

Staffing Considerations and International Trade Fairs for Korean SME Exporters and Innovators

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Abstract

There is a dearth of literature on international trade fair (ITF) staffing functions from the perspective of the exhibitor, and on firm-level internationalization and innovation-related activity within the ITF environment. This research explores specific ITF staffing considerations and their linkages with a number of measures related to firm-level internationalization strategies, relationship building, and innovative activity. A relationship marketing perspective and two research questions are deployed. Results are based on quantitative analyses of firm-level data on small-and-medium-sized (SME) Korean advanced machine tool manufacturers. Results indicate that firms staffed with senior management place more emphasis on meetings with overseas agents and on market information gathering. Firms staffed with technicians emphasize benchmarking activity. The presence of engineers emerges as vital to the setting of clear goals for ITF attendance. Engineers fill even more pivotal roles in the use of ITFs for establishing relationships with potential buyers, for information gathering on them, and for innovative activity. SMEs in technologically advanced sectors and those seeking to expand their export horizons should diversify and enhance their ITF staffing, namely by including more engineers and technicians in conjunction with upper management. They should also move beyond a sales-only motivation and make sure that cross-training helps to better prepare all staff for functions outside of their general job descriptions. Findings may have a direct bearing on Korean firms given the context surrounding the industry, and on (East) Asian firms in particular given an organizational preference to staff with lower-level management and sales personnel.

Keywords: Exporting, Innovation, International trade fairs, Korea, SMEs, Staffing considerations.

Introduction

International trade fairs (ITFs) are forums where important tacit information is exchanged and relationships are built (Bathelt and Zeng, 2015; Sarmiento, Farhangmehr and Simões, 2015; Schuldt and Bathelt, 2011). Linked to this, these events can act as a key element of a firm's internationalization strategies by enabling and facilitating international connections and knowledge sourcing (Sarmiento and Simões, 2018; Kalafsky and Gress, 2013; Evers and Knight, 2008; Bellow and Barksdale, 1986). Participating in ITFs can be particularly important for small-and-medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which can utilize these events as cost and time-effective means to build relationships and engage with global business partners in one location (Measson and Campbell-Hunt, 2015; Kalafsky and Gress, 2014a). Still, many firms, including SMEs, often do not clearly define their ITF-related goals ahead of time (Bettis-Outland, Johnston and Wilson, 2012; Kirchgeorg, Springer and Kästner, 2009; Hansen, 2004). Firms also do not often align their ITF activity with specific goals even if they have them (Tanner and Chonko, 1995), and they often do not fully avail themselves of the opportunities presented at ITFs (Blythe, 2010; Tanner, 2002). This can in turn impede SMEs from deriving maximum value from such events. Part of this goal-setting concerns the selection of personnel (Chonko, Tanner and McKee, 1994), especially with regard to potentially moving beyond salesforce-only staffing considerations at these events (see Sarmiento *et al.*, 2015; Lee and Kim, 2008; Hansen, 1996).

In a comprehensive review of the ITF literature, Tafesse and Skallerud (2017) found that a mere eight percent of ITF-related articles dealt with staffing. Add to this the fact that among the research that examined *diversified* staff outside of the ubiquitous sales and managerial personnel, recommendations were based on attendee interaction, and were generalized, for example to better diversify the staff mix, or to provide better training for 'the staff' to better align with attendee wants (Haon *et al.*, 2020; Tanner and Chonko, 1995). Many questions, however, still remain: which staff members in particular are related to exactly what functions and why from the motives of the *exhibitor* firms? Other studies concentrated more on job-specific training recommendations, for example for managers and sales personnel vis-à-vis exporting success (Bellow and Barksdale, 1986), 'staff' related to image building, relationship development, information gathering, and product placement (Lee and Kim, 2008), and implications for upper management participation (Brown, Mohan and Boyd, 2017; Tanner, 2002). Again, however, the recommendations were often generalized or inferred, and they did not readily cross-fertilize pre-existing job descriptions (e.g., Lee and Kim, 2008). As we shall see, lack of skills cross-fertilization may mean lost opportunities at ITFs.

Further to this, Tafesse and Skallerud (2017), echoing much earlier calls by Bellow and Barksdale (1986), Evers and Knight (2008), and Lee (2008), also concluded that future research needs to pay closer attention to firm-level internationalization within the ITF environment. Bellow and Barksdale (1986) addressed specificities associated with exporting knowledge and intent with regard to staffing and ITFs, but exporting as a firm-level motive has been less emphasized in the majority of the research examining ITF and staffing dynamics. A noticeable exception was the work of Evers and Knight (2008). These scholars determined that ITFs benefited small-firm network formation that in turn facilitated exporting. Exporting received some tertiary attention in the work of Tanner (2002) and Hansen (1996), but there were few foundations for comparisons

given the number of diversified industries in the sample, and no background on firm-level export experience or the importance of exports to the firms going forward. As shall be discussed, these are issues worth considering.

