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ORIGINAL PAPER

Management challenges in the internationalization of Romanian SMEs

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Abstract:

Going out with a business outside Romania's borders is not just a business decision, but is, in essence, an act of courage that tests the very foundation on which an SME was built. In our approach, we move away from the cold figures of statistics to look into the heart of the management of a business that dares to dream on a European or global scale. We rightly ask ourselves: why do so many brilliant Romanian ideas stop at the border? The answer often lies not in the lack of creativity, but in administrative problems and the culture shock of foreign management systems.

We have observed how our entrepreneurs are forced to go through a contradiction: on the one hand, the specifically Romanian agility to solve problems on the fly, and on the other, the rigor and strict procedures required by mature markets. This paper explores the tension between these two worlds. We are talking about the fear of the legislative unknown, about the burden of bureaucracy that doubles at every step across the border and about the loneliness of the SME manager who must be, simultaneously, a strategist, a lawyer and an expert in international logistics.

It is a journey about adaptation. We analyze how digitalization and new models of remote management become the lifeline for small companies that cannot afford entire consulting departments. But, above all, this article is a plea for the professionalization of local management. We argue that internationalization is not just about selling a product in another language, but about rebuilding the entire architecture of the business. In the end, we are left with a conclusion that we hope will inspire, namely that the external success of a Romanian SME depends on the ability to learn from administrative failures and to transform the spirit of survival into a strategy for sustainable and disciplined growth.

Keywords: *Entrepreneurship, Cross-border expansion, Managerial agility, Administrative barriers.*

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1. Introduction

Internationalization puts high demands on the management abilities of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Entering the foreign market involves not only finding potential clients and developing an offer for them but also gaining new knowledge, managing cross-border ties, and allocating managerial efforts towards risky projects. According to OECD (2008), there are some barriers faced by SMEs, such as limited knowledge about the foreign market, insufficient international experience, expenses involved in setting up distribution channels, and problems in managing long-distance relationships. In other words, internationalization becomes for SMEs not only a business choice but also a challenge related to their organizational abilities.

Moreover, the process of internationalization depends on the connections existing outside the particular firm. According to the revised Uppsala model developed by Johanson and Vahlne (2009), firms operate in networks where knowledge, trust, and opportunities for conducting business grow. As a result, uncertainty does not arise only due to an unfamiliar national environment but also because of a firm being positioned outside the relevant networks of business. Thus, this concept explains why even a competitive product and a talented entrepreneur are often not enough for successful internationalization: it involves both developing relationships and learning through them.

This list constitutes a major point of entry for analyzing small and medium sized firms in Romania. In a research aimed at studying companies operating in Romanian manufacturing industry, Dinu and Ionescu (2025) argue that foreign market knowledge, organization related factors and lack of strategic orientation prevent companies from becoming internationalized. The same researchers stress the significance of partnerships, managerial flexibility and resource management. Even though their research is not generalizable to all Romanian SMEs, it serves as a starting point for further examination of internationalization process where external challenges are combined with the capabilities of organizations in dealing with them.

The current paper develops the above managerial approach by considering one crucial trade-off between entrepreneurship flexibility and organizational formalization. Flexibility is understood as the ability of the firm to react promptly to any changes in its environment, while formalization represents the clear definition of roles, procedure descriptions and reliable coordination routines. Instead of treating these approaches as alternative ways to cope with challenges, this analysis considers the possibility of their combination. The main idea behind it is that internationalization requires companies to stay flexible while creating certain organizational structures to ensure greater reliability of decisions and actions.

This reasoning is similarly centered on the changing roles of the SME manager. The research evaluates the connection between strategic choices and administrative compliance, intercultural communication, logistics coordination, and external relationship management. Instead of treating these elements as separate groups of difficulties, the interaction between them is analyzed: novel challenges require more information, limited special resources narrow down decision-making options, and poor coordination turns routine problems into barriers to sustainable development. Such an approach corresponds to the OECD's perspective on the development of SMEs, which involves participation in production, knowledge, and skill networks (OECD, 2023).

Digitalization becomes an additional aspect of consideration, but not a replacement for the development of managers. Mitrache and Spulbar (2025) evaluate the

use of artificial intelligence in resource management, disruption anticipation, and increased economic resilience, although the expenses involved in implementation and the need to consider governance aspects are also recognized. While the paper provides a broader framework for the association between technology and adaptation capabilities, it cannot be seen as proof that artificial intelligence will ensure internationalization success for Romanian SMEs. Hence, technology is discussed along with managerial skills, organizational learning, and accountability.

