

# Managing international professional service firms: a review and future research agenda

Ciara O'Higgins

*Deusto Business School, University of Deusto, Bilbao, Spain*

Nekane Aramburu

*Deusto Business School, University of Deusto,  
San Sebastian, Spain, and*

Tatiana Andreeva

*School of Business, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Ireland*

## Abstract

**Purpose** – Research on international professional service firms (PSFs) has grown in recent years, reflecting the increasing relevance of these firms in the global economy. However, to date, no attempt has been made to systematically examine and integrate this literature. This study reviews the body of knowledge on the international management of PSFs and proposes a future research agenda that aims to strengthen the research on international PSFs, by applying the conceptual lens of PSF characteristics.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A systematic review of 108 empirical articles on the management of international PSFs was carried out.

**Findings** – The authors analyse where, how and what research was carried out on the international management of PSFs, and find that currently the field offers few opportunities to integrate findings or explain differences across different types of international PSFs. In recommendations for future research, the authors show how the lens of PSF characteristics can help overcome these issues and unveil promising avenues for future research that will lead to a more fine-grained theorising and understanding of the international management of PSFs.

**Originality/value** – The study provides a comprehensive state of the art of research on the international management of PSFs and a future research agenda, which builds on PSF characteristics to explore and better understand the heterogeneity of international PSFs, in order to develop more robust explanations of their behaviour and open new research avenues.

**Keywords** International management, Professional service firms, PSF characteristics, Literature review

**Paper type** Literature review

## Introduction

Over the past three decades, professional service firms (PSFs) have expanded internationally to achieve impressive global reach (Boussebaa and Morgan, 2015). Today, international PSFs have become important actors for a number of reasons: first, because of how they support the internationalisation of other multinationals; second, because of their influence on institutional actors (Boussebaa and Faulconbridge, 2019; Suddaby *et al.*, 2007); and third because, as

---

The second and third co-authors have contributed equally to the paper. The authors are grateful for the financial support of the Deusto University Research Training Grant Programme. The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the editor and reviewers for their insightful comments that helped improve this paper. An earlier version of this paper benefitted from valuable feedback at the AIB 2019 Annual Meeting in Copenhagen and the CYGNA (Supporting Women in Academia Network) Writing Bootcamp in 2019 in Middlesex University (UK), for which the authors are also thankful.



drivers of new business practices, PSFs are often considered role models for other firms striving to compete in the knowledge economy (Skjølsvik *et al.*, 2017).

As the relevance of PSFs as global actors grows and is recognised, PSFs are coming out of the shadows of management research (Empson *et al.*, 2015). In particular, research on the international management of PSFs has increased in recent years; yet much remains unknown about the phenomenon (Boussebaa and Morgan, 2015), and little has been done to systematically organise and integrate existing research thereon. Moreover, the field suffers from a lack of clarity around its core concept—PSFs—and therefore faces difficulties in establishing the boundaries of applicability of findings; and this hinders more nuanced theorising on the international management of PSFs (Von Nordenflycht *et al.*, 2015).

This study systematically reviews the literature on the international management of PSFs in order to take stock of what is known and what remains unexplained. Our findings portray a field that is fragmented and provides few opportunities to integrate or compare findings. To overcome these shortcomings and pave a pathway for future research, we propose that PSF characteristics be brought to the forefront of research. By defining PSFs in terms of their core characteristics (knowledge-intensity, degree of professionalisation, low capital-intensity and customisation), greater clarity can be provided regarding the boundaries of each study. As a result, the homogeneity and heterogeneity among international PSFs can be explored, which would allow for comparison and integration of findings, and ultimately the development and refinement of robust theories to provide a more nuanced understanding of the behaviour of international PSFs (Von Nordenflycht, 2010; Von Nordenflycht *et al.*, 2015).

Our study contributes to the literature on the international management of PSFs by providing the first comprehensive overview of the literature to date and a research agenda seeking a more fine-grained theorisation and understanding of the phenomenon. In particular, our PSF characteristics driven research agenda invites researchers to consider unexplored research settings, more varied methodological approaches and the key international management topics for PSFs, i.e. their internationalisation process, foreign operation mode choices, management of the integration-responsiveness dilemma, professionals and knowledge, and how they adapt to the global context. In sum, the PSF characteristics lens provides a scaffolding for conceptual, methodological and theoretical developments that will contribute to the development of this research field.

