Track 5. SMEs, international new ventures and international entrepreneurship
Session Format: Competitive

Making Sense of International Opportunities in Entrepreneurial Selling

This study aims to broaden our understanding of international opportunities and poses the question: How do entrepreneurs make sense of international opportunities in the context of international sales? It places international opportunities in the highly ambiguous context of international entrepreneurial selling in business-to-business negotiations that. In interaction with others entrepreneurs make sense of socially constructed international opportunities. Their sensemaking accounts are studies from the socially situated cognition approach that provides a holistic conceptual framework for analyzing narratives of five entrepreneurs who were interviewed longitudinally over the process of their firm internationalization. The findings illustrate international opportunities as action-oriented, embodied, situated and distributed in their environments. The paper contributes to the international entrepreneurship literature by providing new insights to the concept of international opportunity through the use of fresh, underutilized theoretical and methodological approaches, and by placing it to the often neglected but highly relevant context of international entrepreneurial selling.

Making Sense of International Opportunities in Entrepreneurial Selling

Entrepreneurial opportunity discovery, exploration, creation, construction and exploitation have become central to the research of entrepreneurial activities and processes (e.g., Ciabuschi et al., 2012; Companys & McMullen 2006; Eckhardt & Shane, 2003; Fletcher 2007; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). The notion of opportunity has gained increasing interest also in the international entrepreneurship (IE) field (Dimitratos & Jones, 2005; Mainela et al., 2014) with the often quoted definition of IE as "the discovery, enactment, evaluation, and exploitation of opportunities—across national borders—to create future goods and services" (Oviatt & McDougall, 2005, p. 540). Despite many studies incorporating the concept of international opportunity (IO), it is only recently that it has been taken to the core of IE research and defined as "a situation that both spans and integrates elements from multiple national contexts in which entrepreneurial action and interaction transform the manifestations of economic activity" (Mainela et al., 2014, p. 16).

Seeking new business opportunities is recognized as entrepreneurial sales behavior (Spillecke & Brettel, 2013). Further, small new firms' early sales by founder-entrepreneurs (Pitkänen et al., 2014) are found crucial to firm success and growth. Still, IO in entrepreneurs' selling is largely neglected (Lehto, 2015). IE literature classifies firms according to the extent and degree of international sales (Madsen, 2013) but rarely focuses on international entrepreneurial selling as an activity or a context crucial for IO. Some studies examine the interface of IE and marketing to investigate how new firms' marketing and entrepreneurial capabilities (Zhou et al., 2010) or orientation (Kocak & Abimbola, 2009) drive successful early internationalization and growth, but IO in entrepreneurial selling is left largely uncovered (Lehto, 2015).

In order to gain more insight into IO, this study addresses the question: *How do entrepreneurs make sense of international opportunities in the context of international sales?*

That is, how and what kind of meaning they assign to IO related occurrences over sales interaction processes? The sensemaking approach is scarcely used in IE studies (e.g., Wakkee, 2006) but the entrepreneurship research has started using the approach increasingly to discuss entrepreneurs' identity (e.g., Hytti, 2005), opportunity creation and justification of a new venture (e.g., Holt & Macpherson, 2010) and entrepreneurial failure (e.g., Byrne & Shepherd, 2015; Wolfe & Shepherd, 2015). Following Cardon et al. (2011) this study sees the sensemaking particularly well applicable to IE because both are ongoing social processes involving ambiguity. This study contributes to the IE literature by bridging the IO and sensemaking discussion—specifically the socially situated cognition approach (Smith & Semin, 2004) that goes well together with the narrative constructivist methodology (Sparkes & Smith, 2008) applied in this study—in order to better understand IO in the very specific context of international entrepreneurial selling and early internationalizing venture.

The paper starts with a theoretical discussion on IO in entrepreneurial selling, after which sensemaking as socially situated cognition and its application in IO research is discussed. The methodology section elaborates on the decisions taken in limiting the empirical context and selecting the participants, and the narrative methodology used in collecting and analyzing the data, and the constructivist paradigm underlying this research. Five entrepreneurs' narratives that were collected longitudinally in 2013–2015 are analyzed in order to gain new insights to IO development over time in early internationalization and entrepreneurial selling. The final discussion and conclusions evaluate the findings and the selected approach, and provide suggestions for future research.

International Opportunity in Entrepreneurial Selling

A recent review on IO reveals that the concept is often depicted in an abstract, unspecified way (Mainela et al., 2014). There are alternative approaches to IO e.g., as arbitrage opportunities (cf. Kirzner, 1973) to be discovered or innovation opportunities (cf.

