

AGRICULTURAL EXPORT: WHICH SPECIALIZED SKILLS THAT VIETNAMESE SME MANAGERS NEED TO OVERCOME TECHNICAL TRADE BARRIERS

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Abstract

In recent years, Vietnamese agricultural export has increased significantly due to the growth in the market demand, the improvement in product structure, the intensive application of high technology, as well as the incentives of the government. Nonetheless, the capabilities of Vietnamese small and medium-sized enterprises' (SMEs') agricultural products to meet the technical requirements of the international market is still limited. In this situation, the support related to human resource management in order to enhance abilities for SME managers is extremely necessary. By adopting qualitative approach, this paper investigates the perceptions of Vietnamese agricultural exporters with regard to specialized skills they need in export. Data is collected through in-depth interviews with 124 Vietnamese SMEs doing business in various fields, exporting various agricultural products and coming from various provinces/cities in Vietnam. The participants shared a range of training need with regard to knowledge to help them overcome technical barriers, which was then used to develop appropriate training courses. SME managers and training institutions may use the outcomes of this study do develop effective training programs for SME managers.

Keyword: *specialized skills, technical barriers, Vietnam, SMEs*

1. Introduction

A great number of Vietnamese agriculture product types, especially Vietnamese fruits, are increasingly penetrated fastidious markets, which also sets the higher requirements for quality improvement for Vietnamese producers. However, in export, SMEs are often required to adjust their products to meet the requirements of markets, especially of fastidious markets. A number of product adjustments need to follow the regulations of the governments of the importing countries, especially those regarding the protection of the health and safety for their citizens (Leonidou 2004).

This paper, to begin with, explores the perceptions of Vietnamese agricultural SME managers with regard to specialized skills needed to help them overcome technical barriers in export. Subsequently, implications related to relevant training programs on technical skills are provided. Research outcomes are expected to be beneficial to SME managers and

training/consulting institutions in assisting Vietnamese SMEs to overcome technical barriers in exporting agricultural products to overseas markets.

2. Literature Review

Agricultural export

Enterprises tend to export goods and services for many reasons. Particularly, export may help firms increase their revenue and profit when accessing new markets as well as reduce business risks by diversifying export markets (Troy, 2019). For SMEs, they tend to penetrate into international markets when they realize that the domestic market for their goods and services is saturated or is on the downward trend (Daniels *et al.*, 2013). The decision to expand the market is also made when SMEs want to maintain the development pace, gain numerous benefits such as accumulating international business experiences, accessing modern technology and financial sources, as well as joining the supply chain (Edinburgh Group, 2014; European Commission, 2003).

Agricultural product export activities has witnessed the more involvement of SMEs. When developing countries increasingly participate in the global supply chain of agricultural products, the role of SMEs is increasingly important. Global Trade Report 2016 (WTO, 2016) pointed out some characteristics of the agricultural export activities of SMEs. Firstly, the share of SMEs participating in the agricultural export is still low compared to large enterprises. Secondly, almost all SMEs are indirectly involved in the export of agricultural products. Thirdly, thanks to the revolutionary advances in information technology and e-commerce, the potential of SMEs to participate in export is growing. Fourthly, governments are likely to pay more attention to promoting the participation of this sector in agricultural exports.

Technical trade barriers to SMEs in agricultural export

The impacts "Technical Barriers to Trade" (TBT) on different countries, with different economic growth are not the same. Bao and Qiu (2012) described that measures related to TBT imposed by a developing country have greater impact on export of other developing countries rather than on that of developed countries. However, TBT introduced by a developed country can affect equally export of both developed and developing countries. The export activities of developed countries affected by TBT of developed countries are normally greater than that of developing countries.

