

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## Abstract

The past decade has seen increased scholarly interest in alliances. Authors have devoted attention to the factors underlying alliance formation and the attainment of alliance goals. Concurrently, scholars in the marketing strategy literature examined marketing's contributions to firm strategy. The following paper explores the intersection between these two bodies of work: the attainment of market knowledge through alliances. Topics include the motivations underlying the desire for market knowledge, the difficulty in transferring market knowledge across organizations, and the presence of opportunism within alliances. Also included are a series of propositions and an agenda for future research.

## Introduction

To date, a number of unanswered questions continue to plague efforts to understand the issues surrounding interorganizational alliances. Hunt and Morgan (1994) state that as many as one-third of alliances may be considered "outright failures," while Hamel, Doz, and Prahalad (1989) hold that the record of American businesses in alliances is abysmal.

And yet, many scholars stress that the appeal of interorganizational alliances remains high. Why do managers retain interest in working with potential competitors? Richter and Vettel (1995, p. 37) note that knowledge is the key to competitiveness, however, given the modern firm's pressing needs for information and diverse skills, it is unlikely that one enterprise can attain all of the resources needed to prosper without help from other organizations.

As scholars have made strides toward understanding the nuances of interorganizational alliances, there has also been much interest in assessing marketing's contributions to firm strategy. Scholars have uncovered many interorganizational

arrangements centered on the attainment of marketing knowledge. Varadarajan (1992, p. 337) asserts that "the marketing function is equipped to play a dominant role in the context of leveraging a number of distinctive organizational skills...." Webster (1992, p. 8) holds that "There are multiple types of strategic alliances; virtually all are within the theoretical domain of marketing..."

What specific motivations underlie managerial interest in marketing knowledge? Von Hippel (1978) asserts that improved knowledge of customers and markets benefits an organization's new product development. Varadarajan and Cunningham (1995, p. 286) note that "As industries mature, firms finding their traditional markets stagnating and growth opportunities severely curtailed have entered into strategic alliances..."

Along with the emphasis on marketing as a strategic tool has come unease. "Paradoxically, the deeper marketing is embedded within an organization... the more likely is the role of marketing as a distinct function to be diminished" (Day,

1992, p. 323). Empirical results support the notion that marketing may not play a distinctive role in shaping the modern organization. Myers, Greyser, and Massy (1979) find that many advances in marketing have not “filtered down” to line managers. Biggadike (1981) states that marketers have the potential to shape firm strategy, but often fail to contribute in a meaningful manner.

In summary, a tremendous amount of interest surrounds both interorganizational alliances and marketing as a strategic tool. It follows that examining the acquisition of market knowledge through interorganizational alliances would be of value.

### **Scholarly Views of Alliances & Market Information**

Kogut (1988) stresses that an alliance may be the best means to disseminate “imbedded” knowledge (information that managers cannot easily articulate) to outsiders. He emphasizes that an alliance is merely a strategic tool; managers enter these arrangements to improve their firms’ standing relative to competitors. Hamel, Doz, and Prahalad (1989) also hold that firms enter alliances with the intention of enhancing their competitive position. “Cooperation becomes a low cost route for new competitors to gain technology and market access” (p. 133).

However, Pennings (1981, p. 444) notes that alliance partners are inevitably seeking to improve “their ability to obtain some leverage over other organizations.” Hamel, Doz, and Prahalad (1989, p. 135) warn that “...a laggard (slow learner)... may find itself in a dependency spiral: as it contributes fewer and fewer distinctive skills, it must reveal more and more of its internal operations...” Nonetheless, Crossan

and Inkpen (1995) assert that integration of learning takes time. This presents an interesting paradox: learning requires time, however, firms that attain knowledge at a slower rate than their partners do may find themselves at a disadvantage.

### **Transfer**

What, then, accounts for the difficulties firms face in trying to integrate knowledge attained from alliances? Dodgson (1993) notes that all organizational learning is grounded in what has been done in the past. “The learning activities of firms are heavily constrained. Strategic management theory tells us how difficult organizational change is, as strategies reflect existing capabilities and technologies” (p. 80). Likewise, Inkpen and Crossan (1995, p. 611) hold that the transfer problem arises because “...As individual learning spirals its way to the organization level, dissipation in learning will occur.”

