

# Entrepreneurs' behavioural competencies for internationalisation

## Exploratory insights from the Italian context

Laura Cortellazzo, Sara Bonesso and Fabrizio Gerli  
*Department of Management, Università Ca' Foscari, Venice, Italy*

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The entrepreneur is the main decision-maker in small and medium-sized enterprises and is the principal force in the implementation of a firm's international strategy. Research has paid limited attention to the intangible aspects of human capital, namely behavioural competencies that may have an impact on the entrepreneur's ability to take advantage of international opportunities. This study addresses this gap, identifying the behavioural competencies that distinguish entrepreneurs who pursue a stronger internationalisation expansion beyond the European market.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A competency modelling process is implemented for a sample of Italian entrepreneurs. Data on behavioural competencies are obtained through the coding of behavioural event interviews administered to the entrepreneurs. Export intensity is adopted as a performance criterion to classify the entrepreneurs.

**Findings** – Three behavioural competencies (change catalyst, teamwork and organisational learning orientation) emerged as more significantly activated by entrepreneurs who show a higher export intensity in the global market.

**Research limitations/implications** – The exploratory nature of the study, conducted in a small sample and in a specific geographical area, may reduce the generalisability of the findings.

**Practical implications** – Entrepreneurs can become aware of the behavioural competencies needed for the implementation of internationalisation processes. Additionally, training programmes can be designed to promote the development of these behaviours.

**Originality/value** – Bridging the literature on international entrepreneurship, cross-cultural studies and competency-based research, this study highlights the role of behavioural competencies in the internationalisation process from a micro level of analysis. This article proposes a competency framework that can be adopted to assess a broader portfolio of entrepreneurs' behaviours.

**Keywords** Entrepreneurship, Internationalisation, Export intensity, Behavioural competencies

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

Internationalisation is considered a key driver of firm performance (Denicolai *et al.*, 2015; Schwens *et al.*, 2018) and represents a way by which small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) can pursue new opportunities, broadening their customer base, attaining larger production volumes, and leveraging resources in different markets (Lu and Beamish, 2001; Ruzzier *et al.*, 2007; Skrt and Antoncic, 2004).

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Although most studies investigate internationalisation processes at firm level (Knight, 2001; McDougall and Oviatt, 2000; Oviatt and McDougall, 2005), previous research has pointed out that, in SMEs, the central factor which explains a firm's international behaviour is the entrepreneur (Andersson, 2000). The entrepreneur, coherent with the industrial structure of European firms, is both the owner and the main decision-maker of the company, and thus represents the principal force behind the initiation, development, maintenance and success of the internationalisation process (e.g. Carpenter and Fredrickson, 2001; Ruzzier *et al.*, 2007; Zucchella *et al.*, 2007). According to Gartner (1989), the role of an entrepreneur can be better understood using an approach that focuses on what an entrepreneur does, rather than on what an entrepreneur is. Nevertheless, previous studies, underlining the crucial importance of the entrepreneur's human capital (Becker, 1993) in explaining the export performance (Lloyd-Reason and Mughan, 2002; Makovec Brencic, 2001; Ruzzier *et al.*, 2006), were mainly based on a 'what an entrepreneur is' approach. They maintain that the degree of export aggressiveness can be ascribed to entrepreneurs' characteristics, such as their educational level (Wiersema and Bantel, 1992), attitudes (Bijmolt and Zwart, 1994; Ogbuehi and Longfellow, 1994), international orientation (Dichtl *et al.*, 1990) and demographic characteristics (Manolova *et al.*, 2002; Morgan *et al.*, 2018). This body of research, even if it adopts an individual level of analysis, has primarily considered attitudes and tangible dimensions of the entrepreneur's human capital (such as education), devoting little attention to behavioural patterns.

This study adopts a behavioural approach, drawing on the theoretical framework of behavioural competencies as one of the major models of emotional intelligence (Ashkanasy and Daus, 2005; Cherniss, 2010; McEnrue and Groves, 2006). The concept of behavioural competency has been widespread in organisations since the seminal work of McClelland (1973) and, during the last decades, research has contributed to the analysis of those competencies that represent a critical differentiator of individual performance (Boyatzis, 1982; Boyatzis *et al.*, 2017; Gutierrez *et al.*, 2012; Spencer and Spencer, 1993; Ryan *et al.*, 2009). The identification of the individual behavioural attributes of effective leaders has received a great deal of attention in the competency literature, which has demonstrated that 'depending on the leader's context and situational factors, certain combinations of competencies are more important than others in order to be effective' (Hopkins *et al.*, 2015, p. 568).

The cross-cultural leadership literature has adopted a micro level of analysis in the internationalisation field of study (Bird *et al.*, 2010; Mendenhall and Osland, 2002; Yamakazi and Kayes, 2004), focusing on individual behavioural characteristics that leaders require to operate in a global context. Cross-cultural literature has provided a better understanding of the several key behavioural patterns that may be necessary to act successfully in an international environment. However, it does not take into account the specificities of the role of the entrepreneur, whose responsibilities and challenges may differ from those of global managers.

Thus, bridging the aforementioned streams of literature and using a behavioural competency-based approach, the purpose of this article is to explore the behavioural competencies of the entrepreneur that emerge as drivers of internationalisation in SMEs. In light of the above background, this study addresses the following research question: Which behavioural competencies distinguish those entrepreneurs who demonstrate a higher ability to take advantage of global internationalisation opportunities?

Coherent with the behavioural competency-based methodology, which considers performance in the workplace as the criterion for sampling, the empirical study has been conducted on a sample of Italian entrepreneurs of SMEs with different levels of performance in terms of export intensity in the global market. The behavioural event interview (BEI) technique, adopted as the primary source of data collection (McClelland, 1998; Spencer and Spencer, 1993), allowed the gathering of narratives of events of internationalisation undertaken by the entrepreneurs and their manifested behavioural competencies. The data analysis sought to identify the core set of competencies distinguishing those entrepreneurs

with stronger internationalisation expansion beyond European borders. As firms benefit from free exchange conditions and lower psychological distance in the European Union (EU) zone, only internationalisation beyond the EU is considered.

This study adds to the international entrepreneurship and competency-based research streams along two lines. First, it expands previous literature on entrepreneurship and internationalisation that adopts an individual level perspective (Mudalige *et al.*, 2019) by identifying new antecedents of export intensity related to the entrepreneurs' behavioural patterns. This is in line with the literature calling for more attention to be given to the explanatory mechanisms of higher firm performance located at the micro level (Abell *et al.*, 2008; Coff *et al.*, 2011; Felin *et al.*, 2012; Felin *et al.*, 2015). Second, it advances the competency-based literature investigating the relationship between behavioural competencies and export intensity, in contrast to prior studies that primarily considered economic and financial performance measures (Boyatzis *et al.*, 2012; Gutierrez *et al.*, 2012). Indeed, only a little research has investigated the impact of behavioural competencies on intermediate performance outcomes such as project success measures (Zhang and Fan, 2013). Adopting intermediate level outcomes as criteria sampling in competency-based research, this study contributes to disentangle the role of different behavioural competencies in the attainment of specific outcomes, and specifically extra-EU export intensity, that impact on the overall firm performance.