Research of Decreux *et al.* (2010) on the impact of NTBs in the EU-Korea free trade area also emphasized that different industries are generally affected differently. Bao and Qiu (2010) supported this view by noting that the impacts of TBT on agriculture and other commodities are different. Accordingly, TBT is considered as a factor limiting commercial transactions of agricultural products, but promoting commercial transactions of manufactured products. The results of this study is quite similar to studies of other authors

such as Fontagne *et al.* (2005), Disdier *et al.* (2008) and Moenius (2004). Fontagne *et al.* (2005) generalized the findings of the Moenius (2004) by indicating that trade barriers, including TBT, have a negative impact on trade in agricultural products, but have little or even positive impact on trade in the majority of other commodity production. Choi *et al.* (2015) reflected that the "Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures" (SPS) affecting the trade of the agricultural and food sectors is greater than that of other industries, when considering the international business among China, Japan and Korea.

As can be seen from above studies, TBT have a quite negative impact on the export of agricultural products, especially for developing countries. Therefore, a study with the aim of supporting enterprises in developing countries such as Vietnam in order to overcome the challenges from technical barriers becomes more crucial.

3. Method

3.1. Data Collection

According to Saunders *et al.* (2012), in the studies where the perceptions of participants are investigated the qualitative method should be used. The qualitative method often enables researchers to obtain rich and detailed responses to their investigation (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The primary data in this research were collected in the form of semi-structured interviews. This type of interview provides the researcher with the opportunity to probe answers provided by the interviewees, as they are asked to explain or build on their responses (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Saunders *et al.*, 2012). During the interviews, particular responses may provide interesting and useful ideas for the interviewer to develop the study further.

This research was conducted with 124 agricultural export SMEs. Based on the list of agricultural SMEs in selected provinces, the researcher approached SME managers. Thanks to the introduction of state officials in these provinces, the researcher found it more convenient to connect SME managers. Besides, many of participants were referred by previous interviewees, by using the "snow-ball" technique. The interview protocol was used to assist the interviewer during interview.

3.2. Data Analysis

According to Creswell (2014), qualitative researchers use a step-by-step procedure to systemize the data analysis process. In such a process, researchers organized the data, conducted a preliminary read-through of the database, coded and organized themes, and organized the data in a format for interpretation. The qualitative QSR support software Nvivo supported the data analysis process.

4. Results

4.1. Understanding of technical requirements

General understanding of technical requirements

To begin with, SME managers in this study expressed their need to gain a general understanding of technical standards, as “*knowledge of technical barriers has a huge impact on agricultural export*” (M_82). Besides, the SME manager wanted to acquire “*in-depth knowledge of technical barriers because it directly affects the production process to create commodities to meet the requirements*” (M_30). From their view, only when they master regulations related to technical standards, they may “*avoid violating international regulations*” (M_78), as well as “*minimize the risks in export*” (M_80). This becomes more essential when the understanding of Vietnamese SMEs in this issue is still limited, whereas the requirements from foreign markets are becoming stricter and more complicated. One SME manager emphasized:

“I expect to be equipped with specialized skills related to technical barriers. Currently, technical barrier is still a big challenge for Vietnamese agricultural exporters. An agricultural firm that wants to survive and develop needs to have a deep understanding of all technical requirements to manufacture satisfactory products” (M_29)

In addition, SME managers also wanted to be aware of “*the impact of technical barriers on factors such as price determination and selection of export products*” (M_115). In certain cases, to meet the standards, SMEs have to make great investment in technology, which pushes production costs higher and leads to a disadvantage in price competition.

Proficient use of methods to meet technical requirements

Along with understanding of technical barriers and “*skills to assess and analyze technical requirements*” (M_113), SME managers also wanted to acquire skills to apply and implement activities to meet these technical requirements. Based on the widely and consistently trained and shared knowledge, the manufacturers, exporters, farming households and trading firms would be unified in accordance to the requirements, creating standard export products. One SME manager said: “*We must learn specialized knowledge of technical standards because mastering this knowledge may help us set specific criteria to meet the agricultural export requirements*” (M_72).

