An Implementation Model of An Alliance

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Abstract

A business interpretation of the term globalisation is based on the assumption that products or services being produced must be competitive in all parts of the world **and** they must remain competitive all of the time. This represents quite a departure from previous concepts that most likely involved some type of international expansion with perhaps a single project. As national borders become increasingly more flexible, world-wide competition for construction projects will continue to increase. This idea of participating in a global economy is changing the traditional approaches used by construction companies in their strategic planning. In addition, dwindling financial resources have caused many governments to consider alternative methods to the standard practices of generating revenue for public construction projects. The US construction industry, looking forward to the 21st century, will likely be getting more involved in international projects and is searching for the best possible vehicles to enhance their position in this market. Forming alliances with foreign firms may be one alternative. An alliance is a cooperative agreement between two entities that generally encompasses a long-term commitment from the participants and is built more on trust and mutual sharing of responsibilities than on contractual agreements. A previous article by the writers based on a research project on International Alliances dealt with why companies form alliances and the benefits derived from forming alliances. The purpose of this paper is to adapt the findings of that same research project into an implementation plan, one which will address the key issues required to formulate an alliance with a foreign firm.

Keywords: alliances, cooperation agreements, global markets, international alliances, joint ventures, partnerships.

Introduction

For purposes of this paper, we have defined the term "global" as relating to the entire world - synonymous with world-wide. A global company is one that maintains a presence through a series of regional offices in a significant number of foreign countries around the world at the same time. Logically then, a business interpretation of the term globalisation is based on the assumption that products or services being produced must be competitive in all parts of the world **and** they must remain competitive all of the time. This represents quite a departure from previous concepts that most likely involved some type of international expansion with a single project. As national borders become increasingly more flexible, world-wide competition for construction projects will continue to increase. The ratification of the European Community agreement, the ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement and current discussions on the Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) are evidence of the changes that are taking place. In total, there are 30 countries involved in these cooperative agreements and they represent over $18 trillion in gross domestic products. This idea of participating in a global economy is changing the traditional approaches used by construction companies in their strategic planning. In addition, dwindling financial resources have caused many governments to consider alternative methods to the standard practices of generating revenue for public construction projects. The US construction industry, looking forward to the 21st century, will likely be getting more involved in international projects and is searching for the best possible vehicles to enhance their position in this market. Forming an alliance, which is cooperative agreement between two entities that generally encompasses a long term commitment from the participants and is built more on trust and mutual sharing of responsibilities than on contractual agreements, with foreign firms may be one alternative.

A study to determine why and how alliances are formed has been conducted by the writers under the sponsorship of the Construction Industry Institute (CII). The theoretical basis for the research stems from an underlying belief that US construction firms would find it very difficult to successfully penetrate the foreign construction industry without initiating some form of a cooperative agreement with a representative firm of the host country. The exact type of the cooperative agreement would depend upon established company objectives, eg long term versus short term commitments, targeting one specific country versus a broader area. The rationale used in choosing to focus on the alliance form of cooperative agreement was based on the premise that, compared to the other approaches, alliances truly represent a long term commitment on behalf of the participants. The basic philosophy on which alliances are based embodies the spirit of what "global" participation is all about: a commitment to be ready to compete **anywhere** in the world at **any time**.

It is analogous to what one might define as a global defence strategy, where armed forces are ready to deploy at a moment's notice to any location in the world. A construction company must include their global operations within a well-defined strategic plan and they must pledge sufficient resources to support this commitment. Generally, this would include a serious financial burden and it absolutely requires the support of top-level management. Anything short of this total global perspective, that is being competitive anywhere and at any time, would likely require a much lesser commitment, where occasional projects could more readily be accommodated with some other form of agreement.

An alternate form of cooperative agreement commonly used in both domestic and international operations is the joint venture agreement, in which two or more entities combine their resources to build a single project. Therefore, the agreement is usually for the "short term" and the participants retain their original identities. An example of this type of agreement is the recently completed (1993) Toyota technical centre and test track near Phoenix, Arizona (US). Tasai Construction Corporation of Japan and Bechtel Corporation of the US joint-ventured (Tasai-Bechtel) this multi-million dollar project by integrating project management from both companies and using primarily US labour resources. It is important to emphasise that both companies retained their identities throughout the course of the project.