In the remainder of this paper, we clarify the PSF context and review how the field of international management of PSFs has developed, before presenting our research methods. We then discuss our findings, in particular by analysing *where* research was carried out, *how* PSFs were studied and *what* themes were explored and apply the lens of PSF characteristics to identify relevant research gaps. Finally, we build on PSF characteristics to propose a research agenda that identifies *where* and *how* future research should be carried out, as well as *what* are the most promising research lines, before outlining some limitations and managerial implications of our study.

## Theoretical background

### *Professional service firms*

PSFs can be defined as firms that provide customised, knowledge-intensive services, delivered by highly educated professionals to solve the specific problem of a customer (Aharoni, 1993; Maister, 1993). Nevertheless, a considerable degree of ambiguity remains regarding which firms should be considered PSFs. For example, law, accounting and architectural firms are unambiguously classified as PSFs and a fairly broad consensus exists regarding the inclusion of consulting, advertising and other “neo-PSFs” (Empson *et al.*, 2015; Von Nordenflycht, 2010). However, the term PSF has been also applied to many knowledge-intensive firms such as real estate, software development or insurance firms (Von Nordenflycht, 2010). To provide clearer boundaries, Von Nordenflycht (2010) proposed that PSFs are best defined through a set of core

characteristics—knowledge-intensity, professionalised workforce and low capital-intensity. The customised nature of professional services is also recognised as a distinctive characteristic of PSFs (Greenwood *et al.*, 2005; Löwendahl, 2005).

Evidently, these characteristics are not exclusive to PSFs. Indeed, PSFs are a subset of knowledge-intensive firms, but as an extreme case of knowledge-intensity they are increasingly considered a model for other firms and have become a relevant context to study the strategic management of human capital and knowledge (Von Nordenflycht, 2010; Skjølsvik *et al.*, 2017). Similarly, PSFs are not the only firms to have strong ties to their clients, but their provision of highly customised services does offer a particularly illustrative setting in which to study client relationships (Empson *et al.*, 2015). So taken individually these characteristics do not distinguish PSFs from other firms, but rather their salience makes PSFs a theoretically relevant context to study their implications. Taken together, however, these characteristics do distinguish PSFs from other firms and are theorised to have distinctive managerial implications (Löwendahl, 2000; Von Nordenflycht, 2010).

These characteristics have been used to describe PSFs in relation to other types of firms, either to underline their similarity based on a given characteristic or to differentiate them based on the combination of characteristics. However, in addition to their relevance when juxtaposing PSFs to other types of firms, PSF characteristics also provide a means to identify similarities and differences between PSFs. Different PSFs possess characteristics to varying degrees, e.g. law firms are more highly professionalised than consulting firms; architectural services are more customised than accounting services. Defining PSFs in these terms allows us to identify and explore the homogeneity and heterogeneity across PSF industries and clarify to which firms findings apply, a necessary endeavour to refine and confirm theories relating to the international management of PSFs (Empson *et al.*, 2015; Malhotra and Morris, 2009; Von Nordenflycht *et al.*, 2015).

#### *International management of PSFs*

International PSFs have been studied from several different perspectives. First from an international business (IB) perspective, where PSFs are often treated as a subset of service multinationals. Here it is often argued that service firms are different from manufacturing firms; and so a debate has arisen around the applicability of traditional IB theories to service firms (Blagoeva *et al.*, 2020), and more particularly to PSFs (Aharoni, 2000). For example, the applicability of internalisation or foreign direct investment (FDI) theory, which predicts that firms will choose the entry mode that best balances the trade-offs between the cost of control and of resource commitment (Anderson and Gatignon, 1986; Buckley and Casson, 1976), was tested in service settings. These studies concluded that existing theory could essentially be used to predict the behaviour of service firms, although adjustments to the service or PSF context may be required (Boddewyn *et al.*, 1986; Erramilli and Rao, 1993). Overall, PSFs were considered to be limited in their choice of foreign entry modes due to their knowledge-intensive nature (Dunning, 1989), although this was later challenged when new technologies enabled a broader array of knowledge-sharing mechanisms, and it became apparent that firms could choose from a broad range of operation modes (Ball *et al.*, 2008).

