Program: Doctorate in Professional Practice.

Module 7200: Practitioner Research Proposal.

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The Role of Trust in Employee Retention in Multicultural Matrix Organizations during Crisis (Bankruptcy).

1. Introduction.

This research proposal focuses on the staff retention challenges that global multicultural corporations face during a crisis. There is evidence that companies that fail to understand employee retention (Schmitt et al., 2012) also fail to exit crisis situations successfully; including bankruptcy (Zorn et al., 2017). This is a subject of special interest to my practice and advisory clients.

Proposal Aims and Objectives – Trust.

A key aim of this proposal is to bring greater understanding to the impact that trust has on staff retention in complex organizations. Scholars agree that defining trust is complex and is impacted by circumstance and context (Mayer et al., 1995). Mayer's definition of trust has been widely adopted:

> "The willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party" (Mayer et al., 1995).

However, this description does not capture all the complexity in a multicultural matrix organization; but it does provide a good point of entry.

The Literature Gap – The new area for research.

While there has been research interest in employee trust and retention, there are gaps in the literature[1] for corporations with multicultural matrix organizations[2] operating with broad based geographic footprints and widely diverse cultures. This organizational structure is found in both the Automotive and allied industries.

Criteria for the Business Sector Selection – Why this Industry?

The automotive industry was selected for this proposal because of its relevance to the researchers practice, but mainly because of its importance to the global economy and its significance for emerging markets. The global automotive industry has revenue of 3.5 trillion US dollars and employs over 20 million[3] highly skilled people, making employee retention a key priority. Global annual light vehicle production is 95 million[4]; the industry also supports the parts and maintenance needs of a worldwide in-service population of 1.3 billion vehicles. The industry is a key economic driver of GDP[5] in North America, Europe, and Asia and as such, has both relevance and significant impact on the global economy.

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[1] The Literature Gaps are covered in Section No 2.
[2] Matrix organizations integrate functional and operational control into a dual reporting model.
[3] Source: Mckinsey - https://www.mckinsey.com
[4] Source: European Automobile Manufacturers Association (ACEA) – https://www.acea.auto
[5] GDP - Gross Domestic Product.

Relevance and Timing of the Research Proposal – Why now?

The urgency to understand and address the challenges that the automotive industry faces become evident when one considers the global trends and market forces. The global automotive industry is predominantly focused on serving the mature markets of North America and Europe; driven by these regions' high automobile adoption rates. However, the emerging markets of Asia and India have populations of 3.3 billion and 1.3 billion, respectively, but less than 40% of these populations own a car; compared to the mature markets with 80%+ car ownership, but that is changing. China is an example of rapid economic growth coupled with an accelerating transition from a rural to an urban demographic (Chart 1)[6].

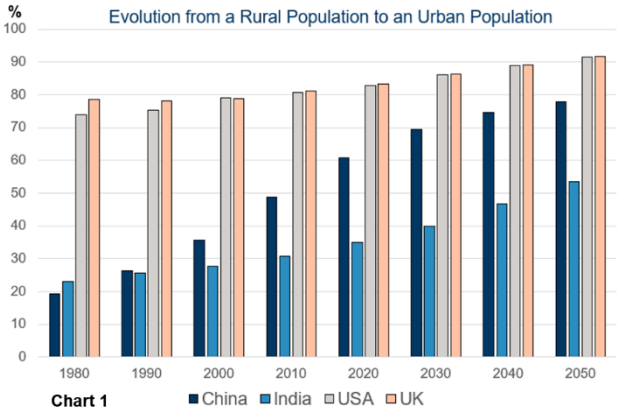
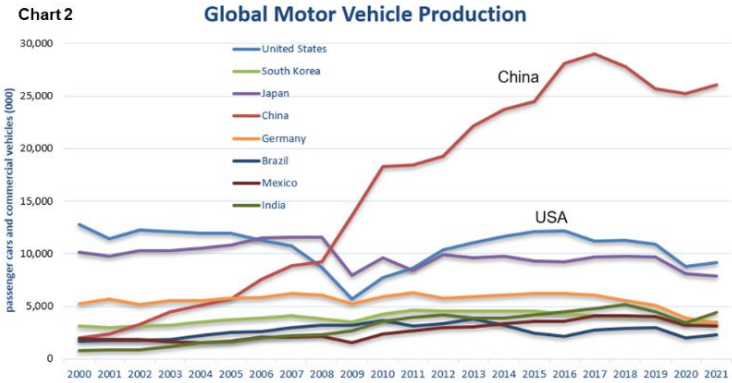