Mastering techniques and methods of production and business to meet technical standards becomes much more difficult for SMEs which are new to agricultural export business. Therefore, with these young firms, the skills assisting them to use techniques in manufacturing and exporting to meet technical requirements become more important, as shared by one SME manager:

“I expected to have the ability to use proficiently techniques to meet technical standards in agricultural export, as my company has just established, the standardization in manufacturing and operation has not completed” (M_100)

SME managers also wished to acquire techniques and methods to handle disputes related to technical barriers. One SME manager expressed: *"I need to be proficient in technical methods to meet technical standards, both in production for export, and in dealing with legal matters"* (M_84)

Update and forecast changes related to technical requirements

SME managers shared the need to be updated on information related to technical standards in order to *"meet the requirements of new partners, new markets"*. (M_47) and to *"make appropriate adjustment"*. (M_94).

Recognizing that the technical standards are becoming stricter, which is due to serves trade barriers and the more demanding requirements of consumers, especially those on food safety, SME managers showed the importance of proactive adaption to changes related to technical standards in agricultural export. In this case, the learning skills of SME managers is strongly crucial.

Agricultural export SME managers also expected to acquire *"skills to predict technical barriers"* (M_76). Capturing *"changes and trends in the application of technical barriers by countries"* (M_115) may help SMEs to be more proactive in production and export, as well as in business strategies adjustment.

4.2. Specific understanding of technical regulations

Understanding of packaging and labeling regulations

Knowledge of standards related to packaging and labeling was believed to help SME managers to provide correct information on product packaging that satisfies labeling requirements, especially those of some difficult export markets. The information provided on the packaging, especially on agricultural products labelling, was believed to be *"directly related to consumer health and the environment"* (M_33), therefore, it is often strictly regulated.

Understanding of food safety regulations

Among technical requirements, food safety standards were emphasized by SME managers as the most important condition, as shared by one SME manager: *"It is necessary to master food safety requirements in export because a very small deviation may make agricultural products to be rejected"* (M_50).

Furthermore, *"a small trouble related to food safety may greatly affect the reputation of the company"* (M_19). Therefore, SME managers extremely stressed that this understanding must be in-depth, comprehensive and updated. One SME manager emphasized: *"The agricultural export SMEs need to have thorough and comprehensive*

understanding of regulations on quality and food safety standards, otherwise it may lead to great loss” (M_55).

Meanwhile, the capabilities to meet food hygiene and safety standards is still a huge limitation of Vietnamese export SMEs, as shared by a manager: *“Among challenges from export markets, strict regulations on phytosanitary and food safety are major problems of many Vietnamese agricultural SMEs in export” (M_123).*

SME managers particularly showed the need for *“in-depth knowledge of food safety and hygiene standards in both traditional and potential markets” (M_88).* They wanted to master food safety standards in some key markets that they are approaching, especially in difficult ones such as Japan and Korea. One SME manager said: *“I need understand technical standards of food hygiene and safety because they are the most important regulation in exporting to Japan, Korea. However, many Vietnamese agricultural exporters have not meet these requirements ” (M_77).*

Understanding of the maximum residue levels of Pesticides

Vietnamese SME managers wished to earn more specific understanding of regulations related to maximum levels of pesticide residues. These regulations have been commonly used by countries to protect domestic production, as shared by a manager *“Some countries set very low residue levels and they are extremely difficult to satisfy” (M_40).* In fact, these standards are often considered as *“the biggest concern of Vietnamese exporters” (M_81).*

In addition, regulations related to *“maximum residue levels of other chemicals that affect product quality” (M_95)* were also requirements that SME managers need to satisfy.

Understanding of product traceability

How to gain certifications of origin of agricultural products was a content that SME managers wanted to master. Among these certificates, Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) was particularly emphasized by Vietnamese SME managers.

Understanding of phytosanitary regulations

Regulations related to phytosanitary such as irradiation requirements were standards that Vietnamese agricultural export suggested to be considered when exporting. These regulations have been seen as a great challenge of Vietnamese agricultural exporters and require the investment of SMEs in all stages of production and export. One SME manager said:

“The most difficult technical barriers for my company are phytosanitary and food safety which are usually set at a high level by foreign markets and require great effort to satisfy” (M_121).

