



# **Optimizing Innovation through Collaboration: Key Success Factors in Strategic Alliances of Multinational Corporations**

Empirical inductive analysis of the key success  
factors

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**ABSTRACT**

**Title:** Optimizing Innovation through Collaboration: Key Success Factors in Strategic Alliances of Multinational Corporations

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In the dynamic landscape of multinational corporations, the effective management of strategic alliances is important to unlock the full innovation potential. However, the reality reveals that over half of all strategic alliances fail. While existing literature has examined various factors contributing to successful alliance management in general, none of the literature discusses the particular type of strategic alliance. This study contributes to the literature by narrowing down the focus on strategic alliances between multinational corporations for innovation. Given the complexity of these alliances and the highly specialized nature of the subject, it can be beneficial to further discover this topic.

To address this gap, this study conducted 19 in-depth, qualitative interviews with representatives from different multinational corporations actively engaged in strategic alliances for innovation. The research identifies key success factors for managing these special alliances, surpassing existing findings, and uncovering additional practices. These include the time-intensive process of building trust, the significance of fostering awareness of the alliance's benefits within corporations, active engagement of all stakeholders, and understanding each partner's strengths and contributions to the collaboration. A notable novelty lies in the assessment of collaboration, demonstrating the importance of a holistic measurement approach and practical implementation. Furthermore, the study presents a framework for the successful management and maintenance of strategic alliances among multinational corporations for innovation.

**Keywords:** inter-organizational collaboration, strategic alliance, success factors, multinational corporation, optimizing innovation

## SUMÁRIO

**Título:** Otimização da Inovação através da Colaboração: Factores-chave de sucesso em alianças estratégicas de empresas multinacionais

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No panorama dinâmico das empresas multinacionais, a gestão eficaz das alianças estratégicas é importante para libertar todo o potencial de inovação. Embora a literatura existente já tenha examinado vários factores que contribuem para uma gestão bem sucedida das alianças em geral, nenhuma delas examina o tipo específico de aliança estratégica. O presente estudo contribui para a literatura, limitando o enfoque às alianças estratégicas entre empresas multinacionais para a inovação. Dada a complexidade destas alianças e a natureza altamente especializada do tema, pode ser benéfico aprofundar este tópico.

Para colmatar esta lacuna, este estudo realizou 19 entrevistas qualitativas aprofundadas com representantes de diferentes empresas multinacionais ativamente envolvidas em alianças estratégicas para a inovação. A investigação identifica os principais factores de sucesso na gestão destas alianças especiais, ultrapassando as conclusões existentes e descobrindo práticas adicionais. Estas incluem o processo moroso de criação de confiança, a importância de promover a sensibilização para os benefícios da aliança no seio das empresas, o envolvimento ativo de todas as partes interessadas e a compreensão dos pontos fortes e dos contributos de cada parceiro para a colaboração. Uma novidade notável reside na avaliação da colaboração, demonstrando a importância de uma abordagem de medição holística e de uma implementação prática.

**Palavras-chave:** colaboração inter-organizacional, aliança estratégica, factores de sucesso, empresa multinacional, otimização da inovação

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**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

BMW	Bavarian Motor Works
e.g.	exempli gratia
IBM	International Business Machines Corporation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Henri Ford once said, “Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is a success.”<sup>1</sup> Henri Ford was an American industrialist and the founder of Ford Motor Company. He played a significant role in the development of the automotive industry and revolutionized manufacturing with the introduction of assembly line production techniques. His legacy still continues, and he remains a prominent figure in the history of business and innovation.

Today, his words have taken on more meaning than ever before. The technological and competitive environment is changing fast, leading to more dynamic and turbulent markets. Technological knowledge related to products and processes has increased and comes from different disciplines and stakeholders. At the same time, the life cycle of products is shortening (Ponta, Puliga, & Manzini, 2021). To face the demands of these challenging and dynamic market conditions, companies must explore novel approaches to maintain competitiveness and achieve success. One increasingly popular strategy in recent years involves the collaboration of companies within strategic alliances to enhance innovation. The existing literature highlights that the creation of value is connected to the efficient pooling and utilization of valuable resources, accessed through diverse collaborations between companies (Das & Teng, 2000; Grant & Baden-Fuller, 1995; Grant & Baden-Fuller, 2004; Ireland, 2002).

Strategic alliances are a notable paradox: Research indicates a yearly increase of approximately 25% in the number of corporate alliances, contributing nearly a third of many companies' revenue and value. However, the failure rate for these alliances remains high, ranging between 60-70% (Hughes & Weiss, 2007). In the past, literature already aimed to analyze the success factors for an effective strategic alliance, observing e.g. the importance of trust between the alliance partner, the optimal partner selection process or the organizational learning through open innovation in a strategic alliance (Argandoña, 1999; Ferrigno, Del Sarto, Cucino, & Piccaluga, 2022; Holmberg & Cummings, 2009). Nevertheless, the literature focusing precisely on strategic alliances between multinational corporations for innovation is limited. Given increasing examples of such collaborations, e.g. between Apple and IBM, Adobe and Microsoft

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<sup>1</sup> Note: This quote has also been attributed to Edward Everett Hale (1822–1909), an American author, poet, historian, and Unitarian minister.

or BMW and Toyota, and considering the comparatively high failure rate of strategic alliances, it would be beneficial for future research to focus on these niche collaborations.

Understanding how to manage strategic alliances between multinational corporations for innovation successfully would be interesting for uncovering factors and practices that can refine strategic decision-making, enhance alliance success, and foster innovation in the contemporary business landscape. Considering the described background, the thesis explores the following research questions:

**How can multinational corporations effectively manage strategic alliances to enhance innovation?**

**What are the key success factors in this dynamic collaboration?**

This dissertation aims to contribute to the literature on strategic alliances between multinational corporations for innovation and follows the structure of an academic research thesis. The study contributes to both theory and practice by delving into specific aspects of managing strategic alliances between multinational corporations for innovation. The theoretical contribution lies in the exploration of nuanced strategies and factors that influence these alliances. The practical contribution involves providing actionable insights and best practices illustrated as a framework for multinational corporations to optimize their alliance management. The study fills gaps in existing literature by addressing the unique challenges and opportunities associated with managing the special strategic alliances for innovation between multinational corporations. It seeks to bridge theoretical concepts with real-world applications, offering a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic collaboration required for successful innovation in multinational corporations.

The initial segment of this study conducts a literature review focusing on key aspects related to the research question. It begins by tracing the evolution of innovation and proceeds with the section of strategic alliances for innovation. Various types of strategic alliances are discussed, with a thorough exploration of their associated benefits and challenges. The conclusion summarizes existing literature on key success factors for strategic alliances for innovation. The following section explains the research methodology, offering clarity on data collection, sampling strategy, and interview protocol, while explicating the chosen research method. The collected data undergoes comprehensive analysis through the systematic Gioia method (Gioia,

Corley, & Hamilton, 2013), employing content analysis to provide a thorough understanding of the results obtained from 19 expert interviews. The fourth section presents the interview results, followed by a discussion that connects insights with the revised literature. This segment also identifies research limitations, managerial relevance, theoretical contributions, and directions for future research. In conclusion, the final part of this research summarizes key statements and a takeaway message.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW – THEORETICAL FOUNDATION**

This section of the thesis provides a comprehensive literature review of current and relevant topics in the field of strategic alliances for innovation purposes. The aim is to inform and guide the development of new research approaches. Specifically, this chapter presents definitions and explanations of relevant theories and frameworks on the key topics of innovation, strategic alliances as well as their advantages and challenges and the key success factors. The aim is to provide a solid understanding of the literature in the respective field of research. This section includes a critical evaluation and synthesis of the relevant literature to identify research gaps and inconsistencies. It also aims to situate the ongoing research within the wider context of this study to highlight its significance and novelty.

### **2.1 Evolution of innovation – closed vs. open innovation**

Changing environmental demands require continuous renewal and adaptation of corporate capabilities (Anderson & Tushman, 1990; Lewin, Long, & Carroll, 1999; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2008). The concept of "dynamic capabilities" places particular emphasis on the need for capabilities to be able to adapt to changing environments by integrating, building, and reconfiguring (Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997). Companies need to respond flexibly to both gradual and fundamental shifts in their environment by adopting both incremental and radical approaches to innovation (Anderson & Tushman, 1990; Benner & Tushman, 2003). Consequently, aligning the innovation strategy to changing environmental requirements is important to securing a sustainable competitive advantage in the long run (Porter, 1998/2004). The management of innovation is a creative process that is not governed by rigid rules. Nevertheless, a well-thought-out innovation strategy can increase the chances of developing innovative products (Sundbo & Gallouj, 2000).

Most companies develop their innovations internally (Bigliardi, Ferraro, Filippelli, & Galati, 2020). Knowledge and technologies are primarily developed using internal resources and predominantly utilized within the corporations' boundaries. This concept is referred to as closed innovation (Sandulli & Chesbrough, 2009).

Companies operating in an environment of rapid change often rely on leveraging externally developed knowledge sources to generate innovations. This urgent need to integrate external

research and development sources has forced many companies to move from a closed innovation model to an open innovation one (Chesbrough, 2003).

The concepts and practices of open innovation have fundamentally reshaped the innovation landscape in recent decades. Open innovation describes the exchange of knowledge and ideas not only within a company's boundaries, but also with external entities like e.g., suppliers, competitors, or customers. This approach expedites internal innovation and broaden horizons by opening new markets for the exploitation of innovations. Furthermore, it serves as a gateway to access valuable knowledge and resources, facilitating the integration of external ideas into the innovation process (Chesbrough, Vanhaverbeke, & West, 2006; Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Coombs, 2003; Staw & Cummings, 1990). The concept of open innovation requires companies to systematically explore a wide range of internal and external sources of innovation opportunities. This exploration process is deliberately integrated with the company's existing capabilities and resources. The resulting innovation opportunities are exploited through various channels to achieve competitive advantages and increase value for the company (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; West & Gallagher, 2006). Therefore, open innovation shifts the focus of innovation from individual companies to distributed inter-organizational networks. Successful innovation is thus no longer seen as the exclusive result of a single company but as the product of collaboration and knowledge sharing between different actors in a network (Perkmann & Walsh, 2007).

An important component of open innovation is to open a company's fixed boundaries to allow valuable external knowledge to flow in. This creates the basis for cooperative innovation processes with various stakeholders (Gassmann & Enkel, 2004). Another characteristic of open innovation is the permeability of product development boundaries. This means that ideas or projects leave the internal process and are further developed by external actors. This requires effective coordination and evaluation of a wide range of innovation projects (Dittrich & Duysters, 2007; Faems, van Looy, & Debackere, 2005). Following the structure provided in Gassmann & Enkel (2004), there are three fundamental processes involved in open innovation. First, the "outside-in" process emphasizes the importance of integrating suppliers, customers, and external sources of knowledge to strengthen a company's ability to innovate. Second, is the "inside-out" process, which aims to generate profits by commercializing ideas, selling intellectual property, and extending technologies to external environments. Third, the "coupled" process combining "outside-in" and "inside-out" through strategic alliances with

complementary partners, where collaborative exchanges are critical to success. These core processes represent different open innovation strategies, but not every process is equally relevant to every company (Gassmann & Enkel, 2004). The research of Cassiman & Valentini (2016) focuses on the interaction between these core processes, investigating how a company's involvement in both “outside-in” and “inside-out” knowledge-sharing activities affects performance. The results suggest that companies that use both approaches do not necessarily perform better than those that limit themselves to one of the knowledge transfer modes (Cassiman & Valentini, 2016).