The article is structured as follows. In the next section, building on the literature on international entrepreneurship and behavioural competencies, the theoretical background of the study is presented. The following section describes the sample and the methodology used in the empirical analysis. Finally, after the description of the main results, conclusions and implications are drawn, discussing how entrepreneurs can develop competencies in order to strengthen their ability to expand their businesses beyond their national borders.

## Theoretical background

### *Behavioural competencies in the international entrepreneurship literature*

McDougall and Oviatt (2000) initially define international entrepreneurship based on the Miller/Covin and Slevin three-dimensional view of entrepreneurial orientation (Covin and Slevin, 1989; Wales, 2016). They maintain that 'international entrepreneurship is a combination of innovative, proactive, and risk-seeking behaviour that crosses national borders and is intended to create value in organisation' (McDougall and Oviatt, 2000, p. 903). According to Knight (2001), this three-dimensional international entrepreneurial orientation is the major success factor determining the international performance of the firm (Wach, 2015).

Some years later, Oviatt and McDougall (2005) refine their definition, moving towards Shane and Venkataraman's (2000) definition of entrepreneurship. They maintain that 'international entrepreneurship is the discovery, enactment, evaluation, and exploitation of opportunities – across national borders – to create future goods and services' and that 'actors (organisations, groups, or individuals) who discover, enact, evaluate, or exploit opportunities to create future goods or services and who cross national borders to do so are internationally entrepreneurial actors' (Oviatt and McDougall, 2005, p. 340). This adjustment implies that innovative, proactive, risk-taking behaviours are no longer considered international entrepreneurship in themselves, but may still enable the exploitation of opportunities across national borders, thus acquiring the role of antecedents. Furthermore, the authors endorse that organisations, groups and individuals can all be considered internationally entrepreneurial actors, thus emphasising the need to explore all levels of analysis. Literature, however, has adopted the firm as the primary level of analysis (Coviello and Jones, 2004), and has focused its attention mainly on the content of firms' internationalisation strategies (Zahara *et al.*, 2005), rather than on the processes by which these strategies are developed and implemented (Zahara and George, 2002). Recent studies (Gallego-Roquelaure, 2019; Jones

*et al.*, 2011) claim the need for a greater understanding of the role of entrepreneurs in internationalisation, as the entrepreneur can be a driving force in many organisational processes (Andersson, 2000; Ruzzier *et al.*, 2007; Zucchella *et al.*, 2007). For example, the entrepreneur's willingness to take risks may highly influence internationalisation choices. Risk-taking applied to an individual level of analysis is defined as the entrepreneur's ability to tolerate risk in his/her decision-making (Li *et al.*, 2015), and it assumes a high tolerance for ambiguity and a willingness to decide (Baum and Wally, 2003). A couple of studies show the influence of entrepreneurs' risk-related behaviours on internationalisation outcomes. For example, Ruzzier *et al.* (2007) reveal that the entrepreneur's environmental risk perceptions influence the firm's degree of internationalisation (Ruzzier *et al.*, 2007). Similarly, Li *et al.* (2015) demonstrate that risk-taking propensity at the individual level has a positive impact on the internationalisation speed of small young firms. According to Fan and Phan (2007), the ability to try despite an uncertain outcome allows entrepreneurs to respond quickly to opportunities and threats in foreign markets.

Together with risk-taking behaviour, proactiveness has been used to define international entrepreneurship (McDougall and Oviatt, 2000), and has been considered one of the main entrepreneurial capabilities (Freeman and Cavusgil, 2007). According to Miller (1983), proactiveness refers to initiative and the anticipation of opportunities in foreign markets. Rauch *et al.* (2009) define it as the ability to predict future market changes. An entrepreneur's initiative allows understanding of a situation in advance and the ability to act accordingly. Indeed, the ability to perceive in advance the dynamics and the evolution of the international environment can be determinant in seeing and exploiting opportunities. Covin and Lumpkin (2011) add to this definition by including the concept of perseverance in ensuring initiatives are implemented, which recalls the ability to work hard, despite the challenges, towards the achievement of an objective, commonly defined as achievement orientation.

The third characteristic attributed to international entrepreneurship is innovativeness, defined as the tendency to engage in creativity, novelty and experimentation that may result in new products, services or processes (Lumpkin and Dess, 1996). Although most studies in international entrepreneurship do not specifically address innovativeness, an expanding body of literature in the field of entrepreneurship has begun to analyse the cognitive and explorative competencies that help entrepreneurs generate new ideas (e.g. Dyer *et al.*, 2008; Puccio *et al.*, 2011). Some studies have underlined the importance of focusing on the analysis of the cognitive competencies that allow entrepreneurs to be effective in the internationalisation process (Nummela *et al.*, 2004). Baron (2006) highlights that opportunity recognition is strictly related to the skill of 'connecting the dots' between environmental changes and needs – namely, pattern recognition; it is defined as the process through which people 'perceive complex and seemingly unrelated events as constituting identifiable patterns' (Baron, 2006, p. 106). Opportunity recognition involves the identification of patterns among trends, changes and events which seem not to be correlated. This is an effort people often undertake in order to understand the world, and it is considered one of the main facilitators of entrepreneurs' opportunity identification. Entrepreneurs acting in an international environment may also need superior ability in analysing situations, conducting an accurate examination, and conceiving causes and effects of events with a system thinking approach.

Dyer *et al.* (2008) suggest that entrepreneurs may recognise opportunities not only because of their cognitive abilities, but also because of their ability to get access to information. Autio *et al.* (2000) underline that knowledge and vision are key elements in international opportunity seeking and assume a relevant role in the new venture theory of internationalisation. Knowledge is also the core of the process model of internationalisation developed by Johanson and Vahlne (1977), in which knowledge clearly boosts international expansion, as well as progress through the incremental stages of internationalisation.

Oviatt and McDougall (2005) recognise that in entrepreneurial firms, knowledge tends to be individualised to the founder. Previous studies mostly explain the entrepreneur's knowledge creation or information seeking by means of his past working or living experiences abroad (Bloodgood *et al.*, 1996; Domurath and Patzelt, 2019; Reuber and Fischer, 1997; Shrader *et al.*, 2000). However, Dyer *et al.* (2008) show that entrepreneurs' patterns of behaviour might also contribute disproportionately to information access and opportunity recognition. These behavioural patterns concern questioning, observing, experimenting and idea networking. Dyer *et al.* (2011) conceive questioning as the capacity to ask questions, particularly those that challenge the status quo, and to ask 'what if' questions about the future. Observing refers to the ability to pay attention to everyday experiences in the personal context and outside it, while experimenting defines behaviours related to trying new things by means of experimentation (Dyer *et al.*, 2011). Idea networking refers to the extent to which entrepreneurs actually test their ideas with a network of individuals (Dyer *et al.*, 2008).

