

Use of Partner Relationship Systems (PRM) in International Sales Development

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Dissertation written under the supervision of Ronaldo Couto
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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of requirements for the
MSc in International Management Strategy & Consulting, at
Universidade Católica Portuguesa and for the MSc in International
Management Sustainability at Escola Brasileira de Administração
Pública e de Empresas, at Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 26/05-26.

Abstract

Title: Use of Partner Relationship systems (PRM) in international sales development

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This study examines how Partner Relationship Management (PRM) systems can support international sales development for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) internationalizing through third-party sales agents, and how cultural distance between supplier and agent moderates these effects. A qualitative case study was conducted on Inventure Group, comprising M&O Partners, Belga Marine, and GAIA Global PRM platform. Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews across four informant groups: leadership, sales and operations, platform developers, and suppliers. Interviews were analyzed through content analysis using a deductive framework derived from four theoretical propositions. GAIA Global address the agency problems by shifting the communication infrastructure from one-way reporting to a shared workspace. The platform reduces information asymmetry, makes effort allocation observable, and raises the cost of passive opportunism by making inactivity detectable. The effectiveness of these mechanisms is bounded by data quality, adoption discipline, and cultural distance between the parties. Trust originates in direct conversation, while the platform reinforces it. The study is based on a single case examining a PRM platform whose dataset is not yet large enough to link documented activity to commercial performance. PRM offer governance value that a CRM do not provide but generate this value only when both supplier and agent adapt to platform use. The study indicates that PRM systems operate as a structural governance mechanism that changes the information environment under which contractual mechanisms operate, rather than substituting for them. It further suggests that information asymmetry in PRM-mediated relationships shifts from access to quality rather than disappears.

Keywords: Partner Relationship Management; SME internationalization; Agency theory; Cultural distance; International sales channels

Resumo

Título: Uso de sistemas de Gestão de Relacionamento com Parceiros (PRM) no desenvolvimento internacional de vendas

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Este estudo examina como sistemas de Partner Relationship Management (PRM) podem apoiar o desenvolvimento de vendas internacionais de pequenas e médias empresas (PMEs) que se internacionalizam por meio de agentes de vendas terceirizados, e como a distância cultural entre fornecedor e agente modera esses efeitos. Foi realizado um estudo de caso qualitativo do Inventure Group, composto por M&O Partners, Belga Marine e pela plataforma PRM GAIA Global. Os dados primários foram coletados por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas com quatro grupos de informantes: liderança, vendas e operações, desenvolvedores da plataforma e fornecedores internacionais, e analisados por meio de análise de conteúdo com um framework dedutivo derivado de quatro proposições teóricas. A GAIA Global aborda os problemas de agência ao deslocar a infraestrutura de comunicação de um modelo unidirecional para um espaço de trabalho compartilhado. A plataforma reduz a assimetria de informação, torna a alocação de esforço observável e eleva o custo do oportunismo passivo ao tornar a própria inatividade detectável. A eficácia desses mecanismos é limitada pela qualidade dos dados, pela disciplina de adoção e pela distância cultural entre as partes, e a confiança origina-se na conversa direta, enquanto a plataforma atua como reforço. O estudo indica que sistemas PRM operam como um mecanismo estrutural de governança que modifica o ambiente de informação sob o qual mecanismos contratuais atuam, em vez de substituí-los. Sugere ainda que a assimetria de informação em relacionamentos mediados por PRM passa de um problema de acesso para um problema de qualidade, em vez de desaparecer.

Palavras-chave: Partner Relationship Management; Internacionalização de PMEs; Teoria da agência; Distância cultural; Canais de venda internacionais

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Prof. Ronaldo Parente for providing me valuable guidance and support as my advisor throughout this research.

I would also like to mention my coworkers in Belga Marine, M&O Partners and GAIA Global that took the time for interviews. Your contributions enriched the research and provided me valuable insights that improved the quality of the research which would not have been possible without them.

Thank you to Católica Lisbon and FGV EBAPE for two incredible years as a double degree student in their International Management programs. Beyond everything I have learned, I am most grateful for the people I have met along this journey, whose support, friendship, and inspiration have shaped these years in ways that go far beyond the classroom.

Last, and more importantly, my family, that has been there for me throughout my whole educational journey across three different continents. Thank you all for your support and always believing in me. I will forever be grateful.

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List of Abbreviations

ABS – American Bureau of Shipping

AI – Artificial Intelligence

CRM – Customer Relationship Management

DNV – The Norwegian Veritas

EIA – U.S Energy Information Administration

KPI – Key Performance Indicator

PO – Purchase Order

PRM – Partner Relationship Management

SME – Small and Medium-sized Enterprise

1. Introduction

Brazil has become one of the most attractive markets in the global oil and gas industry, on track to become the world's sixth largest oil producer by the end of the decade (Smith, 2026). The market is dominated by major international operators such as Equinor, Shell and TotalEnergies, and behind them a long tail of smaller suppliers competes to deliver equipment, components, and technical services to the offshore industry. Many of these suppliers are small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) operating from outside Brazil. Navigating the Brazilian market requires institutional knowledge and relational legitimacy that cannot be acquired through commercial competence alone.

For internationalizing SMEs, these requirements are particularly difficult to meet. SMEs represent more than 90 percent of firms globally (Dabić et al., 2020) but face structural disadvantages when expanding internationally, the most fundamental of which Johanson and Vahlne (2009) term the liability of outsidership: without established relationships in a target market, a firm lacks the legitimacy that local actors require before committing to a commercial relationship. Establishing a subsidiary is rarely viable for resource constrained SMEs (Laufs & Schwens, 2014), and partner based entry through an established local sales agent emerges as the rational response (Fraccastoro et al., 2021; Zhou, 2024). The local partner provides the network position and institutional knowledge that the foreign firm cannot acquire through direct investment alone.

This arrangement creates a governance challenge. Agency theory identifies three governance problems that emerge from this delegation: information asymmetry, where the agent holds local knowledge, the supplier cannot independently observe; moral hazard, where the agent allocates effort across multiple suppliers in ways the supplier cannot monitor; and opportunism, where the agent may withhold effort or attention without breaching any contractual obligation. Partner Relationship Management (PRM) systems have emerged as a digital response to this gap, providing a shared infrastructure through which suppliers and agents can coordinate commercial activity, document agent behavior, and address these governance problems (Storey & Kocabasoglu-Hillmer, 2013; Chatterjee et al., 2023). This study examines that mechanism through the following research question: how can the use of PRM systems support international sales development for SMEs relying on third party sales agents?

1.1 Explanation of the significance of the project

This study is relevant from both a practical and an academic perspective. From a practical perspective, it is relevant for SMEs internationalizing through external sales partners, for sales agencies that represent foreign suppliers, and for developers of digital platforms supporting partner based commercial activity. As internationalizing SMEs face increasing pressure to manage commercial activity across organizational and national boundaries, understanding how PRM systems can address the governance challenges that arise from delegated sales is increasingly important. The findings provide practical insights into the conditions under which PRM systems generate value, the limits of their current functionality, and the role of supplier engagement in determining whether the system delivers its potential benefits.

From an academic perspective, this study contributes to the growing literature on PRM systems by examining how they operate in a context that has received limited research attention. While existing research has concentrated almost entirely on large firms operating extensive partner networks in technology intensive sectors, this study examines PRM use in the context of SMEs operating through international sales partners in institutionally challenging markets, where the structural conditions of the partner relationship differ in consequential ways.

1.2 Research question

How can the use of Partner Relationship Management (PRM) systems support international sales development for SMEs relying on third party sales agents?

1.3 General objective:

To examine how PRM systems can facilitate international sales development for SMEs using external sales agents as part of their internationalization strategy, drawing on insights from users of GAIA Global.

1.4 Specific objectives

- To identify the governance challenges that arise when SMEs internationalize through third-party sales agents.
- To examine how PRM systems address information asymmetry, moral hazard, and opportunism in the supplier-agent relationship.

- To analyze how cultural distance between supplier and agent moderates the effects of PRM use.
- To assess the practical conditions under which PRM systems deliver their intended governance value.

2. Literature review

This chapter establishes the theoretical foundation for the research. It first examines SMEs internationalizing through external sales agents, then drawing on agency theory to identify the governance problems this delegation creates, and finally introduces Partner Relationship Management systems as a digital response to these problems.