Schumpeter, 1934) to be created. Only few studies discuss IO as socially constructed and context-embedded (Mainela et al., 2014) despite entrepreneurship being seen as social and spatial (Low & McMillan, 1988). These studies tend to take a rather individual-centered but contextual view to opportunity. Baker et al. (2005) discuss the influence of subjective interpretation of context on perceived opportunities—their discovery, evaluation and exploitation—, while Zahra et al. (2005) emphasize entrepreneurs' cognitive processes of sensemaking embedded in specific contexts as source of IOs recognized and exploited over time. Bingham (2009) discusses sequencing and improvisation in IO selection, and the role of unlearning and improvisation in IO execution: the less constraining the initial cognitive frames in IO selection, the more resistance to change in IO execution, but the more constraint in IO selection, the more flexibility in IO execution.

This study joins the still underdeveloped streams of IE studies (Mainela et al., 2014) that look at IO construction and enactment resulting from actions and interactions over time (e.g., Fletcher, 2004), located in the wider social context that is continuously changing (e.g., Zahra et al., 2005). In contrast to most IO studies, this study does not view opportunities as pre-existing, exogenous realities (cf. e.g., Chandra et al., 2009) but recognizes IO as socially constructed in relation to past, present and future interactions, events, ideas and experiences (Fletcher 2004; 2006), because it is important to locate IO into a broader setting in search for a deeper insight to envisioning, emergence and enactment of IO over time (Mainela et al., 2014). The phenomenon is approached from a socially situated cognitive perspective of the entrepreneurs, i.e. how they in interaction with others make sense of socially constructed IOs.

Entrepreneurs interact with their environment, and international buyer-seller interaction processes—particularly sales negotiations—are one type of setting in which IO construction takes place (Lehto, 2015). IO construction in sales is understood as a continuous, iterative process involving sensemaking and sensegiving in equivocal environments (cf. Cornelissen &

Clarke, 2010), and IO is seen as a new product or service solution, way of delivering offering, and/or business relationship (cf. Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). Entrepreneurs' with a proactive sales orientation are found to try to gain comprehensive understanding of the customer and identify improvement opportunities for their performance (Pitkänen et al., 2014). They actively seek to exploit opportunities for gaining and maintaining profitable customers through "innovative approaches to risk management, resource leveraging and value creation" (Morris et al., 2002, p. 5). IO construction and realization with regard to solutions to customers' problems, value creation and profit generation (cf. Bonney & Williams, 2009) often takes place in equivocal environments. Ambiguity related to intercultural sales interaction causes the need in negotiators to engage in continuing, reciprocal and repeated sensemaking of the situation for the purpose of reaching an agreement (Kumar & Patriotta, 2011). The next part discusses how the utilization of socially situated sensemaking approach in understanding IO construction in international sales settings.

Making Sense of International Opportunity

Sensemaking has become notably popular in organization research with Weick's (e.g., 1979; 1995) work being particularly influential. However, its use in the IE field remains limited (e.g., Jones & Casulli, 2013; Wakkee, 2006). This study follows Gephart et al. (2010, 284–285) in defining sensemaking as "an ongoing process that creates an intersubjective sense of shared meanings through conversation and non-verbal behavior in face to face settings where people seek to produce, negotiate, and maintain a shared sense of meaning". In addition to a constant updating of mental maps and enacting order to ongoing events, sensemaking is also about retrospectively rationalizing and classifying events and actions, and about presumptions guiding future action (Weick et al., 2005). Sensemaking is also understood here as a social activity: people create meaning in interaction with others rather than individually (Weick 1979) in order to sequence previously unordered environmental cues to a representation that

suggests a certain view of reality (Holt & Macpherson, 2010). Due to the action-orientation of sensemaking, interpretation rather than rational, issue-contingent evaluation or choice is the core phenomenon (Sonenshein, 2007; Weick et al., 2005). It is driven by plausibility of the accounts that should be socially acceptable, comprehensive and credible rather than accurate (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). Reasoning is often nonmonotonic in allowing further information to invalidate old conclusions (Lundberg, 2000) and initial intuitive judgments (Sonenshein, 2007). The traditional approaches to sensemaking are criticized for not considering if and how the context influences sensemaking (Parry, 2003) and behavior that are not simply based on disembodies, individual sensemaking mechanisms (Semin & Smith, 2013). In this paper the social and cultural context is highly relevant to sensemaking.