### **Improved Learning in Alliances**

Many of the problems associated with learning arise due to the ill-conceived views managers hold concerning learning. Inkpen and Crossan (1995) note that managers must show patience because there are significant time lags between the inception of an alliance and the transfer of knowledge. Richter and Vettel (1995) emphasize that managers need to be aware of the bounds that exist on what can be learned before deciding to enter an alliance. Crossan and Inkpen (1995) hold that managers should seek a balance in selecting alliance partners; potential collaborators must be similar enough to understand each other, but not so similar that their differences permit no learning opportunities.

## Outcomes

Finally, scholars differ in regard to how alliances impact firm performance. Kogut (1988) notes that some scholars suggest that firms involved in joint ventures earn less money than do other firms. Lyles (1988) states that much of the confusion regarding learning through alliances pertains to measurement: to assess learning one must separate mere adaptation from deeper changes that influence the entire organization. Weaver and Dickson (1998) suggest that too many previous studies assess alliance outcomes based on the continuation or discontinuation of the alliance. Specifically, these authors note that satisfaction with the alliance may be the most relevant base on which to assess alliance outcomes (Larson, 1992; Tyler and Steensma, 1995).

## Marketing as a Strategic Tool

Researchers have noted that in the 1990s a number of contingencies drove an intense interest in marketing among practitioners. Varadarajan (1992, pp. 341-2) stated that the "...strategic imperatives of the nineties augur well with the competencies of marketing and forebode a major role for the function in strategy formulation and implementation." Day (1992, p. 327) held that strategic marketing issues would play a major role because of "...the convergence of the competencies of marketers with the strategic imperatives of the nineties...."

Wind and Robertson (1983) envision marketing as more than one of many relevant perspectives guiding firm strategy; instead, these authors hold that insights from marketing should provide the firm's guiding philosophy:

"Sound business strategy should have a marketing perspective, i.e., marketing should provide inputs to strategy generation and the evolved strategies should be tested against the reaction of consumers, competitors and other stakeholders. ... A marketing perspective for the development of business strategy... (Recognizes) that marketing is not only a set of functions but also a guiding philosophy for the firm. Yet most firms tend to adopt other orientations" (pp. 12-13).

What benefits do managers associate with marketing knowledge? Varadarajan (1992, pp. 339-340) holds that "...Marketing as a boundary-spanning organizational function... develops certain unique competencies within the organization." More succinctly, Wind and Robertson (1983, p. 12) state that "Marketing strategy's difference is that it serves a boundary role function between the firm and its customers, competitors, and other stakeholders." Similarly, Day (1992) holds that "These (current) trends will put an increasing premium on understanding and managing relationships in boundary-less organizations, understanding the processes by which superior customer value is created, and analyzing dynamic and fragmenting markets" (p. 327).

What benefit do practitioners hope to obtain from marketing? Scholars assert that, properly applied, marketing knowledge can be an invaluable source of information concerning innovation. "The pervasive interest in creating and sustaining innovation in large scale, complex organizations places marketing in a unique position to assume a significant role in strategic management..." (Kerin, 1992, p. 332). Wensley (1982, p. 147) holds that "Strategic market

opportunities arise either because a firm is exceptionally well placed competitively or because it recognizes the opportunity, on the basis of private information, before others.”

While interest in marketing among strategists remains high, scholars note that the integrative, boundary-spanning role the discipline increasingly plays has led to confusion about marketing’s contributions to firm strategy. Indeed, some scholars go so far as to suggest that “marketing is everything” (McKenna, 1991). Anderson also examines the possibility that marketing’s distinct role may be lost unless scholars fully understand the discipline’s contributions to firm strategy. “...Marketing must realize that its role in strategic planning is not preordained. Indeed, it is possible that marketing considerations may not have a significant impact on strategic plans...” (Anderson, 1982, p. 23).