2.1 SME internationalization through agents

SMEs face structural disadvantages when expanding internationally. Limited financial capital, restricted managerial capacity, and the absence of established relationships in target markets systematically narrow their options, and most SME internationalization concentrates around low commitment, partner based entry modes (Dabić et al., 2020; Laufs & Schwens, 2014). The dominant theoretical framework explaining this pattern is the Uppsala model. Johanson & Vahlne (1977) conceptualize internationalization as a gradual, knowledge driven process in which firms increase foreign market commitments incrementally as experiential knowledge accumulates. In the 2009 revision, Johanson and Vahlne reframed the model's core logic, arguing that outsidership in relation to relevant business networks is the more fundamental source of uncertainty facing internationalizing firms. The revised framework no longer treats market knowledge as something a firm accumulates independently through experience, but as something generated through relationships, where the goal is to achieve insidership, a recognized and trusted position within the relevant network.

For SMEs with limited resources and no established network presence, achieving insidership through direct investment is rarely feasible, and partner based entry through an established local sales agent emerges as the rational response (Fraccastoro et al., 2021; Zhou, 2024). The local partner provides the network position, institutional knowledge, and relational legitimacy that the foreign firm cannot acquire through direct investment alone, and Hilmerston & Jansson (2012) describe this as a sequential process moving through phases of exposure, formation, and sustenance, each requiring market specific relational investment that cannot be bypassed or compressed. This entry mode resolves the access problem but creates a

new one. When the firm delegates commercial activity to an independent agent, it gains access to local relationships and knowledge but loses direct visibility into how the agent operates on its behalf, which raises a governance challenge that has structured implications for how international partner relationships can be sustained.

2.2 Agency theory in international partner-based sales

This governance challenge is the central concern of agency theory, which addresses the structural conditions that arise when one party, the principal, delegates a task to another party, the agent (Eisenhardt, 1989a; Jensen, 2000). Three distinct problems emerge from this delegation, and each constitutes a separate governance challenge that the present study examines: information asymmetry, moral hazard, and opportunism.

Information asymmetry is the foundational condition. The agent possesses superior information about the task, the local market, and the agent's own behavior, while the principal lacks structured access to this information (Bergen et al., 1992; Eisenhardt, 1989a). The principal cannot evaluate the agent's decisions, anticipate market developments, or hold the agent accountable without access to information the agent controls. Agency theory identifies two mechanisms through which the principal can partially counteract this asymmetry. Screening refers to the principal's efforts to obtain information about the agent before and at the point of contracting, for instance by assessing the agent's track record or reputation. Signaling refers to the agent conveying information about its quality or intentions through observable actions, allowing the principal to infer what cannot be directly verified (Bergen et al., 1992). This condition sets the stage for the two behavioral problems that follow, because the agent's superior information creates the discretionary space within which both moral hazard and opportunism can operate.

Moral hazard refers to hidden action that the principal cannot observe. Once the contract is established, the principal cannot verify how the agent allocates effort, and therefore cannot establish whether the agent is exerting full effort on the principal's behalf (Grossman & Hart, 1983; Holmstrom, 1979). The condition is particularly acute when the agent represents multiple principals simultaneously because effort allocation becomes a private decision outside the principal's view (Ishii & Kikumori, 2024). The agent has incentive to direct effort toward principals whose products are easier to sell, while neglecting those whose products are more demanding. Output based contracts shift risk to the agent but cannot fully align behavior,

because the principal cannot specify every contingency under which effort allocation should be adjusted (Holmstrom, 1979).

Opportunism extends the agency challenge to deliberate self-interested behavior. Williamson (1975) defined opportunism as "self-interest seeking with guile" (p. 7), which encompasses calculated efforts to mislead, distort, or withhold information for personal advantage. Wathne & Heide (2000) refined this by distinguishing between active opportunism, where the agent violates contractual obligations, and passive opportunism, where the agent withholds effort or conceals information without breaching any agreement. Contractual penalties reach active opportunism but not passive opportunism, particularly in indirect channels where behavioral visibility is limited. Seggie et al. (2013) further show that firms underweight passive opportunism in high value relationships, where it is most damaging over time. The three problems are conceptually distinct: information asymmetry concerns what the principal can know, moral hazard concerns what the agent does with effort, and opportunism concerns whether the agent acts in good faith.

These problems are amplified in international sales channels. Cavusgil et al. (2004) show that distance reduces the principal's capacity for behavioral observation and weakens the institutional mechanisms through which contract enforcement is achieved domestically. Skarmeas et al. (2002) demonstrate that psychic distance is a direct antecedent of partner opportunism in international channel relationships. Cultural distance, defined as the extent to which shared norms and values in one country differ from those in another (Hofstede, 2001; Kogut & Singh, 1988), affects how trust is built, how information is interpreted, and how commitment develops between partners (Nes et al., 2007). Handley & Angst (2015) demonstrate that culture moderates the relationship between governance mechanisms and opportunism, indicating that the same governance tool produces different outcomes depending on cultural distance. Singh & Gaur (2021) show that weak formal institutions in the host market further amplify pre-contractual information asymmetry. Conventional governance mechanisms cannot fully close the agency gap. Channel governance research distinguishes between process controls, which monitor the agent's behavior, and outcome controls, which tie evaluation to measurable results (Aulakh & Gencturk, 1995). Both face structural limits in international partner-based sales: process controls require behavioral observability that distance makes difficult, while outcome controls are weakened when commercial results depend on factors beyond the agent's control. Trust has been examined as a complement to these formal mechanisms, since relational governance can reduce the need for monitoring by creating

mutual expectations of good faith (Geyskens et al., 1998). The capacity of trust to do so is limited, however, under the conditions that characterize international indirect channels. Trust is difficult to build when the principal cannot observe the agent, and where behaviour remains hidden, trust cannot fully substitute for formal mechanisms (Wathne & Heide, 2000).

2.3 Literature review synthesis

The literature reviewed in this chapter establishes the theoretical foundation for the present study. SMEs that internationalize through external sales partners face structural governance challenges that conventional contractual and monitoring mechanisms cannot fully address. Agency theory identifies three distinct problems in this delegation: information asymmetry between supplier and agent, moral hazard in how the agent allocates effort across multiple principals, and opportunism in both its active and passive forms. These problems are amplified in international contexts where cultural distance shapes how communication, documentation, and accountability operate between parties. Partner Relationship Management (PRM) systems have emerged as a digital response to this governance gap, providing shared infrastructure through which supplier and agent can coordinate commercial activity, document agent behavior, and thereby reduce information asymmetry (Chatterjee et al., 2023; Storey & Kocabasoglu-Hillmer, 2013). Unlike Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems, which manage the relationship between a seller and end customer, PRM systems support collaborative documentation in real time and convert commercial information from a private resource held by individual agents into a shared organizational asset accessible to both parties. The next chapter develops four theoretical propositions on how PRM systems address the three agency problems, and how cultural distance moderates these effects: reduction of opportunism and improved performance (P1), reduction of information asymmetry (P2), reduction of moral hazard (P3), and cultural distance as a moderator (P4a, P4b, P4c).

3. Theory framework and propositions

This chapter builds the theoretical framework in four steps. The first three sections each take one of the agency problems identified in the literature review, information asymmetry, moral hazard, and opportunism, and develop a proposition on how PRM systems may address it. The fourth section introduces cultural distance as a moderator of these three effects.

3.1 PRM systems and information asymmetry

In partner-based international sales, the agent holds local knowledge that the supplier does not have. The agent knows what customers are saying, what competitors are doing, and what is happening in the pipeline. The multi-principal structure of agency work amplifies this asymmetry: the agent operates across multiple suppliers simultaneously and accumulates market insight that spans the entire portfolio, while each supplier sees only the portion of the agent's commercial activity that concerns their own products. The supplier must rely on what the agent chooses to communicate, when the agent chooses to communicate it. This is the information asymmetry that agency theory identifies as the foundational governance problem, and it is amplified in international channels where the supplier cannot independently observe the market the agent operates in. PRM systems address this by providing a shared workspace where both parties can document and access commercial information. Information entered in a PRM is categorized, searchable, and continuously available to the supplier, and the supplier and agent can contribute to the same record over time, which makes the information collaborative rather than directional.

Proposition 1: Implementing a PRM system in an international partner-based sales relationship reduces information asymmetry between supplier and sales agent.

3.2 PRM systems and moral hazard

Moral hazard arises after the contract is in place, when the agent decides how to allocate effort across the multiple suppliers it represents. The supplier cannot observe these decisions and bears the risk that effort flows toward suppliers whose products are easier to sell or whose principals respond faster. Contracts cannot specify effort allocation in advance because the relevant trade-offs only become clear in practice. PRM systems address this by making effort observable. Activity logs, pipeline data, and structured records show where the agent is spending time and where the agent is not. A supplier looking at the platform can see how their pipeline compares to the activity the agent records on their behalf, and the platform records this comparison as a verifiable trace. The agent who deprioritizes a particular supplier no longer does so privately, which raises the cost of misallocating effort.