4.3. Understanding of voluntary certifications

The understanding of voluntary certifications related to food hygiene and safety, working safety, environmental issues...was also the content that SME managers in this study expected to master.

Understanding of ISO 14001

According to the SME managers, environmental protection is a responsibility not only of individual enterprise, but also of the whole community. In particular, ISO 14001 related standards such as the Environmental management system (EMS) were particularly noted by participants.

Understanding of SA 8000

From the view of Vietnamese SME managers, ensuring corporate social responsibility (CSR) and management system certification (SA 8000) are related to increasing export competitiveness as well as maintaining sustainable development and corporate reputation for SMEs. One SME manager said: *“I need knowledge and skills to apply SA8000 because it is the inevitable requirement for enterprises to integrate into international markets”* (M_20).

Furthermore, understanding of food safety management system certification (ISO 22000), Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP), Certificate of Good Agricultural Practice (Euro Gap/Global Gap), Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP), or Food Quality Certifications such as Geographical Indications (GI), were also contents related to voluntary certifications that SME managers in this study wished to capture.

4.4. Understanding of product quality requirements

From the viewpoints of SME managers in this study, overcoming technical barriers requires them to gain an in-depth understanding of product quality. In particular, satisfying product quality standards and testing requirements is a prerequisite for penetrating any foreign market. One SME manager shared: *“it is necessary to understand quality standards and requirements related to inspection to avoid losing export opportunities and exporting banned commodities”* (M_55).

Product quality was perceived to be directly related to the export capacity of agricultural SMEs, and requires the efforts of many stakeholders. One SME manager said: *“Improving product quality requires the efforts of many relevant parties such as farmers, manufacturers, exporters, researchers and state agencies”* (M_123).

In particular, SME managers emphasized the importance of *“understanding export product quality requirements of the target markets”* (M_15). One SME manager stressed:

“Only when the enterprises’ product meets the quality requirements of the target markets, the export objectives may be reached and the unnecessary risks may be avoided” (M_44).

To satisfy product quality standards, the SME managers shared the wish to understand *"procedures to assess quality standards to meet technical standards"* (M_23). Based on the understanding of product quality procedures and assessment processes, the agricultural export SMEs may *"produce and export the most appropriate products"* (M_39).

4.5. Understanding of product quality regulations of specific export markets

In order to export to a certain market, SME managers needed to master *"export regulations and technical standards of particular export countries"* (M_32) as *"each market has its own particular requirements for different products"* (M_44). One SME manager said: *“Each country has a different system of standards for product quality, especially for food safety. A single fault related to product quality may cause huge losses, including a loss of enterprises’ reputation. Therefore, it is necessary to understand quality standards of each export country”* (M_19).

SME managers also expressed the need for group of technical standards required by both traditional and potential markets, as well as those from certain regions such as the EU and the US. The requirements of difficult markets such as Korea, Japan are specific contents that SME managers would like to understand. One SME manager said: *“I need knowledge about technical standards currently applied in the most demanding markets in order to manufacture and supply products to meet specific standards in those demanding markets”* (M_89).

In particular, SME managers needed skills to examine the suitability between the quality requirements of each market and their production and export capacity in order to develop strategies to select the right product-market pair and minimize possible risks. One SME manager said:

“I need in-depth knowledge of quality standards and skills of standard analysis of potential export markets. I also want to understand the process of assessing and verifying the product quality on these markets, thereby ensuring the quality of exported goods, limiting risks in export” (M_05).

Due to *“difficulties in satisfying technical requirements set by export markets”* (M_33), as well as the potential loss of violating regulations of export markets, SME managers expected the government should develop programs to help them acquire fully understanding of policies and regulations related to the standards of key exporting countries. Based on that, *"SMEs will be more proactive in preparing conditions to overcome barriers"* (M_20).

4.6. Understanding of agricultural product regulations

SME managers in this study paid particular attention on regulations in agricultural export. From their view, technical standards in agricultural export is strongly difficult to overcome, compared to other industries. Besides, due to the limited export value of Vietnamese agricultural products, they expected to gain knowledge of technical standards to increase export value. One SME manager said: *"I need knowledge of agricultural production, especially technical standards to improve export value, ensuring the quality of agricultural products"* (M_01).