In this regard, the purpose of the paper is to determine the key managerial obstacles associated with the internationalization process of Romanian SMEs and to discuss the role of professionalization, digitalization, and organizational learning in overcoming these obstacles. The main issue to be investigated in this paper is the following: how can Romanian SMEs reconcile their entrepreneurial flexibility with the need for management, relations, and organization in internationalizing? This paper employs a conceptual approach, using the literature of internationalization, institutional documents, and relevant scientific sources related to the business environment in Romania. This paper does not seek to assess the frequency of particular obstacles nor to create a cause-and-effect relationship between variables.

2. Internationalization of Romanian SMEs: Conceptual and Managerial Perspectives

Internationalization of SMEs may be viewed as the process of turning the entrepreneurial opportunities into organizational obligations through the international dimension. The importance of this phenomenon goes further than the physical presence of sales to include the relations, resources, and managerial organization that enable organizations to participate in international business. This difference is important to make because an international transaction and organizational capability for doing international business are two separate things. In the framework of our conceptual approach to internationalization, we understand it as a capability development for conducting cross-border business.

2.1. Entrepreneurial opportunities and international commitment

The international entrepreneurship perspective challenges the view that firms have to develop a strong domestic presence before engaging in international activities. Oviatt and McDougall (1994) explain the emergence of international new ventures through the application of ideas developed within entrepreneurship, international business, and strategic management. This approach stresses the importance of resource uniqueness and alternative governance mechanisms which allow small firms to gain access to resources without owning them. The perspective shows that while limited organizational size is not a barrier to engaging in international business per se, international new ventures are a special case and not a general template for all SMEs.

From the point of view of Romanian SMEs, the international entrepreneurship perspective provides a meaningful distinction between identifying opportunities and developing the ability to capitalize on them. Being contacted by a foreign firm, approached by a potential distributor, or invited into an international joint venture is an opportunity, but it does not mean that the firm will be able to deal with commitments arising therefrom. The theoretical question is not only about whether the entrepreneur is ready to expand, but also about whether the organization is ready to adapt its management practices and financial resources to the proposed activities. Entrepreneurial initiative is seen as a

beginning of international commitment, but not as a replacement of organizational readiness.

Hence, international commitment has to be understood as both a qualitative concept and financial one. Focusing managerial attention, changing contract practices, setting up reporting systems, and building relations with partners are commitments irrespective of the fact that the firm has no foreign subsidiary. Such understanding preserves the relevance of the analysis for SMEs which may internationalize through exporting and cooperation without foreign investments. Furthermore, internationalization is separated from multinational organization.

2.2. Resources, capabilities, and managerial judgment

A capability-based approach explains why resource accessibility does not guarantee the effectiveness of international operations. As Teece (2014) points out, there is a distinction between the ability of performing routine operations and dynamic capabilities necessary to seize opportunities, to allocate resources and to rejuvenate the organization. It is an approach that ties entrepreneurial management with coordination and transformation of resources within international setting. While being formulated as a multinational enterprise theory, it considers the importance of entrepreneurial capabilities of small organizations and their possibilities to acquire complementary resources abroad.

From a conceptual application of the idea to Romanian SMEs, the distinction is between operational readiness and adaptability. Operational readiness refers to the question of possibility of fulfilling an international order under the current conditions, whereas adaptability refers to the ability of revising the organization's arrangements according to changes in customer's needs, contractual agreements and distribution network. The two are related yet distinct: the ability of executing an order does not mean that the organization is capable of sustaining and further developing itself in the international market environment.

Three interrelated questions could explain the managerial importance of the distinction. Is it possible for the organization to recognize an opportunity suitable for its resources and strategy? Is it possible for the organization to mobilize internal and external resources necessary for pursuing the opportunity? Is it possible for the organization to adapt its practices after realizing that some initial assumptions are wrong? These three questions form an analytical perspective without presupposing that all SMEs have the same resources, face the same conditions and have the same path of internationalization.

Judgment of managers plays a key role within this approach. The issue here is not about whether or not to internationalize; the issue is about which commitments the firm can make and under which circumstances and with which partners. This means that the strategic sense of restraining may be equivalent to rapid entering the international market. In other words, managerial preparedness is about consistency between the opportunity and organization's capability to meet its commitments.

