

ENGINEERING COMPANIES STRATEGIZING GLOBALISATION

Martine Buser¹, Petra Bosch and Christian Koch

Division of Construction Management, The Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, Chalmers University of Technology, SE- 412 96 Gothenburg, Sweden

The rapid globalisation of the construction market should bring new potential for the Engineering Construction (EC) industry in terms of collaboration inside and outside of the national borders. Especially, engineering outsourcing is established as a global sector practice and expected to be a booming business in the future. There is a rich literature describing possible strategies, organisational forms and set ups and potential benefits of these internationalisation processes. Besides, the challenges that these forms of cooperation may involve have also largely be identified and discussed. However, there is less focus on how these collaborations occur in practice, in particular how they are initiated and negotiated and in which context they take place. Looking at a small network of Swedish engineering companies which have been active on the globalised market, we followed their concrete considerations, choices and actions in developing contacts and creating collaboration with foreign partners. To do so, we draw on a strategy as practice approach. The practice perspective defines strategy as something performed by people opposed to something a company has, and identifies strategy as the strategic activities reiterated in time by the diverse actors interacting in an organizational context, i.e., strategizing. The empirical material consists mainly of a longitudinal case study of a small engineering company and its network trying to expand to China, including interviews of two project managers of other engineering companies who have also engaged in an internationalisation process. The results feature project managers as strategy practitioners, using, what appears mundane project management tools, yet contain the radical strategic moves of expanding to China. This praxis underlines the lack of classical long term strategy in favour of ad hoc solutions and the central role of project managers in creating these international projects.

Keywords: engineering companies, internationalisation, strategy as practice

INTRODUCTION

The current globalisation of the construction market offers new potential and threats for the Engineering Construction (EC) industry to benefit from collaboration inside and outside of the national borders. Especially, engineering outsourcing is established as a global sector practice and expected to be a booming business in the future worth hundreds of billions of USD by 2020, growing at almost 30% annually.

Engineering companies are indeed becoming more and more international. Large global players such as WSP and AECOM as well as Scandinavian actors such as COWI or Ramboll are penetrating the Swedish market. Furthermore, Swedish companies such as SWECO are expanding abroad. These companies have started sourcing infrastructure engineering processes and methods internationally and

¹ buser@chalmers.se

developed competences in delivering both local and global attractive cost-efficient, high-value and sustainable solutions. Moreover, one can claim that project based organisations should enable the development of these kind of initiatives, through the autonomy of project managers or project “makers”, that adopt any local or international approach that would be feasible in the single project.

A recent study of Swedish engineering firms, focusing on corporate management shows that a majority is reluctant to tackle the strategic choices of developing outside of Sweden (Hammarström *et al.*, 2012). As this form of business development for the Swedish construction industry has not yet been studied in Sweden, we set out to do so.

The aim of this paper is to study how a small Swedish engineering company and its network are entering the globalised market by following their concrete considerations, choices and actions in developing contacts and creating collaboration with foreign partners. The paper is structured in a traditional way, starting with presenting our strategy as practice (SAP) theoretical frame, developing a method, describing the strategy of our case and analysing it with the SAP lenses to reach to some conclusions.

THEORETICAL FRAME

The conventional understanding of strategic management focuses on the formulation and implementation of chosen goals and initiatives decided by a company's top management building on the assessment of available resources and evaluation of the internal and external environments surrounding this company (Porter 1985, Mintzberg *et al.*, 1998). In order to reach these goals numerous models have been developed to guide companies. Exhibiting clear subsequent stages, these models often include a diagnose phase followed by a plan of action, which needs to be diffused top down within the organisation (Porter 1985, Mintzberg & Lampel, 1999, Kim & Mauborgne 2005). However, studies of construction companies underline the strong autonomy of project managers to make decisions (Koch and Friis 2015) and the lack of success for centrally made decisions to be implemented by the employees.