SME managers also emphasized the need for understanding technical standards of agricultural products in specific markets in order to produce, cultivate and trade agricultural products in appropriate to the requirements of export markets. SME managers believed that as agricultural standards are usually related to human health, countries often set strict barriers to these products. They expected to participate training activities to improve understanding of agricultural technical standards of key export countries.

Almost all SME managers interviewed acknowledged that technical standards are normally used as non-tariff barriers and protection tools for agricultural production in export countries. Therefore, it requires SMEs to proactively satisfy these standards to seize export opportunities.

In particular, SME managers in the study wanted to have an in-depth understanding of the standards set for organic agricultural products regulated in particular export markets. One SME managers said: *"I need to know about standards set for organic products in the US, EU, Japan, Australia markets to which my company tends to export agricultural products"* (M_107).

4.7. Understanding technical standards for specific agricultural products

Besides the difference among markets, the differences in technical standards set for various export products were emphasized by SME managers as the knowledge they wanted to master, as shared by one SME manager: *"In fact, each type of agricultural product has its own characteristics and the requirements of each export market for these products are also different. Therefore, SMEs need to fully understand these requirements to reduce the risks"* (M_99).

SME managers wished to master technical standards applied for specific agricultural products to better prepare suitable products for export. One SME manager took an example

"I need to understand the regulations set for lychee products when exporting to certain markets. Normally, there are requirements for traceability, pesticide residues and irradiation prior to export" (M_107).

Because of these differences, SME managers expected to join in-depth training courses on particular agricultural export products, such as "*training on standards in fruit export, particularly on lychee export*" (M_110) with the aim of developing and adjusting business strategies, in accordance with the requirements of target markets. However, it is difficult for one course to cover all the barriers in all markets, thus "*introduction to technical barriers of some popular target markets of Vietnamese agricultural SMEs*" (M_119) was the content that participants wanted.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1. Implications

Based on qualitative findings, some training programs to improve knowledge of SME managers with regard to technical barriers in trade are provided. Accordingly, training courses on TBT should support SME managers improve their capabilities to be able to: Know how to identify and distinguish technical barriers; Know how to assess the possible impact of technical barriers on import-export activities; Know how to meet technical barriers set by specific markets.

Specific courses focusing on enhancing in-depth knowledge related to technical standards should include following contents: Introduction on general TBT; Technical requirements (labeling, terms used); Inspection procedures (accreditation, sampling, testing, registration, approval); Analysis of agreements on TBT

Some specific contents related to TBT that need to be clarified to participants are:

- *Introduce regulations prohibiting or restricting import of products shown in the Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) regulations:* Prohibitions regulated in TBT; Authorization requirements for reasons related to TBT; Registration requirements for importers in accordance to TBT regulations; Other requirements or prohibitions

- *Introduce regulations on maximum levels of pesticides chemicals in products:* General introduction about maximum levels of pesticides and chemicals in products; Regulations on restricting the use of certain substances

- *Introduce regulations on labeling:* General regulations on labeling; Regulations on labels for shipping procedures; Product packaging specifications

- *Introduce regulations on production and post-production regulations:* TBT on the manufacturing process; TBT regulations on transport and storage; Other requirements

- *Introduce requirements on product identification and quality assessment (such as organic and ecological labels)*

- *Introduce product quality regulations:* Assessment on quality conformity related to TBT; Requirements on product registration; Requirement on testing (Conformity);

Certification requirements (according to a certain standard); Inspection requirements (in the importing country); Requirements on traceability information (in production, processing and distribution).

- *Introduce regulations on pre-shipment inspection:* Regulations and procedures for inspection before checking; Requirement on direct deposit; Requirements for permission to pass through customs ports; Requirements for import monitoring (automatic licensing process); Other procedures

Training courses on voluntary sustainable certification should also be provided to Vietnamese SME exporters, such as those related to Environmental certification includes certification for Organic Agriculture, Other regulations such as ISO 14001 and ISO 22000; Social certification such as SA 8000; Certificate of food safety and good practice including: GAP, GMP, GI.