Similarly, internationalisation process theory—which posits that firms will increase their commitment to a foreign market as their experience in that market increases (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977, 2009)—was also explored in PSF settings. Findings seem to indicate that while the overall pattern of increased commitment seems to apply, the patterns of internationalisation appear to differ (Sharma, 1989), leaving its applicability to PSFs inconclusive.

Due to its focus on assessing the applicability of IB theories to service firms, research in the field of IB has focused on comparing service with manufacturing multinationals. As a result, it has largely ignored the heterogeneity among service firms, and PSFs more particularly. Yet, if we ignore this diversity, our ability to understand their behaviour is

limited and the potential for theory development is weakened. The heterogeneity of the service sector, and indeed of PSFs, is recognised by IB scholars, but approaches that provide insights on this diversity are still lacking (Blagoeva *et al.*, 2020; Kundu and Merchant, 2008).

A second research perspective originated from the field of strategy. Here, scholars argue that the conventional strategic approach to globalisation does not apply to PSFs. In particular, two elements are challenged: First, a PSF's ability to exploit economies of scale is limited, as is its ability to disaggregate value chain activities into upstream and downstream activities (Löwendahl, 2000; Rugman and Verbeke, 2008). Second, the value chain of PSFs is actually different from that of manufacturing firms (Jensen and Petersen, 2014; Löwendahl, 2000).

Building on this, Löwendahl proposes that value creation in PSFs rests on three processes: the sale of a credible promise to customers, the delivery on that promise (i.e. service delivery) and knowledge development (Fosstenlökken *et al.*, 2003; Löwendahl *et al.*, 2001). This distinctive value creation logic will have strategic and managerial implications for internationalising PSFs (Löwendahl, 2000). Jensen and Petersen (2014) propose that the particular value creation logic of PSFs will lead them to internationalise at a slow pace and choose foreign direct investment as a foreign operation mode. However, their theoretical propositions remain unexplored empirically. Moreover, in a similar manner to the approach taken in the field of IB, these theoretical contributions were built by comparing PSFs to manufacturing firms. Undoubtedly, they provide additional nuance to our understanding of PSF internationalisation, however they remain silent on why international PSFs differ in their strategies.

A third approximation to the study of international PSFs comes from the field of professions and professional organisations, with scholars building on institutional theory and the sociology of organisations. Here, the focus is placed on the implications of the PSF's distinctive nature, namely the professional nature of their employees and their interactions with institutions (Morgan and Quack, 2005; Skjølsvik *et al.*, 2017). Particular attention has been given to whether the one-firm model (i.e. an integrated organisation with professionals sharing common practices and values (Maister, 1993)) is feasible and appropriate for all PSFs (Muzio and Faulconbridge, 2013; Segal-Horn and Dean, 2009). Building on this, four different forms of PSF internationalisation have been proposed (Boussebaa and Morgan, 2015): the *project form* (requiring temporary ad-hoc project teams), the *network form* (independent network of firms working together), the *federal form* (single brand identity, centralised management and intertwined partnership structure) and the *transnational form* (firms that balance global efficiency and local responsiveness strategies by means of leveraging learning throughout the firm (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1989)). Specific PSF industries have been used to exemplify these different forms, and they provide useful building blocks to explore PSF heterogeneity. However, we still know little about which PSFs choose these forms, why and what strategic and managerial issues will ensue; or how these forms align with traditional classifications of foreign operation modes so that existing research can be mapped onto them.