With the above in mind, this research explores SME staffing at a major Korean ITF and its linkages with a number of measures related to firm-level internationalization goals and strategies, relationship building, and innovative activity. Specifically, it examines the case of South Korean SME machine tool manufacturers that participated in a major ITF in South Korea (referred to as Korean and Korea respectively from here on). The machine tool industry is traditionally seen as a gauge of a country's overall level of manufacturing sophistication and innovative competitiveness (Anderson, Fine and Parker, 2000), and has long been an important cornerstone of Korea's manufacturing activity and industrial growth (KOMMA, 2018; Kalafsky and Gress, 2015). This makes the industry worthy of some attention. Analyses contribute to the literature in two ways. The first contribution concerns the impact that *specific* staff can have on particular, *diversified* firm-level activity at ITFs – a research avenue that, as previously highlighted, merits further exploration. The second related contribution is the focus on SMEs in particular, and how they can utilize ITFs as part of their export marketing strategies. This context includes the development of relationships with potential buyers and other business partners as well as the fine-tuning of products via innovative activity with regard to the presence of specific personnel in attendance. This is a potentially important contribution to the literature given the difficulties that many SMEs face when attempting to discover, and then enter, global markets while remaining competitive (Bashiri-Behmire *et al.*, 2019). As shall be discussed, these challenges are especially pertinent to Korean SMEs and therefore impact ITF policy in the country.

A relationship marketing perspective is utilized to develop categories for analyses, the majority of which have been deployed in previous ITF-related research (e.g., Geldres-Weiss, Monreal-Pérez and Geldres-Weiss, 2021; Kalafsky and Gress, 2013; Lee and Kim, 2008; Tanner, 2002). These categories include goal setting, relationship formation and maintenance, associated trust building, benchmarking, product display and feedback acquisition, and innovation. There are two reasons for this. First, Sarmiento, *et al.* (2015) argued persuasively for a shift from a transactional marketing approach to ITF analysis to a relationship marketing approach, primarily because the transactional approach may gloss over myriad, though crucially important, non-selling interactions taking place at these events. Second, and of equal importance to the present research, these authors specifically integrated innovation into their relationship marketing-based analyses. With the exception of earlier work by Bellow and Barczak (1990), innovative *activity* in ITF-related research has thus far been predominantly the purview of scholars from within economic geography circles (e.g., Zhu, Bathelt and Zeng, 2020; Bathelt, 2017; Bathelt and Gibson, 2015; Kalafsky and Gress, 2013). Innovation, as Sarmiento *et al.* (2015) related, previously had more to do merely with the introduction of new products. The present research, by way of comparison, approaches exhibitor innovative activity in a relational context vis-à-vis the presence of specific personnel. To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is a novel approach. Two research questions (RQs) are deployed - RQ1: How does specific SME staffing impact relationship building and maintenance at an ITF? And RQ2: How does specific staffing impact SME ITF participation regarding institutional learning possibilities and the innovation context?

As previously mentioned, this may have pertinent ramifications for Korean SMEs in particular. There is growing concern locally that they may be increasingly disadvantaged if they cannot develop targeted and successful international strategies going forward (Seo and Choi, 2012). The government has therefore enacted a string of SME support measures to bolster their performance (OECD -SMSBA, 2010). Likewise, an SME-based study is important in the Korean context given that ITFs in Korea are more important for SME exporters than for large firms, primarily because of government policy. This is somewhat different than the roll of these events in neighboring countries such as Taiwan (Bathelt, Li and Zeng, 2015). Additionally, Korean SMEs stand as the weakest link in the country's innovation system (Eom and Lee, 2010), providing clear impetus to study the innovative activity of these firms at ITFs.

The next section provides a foundation for the ensuing analyses and the two RQs. Attention is paid to ITF attendance motivations, activity, and staffing at these events. The analyses and discussion then follow before concluding remarks are ventured.

Literature Review

Almost two decades ago, Blythe (2002) underlined the importance of firms evolving beyond the use of ITFs as mere sales tools, instead developing more holistic strategies for ITF participation. This angle has grown in importance recently, particularly in reference to relationship building and maintenance (see Sarmiento and Simões, 2018). Connected to this, Sarmiento *et al.* (2015) illustrated the dynamics and importance of the relationship marketing perspective in terms of understanding firm-level relationship building and maintenance, and their connection to varied activities taking place at these events. ITFs, for example, can be crucial for building the trust that is essential to relationship marketing (see Siemieniako and Gębarowski, 2017).

Trust is important. The economic geography literature has shown how ITFs become small, temporary agglomerations of industry-related activities – in essence, setting the forum for informal information exchange (e.g., Bathelt and Schuldt, 2010; 2008). More specifically, these venues provide the right environment in which to develop inter-firm communications (Bythe, 2010), and proximity fosters relationship-building (Ramírez-Pasillas, 2010). This geographic proximity, for example, helps to provide the right environment to foster trust, which is key to not only building new relationships, but also to improving existing bonds between sellers, buyers, and other actors (Sarmiento, Simões and Farhangmehr, 2015). Accordingly, management has begun to see the value of these events in terms of their relationship marketing potential (Brown *et al.*, 2017). Thus, an important element of relationship marketing at ITFs would be the selection and placement of the right staff at these events, preferably seasoned and trained to take advantage of the universe of activities and opportunities unfolding at them (Pitta, Weisgal and Lynagh, 2006).