## **2.2 Strategic alliances for innovation**

To enhance the results of open innovation, companies strive to foster collaborative innovation through strategic alliances. A strategic alliance represents a lasting arrangement and collaboration involving two or more partners. In such alliances, these partners pool their organization-specific resources, expertise, and capabilities to achieve mutual benefits and pursue common or individual objectives while maintaining their independence as organizations. The synergy generated through this agreement is typically greater than what each partner could achieve individually. This approach serves to gain a competitive advantage and leverage one's internal assets (Koza & Lewin, 1998; Mowery, Oxley, & Silverman, 1996; Varadarajan & Cunningham, 1995).

Koza & Lewin (1998) make a distinction between alliances grounded in marketing and production activities and those centered around research and development endeavors. Marketing and production alliances are primarily utilized by organizations to attain economies of scale by expanding production capacities and leveraging existing knowledge and competencies. For instance, small and medium-sized enterprises confronted by dominant competitors may collaborate for marketing and production alliances to form stronger collaborative forces. This strategic choice empowers the companies to bolster their competitive positions and reduces the likelihood of being outperformed by larger corporations in the market. On the flip side, research and development alliances primarily serve the purpose of collectively forging new knowledge and amalgamating diverse specialized expertise (Koza & Lewin, 1998). Lavie & Rosenkopf (2006) suggest differing impacts of marketing and production alliances and research and development alliances on exploitative and exploratory innovation. They categorize marketing and production alliances as 'exploitation alliances' and research and development alliances as 'exploratory alliances.' The implication drawn from Lavie & Rosenkopf's (2006)

framework is that marketing and production-based alliances should be viewed as a means to pursue exploitative innovation, while research and development alliances should be regarded as a tool for fostering exploratory innovation (Lavie & Rosenkopf, 2006).

### **2.2.1 Different types of strategic alliances**

In general, there are two different types of alliances: vertical alliances and horizontal alliances. Vertical alliances describe the cooperation between a company and its suppliers and customers in the value chain. Horizontal alliances, on the other hand, are formed between companies that operate in the same business area and work together to increase their market power (Rindfleisch, 2000; Rindfleisch & Moorman, 2001; Swaminathan & Moorman, 2009).

Vertical alliances mainly focus on suppliers and customers, while horizontal alliances focus on competitors. Vertical alliances seek maximum benefit by sharing resources such as raw materials, production, and distribution, while horizontal alliances aim to jointly exploit market opportunities by reducing competition. Vertical alliances offer high-value collaborations and complementary information (Rindfleisch & Moorman, 2001).

Furthermore, these alliances are divided into asymmetric and symmetric alliances. When a large company cooperates with a smaller company in the same industry, this is called an asymmetric alliance. Symmetrical alliances, on the other hand, are formed when companies of similar size work together (Rindfleisch, 2000; Rindfleisch & Moorman, 2001; Swaminathan & Moorman, 2009; Yasuda & Iijima, 2005).

Symmetric alliances may be motivated when both companies involved consider the alliance to be of equal value and have similar bargaining power (Kalaighnam, Shankar, & Varadarajan, 2007). In comparison, asymmetric alliances can arise to access each other's complementary resources (Stuart, 2000). For example, small biotech companies often partner with large pharmaceutical companies to leverage their expertise in the U.S. food and drug administration approval process and market coverage (Yu, Xu, & Dong, 2019).

Similarities between these two types of alliances can be found in several aspects. First, partners rely on the advice and recommendations of trusted business relationships, which can lead to reduced uncertainty and costs in business transactions (Rindfleisch, 2000; Yu et al., 2019). Second, information sharing with business partners can result in knowledge sharing and

increased productivity (Rindfleisch, 2000). Third, collaboration in problem solving can finding common solutions (Rindfleisch, 2000).

### **2.2.2 Benefits of strategic alliances for innovation**

Strategic alliances are generally expected to stimulate and enhance a company's learning process, providing valuable opportunities for skill development in cooperation and innovation. Collaborating with a variety of partners frequently yields novel concepts and opportunities, contributing to the unique knowledge base these companies possess compared to self-reliant organizations (Belderbos, Carree, & Lokshin, 2004; Faems et al., 2005; Granovetter, 1973; Laursen & Salter, 2006; Lavie, 2009; Nieto & Santamaría, 2007; Park, Chen, & Gallagher, 2002). Additionally, the use of innovation networks is an effective mechanism for rapidly adapting to dynamic market conditions and strategic shifts (Dittrich & Duysters, 2007). Similarly, the investigation of Faems et al. (2005) uncovered a favorable association between inter-organizational collaboration and innovative performance. (Faems et al., 2005). By fostering partnerships, companies gain the opportunity to tap into a diverse pool of expertise, knowledge, and skills that may not be readily available within their own internal company border. This inflow of external resources can catalyze innovation, foster creative problem-solving, and ultimately enhance the overall competitiveness of the organization. Additionally, forming strategic alliances decreases risks across multiple entities, as risk is spited among the partners, mitigating the impact of potential challenges or setbacks. (Chesbrough, 2003; Sandulli & Chesbrough, 2009) Collaborating with business partners often translates into a better financial outcome (Du, Leten, & Vanhaverbeke, 2014). Shared expenses, such as research and development, marketing, and infrastructure, can lead to savings for all parties involved (Du et al., 2014). On top of that, efficient partnerships yield a significant advantage in terms of reducing time-to-market (Ind, Iglesias, & Markovic, 2017). Through collaborative efforts, organizations can leverage synergies and optimize processes (Chesbrough, 2003; Du et al., 2014; Ind et al., 2017).

### **2.2.3 Challenges of strategic alliances for innovation**

In contrast to the named advantages, being open to business partners can pose challenges that may harm the successful execution of the strategic alliance (Felin & Zenger, 2014; Fujimoto, 2007). The existing literature is dividing the challenges of collaboration within strategic alliances in two subcategories. Firstly, breaking down complex projects into separate

subsystems is a challenging process, often involving difficulties in finding the optimal structure of the project (Ethiraj & Levinthal, 2004). Additionally, synchronizing the operations of two independent entities is seen as very challenging, as they may possess divergent characteristics related to structure, culture, and process velocity. The greater the disparities, the more challenging it becomes to reconcile them (SPIETH & MEISSNER NÉE SCHUCHERT, 2018). Therefore, setting up a successful structure for complex projects is a challenging undertaking that may result in significant delays and failures if the collaborating partners fail to understand the structures and objectives of the subsystems, or lack the expertise to integrate them effectively (Hobday, Rush, & Tidd, 2000; Takeishi, 2002). Secondly, strategic alliances require intensive knowledge sharing among the involved cooperations (Felin & Zenger, 2014; Nickerson & Zenger, 2004). The needed open and transparent communication and exchange poses a challenge as it may involve an absence of shared practices, language, and identity necessary for effective interaction. On top of that, combining the knowledge from both internal and external sources and transferring it across organizational boundaries can create issues (Hobday et al., 2000; Kogut & Zander, 1992; Nickerson & Zenger, 2004; Nonaka & Krogh, 2009). Additionally, to these two subcategories, there are more potential challenges within a strategic alliance. Particularly within an unclear legal structure, sharing information entails the risk of opportunistic behavior. Utilizing a partner's information to favor one's own organization and thereby engaging in exploitation, undermines trust. In the context of a long-term, mutually beneficial alliance, the tolerance for exploitation is low, and it is likely to result in failure (Bogner, 2005; Das & Teng, 2000).

Additional to the challenges listed above, there are additional difficulties in symmetric strategic alliances of multinational corporations for innovation. Forming and maintaining asymmetric alliances is less challenging than symmetric ones. Asymmetric alliances tend to be less likely to fail than symmetric alliances, and therefore tend to last longer (Morrow, 1991). This results in two reasons. First, changes in the capabilities of the partner with weaker power, usually, will not significantly change the character of the collaboration. The company with stronger power autonomy, its contribution to the alliance is unaffected by changes in its capabilities. The subordinate company's security is mainly guaranteed by its strong partner, so its benefits from the alliance will not change significantly with changes in capabilities of the weaker partner. Consequently, such shifts in capabilities are unlikely to break the alliance. In a symmetric alliance, a change in the capabilities of one of the alliance partners can lead to a redistribution of the alliance's benefits, which makes the durability of the alliance less likely. Second, in

asymmetric alliances both alliance partners aim towards achieving an optimal mix of autonomy and security, generating greater utility than symmetric alliances (Morrow, 1991). Additionally, in strategic alliances focused on innovation, there can be an inherent tension between the dynamic of innovation and the structure of alliances (Bidault & Cummings, 1994). Innovation typically requires flexibility and adoptability. In contrast, strategic alliances are usually set up in a well-defined situation supported by a clear contract. Addressing these tensions, the design of the alliance structure can be a central challenge (Bidault & Cummings, 1994; Kim & Wilemon, 2002; Millson, Raj, & Wilemon, 1996).

### **2.3 Key success factors of strategic alliances for innovation**

The challenges discussed in the prior section have encouraged an identification of key success factors beneficial to overcome these issues. Various authors have compiled potential success factors, as outlined below. However, it is important to emphasize that the research of this study is specifically focusing on strategic alliances between multinational corporations for innovation. The key success factors discussed subsequently apply to strategic alliances with different goals involving diverse partners in a general context.

Regarding strategic alliances through the lens of transaction costs theory underscores the important role of an efficient governance structure in alliance success. This should minimize risks and uncertainties, especially if the partners have different objectives. Monitoring, clear communication and carefully drafted contracts are beneficial. The theory emphasizes that alliances can minimize transaction costs and hedge uncertainties, which can promote long-term growth and competitive advantage. The effectiveness of the governance structure depends on various factors, including the nature of the collaboration and the competitive environment. Companies should therefore consider the principles of transaction cost theory when designing their alliances. Additionally, the study provides various recommendations, emphasizing that partners should establish clear goals and expectations to avoid conflicts. On top of that, it suggests enhancing communication and information flow between partners to reduce uncertainties. Furthermore, the importance of meticulous contract drafting and well-defined ownership rights is highlighted to prevent potential conflicts (Hennart, 1988). Another important factor is the significance of resources, strategic elements, and social factors in strategic alliances, aligning with the resource-based view. The successful formation of alliances is contingent upon obtaining the optimal resource composition and implementing a collaborative strategy to manage these resources effectively. This emphasizes the critical role

of not only tangible resources but also strategic planning and social dynamics in the formation and success of strategic alliances. (Eisenhardt & Schoonhoven, 1996).