One may cite a variety of views in regard to marketing’s role as a strategic tool. Opinions cover a spectrum ranging from Wind and Robertson’s (1983) view of marketing as a well-defined function that forms the basis for all firm strategy to the boundary-spanning discipline envisioned by McKenna (1991). However, what is certain is that the role of marketing has shifted; paradoxically, the discipline’s strategic role has evolved in such a manner that marketing is *both* more important and less distinctive.

### **Marketing Knowledge & Alliances**

Kelly (1990) states that market-related goals are the most commonly cited reasons for alliance participation. Also, Webster (1992, p. 8) holds that, in regard to motivations for alliance formation, “virtually all are within the theoretical domain of marketing.” Mowery, Oxley, and Silverman (1996) note that a number of trends in business have

increased the desirability of market information. The existence of higher development costs and shortened product life cycles has motivated many managers to seek “rapid penetration of foreign markets” (p. 79) and to “facilitate strategic coordination among competitors to increase market power” (p. 79).

Varadarajan and Cunningham (1995) cite four market-related motivations underlying alliances. First, “...growing recognition of the importance of entering and achieving a viable market position in all the major world markets...” (p. 285). Second, “...by forming alliances with domestic firms that are familiar with the nuances of the local environment, a firm may also be in a position to circumvent... barriers to entry” (p. 285). Third, an alliance attacking a competitor in its home market may force the rival’s “diversion of resources away from expansion into new international markets toward protecting its competitive position in the home market” (p. 285). Finally, “As industries mature, firms finding their traditional markets stagnating and growth opportunities severely curtailed have entered into strategic alliances...” (p. 286).

To date, many firms have not been successful at integrating market-related insights obtained through alliances. Researchers (e.g. Simonin, 1999) posit that market knowledge obtained in one context is difficult to reapply in another environment; in scholarly terms, such information has a high degree of asset specificity. Simonin (1999) states: “Such a relationship between the firm and the customer creates ambiguity not only for rivals in the marketplace trying to imitate, but also for alliance partners aiming at the transfer of associated knowledge.” It is not surprising, then, that “the effects of learning on value creation are strongest for research joint ventures, and

weakest for marketing joint ventures” (Anand and Khanna, 2000, p. 295).

Lynskey (1999) suggests that market information held by a firm is often “‘knowledge of experience,’ which is quite specific to particular contexts and is rarely formulated in a logical and consistent way.” Similarly, Collinson (1999, p. 337) holds that “some knowledge management practices are more difficult to transfer between firms because they are more deeply embedded, that is, highly dependent on broader contextual factors to operate effectively.”

If it is clear that market information is often context specific, what sort of outcomes should alliance participants anticipate if they are interested in attaining market knowledge? Chen and Li (1999), in examining the uses of information attained through alliances, hold that market knowledge plays a relatively small role in new product development as compared to technological knowledge. Intriguingly, these authors state that this result may not be indicative of a problem with market information; instead, they suggest that an entirely different set of goals may be appropriate for those firms entering alliances to learn about markets.

### **Propositions**

Kale, Singh, and Perlmutter (2000) examine the outcomes associated with alliances and raise a number of questions. Scholars hold that we do not understand the results managers should expect from alliances (Mowery, Oxley, and Silverman, 1996). Similarly, Lynskey (1999) states that researchers lack insight into those organizational characteristics that help (or hinder) the transfer of knowledge within an alliance. Meanwhile, there is also a gap in

understanding the role market knowledge plays in alliances (Simonin, 1999; Varadarajan and Cunningham, 1995). (In the following discussion “Alliance Success” refers to Weaver and Dickson’s (1998) suggestion that, given the disparate motivations underlying alliances, managerial satisfaction with the alliance is the appropriate measure of alliance performance).

The Figure below explores relationships between organizational, industry and alliance variables with “success” at attaining market information through alliances. The subsequent propositions further develop the concepts outlined in the Figure.