A long tradition of studies has highlighted networking as one of the key features of entrepreneurship and internationalisation. After the initial interest in networks and relationships by Coviello and Munro (1995, 1997), several studies adopted a network perspective to explain entrepreneurial internationalisation (Kirwan *et al.*, 2019; Masiello and Izzo, 2019; Oviatt and McDougall, 2005; Urban, 2019), showing that foreign market entry is often a reflection of the firm's network ties (Jones *et al.*, 2011). The significant role of entrepreneurs' personal networks is related especially to the initial phase of the internationalisation process (Coviello, 2006; Crick and Spence, 2005; Ghauri *et al.*, 2003). McDougall *et al.* (1994) show that networks influence founders' international business choices to a greater extent than psychological distance. Ties not only determine the possibility of gaining resources and information which can be useful in the recognition of opportunities (Baron, 2006; Kontinen and Ojala, 2011), but also allow exposure to diverse ideas and perspectives (Dyer *et al.*, 2008) and the acquisition knowledge of international markets (Bell *et al.*, 2003). Thus, network relationships offer the possibility to control assets and resources that provide a sustainable advantage (McDougall *et al.*, 1994; Oviatt and McDougall, 1994).

The importance of networks in the internationalisation of firms has been highlighted by various authors adopting a firm level approach (see, for example, Coviello, 2006; Johanson and Vahlne, 2009). Adopting an individual level perspective, this study maintains that, in small and medium businesses especially, the entrepreneur is the key driver of network creation and management through actions and behaviours aimed at building and maintaining informal relationships (Boyatzis, 2009; Masiello and Izzo, 2019).

In their latest internationalisation process model, Johanson and Vahlne (2009) also recognise the need to address the affective and emotional dimensions of entrepreneurial relationships. They consider trust as a key factor in relationship development (Morgan and Hunt, 1994) that could affect both external business relationships (Johanson and Mattsson, 1987) and internal relationships (Matiusinaite and Sekliuckiene, 2015). According to Victor (2006), the entrepreneur is the main actor who builds the organisational culture and develops trust and common sense in the organisation. However, little attention has been given by the extant literature to defining what are the actual behaviours that entrepreneurs need to put in practice to develop such trust. Entrepreneurs may need to be able to understand others' points of view, to be able to understand their needs and support them, and to demonstrate collaboration and willingness to help others improve.

Besides the aforementioned patterns of investigation, the literature on international entrepreneurship does not explore other behavioural characteristics of the entrepreneurs that could influence their ability to enter foreign markets and to enlarge their international activities. To overcome this limitation, this article takes into consideration the literature on cross-cultural competencies, which identifies skills that characterise people who manage cross-cultural activities, even if the focus is not specifically on entrepreneurs.

*Behavioural competencies in the cross-cultural literature*

Since the early 1990s, scholars have been studying global leaders and attempting to delineate the competencies that are critical to their success. Extant reviews reveal that a considerable number of competencies have been related to global leadership effectiveness (Bird *et al.*, 2010). Hence, scholars have systematised literature results by grouping competencies into thematic categories and empirical clusters (e.g. Bird *et al.*, 2010; Mendenhall and Osland, 2002; Yamakazi and Kayes, 2004). Bird *et al.* (2010) classify the main competencies resulting from the global leadership literature into three major competency domains. The first concerns relationship management, which comprises emotional sensitivity or empathy, and adaptability. Empathy refers to the ability to understand people's emotions and points of view, while adaptability is defined as the ability to modify ideas and behaviours, to compromise, to be receptive to new ways of doing things, and interpersonal engagement (Bird *et al.*, 2010). Similarly, Yamakazi and Kayes (2004) highlight the abilities of adaptability, building relationships and managing others, which Mendenhall and Osland (2002) further specify, including the abilities to inspire and motivate, to manage conflicts, to negotiate, and to empower others. The second main category identified by Bird *et al.* (2010), perception management, concerns aspects that more closely recall the characteristics highlighted in the international entrepreneurship literature. Recurring competencies concern behaviours connected to being curious and open to cultural diversity, such as listening and observing (Yamakazi and Kayes, 2004), and being able to cope with or embrace uncertainty (Black *et al.*, 1999; Bird *et al.*, 2010; Yamakazi and Kayes, 2004), such as risk-taking. The third category concerns self-management behaviours (Bird *et al.*, 2010), such as optimism, self-confidence, self-identity or integrity, emotional resilience and stress management. An international dimension adds complexity to the organisation and may lead to stress and communication difficulties. Managing these aspects not only requires the adoption of significant leadership behaviours and the ability to organise, inspire and motivate employees, but it also requires self-control. In addition, optimism, in the sense of having a belief that the final result will be favourable, has demonstrated a positive link with opportunity recognition (Baron, 2006).

Although research on cross-cultural competencies suggests a much broader set of behaviours may be required to be effective in international contexts, these studies mainly focus on global leaders, thus investigating those behaviours that are important for intercultural effectiveness and to live and work in a foreign context as an expatriate (Bird *et al.*, 2010). SMEs' entrepreneurs may benefit from the adoption of global leadership behaviours that foster their ability to manage cross-cultural relationships. However, the entrepreneurs' purpose differs from being an effective expatriate, presuming a different set of behaviours may be needed to expand one's business in a foreign country rather than to live and work in a foreign country.

*The behavioural competency framework*

In order to accomplish the aim of this study, a behavioural competency framework has been adopted. This allows us to focus on an individual level of analysis, based on behaviours that entrepreneurs show to take advantage of global international opportunities. As highlighted in the previous sections, international entrepreneurship literature mainly investigates firm-level characteristics. Only a few studies explore entrepreneurs' behaviours, but still refer to a limited set. Thus, this study relies on a broad definition of behavioural competencies (Boyatzis, 2009) to investigate a wider set of behaviours that entrepreneurs may perform to achieve internationalisation outcomes. A behavioural competency is defined as a set of 'related but different' behaviours 'organized around an underlying construct called intent' (Boyatzis, 2009, p. 750) that 'lead to or cause effective or superior performance' (Boyatzis, 1982, p. 23). Therefore, the concept of competency encompasses both actions (that is, a set of alternative behaviours varying according to the situation) and the intent that moves individuals to manifest those behaviours (Boyatzis, 2009). These behavioural capabilities have been shown empirically to enable people to pursue effectiveness in the organisational

context (Beigi and Shirmohammadi, 2011; Brown *et al.*, 2003; Emmerling and Boyatzis, 2012; Emmerling and Cherniss, 2003; Williams, 2008; Zhang and Fan, 2013). Previous studies on effective leaders show the applicability of the behavioural competency framework across industries (Covey, 1996; Goleman, 1998; Sigmar *et al.*, 2012) and across cultural contexts (Boyatzis *et al.*, 1999; Boyatzis and Sala, 2004; Padilla-Meléndez *et al.*, 2014).