Chart 1

China has become the global leader in automotive manufacturing with annual vehicle production of 26 million (Chart 2)[7], compared to the USA production volumes of 9 million[8]. But even at this rate, China's motorization index, at 220 vehicles per 1,000[9] people, is significantly below that of the mature markets (700+ per 1,000 people). As China's demographic approaches an urbanization rate of 75% (forecast to occur in 2035), its automotive manufacturing and service market is forecast to expand rapidly to meet a motorization rate of 500+ per 1,000 people. While China is an important market, its evolution and impact on the automotive industry offers much greater value as it provides valuable insight into the power that the emerging markets of Asia, Eastern Europe, and South America will have on the automotive industry of the future (Teece, 2019).

Chart 2



The Problem – What are the issues, and why is this a new problem?

Industry analysts project that the emerging regions will become the dominant market force in the future (Atsmon et al., 2012); this will drive significant strategic change in the industry's manufacturing and workforce plan, ushering in an era of localized

[6] United Nations Reports – https://population.un.org/wup
[7] IHS – http://autotechinsight.ihsmarkit.com
[8] 2021 US Department of Transportation – https://tedb.ornl.gov. Wards – https://www.wardsauto.com
[9] Motorization rate (vehicles per 1,000 population) derived from ACEA data – https://www.acea.auto

manufacturing and operations (Sturgeon and Van Biesebroeck, 2010). The industries supplier base will also change, with long-standing relationships being replaced with new local suppliers, bringing greater propensity for regional crisis, including bankruptcy (Jiang and Jones, 2018). The corporate challenge is managing a culturally diverse employee base remotely, in an era where crisis is likely to occur more frequently (Canbolat et al., 2008).

Research Questions.

To address the proposal's aims and objectives, the research must be able to answer a number of key questions:

- What factors impact employee retention during a crisis?
- What role does management and executive trust play in a diverse cultural workforce?
- How do corporations manage employee retention during bankruptcy?
- How do matrix organizations manage trust and culture in foreign operations?

Hypothesis.

The hypothesis proposes that in a multicultural matrix organization in crisis, employee trust and retention are related, and that this relationship is impacted by organizational structure and complexity.

Research Focus – The key areas.

The proposal narrows the focus to gain depth; the primary aim is to better understand employee trust and retention during crisis in global multicultural corporations with large manufacturing footprints operating with matrix organizations and central executive teams. An additional filter was placed on the type of crisis, which is defined as bankruptcy, for this proposal. The main research fields are:

- Corporations in crisis.
- Matrix organizations.
- Regionally embedded multicultural operations.

Value – Who will benefit from this research?

The research proposal’s aims, objectives, and deliverables are expected to offer value to global corporations operating in emerging markets in Asia, South America and Eastern Europe. Economists and business leaders project that the global automotive industry will grow to 5.3 trillion dollars in 2030, with 40% of that growth in emerging markets; this growth will add over 200,000 new employees in Asia. This will increase cultural diversity and place increased demand on the staff and executives that manage corporations in these regions. Economists also forecast an increase in supplier bankruptcies and regional legislative issues, presenting the automotive leaders of the future with multiple challenges, including staff retention at all levels in the organization.

It is hoped that this research proposal's objectives will add insight into options to address these situations.

2. Literature Review.

The proposals literature review was designed to explore employee retention in the context of trust, in the focus areas:

- Corporations in crisis.
- Matrix organizations.
- Multicultural workforces.