### **Figure About Here (Two Columns?)**

**P1: Among those alliance participants interested in obtaining market information, those whose target markets are complementary to their partners’ target markets will be more likely to report alliance success**

Bucklin and Sengupta (1993) find that when alliance partners have complementary target markets, the alliance participants are more likely to consider the alliance to be a success. The reasons for this are intuitive: when alliance partners are not direct competitors, but still have some synergies between their target markets, both may benefit from the agreement. In alliances where firms are direct competitors, opportunism is more likely to be a concern. Dev, Klein, and Fisher (1996) reinforce this result through their finding that alliances in the travel industry are often more successful when partners have complementary target markets.

**P2: Among those alliance participants interested in obtaining market information, the impact of partner similarity on alliance success will vary depending on the circumstances**

Proposition Two examines the relationship between partner similarity and alliance success; as the Proposition suggests, this relationship is complicated and defies any easy answers. Managers elect to participate in alliances because they hope to attain some knowledge that their firm lacks at the time of entry; therefore, managers actively seek out firms that possess differing skills from their own firms. If firms do not possess differing skills, there is no rationale for alliance formation.

However, dissimilarity among partners, while it increases the amount of information a firm might *potentially* obtain, does not necessarily lead to improved learning. First, the nature of organizational learning makes it difficult for managers to use information from firms that differ from their own organizations. Dodgson (1993) notes that the foundation of organizational learning is the knowledge the firm currently possesses. Similarly, Cohen and Levinthal (1990) assert that transfer depends on information consistent with a firm's current knowledge base.

The nature of market knowledge also makes it very difficult for managers to learn effectively from other organizations. Simonin (1999) asserts that market knowledge possesses "a high degree of asset specificity," making the knowledge difficult to reapply across distinct business contexts. Similarly, Von Hippel (1978) notes that firms tend to enjoy enhanced outcomes when they obtain more information about their *current* target markets; obtaining more

information about *new* target markets produces more ambiguous results.

**P3: Among those alliance participants interested in obtaining market information, firms whose primary lines of business are later in the industry life cycle will be more likely to report alliance success**

A number of authors note that managerial interest in market knowledge increases as an industry progresses through the industry life cycle. Hagedoorn (1993) holds that in the earlier stages of the industry life cycle managers tend to focus on technological innovation, but as industries mature, managers become interested in marketing as a means of maintaining their competitive position. Researchers (e.g. Anand and Khanna, 2000; Varadarajan and Cunningham, 1995) find that attaining marketing knowledge is a more often-cited goal later in the industry life cycle. Given that strategic opportunities for competitive advantage flow from market information later in the life cycle, managers should report more satisfaction with market information obtained at this stage of the industry life cycle.

**P4: Among those alliance participants interested in obtaining market information, the level of transactions costs associated with the alliance will be negatively related to alliance success**

Williamson (1975) notes that interactions between businesses inevitably involve transactions costs that must be paid by one or both members. Specifically, the need for one or more alliance partners to invest in transaction-specific assets may substantially increase the costs of participating in the alliance. Bucklin and Sengupta (1993) hold that the presence of such costs can lead to

conflict between alliance members. Not surprisingly, when power between alliance participants is unbalanced, the level of conflict rises as well.

The relatively long period required to attain market knowledge becomes particularly relevant when one considers the nature of alliances. Given that firms seek alliances due to self-interest and that opportunistic behavior is a major concern of alliance participants, it is reasonable to suggest that the differential rates of learning between alliance participants may impact organizational conduct within alliances. Ahuja (2000) states that, as time passes, many alliance participants perceive that the benefits from the arrangement deteriorate and their motivation to end the alliance increases. Given the relatively long period Hagedoorn (1993) indicates is needed to learn about market issues relative to other business knowledge, it is likely that firms interested in learning about market issues will require more time than their partners do to complete the learning process. Therefore, firms interested in market knowledge will often need to commit relatively more resources to the alliance than will their partners if transactions costs associated with the alliance are high.

**P5: Among those alliance participants interested in obtaining market information, relationship quality will be positively related to alliance success**

Throughout the paper, an underlying notion has been that alliances exist on two conflicting levels: firms work together while competing at the same time (Hamel, Doz, and Prahalad, 1989; Kogut, 1988). And yet, successful learning requires trust and openness with one's partners. Paradoxically, then, alliances require both openness and wariness. For the manager interested in

attaining market knowledge, there is yet another challenge. A review of the literature reveals that market knowledge is complex and difficult to apply; a firm interested in attaining market knowledge, therefore, must have exceptional trust that a faster-learning partner will not take advantage of the differential rates of learning. Therefore, for firms interested in attaining market-related information, a strong relationship with one's partners is a must if the alliance is to be considered a success.