A key feature of the competency-based perspective is that it analyses behavioural patterns related to performance. While most behavioural models at the individual level result in a description of important skills for a certain category of person, as often occurs in cross-cultural studies, the behavioural competency approach allows the identification of distinctive behavioural patterns of outstanding performers (Spencer and Spencer, 1993). Spencer and Spencer (1993) define threshold competencies as those skills that are required for a minimum efficacy level in a certain position, and define distinctive competencies those that discriminate outstanding from average and below average performers. Most studies in the competency field look at performance measures related to financial, individual or organisational outcomes (e.g. Boyatzis, 2006a), or to the performance level of a task (e.g. Dreyfus, 2008; Koman and Wolff, 2008). As underlined in the competency-based research (Boyatzis, 1982; Gutierrez *et al.*, 2012; Hopkins *et al.*, 2015), according to the specific situation and performance outcome considered, some competencies may be more relevant than others. This study addresses an intermediate performance outcome, namely internationalisation, and aims at identifying those behavioural competencies that discriminate entrepreneurs with higher global internationalisation performance.

## Method

### Sample

This study was conducted on a sample of entrepreneurs operating in northern Italy. Specifically, their companies are located in the Veneto region, characterised by a high presence of SMEs with a strong entrepreneurial tradition. The Veneto is an example of what was called 'the Italian economic miracle' in the 1960s, becoming one of the leading Italian industrial regional economies. Its economy is traditionally directed at exports, and it is internationally known for the presence of its industrial district, including mechanics, the agro-food sector, fashion, furniture and eyewear production.

These companies and their entrepreneurs have been identified as high performers in their industries according to the following criteria. First, the database AIDA, which reports all economic and financial information about companies operating in Italy, was consulted. In order to restrict the study to SMEs, all the private and public limited companies operating in the region that presented total sales between €5 million and €50 million in the period 2008–2012 were selected. This size criterion allowed those micro companies whose organisational structure and internal resources limited the entrepreneurs from undertaking a more global approach in the firm's internationalisation to be removed from the sample.

Second, for each company, its return on assets (ROA) for the period 2003–2007 (thus before the economic crisis) and between 2008 and 2012 (that is, during and after the economic crisis) was retrieved. ROA was adopted as a performance criterion to identify those companies that performed better during the economic crisis. In comparison to other economic indicators (such as return on investments), ROA is considered most appropriate for comparing how well different firms within the same industry generate profits with the assets they have. Indeed, the analysis of ROA was conducted in order to restrict the sample to those firms that showed a higher mean ROA value during the crisis and post-crisis period (2008–2012) than in the pre-crisis period (2003–2007). Among these companies, those that belonged to the top quartile of the ROA value of comparable firms (in the same sector and with the same size) were identified. Applying this criterion, the restricted sample was composed of 570 companies. This criterion was used to restrict the sample as the aim was to identify the behavioural characteristics that differentiate those entrepreneurs who obtain better results in terms of

internationalisation; the threshold condition to be included in the sample was therefore to have had a higher economic performance during the economic crisis. This means that, among the most successful firms, this study analysed the characteristics that cause a different internationalisation performance. Prior studies have demonstrated that during adverse economic conditions, export-driven entrepreneurs achieve higher financial and economic performance, and that entrepreneurs' human capital plays a positive role in the probability of exporting in times of crisis (Giotopoulos and Vettas, 2018).

Subsequently, each company and 31 entrepreneurs who agreed to participate in the research were contacted. The profile of the final sample of the small and medium-sized companies is described in Table I.

Based on the competency-based methodology (McClelland, 1998; Spencer and Spencer, 1993), a competency model was developed to identify distinctive behavioural competencies that differentiate entrepreneurs with a stronger global internationalisation performance. Competencies can be measured by the number of times a person describes a certain behaviour in a BEI (McClelland, 1998). Consequently, data on actual behaviours activated by the entrepreneurs in salient and recent incidents/events in firm internationalisation were collected through semi-structured interviews using the BEI technique (Boyatzis, 1998; McClelland, 1998). Interviews were transcribed and coded according to a set of behavioural competencies identified in the literature over the last three decades of research (for instance, Bird *et al.*, 2010; Boyatzis, 1982; Dyer *et al.*, 2008; Mitchelmore and Rowley, 2010; Morris and Franklin, 2011; Puccio *et al.*, 2011; Spencer and Spencer, 1993; Yamazaki and Kayes, 2004). Then, the extra-EU export intensity of the firm was considered as the performance criterion: the entrepreneurs were classified into two groups, above and below average performers, according to their level of extra-EU export intensity. Finally, the composition of the entrepreneurs' competency portfolio was analysed to identify the distinctive competencies that differentiate the above from below average performers. Each phase of the competency modelling process is described in the following sections.

#### Data collection

The data collection was conducted between March 2014 and July 2015 and included the administration of BEIs to identify the competencies, and an online survey to gather the internationalisation performance.

The BEIs were conducted by a trained interviewer (Boyatzis, 1998; McClelland, 1998). This technique is a development of the critical incident interview (Flanagan, 1954), which is focused on gathering information on specific, salient and recent events in one's life according to the biodata method (Dailey, 1971). It has been widely used to obtain rich and detailed information on the context, behaviours and strategies adopted by the interviewee, and to structure qualitative data (Campion *et al.*, 2011; Chell, 2004). Moreover, despite its retrospective nature, the BEI has shown a higher predictive validity than respondent measures (Boyatzis, 2009; Ryan *et al.*, 2009), because it is not affected by possible biases and unreliable responses associated with self-

Average total sales	Between 10 million and 50 million euros
Average number of employees	115
Industrial sector (NACE classifications)	Manufacturing sector: 26 companies (21% of companies produce machinery and equipment; 17% food products; 17% chemical products; 17% other manufacturing, 12% non-metallic mineral products; 8% metal products; 8% wearing apparels) Wholesale and retail trade: two companies Information and communication sector: two companies Transporting and storage: one company

**Table I.**  
Profile of the SMEs included in the sample ( $n = 30$ )

assessment (Dunning *et al.*, 2004), since a very high level of detail is sought in the interview. The use of BEI also minimises the possible bias usually ascribed to the interview technique, since it limits recall bias and enhances accuracy, focusing on factual evidences of what informants did and avoiding speculation (Spencer and Spencer, 1993). Indeed, the interviewer probed the thought processes that occurred while respondents were engaging in specific behaviours. For instance, when the interviewee began a sentence with 'Usually, I' or 'Generally', the interviewer immediately asked for an example of when or what he or she actually did in the incident, what was the situation, who was involved, and what happened. The interviewee is also asked to re-create what people said in situations in a dramatic dialogue form, like the script of a play. The interviewer does not use present, future and conditional tense questions, nor 'why' questions, in order to avoid abstractions. Instead of asking why the interviewee did something, the interviewer asks what was going through their mind when they did that. When the interviewee during the narration of the incident refers to a collective action using the pronoun 'we', the interviewer invites him or her to specify who 'we' are, and what specifically he/she did.

In this research, the attention of the interviewer was focused on gathering information from each respondent on five specific critical internationalisation incidents that occurred within the previous twelve months in expanding his/her business in the international environment. A total of 155 incidents were collected, and each interview, which lasted on average 1.5 h, was recorded and typewritten. Flanagan (1954, p. 327) defines an incident as 'any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act. To be critical, an incident must occur in a situation where the purpose or intent of the act seems fairly clear to the observer and where its consequences are sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning its effects'. At the beginning of the interview, the respondent was asked to identify those incidents in which he/she felt effective in improving the level of internationalisation of the firm. Specifically, such events concerned the identification of business opportunities and the implementation of the decision to operate beyond the domestic market. Some examples of incidents/events identified by the respondents concerned the redesign or the setup of the foreign commercial department, the recruitment of foreign sales representatives, the establishment of foreign branches/subsidiaries or export consortia, the acquisition of a new foreign client, or the revision of the product offerings for a specific foreign market.