Another approach is to legally bind two or more organisations together into a new entity by forming a partnership. This requires a much more rigid agreement, something that is not always accepted when working with other countries and cultures.

Other forms of cooperative agreements can include consortia, which are generally recognised by the fact that they are based on strengthening financial resources as opposed to any type of technical or management position, and an extension of the partnership concept, called partnering, which embodies the same concepts as a partnership, but is usually activated for a longer period of time than a partnership.

In reality, many firms looking to form cooperative agreements with foreign companies would very likely start with one project under a joint venture agreement and let the relationship progress at its own pace. If a certain level of trust developed over a period of time, the possibility of forming an alliance may become feasible.

A recent example of an alliance involved the privatised British utility, North West Water Group PLC and Bechtel Corporation. The two have teamed up to expand opportunities in North America and elsewhere. Bechtel will absorb North West's engineering subsidiary and take over management of the utility's capital program over the next five years. Desmond Pitcher, North West's chairman was quoted (Engineering News Record, December 5, 1994, p 14) as saying "We are embarking upon a powerful and deep-rooted alliance".

In a previous paper based on this research effort, (Journal of Construction Engineering and Management, Vol 121, No 1, March 1995) the writers discussed in detail why alliances are formed and the benefits that are obtained from forming alliances. The purpose of this paper is to extend the analysis and adapt the findings into an implementation plan, one that addresses key issues and would serve as a viable guide for a construction company serious about conducting international operations under a global business plan.

Research Methodology

The writers were the primary investigators in a research project sponsored by the Construction Industry Institute (CII) to study the impact of forming alliances as a way to enhance the competitiveness of US construction industry firms. Two of the research goals were to address the issues of why alliances are formed and the benefits that can be gained from them. The data collected revealed that there are numerous criteria and rationale used by companies in making their decision to enter into an alliance.

The CII Task Research Team consisted of 14 industry members, equally divided between owners and construction firms, and two academics. The qualifications of the members conducting the research averaged 24 years of engineering/construction experience per member, of which 13 years per member was in international projects. The task force was divided into sub-groups; one studied the future needs of the international construction industry, while the other investigated the alliance concept. The present paper covers results from the latter group only.

The industry members conducted the interviews and provided advice and direction during the research analysis. They conducted 30 personal interviews with senior-level international-construction executives, filling more than 70 hours of tape. The academicians were assigned to analyse the data collected, arrive at conclusions, and prepare the reports. This collection of experiences, lessons learned, and visions were presented in CII Source Document No 89, April 1993, Alliances in International Construction, and further summarised in the CII Publication No 30-1, November 1993, Competing in the Global Market.

The research began with a literature search of the various types of cooperative agreements being used throughout the world for construction projects between firms from different nations, especially those involving US companies. During this part of the analysis, it became evident that conducting construction operations in foreign countries could take on one, or a combination of, several approaches. The task force made the decision to focus on alliances as they were the least understood of the agreements and represented a philosophy more aligned to global construction principals than any of the other approaches.

A set of standard questions was developed which were intended to elicit responses about why alliances are formed, how they function, the benefits gained and the predictions for the future of international alliances. After the analysis phase, the task force members determined which of the criteria used by the various companies were of greatest importance, which were of average importance, and which were of lesser importance. The decisions based on a statistical ranking of the responses were eventually used in preparing the model plan for the implementation of an alliance, which is the subject of this paper.

As with any study involving survey information, there are certain characteristics that may bias the data collected and skew the results in one direction or another. The questions used, together with the respondent's background and the atmosphere in which the interview was conducted, likely created inherent biases. Also, the use of a second language during the interviews may have caused some of the information to be misinterpreted: it is known how much of the meaning was lost or changed due to the translation. The selection of the individuals to be interviewed, and the size and type of firm might also have created biases. Finally, some respondents may have felt compelled to restrict their responses in the interests of protecting their firm's proprietary information and position in a highly competitive environment. It is important to recognise that these biases exist and that valid research analysis and survey techniques should be viewed in the context of such limitations.