Taking the above into account, an important element of ITF performance then concerns the setting of clear goals and affiliated strategies even before attending these events, referred to collectively as 'pre-show activities' (see Kirchgeorg *et al.*, 2009). Part of these strategies concerns how to select and utilize staffing at ITFs (Hansen, 2004). Prior research, for example, found that more successful firms took more advantage of

professional-level benchmarking and new buyer scanning by staffing their ITF booths with trained and knowledgeable personnel (Blythe, 2010; Lee and Kim, 2008; Herbig, O'Hara and Palumbo, 1998). Also, ITFs are important venues within which firms not only benchmark competitors, but perhaps of even more importance, also gain vital customer feedback on *their* products and affiliated services (Bathelt, 2017; Maskell, Bathelt and Malmberg, 2006). This interaction, in turn, facilitates institutional learning and innovation (see Amin, 2003), topics that will be revisited shortly. This is also important because while 'buzz' about new products, trends, and policy is created and widely available at ITFs (Bathelt and Schuldt, 2010; 2008), companies can only take advantage of it if they have the requisite capabilities to do so. Overall, the preceding intimates that staffing decisions can play a role in ITF success. As Pitta *et al.* (2006, p. 164) offered, "Personnel detailed to work the trade show must be well trained and know the objectives they need to attain."

In general, social networks are also a key component of firm internationalization strategies (Glückler, 2006). SMEs tend to depend on network relationships more than their MNE counterparts when seeking to expand their geographical reach (Coviello, 2006). In this respect, ITFs can be part of a well-rounded strategy for firms. Firms, for example, can see competing products from around the world, as well as speak with sales and technical personnel from any number of potential markets (Rinallo, Borghini and Golfetto, 2010; Sarmiento *et al.*, 2015). Concurrently, ITFs are also places where firms can provide in-person demonstrations of their products and innovations to an international audience (Bathelt, 2017). This is particularly important in the high-tech machinery industries (see Kalafsky and Gress, 2014b). The benefit of such events, then, is that they create both 'geographical proximity' and 'organized proximity', where buyers and sellers sharing a common industrial knowledge base are afforded direct contact (Torre and Rallet, 2005). Moreover, the importance of these networks underscores how critical it is for firms to be strategic about ITF staffing decisions vis-à-vis internationalization. Tanner (2002), for example, found that more successful firms placed more emphasis on the use of ITFs for the purpose of entering new markets. In other research, a management presence at an ITF increased firm-level capacity to develop network relationships (Brown *et al.*, 2017). The present research examines these possibilities with an eye toward unpacking the activity of specific personnel to include those outside of traditional sales and management roles. The preceding considerations inform the first RQ:

RQ1 How does specific SME staffing impact relationship building and maintenance at an ITF?

As mentioned previously, the relationship marketing perspective views innovation as a potential driver of ITF attendance. Related to this, Babbar and Rai (1993) suggested that analyzing a sales-only motivation in isolation obfuscated analyses of other firm motivations for ITF attendance to include seeking sources for innovation. Indeed, research on firm activity at ITFs found that some firms pursued innovative activity at these events (e.g., Zhu *et al.*, 2020; Bathelt, 2017; Bathelt and Gibson, 2015; Bellow and Barczak, 1990), and that those that did so also had higher levels of exports (Kalafsky and Gress, 2013). Further to this point, research showed that firms were better served at ITFs when, "higher customization, tailored and effective solutions," were made available (Sarmiento *et al.*, 2015, p. 590). As shall be discussed, these can both be accomplished at ITFs. Here, however, it is important to address context given the

fact that differing ITFs serve different purposes and cater to firms in sectors with differing technological levels. In one ITF study by Bathelt, Li and Zhu (2017), for example, a very small percentage of participating firms acknowledged engaging in innovative activity. These firms were predominantly in low value-added manufacturing (e.g., garments, bags, and footwear). In contrast, as we shall soon see, a majority of firms in the present study, all in a high-tech, advanced manufacturing sector, report engaging in innovative activity at ITFs.

Indeed, given the high-technology-related nature of the machine tool industry, the contextual specificities associated with Korean SMEs (e.g., their export imperative and related government policy), and the attention to innovative behavior at contemporary ITFs (Locatelli, daSilveira and Mourão, 2018; Bathelt, 2017; Saramento *et al.*, 2015), the set of ITF personnel possibilities under study should be expanded from sales and management to include technicians and engineers. Other studies (Haon *et al.*, 2020; Tanner and Chonko, 1995) included engineers and technical personnel in their studies of firm-level ITF activities, but did not consider innovation or export motives on the part of the exhibitors. Again, recommendations generated from these studies tended to generalizations (e.g., to better diversify the staff mix, or to provide better training for ‘the staff’).