To study how the internationalisation process is taking place, we choose to use the strategy-as-practice (SAP) approach. According to this approach ‘doing strategy’ is a dynamic entanglement of actors, the strategy practitioners, practices and praxis (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Whittington, 2006). Practices, of internal and external origin supply routines, discourses, concepts, recipes, which can be used in strategizing (Hodgkinson *et al.* 2006). They here refer to the various tools, norms, and procedures of strategy work, from analytical frameworks such as Porter’s Five Forces to strategic planning routines such as strategy workshops (Vaara and Whittington 2012). Praxis in turn is what practitioners actually do in designing, shaping and implementing strategies such as strategic planning processes or meetings, where they mobilise and translate the practices into praxis. Practitioners are all those involved in, or seeking to influence, strategy-making. Importantly the SAP approach would suggest that formulation and execution are overlapping and views strategizing as a continual transformation of practices into praxis. As it derives, the SAP approach introduces a somewhat difficult distinction between practice and praxis and critics and contributors have pointed to develop even further variations of practice understanding within SAP (Rouleau, 2013). Here we will not differentiate between practices and praxis but focus on the strategic activities carried by the practitioners when engaging with internationalisation processes.

Even if SAP insist on a closeness to how strategy processes develop, the strand of approaches still rest with relatively traditional forms of hierarchical organisations. In SAP studies, strategy practitioners are predominantly top management and occasionally middle managers and consultants, but rarely employees (Jarzabkowski and Spee 2009, Vaara and Whittington 2012). This is in stark contrast to studies of strategizing in project-based organisations where project managers are recurrent actors (Koch and Friis 2015) and where large projects are likely to impact on strategy directions of the entire organisation.

Moreover, most SAP studies look at large organizations and the approach is rarely applied to SMEs. One exception is Friis (2013) which on the one hand demonstrates a case of involving the employees but on the other hand finds a clear dominance of the CEO, managers and consultants in the strategizing; a finding similar to Achtenhagen *et al.*, (2013) and Nordqvist (2012). Also Achtenhagen *et al.* (2013) find a broad involvement of actors as characteristics in SMEs strategizing. They point at three critical capabilities, namely an orientation towards experimenting with and exploiting new business opportunities, a balanced use of resources, and developing and maintaining coherence between leadership, culture, and employee commitment (Achtenhagen *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, strategy in construction SMEs is likely not explicitly formulated and documented in paper versions (Thuesen *et al.*, 2010, Wandahl *et al.*, 2010).

Summarising, our framework understands strategy as a continual practice carried out by strategy practitioners. In order to follow the internationalisation process strategy, we focus on the role and positions of the actors, the formulation decision process and the implementation.

METHOD

The objective of the study is to explore and articulate the dynamics of strategy practices as they unfold for a small engineering company and its network. More precisely we aim at tracing the decisions that has brought this company and its network to be active on the Chinese market. The theoretical frame of understanding summarised a selective literature review that draws on strategy as practice literature. Using an SAP lens - through an empirical case study - allowed the research team to closely study the rationales and decision processes followed by the actors as they occur and not as they are planned. Rasche and Chia (2009) suggest that SAP perspectives should complement traditional interviews and documentary analysis with ethnographic observation. The method to gather information is therefore multidisciplinary and employs an interpretive approach to discuss the empirical material (Bryman and Bell 2011). The empirical material presents a longitudinal case study (2014-2016) and draws on several complementary sources: An exploratory study including observation of three steering meetings of the project network, (between 2014-2015), 22 semi-structured interviews with members of the project, complemented by two interviews with two projects managers in larger companies. These interviews were semi-structured and follow guiding themes. They lasted between one and two hours and were recorded and were partially performed by master students guided by the authors. To validate the study, the results have been presented and discussed in a workshop gathering around 30 practitioners including five members of the network.

The choice of the case study is opportunistic and convenient. Part of a research network bridging academia and practitioners, we met two members of KarlssonCo, a

40 employee engineering company working with sustainable energy solutions, who had ambition to conquer the Chinese market (KarlssonCo is a pseudonym).

Internationalisation strategy at KarlssonCo

The initiation of the internationalization process is actually the result of a misunderstanding. One of KarlssonCo's engineers, Olsson (a pseudonym), was contacted by an architect who listened to a presentation on a sustainable solution KarlssonCo had developed for a local school. During the presentation, it was mentioned that KarlssonCo had three branch offices in Sweden one of them situated in Kinna. The confusion between Kinna, 30 kilometres from Gothenburg (Sweden) and China is appealing only for Swedes as Ki is pronounced Chi in Swedish. By the time they realise their mistake, Olsson had already been convinced to join the architect to a sustainable construction fair organised in China. As the cost of traveling was quite low, the engineer got his trip approved by the company board with the goal to explore the Chinese business potential for KarlssonCo. The company KarlssonCo had not expressed the wish to expand to overseas markets before, and never considered the Chinese market. But it was for this engineer "an opportunity I could not miss and I would do it again if I had the chance" (Olsson).