Proposition 2: Implementing a PRM system in an international partner-based sales relationship reduces moral hazard from the sales agent.

3.3 PRM systems and opportunism

The agent operates at distance from the supplier, which gives the agent room to withhold effort or attention without the supplier being able to verify it. This is passive opportunism, which agency theory identifies as structurally difficult to constrain, and it persists because contractual mechanisms cannot reach it. A contract specifies what the agent must do, but it cannot specify continuous engagement, and an agent who simply does less than the supplier expects has not breached anything.

Seggie & Griffith (2021) further show that firms tend to overlook passive opportunism in strategically important relationships, because the cognitive cost of suspecting a valued partner exceeds the perceived risk of inaction. PRM systems address this by making agent activity continuously visible. When the agent documents meetings, customer interactions, and pipeline progress in a shared workspace, the supplier can observe what is happening without needing to ask. Inactivity becomes equally visible: a period without documented activity signals that the agent is not investing effort, and the platform records this as a verifiable trace. The cost of passive opportunism therefore rises because what was previously undetectable now leaves a record. Over time, the alignment of agent behavior with supplier expectations creates the conditions under which commercial performance can improve.

Proposition 3: Implementing a PRM system in an international partner-based sales relationship reduces opportunistic behavior from the sales agent and thereby improves international sales performance.

3.4 Cultural distance as a moderator

The effect of PRM systems on information asymmetry, moral hazard, and opportunism depends on how the platform is used by both parties. We propose that this relationship is moderated by cultural distance between supplier and sales agent. Cultural distance is defined as the extent to which shared norms and values in one country differ from those in another (Hofstede, 2001; Kogut & Singh, 1988), and it can be analyzed through two complementary frameworks relevant to PRM use. Hall (1976) distinguishes between high-context cultures, which communicate through implicit cues and shared relational understanding, and low-context cultures, which communicate through explicit verbal and written messages. PRM systems are structurally a low-context communication infrastructure: they require activity and

intention to be documented in predefined fields with short and precise input. Hofstede's (2001) dimensions, particularly uncertainty avoidance, further specify how cultures differ in their preference for structured procedures and result-oriented accountability. When a supplier and agent share communicative orientation, the platform's input and interpretation requirements align with established practice, and the visibility mechanism operates as designed. When the orientation diverges, the platform's standardization may not fully constrain interpretation, particularly in free-text fields and in how documented data is read. Handley & Angst (2015) demonstrate that culture moderates the relationship between governance mechanisms and opportunism, and Nes et al. (2007) find that communication in international channels operates through relational and contextual conditions that no standardized infrastructure can fully replace. When cultural distance is substantial, the platform's asymmetry-reducing, effort-allocating, and visibility mechanisms may therefore operate less effectively than the propositions would suggest under cultural alignment.

Proposition 4a: Cultural distance between supplier and sales agent weakens the effect of PRM system implementation on international sales performance.

Proposition 4b: Cultural distance between supplier and sales agent weakens the effect of PRM system implementation on reduction of information asymmetry.

Proposition 4c: Cultural distance between supplier and sales agent weakens the effect of PRM system implementation on reduction of moral hazard.

4. Research method

This chapter presents the methodological approach of the study, covering the research design, the case organization in which the study was conducted, the collection of interview data across the four informant groups and the analytical framework used to examine the propositions.

4.1 Research design

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to examine how PRM systems support international sales development in SMEs that rely on external sales partners. A qualitative approach is appropriate given that the research question concerns how a specific system is

experienced and used in practice across different organizational roles, which requires contextual understanding rather than statistical generalization (Yin, 2018). The case is built around Inventure Group, which comprises M&O Partners, Belga Marine, and GAIA Global, and provides direct access to ongoing commercial processes where external partners are used in international sales. The unit of analysis is the use of the GAIA Global PRM platform across four informant groups: platform developers, the leadership of the agencies, sales and operations personnel, and international suppliers. By examining how the system is understood and applied across these four perspectives, the study captures variation in how PRM usage shapes partner-based sales coordination in practice. This multi-actor design follows the logic outlined by Eisenhardt (1989b) who argues that including multiple perspectives within a single case strengthens internal validity by allowing the researcher to compare and triangulate accounts rather than relying on a single informant group.

4.2 Case description

Inventure Group is a Norwegian company group specializing in venture development and commercial market entry for international companies in the Brazilian energy, offshore, and maritime sectors. The entities relevant to this study are M&O Partners and Belga Marine, which act as third-party sales agents representing international suppliers in the Brazilian market, and GAIA Global, which develops and operates the PRM platform both companies use in their commercial operations. M&O Partners was founded in Rio de Janeiro in 2009 and maintains offices in Brazil, Norway, the United States, and Singapore. Belga Marine was founded in 1981 and shares office space with M&O Partners in Rio de Janeiro, holding certifications from DNV, ABS, Lloyd's Register, and Bureau Veritas.

GAIA Global is a cloud-based PRM system built specifically for indirect sales in the energy and maritime industries. The platform was developed in response to what its founders identified as a highly fragmented sector, where the working arrangements between international suppliers and their sales agents varied considerably across organizations and markets, and where no dedicated tool existed to structure and coordinate these relationships. The founding ambition was to create a system that could support the workflows between suppliers and sales partners across multiple countries simultaneously, on a common platform with a shared process logic. In practical terms, the platform aims to give suppliers a library of visibility across all their international partner activities, enabling them to build and execute an internationalization strategy through a single system rather than through fragmented

combinations of email, spreadsheets, and informal reporting. Where a standard CRM manages the relationship between a seller and an end customer, GAIA manages the relationship between a supplier and the sales agent acting on their behalf, providing a shared workspace where both parties can document and access commercial information in real time, covering sales management, activity tracking, dashboards and KPIs, training, compliance, contracts, and contact management.

4.3 Data Collection and Research Participants

Primary data was collected through 24 semi-structured interviews across four informant groups, as presented in Appendix 1: the leadership of M&O Partners and Belga Marine, sales and operations personnel from both organizations, commercial and development staff at GAIA Global, and two international suppliers represented by the agency. The sample was constructed to capture the governance and coordination dynamics of partner-based international sales from four distinct perspectives: strategic intent, day-to-day operational practice, platform design logic, and supplier experience. Informants were recruited through the researcher's position as an intern at Inventure Group, which provided direct access to the agent and platform sides, while supplier informants were recruited through their existing engagement with the platform. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow the researcher to follow a consistent set of themes while remaining flexible enough to pursue responses in depth, which suits a theoretical case study where informants hold different roles and provide complementary perspectives. Each informant is assigned a code reflecting their group affiliation and interview sequence, used consistently throughout the analysis.

Interviews were conducted between April and May 2026, primarily in person at the companies' offices in Brazil, with a smaller number conducted via video call. Duration ranged from 32 to 103 minutes. All interviews were conducted in English, which serves as the organization's working language and in which all informants had sufficient professional proficiency. Informants received the interview guide in advance and signed a consent form. Four separate interview guides were developed, one for each informant group, tailored to the role and perspective of the group. Interviews were transcribed in real time using Microsoft Teams transcription and subsequently reviewed by the researcher, with names of individuals and organizations removed and transcription errors corrected. The researcher had direct access to the GAIA Global platform throughout the study, which supported interpretation of interview responses by allowing system functionalities and usage patterns to be observed firsthand.

4.4 Data Analysis

The interview data was analyzed using Mayring's (2000) structuring content analysis. A deductive coding framework was developed from the propositions presented in chapter 3, producing four main categories aligned with the propositions: information asymmetry (P1), moral hazard (P2), opportunism and performance (P3), and cultural distance as a moderator (P4). Each category was further divided into subcategories reflecting the specific mechanisms identified in the theoretical argument. All 24 interviews were coded systematically against this framework. Each excerpt was assigned a category code and an evidence type indicator: supporting evidence (S), modifying evidence (M), or contradicting evidence (C). Patterns were then identified within and across the four informant groups, with convergent accounts treated as illustrations supporting the propositions, and divergent accounts examined to determine whether they reflected role differences, adoption levels, or boundary conditions of the proposed mechanisms. Contradicting evidence was retained and reported rather than treated as outliers.

5. Discussion and implications

This chapter discusses the case findings in relation to the propositions developed in chapter 3. The first three sections examine information asymmetry, moral hazard, and opportunism, including the moderating role of cultural distance, and the fourth section presents the managerial implications.