Exploring the organizational design of strategic alliances, a comprehensive perspective considers dimensions like the interface and intraface between partners, as well as specialization, formalization, and centralization within the alliance organization. There are various potential setups for strategic alliances, with a specific focus on how employee specialization in alliance tasks could significantly influence outcomes. Regarding specialization, the greater the specialization of employees in alliance tasks, the higher the associated costs, but concurrently, the potential value of the alliance increases. (Albers, Wohlgezogen, & Zajac, 2016).

Despite the wealth of literature on potential success factors of companies forming strategic alliances, it is important to outline that the studies conducted so far are focusing on strategic alliances between companies in general. As previously mentioned, there are various types of strategic alliances, each geared towards different outcomes. There exists a substantial distinction in collaboration among these diverse alliances, along with variations in companies engaged in such partnerships. Consequently, there is a gap in research, particularly in the exploration of strategic alliances for innovation between multinational corporations, which refines and narrows down the existing body of literature. As already highlighted above, this particular strategic alliance is especially complicated. The complexity arises from both the participating partners and the alignment of alliance objectives, both contributing to additional complications, as both the involved partner as well as the goals of the alliance are bringing issues.

Given the complexity of these alliances and the highly specialized nature of the topic, it would be beneficial to discover this topic further. Exploring the key success factors of symmetric alliances among multinational corporations, with a specific focus on innovation, could yield valuable insights. Following the identification of best practices, it would be valuable to develop a supportive framework, guiding managers and corporations in successfully establishing and maintaining strategic alliances for innovation. The objective of this research is to uncover potential factors that may contribute to reducing the elevated failure rate of strategic alliances by recognizing best practices. As strategic alliances between multinational corporations for innovation continue to gain popularity, this research could provide valuable practices and insights for the future of such collaborations.

### **3. EXPERT INTERVIEWS AS A QUALITATIVE EMPIRICAL STUDY**

The upcoming chapter outlines the methodology adopted in this research. First, it elaborates in greater detail the methodology for conducting expert interviews. Subsequently, the segment defines the term 'expert' as well as the interview procedure and key contextual factors. Following this, this part justifies the selection of interview participants. Finally, the section provides insights into the underlying rationale and structure of the interview guide and explains the data analysis method.

#### **3.1 Methodological procedure - Expert interviews**

The two prevailing research data collection methods commonly used are quantitative and qualitative methodologies (Ghauri, Grønhaug, & Strange, 2020). Quantitative methods encompass systematic empirical investigations that involve quantification aided by mathematical and statistical techniques (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Data is gathered and converted into numerical formats, which are subsequently subjected to empirical testing. The aim is to identify potential relationships, enabling the extraction of meaningful conclusions from the obtained results. Conversely, qualitative research abstains from reliance on statistics or numerical data, where information is exploratory collected from a limited number of subjects under investigation (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

The choice of qualitative research methodology in this study is adopted for several reasons, based on careful scientific consideration for investigating the complex topic of managing strategic alliances between multinational corporations for innovation successfully. Qualitative research offers an appropriate set of tools to thoroughly explore the challenging aspects of this topic. A commonly accepted definition of qualitative research characterizes it as a comprehensive research methodology involving exploration (Williams, 2011). Additionally, qualitative research captures and analyzes subjective aspects. This becomes more important as these individual perspectives offer valuable insight into the views and attitudes of the actors. Another important reason for choosing qualitative research is its flexibility and adaptability during the research process. Open innovation and strategic alliances are multifaceted concepts that often create surprising and new perspectives in practice. As literature about alliances between multinational corporations for innovation is limited but recent, the research is focused on exploring an issue and its nuanced details rather than on confirming previous propositions in the literature. Qualitative research, unconstrained by predefined hypotheses, allows these

new ideas to be explored. It gives room for the evolution of the research direction and the consideration of emerging views. Additionally, open innovation and strategic alliances can strongly be influenced by interpersonal relationships and cultural factors. This human dimension can play a fundamental role in the success or failure of projects. Qualitative research offers the possibility to capture this and include them in the overall view, thus, a deep understanding into the culture and interpersonal dynamics can be gained.

The interview partners selected for the survey are considered experts, based on different criteria. An expert is described as someone who has specialized knowledge about the topic area under investigation. Expert interviews represent a method for tapping into this specialized knowledge (Gläser & Laudel). In the context of this study, all experts work for multinational corporations. All interviewees have senior job positions and are actively engaged in symmetric strategic alliances with other multinational corporations, fostering the innovation outcome, and have a minimum of seven years of working experience in this field.

The expert interviews conducted in the context of this thesis were carried out via video calls, with an average duration of 30 to 60 minutes. Only the audio is recorded to capture the content and results of this study. The interviews followed a semi-structured format that required reliance on a predetermined guideline (Bogner, 2005). This form of interview aims to gain exclusive knowledge on a specific topic and to open up information that is difficult to access for further analysis (Kaiser, 2014).

The interview is based on a prepared list of questions. When designing the interview, it is of great importance to plan a communication process that includes all relevant information for the investigation and at the same time takes into account the cultural context of the interlocutor (Gläser & Laudel). During the interview, the focus is on exploring the interviewee's field of experience and knowledge (Atteslander, Ulrich, & Hadjar, 2023). The interviewer needs to guide the conversation skillfully to ensure that the expected information can be gathered. This is achieved by using open-ended questions to ensure that the experts are not influenced and can fulfill their role as information providers. The use of open-ended questions allows for a flexible and adaptable interview process. Nevertheless, the interviewer mustn't relinquish control of the conversation to be able to answer the research questions later based on the information obtained (Kaiser, 2014).

### **3.2 Selection of interviewees**

The selection of 19 interview participants was based on specific criteria, discussed before, that the participants needed to meet to be classified as experts, to ensure the quality and relevance of the insights.

Various experts from different sources and networks were identified for this study. As defined previously, experts are individuals with specific knowledge in a particular field. To identify interview partners, the primary approach involved using existing professional contacts and the personal network. Additionally, potential interview partners were found through LinkedIn. The alumni network of the University of Augsburg and the Católica Lisbon School of Business and Economics also facilitated access to qualified interviewees. Some of the experts were also found through the snowball principle, with recommendations from previously identified experts bringing in additional interviewees.

The expert selection process prioritized both diversity and specialization, ensuring that all chosen individuals were from multinational corporations engaged in a strategic alliance for innovation, holding senior management positions. This deliberate approach facilitates a comprehensive data comparison. Furthermore, the diverse industries and global origins of the involved companies and alliances contribute to a broad and insightful perspective. This approach ensured a broad range of perspectives and insights regarding the topic.

To see a detailed list of interview partners, please refer to Appendix 1.

For confidentiality reasons, the names of the interview participants are kept anonymous, and only their respective companies and job positions are disclosed.

### **3.3 Structure of the interview guideline**

This section explains the conception and structure of the interview guide. The questions were a balance of as open as possible and at the same time providing the necessary structure (Baur & Blasius, 2014).

The semi-structured expert interviews are organized into five categories to maintain a clear outline during the interview.

First, after a warm welcome, interview participants receive a detailed introduction to the study, including its background and the research objective. Additionally, explaining the procedure, and responding to the confidentiality and the purpose of the interview. The open-ended questions of the interview explore the expert's touch points with strategic alliances in the context of innovation. This section ensures that the terms "strategic alliance" and "open innovation" are defined consistently to avoid potential inconsistencies in the study.

Following this brief introduction, the interview transits to the first main topic: "Strategic alliances and open innovation." This section encourages the expert to share his or her thoughts and experiences regarding the importance and impact of strategic alliances between multinational corporations on innovation.

After this section, the questions move to the second main topic of the questionnaire by going into more depth on the expert's experiences addressed in the previous interview section. Respondents discuss how the success of innovation is measured in the context of symmetric strategic alliances for innovation, and list advantages and disadvantages of strategic alliances in the context of open innovation. The aim is to encourage the expert to deepen his or her views and provide further information on this topic.

At the end of the main section, the interview guide aims to encourage respondents to express their opinion or expectations regarding the future of strategic alliances in the context of open innovation, as well as trends and best practices.

Finally, the interviewees give their advice on how organizations can best leverage strategic alliances to achieve the best possible output from open innovation projects. This part also ensures that there are no remaining questions from the side of the respondents.

The interview terminates with politely thanking the interviewee for their time and valuable information.

For a detailed list of the interview questions, please refer to Appendix 2.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

The data collected in semi-structured interviews are generally analyzed using content analysis. This data analysis should remain as faithful as possible to the data (Neergaard, Olesen,

Andersen, & Sondergaard, 2009). The application of Gioia's et al. (2013) approach for qualitative data analysis provides a useful method to extract original and practically relevant insights from inductive in-depth research (Gioia et al., 2013).

After the data collection, in which the researcher gathered qualitative information through interviews, Gioia's et al. (2013) approach is divided into several sequential steps. In this study, expert interviews were conducted as described in the previous section. The collected data are then subjected to a comprehensive coding process.

The first step of this method consists of open coding. In this process, the data is structured according to content, categories, and thematic patterns. In order to stay close to the data and ensure that the thematic analysis is based on the respondent's views, the first-order concept is taken directly from participant's formulation. This coding process involves repeated reading and searching of the data to identify hidden relationships and patterns (Gioia et al., 2013). After that, the axial coding process groups the findings from the first-order concept in broader second-order themes. In this step, the research identifies common elements and differences among the categories to represent the main aspects of the data. These second-order themes reflect the researcher's interpretation of the data and are, compared to the first-order codes, more abstract. (Gioia et al., 2013). The final step is theory building, in which the themes developed merge into a more comprehensive theory or concept, where second-order themes are synthesized into aggregated dimensions. This process requires careful reflection and interpretation of the data in order to draw coherent and meaningful conclusions. An important aspect of this approach is that it emphasizes that theory building should come from the data collected and does not require that pre-existing theories or concepts be used. Gioia's method (2013) aims to derive original and novel concepts from the available data while maintaining qualitative research integrity (Gioia et al., 2013).

## 4. RESULTS

Examining all 19 interviews, the thematic analysis reveals a multitude of significant insights and emerging themes derived from the gathered data. Accordingly, the critical success factors for innovation-focused alliances were organized into seven aggregated dimensions. These dimensions include aspects such as the important role of trust, effective communication, the establishment of legal agreements, intra-organizational practices, clarity in defining goals and objectives, optimizing collaborative structures and the assessment of collaboration. These aspects highlight and organize the diverse aspects and considerations relevant to the discussion on the successful collaboration between multinational corporations engaged in a strategic alliance for fostering innovation.

See Appendix 3 to find the detailed thematic analysis of the interviews based on Gioia et al. (2013).