All of the above point to the need for SMEs to staff their ITF booths with personnel who can best accomplish not only the sales and marketing functions most commonly associated with ITF attendance, but also those able to best facilitate institutional learning. Individuals, in this sense, help organizations internalize valuable knowledge that can contribute to future success. Over the longer term, however, organizational *cultures* that promote learning are better positioned to take advantage of the spatial proximity afforded by ITFs (Amin, 2003). The most recent work on ITFs found that firm experience, whether measured by age or in ITF experience, lent itself to superior sales, feedback, and new product sector development (Geldres-Weiss *et al.*, 2021). Relatedly, Gress and Kalafsky (2020) determined that ITF relational activity impacted longer-term, firm-level export and ITF-related routines. In that study, firms related that they were learning *as organizations* from their ITF participation. In terms of staffing, some previous work examined sales and marketing managers, owners/partners, and administrators (Blythe, 2010), and the impact that staff can have on ITF-level, export-related metrics (Kalafsky and Gress, 2014a). Others looked at ‘staff’ related to image building, relationship development, information gathering, and product placement (Lee and Kim, 2008), in addition to implications for upper management participation (Brown *et al.*, 2017; Tanner, 2002). These studies, however, did not specifically capture exporting and innovation-related activity. The takeaways from the above are that staffing impacts internationalization, and that ITF experience impacts institutional learning (and potentially exporting and innovation). The present research bridges these facets of ITF participation by operationalizing them and examining them vis-à-vis specific staffing possibilities.

In summation: 1) only eight percent of ITF-specific research has concentrated on staffing-related issues; 2) of the research that has examined impacts from the presence of engineers and technical personnel, emphasis has been on attendee preferences; 3) along with very little in the way of attention to exhibitor innovation motives, there is a dearth of literature on SME ITF activity vis-à-vis exporting; and 4) given differing levels of technological sophistication, firm-level capabilities, and ITF policy goals

across industries and markets, context is important. Building off RQ1, RQ2 captures more of the preceding considerations:

RQ2 How does specific staffing impact SME ITF participation regarding institutional learning possibilities and the innovation context?

Data and Methodology

Data were collected at the Seoul International Manufacturing Technology Show (SIMTOS), which took place from 3-7 April 2018 at the Korea International Exhibition Center (KINTEX) outside of Seoul, Korea, via a distributed, structured survey. This machine tool exhibition is now among the world's largest, along with ITFs held in Germany, Japan, China, Taiwan, and the United States. There were approximately 530 Korean firms attending, but only complete machine producers were targeted for participation. Moreover, given the aforementioned challenges faced by SMEs in this industry, and the associated impetus for the Korean government's ITF policy, this sample was further limited to SMEs – that is, firms employing fewer than 300 employees, as per the standard Korean definition (see Kushnir, 2010). All told, 106 firms were initially identified on-site, but 13 firms were either intermediary parts producers or manufacturers of physical tools alone, thereby reducing the survey population to 93 firms. Surveys were distributed and completed by 52 firms for an overall response rate of 56 percent.

For the purposes of this research, the survey instrument consisted of ten questions pertaining to descriptive company information, and 24 questions pertaining to relationships and ITF motivations and activity. 77 percent of participating firms were small firms with 50 or fewer employees, and 23 percent were medium-sized firms with 51 to 300 employees. Based on a seven-point Likert scale (1=Not Important; 7=Very Important), participating firms reported perceiving exports to be important, with a mean of 5.53 and standard deviation of 1.88. Table 1 provides additional descriptive statistics related to firm export activity.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics – SIMTOS Attending Firms

Percent of Sales from Exports	Number of Firms	Projected Export Growth (5 years)	Number of Firms
1-15%	13	0%	5
20-45%	18	1-10%	6
50%+	18	11-20%	8
		20%+	29
Exports: Number of Countries		Personnel Staffing	
1-3	18	Engineers	34
4-9	17	Sales and Marketing	46
10+	10	Senior Management	24
		Technicians	17

Source: Data collected from participating firms at SIMTOS

To provide context for the analyses in the next section, note that these SMEs were comparatively export intensive, with over a third of the respondents reporting that exports comprise half or more of total sales and two-thirds reporting export intensities of over 20 percent. Furthermore, over half of these firms projected export growth rates of over 20 percent, suggesting that an ITF such as SIMTOS could be critical to the growth and internationalization strategies of these firms. Finally, note that in line with previous works (Haon *et al.*, 2020; Tanner and Chonko, 1995), most firms staffed their exhibits with sales personnel while engineers, senior management, and technicians were comparatively underrepresented. Before continuing, please note that this research does not delve into the specific gross number of personnel staffing individual booths. Other research, for example by Tanner and Chonko (1995), and Lee and Kim (2008), found no impact from personnel density.

The methodology deployed is quantitative, encompassing t-tests, chi-square analyses, and the computation of odds ratios.