5.1 Information asymmetry

In international partner-based sales, the agent holds local knowledge about customers, market dynamics, and commercial activity that the supplier cannot independently observe. Bergen et al. (1992) and Eisenhardt (1989) identify this information asymmetry as the foundational condition of the agency problem, distinguishing between hidden information that the agent possesses but the principal lacks, and hidden action that the agent takes without the principal being able to observe it. Both forms produce governance challenges, but they require different responses. Hidden information can be partially addressed through screening before contracting and signaling during the relationship, while hidden action requires monitoring or output-based contracting once the agent is engaged. The case material indicates that PRM systems address both dimensions simultaneously. By providing a shared infrastructure built for continuous reporting, the platform creates a structure and an expectation that commercial

activity is documented as it unfolds. This makes the information that the agent holds, and the actions the agent takes, visible to the supplier through the ordinary use of the platform rather than through the agent's discretionary decision to communicate. A sales informant described the pre-platform condition directly: *"Before GALA, I was driving blind, with no information. Before, yes, a lot of challenges, because I had no history about the customers and the history with the partners"* (S4). PRM systems address this by shifting the underlying communication structure from one-way reporting to a shared workspace where both parties can document and access the same commercial record. An informant from the platform side framed the structural distinction:

Working from a CRM doesn't really work in the partner environment because you have a silo and a wall that you need to constantly cross to get information out there as quickly as possible. In comparison to most CRM platforms, we don't have a wall that the users need to get through to get their partners the proper information. (T3)

The wall metaphor captures what PRM systems remove. In a CRM system, commercial information is managed internally within the agent organization, and the supplier has no direct access to it. PRM systems remove this barrier by making the documented record continuously visible to both parties. The supplier perspective confirms the structural shift: *"It is more organized, and you keep it there. It's traceable. You can always go back to Gaia to find all the information that has been shared"* (SP1). Bergen et al. (1992) treat screening and signaling as mechanisms that operate primarily before and at the point of contracting. The case suggests that PRM systems extend signaling into a continuous operational dimension, where the agent's behavior is constantly visible rather than being inferred from periodic outputs. This continuous signaling reduces the principal's dependence on inferring agent quality from indirect indicators.

The case material further indicates that information asymmetry operates at a second level. A sales informant described what happens when the agent who holds the knowledge is no longer available: *"I joined the company, there was no handover and I was completely blank within the first six months. I had no information about the history behind the customers. We even lost some clients because of this."* (S4). The account points to an internal dimension of asymmetry. The agent organization itself produces commercial knowledge that, if not documented in a shared infrastructure, becomes proprietary to individuals rather than to the firm. The supplier's exposure is therefore not only to the agent's discretionary use of commercial knowledge between the two parties, but to the loss of that knowledge when personnel change within the agent organization. Another sales informant captured this internal dimension by reference to an earlier system: *"It wasn't standardized, so each person could*

include information in the way that they wanted to. After two years we don't have the employee, and then we need the PO or need some documents and we couldn't find it" (S5). PRM systems address this internal dimension through the same architectural shift, where standardized documentation persists beyond personnel transitions and remains accessible across the organization.

The reduction is not absolute, however, and the empirical material indicates an important boundary condition that nuances the agency-theoretic framing. A sales informant questioned the reliability of the information stored in the system:

My main challenge is finding incorrect information inside the system. The value I need to invoice to the customer is always different from what I actually need to invoice based on the PO. I think the team just inputs an incorrect percentage inside the system, it's a human mistake. (S9)

Another sales informant expressed skepticism about the historical record itself: *"I don't believe in using historical data in GAIA because I believe there is a lot of misinformation about things that were inserted in the past. The data is not clean enough" (S7).* These observations point to a meaningful shift in the nature of the asymmetry problem rather than its disappearance. Bergen et al. (1992) treat information asymmetry primarily as a problem of access, where the principal cannot obtain information, the agent holds. The case suggests that in PRM-mediated relationships, the problem shifts from access to quality. The information is structurally available, but the principal must assess its reliability rather than its existence. The platform provides structural conditions for reducing asymmetry that email and informal communication cannot offer, but the operational value of these conditions depends on input discipline and data quality that take time and organizational commitment to establish.

The asymmetry-reducing effect of PRM systems is moderated by cultural distance between supplier and sales agent. As established in 3.4, PRM systems are structurally a low-context infrastructure that favors explicit, categorized, and concise input. For information asymmetry specifically, the moderation operates at the level of what gets entered into the platform and what is treated as meaningful by the reader. Hofstede's (2001) uncertainty avoidance dimension provides a relevant lens: cultures with higher uncertainty avoidance tend to favor formal procedures and detailed documentation as ways to manage ambiguity, while cultures with lower uncertainty avoidance tend to favor pragmatic and selective approaches. The supplier perspective illustrates how this difference can manifest in PRM use: "I see that the Brazilian users of Gaia do put a lot of information in. And, if I'm critical, it may not always be that relevant. It can become quite a lot" (SP1).

The observation indicates that the asymmetry-reduction through documentation depends on whether the reader treats the documented content as relevant. A sales informant from M&O Partners offered a complementary observation about the interpretive load of cross-cultural communication: "Cultural misunderstanding certainly happens. At least one of my biggest partners, every meeting we have to explain deeply how one customer works because it's not easy for them to understand" (S3). This points to a subtlety in the moderating effect that operates in both directions. On the one hand, the supplier may be correct that some of the documented information is not relevant, and a high volume of low-value input can make the platform harder to navigate. On the other hand, the supplier's judgement of relevance is itself shaped by a position outside the local market: information that appears peripheral to a Northern European supplier may carry commercial significance that only becomes apparent with the local market knowledge the agent holds. The asymmetry that the platform is meant to reduce can therefore re-enter at the level of interpretation, where the supplier has access to the documented record but may not always be positioned to judge which parts of it matter. Singh and Gaur (2021) show that institutional distance amplifies pre-contractual information asymmetry, particularly where formal institutions for verifying partner capabilities are unreliable. The case suggests that PRM systems can partially compensate for this through post-contractual visibility into actual partner behavior, but the value of that visibility depends on whether supplier and agent share the conventions under which documented information becomes meaningful.

5.2 Moral hazard

Moral hazard in international partner-based sales is structurally invisible to the supplier. Once the contract is signed, the agent decides which suppliers receive how much attention, and the supplier has no direct mechanism for observing this allocation. The structural logic of the problem was described by a leadership informant in the case organization:

When you start a new project with a new supplier, it's easy for the salespeople to prioritize those with more positive feedback or quicker results. Salespeople might not prioritize huge opportunities in the long run for smaller ones in the short run, because that's more gratifying. (L1)

The observation describes moral hazard as a structural tendency rather than as bad faith. Sales agents operating with limited time and attention will allocate effort toward suppliers whose products are easier to sell, whose deals close sooner, or whose principals respond faster. The most extreme form in the case material was described by another leadership informant who experienced it from the supplier side:

I myself reached out to a company in Europe a couple of years ago about their product. They said, actually, half a year ago we signed up with an agent. But then after we signed, we never heard anything more. (L3)

The account illustrates what may be called dead-by-birth: the partnership is formally established, but the agent's attention dissipates immediately after signing. The supplier has no recourse because no contractual obligation has been violated, and yet the commercial relationship effectively ends before it begins. This is the structural condition that Grossman & Hart (1983) and Holmstrom (1979) describe as hidden action, where the principal cannot specify in advance every contingency under which effort allocation should be adjusted. This example illustrates the limit of contractual governance: the contract created formal obligations but could not produce effort, and the absence of effort generated no observable signal. From the supplier's position, the partnership simply went quiet after signing, without any mechanism to reveal whether the agent was working on their behalf or not. What makes the case material analytically distinctive is that moral hazard is not only structural but consciously acknowledged. A sales informant described a self-aware version of the pattern: *"I've realized that sometimes I visit the same customer two months in a row and never mention one of my partners. This week I was at xxx and realized I've been there this month and last month and never mentioned them"* (S3). The acknowledgement matters because it indicates that moral hazard is part of how agents themselves understand the structure of their work. The agent is not concealing the misallocation from the supplier so much as discovering it through reflection on their own practice. Another sales informant captured a complementary dimension that pushes the analysis further:

When I visit the shipyard, I need to show many companies, I need to show many things, and this is not so good. It's a lot of information. When they explain about the fifth company, the client forgets the first one, because it's a lot. (S11)

The observation indicates that moral hazard is not only a matter of agent attention but of cognitive constraint at the customer end. The agent who tries to mention every supplier in every meeting risks diluting all of them, because the customer cannot retain extensive parallel pitches. The trade-off is also shaped by the purchasing cycle of each supplier's products. Some products are recurring purchases that the end customer needs to reorder at short intervals, while others are bought once and not again for a long period. An agent who omits a supplier in a given meeting may be making a rational commercial judgement that the customer has no current need for that product, rather than neglecting the supplier. Effort allocation across suppliers therefore involves a strategic choice about what to present in any given interaction,

and the agent must continuously make trade-offs that no contract can specify in advance. This nuances the moral hazard problem in two ways. First, the misallocation that agency theory treats as a governance failure is sometimes a rational response to communicative constraints and to the differing purchasing rhythms of the products in the agent's portfolio. Second, PRM systems do not address a problem the agent denies, but a problem the agent recognizes and has limited structural mechanism to counter without the platform.