During the trip to China, contacts were made with a few companies in particular a Chinese sustainable architect company Jiànzhú shī (pseudonym, Chinese for architect) Besides, Olsson carried a small complimentary investigation to solve a technical problem regarding ventilation for a Chinese Company part of the Jiànzhú shī network and also related to a HVAC company, called Guǎn here (pseudonym Chinese for pipe), presenting them with three alternative solutions. A year later, convinced by the quality of the proposal, a small delegation composed of Jiànzhú shī and Guǎn managers came for a two-week' visit to Gothenburg. One of KarlssonCo engineers was Chinese and she was directly associated to the project, however more for her language skills than her professional competences; explaining partially why she later left the company. In order to strengthen KarlssonCo's position, Olsson, invited two engineer colleagues to join the team, Andersson and Larsson as well as an architect specialised in Eco-building with whom he had previously worked in another project. Satisfied with KarlssonCo's innovative proposal, the Jiànzhú shī decided to hire KarlssonCo to make some pre-studies.

At this point, KarlssonCo started to gather information about work collaboration with China. Building on their local network they collected advice from companies who had carried out jobs for Chinese clients. This advice was not very encouraging, pointing out the difficulty among others to agree on the amount of work, the fees for specific tasks, and the final payment once the project delivered. As sceptical opinions were expressed within the company, KarlssonCo commissioned the West Sweden Chamber of Commerce to deliver a short investigation on their partners as well as an assessment of the real potential of exporting Swedish sustainable design to China. Though presenting explicitly the barriers and challenges this process would face, the report concluded with a real possibility of establishing a market. It also supplied KarlssonCo with short, medium and long term strategies for their establishment in China providing the company would establish an office in the country. These strategies, though offering a topic for a master thesis of engineering students were rapidly discarded by the small group working with China.

To maintain their freedom of movement and silence internal critic, the KarlssonCo Chinese project group looked for additional support to finance their project with China.

They applied for funding at the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth which is a national governmental agency tasked with promoting entrepreneurship and regional growth. They received subvention to create a network of sustainability interested companies in Gothenburg in order to better profile their competences on the Chinese market. The Chinese group developed then to a network, integrating companies belonging to their close network. Besides the Eco-architect, a larger consultancy company operating mainly in construction planning, project administration and maintenance, the Pingman joined the group; a larger architectural practice with among other experiences in green office and urban planning, AR., was also invited. The partners of both companies are long term friends of one of the KarlssonCo engineers. However neither of them were interested in growth per se, it was the novelty of the project which attracted them. The Pingman partner was openly not convinced of the business potential of the Chinese project, yet he enjoyed working with the group and had minimised the financial risk his company took in the project.

Besides working partners, the network also included institutional partners. One partner, supported by the City of Gothenburg, is supposed to increase national and international recognition of the Gothenburg region as a leader in environmental and sustainable development, offering services to public and private sectors who are facing environment-related challenges, primarily in the global market, and to regional companies seeking international business contacts, as well as Chalmers Technical University researchers.

The KarlssonCo group also had contact with the Centre for Environmental Technology (CENTEC) part of the Swedish Embassy in Beijing who they met during their first trip. This centre is promoting national environmental technology in China. The centre was keen on having them return to China to advertise Swedish sustainable solutions for the construction sector. Consequently, CENTEC invited the KarlssonCo group twice to participate in large sustainability oriented professional fairs and touring in large cities to meet both private and public clients.

Besides financing their travel, these trips also contributed to identify and develop new business proposals. Noticing a lot of mistakes in the new buildings during their visit, as well as an apparent lack of competences regarding site management and technical skills in the production phases, Andersson and Larsson considered providing education modules to contractors and architects in China focusing on the realisation of passive and zero energy houses. They contacted a professor at Gothenburg University (SE), also a member of their professional network, to discuss the realisation of these modules; however their application for public funding was unsuccessful and the project was abandoned.

Similarly, facing the lack of competences in managing the large system of infrastructures expressed by some administrative members in the large new cities they visited, they thought to develop education to help cities to organise and control these infrastructures. This suggestion however did not meet the support of the steering group of KarlssonCo.

The Chinese adventure has led to a few projects together with Jiànzhú shī focusing on, for instance, pre studies of energy saving solutions for a hotel, a student house and a

forest tourist centre. The size of the projects has varied between 40 000 - 450 000 SEK. And final payment has indeed been an issue.