Entrepreneurs' sensemaking is triggered as a response to ambiguous conditions and equivocality (Cardon et al., 2011) that involves multiple simultaneous interpretations the person needs to mediate among, or to uncertainty and lack of information that makes it difficult to construct plausible interpretations (cf. Sonenshein, 2007). Mitchell et al. (2011) seek to extend Cornelissen and Clarke's (2010) more dynamic perspective to entrepreneurs' sensemaking as means for comprehending a situation explicitly (verbalized) and as basis for action. As opposed to the traditional focus on the object of cognition (such as persona, events and relationships) the emerging approach used in this study views cognition as social, as an ability to represent and adaptively co-regulate (inter)action (Semin & Smith, 2013). Socially situated cognition (SSC) is understood as action oriented, embodied, situated and distributed (Semin & Smith, 2002, 2013; Smith & Semin, 2004, 2007). Looking at cognition as socially situated requires a macroscopic level approach to (buyer-seller) interaction in specific settings (international sales negotiations) that induce a constellation of motivational states and representations expressed in actions (IO construction) that, again, are influenced by the

situation and other actors (Semin & Smith, 2013). Objects' and persons' representations do not reflect their abstract 'objective' qualities but their relations to the entrepreneur (ibid.).

Entrepreneurs' sensemaking is action oriented (Mitchell et al., 2011): their evaluation of and motivation toward IO construction. Cognitive representations of IO are flexibly shaped by action and interaction so that adaptation to changing circumstances is possible (cf. Semin & Smith, 2013). This extends the focus from isolated individual and brings attention to situated interaction and mutually coordinated adaptive behavior by the selling entrepreneur, prospect and possibly other relevant actors (cf. ibid.). Embodiment of cognition suggests that mental representations as shaped and constrained by the bodily actions that entrepreneur can engage in with and that are determined by the objects or interactions with people (Smith & Semin, 2004; cf. Cornelissen & Clarke, 2010). For instance, IO construction in face to face interaction in which the physical presence and actions, such as demonstrating solutions or gaining an understanding of prospects offering by physically holding or manipulating an object (cf. Cornelissen & Clarke, 2010), influence intersubjective sensemaking.

The notion of situated cognition can be examined on three interpersonal levels: communicative, relational, and broader group context (Mitchell et al., 2011; Smith & Semin, 2004). Semin and Smith (2013) describe how situational effects on behavior can occur in tuning ones messages and behavior according to the audience, its attitudes and locally salient information or in self-categorization as reaction to other people. Communicative context influences, for example, the ways in which entrepreneurs' articulate motivation and rationale for relationship establishment and IO construction. Relational contexts can be considered when studying social networks' effects on IO construction, while group level contexts can be observed in e.g. group perceptions' influence on IO desirability and feasibility and hence entrepreneurial intentions (cf. Mitchell et al., 2011). Cognition is also distributed across the environment of sensemaking (Mitchell et al., 2011; Smith & Semin, 2004) that includes other

cognitive agents that cognition makes use of and is distributed to in e.g., group decision-making and brainstorming (Semin & Smith, 2013). In selling and particularly in IO construction, cognition is distributed through negotiation of shared understanding and intersubjective envisioning of IO (cf. Lehto, 2015).

In this study, the SSC approach is applied to IO construction—for the first time to the author's knowledge—for the purpose of understanding the phenomenon more holistically. As Mitchell et al. (2011) state, it provides an integrative perspective also to IE research. The empirical analysis is guided by the above presented dimensions of cognition: time, action-orientation, embodiment, situatedness, and distribution.

Longitudinal Narrative Inquiry

Selecting and collecting data

This empirical study is based on interviews with five Finnish entrepreneurs who were selected through purposive sampling: these particular individuals in their particular settings could provide insights into IOs in international entrepreneurial selling (cf. Teddlie & Yu, 2007). As co-founders or partners the participants have been involved in the new venture development from early on, and have taken full or partial responsibility of international sales. To allow diversity of perspectives to the phenomenon, the participant selection was restricted with regard to the entrepreneurs' background, business field or market areas.

The empirical context was limited, first, to early internationalizing firms (EIFs), i.e. firms that internationalize within three years of inception (Zucchella et al., 2007), because small and new firms are found to struggle particularly with international sales at the outset of their internationalization (Reuber & Fischer, 2002) while at the same time a small domestic market is found to urge firms to seek growth internationally (e.g., Kuuluvainen & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2010). The timing of first foreign sales is found to influence a firm's sales growth, return on foreign sales (Fernhaber & Li, 2010), and the operations and learning

after entering the first foreign market (De Clercq et al., 2012). The EIF focus allowed the study to longitudinally examine small, new firms that initiate internationalization in an early stage—but not necessarily since inception—when the entrepreneur(s) were directly involved in sales. Such a setting provides a fruitful ground for examining potential successes and setbacks in the start and expansion of international sales.

Secondly, the context was limited to international sales in business-to-business sales negotiations in which IOs are envisioned, executed, evaluated, constructed anew or replicated in buyer-seller interaction within and across dyadic relationships and contexts (Lehto, 2015). International sales negotiations provide particular a setting for selling (Ghauri & Usunier, 2003; Simintiras & Thomas, 1998) with increased ambiguity related to the interaction due to various contextual differences (Kumar & Patriotta, 2011). Hence, socially situated sensemaking seems highly relevant for understanding IO in this context.