Also, it should be noted here that the majority of the references cited at the conclusion of this article were used strictly during the literature search. Most of the information contained within this paper was derived from the interview responses and, as such, has not been cited to protect the confidentiality of the interviewees.

An implementation plan consists of the following steps:

Table 1: Implementation Plan

1.	Identify benefits common to alliance participants
2.	Define the alliance and how it will differ from standard business practice
3.	Develop goals for the alliance/mission
4.	Identify any challenge/obstacles to forming an alliance
5.	Define criteria, costs and schedules
6.	Identify responsibilities

Identifying benefits common to alliance participants

The first step in forming an alliance should be to identify the mutual benefits that exist for both the prospective participants. Unless all parties engaged in the alliance would derive some value from the association, it would be futile to form one.

Define the alliance and how its operations will differ from standard business practices and other forms of cooperative agreements

Many firms, including those that have formed alliances, have different concepts of what an alliance should and should not be. Therefore, alliance partners should define their relationship in the beginning. In order to identify problems caused "by" unfulfilled expectations when forming an alliance, the following definitions of various forms of cooperative agreements are given to serve as a starting point for firms that wish to define their own relationship during the alliance formation.

Alliance

An alliance is a long-term association with a non-affiliated organisation used to further the common interests of the members. The continued association is based upon mutual trust, the satisfactory performance of each participant, and the alliance as a whole, rather than as a pure contractual obligation. An alliance can be an association of domestic organisations or an organisation in association with foreign organisations. An alliance can include international cooperation agreements, multi-project joint ventures, or even some partnerships.

An alliance relationship is usually an association between a Constructor and one of the following:

- An owner
- Another constructor
- A subcontractor/speciality contractor
- A supplier/vendor
- A financial institution
- A government organisation
- An architect/engineer
- A combination of any of the above

Joint Venture

A construction joint venture involves two or more participants and is typically short-term, such as an agreement for one project. The participants retain their original identity in a joint venture relationship.

Partnership

A partnership legally binds together two or more organisations into an independent organisation which then becomes a new entity.

Develop goals for the specific alliance

Alliances, more than other business ventures, should be formed with an ultimate goal in mind, due to the fact that they are long-term commitments. They may require years to form or to undertake a project, and represent a size financial investment. They may take even longer to produce a profit for any of the participants. In developing goals, it should be recognised in the early stages of an alliance that a short-term profit is generally not considered a realistic goal. Some goals that firms hope to reach may be measurable; however, others, such as maturity, culture, etc., are not easily quantifiable. Possible goals that may be of interest to firms considering alliances are:

- Improve competitiveness in a particular geographic or technical market
- Increase market share to a certain level
- Learn a new technology or process
- Establish an office in a new area
- Improve the firms' financial position
- Develop employees
- Improve company cultural maturity
- Increase long-term profits

Identify challenges and/or obstacles to forming an alliance

When introducing a new form of business operation to a firm, management will undoubtedly identify challenges and obstacles, in addition to benefits. The following items are representative of many of the issues that must be addressed by management.

Enlisting the support of key players

Unfortunately, the people who will determine the success of an alliance are generally not the same people involved in the initial planning stages. However, the involvement in the preliminary stages of everyone who will play a key role in the activities is crucial to the eventual success of achieving common understanding and alignment.

Obtaining executive support for the project

As with all business ventures, executive commitment must be assured prior to initiating any action towards forming an alliance. Without executive commitment, the project is destined to fail, particularly if it runs into difficulties.

Another benefit to obtaining executive support before forming an alliance relationship is continuity. As it has been noted, an alliance may take years to form. US firms, however, seldom leave an upper-level manager in the same position for longer than two years, years in which the fledging alliance is being formed or is just "getting off the ground". The alliance may be at risk once the champion of the alliance has moved out of his or her job. Without the continuity of executive commitment and support, it is very unlikely that the project will be given a high priority by the new manager. Furthermore, it is not enough for the executives of the firm initiating the project to pledge their support. The other alliance participant's executives must also extend their equal support in order for the alliance to succeed.

Developing a comprehensive plan

Planning can be as simple and inexpensive as conducting a literature search for current information on forming an alliance, potential alliance partners, potential geographical markets to enter, or possible technologies to access. More extensive planning may consist of conducting an in-depth market analysis, including visits to foreign countries and personal interviews of potential alliance participants.