### **4.1 Establishing trust: A fundamental requirement for successful collaboration, demanding a time-consuming process of human interaction**

Collaborating on innovation projects between multinational companies necessitates the sharing of corporate secrets to cultivate innovative ideas, as stated by Expert AM: “(...) you disclose a lot of your corporation’s secrets, and it [the strategic alliance for innovation] only works if you disclose it”. In the view of experts, trust is a critical element in this context, as a robust sense of trust in your partner becomes imperative when sharing proprietary information (Expert AM, NB, AK). Thus, establishing trust is helpful for unlocking the full potential of innovative outcomes. The challenge lies in the gradual and time-consuming nature of building trust in the business realm (Expert AQM, CDN, AK). Trust is a delicate process, easily destroyed but fundamental for ensuring successful collaboration (Expert AQM). Building trust depends on maintaining continuous and supportive actions over time and “(...) you just have to open yourself step by step (...)” (Expert AM). Actively and sensitively working on the creation of trust becomes common in the context of a strategic alliance for innovation.

The nurturing of trust occurs through behaviors that are open, consistent, transparent, and honest. Noted by Expert AQM, trust is earned through actions, emphasizing the importance of delivering on promises. Regular updates on progress and the fulfillment of commitments contribute to the establishment of trust. Moreover, face-to-face interactions are recognized as

supportive for fostering the necessary human bond (Expert CDN). Maintaining a culture of no secrets, delivering on promises, and engaging in regular, question-oriented meetings are identified as consistent practices to affirm and build trust in collaborative endeavors (Expert CDN). Additionally, building trust and managing disclosed secrets can be supported by “(...) setting up a good firewall and shielding.”, as stated by Expert NB.

#### **4.2 Navigating effective communication: Following a clear strategy for prioritizing, enhancing and succeeding communication**

Initiating a strategic alliance demands thorough and transparent discussions with the partner, shared by multiple experts (Expert AB, AK, AM, FN, LH, LD, GC, TC). Given that collaborating with multinational corporations often constitutes a novel working experience (Expert AK), it is advantageous to establish clarity and honesty from the beginning (Expert AB, LD). While clear and intensive communication is paramount, it is equally important to recognize that large organizations may inadvertently speak their own language (Expert GC), necessitating bridges for successful communication within the alliance (Expert JB, GC, CDN, LH). Experts shed light on indispensable communication strategies. Recognizing the need for "translators" or communication ambassadors within these partnerships (Expert JB), the emphasis lies on ensuring a seamless flow of information. This involves translating intricate concepts into a common language and embracing over-communication, particularly in the diverse settings of large partnerships where teams may have varying communication preferences (Expert GC). Understanding one another is identified as a critical factor, as articulated by Expert CDN. To foster this comprehension and alignment on values, regular question and answer sessions are employed. Regarding bridging differences in communication styles, Expert LH advocating for regular face-to-face reviews to steadily progress and advance alliance innovation goals. Highlighting the centrality of communication, daily meetings are important in strategic alliances, ensuring inclusivity where everyone's ideas are not only heard but also valued (Expert AM). Post-meeting, a proactive approach involves summarizing key points and disseminating them to all engaged employees via email, promoting transparency and alignment (Expert TC). Ensuring an equal footing in discussions becomes a recurring theme, with Expert FN underscoring the importance of active participation and collaborative decision-making. Addressing challenges and issues is approached through regular extra meetings, held every two to three weeks with team managers, offering a dedicated forum for problem-solving (Expert LD). Expert HS contributes a valuable perspective on resilience, acknowledging the

inevitability of challenges in collaborations. The recommendation is to take a step back, engage in thoughtful reflection, and navigate obstacles effectively.

#### **4.3 Legal agreements establish a collaborative environment by regulating intellectual property: Contract as a supportive frame for the partnership**

In establishing strategic alliances, the importance of defining legal structures becomes evident, with experts emphasizing the need for clear goals, milestones, and exit strategies articulated in contracts (Expert MS, AB, HDS, LD). Partnerships are viewed as requiring explicit definitions under a contract to guide collaboration effectively. Especially, confidentiality agreements are supportive in partnerships, ensuring clarity on intellectual property ownership, potential disputes, and the development's outcome (Expert FN, MS; PH, AB, MS). Experts emphasize the importance of detailed legal agreements to prevent imbalances and advocate for open discussions facilitated by comprehensive confidentiality agreements.

Additionally, expert MS and NB name the necessity for flexibility in partnerships, as a rigid contractual basis that cannot adapt to necessary changes is deemed less than ideal. They acknowledge that occasional adjustments to contracts, often resulting in numerous amendments, are constructive to accommodate evolving needs in these partnerships.

#### **4.4 Intra-organizational practices: Cultivating an open mindset across the company, selecting appropriate employees for collaboration, and ensuring the commitment from stakeholders and top management**

Experts underscore the significance of aligning cultural aspects within strategic alliances, requiring a consideration of emotional and human dimensions (Expert PC). The creation of an open mindset is highlighted as a favorable practice, encouraging cross-functional collaboration and shared achievements within the alliance (Expert AK). The promotion of diverse thinking and effective problem-solving is emphasized through regular training sessions on cultural sensitivity, fostering understanding and appreciation of diverse perspectives (Expert LD). Expert LD mentioned “(...) initiatives that promote diversity and inclusion, creating an environment where all voices are heard and valued”. Additionally, the establishment of professional collaboration is supported by mentorship programs, pairing experienced employees with newcomers to facilitate knowledge transfer and collaboration for innovation (Expert LH). In summary, these practices contribute to the creation and maintenance of a

company culture that fosters openness, collaboration, and a shared commitment for strategic alliances for innovation.

Additionally, several experts highlight the importance of the acceptance of cooperation, understanding the reasons for working with external partners, who may operate beyond the organizational barriers with different goals and agendas. (Expert AM, GC, AQM, NB, PC). To foster this understanding, workshops and specialized trainers are employed to educate employees on the concept of strategic alliances, with a focus on how such collaborations can drive innovation and yield benefits for the organization (Expert AM). Prior to collaboration initiation, the sharing of case studies and success factors of strategic alliances for innovation can demonstrate the positive impact of partnerships to employees (Expert GC). The continuous effort to build awareness is exemplified by the presence of strategic alliance representatives within different departments, serving as points of contact for questions and sharing insights and best practices with their teams (Expert AQM). Aligning capabilities, ensuring understanding, and providing adequate training to avoid conflicts can be beneficial. Moreover, establishing a continuous learning platform that offers resources, articles, and webinars on strategic alliances and innovation contributes to ongoing education (Expert NB). Recognizing that interactions with partners occur at every organizational level, efforts are made to develop a collaborative mindset across the entire organization. Network opportunities, such as conferences or workshops, educate employees about collaboration for innovation and the associated benefits (Expert PC).

"(...), the most important thing, and I'm a hundred percent sure about this, is getting the buy-in of the stakeholders. First of all, we identify and list all potential stakeholders who may be affected or can affect the project. This can include, for example, internal and external parties such as team members or clients." (Expert MR). The centrality of involving the right stakeholders in decision-making processes is emphasized as a strategic approach to effective problem-solving and project advancement. Additionally, in the development of strategic alliances, convincing efforts and visibility strategies are valuable to garner the commitment and active involvement of multiple stakeholders. To operationalize this, experts advocate for the creation of stakeholder engagement plans, outlining tailored communication and involvement strategies for each stakeholder throughout the collaborative journey (Expert CDN).

Moreover, the process of selecting individuals for a strategic alliance involves identifying a special blend of people with a collaborative mindset. This entails prioritizing individuals "who

are less in the negotiation mode, but more in the collaborative”, a characteristic not easily found (Expert JB). Additionally, according to Expert JB, team leads play a pivotal role in discussions to determine suitable employees for collaboration, emphasizing the importance of assembling the right mix of individuals. The mindset of each team member becomes a critical factor in the success or failure of cooperation. Past project performance can be an important criterion in identifying optimal individuals for collaboration (Expert HS). To address complex challenges or embark on innovative initiatives, companies actively seek out exceptional individuals. The selection process involves careful consideration of employee assessments and a thorough understanding of each employee's capabilities, ensuring that the collaborative effort is fueled by a team of skilled and motivated individuals (Expert MR).

On top of that, achieving success in a strategic alliance is based on securing the commitment and support of the top management. Following Expert AM, presenting strategic objectives to the Board of Directors ensures a shared understanding of the long-term vision and the role of innovation in achieving it. Demonstrating the alignment of the strategic alliance with organizational priorities is beneficial for gaining ongoing support from top management, as it highlights how innovation within the alliance contributes to overall company success (Expert LD). On top of that, it can be helpful to emphasize the role of top-level sponsorship, with senior leaders providing support and setting the tone for collaboration across the organization (Expert GC). “They [the top management] must also communicate top-down that alliances are good, and that value is generated.”, mentioned by Expert PC. Additionally, maintaining open channels of communication with top management ensures ongoing alignment of goals and allows for adaptability in alliance strategy based on their insights (Expert LD). Following Expert GC, facilitating interactions and networking opportunities between top executives from partnering organizations strengthens personal relationships, fostering a deeper commitment to shared goals.

#### **4.5 Embracing a clear mission: Clarifying the purpose, recognizing the strength of each partner, and defining shared goals in collaboration**

Another component of successful collaboration in strategic alliances lies in a profound understanding of why organizations are working together and the objectives they seek to achieve (Expert PH, HS, AM). Experts emphasize the need to articulate and discuss the purpose of the collaboration extensively. This involves delving into questions such as why the new initiative is being undertaken and what each party brings to the partnership (Expert PH). Extend

discussions centered on the understanding of the collaboration's purpose are considered important for its success (Expert HS). Interrogating the motivations behind collaboration—why organizations need each other and what value they bring—is identified as another favorable step by Expert PH. Conforming to Expert AM, transparency and simplicity play an important role, recommending the documentation of collaboration purposes in straightforward terms. When everyone involved comprehensively understands the reasons for collaboration, their interests, and what each party can contribute, subsequent processes, including contract negotiations, can become more streamlined and effective (Expert AM).

Moreover, the success of strategic alliances hinges on a meticulous examination of the reasons for collaboration and the strengths each partner brings to the table. (Expert AK, AQM, CDN) Clear articulation of strengths, identification of gaps, and strategic discussions to leverage complementary abilities are helpful practices and components (Expert AK). Based on Expert AK, acknowledging the importance of transparency, a systematic self-assessment process has been instituted, ensuring continuous evaluation, and updating of each partner's strengths. This practice can foster a dynamic and acknowledged understanding of strengths, forming a robust foundation for partnerships (Expert AK). Being open, transparent, and explicit about capabilities is emphasized to align expectations and prevent misunderstandings (Expert AQM). An additional aspect of this clarity involves dedicating time to defining the value each partner contributes to the alliance. “(...) We usually develop a metrics that clearly defines the unique value each partner brings to the alliances. Especially for innovation purposes, this is important as different skills improve innovation outcomes.”, as stated by Expert CDN.