The entrepreneurs were identified through the researcher's personal networks, a start-up event and online searches, and contacted via phone and email. Narrative data was collected in face-to-face interviews in the companies' own or co-working premises. Daniel and Laura were interviewed three times over the process of first foreign market entry, while Maria, Joel and Kai were interviewed twice to provide retrospectives on past international experiences and insights to ongoing and planned market entries and expansion. Secondary data from the companies' websites, news articles and online venture information directories was used to gain information on partners, investors, and key ratio (financial ratio, number of personnel) when preparing for interviews and following events between interviews. Background information on the data is presented in Appendix 1.

Narrative data and analysis

In this study narratives are understood as discursive constructions that provide means for individual and social sensemaking, but are also an outcome of collective construction of

meaning (Rantakari & Vaara, forthcoming). As they are used to continuous temporal describing, ordering and explaining of events in relation to other events in a particular context over time (Gergen & Gergen, 1997), narratives are found to be particularly suitable as data for longitudinal, processual research (Rantakari & Vaara, forthcoming). They are used in retrospective but also in ongoing sensemaking entailing past, present and future (Hytti 2005).

The analysis focuses on the content and meaning making structures of the narratives, examining the how the entrepreneurs make sense of their experiences, the relevant events, actors and their context (Hytti, 2005; Johansson, 2004), and justify their actions and thinking (Shkedi, 2004) by building holistic descriptions and causal pathways (Makkonen et al., 2012). Hence, the narrative constructions per se are the object of the study. In narratives constructed in the interview situations entrepreneurs assign meaning to occurrences and their circumstances (Cardon et al., 2011). The longitudinal research design enables an analysis of the processes of IO construction in selling: expectations, (inter)actions and events, and changes and discontinuities in these occurring over time (cf. Nummela, 2015, p. 248–249). Longitudinal analysis of narrative sensemaking provides a balance between future prospect (anticipation) and retrospect (resilience); reinterpretations of occurences enhancing learning; and, basis to "treat plausibility, incrementalism, improvisation, and bounded rationality as sufficient to guide goal-directed behavior" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 419).

Research process and narrative constructivist paradigm

The research process can be described as iterative and abductive (cf. Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Klag & Langley, 2013). The research interest started with the researcher's empirical notions and discussions with practitioners. Finding the more specific research focus and research question was a process guided by both theory and empirical data. Topics discussed in the first interviews were influenced by theory and own experiences. The initial data analysis guided further selection of the theoretical approach, and refined topics of following interviews. A

more inductive phase of empirical investigation (interviews and analysis) was later followed by an intensive deductive phase of theoretical reading for the purpose of this paper. The final stage was characterized by matching theory and empirical findings to a more coherent whole.

This study relies on a narrative constructivist perspective in analyzing the data: the focus is on entrepreneurs' sensemaking as socially situated cognition. Their knowing and experience, thoughts and cognitive processing, but also the linkages between the social environment and the individual experience are interpreted in the analysis (cf. Fletcher 2006; Rogers 2007). Narratives are seen "as making explicit the meaning that is there in experience" (Sparkes & Smith, 2008, p. 297).

Findings

The next section presents the key finding of the narrative analysis organized according to the theoretical dimensions of action-orientation, embodiment, situatedness and distribution of sensemaking of IO construction. The limited space not allowing an elaborate re-narration of the stories, a more detailed mapping of the findings over time is provided in Appendix 2.

Daniel – challenge of committing customer to IO execution

Daniel founded a software development firm with two partners in late 2011. His sensemaking narrative of IO is strongly action-oriented reflecting the vision of high growth, scalability and strong market position eventually enabling an exit—possibly becoming and innovative 'thought leader'. The team perceived IOs in the UK and the USA that are familiar to Daniel through his previous career. During the second year of operations, after piloting tailored marketing application domestically first, the firm hired a consultant to collect leads and contact prospects in the UK. This led to a roadshow with twelve company visits in July 2013, and several consecutive trips to the UK before an agreement on the first IO execution was reached in spring 2014. It was not long that Daniel felt he needed local professional salespeople's help in order to deal with prospecting efficiently in the UK. This decision links

also to the embodied cognition of the IO, as a local agency would also partly solve the logistic challenge caused by the company location. Yet, the entrepreneur's physical presence in negotiations remains crucial when opportunities for collaboration are envisioned and details discussed. Face to face meetings are needed for trust development, but also because in these occasions Daniel as the expert of his teams' capabilities can flexibly adapt to customer's needs and suggest different solutions.