2.3. Entrepreneurial agility and proportionate formalization

Agility and formalization are other concepts that serve as grounds for interpreting the phenomenon of managerial adaptation. Agility represents responsiveness to changes, whereas formalization is the process of clearly outlining roles, processes and decision-making procedures. It is important to note that their connection should not be considered as a choice between entrepreneur freedom and bureaucracy. The question here is about

what activities need some stability and what decisions should remain dependent on the context.

Proportionate governance offers an adequate ground for such differentiation. In her paper, Mitrache (2025) considers how governance practices that are typically used by large companies could be applied to SMEs and microenterprises. She discusses the importance of transparency, accountability, financial and stakeholder management but rejects the concept of unified governance practice, which does not take into account resource constraints of SMEs and microenterprises. It makes the discussed concept of governance practices relevant for the discussion on organizational adaptation.

In the present context, the idea of proportionate formalization is the development of enough organizational structures to make international activities understandable, transferable and reviewable. The example could be the difference between allowing a manager to negotiate with a potential partner and providing evidence of all the obligations that the company has accepted. The first case provides the possibility to be flexible; the second one brings organizational responsibility into play. Those two concepts are complementary since organizational flexibility does not mean lack of clarity when talking about organizational responsibility.

Thus, professionalization is the development of organizational reliability without replacement of entrepreneurs. The main goal of this concept is to make organizations less dependent on undocumented individual knowledge but still maintain their initiative and flexibility. The required transformation is moving from a firm whose coordination is dependent mostly on individuals to the firm in which responsibilities and information could be easily shared. At the same time, it is important not to consider informal management as a specific Romanian concept.

2.4. Digitalization, responsibility, and the boundaries of the conceptual framework

Organizational approaches to internationalization require consideration of the interaction between technological developments and corporate responsibility. Spulbar et al. (2024) consider the connection between digitalization, ESG issues, and regional development via corporate action. The relevance of the research conducted by the authors resides in connecting digital transformation to a broader discussion about business responsibility; the focus on regionality in this study does not constitute a direct illustration of outcomes of internationalization by firms.

Here, digitalization is interpreted as one of the aspects of organizational capacity rather than as an independent reason for international success. The key theoretical issue raised by Spulbar et al. (2024) is related to the ability of technological structures to facilitate the flow of information, coordination, and accountability in line with the activities selected by a company. In addition, sustainable growth is seen as the ability of a firm to maintain international commitment without constantly exceeding its organizational resources. This approach should not be confused with environmental sustainability since the environment and social responsibilities can form part of the operational context in which a business acts.

All this makes it possible to adopt the perspective of internationalization based on alignment: opportunities for entrepreneurship should be consistent with resources, adaptability, and adequate organizational structure. The application of these principles to Romanian SMEs is a conceptual framework rather than an empirical characterization of this business category. The main point of view is that agility acquires additional value

when it is reinforced by organizational processes that ensure learning, responsibility, and performance of commitments.

3. Key Managerial Challenges in Cross-Border Expansion

Managerial problems arising from internationalization occur due to the interaction of external pressures and internal organizational limits. Regulatory pressures, unfamiliarity with customers' needs, or distribution problems do not result in the same outcomes for each company as their relevance depends on company resources, knowledge base, and coordination processes. Through a systematic literature review of 39 obstacles to exporting discovered in 32 studies, Leonidou (2004) makes a clear separation between internal obstacles including informational, functional, and marketing ones, and external obstacles related to procedures, governmental intervention, market situation, and wider business environment. The research proves that the influence of these obstacles is relevant to the specificities of the situation, rather than applicable to smaller firms universally.

Such division provides a good starting point for the analysis of Romanian SMEs while avoiding the generalization of them into one group. The managerial factors making cross-border complexity hard to manage will include the interpretation of administrative requirements, managing relationships, managerial attention allocation, and coordination of business and financial commitment. The importance of such factors is based on their interdependence, so the lack of development in one area raises demands on the others.