While these focus areas converge under the proposal's overall aims, one of the objectives of the literature review is to understand how they interact. The literature suggests that this is best accomplished in specific circumstances, including bankruptcy, economic downturn, mergers and acquisitions, and corporate corruption case studies (Sturgeon and Van Biesebroeck, 2010). It is in these situations that the greatest level of understanding takes place, for example the Enron Corporation collapse in 2001 (Vinten, 2002), the Economic Crisis of 2007 – 2009 (Pavlínek, 2015), and the Automotive Industry collapse of 2005. In each of these events' employee retention became a key driver of the event outcome, and employee trust was a pivotal issue. These examples demonstrate that trust is impacted by context and circumstance, for example, trust in a corporation achieving its financial and performance goals, in a growing economy differs from trust in an organization failing to meet its objectives (Brown et al., 2015). This is further compounded by culture, organizational structure (the matrix), and geographic diversity. This literature review strives to capture a broad input on the issues of trust and retention, with a significant focus on context and circumstance (Creed et al., 1996).

Corporations in Crisis – Bankruptcy.

Bankruptcy radically changes the rules of employee management; for most corporations the employee, employer relationship is benevolent; employees are offered job security and benefits, career development, training, status and motivation (Das and Baruah, 2013), but bankruptcy removes all of these and replaces them with uncertainty, layoffs and cancelled pension and benefit programs (Jeffrey and John, 2005). In most instances bankruptcy has one of two possible outcomes; the corporation liquidates or restructures, both have the potential to invoke a crisis.

For company leaders and managers, bankruptcy proceedings may create an environment of immediate crisis on multiple fronts, and for many, the issue becomes prioritization (what to address first?). Analysis of prior bankruptcies (Gaughan, 2010), details the speed and magnitude of the type of crisis that leaders must deal with; broken customer commitments, supplier defection, competitor misinformation, a collapse of employee morale, investor loss of confidence and unfavorable media exposure; many leaders report being overwhelmed (Groenendaal and Harvey, 2003), and it is at this point that employee trust and retention are at their most vulnerable (Sims and

Brinkmann, 2003). The literature indicates that successful companies place a very high priority on staff retention during crisis situations (Lee et al., 2017); without key staff a company has little value and becomes a candidate for liquidation. At its core, the bankruptcy process is designed to allow companies to restructure and develop a viable business model and therefore avoid liquidation. The process of corporate restructuring has been the subject of much scholarly debate (Klier and Rubenstein, 2013), but while there is consensus in some areas, there are conflicting views in other areas, for example, retention of management teams; many feel that continuity is important (Zorn et al., 2017), others believe that management change offers greater chance of success (Kwak et al., 2016).

Matrix Organizations.

Matrix managed organizations have grown in popularity over the past thirty years and have been adopted by some industries including automotive. There have been studies that highlight the special issues of this structure (Sayles, 1976); which features dual reporting and adds complexity in leader-follower, peer-to-peer and subordinate trust (Lukinaitė and Sondaitė, 2017). The matrix structure challenges the conventional thinking of trust in crisis situations and the impact on employee retention (Sahlmueller et al., 2022).

Management of a Global Multicultural Workforce.

There has been some research that highlights the complexity of a multicultural workforce in a global organization (Steers et al., 2013; Adler, 1983); these structures place employees in leader-follower relationships with dual reporting, often with superiors located in different regions of the world, influenced by different cultures (Tsui et al., 2007). This proposal seeks to understand trust and employee retention in these complex structures (McAllister, 1995). The proposal acknowledges the work of Mayer and the linkage between trust and risk (Mayer et al., 1995), but also comprehends the need to challenge conventional thinking (Lukinaitė and Sondaitė, 2017), and question corporate practices (Zolfaghari and Madjdi, 2022).

The Literature Gap.

The literature review sought to find research that studied employee retention in the context of trust in multicultural matrix-managed organizations operating in crisis (bankruptcy). While there was literature that covered management trust and retention in matrix organizations (Lukinaitė and Sondaitė, 2017; Sayles, 1976), and literature that focused on multicultural organizations (Zolfaghari and Madjdi, 2022; Adler, 1983) the review did not find literature that researched organizations that have an **integrated** multicultural matrix design. This gap creates a void in understanding the role that trust plays during crisis on employee retention in automotive companies.