What seems to have been one of the biggest challenges in constructing IO is gaining shared understanding of the reasons why the prospects should commit to joint IO execution requiring changes to its approach to marketing. The team perceives UK prospect as more enthusiastic and faster decision-makers than Finns but despite various communicative approaches to ease the commitment no new deals have been closed. Daniel's dissatisfaction with the slowness of gaining sales and reflections on the experiences led to a decision to take a step back, gain more resources domestically and retry the market entry later with more resources and consideration on alternative approaches to IO.

Laura – embodied IO construction as a challenge

Laura is an entrepreneur in a new firm registered in August 2012. She has a strong role in the product content development of a wellbeing service platform. In late 2013 she took the first action in entering the US market by visiting a conference with a potential local sales representative who soon was trained to demonstrate the product to prospects. The motivation of reaching scalability by replicating IO, along with the market distance, led the entrepreneurs to decide to rely on the salespersons effort and consider visits later if needed. With growing dissatisfaction to the slowness of gaining and meeting prospects, Laura started questioning the representative's ability and motivation to demonstrate the product as planned. An employee from Finland was sent to visit prospects with the local representative to ensure the quality of the product demonstration (embodied cognition), and to get a direct, 'internal' view and

interpretation of the prospects feedback (communicative context). Laura felt it was difficult to have all customer communication mediated by the representative who did not seem to commit to flexible IO construction but rather tried to sell a product as it was. She believes that there will be adaptation needs if IO construction with prospects is done flexibly. As targets set for sales in the US were still not met by early 2015, collaboration with the sales representative ended. Laura now sees the US market challenging because of wellness is perceived from different perspectives in the US than in Europe, that now actually is considered to be an appealing, developing area for IO construction. With social networks providing potentially suitable sales representatives in both market areas, the entrepreneurs must now consider how to approach internationalization while the focus has shifted on the striving domestic market.

Maria – IO construction over roadshows

In Autumn 2011 Maria joined the entrepreneurial team of a medical research and development firm founded in March 2011. Since the beginning the firm's actions were guided by the growth intentions (and long-term exit plan) that led it to start rather fast but controlled internationalization from close markets in Scandinavia in 2011 and to expand to several European countries soon thereafter. Maria emphasizes the importance of roadshows as an efficient way to use the limited resources for IO construction. In her field, face to face meetings are necessary for gaining trust and mutual understanding of needs and solutions, and the entrepreneurial seller must have substance know-how in order to be able to flexibly offer different service solutions and tailoring options. When discussing IO the communication must be adjusted (situated) e.g., according to customer's size and cultural context. Maria assigns high value to the positive word-of-mouth spreading in customers' networks. In addition to expansion plans to the USA, Maria reflects how IOs as in new service areas have been developed based on customer demand and own interests. While direct interaction in meetings with customers particularly in the IO envisioning state will continue to be handled by the

entrepreneur, she has learned that local agents are efficient help in ‘opening door’ to prospect in areas that are challenging due to language, culture or distance. A future opportunity to better be able to serve big customers despite limited resources and competence areas, would be a partnership with a mid-sized customer.

Joel – social networks crucial in IO construction

Joel established a software development company with a team of old colleagues in September 2012. Since beginning, he had two good prospects within his networks from the USA and Europe, and he was able to negotiate an agreement on IO enactment by offering a team with rather unique know-how for a service project he knew already in advance would support the customers’ needs. As the entrepreneurs target is to develop the business in a long run, there is no exit target and growth is planned through growth in service sales and, later, through scalable own product. In 2014 the service sale growth was supported by establishing a subsidiary to the USA where Joel already had been partnering with a consultant to help in prospecting. However, own presence at the big market is necessary as Joel points out that IO construction in service sales takes a long time and multiple meetings. Trust needs to be built and the entrepreneur must convince the customer of the team’s unique expertise and be flexible in tailoring solutions in order to ease the purchase decision that often requires considerable commitment from the customer. Joel emphasizes the importance of communicating clearly the offering and how it differs from others, and later adds that the selling entrepreneur must be able to have a consultative approach to discussing solutions. An example of the distribution of cognition within the company and influenced by social networks is the decision not to approach Asian or Russian market in search for IO. Joel anticipates that the newly launched product’s sale will be separated from the service sale under a subsidiary, and time will show how IOs develop on the product side of the business.