The case material indicates that PRM systems intervene by converting effort allocation from a private decision into a documented record that both parties can observe. A sales informant described how the engagement-driven dynamic operates in practice: *"When you have suppliers who are very interactive on GAIA, it becomes much harder to lose the momentum. You are constantly reminded of what needs to be done."* (S6). The mechanism is not coercive monitoring but a structural support for visibility of effort allocation. The platform documents how the agent distributes attention across multiple suppliers and produces structured reminders of pending tasks and ongoing opportunities. PRM systems address moral hazard not by removing the structural tendency to prioritize easier suppliers, but by making effort allocation observable and providing the conditions under which it can be discussed between supplier and agent. The mechanism is conditional on actual platform engagement from both sides. The supplier perspective makes this limitation operational:

I'm not sure if it has had an impact on engagement to a large degree. It's still a bit early days for us in actually using the full potential of Gaia. It's primarily myself and one colleague who basically have access and we're spread out too thin to have the time to keep it updated. (SP2)

It is important to note that PRM systems do not replace conventional communication channels. The supplier and agent continue to exchange information through email, meetings, and direct conversation, and a supplier who engages limitedly with the platform does not lose access to information about the partnership. PRM functions as an additional layer designed for interaction between supplier and agent, providing the transparency that allows the supplier to access information at any time and to initiate dialogue when something requires follow-up. The supplier perspective illustrates how this design plays out in practice: *"Prior to a status meeting, I would go into Gaia and check if anyone has updated, put in anything new. Then I can, on my own initiative, go log in and find the information."* (SP1). The example captures the operational logic of the platform. The supplier does not need to ask the agent for an update or wait for periodic reporting to know what is happening with their products in the market. They can check the documented activity at any point, identify questions or concerns, and bring those to the agent in subsequent conversation. This is a different governance logic than what

Holmstrom, (1979) describes when he treats moral hazard as a problem the principal must address through incentive design. The platform does not replace incentive contracts, but it changes the information environment under which those contracts operate. The supplier can now assess effort allocation through documented patterns rather than relying on the agent's periodic communication or on inferring effort from commercial outcomes alone. The moral-hazard-reducing effect of P2 therefore depends on the platform being used as a shared workspace where both parties can access how effort is being distributed and act on what they see when the need arises. The case material thus indicates support for the moral-hazard-reducing mechanism in P2 while qualifying the conditions under which the mechanism produces operational value, and we now consider how this mechanism is shaped by the cultural distance between the parties.

Cultural distance moderates the moral-hazard-reducing effect of PRM systems through where commercial interaction is actually conducted. The mechanism described above depends on the platform documenting how the agent distributes effort across the suppliers it represents. Cultural conventions for communication shape whether commercial activity is conducted through the platform or in parallel channels, and this distinction determines what the system can capture. As established in 3.4, Hall (1976) distinguishes between high-context cultures, which favor implicit and relational communication through immediate channels, and low-context cultures, which favor structured and documented communication. When commercial activity is conducted through high-context channels that operate outside the platform, the agent's effort is real but invisible to the documentation, and the moral-hazard-reducing effect of P2 weakens because the supplier cannot observe what is happening through the system. A sales informant captured the operational consequence of this dynamic:

The one that's supportive with leads and information constantly keeps me working for them. If that engagement were happening inside GAIA it would be even better because right now it's a lot of emails that could be structured as proper leads in the system. (S1)

The informant's observation has a second implication beyond the immediate supplier-agent dyad. When leads and commercial information are documented in the platform rather than exchanged through individual emails, the agent team, gains access to the opportunities the supplier is generating. Different members of the sales team can act on different opportunities, coordinate their efforts, and ensure that no lead is left unaddressed because it sat in one person's inbox. Cultural conventions that route engagement through immediate push channels therefore weaken not only the moral-hazard-reducing mechanism between supplier and individual agent, but also the team-level coordination that the platform makes possible.

The supplier perspective offered a particularly concrete illustration of how high-context communication operates in parallel to the platform: *"Another tool that is being very frequently used, which is maybe a cultural thing, is WhatsApp. I think I received 21 WhatsApps one evening."* (SP1). The example illustrates the operational dynamic that the moderator argument addresses. The supplier described how the agent had forwarded information from a conference and sent them through WhatsApp. The agent's effort on behalf of the supplier is real and substantial, but it is conducted through channels the platform does not capture. The supplier receives the information, but the activity does not enter the documented record that allows for systematic comparison of effort across partners and over time. The same logic applies to team coordination: when the information shared via WhatsApp is not uploaded to the platform, other members of the sales team cannot access them for use in subsequent customer meetings, and the cross-pollination of insights across the agent organization is reduced. The moderating effect of cultural distance on P2 therefore operates by routing both effort and the artifacts of that effort outside the platform's documentation infrastructure, which weakens both the supplier's capacity to observe effort allocation and the agent team's capacity to coordinate shared information.

5.3 Opportunistic behavior

Opportunism in international partner-based sales takes two structurally different forms that require different governance responses. Wathne & Heide (2000) distinguish between active opportunism, where the agent violates contractual obligations, and passive opportunism, where the agent withholds effort or attention without breaching any agreement. Contractual mechanisms reach active opportunism through formal penalties, but passive opportunism remains structurally difficult to detect because it leaves no contractually verifiable trace. The case material indicates that PRM systems intervene specifically at this point. A sales informant described the structural shift that the platform produces: *"The control. Actually, in the past we didn't have control of everything. So now we do. In the past, it depended a lot on each person, what each person was working on."* (S5). The platform converts what was previously dependent on individual reporting practices into a structured documentation that the supplier can observe directly. The supplier perspective confirms this from the receiving end: *"I would get email notifications if one of agents have entered in minutes of a meeting with a customer or what they think is an interesting opportunity for us, and then I can log in and look at the details"* (SP1). PRM systems intervene at passive opportunism by making inactivity itself

observable. An agent who chooses not to engage with a particular supplier no longer does so privately, because the absence of documented activity becomes a signal that the supplier can detect. A leadership informant captured this dynamic directly: *"Transparency is good but also dangerous. If you don't do anything with a partner for a month, they will see that."* (L2). The observation is analytically sharp because it identifies the precise mechanism through which PRM addresses passive opportunism. Conventional governance mechanisms rely on the principal noticing that something is wrong, which depends on the agent's behavior producing detectable consequences. PRM systems shift this logic by making the absence of behavior itself the signal. The cost of passive opportunism therefore rises, as the agent is being actively monitored, but because what was previously undetectable now leaves a record by its absence. This extends Seggie & Griffith (2021) who show that firms tend to overlook passive opportunism in strategically important relationships, because the cognitive cost of suspecting a valued partner exceeds the perceived risk of inaction. The platform reduces this cognitive cost by surfacing inactivity without requiring the supplier to actively interpret it as a problem.

The continuous visibility produced by the platform creates conditions for trust between supplier and agent that conventional reporting cannot provide. An informant from the platform side framed the logic compactly: *"Structure gives efficiency. Transparency gives trust. These two factors together. Because trust gives energy to do more"* (T2). The same informant elaborated on the underlying dynamic: *"Through transparency you gain control. On the other side it is like being a backseat driver or a passenger on a motorcycle. You do not have control of the situation and people like to have that"* (T2). The platform converts the relationship from one in which the supplier must trust the agent to communicate accurately, into one in which the supplier can verify what is happening without needing to ask. The supplier perspective adds an important qualification:

It does show us that there is a lot of activity. But I would say primarily the trust is being built by speaking to each other. We speak to the team quite frequently. Gaia again documents that actions have been taken afterwards, but I would put more emphasis on verbal communication and engagement. (SP2)

The supplier's account indicates a sequencing in how trust is built that the proposition does not fully capture. Trust originates in direct conversation, where the supplier sees that the agent gives priority, asks the right questions, and is prepared. The platform then documents the actions that follow from these conversations, which reinforces the trust that conversation has begun to build. The platform does not produce trust independently of the underlying communicative relationship. It provides the verifiable record through which trust, once established, can be sustained, and tested over time.