3.1. Administrative complexity and the interpretation of legal requirements

In connection with Romanian small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), the process of internationalization presupposes an important differentiation of involvement in the European Union (EU) Single Market and doing business with non-EU countries. According to the advice of the European Commission, while most of the products freely circulate within the EU Single Market, the requirements regarding products, obligations connected to particular classes of goods, and prerequisites of statistical reporting can still remain relevant. Trade of the EU and non-EU nations implies the existence of customs formalities. Hence, internationalization cannot be interpreted as a need for applying equally heavy administrative requirements in any case of border crossing; the requirements will depend on the destination, product, and transaction itself (European Commission, n.d.-a).

In this regard, the problem of management consists in recognizing and interpreting these obligations instead of following the same procedure in all cases of foreign transactions. The relevance of the differentiation mentioned above is especially obvious when the business decision is made without taking into account its administrative consequences. In this respect, some proposed delivery system can seem to be quite profitable but at the same time, there is a risk to stay uncertain about who is responsible for paperwork, transportation, and associated expenses. Under this conceptualization, the issue of administrative complexities becomes the organizational problem if there is no clarity concerning responsibility or timely provision of information to the decision-makers.

The example of VAT can illustrate the importance of transaction-specific approach to administrative issues. The differentiation of obligations depending on whether the transaction involves goods or services, whether the client is a business or private individual, and whether the transaction takes place inside or outside the EU is offered by the European Commission (n.d.-b). Hence, in this regard, geographical destination does

not influence the application of the appropriate treatment. In managerial practice, this means that the price, invoices, and other transaction features have to be considered according to the type of the transaction rather than usual domestic practice.

As an addition to this interpretative problem, the issue of digital decision-making systems arises. In this way, Spulbar (2026) examines the conditions under which legal framework influences the process of AI-assisted corporate governance and puts emphasis on accountability and organizational restrictions of the legally informed type. While the research does not focus on SME internationalization, the boundary identified by the author is important in this situation. Namely, any technological assistance does not mean the establishment of responsibility for decisions taken using such systems.

3.2. Cultural differences, communication, and relationship management

Cross-border business relations require interpreting expectations that are not entirely formulated within contractual agreements or official letters. According to the approach used here, cultural differences are discussed in terms of their effects on communication, negotiation and coordination. It is not about labeling each nation with certain behavioral patterns but examining what effects divergent expectations may have on the business relationship.

A sample problem is a misunderstanding that can emerge regarding the nature of what seems to be quite a simple obligation. One side sees the provisionally stated delivery date as provisional, while the other treats the date as the deadline. In addition, an informal promise can be regarded as satisfactory by one of the parties, whereas the other one considers it to be incomplete unless confirmed in writing. This is just a hypothetical example that helps illustrate how misunderstanding can occur even if the participants of the business relationship see themselves as cooperative and proficient enough.

This makes it clear why it is necessary to distinguish language skills from managerial communication. Even if the individuals involved in the business relationship are able to communicate using a foreign language, it does not mean that there is common understanding of specifications, obligations and procedures for escalation of issues. In terms of relationship management, the question is whether the parties are capable of translating communication into mutual commitments.

The dilemma of flexibility and consistency becomes particularly salient in cross-border business communication. Accommodation to the partner's request may help to maintain the good relationship but it may also make it difficult to trace responsibilities if too many exceptions are made informally. On the contrary, sticking to the procedure may make it hard to maintain the relationship when some flexibility is required.

3.3. Resource constraints and the concentration of managerial responsibilities

Resource constraints are not limited only to financial difficulties. According to the OECD (2023), skill availability, management systems, network connections, and the capability to leverage strategic resources become important in terms of SME development and their internationalization efforts.

In this case, managerial attention becomes a resource that is scarce and should be distributed between different tasks. Participation in international operations could imply different decisions related to partner selection, contract terms, production, transport issues, complaints of customers, and many others. In this regard, it becomes more complicated not just due to the overload but also because of the constant return to operational issues instead of strategic considerations.

This allocation strategy could be seen as one of the possible bottlenecks rather than an intrinsic attribute of all Romanian SMEs. It is possible to imagine an SME where the owner-managers approve any change of price, delivery conditions, and customer correspondence. On the first stages of operation, this could ensure some coherence but when transaction numbers increase and the situation becomes more complicated, it becomes more challenging to maintain this practice. Moreover, it can become one of the barriers to consistency even when the product is in high demand.

Access to outside experts cannot help here in many cases. First of all, any advice should be operationalized. The firm can receive the needed assistance from lawyers or accountants but still have no procedures to make sure that the relevant advice will be used by the salesmen, logistic partners, documenters, etc. The main difference here is the one between access to the expertise and ability to use it.