Scholars agree that trust impacts retention (Costigan et al., 2013). However, the emphasis is mostly on conventional organizations, with a focus on trust creation (Creed

et al., 1996), trust loss (Sverdrup and Stensaker, 2018), and trust restoration (Eberl et al., 2015). The gap in the literature is an analysis of trust in a fully integrated multicultural global matrix organization.

Literature Review Summary.

The gap in the literature leaves an important sector of the automotive and allied industries with a void in understanding trust in complex organizations (Sturgeon and Van Biesebroeck, 2010); this void is of concern, especially as global expansion exposes the industry to increasing turmoil and potential crisis situations.

In summary, the literature gap leaves unanswered questions (identified in this paper[10]). The gap prompted this proposal which seeks to fully comprehend the organizational complexity of the automotive sector and the impact of this complexity on employee trust and retention.

3. Methodology.

The research questions identified include a focus on understanding trust in the matrix; including leader-follower, peer-to-peer and subordinate trust. This may lend itself to a phenomenological approach which seeks to discover knowledge by understanding trust through employees' personal experience (Migliore and Horton DeClouette, 2011). The proposals paradigm is interpretive designed to probe the trust elements in complex organizational structures. The researcher believes that the knowledge and understanding is discoverable and opts for a positivist approach with a realist ontology and an objective epistemology. As the research moves beyond the proposals initial qualitative methodology it evolves to mixed methods driven by the discovery.

The review of the research questions, coupled with an exploratory literature search, suggests that the research should include a special thematic element designed to understand the drivers of trust in matrix organizations in crisis (Lukinaitė and Sondaitė, 2017). The research will also study the broader implications; the “cause and effect,” of a lack of trust in global organizations with subsidiaries. The proposal will also probe organizations that have demonstrated strategies to strengthen and recover trust (Eberl et al., 2015); this will form an important element in the research deliverables. The inclusion of mature European companies (Mercedes, Volkswagen etc.) may potentially lead the research to include a quantitative element designed to provide optics on retention trends in companies where employee retention rates are monitored at a matrix level by advanced data driven systems.

Narrowing the Proposals Scope.

To ensure that the proposals aims and objectives are achievable with the resources, budget and time available, the research scope was narrowed to include only global corporations who have been through a bankruptcy; the rationale and logic being that

[10] What role does trust play in crisis situations in the matrix, and across organizations in remote locations?

bankruptcy invokes most of the leadership challenges of mergers, acquisitions and economic downturns and therefore characterizes a wide range of business crisis events. Bankruptcy also provides a research field where management actions and both the impact of employee trust, and the outcome of management decisions are highly visible (Vinten, 2002).

Methods and Research Instruments.

To facilitate the research, the proposal includes the use of both special instruments and third-party resources.

Instruments.

For qualitative research, the proposal includes the use of specialized software including MAXQDA and ATLAS; the researcher has access and is familiar with both programs. The programs allow detailed Thematic analysis derived from surveys, interviews, and narrative analysis.

While at this stage, the researcher is focused on a qualitative methodology; the researcher acknowledges that there is the need for mixed methods. Therefore, the proposal comprehends the need for a quantitative element, potentially including regression analysis and the use of parametric and non-parametric tests. For this element, the researcher proposes SPSS V28 with its Pro features (Verma, 2012); the researcher is familiar with the program and has direct access.

Study Technique Rational and Use of Instruments and Methods.

While at this stage, the proposal has potentially identified four options (Interviews, Surveys, Case Studies, and a Delphi Study), and these may indeed form the major thrust of the research effort, the researcher has not eliminated the use of a broader suite of options including Focus Groups and Narrative analysis. The rationale for the currently proposed options is based on the following line of exploration (shown below), and seeks a best fit from the options identified:

1. What knowledge and information is sought?

At its essence, the proposal seeks to understand the human experience of employees during a period of crisis; understanding this experience brings the research closer to understanding the key research questions of trust (Mayer et al., 1995), and the outcomes of that experience; including retention (Lee et al., 2017). Most importantly, the research seeks to understand the “cause and effect” of the employee experience. Will employees remain or leave the organization? How will leaders and managers respond to these outcomes? What action will the corporation take? How will this change how corporations manage crisis?