According to one of KarlssonCo's Chinese group members, the network is now concentrating on the design of green energy solutions for housing and offices. As they lack knowledge regarding Chinese building codes and regulations, they produced the pre-studies which are handed over to Jiànzhú shī engineers who finalise the drawings. The bigger project so far is their participation to design the first office building with passive house technology in Harbin, China.

ANALYSIS

The analysis looks at some selected themes derived from the study. First, we discuss the character of decision processes, followed by the limited information of the market, the choice of partners and finally the role of projects in the involved companies' strategy.

Decision processes

The case study illustrates very clearly that new projects at KarlssonCo are not created to concretise strategy or planned goals. On the contrary, it is the unplanned reaction to an opportunity which is initiating the project. The prospect of visiting China for the first time and to look at how environmental issues are dealt with, a topic he is genuinely interested in, is intriguing enough for Olsson to accept the proposition; at this point the goal to explore the Chinese market is nothing but a vague justification for his travel. This approach, taking an unexpected opportunity to launch new activities has often been described in the internationalisation of SME literature (Child and Hsieh, 2014). Usually, however, it is associated to the leading decision maker, not to the project manager (Schweizer 2012).

Once the opportunities have been created during the China trip, Olsson is defining their first project. Building on his usual practices on answering clients' demands and tenders, he constitutes the project around the Jiànzhú shī demands. Both the technical as well as the partners' solutions which he has gathered for the proposal, are chosen to fit the particular conditions. Dealing with uncertainties, Olsson assembled a group of people from his close network whom he trusts and has cooperated with before. The goal is to obtain a project from the Chinese connection, he is keen on working with. The introduction of the two KarlssonCo colleagues also diversified the content of the project, as they take a more active role in the process. The scope of the project moves from a technical solutions focus to a broader agenda including education, networking, and political influence.

As we follow the network, new goals are associated to the project, triggered by identified problems as they appear concretely in the field during the trips to China. A market study is contracted to the West Sweden Chamber of Commerce. But the report on this market study is not so much aimed at assessing the business potential of the Chinese project as to tranquilise the others members of the company, the CEO included.

The growing of the network is also understood as a necessity to strengthen the offer for the Chinese clients. By adding new companies, they add new competences to their problem solving strategies. None of the new companies is building on strategic consideration to join the network: curiosity and acquaintanceship are the motor of this association.

Limited information about the market

The members of the active network try neither to rationalise their participation in terms of business potentials or strategic moves, nor to measure the possible benefits they could obtain. They do not try to map the sector and assess their potential competitors. During the steering meeting they describe Stockholm region as their biggest competitor but this connects to the repartition of the Swedish market not the internationalisation project. Once again, going back to the common understanding of the market as it functions in their everyday practice.

During their two first trips to China, the two KarlssonCo members are confronted with their international competitors as portrayed by their local clients. They are surprised to find out that they have been in competition with other companies from European countries such as France or Germany. But what really shocked them is to be told that "Italian engineering companies are at the front of environmental driven companies!", as they take for granted that Italians are nobody in the green business" since they have never heard of them" (Larsson). However, they don't try to find out if the Italians' reputation is justified.

The choice of partners

The choice of the international partners has been coincidental in the Chinese project. When Olsson travels to China he has neither asked nor searched for information about potential partners, clients or projects that could fit with the competences his company provides. Though trusting the architect who has invited him, he is setting no goals to his travel. The meetings with Guǎn and Jiànzhú shī are somewhat accidental and their common interest for environmental sustainability as well as the unexpected help Olsson provides to their ventilation issues, initiates their collaboration.

Even if Andersson and Olsson meet numerous potential partners and clients during their two next travels to China, Guǎn and in particular Jiànzhú shī remain their main interlocutors in China.

We have asked other partners of the network, who carry other international activities, how they determine possible partners when planning a project abroad. Pingman is taking projects outside Sweden only to answer the demands of their Swedish clients. So when they screen a foreign market, it is not to find new projects but to realise the projects of their clients. They act as construction advisor/client counsellor for a few large manufacturing companies, monitoring the establishment of new factories. These turnkey projects cover the whole process from finding a suitable location, to choosing the contractors and controlling the properly functioning features of the finalised property. Since they have performed a number of these projects, they work with standardised requirements. Pingman is currently running similar constructions in US, Czech Republic and India. Two engineers, a senior and a junior employed in the company for the last 5 years, are in charge of managing these.