3.4. Operational coordination and financial exposure

The problems of operations and finance are interlinked with respect to international expansion. According to the OECD (2008), the main obstacles mentioned by SMEs are foreign distribution costs, problems connected with international business processes, and difficulties of payments. Thus, the possibility of international expansion cannot be analyzed only with the help of sales potential.

From the point of view of management, the foreign order is a set of interrelated commitments, but not a single commercial success. The production, documentation, transportation, confirmation of delivery, invoicing, and payment must be coherent and consistent with each other. The problems at one stage might influence the timing or costs of the whole process. In other words, the analytical problem goes beyond the completion of individual activities towards understanding and coordinating them.

One of the possible examples explains this connection. The order might seem profitable from the point of view of production and transportation costs of the SME; but the SME does not take into account the period of time when its money will be engaged before receiving payment. In case of delay in the delivery or mistakes in documentation, the cash flow will differ from the expected one at the negotiation stage. Although there are no numbers provided to show how often such situations happen, it is obvious that profitability and financial capacity of the SME should be estimated separately.

It leads to another question related to external partners. Their help with the transport, distribution or administrative problems can provide the SME with the competencies which it does not have itself. But the engagement of the partner does not mean the lack of coordination problem.

3.5. The cumulative nature of managerial challenges

The key problem is due to the fact that each of these problems could exacerbate the other one. Within the approach developed here, lack of information on the market could lead to wrong contractual agreements; unclear definition of responsibility could hinder the administrative response; and administrative delays could impose further pressures on the company's budget. These relations are propositions of analysis and not causality proven empirically using the case of Romanian SMEs.

The importance of this distinction is that it separates an external obstacle from an internal weakness. The company could have little control over an external requirement, but it could be different from others in the extent to which it clearly assigns responsibility for coping with the requirement. Similarly, the company could not make uncertainty

disappear from its international operations, but their organizational implications would depend, among other things, on the ways of information and commitment management.

This means that the internationalization management problem is one of coordination under conditions of scarce resources and imperfect knowledge. Administrative skills, relationship management, financial acumen, and discipline are not alternatives to entrepreneurship. Instead, they are the organizational prerequisites of entrepreneurship.

4. Managerial Adaptation: Digitalization, Professionalization and Organizational Learning

Managerial adaptation involves more than addressing individual problems as they arise. Within the conceptual framework developed here, it concerns the ability to turn experience into organizational arrangements that make international activities more manageable. The objective is not to eliminate uncertainty, which remains inherent in cross-border business, but to prevent recurring difficulties from requiring the same improvised response. Digitalization, professionalization, and organizational learning are considered complementary dimensions of this process: digitalization supports the management of information, professionalization clarifies how decisions are made and implemented, and organizational learning enables practices to change in response to experience.

4.1. Digitalization as an infrastructure for coordination

Digital technologies can support adaptation by improving the availability and use of information across organizational activities. The OECD's 2024 D4SME survey examines how digital tools help SMEs navigate short-term challenges and strengthen resilience, while also identifying continuing difficulties associated with skills and adoption. Its findings provide a basis for considering digitalization as an organizational process rather than a purchasing decision. However, the survey evidence should not be interpreted as a direct assessment of Romanian SMEs or as proof that adopting a particular technology produces successful international expansion (OECD, 2024).

For an internationally active SME, the relevant starting point is the coordination problem to be addressed. A shared record of contractual commitments, customer requirements, delivery milestones, and outstanding payments may be more useful than a sophisticated application that remains disconnected from daily work. The conceptual priority is therefore informational consistency: those responsible for a transaction should be able to work from an agreed and sufficiently current account of its status.

Remote management illustrates this relationship between technology and organization. Digital access to information does not, by itself, establish who must act when a delivery changes or a customer disputes an invoice. An effective arrangement also requires responsibility for updating records, criteria for identifying exceptions, and a clear route for escalating unresolved issues. In this interpretation, remote coordination depends less on continuous electronic supervision than on the combination of accessible information and explicit obligations.

Digitalization should consequently be proportionate to the enterprise's resources and activities. The OECD (2021) emphasizes that digital transformation requires complementary investments in skills, organizational assets, data management, and security. This supports an approach in which technological choices are evaluated alongside the capacity to implement and maintain them, rather than through their advertised functionality alone. For the present analysis, the implication is that a limited but

consistently used system may offer a stronger organizational foundation than multiple tools whose responsibilities and information flows remain unclear.