2. Who will provide the information?

The information will be predominantly provided by the employees, staff, managers, and leaders in the organization; however, to provide independent perspective, some of the information may be collected via surveys of external entities, including suppliers and customers.

3. How will information be collected?

The information sought is very much embodied in the human experience of employees at all levels, including the executives and the board of directors. Exploring a large complex global corporation is a significant task (Sebastian Reiche, 2007), the methodology, therefore, includes a variety of instruments. Initially, information will be collected via surveys targeted at the domestic and overseas operations; however, to gain depth and perspective, the research must seek direct interface with staff. To facilitate this, the proposal includes interviews with structured and semi-structured formats.

The most challenging task in this proposal is understanding trust in all areas of the matrix. The matrix structure includes a range of complex relationships, which are further complicated by dual reporting. The proposal is designed to conduct interviews at multiple levels, and key points of intersection in the matrix.

4. Research Approach.

The proposal's initial research approach is a qualitative interpretative study using an inductive mindset supported by Phenomenology; also considered are Ethnography and Action research; however, the study evolves to mixed methods.

Phenomenology.

For the research to have meaningful depth the research must understand trust through the experiences of people in the matrix and across multicultural operations, essentially the lived experience. Phenomenology seeks to understand not only the lived experience but also the impact that people have on that experience; the latter is a critical element in understanding the matrix; however, the proposal also understands the potential shortcomings and distortions, in particular the influence the researcher may have on the results, however with “bracketing,[11]” these conflicts are reduced. A phenomenological approach brings the research very close to the “real world” providing optics on trust in the matrix in a multidimensional view, allowing the researcher to see the complete spectrum of leader-follower, peer-to-peer and subordinate interaction, and it is at this level that trust must be examined to fully understand the research questions and develop the study’s conclusions.

[11] Bracketing is necessary to remove the researchers own beliefs and biases from the study.

Ethnography.

Phenomenology offers significant benefit as the research explores the matrix; however, to fully explore the embedded[12] multicultural elements of the organization, Ethnography offers special benefit, especially in corporations with operations in Asia, Eastern Europe, and South America. Ethnography places the researcher and the researched in direct contact and allows intimate observations and the ability to become embedded in the culture. This may be of particular value when assessing dual reporting relationships, which, for example, may place one of an employee's superiors in Asia and the other superior in South America. However, Ethnography puts a high bar on research cost and complexity, and the proposal's budget may not be able to support or justify its inclusion; this may be offset to some degree by using specific Case Studies.

5. How will the information be analyzed and interpreted?

The proposal comprehends the use of both qualitative and quantitative analysis. Interpretation will be supported by a range of readily available instruments, including MAXQDA and SPSS.

6. How will the proposal's assumptions and conclusions be tested for reliability?

While the proposal focuses on the automotive industry, and indeed the industry is unique and has some complex challenges; bankruptcy, retention, and crisis in global corporations have commonalities that exist across other industries. To test the research assumptions, the proposal includes an option to evaluate Case Studies for three other industry sectors, this potentially provides valuable comparative data and insight.

Use of Instruments: Strategy and Execution (Why and How?).

The proposal includes the use of Surveys, Interviews, Case Studies, and a Delphi Study. While these methods will have some level of overlap, the objectives of each are focused on research in specific areas of the study.

Surveys.

The surveys will be designed to probe the workforce to understand the effectiveness of the matrix and multicultural business units and to, probe employee trust in dual reporting structures, and gauge the impact on retention. The researcher has considered the use of structured and semi-structured surveys based on the level in the matrix being evaluated. The proposed delivery and tabulation mechanism will include third-party providers (e.g., Qualtrics) for foreign entities. The surveys will comply with ethics guidelines. The proposal comprehends 600 – 800 survey participants[13], designed to accommodate headquarters and regional business units.