Based on understanding the purpose for the strategic alliance as well as each partner's strength and contribution, a shared strategic vision stands out as a cornerstone for successful partnerships (Expert AB, FN, MR, CDN, MS, AK). To cultivate this, in-person gatherings dedicated to share perspectives, goals, and objectives, following the insights from Expert AB. Clear goal setting is identified as a beneficial practice (Expert FN), complemented by the establishment of alignment, priorities, and objectives through documents and presentations (Expert MR). Despite formal partnership agreements, the emphasis remains on understanding the joint mission and scope, ensuring strategic alignment of all partners (Expert CDN). Strategic alignment poses a central challenge, requiring careful consideration of shared goals and potential conflicts of interest (Expert MS). Developing a long-term vision, often referred to as the "North Star," guides collaboration and innovation, involving all partners in its articulation

and allowing for short-term flexibility within a framework of long-term clarity and determinism (Expert MS, AK). Expert AK further outlines components of a sustainable strategy, including a clear articulation of objectives, measurable goals, stakeholder impact, alignment with market trends, incorporation of innovation, a specified time horizon, and a plan for regular review and alignment with the strategic vision.

#### **4.6 Optimizing collaborative structures: Strategies for equal decision making, efficient task distribution and successful role definition**

"Equal structures are essential. Otherwise, you have this imbalance. Clearly defined roles and positions help minimize conflicts by reducing uncertainty. If everybody knows their tasks, you are less likely to step on each other's toes.", states Expert HS. This emphasis on role clarity is complemented by Expert TC's perspective, who advocates for the establishment of specialized roles within the alliance. According to Expert TC, such an approach can result in a cohesive team where members excel in their designated areas. Expert AB reinforces the narrative, asserting that a clear vision of partners' roles and organizational structure is favorable for long-term success. Expert FN stressing the importance of written requirement lists and careful task distribution for effective collaboration.

#### **4.7 Strategically assessing collaboration: Balancing long-term goals with short-term agility to identify alliance strength and weakness**

Following the experts' opinions, in evaluating strategic alliances, it is advantageous to have a dual focus on both hard metrics and soft aspects, creating a holistic measurement approach (Expert AQM, LD). Expert AQM highlights the inclusion of hard facts like revenue alongside softer elements such as team alignment. Expert NB describes the use of scorecards covering financial and manufacturing KPIs as well as relationship assessments, collaboratively developed and regularly tracked to address issues promptly. Expert LH identifies the need to address issues in soft skills promptly, as problems in this area can impact hard facts. Furthermore, proactive tracking of decision-making processes is mentioned as a preventative measure against potential delays.

Regular milestone meetings can help to ensure a focused approach and clear evaluation. Expert AK recommends creating "lighthouses" — specific, successful initiatives rather than pursuing broad strategies. Expert FN emphasizes the necessity for partners to fulfill different milestones,

with an evaluation process in place, and potential termination if milestones are not met. On top of that, Expert MS notes the assessment of goal achievement or partial failure, making them a critical forum for evaluating the progress and viability of strategic alliances. Additionally, continuous assessment mechanisms, including surveys, and interviews, are important. According to Expert NB, the implementation of “health checks”, employing short surveys and comprehensive assessments every two years supports the quantitative evaluation of alliance’s health. These practices, including shorter surveys for quick insights and more extensive assessments for in-depth analysis, collectively contribute to a proactive and informed approach in managing and evaluating strategic alliances. A traffic light system (red, green, yellow) helps to signal issues in alliance management, facilitating quick identification of challenges and identifying areas requiring intervention. Additionally, variations between companies in conducted surveys prompt alignment efforts. The surveys help to enable a precise identification of strengths and areas requiring development within the alliance (Expert NB).

## 5. DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Theoretical and managerial contributions

Comparing literature review and this study highlight both confirmations of previous research as well as new perspectives, bringing light on the question of how multinational corporations can effectively manage strategic alliances to enhance innovation.

As previously examined, the formation of strategic alliances by multinational corporations for innovation is inherently intricate. The complexity arises from both the intended outcome of the alliance and the composition of the partnering entities, presenting unique challenges. This disparity is evident when comparing existing literature with the findings of this study.

For a detailed table pertaining to the discussion, please refer to Appendix 4.

Hennart (1998) discusses that companies in equity joint ventures should consider the principle of transaction cost theory when designing their alliances. This includes setting up an efficient governance structure, which includes monitoring, clear communication and carefully drafted contracts are advantageous (Hennart, 1988). At a surface level, the finding of the study from Hennart (1998) align with the second (Effective communication), third (Establishment of legal contract), fifth (Clarity in defining goals and objectives), sixth (Optimizing collaborative structures) and seventh (Assessment of collaboration) finding of this study. However, upon a more profound examination, except for the insights into the establishment of legal contracts (Finding 3), this study surpasses Hennart's (1997) work by delving extensively into various aspects. This study not only identifies key points but also provides specific measures and practices, beneficial for fostering a successful collaboration for innovation. Consequently, the depth and comprehensiveness of this study underscores its importance in guiding practitioners toward effective collaborative strategies for innovation.

Furthermore, Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven (1996) identified the optimal resource composition and collaborative strategy as constructive factors for the successful formation and management of strategic alliances between entrepreneurial firms (Eisenhardt & Schoonhoven, 1996). Compared to this study, their framework observes alignment with finding one (Important role of trust), two (Effective communication) and four (Intra-organizational practices). However, it is again noteworthy that all three intersections in Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven's (1996) research exhibit a shallower depth compared to the nuanced findings of this study.

Moreover, Albers et al. (2016) took a perspective rooted in organizational design when examining strategic alliances and developed a framework with different aspects. Parallels between this study and the findings of Albers et al. (2016) can be noticed in finding one (Important role of trust), two (Effective communication), three (Establishment of legal contract), four (Intra-organizational practices), five (Clarity in defining goals and objectives) and six (Optimizing collaborative structures). However, once again, differences in depth exist between the two studies, with findings two (effective communication) and six (optimizing collaborative structures) showing considerable overlap in execution. Notably, the remaining findings in this study delve more profoundly into the examined aspects.

To summarize, six out of seven main categories identified in this paper have been partially analyzed in prior research. However, nuances within these six categories underscore the beneficial contribution of this study to existing literature. For instance, finding one (Important role of trust) sheds light on the time-intensive process of establishing trust within a strategic alliance, a dimension largely overlooked in previous analyses. In the case of finding four (Intra-organizational practices), there is a notable absence of discussions on the awareness of the benefits of a strategic alliance for innovation, as well as the necessity to secure commitment and involvement from the right stakeholders. Finding five (Clarity in defining goals and objectives) emphasizes understanding each partner's strengths and contributions, a key success factor often understated in prior research.

Of particular interest could be the finding on the assessment of collaboration. This unique contribution establishes the indispensability of a dual focus on hard metrics and soft aspects for a holistic measurement approach in managing strategic alliances among multinational corporations for innovation. The descriptions provided by experts reveal the practical implementation of this approach, including regular milestone meetings, additional surveys for in-depth assessments, and strategic survey analysis for effective intervention. These concrete examples not only highlight the novelty of this study but also can be seen as addition to the existing literature, offering valuable insights into the complexities of successful strategic alliance management for innovation between multinational corporations.

Regarding the disparities between the existing literature and this study, there may be a plausible explanation. The prevailing body of research has predominantly focused on diverse types of alliances, and it is conceivable that these distinctions contribute to the variations observed between the established literature and the outcomes of this study.

As outlined earlier, superficial resemblances emerge when comparing the existing literature with the present study. However, upon closer examination, significant omissions become evident in the literature, revealing that this study delves beyond and deeper than the currently available body of knowledge. This underscores the critical importance of this study, emphasizing that a mere surface-level analysis of general alliances for general purposes is not optimal for effectively managing strategic alliances for innovation. Given the complexity of such collaborations, a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding is beneficial.

Given the complexity of alliances for innovation between multinational companies, a comprehensive and detailed approach can be helpful to overcome the multiple challenges in this collaboration. The findings of this study are supportive for managers of multinational companies seeking successful collaboration for innovation. They should be aware of the different aspects relevant to the successful management of this complex project, from concrete facts and structures to understanding human behavior.

Figure 1: Framework for successful management of strategic alliances between multinational corporations for innovation

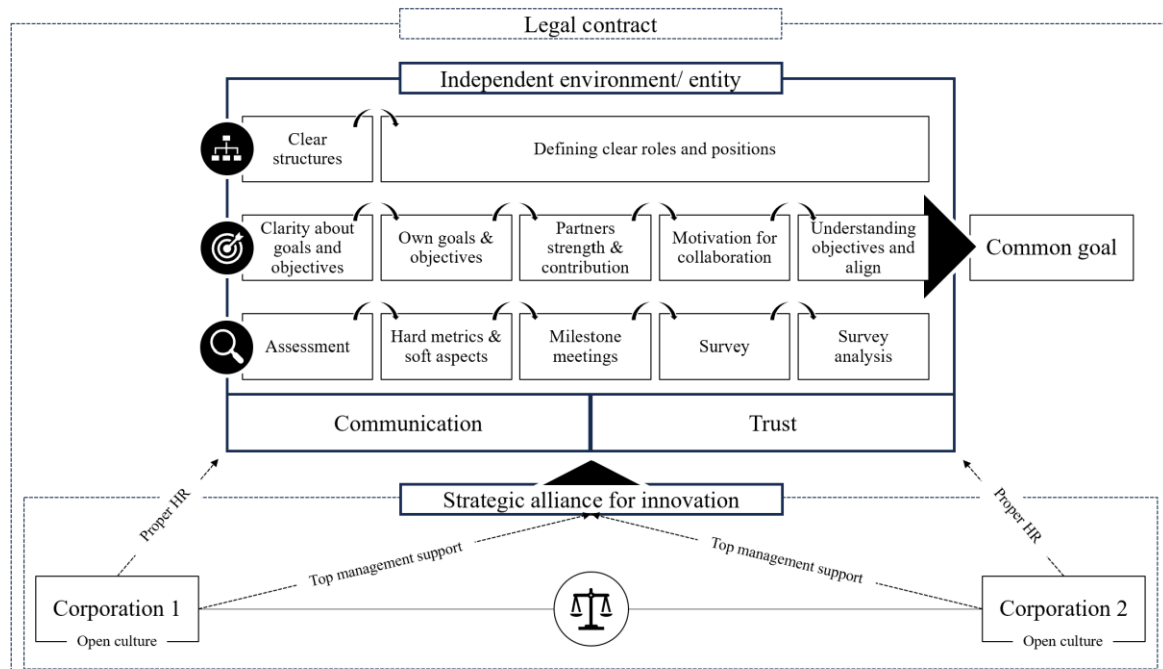


Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework showing a holistic approach for managing strategic alliances between multinational corporations for innovation successfully. This framework

serves as a guiding tool consolidating beneficial best practices within the realm of strategic alliances for innovation, based on the conducted expert interviews.