4.2. Artificial intelligence and managerial judgment

Artificial intelligence introduces additional possibilities for processing information and supporting decisions, but its managerial relevance depends on how it is embedded in organizational practice. Mitrache, Spulbăr, and Mitrache (2024) discuss the relationship between AI-enabled corporate management and intrapreneurship, emphasizing strategic alignment, resource allocation, and employee-driven innovation. Their analysis connects technological support with managerial structures and internal initiative, rather than treating AI as an isolated technical intervention.

Applied conceptually to SME internationalization, this relationship suggests a distinction between generating an output and accepting responsibility for its use. A manager might employ AI to prepare a draft customer response, organize preliminary market information, or summarize documents. These are illustrative applications, not evidence of their effectiveness in the Romanian SME sector. The relevant organizational question is what verification is required before the output informs an external commitment.

A proportionate approach would distinguish tasks according to their consequences. Assistance with an internal draft does not raise the same managerial concerns as reliance on an unverified interpretation of contractual or regulatory obligations. Within the proposed framework, the degree of human review should therefore reflect the potential effects of error, the sensitivity of the information involved, and the enterprise's ability to check the result.

AI-supported adaptation also requires room for employee judgment. If staff members identify recurring inconsistencies in customer documentation or operational records, technological assistance may help organize the information, but management must still decide whether responsibilities or procedures require revision. The purpose of adoption is thus not to remove judgment from the organization, but to improve the conditions under which informed judgment can be exercised.

4.3. Professionalization through delegation and proportionate procedures

Professionalization is understood here as the development of reliable decision-making and implementation practices. It does not necessarily require a large management team or the replication of corporate bureaucracy. For an SME, it may instead involve identifying which decisions require owner-manager approval, which can be delegated, and which circumstances justify escalation.

A practical expression of this principle is the separation of routine decisions from exceptional commitments. For example, a hypothetical enterprise could authorize employees to confirm deliveries within agreed contractual conditions while reserving changes to payment terms or significant price concessions for managerial approval. The analytical value of this distinction lies in preserving operational responsiveness without allowing employees to assume obligations beyond their authority.

Delegation must also be accompanied by access to information. Assigning responsibility without providing the relevant contract, customer history, or operational status would transfer a task without establishing the conditions for its completion. Conversely, providing access to information without clarifying authority may leave staff able to identify a problem but uncertain whether they can resolve it. Professionalization therefore requires alignment among responsibility, information, and decision rights.

External expertise can be incorporated on the same basis. Legal, accounting, or logistics advice becomes organizationally useful when someone within the firm is responsible for translating it into action. The proposed approach is not to seek specialist intervention for every transaction, but to establish when advice is needed, who obtains it, and how the resulting guidance changes operational practice. This allows selective use of expertise while retaining internal accountability.

Procedures should likewise be judged by their contribution to reliability. A concise checklist that prevents repeated omissions can serve a clear purpose; a reporting requirement that does not inform any decision may add administrative work without improving control. The objective is disciplined flexibility: consistency in essential commitments, combined with discretion where adaptation remains necessary.

4.4. Organizational learning from administrative and operational difficulties

Experience becomes a managerial resource only when it changes how the organization understands or performs its activities. Argyris and Schön's (1978) theory-of-action perspective provides a foundational account of organizational learning and the relationship between inquiry, action, and organizational change. It directs attention beyond individual knowledge acquisition to the conditions under which learning becomes part of organizational practice.

For Romanian SMEs pursuing international opportunities, this perspective offers a way to interpret administrative and operational setbacks without romanticizing failure. A delayed delivery, an incomplete document, or a misunderstood specification does not automatically produce useful learning. Its value depends on whether the firm identifies what happened, examines the assumptions behind the decision, and incorporates the lesson into subsequent activity.

A hypothetical documentation error illustrates the distinction. Correcting a missing field may resolve the immediate transaction. Examining why the omission occurred may reveal an unclear handover between sales and administration, an outdated template, or an unrealistic assumption that an external partner would complete the task. The first response repairs the immediate problem; the second creates an opportunity to revise the organizational conditions that produced it.