The performance link in P3 is more tentative than the opportunism-reducing mechanism. The case material indicates that PRM systems produce behavioral alignment between supplier and agent, but the translation of that alignment into measurable commercial performance is conditional on factors that the platform itself does not control. The platform-side acknowledged this gap directly: *"we track it, I track it visually, but we do not have supporting data at this point"* (T3). A leadership informant offered an indirect indication of how performance evidence might emerge over time

What I love about GAIA is that we can look at these data and see what's going on, given that everybody puts in everything. If people actually do that, we can see what's going on and what produces results or not in the long run. (L1)

The conditional clause matters. Performance evidence depends on adoption discipline, which the case material suggests remains uneven at this stage of platform maturity. The supplier perspective makes the limitation operational: *"Our perception is that our agents are doing a lot. They are really active. But we get to a point where you need to see the results of all those actions."* (SP1). The observation captures a tension between activity visibility and outcome visibility. PRM systems make agent activity observable in real time, which directly addresses the visibility problem that agency theory identifies. They do not make commercial outcomes observable in the same way, because outcomes depend on factors that extend beyond agent behavior: market conditions, product fit, customer decision cycles, and the supplier's own responsiveness.

A further dimension emerges from how attention should be allocated to produce commercial results. A leadership informant framed the strategic logic of prioritization: *"If you have 1,000 opportunities you cannot give the same attention to a \$1million commission sale and a \$5 million commission sale"* (L1). A sales informant captured the operational temptation that runs counter to this logic: *"It is a bit of the 'screaming rule' — whoever screams louder gets more attention"* (S10). The observation indicates that the supplier most insistent on attention is not necessarily the supplier where commercial potential is greatest, and that PRM systems can either reinforce or counter this tendency depending on how they are used. When the platform is used to make commercial potential visible alongside activity, the agent can prioritize on a strategic basis rather than on the basis of who is most insistent. When the platform is used only to record activity, the screaming-rule logic may continue to operate beneath the documented surface.

It is important to emphasize that GAIA is a relatively young system, and the dataset it has accumulated is not yet large enough to support systematic analysis of how documented

activity relates to commercial performance. The platform side acknowledged this directly in relation to incentive design: *"GAIA is still maybe too young for [milestone-based fee governance]"* (L1). As input discipline improves and the dataset grows, the platform's capacity to link activity to outcomes is likely to strengthen over time. This distinction maps onto the classical separation between process controls and outcome controls in channel governance (Aulakh & Gencturk, 2000): PRM systems strengthen process controls by making agent behavior continuously observable, but outcome controls remain dependent on commercial results that the platform records without being able to produce. PRM systems therefore contribute to behavioral alignment in the present, while the performance dimension may become more empirically traceable as the platform matures and as the link between documented process and commercial outcome becomes statistically observable.

The opportunism-reducing effect of PRM systems is moderated by cultural distance between supplier and sales agent. The moderation operates through how expectations are formed, communicated, and verified across cultural contexts. As established in 3.4, cultural distance shapes both what is treated as acceptable agent behavior and what is treated as legitimate evidence of effort. When supplier and agent come from cultures with different expectations of communication, accountability, and documentation, the platform's standardized record may not be sufficient to align what each party considers adequate performance. A sales informant described how PRM contributes to expectation alignment in practice: *"It aligns expectations, my expectations with the partner and the partner's expectations with M&O. It gives us orientation on where we need to go."* (S3). The observation indicates that the platform's contribution to opportunism-reduction operates not only through visibility of activity, but through alignment of what activity is expected. When both parties can see the same record, they can develop a shared understanding of what counts as adequate performance and what does not. A leadership informant captured the precondition for this alignment from the agent side:

GAIA bridges the expectation gap, because you do keep track of everything. If you visit all the clients and say okay, we talked and this is it, they will not buy right now, then you have tracked all the meetings and you can actually see that you did what was possible (L1).

The platform provides a verifiable record that the agent can point to when expectations diverge, which reduces the cognitive cost of explaining why commercial outcomes have not materialized. Cultural distance complicates this alignment in two ways. First, what counts as adequate documentation differs across cultures, as discussed in 5.1. Second, what counts as adequate performance differs as well. A leadership informant illustrated the cultural divergence

in how commercial signals are read: *"Brazilians are very open, very caring, they send what looks like a lot of buying signals. But does that mean he will buy? Not at all. It's just culture"* (L2). The same logic operates in reverse for performance assessment. A Brazilian agent may consider extensive relationship-building activity as evidence of progress, while a Northern European supplier may expect documented advancement in the sales pipeline. Handley & Angst (2015) demonstrate that culture moderates the relationship between governance mechanisms and opportunism. The case extends this argument by indicating that the moderation operates through how documented agent behavior is interpreted. The same documented record can be read as evidence of opportunism by a supplier whose cultural expectations are not met, and as evidence of legitimate commercial practice by an agent operating within a different set of cultural conventions. PRM systems therefore reduce opportunism most effectively where supplier and agent share the conventions under which documented activity is read as adequate performance.

5.4 Managerial implications

For SMEs that internationalize through external sales partners, the case points to several practical considerations in how digital infrastructure can support partner governance. PRM systems offer governance value that a conventional CRM does not provide, because they make agent activity visible to the supplier, support the alignment of expectations between supplier and agent, and preserve commercial knowledge when personnel in the agent organization change roles or leave. Where a CRM keeps commercial information internal to one organization, a PRM converts it into a shared resource that both parties can access and contribute to. This addresses a concrete vulnerability for SMEs selling through agents abroad: the supplier no longer depends entirely on the individual agent and the knowledge built up around customers and opportunities does not disappear when an individual salesperson leaves the agent organization. Managers evaluating whether to adopt a PRM system should weigh this governance value against the investment the system requires, recognizing that the most significant benefits concern visibility and continuity rather than immediate revenue gains.

The case also indicates that this value is not automatic. As with any new system, a PRM platform requires time before it functions fully. Because the platform is built largely on predefined fields and categories, much of the documentation is standardized by the system itself. What is not resolved by the architecture is input discipline: whether users enter information consistently and promptly, how free-text fields are used, and what level of detail

is treated as worth recording. Managers should focus attention on these aspects, where organizational practice rather than platform design determines data quality. Managers should also recognize that a PRM system is a complement to direct communication, not a replacement for it. The case suggests that trust between supplier and agent originates in conversation and is reinforced by the platform rather than produced by it. This is particularly relevant where supplier and agent come from different cultural contexts, since the case indicates that documented information is not always interpreted the same way by both sides. Managers operating across cultural distance should invest in establishing a shared understanding of what should be documented and what documented activity is taken to signify.

6. Conclusion, limitations, and future avenues

This chapter concludes the study. It first summarizes what the case indicates about how PRM systems support international sales development in SMEs, and then sets out the limitations of the present design and the avenues for future research that follow from them.

6.1 Main conclusion

The study has explored how a Partner Relationship Management system can support international sales development in SMEs that rely on third-party sales partners. Through a qualitative case study of Belga Marine and M&O Partners in Inventure Group and their use of the GAIA Global platform, the analysis suggests support for the proposition that PRM systems may reduce the three core agency problems identified in the theoretical framework: information asymmetry, moral hazard, and opportunism.

The central finding is that GAIA Global addresses these problems through a structural shift in the communication infrastructure from one-way reporting to creating a shared workspace. The platform converts commercial information from a private resource held by individual agents into a shared interactive organizational cloud accessible to both parties. This shift operates across all three agency problems: it reduces information asymmetry by making the agent's knowledge continuously visible, it makes moral hazard observable by documenting how effort is allocated across suppliers, and it increases the cost of passive opportunism by making inactivity detectable. The case indicates that the most distinctive contribution of the platform concerns passive opportunism specifically, as the absence of documented activity becomes a signal in a way that conventional contracts cannot achieve.

Beyond the core mechanisms, the case points to three observations that nuance the agency theory. First, information asymmetry operates not only between supplier and agent, but internally within the agent organization, where commercial knowledge held by individual personnel is lost when those personnel change roles. PRM systems address this internal dimension through the same architectural shift that addresses the external one. Second, moral hazard is not always a governance failure: the case indicates that the agent's uneven allocation of attention is sometimes a rational response to the cognitive limits of customers and to the differing purchasing rhythms of the products in the agent's portfolio. Third, the case suggests that information asymmetry in PRM-mediated relationships does not disappear but can change form. Shifting from a problem of access, where the principal cannot obtain information, to a problem of quality, where the information is available, but its reliability must be assessed.

The study also finds that the effectiveness of these mechanisms is bounded. Data quality and adoption discipline determine whether the platform's structural potential is realized in practice, and the case indicates that both remain uneven at this stage of platform maturity. Cultural distance further moderates all three mechanisms: because the platform operates as a low-context communication infrastructure, its effects may weaken when the supplier and agent come from cultures with different conventions for documentation, communication, and accountability. The case also finds that trust between supplier and agent originates in direct conversation and is reinforced rather than produced by the platform, which functions as an additional layer alongside conventional communication channels rather than as a replacement for them.