Overall, the field of international management of PSFs has benefitted from the variety of disciplinary and theoretical approaches adopted, as a wide range of issues have been explored and a significant body of empirical work accumulated. This makes a literature review timely. Our approach to the review consists of bringing PSF characteristics to the forefront. Defining international PSFs in terms of their characteristics would allow researchers to identify and discuss the boundaries of their research more clearly and point to PSFs with similar characteristics to which their findings might apply. This approach also allows PSFs to be compared, and potential answers found to why they behave differently in the international arena. We apply the lens of PSF characteristics to analyse *where, how* and *what* research has been studied to date and identify the main gaps in the extant literature and identify promising future research avenues. By building on PSF characteristics to

---

develop the future research agenda, we provide a means of achieving greater conceptual rigour, more varied methods and more nuanced theorising, which will lead to greater understanding of the phenomenon and ultimately greater ability to support managers of international PSFs.

### Research method

To address our research aims, we carried out a systematic literature review, following guidelines suggested in the literature (Tranfield *et al.*, 2003) and as described below.

#### *Step 1: review protocol*

Our review protocol included several inclusion/exclusion criteria that are detailed below. First, due to the ambiguity surrounding the industries considered PSFs, we focused on articles that explicitly used the term “professional service”. We acknowledge that defining the boundary this way may have led to omitting studies on PSFs that did not use the term explicitly, i.e. studies on a particular PSF industry without referencing the PSF concept or that framed them as knowledge-intensive firms rather than PSFs. We concluded that this was an indication that the PSF lens was not central to their analysis and for our review. However, we acknowledge that our findings must be interpreted within these boundaries, and that further insights may be imported from related fields (e.g. services, knowledge-intensive firms).

Second, we focused on studies with an international dimension, i.e. cross-border activities of firms and the impact of the international environment on these firms (Tung and Van Witteloostuijn, 2008). The terms “international”, “global” and “transnational” were considered as synonyms because, despite being conceptually different, they are often used interchangeably (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1989).

As a result, our search protocol included the search string “professional service” AND “international\*” OR “global\*” OR “transnational”.

Finally, two further inclusion criteria were defined. As the focus of this study was to identify what empirical work has been done, only empirical articles were included. Also, following other recent literature reviews aiming to include high quality research (e.g. Skjølsvik *et al.*, 2017), articles needed to be published in peer-reviewed journals included in the Chartered Association of Business Schools ranking. Therefore, our search did not include book chapters or other sources. No time limit was set for the publication date to cover all the scholarship on the topic from its origin.

#### *Step 2: data collection*

The search was run according to our search protocol (with the string defined above) in Scopus and Web of Science, two of the leading academic databases that follow a rigorous selection of indexed sources. Once duplicates were removed, the search resulted in 137 articles, and 50 additional articles were identified manually through citation analysis, providing a total of 187 articles for further filtering.

Title, abstract and keywords were analysed for each of these 187 articles in order to apply inclusion and exclusion criteria, and where further clarification was necessary, articles were read in full. In the subsequent screening of articles, studies that, while empirically set in international or global PSFs, did not investigate international or cross-border issues were excluded. This search and filtering process was completed in December 2020. The resulting dataset of articles for the analysis includes 108 empirical articles that focus on the international management of PSFs [1].

*Step 3: data analysis*

Content analysis, a helpful method to take stock of existing knowledge in a systematic manner (Gaur and Kumar, 2018), was used to structure the content and themes identified in the dataset.

We designed a coding scheme composed of attribute and thematic codes (Saldaña, 2013). Attribute codes were assigned standardised values, i.e. descriptive information about the study and its dataset, e.g. research setting (size, industry and geography) and methodology; and theory-based thematic coding was used for theoretical approaches and research themes. In particular, to map the research themes in our dataset, we used a categorisation of international management themes, which has proven useful for literature reviews in the field (Werner, 2002).

To ensure coding reliability, the coding scheme was tested on a subset of articles by two of the co-authors, and all doubts were discussed to reach a consensus. The first author then coded the remainder of the dataset, and arising doubts were discussed among all co-authors. To further enhance coding reliability, various cycles of coding, recoding and classification were carried out (Gioia et al., 2012; Miles et al., 2013), and themes were grouped or subdivided where necessary (e.g. research themes) through joint discussions between the authors. The NVivo software was then used to analyse the data, namely to generate frequency tables and graphs, as well as to link different codes.