Before going into the detail of each incident, the interviewee was asked to provide a brief overview of what led up to the situation, how he/she got involved, and what the actual outcome was, answering questions like: What was the end result of this situation? How did this situation make you feel effective? This allowed the interviewer to understand if the incident identified by the entrepreneur fitted with the aim of the research, namely actions undertaken to improve the internationalisation of the firm and achieve a positive outcome. During the narration of the incident, the interviewer asked probing questions in order to detect the intent underlying the behaviours, guiding the respondent to specify the context, the people involved, what he/she thought, felt, said and actually did, the problems encountered, and the solutions and outcomes attained (Dainty *et al.*, 2005).

Regarding the international performance, the firm's export intensity was considered, since this indicator is the most common measure for the internationalisation level (Denicolai *et al.*, 2015; Knight and Kim, 2009; Shoham, 1998). Data were obtained through completion of an online survey in which the entrepreneurs were asked to report the company's EU and extra-EU sales as a percentage of total sales. Since in the case of SMEs, entrepreneurs are the main decision-makers, they may account for much of the difference in their company's performance (Mollick, 2012). In the firms selected, the main strategic decisions are made at the entrepreneurial level rather than at the level of top management teams. The degree of centralisation of the decision-making process of the sampled SMEs was investigated during the interviews. Specifically, each entrepreneur was asked to evaluate their level of autonomy in making decisions in their

company, including those concerning international growth. Consequently, entrepreneurs who were the owners of the analysed firms appeared to play a crucial role, from opportunity recognition to the implementation of internationalisation initiatives. As prior studies in SMEs – which adopted the theoretical lens of international entrepreneurship – have demonstrated, the decision-maker's action has a relevant impact on the internationalisation intensity of the firm (Deligianni *et al.*, 2016; Hsu *et al.*, 2013; Masiello and Izzo, 2019; Mudalige *et al.*, 2019), since small firms are less hierarchical in structure and present a high level of centralisation.

#### *Coding of behavioural competencies*

The analysis was conducted in two steps. First, a codebook of behavioural competencies was developed for the subsequent coding. In order to do so, the existing competency dictionaries, which focus on the competencies needed to obtain effective results in leadership roles, were reviewed (for example, Boyatzis, 1982; Spencer and Spencer, 1993). Then, the codebook was integrated with competencies identified in streams of research related to entrepreneurship and internationalisation (for example, Dyer *et al.*, 2008; Mitchelmore and Rowley, 2010; Morris and Franklin, 2011; Puccio *et al.*, 2011) and cross-cultural competencies (for example, Bird *et al.*, 2010; Yamazaki and Kayes, 2004). This systematic analysis of the literature allowed the identification of thirty-six competencies that were conceptually organised into six thematic areas. Each thematic area is described as follows and encompasses competencies that theoretically present similarities in the behaviours manifested.

- (1) *Awareness*. Competencies that allow entrepreneurs to understand themselves, other people, and organisational relationships (emotional awareness, empathy and organisational awareness).
- (2) *Action*. Competencies that allow entrepreneurs to realise ideas, plans and solutions, working methodically and with initiative (efficiency orientation, achievement orientation, positive orientation, initiative, change catalyst, planning, adaptability, self-control, attention to detail, risk-taking, risk management).
- (3) *Social*. Competencies that allow entrepreneurs to interact positively with other people and help them to work with others effectively (influence, conflict management, teamwork, developing others, networking, inspirational leadership, service orientation, engaging others).
- (4) *Cognitive*. Competencies that allow entrepreneurs to use information and analysis effectively to interpret phenomena or situations (systems thinking, diagnostic thinking, pattern recognition, analogical thinking, associative thinking, lateral thinking, quantitative analysis).
- (5) *Exploratory*. Competencies related to the activation of processes of innovation generation (questioning, observing, experimenting).
- (6) *Strategic*. Competencies related to strategic thinking and interpretation of the competitive environment (visionary thinking, strategic thinking, organisational learning orientation, opportunity recognition).

A full description of these competencies is presented in the Appendix. For each competency, a definition is provided which contains the specific intent that activates individual behaviours. Due to the exploratory nature of the analysis, this broad repertoire of competencies derived from the literature has been adopted in order to achieve an in-depth understanding of the behaviours most frequently activated by the interviewees in the incidents described.

The second step of the analysis consisted of the coding process. The transcribed interviews were coded independently by the authors to ensure reliability through multiple,

independent data coding (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Since each competency is a set of related but different behaviours organised around an underlying construct called the intent, the coders were trained with repeated practice to detect the intent behind the behaviour in each incident in order to codify the corresponding competency. To claim that a person had demonstrated the competency, the coder was asked to determine both at least one of the behavioural indicators in the codebook and the intent as described in the definition of the competency. For instance, for the competency 'empathy' the intent is to understand others, and the behavioural indicators through which it can be manifested are: (1) the person understands the reasons for others' behaviour; (2) the person accurately reads, interprets the moods, feelings or nonverbal behaviour of others; (3) the person listens to others by asking questions and waiting for their reply, or takes time to allow another person to explain or describe something at his/her own pace and in his/her own way (Boyatzis, 1998). The behavioural coding of the BEI has been shown to predict effectiveness statistically and significantly in a wide variety of managers and executives (Boyatzis, 1982; Boyatzis *et al.*, 2002; Boyatzis *et al.*, 2017; Camuffo *et al.*, 2012; Dreyfus, 2008; Gutierrez *et al.*, 2012). Inter-rater reliability estimates showed a high level of agreement (Cohen's kappa = 0.87). Afterwards, a dataset was constructed in which, for each entrepreneur and for each event, each single competency was categorised as 1 if present in the event and 0 otherwise.

### Measures

*Behavioural competencies.* In order to measure the level of manifestation of behavioural competencies, all interviews were coded for frequency of occurrence (Boyatzis, 1998). Thus, a competency was scored every time it emerged at least once in one event, and the frequency of occurrence was calculated considering the number of times it occurred in all events, with a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 5.

*Internationalisation performance.* To measure the degree of internationalisation performance, international export intensity was adopted, calculating foreign sales as a percentage of total sales (Shih, 2010), which is the most common measure for internationalisation level (Denicolai *et al.*, 2015; Knight and Kim, 2009; Shoham, 1998). Due to the free exchange conditions that characterise the EU area and the less prominent cultural differences among countries in the EU zone, only the percentage of foreign extra-EU sales was considered. In addition, since the firms under investigation present a high level of centralisation, which is also typical of the industrial context of the Veneto region, the international export intensity is consequently dependent on the strategic decisions taken by the entrepreneur, consistent with his/her active role, as described above. In order to distinguish the companies in the sample according to their performance, all companies were classified according to this measure and those who had a higher than average level of internationalisation were considered as the best. In the sample, the average percentage of extra-EU sales was 29.25 per cent. Twelve companies were classified as above the average; nineteen companies were classified as below the average.