When multinational corporations establish a strategic alliance, fostering a successful partnership is based on the cultivation of an open-minded culture and the commitment to balance collaboration. The top management of each entity plays a significant role in championing this alliance, reinforced by a legally binding contractual framework to ensure seamless cooperation. To effectively manage this collaboration, it is recommended to establish an independent unit dedicated to the partner's joint efforts, characterized by its unique culture. This approach safeguards against the dominance of one company's culture, requiring both partners to allocate appropriate resources to this collaborative unit. Communication and trust form the foundation of this unit, supported by clear structures that define roles and positions. Furthermore, clarity regarding goals and objectives is useful. Initially, each company should consider formulating its individual goals and objectives, followed by an exploration of its strengths and contributions to the collaborative venture. Subsequently, it is constructive to focus on the motivations, aligning both entities towards a shared common goal. Throughout the collaboration, a systematic approach is helpful, assessing both hard metrics and soft aspects. Regular milestone meetings, surveys, and subsequent analyses can contribute to a thorough evaluation of the partnership. These measures collectively support the establishment of a seamless collaboration and effective alliance management, ultimately fostering innovation within the partnership.

## **5.2 Limitations and further research**

The current body of literature addressing the effective management of strategic alliances primarily focuses on successful alliance management in general. This study diverges by concentrating on a specific niche within this domain, aiming to identify the key success factors in strategic alliances between multinational corporations specifically for innovation. This paper critically examines the current literature, unveiling new areas, reevaluating existing ones, and synthesizing insights into a practical framework. However, certain limitations can be identified.

This study primarily elaborates collaborations between two multinational corporations, providing specific insights. To broaden understanding, future research could explore collaborations with multiple partners, diverse company sizes, and across different industries. Investigating management practices beyond two multinational corporations offers avenues for

deeper exploration. Additionally, studying the evolution of key success factors over time can provide valuable historical perspectives, contributing to a more holistic understanding of successful strategic alliance management.

The qualitative nature of this study, deliberately chosen for its depth and flexibility, hinges on interviews and content analysis of collected data. While this approach facilitates in-depth exploration, a complementary quantitative research component could enhance the robustness of findings, allowing for verification and generalization on a broader scale. Surveys or experiments quantifying key success factors in alliance management could provide a more comprehensive understanding.

In its attempt to present a broad approach, the study identifies seven subsections supportive for successful alliance management. However, delving into each subsection in greater detail would enrich the analysis and contribute to a more nuanced understanding. Each subsection is worth further investigation, potentially leading to refined insights and an enhanced framework.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The content seems simple, but regarding the increasing number of strategic alliances between multinational corporations for innovation and the high failure rate, this study contributes new and holistic insights into overcoming the challenges of strategic alliances between multinational corporations for innovation to be successful. The results are shedding light into success factors advantageous for fostering collaboration for innovation. The collective findings underscore the multifaceted key success factors and the importance of a holistic approach. While existing literature offers valuable insights on a broader level, a gap exists, and this study seeks to fill it, by articulating niche research and an additional framework encapsulating both soft and hard facets of successful alliance management between multinational corporations for innovation.

The thematic analysis of 19 in-depth interviews identifies seven dimensions critical for successful alliance management: the important role of trust, effective communication, the establishment of legal agreements, intra-organizational practices, clarity in defining goals and objectives, optimizing collaborative structures and the assessment of collaboration. Comparisons with established literature reveal both confirmations and novel perspectives, highlighting the complex nature of strategic alliances between multinational corporations for innovation. In essence, the journey toward effective strategic alliance management necessitates a continuous evolution of perspectives, skill sets, and ethical considerations.

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## APPENDIX

## Appendix 1: Interview participants

Interview Participants							
#	Identification	Company	Position	Industry	Domain Expertise	Years of experience	Geographical Location
1	Expert NS	Microsoft	Partner Development Director	Technology Industry	Innovation, Strategic Alliances	30	Portugal
2	Expert TC	ServiceNow	Senior Director, Enterprise Sales	Technology Industry	Innovation, Strategic Alliances	15	Germany
3	Expert HS	Daimler	Senior Manager Design HV Battery	Automotive Industry	Innovation, Strategic Alliances	34	Germany
4	Expert AM	BMW	Head of Scouting, Establishing, and Enabling of Cooperations R&D	Automotive Industry	Innovation, Strategic Alliances	26	Germany
5	Expert JB	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe	Bureau Member - Committee on Innovation, Competitiveness and Public-Private Partnerships	Politics	Innovation	13	Portugal
6	Expert AB	Roland Berger	Global Senior Advisor	Management Consulting	Strategic Alliances	32	Portugal
7	Expert AK	IBM	Executive Partner, Microsoft EMEA	Technology Industry	Innovation, Strategic Alliances	12	Germany
8	Expert AQM	Microsoft	EMEA Director, IBM Alliance Lead	Technology Industry	Innovation, Strategic Alliances	25	Portugal

9	Expert PH	Sopheon	Chief Innovation Evangelist	Technology Industry	Innovation, Strategic Alliances	24	United States of America
10	Expert GC	Microsoft	EMEA Director, Adobe Alliance Lead	Technology Industry	Innovation, Strategic Alliances	36	Spain
11	Expert FN	CLAAS	Alliance Relationship Manager	Agricultural Machinery Industry	Innovation, Strategic Alliances	15	Germany
12	Expert MR	Google	Strategic Partnership Manager	Technology Industry	Innovation, Strategic Alliances	8	England
13	Expert LH	Hapag-Lloyd AG	Director Network & Cooperations	Transportation & Logistics Industry	Strategic Alliance	7	Germany
14	Expert CDN	Microsoft	Director, EMEA Partner Business Development – Microsoft Corp. GPS	Technology Industry	Innovation, Strategic Alliances	25	Italy
15	Expert MS	BASF	Head of Innovation Excellence	Chemical Industry	Innovation, Strategic Alliances	17	Germany
16	Expert LD	Bondalti	Executive Board Member	Chemical Industry	Innovation, Strategic Alliances	21	Portugal
17	Expert HDS	Innovation by Kaizen	Managing Partner	Management Consulting	Innovation, Strategic Alliances	23	Portugal
18	Expert NB	Bayer Pharma AG	Senior Director Business Development & Licensing/ Alliance Management	Chemical and Pharmaceutical Industry	Innovation, Strategic Alliances	25	Germany
19	Expert PC	Bayer Pharma AG	Head of Strategy and Operations/ Global Business Development &	Chemical and Pharmaceutical Industry	Innovation, Strategic Alliances	15	Germany

			Licensing and Open Innovation				
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**Appendix 2: Semi-structured interview protocol**

#	Topic	Questions
1	Introduction	<p>Can you describe your experience in establishing/participating/supporting strategic alliances?</p> <p>What were the main goals of the alliances you have been involved in? Did any of the alliances focus on collaboration in the innovation process/ R&amp;D for new products and services?</p>
2	Topic 1: Characterizing the innovation process within the strategic alliance	<p>Were you involved in developing or managing the innovation process within the strategic alliance context? If so, in what way and for how long?</p> <p>Can you share concrete examples of innovation projects within your company that you have been involved in?</p> <p>Can you describe the different stages of the innovation processes within the strategic alliance you have been involved in? If more than one experience, can you talk about the most significant one?</p> <p>In the innovation processes you were involved in/ know about, were there inflows or outflows of knowledge through the strategic alliance boundaries?</p> <p>How did each partner contribute to the innovation process? Were roles designed to be similar/ different? Did those roles evolve as the strategic alliance progressed?</p>
3	Topic 2: Strategic alliances for innovation	<p>What motivates these partnerships/ strategic alliances?</p> <p>How would you assess the effectiveness (creativity, speed, profitability, or other criteria?) of the innovation process within the strategic alliance?</p> <p>From your perspective, what are the key benefits of strategic alliances in advancing the innovation process?</p> <p>What challenges have you encountered when forming and managing strategic alliances focused on innovation purposes?</p>

		<p>Is this strategic alliance still working? If not, why not? What happened?</p> <p>How do you evaluate the effectiveness of the innovation process in the context of strategic alliances?</p>
4	Outlook	<p>How do you see the future of strategic alliances in the context of the innovation process? Are there emerging trends or best practices that you believe will shape the role of strategic alliances in the innovation process?</p> <p>From your perspective, what advice or recommendations would you give to organizations looking to leverage strategic alliances for a more effective innovation process?</p>
5	Closing	<p>Do you have any additional questions or remarks?</p> <p>Do you know anyone else in the field of innovation and strategic alliances who might have more insights to share on this topic?</p>

### Appendix 3: Thematic analysis of the interviews based on Gioia et al., 2013

Interview Findings		
First-Order Concepts - Direct Quotation	Second-Order Themes	Aggregate Dimensions
“The collaboration doesn't work at all without mutual trust. After all, you disclose a lot of your corporation's secrets, and it [the strategic alliance for innovation] only works if you disclose it.” (Expert AM)	Trust as a requirement for successful collaboration	1. Establishing trust: A fundamental requirement for successful collaboration, demanding a time-consuming process of human interaction
“Building a lot of cooperation and trust is crucial.” (Expert NB)		
“They won't do business if they don't trust each other. (...) You have to bring them together two, three, four, five times. It's not just one coffee date.” (Expert AK)		
“So, trust takes a lot of time to build. And people also say that it takes only a second to lose it.” (Expert AQM)	Establishment of trust is a time-consuming process	
“Trust is the cornerstone. And to build, trust is not a word. It is really a day-by-day something in partnership. My personal experience in partnership, everything changes in a slow manner.” (Expert CDN)		
“And so, it's important to create this sense of trust. And like in any relationship, trust builds over time, you cannot pretend that, the first day that you meet a person they trust you 100%.” (Expert CDN)		
“Look at any relationship of human beings. Trust comes with consistent behaviors and people understanding who you are. We believe in delivering on promises, knowing that trust is earned through our actions in addition to our words. We provide our partners with regular updates on how our work is going and if we succeed in bringing our promises into reality.” (Expert AQM)	Different forms of human interaction to foster trust	
“So, to build trust, you just have to open yourself step by step and see how it works. (...) We are committed to transparent communication, and sharing ideas freely to show that we really think that partnering is the right way to successful innovation.” (Expert AM)		
“Be honest and transparent. That's the basis [for creating trust between partners]. And showing a good intent. (...) Face-to-face interactions build that bond you need for trust.” (Expert CDN)		
“We aim to have a certain firewall and safeguarding, as it's about the product in which we are partners. Building trust is crucial, and it can be managed by setting up a good firewall and shielding.” (Expert NB)		
“It's a consistent fact that confirms trust. It's important to have no secrets and to do what you promise. We have regular meetings where we answer all the questions our partner is asking. And of course, we are asking questions to our partner.” (Expert CDN)		
“They should not go into a strategic partnership without discussing.” (Expert AB)		