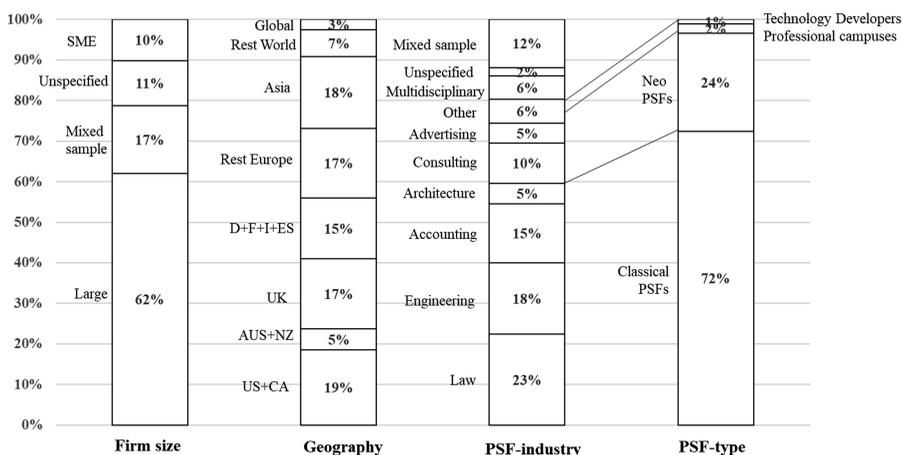
**Findings**

We examined *where* research was carried out, namely the research settings most frequently chosen, *how* international PSFs were studied, i.e. the theoretical and methodological approaches, and explore *what* was studied in the field. The application of the lens of PSF characteristics then helped highlight important questions that remain unanswered.

*Where: research setting*

First, we examined the research setting of the studies in our dataset, in particular the size, country and the industry of the firms in the sample. Findings are summarised in Figure 1.

*Firm size.* The papers in our dataset focus mainly on large PSFs, with only 11 studies of small or medium-sized firms (SMEs). This is not representative of the overall population of

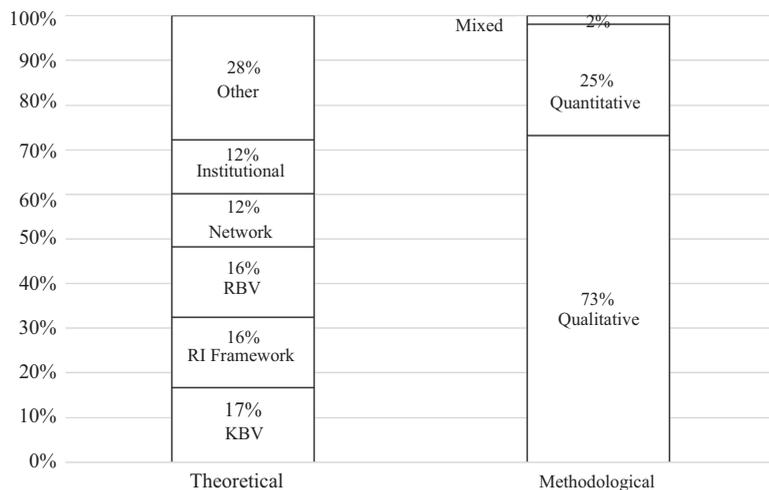


**Figure 1.**  
Where: Research setting

PSFs, which includes the “Big Four” and global top tier consulting or law firms, but also small high street practices (Empson *et al.*, 2015). These smaller PSFs may find the international path of the Big Four (e.g. federal form) unsuitable and may internationalise differently (Deprey *et al.*, 2012; Poulfelt *et al.*, 2014), but little guidance can be found in the literature.

*Geography.* Having coded the geographic location of samples used in each study, we calculated the frequency with which research was carried out in countries across the world (see Figure 2). Data samples from United Kingdom (UK), United States (US), Canada, Australia and New Zealand, grouped together as “Anglo-Saxon”, make up nearly half of the total (41%). Adding Western economies, 74% of the sample is reached, indicating a lack of focus on non-Anglo-Saxon and emerging economy PSFs. This reflects the historical origins and international development of traditional PSF industries such as law or accounting firms (Morgan and Quack, 2005; Spar, 1997). However, critical scholars contend that this is a reflection of the imperialist mind-set adopted in global PSFs and that greater attention should be paid to peripheral offices (Boussebaa, 2015a; Boussebaa *et al.*, 2012). Studies on PSFs from emerging markets are growing in number and show that these firms rely on different performance drivers (Mathew *et al.*, 2020; Radulovich *et al.*, 2018). If confirmed, the recent shift towards alternative research settings promises a more holistic understanding of international PSFs.