These findings lead to two contributions. First, the study indicates that PRM systems operate as a structural governance mechanism that changes the information environment under which contractual mechanisms operate, rather than substituting for them. Where agency theory has treated information asymmetry and the behavioral problems that follow from it as conditions the principal must counteract through contract design and monitoring, the case suggests that digital infrastructure can address the underlying condition directly by changing who can observe what. Second, the study indicates that the information asymmetry problem in PRM-mediated relationships shifts from access to quality. Under the classical framing the principal must extract information the agents withhold, while under PRM-mediated relations the information is structurally available, and the governance task becomes ensuring that is accurate and consistently maintained.

6.2 Limitations and future avenues

First, the framework was developed through a single case in a single country, examining one PRM platform within one organizational group. This design supports analytical generalization, where the findings inform and extend theory, but it has limited external validity statistically: the propositions cannot be assumed to hold across PRM platforms, industries, or national contexts without further testing. GAIA is also a relatively young system whose database is not yet large enough to systematically link documented activities to commercial performance, which makes the performance link in P3 the most tentative of the three core propositions. Future research should conduct comparative case studies across multiple PRM platforms to identify which findings are platform-specific and which reflect more general dynamics of PRM-mediated governance. Longitudinal designs that follow PRM implementation over several years would also allow the link between activity and outcomes to become empirically traceable as the dataset matures.

Second a particularly promising direction is the integration of artificial intelligence into PRM platforms, which may significantly extend what these systems can do. Chatterjee et al. (2023) introduce the concept of AI-integrated PRM, where AI capabilities automate partner-related processes, streamline data analysis, and enable more efficient knowledge sharing between suppliers and partners, while noting that academic research on AI-PRM remains in an early stage. The case material from the present study points in a similar direction: AI capabilities could automate the structured linking of leads across an agent's supplier portfolio, generate tasks based on patterns the platform detects, and identify cross-pollination opportunities where insights from one supplier may be relevant for others. As PRM platforms integrate AI, future research should examine how these capabilities affect the agency-theoretic problems the present study addresses, and whether AI-enabled analysis introduces new governance dimensions that the current framework does not capture.

Third, a further limitation concerns the balance of the empirical material. As the platform is still being developed the number of external users from the supplier side was limited. Two interviews were conducted from the supplier side, which was sufficient to surface the dynamics discussed in the analysis but not to establish patterns. The supplier side is central because PRM systems are designed primarily to serve the supplier's need for visibility into agent behavior. It is also where the moderating effect of cultural distance can be examined most directly, since suppliers come from a wide range of cultural and institutional contexts, bringing different conventions for documentation, communication, and accountability to the

platform. Future research should expand this perspective substantially and aim to examine how suppliers from different cultural backgrounds experience PRM-mediated relationships and how their documentation practices interact.

A final avenue follows not from the limitations of the design but from the findings themselves. The case indicates that trust between supplier and agent originates in direct conversation, where the supplier sees that the agent gives priority, asks the right questions, and is prepared, and that the platform documents the actions that follow. This sequencing differs from how agency theory typically conceptualizes trust, where governance mechanisms are treated as substitutes for or complements to trust without specifying the temporal relationship between them. Future research should examine this sequencing more systematically, including the conditions under which platform documentation strengthens or undermines trust that has originated through conversation. One open question is whether the platform can sustain trust through periods when verbal communication is sparse, and whether documented activity can help rebuild trust that has been damaged by relational tension

7. References

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8. Appendix

Appendix 1: Interview overview

Code	Role	Informant group
Leadership		
L1	Founder and Chairperson	Leadership
L2	Chief Executive Officer / Chief Commercial Officer	Leadership
L3	Managing Director	Leadership
L4	Partner and Managing Director	Leadership
Sales and Operations		
S1	Sales Director	Sales and Operations
S2	Sales and Business Development Director	Sales and Operations
S3	Category Lead	Sales and Operations
S4	Sales Manager	Sales and Operations
S5	Commercial and Operations Manager	Sales and Operations
S6	Business Development and Sales Director	Sales and Operations
S7	Business Developer	Sales and Operations
S8	Commercial Support Analyst	Sales and Operations
S9	Operations Manager	Sales and Operations
S10	Sales and Business Development Director	Sales and Operations
S11	Sales Executive	Sales and Operations
S12	Chief Commercial Officer	Sales and Operations
S13	Category Director	Sales and Operations
S14	Technical Manager	Sales and Operations
Technology and Development		

Code	Role	Informant group
T1	Chief Executive Officer	Technology and Development
T2	Chief Commercial Officer	Technology and Development
T3	Commercial Analyst	Technology and Development
T4	Business Developer	Technology and Development
Suppliers		
SP1	Supplier representative, maritime sector	Suppliers
SP2	Supplier representative, maritime sector	Suppliers

FREE AND INFORMED CONSENT FORM

1. Project title: Partner Relationship Management Systems as a Coordination Capability: How PRM Supports International Sales Development for SMEs Using External Sales Partners

2. General characteristics and objectives of the research:

The research is conducted by Amanda Langhelle Trøøyen (FGV EBAPE, Master in Management – MiM Double Degree with Católica Lisbon SBE). The academic advisor is Prof. Ronaldo Parente (FGV EBAPE). The study is not funded by any institution.

The other participants in this study are professionals involved in the development, management, and use of Partner Relationship Management (PRM) systems in the context of international sales. This includes sales agents, commercial managers, sales directors, business developers, operations staff, and technology and development personnel working within companies operating in the maritime, offshore, and energy industries in Brazil and internationally.

The objective of this study is to examine how PRM systems support international sales development for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that rely on external sales partners or agents as part of their internationalization strategy. The study analyses how partner-based international sales are structured and coordinated in practice, and how PRM system usage shapes coordination, transparency, and performance outcomes for both suppliers and sales partners.

3. Procedures:

This study uses a qualitative research design based on a single embedded case study. Data collection consists of semi-structured interviews exploring topics such as internationalization strategy and partner-based sales models, the governance and coordination of external partner relationships, and the practical use of the GAIA Global PRM platform across different organizational roles.

4. Research participation:

Your participation will consist of one semi-structured interview lasting approximately 30–60 minutes, conducted by the researcher (Amanda Langhelle Trøøyen, Double Degree MiM student at FGV EBAPE / CLSBE) via online video call or, if feasible, in person. With your permission, the interview may be audio-recorded for transcription and analysis. No other persons are expected to be present besides the participant and the researcher.

5. Voluntariness and right of withdrawal:

Your participation is completely voluntary and not mandatory. You can withdraw from participation and withdraw your consent at any time. Your refusal, withdrawal or withdrawal of consent will not cause damage.

6. Benefits and risks:

There are no direct personal benefits for participating. Indirectly, the research may contribute to academic knowledge on PRM systems, partner-based internationalization, and digital coordination capabilities in SME contexts. Risks are minimal. A potential risk is discomfort when discussing internal processes, system usage, or commercial activities. You may decline to answer any question and may stop the interview at any time. You will be asked not to disclose confidential, proprietary, or commercially sensitive information about your employer. Participation involves no costs and no payments or incentives will be provided.

7. Right of confidentiality and anonymity:

To ensure your privacy, interview data will be treated confidentially and anonymized in research outputs. Your name, job title, and company name will not be disclosed in the dissertation or any related publications unless you explicitly authorize identification in writing. During transcription and analysis,

identifying details will be removed and replaced with participant codes (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2). Audio files and transcripts will be stored securely with restricted access.

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8. Guarantee of access to data and doubts in general:

You can ask questions about the project and your participation, and request access to your interview data, at any time through the contacts indicated below.

Responsible researcher:

Amanda Langhelle Trøøyen, FGV EBAPE (Master in Management – MiM Double Degree)

Email: amanda.trooyen@fgv.edu.br

Responsible advisor:

Ronaldo Parente, FGV EBAPE

Email: ronaldo.parente@fgv.br

Committee for Ethical Compliance in Research Involving Human Beings of the Fundação Getulio Vargas - CEPH/FGV: Praia de Botafogo, 190, room 1511, Botafogo, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Zip Code 22250-900, telephone +55 21 3799-6216. Email: etica.pesquisa@fgv.br

9. Consent:

If you agree to participate in this research, sign at the end of this document, which has two copies, one of which is yours and the other of the responsible researcher.

I, _____ declare that I understand the objectives, risks, and benefits of my participation in this research and that I agree to participate.

Rio de Janeiro, _____ / _____ / 2026.