Results and Discussion

Personnel Staffing and Relationship Building and Maintenance at an ITF

RQ1 explores the impact of specific personnel on relationship building and maintenance activities geared toward internationalization that unfolded at SIMTOS. Table 2 below presents the results of a series of t-tests conducted for firms staffed with engineers, sales and marketing personnel, senior management, and/or technicians at their SIMTOS booths. All firms indicated that making or strengthening relationships with customers, suppliers, and agents were important functions of ITF participation. For a start, note that no significant differences emerged with regard to sales-related personnel; in essence, they were ubiquitous and sales remained one of the core functions at this trade fair (see also Bathelt *et al.*, 2017). However, some statistically significant differences emerged where engineers and senior management were concerned. For example, firms with booths staffed with engineers placed more emphasis on the importance of ITFs for forming new relationships with overseas customers and rated the importance of ITFs higher when it came to information gathering on them. In other studies (Haon *et al.*, 2020; Sarmiento *et al.*, 2015; Lee and Kim, 2008; Bellow and Barskdale, 1986), these were generalized functions of ‘the staff’, integrated functions of sales and marketing personnel, or approached with regard to attendee preferences. Further, those staffed with engineers posited that they had clearer goals and objectives for attending ITFs. This result varies from findings presented in Tanner and Chonko’s study (1995). In that study, some firms were staffed with technical personnel, but this was found to have had no impact on ITF goals. The reason for this could be the time elapsed between that study and the present study. Firms in this sector have been increasingly forced to compete in terms of product innovation and price over the years, and as mentioned previously, ITF attendance has been touted as a means by which Korean SMEs in particular can increase their competitiveness globally.

There are several other reasons that these trends may have emerged. Recent research highlighted the importance of ITFs for gauging changing user requirements and technological shifts in markets as well as for technological troubleshooting and collaboration (Bathelt, 2017; Bathelt and Zeng, 2015). Engineers are well suited to

these functions. The increased attention paid to ITF attendance goals and objectives is interesting, perhaps lending nuance to the suggestions of Pitta *et al.* (2006) mentioned earlier. These scholars concluded that well-trained personnel needed to be familiar with clear-cut objectives at an ITF venue. Thus, engineers appear in the present study because the machine tool industry is highly competitive, not only in terms of pricing, but also particularly in terms of technological positioning. Further, previous research showed that this industry is sensitive to extra-local product placement and after service (Gertler, 1995). As such, building relational bridges via engineers at an ITF may be a way for firms to take the initial step toward satisfying this potentiality (see Kalafsky and Gress, 2014b). In effect, technological and innovation-related know-how may enable engineering staff to establish the trust that is essential when establishing and maintaining such networks. Sarmiento *et al.* (2015) found, for example, that trust is intimately tied to product quality in industrial markets. In the present research, we merely see exactly which booth staff, in this case engineers, may more specifically benefit from relationship building and maintenance training. Additionally, engineers should be actively included in planning for ITF attendance.

Senior management, by comparison, emerged as important when meeting with overseas agents, and, again, when gathering information on potential customers at these events. This may be because strategic market entry decisions are a function of management and their social networks (Glückler, 2006), and Korean firms in particular view these events as opportunities to enhance long-term relationship building (Kim, 2011). Previous work on ITFs (e.g., Choi and Jeon, 2012; Blythe, 2010) found that staffing in general was important for firms looking to capitalize on their ITF efforts. Results here show more specifically which personnel, in this case managers, may help to maximize ITF participation in certain ways. This mirrors results by Brown *et al.* (2017), who found that top management at ITFs aided in the formulation and maintenance of relationships. In this case, given the context of Korean SMEs in this industry, there is evidence pointing to the establishment of export-oriented relationships. Taking these findings into account, ITFs could be an effective venue in which to take full advantage of relationship marketing, but senior management should be on-site. As we shall soon see, this is not a forgone conclusion.

Table 2: T-Test Results: Personnel Staffing at SIMTOS and the Relational Context

SIMTOS used to...	Engineers			Sales & Marketing			Senior Management			Technicians		
	Mean		t-stat	Mean		t-stat	Mean		t-stat	Mean		t-stat
	No	Yes		No	Yes		No	Yes		No	Yes	
Strengthen relations with overseas customers ¹	5.24	5.36	-0.29	5.00	5.36	-0.56	5.19	5.46	-0.63	5.27	5.41	-0.31
Form new relations with overseas customers	5.18	5.85	1.83**	5.83	5.59	0.44	5.35	5.92	-1.63	5.55	5.76	-0.58
Strengthen relations with overseas suppliers	5.18	5.45	-0.61	5.17	5.39	-0.33	5.12	5.63	-1.20	5.39	5.29	0.22

Form new relations with overseas suppliers	5.12	5.79	-1.54	6.00	5.50	0.80	5.27	5.88	-1.52	5.55	5.59	-0.01
Meet with overseas wholesalers and agents	5.24	5.76	-1.09	6.17	5.50	0.95	5.15	6.04	-2.02*	5.64	5.47	0.34
Information gathering on new customers	4.53	5.30	2.04*	4.83	5.07	-0.41	4.73	5.38	1.78**	5.15	4.82	0.84
Firm has clear goals and objectives for ITFs ²	4.38	5.52	-2.57*	5.17	5.12	0.07	4.80	5.50	-1.59	5.03	5.31	-0.59

