

Can previous international work experience among co-founders speed up global expansion and improve performance?

Could working abroad together be the secret to smoother, smarter internationalization for new ventures?

GIUSEPPE CRIACO · LUCIA NALDI · SHAKER A. ZAHRA

Published on October 4, 2022

In today's fast-moving global economy, the decision to internationalize can make or break a young company. For family-owned startups and ventures, this move is particularly complex. They're balancing long-term values with short-term pressures, and family relationships with business dynamics. But what if one key to a successful expansion lay not in the business plan, but in the *past experiences of the founding team*?

A recent study by Lundan, Chirico, Kraus, and Maksimov brings fresh insight into this question by exploring how **shared international work experience** among co-founders affects the speed of entering foreign markets—and how that, in turn, influences early performance. As more family ventures emerge in global markets, understanding this link can offer a vital edge.

WHAT WE STUDIED

This research centers on an increasingly relevant but underexplored topic: how **shared experiences abroad**—specifically, when co-founders have worked together internationally—shape strategic decisions in startups.

Research Scope and Methodology

The authors studied **431 new ventures** from the **Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM)** dataset. Unlike prior research that typically looks at individual traits (such as whether *one* founder has international experience), this study zooms in on whether the **founders have shared that experience**—working *together* in an international setting before launching the business.

To analyze this relationship, the authors employed **structural equation modeling** to trace both direct and indirect effects between variables:

- **Shared International Experience (SIE)** among founders
- **Time to first foreign market entry**
- **New venture performance**

The analysis tests the idea that prior collaboration abroad fosters strategic alignment and trust, thereby enabling faster international moves and, ideally, better performance.

Theoretical Framework

The study builds on **Upper Echelons Theory**, which holds that leaders' backgrounds, experiences, and values shape organizational outcomes. The twist here is the emphasis on **shared** rather than individual experience—highlighting how previous collaboration in complex international environments can improve communication, trust, and joint decision-making in a startup context.

This approach provides a powerful new lens for analyzing founding teams—especially relevant for family businesses where relationships are often deep-rooted and multifaceted.

KEY INSIGHTS

1. Shared International Experience Drives Faster Foreign Market Entry

When founders have previously worked abroad together, their businesses tend to **enter foreign**

markets sooner. This isn't just about knowledge—it's about **relational capital.** Working abroad as a team develops mutual understanding, aligned goals, and familiarity with uncertainty—all crucial for confident, timely internationalization.

For family businesses, where intergenerational or sibling teams are common, these insights suggest that intentional, shared international exposure can offer strategic advantages down the line

2. Earlier Internationalization Boosts Performance—but Only Up to a Point

Timing is everything. The study found that **earlier foreign market entry is associated with stronger early performance,** but this effect is **curvilinear**—meaning it doesn't hold indefinitely. Go global *too soon*, and the venture might lack the resources, networks, or operational strength to compete. Go *too late*, and the firm risks losing its window of opportunity.

For family firms, this means **calibrating ambition with readiness.** Even if the team feels confident due to prior experience, market timing and internal capacity must still guide the decision.

3. Shared Experience Indirectly Affects Performance

A surprising finding: **shared international experience doesn't directly improve performance.** Instead, it does so **indirectly,** by helping the firm move into foreign markets faster. In essence, it sets off a **chain reaction:**

Shared experience → earlier internationalization → stronger performance.

This reinforces the idea that experience is a **facilitator,** not a performance driver on its own. It enables better timing and strategic alignment, which then drive results.

4. Strategic Trust is Key—Not Just Familiarity

Trust between founders is a common trait in family firms. But this study suggests that **strategic trust**—built through shared problem-solving and decision-making in high-pressure international settings—is more valuable than emotional familiarity. Co-founders who've navigated foreign business landscapes together are more likely to align on vision, manage ambiguity, and act decisively.

Family business leaders should not assume that family bonds are a substitute for strategic readiness. Shared global experiences build a different kind of trust—one rooted in action, not just blood ties.

TAKEAWAYS FOR FAMILY BUSINESSES

Embrace Global Exposure as a Strategic Development Tool

If your family business aims to grow globally, consider **creating international experience opportunities** for key members of the next generation—preferably in pairs or teams. These experiences can pay dividends later in terms of speed, cohesion, and confidence in expansion decisions.

Don't Confuse Confidence with Readiness

Even if your founding team shares an impressive international background, **evaluate operational readiness carefully.** The temptation to go global early must be balanced with financial health, product maturity, and organizational stability.

Invest in Founding Team Alignment

For family firms involving siblings, cousins, or family friends as co-founders, focus not just on personal chemistry but on **shared strategic experience.** Working abroad together fosters mutual understanding of risk, culture, and adaptation—critical when navigating complex markets.

Build International Partnerships Early

Even before a formal expansion, family firms can simulate shared experience by launching **joint overseas projects** or partnerships. These initiatives offer “training ground” benefits without full commitment.

IMPACT

This research has broad implications not just for early-stage ventures, but for **succession planning and leadership development** in family businesses. As globalization continues to reshape industry norms, the ability to internationalize successfully is no longer optional.

Family firms often rely on **long-standing relationships** and **trust-based decision-making.** While these are strengths, the study reminds us that **shared strategic experience in international settings** is a distinct and powerful asset. Whether through internships, assignments, or collaborations, cultivating this experience can significantly shape future expansion outcomes.

It also underscores the importance of **founding team composition**—a critical but often under-discussed aspect of family business success. In an era where collaboration and speed are key to global success, this research offers a roadmap for how to build and prepare the right team.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Design Co-Development Tracks for Future Leaders

Send family members or key non-family executives on joint international assignments. The goal isn't just exposure—but shared problem-solving abroad.

2. Use International Experience as a Criterion for Founding Teams

If forming a new venture within the family, favor co-founders with **shared global exposure**. It's not only experience—it's alignment in the face of complexity.

3. Pilot Test Internationalization Before Full Entry

Use short-term international collaborations, partnerships, or pilot projects to rehearse entry. These can help simulate the pressures of internationalization without long-term risk.

4. Recalibrate Timing with Performance Metrics

Balance enthusiasm with hard data. Use objective performance indicators to assess whether the firm is ready to scale internationally—even if the team feels personally prepared.

Spotlight by CeFEO, *Can previous international work experience among co-founders speed up global expansion and improve performance? Could working abroad together be the secret to smoother, smarter internationalization for new ventures?.* Downloaded on 26 June 2026 from <https://spotlight.cefeo.se>

CEFEO AUTHORS



Lucia Naldi

Professor

Jönköping International Business School

lucia.naldi@ju.se

PUBLISHED IN



Criaco, G., Naldi, L., & Zahra, S. A. (2022). Founders' prior shared international experience, time to first foreign market entry, and new venture performance. *Journal of Management*, 48(8), 2349–2381.

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/01492063211029701>

Spotlight is an online magazine that translates research from the Centre for Family Entrepreneurship and Ownership (CeFEO) at Jönköping International Business School, Jönköping University, into accessible insights for family business owners, practitioners, and policymakers.

Spotlight is supported by the WIFU Foundation. This partnership advances dialogue and education in responsible family entrepreneurship and ownership.