*PSF industries and types.* Law, engineering and accounting have received most attention, followed by consulting, advertising and architecture. Overall, the predominance of single industry studies (81%) is salient. This single-industry focus, which has become a convention in the field, is contributing to the fragmentation of the field, as many of these studies rooted in a particular PSF industry omit clues of how findings apply to other PSFs. An analysis of these industries through the lens of PSF characteristics, and more specifically the taxonomy proposed by Von Nordenflycht (2010) (see Table 1) revealed that of the 87 papers that could be classified (the 21 studies in multidisciplinary or unspecified settings and mixed samples could not), 72% were set in *Classical PSFs*, 24% in *Neo-PSFs*, 2% in *Professional campuses* and 1% in *Technology Developers*. Table 1 also highlights a prevalence of studies in highly professionalised (75%), highly customised (78%) or low capital-intensive (97%) contexts, leaving us with an incomplete picture of the diversity of PSFs.



**Figure 2.**  
How: theoretical and methodological approaches

PSF-industry	Frequency in dataset	Type of PSF by <i>Von Nordenflycht (2010)</i> (% of classified papers)	Characteristics from von Nordenflycht taxonomy				High customisation <sup>(*)</sup>
			Knowledge intensity	Low capital intensity	Highly professionalised workforce	High customisation <sup>(*)</sup>	
Law	25	<i>Classical PSFs (72)</i>	X	X	X	X	X
Accounting	5		X	X	X	X	X
Engineering	18		X	X	X	X	X
Architecture	15		X	X	X	X	X
Consulting	10	<i>Neo-PSFs (24)</i>	X	X	X	X	X
Advertising	5		X	X	X	X	X
Headhunting	3		X	X	X	X	X
Financial services	2		X	X	X	X	X
Real estate	1		X	X	X	X	X
Hospitals	1	<i>Professional campuses (2)</i>	X		X		X
News agency (**)	1		X		X		Insufficient data
Weather forecast	1	<i>Technology developer (1)</i>	X		X		X
service provider (**)							
<i>Total: Single industry studies</i>	87 ***		87	84	65	68	
<i>% of classified papers</i>			100	97	75	78	

**Note(s):** (\*) Assignment of customisation category is based on extant literature (Greenwood *et al.*, 2005; Malhotra and Morris, 2009; Von Nordenflycht *et al.*, 2015) and information provided in the dataset  
(\*\*) Assignment to von Nordenflycht taxonomy based on information provided in the dataset  
(\*\*\*) of the remaining 21 papers, 6 included multidisciplinary firms; 13 mixed sample and 2 did not specify the industry

**Table 1.**  
PSF industries, types and characteristics

*How: theoretical and methodological approaches*

The second step in our analysis was to examine the approach used to study the international management of PSFs. Findings are summarised in [Figure 2](#) and discussed below.

*Theoretical approaches.* The dataset unveiled that a broad range of theories (24) or theoretical frameworks (12) have been used to analyse international PSFs, with most of them being used in one to three papers only. The conceptual works building on the distinctive nature of PSFs (namely their characteristics) (e.g. [Löwendahl, 2005](#); [Malhotra and Morris, 2009](#); [Von Nordenflycht, 2010](#)) were often cited, but rarely used as a theoretical foundation on which to build empirical studies. Instead, scholars have mainly anchored their research in general management or international business theories and frameworks. In particular, five theoretical approaches were used between 11 and 18 times each: resource-based view, knowledge-based view, the responsiveness-integration framework, institutional theory and network theory. The proportion of studies using general management or IB theories would suggest that these theories do apply to PSFs; however, as the theoretical propositions put forward by PSF scholars have rarely been explored empirically, it is difficult to determine which theories may be more useful to explain or predict the behaviour of international PSFs.