Recognising and changing industry and corporate paradigms

Typically, it is human nature for employees to resist change in their organisation. This is especially true within the construction industry where traditions are deeply ingrained in a firm's culture. Many of these traditions, and the related paradigms, will necessarily have to be abandoned, or at least modified, if an alliance is to survive even the initial stages of formation. This is especially true when the alliance is between a constructor and an owner, or a constructor with another constructor. Some of the common traditions and paradigms that must be overcome are:

• **Lack of trust**

Alliance relationships must be based on trust. Because alliances are governed by the performance of each partner and the relationship as a whole, not by a contract, each partner must have the trust that the other will do what is right for the relationship.

• **The resistance to sharing of information**

The US construction industry has a reputation for keeping all internal information secret. These "trade secrets", sometimes technical and other times market related, are thought to give construction firms the edge they need to remain competitive. However true this may or may not be, alliance partners are required to share information in order to strategically plan their activities as a team.

• **Competitive spirit**

Many American firms are so competitive that they will not form a relationship with another firm, particularly another US firm. They consider their own methods, expertise, marketing strategy, and culture to be superior to both that of their American and foreign counterparts, and that forming an alliance may assist a firm which may someday be their competitor.

• **Adversarial relationship**

Some constructors will avoid forming any type of relationship, including an alliance, with an owner. This attitude is due to the long-standing perception that an adversarial relationship always exists between constructors and owners. Firms considering an alliance must overcome this bias.

• **Lack of long-term commitment**

Alliances take a long time to develop because different corporate cultures must be joined to make one efficient organisation. If alliances are rushed, the participants will begin to question the reliability and dependability of each other. Asian construction firms are thought of as having more patience and commitment to this process than US firms. For example, a Japanese steel supplier attempted to form alliances twenty years ago by sending representatives to construction firms in several different countries, including the US, to learn how they operated. Some of the supplier-constructor relationships formed by the Japanese company's representatives have developed into alliances over this time, and some have not. Although this might be an extreme case, it is indicative of the length of time that may be required to develop a true alliance.

• **An attitude that "US methods are always right"**

US firms are often not willing to modify the way they do business, but try to impose their way of conducting business on their alliance partners and the host country. To remedy this problem, US firms need to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the customs and cultures of the prospective partners and countries, and learn to be more flexible. They need to compare methods and select those best suitable to the alliance and location.

- **Lack of delegation of authority**

Many US firms restrict their overseas manager's authority to make decisions. These managers are usually required to consult with their corporate office when conducting contract negotiations and making routine decisions. On the other hand, European firms give their site managers more autonomy, responsibility, and the authority required to operate in the international marketplace. As a general consensus, participants in international construction have more respect for, and prefer to work with, construction firms who give their managers more authority, because it improves the problem-solving process. While it can be argued that the US management approach is a "safer" method of conducting business, it is generally recognised as being too confining for operating in the international domain.

- **Direct style of communication**

Many of the executives and managers of firms from foreign countries are very sensitive to the American style of verbal communication. Foreign managers will hesitate to criticise another person's work, and seldom negotiate changes in a meeting-type situation with the same degree of candour used in a typical American environment. US executives and managers deal with their foreign counterparts in full awareness of these cultural differences.

- **US dependency on excessive legal documentation**

US firms operate within a very litigious environment compared to the conditions that exist in Europe or Asia where business relationships are based more on understanding and trust. While not unheard of, lengthy documentation of an alliance with a rigid, written contract is uncommon in Europe and Japan. European firms are accustomed to verbal understandings that serve as the basis for long-term alliances, and Japanese firms normally document their alliances with a one-page memorandum of understanding. the majority of those interviewed feel that the US approach to business and the documentation of agreements is saturated with ambiguous, legal-orientated contract language that can act as a barrier to what could be a more fertile alliance environment.

Rewarding initial "champions" and supporters

Establishing an alliance relationship is a time-consuming task in which immediate results are often not apparent, especially during the formulation stages. Those participants who are in on the early planning and negotiations stages are frequently looked on as "overhead", rather than as contributing members of the organisation. To help avoid this type of situation, employees of both participating firms should strive to attain a pre-defined and articulated interim goal. They can then be recognised accordingly by upper management and rewarded for achieving this common goal. This method of goal formulation and recognition forms a bond between both firms and the employees of the alliance, and will increase the chances of success. In addition, other employees within both organisations will recognise the importance of the alliance concept and the benefits it might bring to their own jobs.