### Results

Considering the overall sample of entrepreneurs, almost all behavioural competencies included in the codebook adopted for the coding process and derived from the literature review were shown by the interviewees during the incidents, confirming the complexity underlying the internationalisation process, which requires a broad repertoire of individual behaviours. Table II reports the mean value of the relative frequency of occurrence of each competency in the two sub-samples of entrepreneurs (above and below the average) according to the level of export intensity of their firm.

The most frequently manifested competencies in the events narrated by both groups of entrepreneurs are strategic thinking, which is included in the thematic area of strategic

**Table II.**  
Frequency distribution  
of behavioural  
competencies in the  
above and below  
average groups

	Above average performers (%)		Below average performers (%)
Change catalyst	57.5	Strategic thinking	57.4
Strategic thinking	57.4	Diagnostic thinking	47.1
Diagnostic thinking	48.2	Emotional awareness	42.1
Observation	38.2	Observation	39.1
Efficiency orientation	34.7	Achievement orientation	38.8
Achievement orientation	31.8	Opportunity recognition	36.6
Initiative	31.4	Change catalyst	35.3
Organisational learning orientation	31.0	Empathy	33.8
Opportunity recognition	30.3	Efficiency orientation	32.3
Visioning	28.9	Initiative	29.6
Emotional awareness	28.5	Experimenting	28.0
Risk management	24.6	Risk management	25.7
Developing others	24.0	Service management	22.3
Service orientation	23.6	Influence	21.9
Risk taking	21.5	Organisational awareness	21.7
Influence	21.1	Organisational learning orientation	18.7
Organisational awareness	20.3	Visioning	17.8
Empathy	19.7	Inspirational leadership	16.8
Teamwork	18.6	Developing others	15.2
Engaging others	18.5	Risk taking	13.9
Experimenting	18.3	Questioning	12.3
Inspirational leadership	16.8	Attention to detail	12.1
Questioning	14.6	Networking	12.1
Networking	10.6	Pattern recognition	11.8
Associative thinking	10.0	Systems thinking	10.9
Attention to detail	6.1	Engaging others	10.7
Pattern recognition	5.4	Associative thinking	8.2
Adaptability	4.9	Analogical thinking	6.6
Positive orientation	3.3	Conflict management	6.2
Planning	3.3	Lateral thinking	5.6
Systems thinking	2.1	Adaptability	4.5
Lateral thinking	1.7	Positive orientation	4.2
Self-control	0.0	Teamwork	4.2
Conflict management	0.0	Planning	1.1
Analogical thinking	0.0	Self-control	0.0
Quantitative analysis	0.0	Quantitative analysis	0.0

behavioural competencies, and diagnostic thinking, which is part of the cognitive behavioural competencies. This means that entrepreneurs promote internationalisation initiatives first of all by understanding the strategic and competitive environment of the company. Strategic thinking also describes the propensity to benchmark with other firms and pursue distinctive differences and advantages compared to competitors. Through diagnostic thinking, entrepreneurs then critically analyse the nature of the actual situation, such as potential barriers to foreign market entry. By investigating in depth the characteristics of the geographical market, entrepreneurs aim to penetrate and understand them carefully. Thus, by using these two behavioural competencies, they are able to obtain the information they need in order to make a well-informed decision.

In the second step of the analysis, the two sub-samples were compared to identify the set of behavioural competencies that distinguish the above average performers. The Mann-Whitney U one-tailed test was applied since, according to the competency modelling framework, entrepreneurs who attain better extra-EU export performance manifest a specific set of behavioural competencies in comparison to the entrepreneurs classified in the group of below average performers. The results show that three competencies characterise the group

of outstanding performers. The first is change catalyst ( $p$ -value 0.048), which belongs to the thematic area of action competencies; the second is teamwork ( $p$ -value 0.078), which belongs to social competencies; and the third is organisational learning orientation ( $p$ -value 0.071), which refers to strategic competencies.

The change catalyst competency is the ability to recognise when a change is necessary, defending the need to change even when facing obstacles (Boyatzis, 1982; Carter and Chu-May, 2012), and personally leading the change.

As maintained by Knight and Kim (2009, p. 257), 'fundamental changes in business philosophy and orientation are required to succeed in an international, as opposed to a domestic, marketplace'. Shifting the firm orientation from the domestic market to the foreign one requires the implementation of relevant changes in terms of new structure, behaviours and cultural approaches, such as the establishment of an international sales department, the development of a network of foreign sales agents, or the redesign of the supply and production network in different countries. Entrepreneurs must support their collaborators and employees to become aware of the changes needed to compete in the international market by anticipating the possible resistance to change and removing the barriers that the internationalisation process implies.

The following extract from an interview exemplifies the activation of a change catalyst.

I am strengthening the commercial office by building a team who can manage all the export activities that so far have been handled by myself personally. This implies a process of empowering and training devoted to the collaborators. I am doing the same in the technical department. This is due to the fact that in the last two years, I am shifting the focus from the European market, which is already consolidated, to a global one that is less structured and requires a different organisational structure. I personally promote the growth of the departments and their formalisation. I introduced a different approach to data collection and analysis, more proactive in comparison to the past, in order to plan in advance the foreign sales – for instance, the use of the budget and the planning of commercial actions. (Entrepreneur 19)

During the narration of this incident, the entrepreneur showed in this part of the interview the intent to initiate and manage a change in the sales department in order to approach the extra-EU market. As emerged in the extract, the entrepreneur personally led the redesign of the structure and the formalisation of the foreign department, as well as the training of the employees. Moreover, he motivated the need to change the approach and the related techniques through which data have to be collected and analysed.

The behavioural indicators applied for the coding process of change catalyst are: (1) the person removes barriers to change; (2) the person personally leads change initiatives; and (3) the person calls attention to the need for change. As illustrated in the method section, a competency can be codified if the following conditions are met: the intent of the interviewee emerged and at least one of the behavioural indicators in the codebook was activated.

A second distinctive competency that emerged from the analysis is teamwork, which belongs to the thematic area of social competencies. The intent of persons that demonstrated this competency is to be respectful, collaborative and helpful to the group (Boyatzis, 2009; Salas *et al.*, 2016). Individuals show this competence through the following indicators: (1) the person creates symbols of group identity, pride, trust or team effort; (2) the person acts to promote commitment to a team, task or shared goal through friendly, personal contact; and (3) the person explicitly communicates to others the need for cooperation or teamwork within the group. In order to succeed in their internationalisation endeavours, entrepreneurs need to rely on a sales workforce prepared to sell in specific foreign markets and committed to the firm's internationalisation goals. As observed by Lehto (2015), it is crucial for entrepreneurs to understand how to develop and adapt their future offering to target markets and different contexts. The development and evaluation of offerings and the establishment of long-term

relationships with foreign customers can be attained only if the entrepreneurs engage the sales force in international growth. This is the case of an entrepreneur who, during the narration of an incident (successful management of the relationship with a foreign client), relied on teamwork behaviours to foster communication within the commercial department and stimulated employees to discuss the information gathered through their individual interaction with potential new clients:

In the commercial area, I stimulated the collaborators to meet more often in order to share the opportunities that each of them identified in the market while interacting with new foreign customers and high potential clients, especially in the geographical areas in which our company is not present yet. (Entrepreneur 20)

According to the behavioural indicators that describe teamwork, this entrepreneur induced others to engage actively and enthusiastically in order to identify new opportunities to satisfy clients operating in extra-EU markets. Through frequent meetings and the promotion of different ways of sharing information, he reinforced the team spirit and encouraged the participation of all.