Source: Data collected from participating firms at SIMTOS; 1. Based on seven-point Likert scales (1=Not important; 7=Very important); 2. Based on seven-point Likert scales (1=Strongly disagree; 7=Strongly agree); *P<.05; **P<.01

Personnel Staffing, Innovation, and Organizational Learning at an ITF

Much as with the previously presented results from RQ1, organizational learning and innovation are further explored via RQ2 regarding the presence or absence of personnel, namely engineers, sales and marketing, senior management, and technicians. These activities reflect a potential for these SMEs to build out their competencies as learning organizations (see Amin, 2003). T-tests were performed comparing the presence or absence of these key personnel for all institutional learning-related variables (see Table 3). All firms, irrespective of the presence of certain staff, reported that ITFs were important along the organizational learning and innovation-related spectrum of questions asked. Interestingly though, engineers again emerged as having a statistically significant impact on at least two categories. Firms staffed with engineers at SIMTOS rated the functions of discovering industry trends and innovating or improving on existing machine tools as being more important than firms not staffed by these professionals, similar to findings discussed in Sarmiento *et al.* (2015). This adds credence to the call for more attention to be paid to the study of innovative activity at ITFs (Tafesse and Skallerud, 2017), as well as a subtle nuance to innovation-related, knowledge sourcing, and ‘buzz’ filtering activities engaged in by high-tech firms at ITFs (e.g., van Tuijla, Carvalho and Dittrich, 2018; Bathelt, 2017; Bathelt and Zeng, 2015). Here, this is all connected to the export context. Also, firms in this industry, especially those looking to increase their technological level of competitiveness, benefit from extra-local knowledge sourcing via ITFs (Chen, 2009). Recent work from Zhu, Bathelt and Zeng (2020) on a major Shanghai ITF *in the same industry* found that participating firms had much deeper, innovation-focused networks (e.g., patenting and cooperative relationships).

Firms staffed with technicians, by way of comparison, placed a statistically significant and higher degree of importance on the benchmarking possibilities available at ITFs. While previous research (Maskell *et al.*, 2006) highlighted the potential for firms to take advantage of benchmarking at ITFs, and of information exchange and learning possibilities (Sarmiento *et al.*, 2015), we see here more specifically which personnel

may increase a firm's ability to do so. Technicians are also the 'hands-on operators' of their firms' machine tools at these venues. It stands to reason that they would be well-placed to take advantage of the fact that ITFs are important venues within which firms can display their newest and most popular technology (Kalafsky and Gress, 2013). Taken in tandem, these findings not only confirm, but also add to previous research results pertaining to the importance that staff members can play in ensuring success at ITFs (Choi and Jeon, 2012; Blythe, 2010).

Concerning organizational learning and innovation, the presence of senior management or sales and marketing staff create no differentiation in perceptions. As may have been expected, the roles of these personnel were largely relationship building and customer scanning-oriented. And, indeed, a t-test confirmed (-3.692, 0.001) that firms staffed with sales and marketing personnel exported to a larger number of countries than firms who did not staff with these personnel (mean=2.00, SD= 1.67 vs mean=6.02, SD=5.63). While follow-up interviews would be necessary to confirm it, one insight to be gleaned here is that, following Bellow and Barskdale (1986), not only are these personnel critical if firms are looking to export, but also that staffing with sales and marketing personnel *trained specifically to enhance exporting* can have beneficial knock-on effects. This may include multi-lingual personnel well-voiced in cross-cultural business practice as well as institutional specificities associated with target markets. Tanner (2002), for example, suggested placing greater value on new market entry guided by a knowledgeable lead manager on site.

Table 3: Personnel and ITF Organizational Learning Possibilities

SIMTOS used to...	Engineers			Sales & Marketing			Senior Management			Technicians		
	Mean		t-stat	Mean		t-stat	Mean		t-stat	Mean		t-stat
	No	Yes		No	Yes		No	Yes		No	Yes	
Discover industry trends ¹	5.17	6.03	-2.22*	5.83	5.71	0.18	5.56	5.92	-0.91	5.53	6.12	-1.45
Learn about new export markets	5.22	5.15	0.05	5.50	5.13	0.55	5.22	5.13	0.15	5.23	5.06	0.30
Innovate/improve on existing machine tools	5.28	6.01	-2.27*	5.83	5.87	-0.09	5.96	5.75	0.64	5.77	6.06	-0.65
Display/introduce new products	5.94	6.24	-0.10	6.33	6.11	0.50	6.11	6.17	-0.18	6.11	6.19	-0.27
Reduce export costs (travel and information gathering)	5.00	5.33	-0.70	4.50	5.31	-1.18	5.33	5.08	0.59	5.26	5.13	0.29
Gather information on competitors	5.56	6.06	-1.55	4.17	4.70	-1.41	5.89	5.88	-0.08	5.60	6.50	-2.53*