Soliciting the help of the right people

According to the interviewees, the prerequisite qualities of employees who work closely in an alliance relationship are:

- Honesty and forthrightness
- Sensitivity to the needs and culture of others
- Being a team member
- Loyalty
- Innovativeness
- Patience
- Adaptability to changing situations
- A spirit of cooperation
- Commitment
- Openness

Training and orientation

Some employees, particularly mid-level managers, may be uncomfortable in helping a firm that was a competitor or, even worse, an owner who was an "adversary". In an alliance relationship, the traditional adversarial attitude is out of place. Realistically, this attitude adjustment is very hard for some people to make. Many employees will eventually adjust to the new environment over a period of time, or perhaps through additional training. To avoid or at least reduce the stress and possible dismissal of employees, employee orientation and training must take place prior to and during the formation of the alliance. Team building sessions, cultural seminars and language courses are vehicles that can be used to educate those employees who will be participating in the alliance.

Selecting the correct contract vehicle

Many US contractual agreements dealing with alliance relationships are often considered too restrictive. This character in an alliance contract could ultimately stifle the creativity and innovation required to remain competitive.

Alliances based on trust do not require the typical construction contract commonly used by US firms to document an agreement. A simple one-to-two page contract or memorandum of understanding may cover all areas that require documentation, especially during the initial stages of the relationship. Once the participants agree on a "vision" for the alliance, a simple contract of less than ten pages should be drafted. To prevent the alliance from interfering with any of the participants' businesses, the contract should:

- Be broad in scope
- Outline the alliance goals and objectives
- Specify the type and size of projects the alliance will pursue
- Specify the geographic location or technology in which the alliance is going to pursue work
- Specify the types and sizes of projects "off-limits" to the participants of the alliance
- Include an anticipated duration for the alliance. Three years is considered a reasonable time period unless the participants have successfully worked together in the past. At the end of the three-year period, the alliance participants should review their goals, objectives, and mission, and revise them to suit their needs.

Ensuring adequate time and financing

The formation of an alliance can be a time-consuming and expensive endeavour. During the formation period, the alliance may never construct one single project. Senior level executives from all of the firms involved will generally have to meet periodically, possibly monthly or quarterly. Mid-level mangers will also have to meet to begin the formation of personal and professional relationships that are so vital to the success of an alliance. The alliance may also agree to conduct extensive market analyses to determine the niche in which to concentrate their activities and resources. It requires a visionary approach to invest the necessary time and money into a program that may or may not become profitable.

Reorientating the purchasing approach

Firms considering an alliance should address alignment of the purchasing organisations as early as possible so as to adjust corporate policies and procedures accordingly. The system that worked for domestic projects may be totally inappropriate when purchasing for internationally-orientated projects. Foreign country regulations and laws may specify items and criteria that cannot be obtained or met through what a US firm considers standard procedures. The alliance agreement itself may dictate that certain materials be obtained from a sole source that is not normally accessed through domestic procurement channels. Hence, a requirement to study the impact(s) on the purchasing function, generated by entering into an alliance, must be recognised. In addition, many corporations assign responsibility for acquiring professional services, such as engineering and construction management, to their purchasing organisation. Their internal procedures are similar to the bidding process for lump sum, fixed-price construction contracts. Establishing an alliance will require that the selection of a participant in an alliance is not appropriate through the purchasing process, ie the "purchasing mentality" of low price.

Define Criteria, Costs and Schedule

Each of the action items below is important to implementing a change to the way a construction project is organised. They are especially applicable to the formation of an international alliance.

Define measurement criteria

The criteria used to measure whether or not goals are being met can be as varied as the goals themselves. Individual firms must define their own measurement criteria based upon their goals and the standard operating procedures of their company.

Estimate costs

Most of the US companies estimated that it would require a minimum of two US employees in a foreign country to develop an international alliance from scratch. In addition, a typical response estimated the cost at about $300,000 per person per year to maintain a presence overseas during the development period.