Kai – opportunistic IO construction

In November 2013 Kai founded a company with a colleague and gathered a group of people to start working for the first customer since the initiation. Within half a year Kai had negotiated first IO in the UK and another IO was being constructed with a customer in the USA. Due to very limited resources, no traditional proactive approaches were used to access international markets but the entrepreneurs existing networks were utilized. From people they know, they learned about prospects who were in need of software development services and, hence, likely to make purchase decisions fast. The social networks also work other way around as potential customers may hear about Kai's firm and approach him directly. No big risks and investments in IO construction are made unless the entrepreneurs' think a deal is very potential. Yet, in Central Europe this approach has not worked out as Kai feels personal recommendations seem to carry less value than firm reputation. Kai tells that he is very open to different types of opportunities in negotiations and everyone in the company is used as lead generator who keeps his ears open for potential IOs. The highly adaptive approach to interaction and IO is often coined with a consultative approach in order to explicate the entrepreneurs' know-how in solution development. While Kai admits to be rather surprised about the relatively fast growth in sales and size, the aim is still to continue growth without risk-taking, continuing to approach IOs rather opportunistically. In future, he sees that the company must decide how to profile itself and instead of being purely sales-led, must also put effort in marketing. The vision has never been an exit, but rather to acquire more know-how to the firm when the time is ripe.

Discussion and Conclusions

This research contributes to the IE literature by studying the concept of IO in the often neglected, but practically highly relevant context of international entrepreneurial selling (cf. Lehto 2015). In answering the question, how do entrepreneurs make sense of international

opportunities in this context, the study draws on the socially situated cognition approach that provides a conceptual framework for looking at sensemaking more holistically than in traditional cognitive constructivist studies (Seming & Smith, 2002; 2013). The findings indicate the potential of this approach for more in depth examination of entrepreneurs' sensemaking, and elaborate on the concept of IO by discussing it as action-oriented, embodied, situated and distributed in its larger context. Furthermore, the study contributes to the methodological variety of IE by utilizing the method of narrative inquiry that has gained increasing recognition in the entrepreneurship domain (e.g. Hjort and Steyaert 2004; Hytti 2005; Hjort 2007; Gartner 2007, 2010; Larty and Hamilton 2011) but has remained underutilized in the IE domain.

As a narrative study, the paper could have discussed the relationship and interaction between the researcher and the participants more openly, and put the phenomenon more to its empirical context that is now described in a very limited way. Due to the space limitation of the paper, the paper does not manage to discuss and analyze the narrative data in such detail as it would deserve. The ten hours of recorded interviews are not condensed under four limited conceptual categories, even though interrelated and holistically viewed. This author encourages future research to take on the challenges of performing in depth narrative inquiry studies in order to gain more broad and varied views to international entrepreneurship and opportunities in its multiplicity of relevant contexts.

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Appendix 1. Background information on participants and their firms.

	Daniel	Laura	Maria	Joel	Kai
Interview times and durations	28 Aug 2013, 0:59 24 Feb 2014, 0:58 16 Feb 2015, 1:03	22 Jan 2014, 1:05 1 Jul 2014, 0:50 9 Feb 2015, 0:52	6 Feb 2014, 1:18 3 Feb 2015, 1:09	14 Apr 2014, 0:45 26 Jan 2015, 0:47	18 Jun 2014, 1:20 4 Feb 2015, 1:11
Prior work experience	Software development, strategy work	Product training and management	Researcher	Software development, intrapreneur, team management	Software development, selling and sales management
Prior international experience	Yes (globally) Lived in the USA and Denmark	Yes (globally)	Yes Lived in the USA	Yes (globally)	Yes (globally)
Prior sales negotiation experience	Attended negotiations, not as seller	None	None	None	Selling and sales team management
Venture established	Nov 2011	Aug 2012	Mar 2011	Sep 2012	Nov 2013
Offering	Software development	Wellbeing service platform	Medical research and development	Hardware and software development	Software development
Size	2011–2015: ≤ 10	2012–2015: ≤ 10	2011–2012: ≤ 10 2013–2015: ≤ 20	2012: ≤ 20 2013: ≤ 40 2014: ≤ 60 2015: ≤ 80	2013: ≤ 20 2014: ≤ 20 2015: ≤ 30
Foreign markets	First foreign customer in the UK in 2014	Negotiations in the USA since 2014	First foreign customer in Sweden in 2011 Continuous expansion in Europe, some customers in the North America	First customers in the USA and Germany in 2012 Expansion in Europe and the USA	First customer in the UK in 2013 In 2014 customers in the UK and in the USA
Profitable revenue	No	No	Yes, since 1st year	Yes, since 1st year	Yes, since 1st year
Venture capital	Yes, gained	Yes, gained	None applied	Yes, applied	None applied

Appendix 2.. IO construction rationalized through socially situated cognition approach