Source: Data collected from participating firms at SIMTOS; 1. Based on seven-point Likert scales (1=Not important; 7-Very important); *P<.05

More on the Role of Engineers at ITFs

The results above indicated that firms that staffed ITFs with engineers placed more emphasis on the potential relational benefits accrued via participation, for example forming new relationships with foreign customers and information gathering on them, as well as organizational learning functions such as discovering industry trends and engaging in innovative activity. While these were admittedly differences of degree, these differences may nevertheless have an impact, particularly in highly competitive, technologically advanced industries such as the one under study in the present work. Previous research showed, after all, that SMEs that took more aggressive steps to internationalize were more successful (Love, Roper and Zhou, 2016). This, then, begs the question of why would firms *not* staff their ITF exhibits with engineers, or perhaps staff them in conjunction with, say, senior management (also found to be effective in agent and new market scanning)? Akin to analyses presented in Tanner and Chonko (1995)¹, cross-tabs run on the presence of management and engineers, however, paint a picture of opportunities lost (Chi-square 4.300, 0.038). Recalling Table 1, for example, only 64.2 percent were staffed with engineers, and among those firms, only 55.9 percent had senior management present. Put in starker terms, of all firms surveyed, only 35.8 percent were staffed with both engineers and senior management. Again, this reaffirms findings from Haon *et al.* (2020) in that firms tend to understaff with technical personnel and to overstaff with sales personnel.

Given the abovementioned importance of firms to aggressively seek out internationalization, as well as the call in the literature to more fully explore the linkages between firm internationalization and ITF activity, additional cross-tabs were therefore run on the presence or absence of management and of engineers on the perceived importance of exports to the success of the firm going forward. Further impetus comes from the contextual specificities associated with Korea's economy and this industry. Korean SMEs in this industry, while currently exporting (see Table 1), will need to extend their market reach as other countries expand and diversify their own machine tool industries.

In terms of current activity, the presence of all four types of personnel were first regressed individually against export intensity. None of the regressions were significant. However, a great deal of the formation and maintenance of relationships going on may be *future-oriented*. Firms were therefore asked to rate the importance of exports to their *future* business on a seven-point Likert scale. Two groups formed the basis for analysis, firms that rated the importance low to medium (1 through 4 on the Likert scale; 13 firms), and those that rated the importance high to exceptionally high (5-7 on the Likert scale; 39 firms). The presence of management registered no significant impact, leading to a subsequent analysis based on the presence of engineers. It was here that some interesting results emerged. First, there was a difference based on the presence or absence of engineer staffing (Chi-square=4.672, 0.031), with the Cramer's V statistic (.30) indicating a high-moderate to low-strong relationship. Of the 39 firms that rated the importance of exports high to exceptionally high, 72 percent were staffed with engineers, versus only 28 percent staffed with no engineers. The odds ratio for engineers (4.07) suggests that firms staffed with engineers were roughly four

¹ Tanner and Chonko (1995) present correlation analyses based on percentages of responding firms with each type of personnel. For the sake of simplicity, we deploy chi-square analyses based on whether or not a given firm did or did not staff with each type of personnel.

times more likely to place a higher emphasis on exports vis-à-vis their business success going forward. Engineers, it would seem, were part and parcel of the ITF staffing strategy for the majority of firms looking to expand their export horizons.

Recalling again previously discussed results concerning engineer staffing, these firms may be better positioned to garner trust with potential partners and to learn more about them. Strategically, therefore, it would behoove other (Korean) SMEs attending industry ITFs with an eye toward *expanding their exporting* to include engineers to their attending staff; other SMEs are benefiting from their presence in myriad ways and have a more aggressive stance toward exporting. Can firms afford not to, particularly given the outlays associated with participation? Evidence up to this point as a whole leads to the suggestion that training staff for an ITF experience may mean training them for functions that fall outside of their general job descriptions; engineers, for example, should perhaps learn relationship building and market assessment skills, and technicians should perhaps learn about competitive business intelligence. An even more forward-looking SME may even make these varied skill sets a prerequisite to hiring, especially given the dependence many of these firms have on ITFs for their profit generation, relationship maintenance, and industry-specific knowledge acquisition. These prescriptions go beyond those generally provided in the ITF literature to date.

Conclusion and Implications

This research sought to fill a small void in the ITF-related literature, in particular concerning exporting and SMEs, firms that operate with smaller budgets, but that face myriad challenges compared to their larger-firm counterparts. Specifically, while it is now widely accepted that staff training prior to an ITF, as well as the activity of staff at an ITF in general, can have positive impacts on ITF attendance, the questions of exactly which staff and in what regards remained largely unaddressed. This is particularly the case when searching outside the ubiquitous sales and management staff from the *exhibitor* motive perspective.