Participant's signature: _____

Researcher's signature: _____

Amanda Langhelle Trøøyen

Appendix 3: Interview guide: Leadership

INTERVIEW GUIDE — GROUP 1: LEADERSHIP

Founder & Chairperson, Partner & Managing Director, CEO GAIA

Estimated duration: 45–60 minutes.

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. The purpose of the research is to examine how Partner Relationship Management systems support international sales development for SMEs that rely on external sales partners. Your responses will be anonymized and used solely for academic purposes. To support accurate analysis, this interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. The recording will only be used for research purposes and will not be shared with anyone outside of this study. You may withdraw your consent at any time during or after the interview. Do you consent to being recorded?

Section A: Internationalization Strategy

1. How would you describe the strategic rationale behind choosing a partner-based model for international sales rather than establishing own subsidiaries in foreign markets?
2. What were the main factors driving that decision? Has that reasoning changed over time?
3. From your experience, what are the most significant advantages of using third-party sales agents compared to building internal sales teams abroad?
4. In your view, at what point does it make more sense for a supplier to establish a subsidiary rather than continue working through an external agent?

Section B: Managing Partner Relationships

5. How has the approach to managing relationships with international suppliers evolved since the company was founded?
6. What were the biggest coordination challenges before GAIA was developed?
7. How do you ensure that sales partners are actively prioritizing your suppliers' products over competing offerings in their portfolio?
8. What governance mechanisms do you rely on to maintain visibility and control over partner activities across multiple markets?

Section C: GAIA Global and PRM

9. What was the primary problem GAIA was designed to solve, and how did that translate into the platform's design and functionality?

10. How has the introduction of GAIA changed the way M&O/Belga Marine manages its supplier relationships?
11. Can you point to specific improvements in coordination, reporting, or commercial outcomes?
12. From a strategic perspective, what do you see as the main competitive advantage of offering a structured PRM system to international suppliers?
13. Where do you see GAIA evolving over the next three to five years, and what role do you see PRM systems playing more broadly in partner-based internationalization?

Closing

Is there anything about how M&O/Belga Marine manages international sales partnerships, or about the role of GAIA in that process, that we have not covered today and that you think is important for this research?

Appendix 4: Interview guide: Sales and operations

INTERVIEW GUIDE — SALES AND OPERATIONS

Sales Directors, Commercial Manager, CCO, Category Lead, Sales Support Analyst, Business Developer, Business Development Analyst

Estimated duration: 45–60 minutes.

Opening

Thank you for participating in this study. The research examines how PRM systems support international sales development for SMEs using external sales partners. Your responses will be anonymized. To support accurate analysis, this interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. The recording will only be used for research purposes and will not be shared with anyone outside of this study. You may withdraw your consent at any time during or after the interview. Do you consent to being recorded?

Section A: Role and Context

1. Could you briefly describe your role and what your day-to-day work looks like when representing international suppliers?
2. How many suppliers are you currently working with?
3. How long have you been using GAIA in your work?
4. Before GAIA, how did you manage the commercial activities and reporting related to the suppliers you represent?
5. What were the main challenges with that approach?

Section B: Internationalization and Partner-Based Sales

6. In your experience, what are the main advantages for an international supplier of working through a sales agent like M&O or Belga Marine rather than establishing their own presence in Brazil?
7. In which situations would you recommend a supplier to establish a subsidiary instead?
8. How do you typically get started with a new supplier relationship?
9. What information and resources do you need from the supplier to work effectively on their behalf?
10. What are the most common challenges you face when representing international suppliers in the Brazilian market?
11. How do you handle situations where the supplier's expectations are not aligned with market realities?

Section C: Using GAIA in Practice

12. Walk me through how you use GAIA in a typical sales process, from first contact with a prospect to closing a deal.
13. Which features do you use most frequently?
14. Which parts of your work still happen outside GAIA?
15. How does GAIA help you manage activities and opportunities across multiple suppliers without creating confusion?
16. Is there ever a risk of mixing up information between suppliers?
17. How does having a shared platform with the supplier change the nature of the relationship compared to more informal arrangements? Does it feel more structured, more monitored, or both?
18. When you need product information, pricing, or marketing materials to support a customer conversation, how does GAIA help or not help?
19. Have you ever lost a sales opportunity because you could not access the right information in time?
20. Does using GAIA change how actively you work on a particular supplier's deals compared to suppliers you manage with less structured tools?
21. If a supplier is active and responsive on the platform, does that motivate you to prioritize their products?

Section D: Benefits and Limitations

22. What do you see as the most valuable aspects of using GAIA in your daily work?
23. What are the most frustrating or time-consuming parts of using the platform?
24. Are there workflows the system does not support that you wish it did?
25. If you could change or add one feature to GAIA that would make the biggest difference to your effectiveness as a sales agent, what would it be?

Closing

26. Is there anything about how you manage international sales partnerships or use GAIA that we have not discussed today and that you think is important for this research?

Appendix 5: Interview guide: Technology and development

INTERVIEW GUIDE — GAIA TECHNOLOGY AND DEVELOPMENT

DevOps Teamlead, Commercial Analyst

Estimated duration: 45–60 minutes.

Opening

Thank you for participating in this study. The research examines how PRM systems support international sales development for SMEs using external sales partners. Your responses will be anonymized. To support accurate analysis, this interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. The recording will only be used for research purposes and will not be shared with anyone outside of this study. You may withdraw your consent at any time during or after the interview. Do you consent to being recorded?

Section A: Role and Context

1. Could you briefly describe your role and how you are involved with the GAIA platform?
2. How long have you been working with GAIA?
3. What aspects of the platform are you most closely involved with?

Section B: System Design and Development

4. What were the core coordination and reporting problems that GAIA was designed to solve, and how did those problems shape the platform's architecture and features?
5. How does GAIA differ from a standard CRM system, and what specific design choices reflect the needs of indirect sales channels in the energy and maritime industries?
6. How is user feedback from sales agents and suppliers incorporated into the ongoing development of the platform?
7. Can you give an example of a feature that was added or changed based on how users were actually working?
8. What are the most common technical or usability challenges that users encounter, and how are these addressed?

Section C: Data, Performance, and Governance

9. How does GAIA support suppliers in monitoring and evaluating the performance of their sales partners?

10. What data does the platform generate, and how is it used in practice?
11. How does the platform handle the compliance and anti-bribery requirements that are particularly relevant in the energy and maritime industries?
12. How are these features used in practice by suppliers and partners?
13. How does GAIA manage the challenge of giving suppliers visibility into partner activities while maintaining an appropriate level of partner autonomy?
14. Where is the balance struck between transparency and control?

Section D: PRM and International Sales Development

15. From your perspective, what is the most direct way in which GAIA contributes to improved commercial outcomes for the suppliers and partners using it?
16. Is there data from the platform that supports this?
17. What do you see as the main limitations of the current platform in supporting international sales development for SMEs?
18. What are the most important development priorities going forward?
19. How do you see the role of PRM systems evolving in partner-based international sales over the next few years, particularly with developments in AI and automation?

Closing

20. Is there anything about the technical design, governance logic, or commercial impact of GAIA that we have not covered today and that you think is important for this research?

Appendix 6: Interview guide: International suppliers

INTERVIEW GUIDE — Suppliers

Thank you for participating in this study. The research examines how PRM systems support international sales development for SMEs using external sales partners. Your responses will be anonymized. To support accurate analysis, this interview will be transcribed using Microsoft Teams transcription. The transcription will only be used for research purposes and will not be shared with anyone outside of this study. You may withdraw your consent at any time during or after the interview. Do you consent to being transcribed?

Section A: Role and Context

1. Could you briefly describe your role in the company and how long you have been in this position?
2. How long have you been working with your agent?
3. How long have you been using GAIA?

Section B: Information access and visibility

4. Before you started using GAIA, how did you receive information about the activities your sales partner was performing on your behalf?
5. When you log into GAIA today, what kind of information do you typically look for? Can you give a concrete example of how you used the platform recently?
6. How would you compare the information you get through GAIA with information you receive through direct conversations or emails with your sales partner?
7. Has GAIA had an impact on how you engage with your sales partner on a day-to-day basis? Can you describe what that engagement looks like now?

Section D: Cultural and operational differences

8. Your company is based outside Brazil. Have you noticed differences between how you and the Brazilian sales agents use or interpret the platform?

9. Are there moments when you feel cultural or contextual differences affect how information in GAIA is communicated or understood?
10. Are there aspects of doing business in Brazil that are difficult to capture in a standardized platform like GAIA?

Closing

11. What do you see as the most important benefit GAIA provides for your company?
12. Is there anything about how you manage international sales partnerships or use GAIA that we have not discussed today and that you think is important for this research?