Table 1		Action-oriented	Embodied	Situated	Distributed
Daniel	Aug 2013	*Retrospect:* - Perceive big potential for IOs in the UK → start lead generation *Ongoing:* - First IOs discussed in the UK - Flexibility and expertise in IO envisioning → fast adaptation *Prospect:* - Small domestic market → IOs necessary (high growth, exit) - USA as the 'ultimate' target	*Retrospect:* N/A *Ongoing:* - Daniel's presence in meetings to construct IO - Local representation not needed necessarily (UK familiar setting) *Prospect:* - Possible need of local representation due to distance - USA: entrepreneur's presence perceived necessary	*Retrospect:* N/A *Ongoing:* - For gaining trust: communicate Finnish know-how, skilled team and good product - UK prospects perceived enthusiastic and faster in decision-making *Prospect:* - UK: more developed and bigger market for IO	*Retrospect:* - Consultant's research in UK: potential for IO exists, meetings set up *Ongoing:* - Opportunities in offering based on domestic relationships: platform + tailored application, consulting *Prospect:* - New IOs constructed with prospects (UK, USA)
	Feb 2014	*Retrospect:* - Several trips to discuss IOs with prospects - Professional salespeople needed to effectively close deals on IOs *Ongoing:* - Seeking IOs through agents' active lead generation *Prospect:* - Desire to become an innovative 'though leader'	*Retrospect:* - Several visits to discuss with prospects in person *Ongoing:* - Local representatives needed to gain access to prospects efficiently. Daniel's presence needed when IO constructions starts. *Prospect:* Focus on domestic and UK market (resources, physical presence)	*Retrospect:* - 'Light bulb' moments in UK in negotiations → 2 billing models *Ongoing:* - Arguing for customer's need to commit to IO execution *Prospect:* - Teams' understanding: from proof-of-concept stage to 'healthy' business, scalability and exit	*Retrospect:* N/A *Ongoing:* - IO potential discussed among Daniel, local agents and prospects - Learning from negotiations to establish replicable IOs *Prospect:* - New IOs constructed with prospects (UK)
	Feb 2015	*Retrospect:* - Several trips to discuss IOs with prospects - First IO execution in UK started *Ongoing:* - Disappointment in UK: challenge of closing and commitment *Prospect:* - Decrease commitment in UK, consider new approaches	*Retrospect:* - Almost monthly visits to meet sales representatives, prospects and customer face to face *Ongoing:* - Daniel's visits found to influence prospects attitudes and be crucial for trust development *Prospect:* N/A	*Retrospect:* N/A *Ongoing:* - Local agents easier gain initial contact and trust (language, experience) - Start with consultative talk and see if need for joint IO construction *Prospect:* N/A	*Retrospect:* - Clear product packaged developed as result of customer interaction *Ongoing:* - Agents do contacting; Daniel and agents envision IOs with customers; colleagues execute IOs with customers *Prospect:* - Local references needed

Table 1		Action-oriented	Embodied	Situated	Distributed
Laura	Jan 2014	*Retrospect:* - Visited conference in the US *Ongoing:* - Gaining foothold domestically, then entering the USA →training a local sales representative *Prospect:* - Perceive greatest market potential in the USA → contacting prospects - Targeting scalability	*Retrospect:* N/A *Ongoing:* N/A *Prospect:* - Must demonstrate product physically to prospects, needs an engaged person	*Retrospect:* N/A *Ongoing:* - USA the most developed market →need for such product understood - Use Finnish origin and rand of previous employer appear credible *Prospect:* - Vast personal networks expected to aid internationalization	*Retrospect:* N/A *Ongoing:* - Decision on US market entrance driven by the partners' work history and social networks there *Prospect:* - Consider utilizing personal networks more for support in internationalization - Evaluating possible IO approach
	Jul 2014	*Retrospect:* - US representative made slow progress in meeting prospects→ clear targets set to get results *Ongoing:* - Learning to manage and control US salesperson from distance *Prospect:* - Send employee to support demos and get direct prospect feedback	*Retrospect:* - Representatives suitability to demonstrate service questioned *Ongoing:* - Employee to ensure right demo experience to prospects and to get direct contact with them *Prospect:* - Need for consistent quality in product demos and training	*Retrospect:* - IO construction mediated by the local representative *Ongoing:* - No direct prospect feedback and communication; no tailoring wishes *Prospect:* - Employee to communicate the thoroughly crafted 'message' and to interpret feedback internally	*Retrospect:* - IO envisioning between entrepreneurs and local representative *Ongoing:* - Local IOs approached as recommended by sales representative (pricing, content) *Prospect:* - Adding direct firm internal view
	Feb 2015	*Retrospect:* - Need someone more committed to really understand IOs in US *Ongoing:* - CEO visited US: still no pilot customers → the sales representative not used anymore *Prospect:* - New focus on domestic market that shows good sales figures - Potentially suitable sales representative in US and Europe	*Retrospect:* - Product demos done by the visiting employee, no deals still *Ongoing:* - IO discussions require someone who is credible physically capable of demonstrating the product *Prospect:* - Own representative needed in US to understand needs and IOs there	*Retrospect:* - Targeting of US market was taken for granted due to the teams' prior experiences; approach to wellness different *Ongoing:* - Maybe Europe better IO location *Prospect:* - IOs in Europe could be feasible through networks (closer, less competitive)	*Retrospect:* - Product trainer trained in the US *Ongoing:* - Unsure how to proceed in internationalization: location, representative, approach to offering *Prospect:* N/A