**P6: Among those alliance participants interested in obtaining market information, duration of the alliance will be positively related to alliance success**

Chen and Li (1999) suggest that market knowledge differs from other business-relevant knowledge. Specifically, firms entering alliances to attain market knowledge are likely to have different organizational goals and capabilities than are those firms entering alliances to attain technological knowledge. Interestingly, these authors find that market information, in spite of its prevalence as an alliance goal, plays little role in new product development. How, then, is market knowledge unique and why do firms seem to attain little benefit through its acquisition?

Simonin (1999) suggests that the complexity associated with market knowledge will impair the ability of managers to transfer such information across organizational boundaries. Specifically, market knowledge may be more ambiguous than other types of business-relevant information. Similarly, Lyskey (1999) holds that certain business knowledge ("tacit knowledge" in his terms) will be difficult to transfer. To Lyskey, the transfer of business *skills* is much more difficult to manage than the exchange of *resources*.

But what if a firm's managers hope to attain market knowledge that is beyond their current knowledge base? Present research suggests that firms with these goals should allow for an extended time to complete the learning process. Lei (1993) holds that those managers seeking to acquire tacit knowledge should commit employees to an alliance on a long-term basis; otherwise, there is little chance to attain such knowledge. Similarly, Morgan and Hunt (1994) find that alliances require a long-term perspective; the trust and commitment needed to attain another firm's knowledge are only possible over an extended period. Finally, Hagedoorn (1993) is more explicit; he states that his study reveals no short cuts for those firms that seek to attain market knowledge: the acquisition of market knowledge is always an extended process.

**P7: Among those alliance participants interested in obtaining market information, the number of contractual safeguards built into the alliance agreement will be positively associated with alliance success**

Managers have encountered a number of new challenges in attempts to collaborate with their competitors. Morgan and Hunt (1994) note that the situation presents a paradox: successful competition rests upon a firm's ability to collaborate with outside entities. Oliver (1990) holds that while the presence of asymmetric assets and goals drives alliance formation, it also causes tension. Ahuja (2000) states that firms partner due to their self-interest, however, through time, the costs of managing the alliance are likely to increase as the benefits decline. Therefore, one partner may wish to terminate the alliance.

The implications for firms interested in attaining market knowledge should be

obvious: there is a "race to learn" and at the completion of the learning process, self-interest dictates that the faster learning partner will have an incentive to terminate the alliance. Furthermore, Simonin (1999) leaves little doubt that firms interested in market knowledge are likely to be the loser in any competition to attain such knowledge.

However, contractual arrangements prior to the inception of the alliance can decrease opportunism. Bucklin and Sengupta (1993) find that contractual restraints are an excellent means of preventing opportunism in alliances. Williamson (1985) also alludes to the need for restraints to eliminate self-interest-seeking behavior when firms engage potential competitors. Similarly, Chen and Li (1999) assert that learning within alliances increases when managers devote more attention to alliance structure prior to the inception of the alliance.

**P8: Among those alliance participants interested in obtaining market information, firms whose anticipated alliance outcomes have a relatively narrow scope will report higher alliance success than will those firms desiring outcomes with a relatively broad scope.**

Richter and Vettel (1995) note that understanding the limits, or bounds, on organizational learning at the start of the process is the key to successful knowledge acquisition. And yet, Varadarajan (1992) as well as Wind and Robertson (1983) hold that one of the unique characteristics of marketing is that the discipline spans the boundaries of business. Those seeking to attain market knowledge, then, must be very careful when setting their goals.

A number of scholars note that firms seem to have great difficulty in attaining market knowledge. Ananda and Khanna (2000)

state that joint ventures centered on the attainment of market knowledge contribute little to firm value. Chen and Li (1999) find that marketing knowledge contributes little to new product development. The reasons for these problems have been discussed previously: marketing knowledge is heavily dependent on contextual factors (Collinson, 1999) and transfer of this knowledge is exceptionally difficult (Lynskey, 1999).