[12] The overseas operations are embedded (fully integrated) in the regions they serve.

[13] The number of survey participants is based on the size of the target corporations.

Interviews.

While the surveys will provide valuable broad-based information, structured and even semi-structured formats will be challenged to provide the depth needed to understand trust at all levels in a complex organization. To overcome this, the interviews will include both unstructured and semi-structured formats designed to probe both leader and follower relationships in the matrix, this will bring insight to the dynamics of the relationships in both normal and crisis situations. The interviews will follow the bankruptcy process to understand the impact at executive, manager, and staff level and the effect this has on trust, and the subsequent impact on employee retention. Due to the global nature of the corporations, the interviews will be mainly[14] conducted remotely by a secure platform (Microsoft Teams). At this point, the proposal comprehends 12 to 18 interviews designed to accommodate key functions and locations.

The Delphi Study.

To fully understand a corporation's ability to navigate a crisis, it is necessary to get close to the executive leadership and interrogate their role at a detail level. It is at the executive level that all of the strategy and many of the tactical decisions take place in a fast-moving crisis; a survey or even interviews may not comprehend the complexity of the decisions; because many of the decisions involve a consensus agreement between a number of functions; Board of Directors and CEO, VP of Operations and VP of Sales etc. To fully understand this in a way that allows visibility to the "cause and effect" of the decisions, requires a multi-step approach. The Delphi Study provides this (Okoli and Pawlowski, 2004). Using a Delphi Study will allow the research to probe the strategy and experience of the industry experts who form the Delphi panel, many of whom may have been responsible for leading corporations through crisis, and have had the task of both developing and implementing employee retention plans. For this proposal, the target Delphi panel of industry experts will include a manageable group of 8 to 12 members (Hsu and Sandford, 2007), with executive and direct management experience in global automotive corporations. The proposal comprehends three to four rounds in the Delphi process (Humphrey-Murto and de Wit, 2019).

Case Studies.

Case studies may yield valuable insight into adjacent industries and allow the researcher to see beyond the automotive sector, bringing a deeper understanding to trends and anomalies. The researcher considers this to be useful to validate and challenge some of the assumptions and conclusions of the research. The proposal comprehends a review of two to three case studies embracing manufacturing and retail corporations in Eastern Europe and Asia.

[14] Executives based in the USA may have " face to face" interviews.

Planning and Cadence of the Research Instruments.

Given that there is some overlap of the methods, and both the surveys and interviews may yield valuable insight; which can be used in the development of the Delphi Study. it is proposed that the launch cadence of instruments follows a timing plan which places the surveys first, followed by interviews, followed by the Delphi Study.

4. Ethics.

There will be four primary areas of focus during the ethical due diligence.

1. Full and documented disclosure of all processes and protocols for all participants of the research.
2. Confidentiality and anonymity for Survey, Interview and Delphi Study participants.
3. Confidentiality and document control for all company data.
4. Secure storage of all written, recorded or sample information provided during the research.

To achieve these objectives, all participants will receive and be required to sign a release form; all surveys and interviews will be conducted in a secure environment.

Information Storage: All information will be encrypted and stored on a secure server; the information will be password protected with a detailed log of access.

Video conference calls will be conducted with Microsoft Teams and will use both MS Teams and UWTSD protocols to manage the participant interface.

All facets of the research will strictly comply with UWTSD protocols and processes.

5. Budget.

The proposal comprehends that there will be costs to achieve the research objectives. Three main activities will drive the costs:

1. Survey construction and dissemination.
2. Interviews.
3. The Delphi Study.

The costs associated with these areas fall into three categories:

1. Third-party costs (mainly for the survey activity).
2. Travel.
3. Communication (secure video conferences).

Funding.

The costs associated with the budget will be fully funded by the researcher.

6. Summary.

This research proposal seeks to examine the hypothesis that in a multicultural matrix organization in crisis, employee trust and retention are related, and that this relationship is impacted by organizational structure and complexity. The research proposal found a gap in the trust literature for matrix organizations in crisis (bankruptcy). This proposal seeks to address that gap with a focused mixed methods study.

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