Determine implementation schedules

Determining a schedule to form an alliance is an activity that must be undertaken by the alliance participants. It is not that much different from the procedure used in scheduling domestic projects. Progress reporting must meet the needs of the alliance and should be based on a timetable that is comfortable to each participant.

Identify responsibilities

Many firms that form international alliances are experienced in assigning responsibilities to individuals within their organisation to control the progress of business ventures. Some of these professionals and their responsibilities within the context of an alliance are:

Executive level management

This person is typically a principal within the organisation that is pursuing an alliance. The most important act that the principal performs is lending total support for the formation of the alliance. As a part of this commitment, the principal pledges the resources and corporate cooperation required for the formation and continuing preservation of the alliance. The principal should attend several meetings with the other firm's alliance executives. These meetings will help ensure the success of the alliance through the development of a personal relationship or friendship between the executives of the alliance members. During these initial meetings, the executives should also discuss and agree on a "mission" that will serve as the foundation for the alliance relationship. During the formation of the alliance, the same executives should meet on a quarterly basis to evaluate progress and to provide direction. Once the alliance has been formed, the executives should meet twice yearly to reallocate resources, if needed, as well as to evaluate progress and provide direction.

Senior project level management

The "champion" of an alliance is typically a high-level manager serving in a position equivalent to an international project manager. This individual's responsibilities include day-to-day interaction with each of the alliance participants' primary points of contact. This person should have a very good understanding of the philosophy and procedures of his/her company as well as those of the alliance partner. This manager must also have the trust and confidence of all alliance members that he/she can be depended upon to make the right decisions with the same degree of concern for all. Because this knowledge and trust may take two or three years to develop, this "champion" for an alliance should not be moved to a new assignment until a seasoned replacement, acceptable to all participants, is identified and trained.

On-site manager/superintendent level

It is important that the overseas on-site manager or superintendent be given an equal amount of authority for the responsibility he/she will encounter. This manager, who must be recognised as a key decision-maker, should:

- Possess an exceptional and experienced construction background, being well trained in all aspects of the field operations that are consistent with the project being built.
- Be well attuned to the specific culture and sensitivities of the host country. Preferably, this would include a capability of conversing in the native language.
- Exhibit a very positive attitude. This person will be a direct reflection of the company he or she represents.

Conclusions

It becomes very evident, when scanning the economic forecasts and the possible scenarios for the construction industry, that the impact that international markets and construction opportunities will have on US firms is significant. This impact will likely play an important role in determining the future growth of many construction companies. The US share of the international market, after experiencing a decline for several years, has been on the increase for the past few years as a result of a better understanding of alliances by US construction firms. Implementation of alliance concepts has enhanced their position in the global market. Varying degrees of impact are being felt by firms throughout the world. The degree of influence seems to be dependent on a combination of the firm's area of construction expertise, geographical market, and market analysis. Therefore, it is imperative to begin planning for the inevitable. One necessary prerequisite crucial to prospering in the global construction market will be a company's awareness and understanding of the commitments that this strategy will entail, that is, being able to compete anywhere in the world at any given time. The implications and ramifications in forming alliances with foreign entities will most likely play a significant role in these decisions.

Recurring themes, which require entirely new approaches in international business relationships, became apparent during the study. One of the most significant themes was centred around the formation of a team-orientated approach based on a long-term relationship. Whether it is to add technical expertise, a new management approach, increased quality control, flexibility, or financial strength, or some combination of these, it is improbable to expect tangible, long-term results without entering into an alliance-based relationship with foreign associates.

In their visionary analysis, strategic international alliances were considered by the respondents as a necessity for construction firms if they want to compete in the global marketplace. As more construction firms adopt the "global concept" of doing business, team efforts, through alliance relationships will become more commonplace. The future holds an opportunity to conduct our affairs on a much higher level of sophistication than is done presently. Agreements will likely become less orientated to legal documents and relationships will become less adversarial. The 21st century should usher in a whole new era of cooperation within the construction industry as owner/clients demand more from the designers and constructors and the industry moves from domestic to foreign ventures. Every US construction firm contemplating a global strategy should be ready to accept the new "rules".

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