Firms staffed with senior management placed more emphasis on ITFs for meeting with overseas agents and market information gathering, and those staffed with technicians emerged as emphasizing benchmarking activity to a larger extent. On balance, though, engineers filled a pivotal role. Firms staffed with engineers perceived ITFs as more important when establishing relationships with potential international clientele, information gathering, and anchoring the technological and innovative credibility that are critical in terms of establishing long-term relationships and fostering specific exchanges of tacit information vital in this industry. In short, engineer activity at ITFs may help to build out the infrastructure for creating export-oriented learning organizations going forward. It was suggested that engineers be included in the ITF attendance planning process as firms staffed with engineers were more apt to be aggressive in terms of exporting and innovation going forward, and had clearer ITF attendance goals. This adds to the literature on pre-show and at-show ITF-related activities, specifically in terms of relationship marketing, on many fronts. Suggestions were also presented. Implications from these suggestions will be discussed shortly.

Directions for Future Research and Limitations to the Study

Two immediate research avenues emerge from this work. The first concerns the scale and scope of future research. It was argued, for example, that contextualization was important in order to provide firms from this country and this industry guidance, though it may very well be that the guidance transcends these truncations. Future work should therefore expand to other ITFs and explore firms from other countries, certainly with larger sample sizes, in order to gain an even more nuanced view of staffing choice impacts for SMEs at ITFs in relation to their exporting and innovation goals. The discovery of engineers' potential to develop technological knowledge-based trust, for example, was one contribution that could be further researched vis-à-vis broader organizational learning and ITF participation. It may prove fruitful to therefore examine specificities associated with the technological sophistication of products and any affiliated knowledge exchange or innovative behavior taking place at the ITF to include the roles of specific staff. Finally, a combined pre-show, at-show, and even post-show perspective, as suggested by Gopalakrishna and Lilien (1995) could provide additional insights into SME internationalization and innovation strategies at ITFs, and thus build upon the growing bodies of work on these topics.

Limitations to the study include the fact that results were confined to firm activity and staffing considerations within SIMTOS, or what is termed "at-show activity." Further, while the data were representative of Korean SMEs from this sector present at SIMTOS, a larger, sector-specific data set representative of the universe of Korean SME manufacturers active at multiple ITFs would have helped to add explanatory breadth to the study. Finally, a more in-depth, mixed methods approach, to include interviews with both firm and government actors, would help to create a more multi-faceted understanding of ITF staffing activity.

Implications for Asian Business

Korea is one of only few countries with a trade surplus in this globally competitive industry. Overall, however, the country places a comparatively low number of key export products in global markets (Mahlich and Pascha, 2007), and its SMEs' connections to global production networks ranks lowest in the OECD (OECD, 2018). Disadvantages range from the ability to obtain information on global market opportunities, securing sources of capital, and from a lack of managerial experience vis-à-vis the dynamics associated with new market entry (Seo and Choi, 2012). Further, while exports make up roughly one half of Korea's GDP, they have been steadily declining since 2012 (OECD, 2018). Even though firms in this sector are exporting, expanding export horizons will nonetheless become increasingly critical for Korean firms in this industry as other countries, for example China, Vietnam, and India, continue to expand and diversify their own machine tool industries while competing on cost. These inevitabilities will challenge current key Korean export market shares, and simultaneously force Korean firms to compete globally for new markets. The same inevitabilities will impact SMEs from other Asian developed and developing economies as they compete, or come to compete, in higher value-added product sectors.

When taking all of the above into account, ITFs can be immensely valuable venues where resource-challenged (Asian) SME manufacturers in high-tech industries can strategically network with wider groups of potential international customers with an eye toward exporting and innovation. This can be done by cultivating an organizational culture prepared to take advantage of ITF proximity-related benefits. For high power distance, management-centric (East) Asian firms, deploying more engineers and technicians may run counter to administrative norms. Still, this study provided evidence that some firms are indeed benefitting, both in terms of innovative practice and export success. Also, a mere 35.8 percent of firms were staffed with *both* engineers and senior managers in the present study. This may indicate that senior management downplays their potential contributions at these events even though results suggested that they played key roles in obtaining market intelligence and the formation of ties with agents and intermediaries. Asian SME senior managers would do well to integrate themselves into well-planned ITF ventures, and to staff accordingly rather than merely relegating ITF duties to subordinate personnel.

Strategically, it was therefore suggested that SMEs in high-tech sectors may be better served by increasing the breadth of their staffing at ITFs to include more engineers and technicians, and by making sure that training helps to better prepare all staff for functions that may not be in their overall general job descriptions. It was also suggested that forward-looking, export-intensive firms may wish to integrate these capabilities into their initial personnel searches. Evidence presented in this study suggests that this advice, in addition to the suggestion to have senior management on site, would especially benefit firms in high-tech sectors. While all of the aforementioned facets of ITF participation are important, especially for SMEs looking to establish themselves globally or to expand their export horizons, they may perhaps take on further saliency in the future. With travel restricted into the foreseeable future due to the Coronavirus, and with budgets reduced due to economic slowdowns worldwide, it will become even more critical for firms to capitalize as much as possible on their ITF experiences. Firms will need to be more strategic about their staffing choices at these events and the roles they perform.

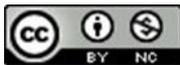
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