<p>“Suddenly you end the game speech. And it's the same as when you play Man Trouble. So, if you change the rules of the game, you have to explain them first. Then you have to communicate with them because otherwise there are suddenly new rules. Nobody understands them and the game doesn't work, and nobody has fun.” (Expert AK).</p>	<p>Importance of open and honest discussions</p>	<p>2. Navigating effective communication: Following a clear strategy for prioritizing, enhancing, and succeeding communication</p>
<p>“An open discussion is necessary and open, i.e. honesty and transparency, because otherwise you are fooling yourself. (...) But what is important to us is that we really do say that we are on an equal footing and that we discuss things very often and intensively.” (Expert AM)</p>		
<p>“It's important to discuss things together.” (Expert FN)</p>		
<p>“The basis for us is definitely to be constantly in exchange in our alliance.” (Expert LH)</p>		
<p>“So, everything [communicating] as much as clear as from the beginning.” (Expert LD)</p>		
<p>“Clarity is a priority [in communication] because large organizations, tend to speak their own languages with their own acronyms, their own jargon, their own way of speaking.” (Expert GC)</p>		
<p>“So, there's a need of translators within the strategic partnership. They facilitate regular cross-functional meetings. (...) It is like having communication ambassadors who keep the information flowing seamlessly.” (Expert JB)</p>		
<p>“You need to translate into a common language. And that's the reason why over-communication is especially relevant in large partnerships. Different teams prefer different communication channels. We try to include various preferences in the communication process, making sure everyone has a favorite way of communicating and addressing things.” (Expert GC)</p>		
<p>“When you go to the big guy [MC], it's really about understanding each other. It is really finding the sweet spot where everybody sees the value. So, we have regular question and answer sessions to avoid misunderstanding.” (Expert CDN)</p>		
<p>“I believe this is an important point to get to your point, how can we bridge differences in communication and have regular face-to-face reviews of what we have, to steadily progress and always have a chance to advance our goals.” (Expert LH)</p>		
<p>“In our strategic alliances, talking is super important. We make sure everyone is in the loop by talking a lot in daily meetings and keeping each other updated, when someone doesn't attend the meeting. This way, we make sure everyone's ideas are heard and valued.” (Expert TC)</p>		
<p>“After each meeting, we take the extra step to summarize key points, and share them with all employees engaged in the alliance by mail.” (Expert LH)</p>		
<p>“It's important to argue on an equal footing, giving everybody an active voice in the meetings, and make decisions together and also discuss things together when they are not going well.” (Expert FN)</p>		

<p>“You always have to negotiate all the different issues. Every two to three weeks we have extra meetings only to discuss challenges and problems with all team managers.” (Expert LD)</p>		
<p>“Of course, we sometimes had situations where things were so bad that we would have liked to bash each other's heads in. It's no use. Always a little step back. Thinking about what we have here now and how we can get the cow off the ice again. That's really important in collaborations.” (Expert HS)</p>		
<p>“Once the goals are set, it's about defining the organizations. But then the question arises: what are the legal structures in which we cooperate?” (Expert MS)</p>	<p>The role of legal structures in collaboration</p>	<p>3. Legal agreements establish a collaborative environment by regulating intellectual property: Contract as a supportive frame for the partnership</p>
<p>“In the beginning, the partners should really define also an exit strategy, if it doesn't work.” (Expert AB)</p>		
<p>“That's why it's important to clarify what you mean by partnership. Because a collaboration needs to be defined under a contract.” (Expert HDS)</p>		
<p>“You have to have an agreement before of what are the goals, what are the milestones that you have to achieve?” (Expert LD)</p>		
<p>“Once the goals are set, it's about defining the organization. But then the question arises: what are the legal structures in which we cooperate?” (Expert MS)</p>		
<p>“We have a reasonable arrangement in place for who gets what IP afterward.” (Expert FN)</p>	<p>Confidentiality agreement</p>	
<p>“Set up a contract to determine what happens if it doesn't work out so well, so that there are no disputes afterward, but rather clarity on who gets what and how it can continue.” (Expert FN)</p>		
<p>“Clear confidentiality agreements are also negotiated, outlining the purpose of the partnership.” (Expert MS)</p>		
<p>“[It is important to have in mind:] Who is going to be the owner of the knowledge, of the IP, of whatever is developed between the two?” (Expert LD)</p>		
<p>“Make it really clear who owns what information that's created. So, if they stop the project in the middle, they [the company] knows what information it owns.” (Expert PH)</p>		
<p>“There is the need to have a very detailed, I would say legal agreement, to avoid that one partner will get advantage, vis-a-vis the other partner and so on.” (Expert AB)</p>		
<p>“We also work extensively with confidentiality agreements, allowing open discussions with the collaboration partner.” (Expert MS)</p>	<p>Flexibility in contract</p>	
<p>“It is essential to be sufficiently dynamic in these partnerships because having a contractual basis that is so rigid it cannot adapt to necessary changes is not ideal.” (Expert MS)</p>		
<p>“Sometimes, it need necessary adjustments to the contract, resulting in numerous amendments.” (Expert NB)</p>		

<p>“I think one should not forget this cultural aspect; in the end, people work together. Even if everything can be rationalized, I believe there is also an emotional level and a human level in alliances that must ultimately align. We organize social events and team-building activities to strengthen interpersonal relationships and create a sense of family.” (Expert PC)</p>	<p>Creating and maintaining a culture of openness and collaboration</p>	<p>4. Intra-organizational practices: Cultivating an open mindset across the company, selecting appropriate employees for collaboration, and ensuring the commitment from stakeholders and top management</p>
<p>“This is a mindset topic that is more open than closed, more communal than singular. Promoting cross-functional collaboration represents this open mindset, encouraging collective efforts and shared achievements within the alliance.” (Expert AK)</p>		
<p>“Always have a culture of openness. So, being open, other ways of thinking, other ways of solving problems, of adding something that you don't have. We offer regular training sessions on cultural sensitivity to ensure that employees understand and appreciate diverse perspectives in the alliance.” (Expert LD)</p>		
<p>“Cultivate a culture where individuals can effectively steer such partnerships. (...), it's a challenging process due to varying perspectives, cultures, entries, and sometimes conflicting goals. (...) As an example, we also develop initiatives that promote diversity and inclusion, creating an environment where all voices are heard and valued.” (Expert LD)</p>		
<p>“In the end, it is also that we work professionally with each other, and that is lived by everyone. (...) Within our company, we have mentorship programs that pair experienced employees, in terms of collaboration for innovation, with newcomers. With it, we want to foster knowledge transfer and collaboration.” (Expert LH)</p>		
<p>“To be successful together in the strategic alliance, you first need to realize that this cooperation is necessary. And that has to be accepted. (...) We host workshops and hire special trainers, to educate employees about the concept of strategic alliances, with the focus on how such collaborations can drive innovation and benefits for the organization.” (Expert AM)</p>	<p>Spreading awareness of the benefits of a strategic alliance for innovation</p>	
<p>“[It is important that] they [the partner working together] understand why they need to work with someone else, someone else who is away from the barriers of the organization with different goals, different agendas, et cetera. Before we start the collaboration, we always try to share a case study or success factors within the alliance to show the employees that a partnership can be very helpful.” (Expert GC)</p>		
<p>“It's a very interesting business of building bridges, of ensuring that people are aware of the potential of us [partner within the strategic alliance] being together. It is a never-ending effort on that. In the past two years, we have an strategic alliance representative within different departments. These individuals answer all kinds of questions and sharing insights and best practices with their team. We only got positive feedback on this idea so far.” (Expert AQM)</p>		
<p>“If someone says alliances are crucial, they must ensure that the capabilities in the company align, people understand what it means, and they are well-trained to avoid conflicts and address issues. (...) We implemented a continuous learning platform that provides resources, articles and webinars on strategic alliances and innovation.” (Expert NB)</p>		

<p>“The entire organization must also develop the mindset because interactions with partners occur at every level. Twice a year, we create network opportunities for people working within but also outside the strategic alliance. Sometimes it is a small conference or a workshop, where employees learn about collaboration for innovation and the benefits behind the concept.” (Expert PC)</p>		
<p>“I think the most important thing, and I'm a hundred percent sure about this, is getting the buy-in of the stakeholders. So, first, we identify and list all potential stakeholders who may be affected or can affect the project. This can include for example internal and external parties such as team members or clients.” (Expert MR)</p>	<p>Securing the commitment and involvement of the right stakeholder</p>	
<p>“The way to solve this is to have the right stakeholders in the room. So, you can solve whatever problem your company has, if you have the right stakeholders in the room for five days. (Expert MR)</p>		
<p>“To develop such strategic alliances, you need to involve many stakeholders. You need to convince the stakeholder and give them visibility. (...) We always create a stakeholder engagement plan outlining how we communicate and involve each stakeholder throughout the collaboration.” (Expert CDN)</p>		
<p>“Within the strategic alliance, you need a special kind of people. It is a very special blend of people that should be in the mix to cooperate. You need people who are less in the negotiation mode, but more in the collaborative, which is not easy to find. (...) When going into a strategic partnership, we usually sit together with all team leads and discuss suitable employees for the collaboration.” (Expert JB)</p>	<p>Selecting people with a collaborative mindset for collaboration</p>	
<p>“The mindset of each individual employee is very, very decisive in determining whether cooperation is good or bad. We always try to find the optimal people by looking back to past projects and their performance on it.” (Expert HS)</p>		
<p>“You're [as a company] trying to really gather great people, to solve one issue or, to create something completely new from scratch. We select our people for collaboration by looking at their assessment. We have people assessments after each project. So, we know our employees very well.” (Expert MR)</p>		
<p>“It's very important that this kind of cooperation and the objective is really wanted and protected by the Board of Directors. You really need the commitment of the management to say, yes, we're doing this now. (...) So usually, we present the strategic objectives of the alliance to the top management. We ensure that they [the top management] understand the long-term vision and the role of innovation in achieving it.” (Expert AM)</p>	<p>Commitment and support of top management</p>	
<p>“You have to always have the support of the top management, if we want to make it this [the strategic alliance] work. So, we demonstrate how the strategic alliance aligns with the broader organizational goals and priorities - how innovation within the alliance contributes to the overall success of the company.” (Expert LD)</p>		
<p>“If you want a true partnership, you need someone senior with the right level of authority in your own organization to sponsor that partnership and to support the decisions which are going to be made aligned to that partnership. So, our leadership usually talks a lot about the values and benefits of collaboration. They set the tone for the entire organization.” (Expert GC)</p>		