Managers entering alliances to obtain market knowledge, therefore, would be well advised to heed Richter and Vettel's (1995) advice: set reasonable, specific goals. Those firms choosing narrow, well-defined objectives in regard to the attainment of market knowledge should be more pleased with their alliances than those firms that do not heed this advice.

### **Future Research**

What questions remain for authors interested in knowledge acquisition through interorganizational interactions? The most pressing need, at present, is for a model that explains those factors that predict success or failure for firms entering alliances to attain market knowledge. While, there have been a number of studies that have examined individual factors contributing to success or failure in regard to attainment of market knowledge, to date, authors have not made an attempt to examine these factors in a single model. An empirical test of the model presented in this paper would be a good start. Such a review would provide an idea of which factors contribute the most to successful acquisition of market knowledge.

Also, scholars do not understand the nature of market knowledge. Simonin (1999, 463) notes that "With only a few exceptions dealing with local market knowledge, marketing skills and know-how have yet to receive proper conceptual and empirical attention as a competency source of competitive advantage that can be transferred across alliance partners." Likewise, Varadarajan and Cunningham (1995, p. 295) assert that scholars should answer the following question: "How will traditional ways of organizing the marketing function have to be changed in light of the increasing incidence of alliances?"

In summary scholars need to improve their comprehension of both those factors underlying successful learning within alliances and the outcomes managers should expect from market knowledge acquisition. Specifically, a study examining the appropriate role of market knowledge in an alliance context would address a number of consequential scholarly issues.

### **Conclusion**

At present, managerial interest in alliances remains high. However, many studies indicate that results obtained from such arrangements are often unsatisfactory. Managers may improve their firms' alliance performance by better understanding the idiosyncratic nature of the knowledge they hope to attain through the alliance. While striving to attain market knowledge through an alliance, managers should bear in mind that the process may be lengthy and may lead to opportunistic behavior on the part of alliance partners.