Within the proposed framework, a proportionate learning routine would involve recording consequential incidents, identifying contributing factors, assigning responsibility for corrective action, and checking whether the revised practice is used. The purpose is not to document every minor inconvenience. It is to prevent knowledge gained through difficult experiences from remaining confined to the memory of the person who handled them.

4.5. An integrated approach to managerial adaptation

Digitalization, professionalization, and learning become mutually reinforcing when they address the same organizational problem. A shared digital record can make a recurring discrepancy visible; clear responsibilities establish who investigates it; and a learning process determines whether the underlying practice should change. Conversely, technology without responsibility may reproduce confusion more quickly, while procedures without review may preserve arrangements that no longer fit the firm's activities.

The following sequence summarizes the conceptual approach proposed here:

- Identify a recurring difficulty or a significant exposure associated with

international activity.

- Clarify the information, responsibilities, and decisions involved.
- Introduce a proportionate procedural or technological response.
- Review its use and revise it in light of experience.

This sequence is an analytical proposal, not an empirically validated model or a universal implementation formula. Its relevance depends on the firm's size, resources, sector, and form of international engagement. Its central principle is alignment: entrepreneurial responsiveness becomes more sustainable when information systems, decision rights, and learning practices support the commitments the enterprise chooses to undertake.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion the findings explores the internationalization of Romanian SMEs not as an expansion of sales outside national borders but as a transition in terms of managerial and organizational capabilities. Specifically, there are two distinct stages of internationalization: the discovery of a market opportunity abroad and the ability to maintain the commitments it makes possible. The former requires an entrepreneurial drive; the latter involves systematic decision making, access to information, clear responsibilities, and the ability to learn based on experience.

The analysis covers several aspects of SME internationalization: administrative, relational, operational, and financial, bringing them together in a managerial framework. These challenges cannot be generalized for all Romanian SMEs or treated as separate obstacles with equal consequences. Their relevance depends on the resource level, sector, targeted markets, and mode of international activity of the firm. Particularly, the administrative requirements should not be presented as automatic increase in bureaucracy in a new country; instead, they should be differentiated based on the type of transaction and regulation. The general managerial question here is how external complexity interacts with internal weaknesses, including unclear responsibilities, fragmented information, and too much dependence on interventions made by the owner-manager.

One of the main implications of this conceptual framework concerns the interaction between agility and organizational discipline of the firm. There is no need to see these qualities as mutually exclusive alternatives. It is possible to keep agility to be responsive to customers and partners, while introducing some formalization to make the firm's commitments more coherent and responsibilities clearer. Thus, professionalization does not have to imply that the firm gives up its entrepreneurial approach and replaces it with a number of complicated procedures; instead, it implies the creation of the necessary organizational structure allowing the firm to act consistently without the involvement of the owner-manager at every stage.

Digitalization is seen in this paper as the means of support for the transition process and not as an independent way to international success. Its managerial value is in its ability to help the firm with the necessary information and coordination. Also, the results of work with artificial intelligence require proper verification and attribution of responsibilities to inform the firm's decisions. Technological implementation becomes relevant only in combination with necessary skills, decision-making rights, and working procedures; otherwise, it may not solve the firm's organizational problems.

Organizational learning is the link between the solution of current problems and the firm's adaptation. Correction of an administrative mistake or solving a delivery conflict solves the current transaction, but does not help the firm to deal with the next one.

Organizational learning implies examination of the underlying assumptions and structures that led to the problem and incorporation of lessons learned in the practice. This way, the transition from the survival-oriented reaction to disciplined growth implies the transfer of experience beyond the person who solved the problem. For managers, the implication for practice is to evaluate international opportunities with regard to the firm's ability to live up to its commitments. It implies clarification of responsibilities, separation of routine tasks from special cases, selective use of specialist advice, and examination of recurring problems. The degree of organizational structure required varies, but its purpose remains unchanged: to preserve the entrepreneurial ability of reaction while reducing unnecessary ambiguity and improvisation.

The contribution of this paper is in the integration of the discussed relationships into the conceptual framework for Romanian SMEs' internationalization. The limitation comes from the same feature. This paper does not provide any information about the prevalence or importance of certain barriers, their causal effect or diversity of the Romanian SME sector with the help of empirical data. Future research can analyze how the described relationships vary depending on the sector, international experience, and destination markets. Comparative case studies, interviews with managers or longitudinal research can examine whether and how delegation, digital coordination, and learning practices change along with the international activity of the firm.

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