Table 1		Action-oriented	Embodied	Situated	Distributed
Maria	Feb 2014	*Retrospect:* - Growth intentions and exit plan driving internationalization; start in the Scandinavia *Ongoing:* - Entering new markets in Europe stepwise, expanding in existing markets *Prospect:* - IO construction further in Asia or North America as next big step	*Retrospect:* - Face to face meetings necessary for gaining trust *Ongoing:* - Roadshows to initiate IO construction with new customers - Content expertise: flexibility and consulting during IO construction *Prospect:* - Continue with effective use of resources in roadshows	*Retrospect:* - Local agents to ease communication in Southern Europe *Ongoing:* - Arguments toned to customer's size, culture, and (potential) needs - Flexibility in discussing tailoring needs *Prospect:* - Particularities of IO context in Asia and North America assessed	*Retrospect:* - Local agents help in 'challenging language areas' bringing efficiency - Learning local specificities with smaller customers useful with IO construction with bigger prospects - Positive word-of-mouth *Ongoing:* - Firm internal decision-making processes of target market selection *Prospect:* - Big firms →competence needs
	Feb 2015	*Retrospect :* - New customers, countries, and service area *Ongoing:* - USA targeted actively soon *Prospect:* - USA entry: agent or project	*Retrospect:* N/A *Ongoing:* - Location kept in Finland *Prospect:* - Customers services from distance, visited when needed	*Retrospect:* N/A *Ongoing:* - Important to really listen to customer's needs *Prospect:* - Expressing consistent high quality and flexibility in IO construction	*Retrospect:* - One new service area taken after customers demand in negotiations *Ongoing:* N/A *Prospect:* - Partnering with customer to construct IO with big customers
Joel	Apr 2014	*Retrospect:* - IO construction in USA and Europe before firm inception *Ongoing:* - Planned, controlled growth the USA and Europe *Prospect:* - Hardware development → own product, scalability	*Retrospect:* - Service sales slow and requires personal contact (trust) to reach agreement on IO realization *Ongoing:* - Expertise needed in constructing IO in negotiations *Prospect:* N/A	*Retrospect:* - IO requires customers commitment to project →articulate unique expertise *Ongoing:* - Importance of clearly articulating offering and differentiation *Prospect:* N/A	*Retrospect:* - Positive word-of-mouth - Consultants examining market potential *Ongoing:* - Partner: prospecting in the USA *Prospect:* - Networks and team discussions → no approaches to Asia or Russia
	Jan 2015	*Retrospect:* - Sales subsidiary in the USA *Ongoing:* - Own product launch *Prospect:* N/A	*Retrospect:* N/A *Ongoing:* - Closer contact to US customers *Prospect:* N/A	*Retrospect:* - Consultative approach *Ongoing:* - Concept studies to ease purchase *Prospect:* N/A	*Retrospect:* N/A *Ongoing:* N/A *Prospect:* - Separation of product and service sales for clarity?

Table 1		Action-oriented	Embodied	Situated	Distributed
Kai	Jun 2014	*Retrospect:* - First IO in UK soon after start *Ongoing:* - IO construction process progressing well in the USA *Prospect:* - IOs in Central Europe perceived - Looking for a balance between domestic and foreign sales	*Retrospect:* - Restricted resources for travelling to meetings; must be very clear purchase intention *Ongoing:* N/A *Prospect:* N/A	*Retrospect:* N/A *Ongoing:* - Country differences in speed of decision-making processes - Very open to the type of IOs constructed *Prospect:* N/A	*Retrospect:* - Learn from IO potential through own networks *Ongoing:* - Recommendations through networks →faster IO construction *Prospect:* N/A
	Feb 2015	*Retrospect:* - Still no deals in Central Europe *Ongoing:* - IO enacted in the USA - No big risks taken, sales-led and highly adaptive to different IOs *Prospect:* - There are good opportunities for doing business when not taking too big risks - Rather than exit, would acquire another firm in future	*Retrospect:* N/A *Ongoing:* - USA difficult without physical presence, direct contact *Prospect:* - No plans for other locations or more active presence at foreign markets (roadshows etc.)	*Retrospect:* - Everyone as lead generator at customer interface: open for further IO, listen carefully *Ongoing:* - Using country reputation: technological know-how - Consultative approach to negotiations *Prospect:* - Decisions with regard to profiling needed in future when resources for marketing	*Retrospect:* - Effect of word of mouth and reputation in networks *Ongoing:* - Try to use own networks to access Central Europe *Prospect:* N/A