The third distinctive competency that characterises entrepreneurs with a stronger global international performance is organisational learning orientation. Entrepreneurs who manifested this competency in the events narrated showed the intent to develop the knowledge base of the company through learning processes. Individuals show this competence through the following indicators: (1) the person promotes the development and sharing of new and valuable knowledge inside the organisation or among organisations; (2) the person identifies and enhances the knowledge developed through new experiences; and (3) the person acts to make new knowledge a common heritage of the organisation.

Internationalisation requires the acquisition of new knowledge, resources and processes which are specific to the geographical area that the firm aims to serve. As argued by [Kungwansupaphan and Siengthai \(2014, p. 569\)](#), entrepreneurs 'use and combine a needed set of resources across national borders to internationalize a firm'. Therefore, the ability of entrepreneurs to define appropriate organisational structures and systems, suitable for facilitating knowledge-sharing and continuous learning, represents a critical factor for coping with the uncertain and fast-changing nature of a foreign market environment. Thus, entrepreneurs through this competency favour the development and sharing of organisational knowledge necessary to operate successfully in foreign markets ([Autio et al., 2000](#); [Johanson and Vahlne, 1977](#)).

As an example, an entrepreneur who narrated in an incident the establishment of a consortium project among SMEs, demonstrated during the interview the manifestation of an organisational learning orientation:

I launched the idea of creating a consortium with ten other small-sized firms with the aim to enter the US market. I am currently the president of this consortium and the person who proposes the initiatives that can be undertaken. We meet once a month to share experiences and results. I also set up a blog to streamline communication and enhance reciprocal learning. (Entrepreneur 6)

The competency emerged when he described his behaviours aimed at identifying best practices of internationalisation. The entrepreneur favoured knowledge-sharing assimilation among companies which are partners of the consortium.

An organisational learning orientation was identified in another entrepreneur when he narrated an incident of foreign branch creation:

In five years, I created six branches abroad to guarantee a direct contact with the foreign clients, in order to get acquainted with the local culture and be inside the specific market logics. I developed a learning path, acquiring experience after each set up, and replicating the good practices developed. (Entrepreneur 11)

The entrepreneur promoted practices of knowledge accumulation and assimilation inside the company in order to improve the organisational resources of the firm.

These results on the distinctive competencies that differentiate the sub-sample of outstanding performers emphasise that entrepreneurs, to strengthen their presence in the global markets, rely on a complex set of actions, and social and strategic behavioural competencies.

## Discussion and conclusion

### *Theoretical contribution*

This research contributes theoretically to the international entrepreneurship and competency-based literatures in several ways.

Firstly, it adds to the international entrepreneurship literature which claims that 'despite the growing salience of international SMEs, there has been little research to investigate the intangible resources that these firms employ in order to expand abroad' (Knight and Kim, 2009, p. 255). Specifically, the research advances understanding of the characteristics of entrepreneurs' intangible human capital that impacts firm international performance. Starting from the assumption that entrepreneurs, especially in SMEs, make decisions that have an impact on the whole organisation and on its results and consequently define the internationalisation strategy of the firm, a competency model was developed aimed at identifying the distinctive behavioural competencies that characterise those entrepreneurs who achieve superior global international performance in terms of extra-EU export intensity. Differently from the established literature that analyses the competencies necessary for international entrepreneurs, such as tolerance of ambiguity, proactivity and networking, the study demonstrates that three competencies, namely change catalyst, teamwork and organisational learning orientation, seem to distinguish those entrepreneurs that achieve a higher performance in global foreign markets.

Secondly, it contributes to research that has highlighted the relevance of the individual level of analysis in explaining performance differences between firms (Crossland and Hambrick, 2011; Gimeno *et al.*, 1997; Sadler-Smith *et al.*, 2003). According to Denicolai *et al.* (2015, p. 394), 'In SMEs, decision-making power is generally in the hands of one or very few persons. Hence, these decisions are strongly influenced by individual-related characteristics, particularly when the small firm is investigated'. Considering the entrepreneurs as drivers of internationalisation, this research suggests that competencies should be taken into account in theoretical models that explain company internationalisation in addition to other personal characteristics already examined in the literature, such as the level of education and prior international experience (Hsu *et al.*, 2013).

Finally, this study extends the measures of firm performance adopted in the competency-based literature. Indeed, an intermediate instead of a final outcome as a performance criterion is considered – namely, foreign sales as a percentage of total sales. In so doing, a more fine-grained level of analysis is adopted in understanding the role played by behavioural competencies in the internationalisation process. The results suggest that, in order to improve firm performance via export sales into global markets, entrepreneurs should equip themselves not only with the so-called threshold competencies (such as strategic and diagnostic thinking), but also with a change catalyst, teamwork and organisational learning orientation, associated with superior performance.

### *Practical implications and future lines of research*

The findings offer relevant implications for higher education institutions and policymakers. The results of this study suggest that behavioural competencies should be considered in designing dedicated courses in international management and entrepreneurship within master's programmes. These courses should allow aspiring entrepreneurs to become aware

of the relevance of these behavioural competencies for internationalisation purposes, enabling them to assess the level of manifestation of the competencies, and supporting them to acquire the competencies necessary to penetrate and operate effectively in more complex international environments. As demonstrated by longitudinal empirical research, behavioural competencies can be significantly improved through the adoption of dedicated learning programmes (Boyatzis and Saatioglu, 2008). However, educators of these learning initiatives should be aware that in order to motivate individuals to be engaged in a desired and enduring change of their behavioural competencies, they are required to adopt a self-directed and a whole person learning approach (Boyatzis, 2006b; Hoover *et al.*, 2010), which differs from the traditional methods, grounded in the lecture format. During their learning path, participants experience moments of being destabilised in order to awaken in them the need for change, and are spurred towards long-lasting practice, reflection and the repetition of new behaviours in real contexts.

Moreover, higher educational institutions which operate in geographical areas characterised by 'born local' SMEs operating in mature sectors should devote particular attention to the assessment and development of the three distinctive competencies that emerged in the analysis. Such a consideration can be extended also to policymakers, who can promote, in collaboration with the local higher education system and industrial associations, initiatives aimed at raising entrepreneurs' awareness of the relevance of the distinctive behavioural competencies for internationalisation, as well as at providing opportunities and tools for their assessment and subsequent development.