The interviews with Pingman reveal a more systematic search process to find partners: First they rely on their professional network, then on other Swedish companies active in the target location, or on embassies and supportive institutions such as CENTEC, but they recognised that google is actually quite efficient to find relevant partners. Once identified on the internet, these potential suppliers are contacted and invited to a bidding process. They judge the companies according to their answers to the brief and invite the chosen candidates for a final negotiation in Gothenburg where the contract is signed. It can be speculated that the company here draws on a high trust culture from the Swedish construction sector context, as studies from other countries have

shown far more cautious partner search processes (Bresnen and Marshall 2000). This has however not been investigated in this study.

A project is a project is a project

In the account of the company actors there seems to be little difference between the KarlssonCo Chinese group engaging in an internationalisation project and their business as usual when bidding or responding to their clients' demands on the local or national market. These engineers are used to not systematically obtain the projects they apply for. There is an element of risk whenever they answer a public tender that they are ready to take, it being in Gothenburg or in China.

This illustrates how existing practices, developed on the basis of the Swedish market are transformed into new similar praxes when operating on the Chinese market. This is in line with one source of strategy in SAP: the internal practices. Which is in line with one source of strategy in SAP; internal practices (the other being external practices such as strategy concepts). The project managers draw on their usual project development process, and new steps into a new market are legitimized by the project framing, causing these strategic moves to appear as business as usual. Perhaps one way to distinguish between these everyday routines and strategizing can be found in Oral and Jarzabkowski (2016) notion of managers "learning to live with it" as a response to strategizing occurring in a company. However, these project managers are, even if praxes build on previous practice, actively adopting new strategic opportunities and experimenting under the resource regime a small company operates under (Achtenhagen *et al* 2013). Importantly, in doing so they disregard the (external) tools defined by strategic models and reverse the strategy logic by focusing first on the implementations and building consequently the goals and the legitimation of the projects. Importantly in doing so they disregard the (external) tools defined by strategic models and reverse the strategy logic by focusing first on the implementations and building consequently the goals and the legitimation of the projects.

Would it be better to rely on rational strategy planning instead of building on opportunism and what appears to be intuitional decision processes? What seems to be at the first sight naïve and intuitive is actually the result of having carried out a large number of projects. Our network takes quick and often efficient decisions regarding the available possibilities. The project managers show flexibility, creativity and to a minor degree efficiency. In doing so, they contribute to the development of the company. If the Chinese project has not generated a large profit, it has certainly not increased the company deficit. Besides the formal contracts with the Chinese clients, this initiative has also generated increasing interest for KarlssonCo and its partners on the local and national market, as their collaboration with China has been covered by the local and professional media.

This observation is moreover not only valid for SMEs. Drawing on processual (SAP) studies of strategizing in large companies one can find similar transformations of existing practices (Koch & Friis 2015).

Project managers as strategy practitioners

The study features senior project managers in the role of central strategy practitioners. They transform Swedish practices into new praxes for the Chinese market. This occurs under the framing of a strategy development which is focused on the Swedish market. Strategizing in our case company occurs in both internal and external arenas that relaxes ordinary assumed hierarchy of management positions: top managers,

middle managers and project managers. Rather this strategic orientation, strategizing, is shared within these liminal arenas where several types of managers contribute to new developments.

Project managers are rarely discussed in the SAP literature, where recurrent strategists are higher level managers (Jarzabkowski and Spee 2009, Vaara and Whittington 2012). But the result can be compared to Koch *et al.*, (2015) and Sage *et al.*, (2012) cases of project and middle managers in contractor firms acting as strategy practitioners. The project managers in our case act as strategists. They have close contact to the company management and do not have to strategize for years as in Koch and Friis (2015) discussing a large contractor. However, we would argue that such closeness between a corporate management group and project managers representing the "strategic end" of projects may not be so unusual in larger project based companies.

CONCLUSION

Building on the SAP lens has enabled us to observe how an internationalisation process was unfolding in a local network of small engineering companies. Following the project managers' activities underlines how their practices refer to mostly internal but also to external routines, discourses, concepts, recipes, which can be used in strategizing. In doing so, their activities clearly depart from conventional understanding of internationalisation strategy as they draw on their working habit of developing specific solutions for their customers' demands or needs. The study shows that this approach is actually quite agile and appropriate for the company. It thereby breaks with many mainstream classical strategic models, while supporting those that find strategy processes as being anarchic and emergent.

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