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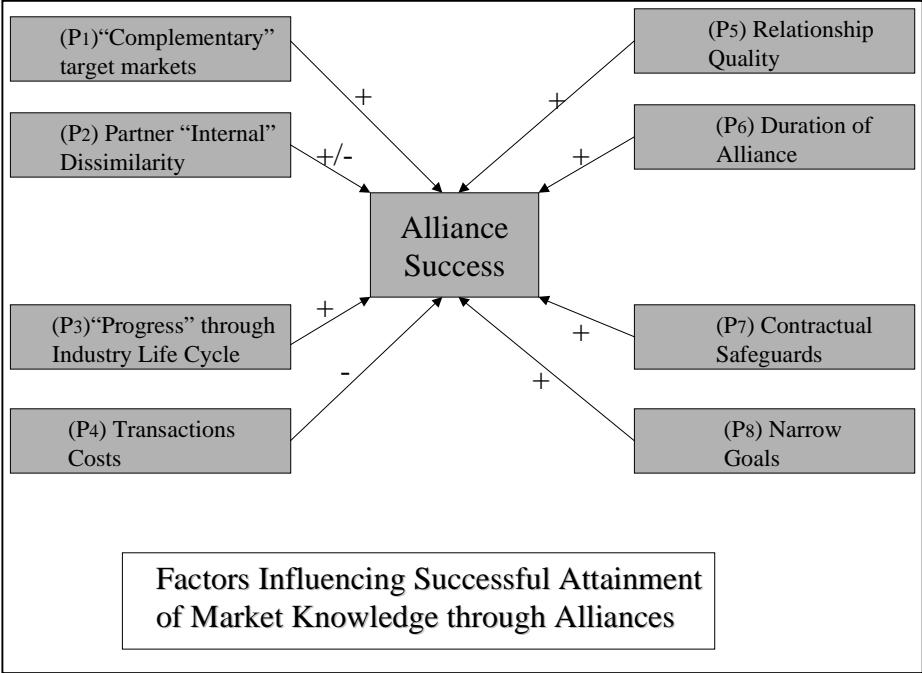
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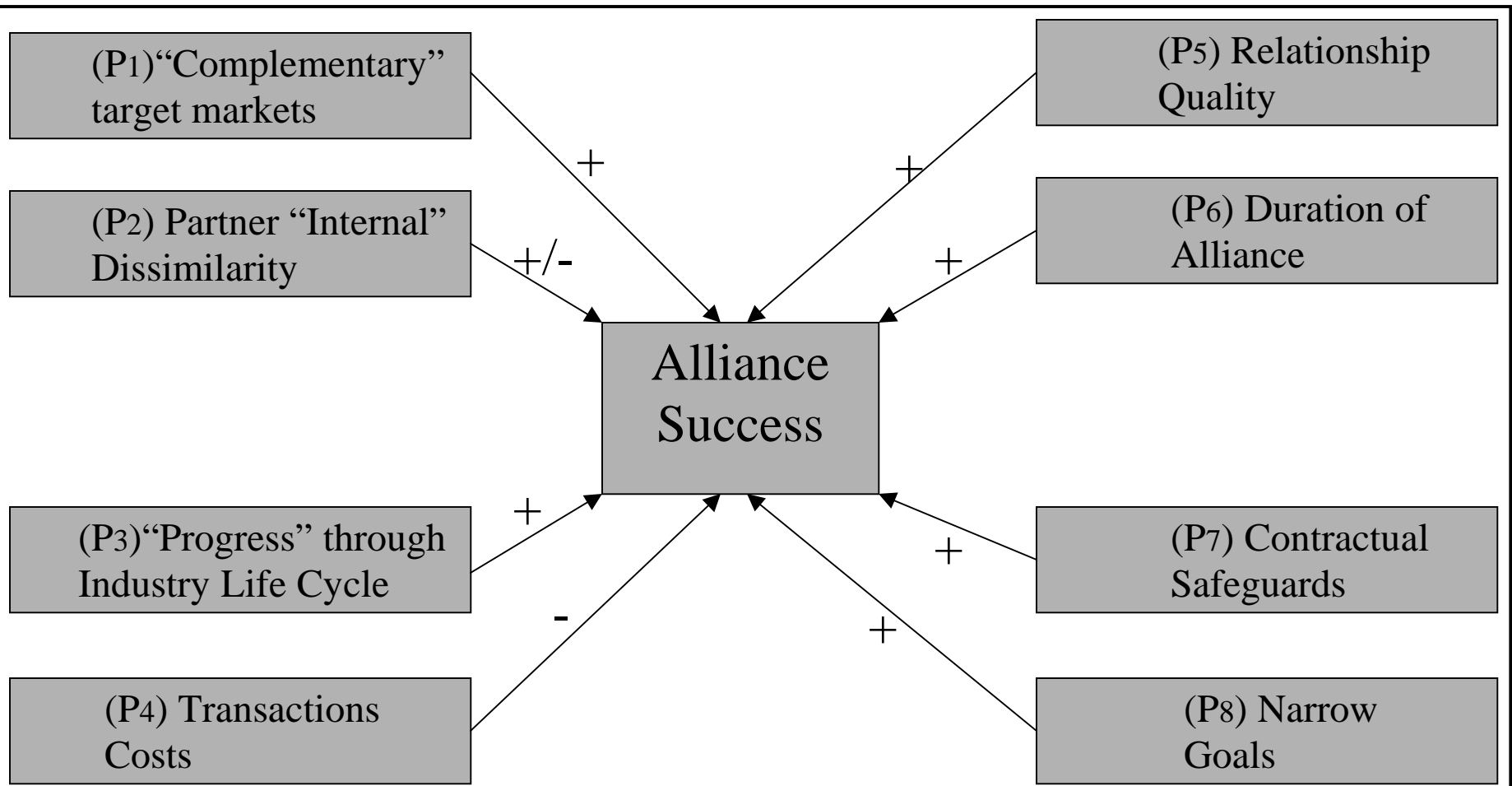
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Factors Influencing Successful Attainment of Market Knowledge through Alliances