This research also has important practical implications for entrepreneurial SMEs which wish to increase their degree of export intensity. Entrepreneurs should engage in a learning path in order to strengthen the individual skills they need to cross domestic borders. They should also train and assess their managers according to the competency-based approach, motivating them to rely more on their behavioural competencies during the internationalisation effort.

This study presents a number of limitations that should be addressed in future research. For example, the exploratory nature of this research reduces the generalisability of the findings, which are derived from a small sample of entrepreneurs who operate in the same geographical area. Future research would benefit from extending this study by investigating a larger sample of entrepreneurs in different geographical contexts in order to consider cultural and institutional factors that can facilitate or hamper the entrepreneurs' international behaviours. Moreover, export intensity is considered as the indicator of international performance to discriminate between above and below average entrepreneurs. Since internationalisation is a multidimensional construct (Majocchi and Zucchella, 2003), further measures of international performance could be considered, such as the export diversity or scope, in terms of the number of markets and the types of country a firm may select, or other entry modes pursued by the entrepreneurs, such as foreign direct investments and international alliances. As highlighted in prior research (Denicolai *et al.*, 2015, p. 399), 'studying the type of markets is relevant since the more different the countries into which the firm is expanding, the more entrepreneurial the nature of international expansion'. Therefore, the international entrepreneurial profile may vary according to the number of geographical regions served or the different entry modes into foreign markets. Furthermore, in the sample, long-established 'born local' companies which progressively undertook the internationalisation process were analysed. Future research should also consider 'born global' entrepreneurs and investigate if different behavioural competencies are needed to succeed abroad.

Another limitation refers to the data collection method adopted, since all the information on behavioural competencies and internationalisation came from a single source. This study attempted to minimise possible contamination and common source bias through the coding of

entrepreneurs' behaviours conducted by the research team and use of the BEI, which limits recall bias and enhances accuracy, focusing on factual accounts of what informants did and avoiding speculation. Finally, the article opens up reflection on the role of behavioural competencies in internationalisation outcomes. Prior studies have demonstrated both direct and moderating effects of entrepreneurs' tangible human capital on firm internationalisation performance (Hsu *et al.*, 2013; Javalgi and Todd, 2011). Future research should investigate further the impact of competencies, as well as their relationship with other dimensions of human capital, such as demographic characteristics, education and the entrepreneurs' prior experience.

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**Appendix**

Competency	Description
Emotional awareness	The capacity to know your inner moods, your resources, insights and skills
Empathy	The capacity to understand people, to listen carefully, to interpret and respond to the wishes of others
Organisational awareness	The capacity to understand the relationships and the culture in an organisation
Efficiency orientation	The capacity to perceive the relationship between input and output, with an attention to increase efficiency
Achievement orientation	The capacity to measure up to the standard of excellence, not discouraged by obstacles to achieving a goal
Positive orientation	The capacity to see opportunities rather than threats, trusting that the future will be better than the past
Initiative	The capacity to take action to achieve a result even if it is not required or imposed by the situation
Change catalyst	The capacity to recognise the need for change, removing barriers and finding solutions
Planning	The capacity to identify and organise the future, to organise those activities necessary to achieve a goal
Adaptability	The capacity to adapt to changing circumstances or to change your behaviour
Self-control	The capacity to retain control of your emotions in stressful or emotional situations
Attention to detail	The capacity to search for order and predictability by reducing uncertainty
Risk-taking	The capacity to take a risk or to carry out an activity with an uncertain outcome
Risk management	The capacity to control uncertain activities and contain losses and/or negative impacts
Influence	The capacity to convince one or more people of the value of your point of view
Conflict management	The capacity to stimulate groups or individuals to resolve their conflicts
Teamwork	The capacity to stimulate the members of a group to work together effectively
Developing others	The capacity to stimulate someone to develop his/her skills or improve his/her performance
Networking	The capacity to build and use relationships, including personal ones, in achieving objectives
Inspirational leadership	The capacity to take the lead of a group or inspire and lead others
Service orientation	The capacity to focus your efforts in research and meeting of the needs of others
Engaging others	The capacity to engage individuals to achieve the identified objectives
Systems thinking	The capacity to give order to a number of causal events and to interpret a situation from a systems perspective
Diagnostic thinking	The capacity to conduct an accurate examination of the situation, describing the nature of the problem
Pattern recognition	The capacity to recognise an underlying structure in a complex set of information that is not organised
Analogical thinking	The capacity to access a known domain of knowledge to solve a problem
Associative thinking	The capacity to create logical connections between issues, disciplines and ideas which are seemingly unrelated
Lateral thinking	The capacity to try new ways of looking at problems, adopting different perspectives
Quantitative analysis	The capacity to use quantitative methods for diagnosis and operation in various fields
Questioning	The capacity to formulate questions to understand the nature of problems and change the status quo

*(continued)*

Competency	Description
Observing	The capacity to observe the world around you with the aim of finding new ideas
Experimenting	The capacity to explore the world and experience new things constantly
Visionary thinking	The capacity to create and pass on a vivid image of what you want to create or of the organisational vision
Strategic thinking	The capacity to understand the strategic and competitive environment of the company
Organisational learning orientation	The capacity to develop the knowledge base of the company through learning processes
Opportunity recognition	The capacity to perceive the opportunities emerging from the environment

### About the authors

Laura Cortellazzo is a post-doc research fellow and adjunct professor at the department of Management, at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. She is also research fellow at the Ca' Foscari Competency Centre. She received her PhD in Management at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, and a PhD in Management-People management and organization at ESADE Business School in Barcelona. Her research interests focus on Organizational Behaviour and Human Resources Management. Her research investigates the assessment and the development of behavioral competencies, the impact of emotional and social competencies on employability and career outcomes. Her research has appeared in *Journal of Vocational Behavior* and *Journal of Small Business Management*.

Sara Bonesso is associate professor of Business Organization and Human Resources Management at the Ca' Foscari University of Venice, where she received her PhD in Management. She is also the vice-director of the Ca' Foscari Competency Centre. Her research interests lie in the fields of Organizational Behavior and Human Resources Management. Her recent research investigates the development of emotional and social competencies, the impact of behavioral competencies on entrepreneurial intent, innovation, employability and career development. Her research has appeared in *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *Industrial and Corporate Change*, *Creativity and Innovation Management*, *Journal of Small Business Management*, *Frontiers in Organizational Psychology*, *Technovation*, *The Journal of Technology Transfer* and the *European Management Journal*. Sara Bonesso is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: [bonesso@unive.it](mailto:bonesso@unive.it)

Fabrizio Gerli is associate professor of Business Organization and Human Resources Management at the Ca' Foscari University of Venice, where he received his PhD in Management. He is the director of the Ca' Foscari Competency Centre and Scientific Coordinator of postgraduate courses in Human Resources Management. His research interests focus on inter-firm and inter-industry competency modelling, entrepreneurial competencies and firm performance, development of behavioral competencies. His research appeared in *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *Industrial and Corporate Change*, *Creativity and Innovation Management*, *Journal of Small Business Management*, *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*, *Frontiers in Organizational Psychology*, *Industrial Relations*, *The Journal of Management Development*, *Cross Cultural Management* and the *European Management Journal*.

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