<p>“They [the top management] must also communicate top-down that alliances are good and that value is generated.” (Expert PC)</p>		
<p>“They [the top management] don't have to be involved in the day to day, of course. But they have to, the goals between the top management of the two companies have to be aligned and clear, as for the other ones. (...) We regularly asking feedback from top management. We are open to their suggestions and concerns, and willing to adapt the alliance strategy based on their insights.” (Expert LD)</p>		
<p>“And that is the next step to make sure that the top executive sponsors, they know each other, they understand each other, they agree on what is the common goal and what is not, right, because this is very often about what they want to do together and what do you want to do together. Se, we create opportunities for the top management to network with counterparts from the alliance partner. Personal relationships can strengthen commitment.” (Expert GC)</p>		
<p>“It's not just why are we taking on this new initiative to build something, but why are we working together?” (Expert PH)</p>	<p>Being clear about the reason for collaboration</p>	<p>5. Embracing a clear mission: Clarifying the purpose, recognizing the strength of each partner, and defining shared goals in collaboration</p>
<p>“That is the most important thing. So, this understanding of what cooperation is good for, what is our job? We usually sit together and discuss for hours.” (Expert HS)</p>		
<p>“Why are we working? Why do I need you? Why do you need me? Just the why. (...) You have to clarify these questions as detailed as possible.” (Expert PH)</p>		
<p>“And if you write it down in very simple terms and are really transparent about why we are actually doing this [entering in the strategic alliance], why everyone is doing it, what their interests are. And then you say what you can do with it. Then everything else will flow relatively easily afterwards and you'll be able to make contracts quickly.” (Expert AM)</p>		
<p>“Reasons for the partnership need to be worked out very clearly. Who has which strengths? Where are the gaps in the whole topic? How can the strengths be used to create a greater complementary whole? We have extra meetings just to discuss this.” (Expert AK)</p>	<p>Understanding each partner's strength and contribution to strategic alliance</p>	
<p>“So, you have to work out your assets and be prepared to share them with a potential partner. We implemented a regular self-assessment process for each partner to evaluate and update their strength. (...) This awareness ensures that partnerships are built on a foundation of evolving and recognized strengths.” (Expert AK)</p>		
<p>“So, you need to be very open, very transparent, very clear on what you can do and what you cannot do. So that expectations are met and never not met.” (Expert AQM)</p>		
<p>“[Third advice] is really to spend time on defining the value. What is the value that you can bring to the partnership? We usually develop a metrics that clearly define the unique value each partner brings to the alliances. Especially for innovation purposes, this is important as different skills improve innovation outcomes.” (Expert CDN)</p>		

<p>“[A] shared strategic vision [is key for a successful partnership]. Therefore, we foster open discussion with our partner. We try to have face-to-face meetings only for sharing perspectives, goals and objectives.” (Expert AB)</p>	<p>Understanding the partner's objectives and transparently defining shared goals</p>	
<p>“It's important to set clear goals.” (Expert FN)</p>		
<p>“The second one [best practice] is really in terms of alignment, priorities, and also objectives. We create lists, presentations or documents summarizing what each partner aims to achieve.” (Expert MR)</p>		
<p>“Despite you sign a partnership agreement, you know, what is important. (...) You know, what, what is the joint mission? What is the joint scope?” (Expert CDN)</p>		
<p>“The main challenge is the strategic alignment of the two companies. Do both companies strategically aim for something similar, and is it complementary or are there latent conflicts of interest? (...) It is about choosing the right fields and determining the goal of the collaboration.” (Expert MS)</p>		
<p>“Despite that [a good strategy], one [the strategic alliance] must be able to develop a vision of where to be in ten years, the famous North Star. This North Star guides us through the dynamic landscape of collaboration and innovation. We define it in involving all partner discussing over a certain time period. (...) There must be flexibility in the short term but relative clarity and determinism in the long term.” (Expert MS)</p>		
<p>“Have a very clear strategy, but still be reflective. A bit like walking through a foreign city. So, know exactly where you want to go. But don't let every traffic light stop you, or dare to take a detour, or take a shortcut. Or ask someone. That works too. So, learn along the way.” (Expert AK)</p>		
<p>“So, setting a sustainable strategy to implement it, which doesn't mean not making any changes. This also means learning quickly, perhaps adapting things tactically, but having a North Star. This North Star include a clear articulation of our objective, measurable goals, impact on stakeholders, alignment with market trends, incorporation of innovation, a specified time horizon, and a plan for regular review and alignment with our strategic vision.” (Expert AK)</p>		
<p>“Equal structures are essential. Otherwise, you have this imbalance. (...) Clearly defined roles and positions help minimize conflicts by reducing uncertainty. If everybody knows their tasks, you are less likely to step on each others toes.” (Expert HS)</p>	<p>Equal structures and balanced decision making</p>	<p>6. Optimizing collaborative structures: Strategies for equal decision making, efficient task distribution and successful role definition</p>
<p>“The strategic composition of cooperation has always been set up on an equal footing, i.e. there have always been two equal voices that also decide on an equal footing. This prevents one partner is making dominant decisions and ensures a balanced distribution of influence.” (Expert HS)</p>		
<p>“When collaboration with big cooperations for innovation, the rules for equal structures should be more strict, because the environment is more difficult.” (Expert LD)</p>		
<p>“The tasks and responsibilities, the job split, what does that look like, that needs to be defined, and then the topics are often distributed in such a way that you think who's going to get the heat. If you distribute the task and roles, you</p>		

enhance efficiency. Each partner knows their responsibilities, this reduces potential duplication and ensures that tasks are performed by those with relevant expertise.” (Expert HS)	Efficient task distribution and role definition	
“We set up a structure within the alliance, where we have special roles. Assigning tasks to people who are really good at them makes the work better. It's like putting together a great team where everyone does what they're best at, and that makes everything turn out really well.” (Expert TC)		
“It is important to have a clear vision of what is the role of every one of the partners, very clear roles, how we define the unit and the organization structure. This helps to ensure the long-run success. (...) If each partner contributes meaningfully, recognizing the value in each other’s strength, they create a strong partnership that benefits from both. That makes a collaboration successful.” (Expert AB)		
“It's important to divide who does what. (...) It's helpful to write down a requirement list and carefully distribute tasks.” (Expert FN)		
“Some of them [KPIs] are really hard facts like revenue for instance, and things like that that are more soft, like customer satisfaction and alignment of the teams; our ability to have a specific governance.” (Expert AQM)	Dual focus on hard metrics and soft aspects, for a holistic measurement approach	7. Strategically assessing collaboration: Balancing long-term goals with short-term agility to identify alliance strengths and weaknesses
“The alignment between two units or two stakeholders, or if the customer has some kind of challenges that we need to tackle together, that's different from hard data like revenue or something like that.” (Expert AQM)		
“It is mandatory, that you track hard numbers and hard facts. Tracking soft skills like human interaction or decision making, it is not a milestone-driven event. You have to track this along the way.” (Expert LD)		
“When launching a new alliance, we often use scorecards with different levels such as financial KPIs, manufacturing KPIs, and relationship assessments. These scorecards are collaboratively developed with the partner, presented in joint meetings, and tracked regularly to identify and address issues promptly.” (Expert NB)		
“If, of course, things are noticed in the soft skills area that are not going well, it has to be addressed because, in the end, you also have a game over on the hard facts.” (Expert LH)		
“What we started some time ago is a certain tracking of decision-making processes to, in a way, prevent a partner from blocking decisions for months because they simply do not provide feedback.” (Expert LH)		
“And of course, you have to track it [the agreement]. You have to be very clear on the results that you are achieving and like adjustments if you want, if you have to make it.” (Expert LD)		
“I think the best way to go about it is to simply create lighthouses. By not starting with a broad mass and saying, let's try everything now, but by taking very specific things and simply saying, look, it worked.” (Expert AK)	Regular meetings to discuss milestones	
“There are different milestones that must be met, which the partners must fulfill.” (Expert FN)		
“There are milestones, and if they are not met, you evaluate whether it fits or not, and eventually, you have to pull the plug.” (Expert FN)		

<p>“In milestone meetings, it is determined whether the goals are being achieved or not, or if it has partially failed.” (Expert MS)</p>		
<p>“We meet every two or three weeks to see how far everyone has come.” (Expert FN)</p>		
<p>“You need to establish any kind of monitorization. I would be more on a kind of a steering wheel where, let's say, regularly once a month you go, you get together to discuss the evolution.” (Expert NS)</p>		
<p>“Of course, they did check-ins every two weeks to get an update of how the collaboration is going.” (Expert TC)</p>		
<p>“Health checks, comprising short surveys and more comprehensive assessments conducted every two years, provide a quantitative view of the alliance's health.” (Expert NB)</p>	<p>Additional surveys for proper assessment</p>	
<p>“Shorter surveys for all participants working in partnerships provide a quick initial sense of where we stand.” (Expert NB)</p>		
<p>“We also conduct regular health checks, approximately every two years, with more extensive questioning, taking a bit more time to answer but still relatively quantitative. We examine the scale for the most significant deviations.” (Expert NB)</p>		
<p>“We use a traffic light system – red, green, yellow – to indicate where we see issues. This allows the management to quickly identify the real challenges and determine where interventions are needed.” (Expert NB)</p>	<p>Strategic survey analysis and alignment for effective intervention</p>	
<p>“If we observe variations between Company A and B [in the conducted surveys], we work on aligning them.” (Expert NB)</p>		
<p>“We could precisely identify [in the conducted surveys] our strengths and areas needing development.” (Expert NB)</p>		

#### Appendix 4: Analysis of the findings of the existing literature compared to this study

<b>Seven dimensions: Findings of conducted study [Multinational corporations in alliances for innovation]</b>	<b>Hennart (1998) [Equity joint ventures]</b>	<b>Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven (1996) [Entrepreneurial firms]</b>	<b>Albers et al. (2016) [Alliances of different companies]</b>
1. Important role of trust	N	P	P
1.1 Trust as a requirement for successful collaboration	N	F	F
1.2 Establishment of trust is a time-consuming process	N	N	N
1.3 Different forms of human interaction to foster trust	N	N	F
2. Effective communication	P	P	F
2.1 Importance of open and honest discussions	F	F	F
2.2 Measures to enhance communication effectiveness in strategic alliances	N	N	F
3. Establishment of legal contract	F	N	P
3.1 The role of legal structures in collaboration	F	N	F
3.2 Confidentiality agreement	F	N	F
3.3 Flexibility in contract	F	N	N

4. Intra-organizational practices	N	P	P
4.1 Creating and maintaining a culture of openness and collaboration	N	P	P
4.2 Spreading awareness of the benefits of a strategic alliance for innovation	N	N	N
4.3 Securing the commitment and involvement of the right stakeholder	N	N	N
4.4 Selecting people with a collaborative mindset for collaboration	N	F	F
4.5 Commitment and support of top management	N	N	P
5. Clarity in defining goals and objectives	P	N	P
5.1 Being clear about the reason for collaboration	F	N	N
5.2 Understanding each partner's strength and contribution to strategic alliance	N	N	N
5.3 Understanding the partner's objectives and transparently defining shared goals	N	N	P
6. Optimizing collaborative structures	P	N	F

6.1 Equal structures and balanced decision making	P	N	F
6.2 Efficient task distribution and role definition	N	N	F
7. Assessment of collaboration	N	N	N
7.1 Dual focus on hard metrics and soft aspects, for a holistic measurement approach	N	N	N
7.2 Regular meetings to discuss milestones	N	N	N
7.3 Additional surveys for proper assessment	N	N	N
7.4 Strategic survey analysis and alignment for effective intervention	N	N	N

N = Not discussed in study

P = Partly discussed in study

F = Fully Discussed in study