In addition to the general introduction, training courses for Vietnamese agricultural export SMEs should specify the contents associated with the export of agricultural products and appropriate to the limited capacities of Vietnamese SMEs. Apart from training courses, seminars and workshops to help SMEs update the changes related to technical standards are also essential.

Furthermore, the courses should include in-depth contents related to technical standards for agricultural products exported to specific markets, as well as technical standards for some specific agricultural products. Therefore, the grouping of exporters with similar products, exporting to similar markets in training courses or seminars may increase training efficiency.

5.2. Conclusion

The paper has provided the perceptions of Vietnamese SME managers with regard to skills and understanding needed to overcome technical barriers in agricultural export. SME managers shared a range of knowledge, from general understanding of technical standards to specific regulations related to labeling, food safety, maximum residue levels of pesticides, product traceability, and phytosanitary, etc. The understanding of product quality regulations applied in specific markets and for particular products were also reflected by SME managers. Based on the training need investigated, some implications related to training courses were provided.

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List of Participants

Code	Position	Location	Labour (people)	Capital (million)	Age (year)	Main markets
M_01	Sale Leader	Hanoi	10-200	10-20	6-10	China
M_05	Sale Leader	Ha Tinh	10-200	<10	6-10	Various markets
M_15	Sale Leader	Hanoi	<10	<10	<3	Various markets
M_19	Sale Leader	Hanoi	10-200	<10	6-10	Variouis markets
M_20	Director	Hanoi	<10	<10	6-10	Various markets
M_23	Sale Leader	Hanoi	200-300	10-20	6-10	China
M_29	Deputy Director	Hanoi	10-200	20-100	3-5	Korea
M_30	Sale Leader	Hanoi	10-200	10-20	>20	Various markets
M_32	Sale Leader	Hanoi	10-200	10-20	11-20	EU
M_33	Director	Lang Son	<10	<10	3-5	China
M_39	Deputy Director	Hanoi	10-200	10-20	3-5	India
M_40	Director	Hanoi	10-200	10-20	<3	EU
M_44	Sale Leader	Thai Nguyen	10-200	<10	11-20	China
M_47	Sale Leader	HCMC	10-200	20-100	6-10	Singapore
M_50	Sale Leader	Hanoi	10-200	10-20	3-5	China
M_55	Sale Leader	Ninh Binh	10-200	20-100	11-20	China
M_72	Sale Leader	Ha Nam	10-200	10-20	<3	Various markets
M_76	Director	Son La	10-200	20-100	>20	Taiwan
M_77	Sale Leader	Son La	10-200	10-20	3-5	Korea

M_78	Director	Son La	10-200	<10	11-20	China
M_80	Sale Leader	Son La	10-200	10-20	11-20	US
M_81	Director	Son La	<10	<10	11-20	Iran
M_82	Director	Son La	10-200	10-20	11-20	EU
M_84	Sale Leader	Son La	200-300	20-100	>20	EU
M_88	Sale Leader	Son La	10-200	20-100	>20	Afganistan
M_89	Sale Leader	Son La	10-200	20-100	3-5	EU
M_94	Sale Leader	Bac Giang	200-300	10-20	6-10	China
M_95	Director	Bac Giang	200-300	10-20	11-20	Belarut
M_99	Director	Bac Giang	10-200	20-100	11-20	China
M_100	Director	Bac Giang	<10	<10	<3	China
M_107	Deputy Director	Bac Giang	<10	10-20	6-10	China
M_113	Sale Leader	Hai Duong	10-200	10-20	<3	Various markets
M_115	Sale Leader	Hai Duong	10-200	20-100	11-20	EU
M_119	Sale Leader	Hai Duong	10-200	<10	3-5	China
M_121	Sale Leader	Hai Duong	10-200	<10	3-5	China
M_123	Director	Quang Ninh	10-200	20-100	3-5	Various markets