*Research methods.* The overwhelming majority of the articles (75%) are qualitative studies. These provide a wealth of detail regarding the historical development of PSF industries, institutional factors and internal organisation of PSFs but limited opportunities to generalise across different settings. Due to this, and the fact that many studies are set in a single industry, the field is suffering from fragmentation. Furthermore, dominance of qualitative studies can be indicative of a new, emerging field ([Yin, 2016](#)), but given that this research area has been developing for several decades and generated a wealth of theoretical propositions, opportunities exist for quantitative studies also.

*What: research themes*

The third step in our analysis was to explore what topics had been studied in relation to the international management of PSFs. Inspired by [Werner's \(2002\)](#) themes in international management, we identified the six themes discussed below. [Table 2](#) builds on [Table 1](#), and presents these research themes by PSF industries and PSF characteristics. Here too, the lens of characteristics provided a useful means of identifying the relevant gaps and future research questions.

*Internationalisation process of PSFs.* This theme is prominent and is covered in all PSF industries (see [Table 2](#)). The literature is rich in contextual descriptions of the internationalisation of PSFs of different origins (Japanese, German, French etc.), or industries (law, architecture, engineering etc.), but provides few generalisable conclusions about the drivers of these patterns. Recent studies have identified determinants of international performance such as order of entry effects ([Magnusson et al., 2009](#)), human and relational capital ([Hitt et al., 2006](#); [Suseno and Pinnington, 2018](#)) or certain firm capabilities ([Bello et al., 2016](#); [Uner et al., 2020](#)). Overall, however, the central question of what are the drivers and barriers of PSF internationalisation remains largely unanswered. Moreover, evidence is lacking to support the proposition that the pace of PSF internationalisation will be slow due to the time required to recruit and train professionals ([Jensen and Petersen, 2014](#)). While the literature does link the international growth of PSFs to human capital or knowledge-intensity ([Boxall and Steeneveld, 1999](#); [Hitt et al., 2006](#)), there is also evidence to suggest that PSFs engage in inorganic growth strategies ([Jewell et al., 2014](#)) or may be born as international new ventures ([Bunz et al., 2017](#)).

*PSF foreign operation modes.* In contrast with the general IB literature, research on the modes (e.g. exports, foreign direct investment (FDI), franchises, alliances and networks) that PSFs use to operate in foreign markets remains scant. As a result, the contradictory findings

Themes	PSF industry										PSF characteristics																			
	Accounting		Advertising		Architecture		Engineering		Law		Consultancy		Other		Mixed sample		Multidisciplinary		Unspecified		Total		Capital intensity		Professionalisation		Customisation			
	Low*	High**	Low*	High**	Low*	High**	Low*	High**	Low*	High**	Low*	High**	Low*	High**	Low*	High**	Low*	High**	Low*	High**	Low*	High**	Low*	High**	Low*	High**	Low*	High**	Low*	High**
(1) Internationalisation	2	3	2	2	6	4	2	4	2	2	2	2	2	4	4	0	0	0	0	0	25	20	95	15	71	17	81			
(2) Foreign operation mode	2	0	1	2	2	2	0	1	4	1	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	12	8	10	7	88	6	75				
(3) Integration-responsiveness dilemma	4	0	0	5	3	1	2	2	2	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	23	14	93	13	87	10	67				
(4) Managing professionals	4	0	0	2	6	1	0	2	0	2	0	2	0	2	0	2	0	0	0	17	13	100	12	92	9	69				
(5) Managing knowledge	1	1	0	3	2	4	2	4	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	13	12	92	6	46	11	85				
(6) Adapting to global context	2	1	2	0	8	2	2	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	18	17	100	12	71	15	88				
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>84*</b>	<b>65*</b>	<b>68*</b>															

**Note(s):** Knowledge-intensity is not included in this table as all PSFs are knowledge-intensive (see Table 1)

(\*) Number of papers in the theme set in a context with this characteristic (see Table 1 for assignment of characteristics)

(\*\*) % of papers in the theme with this characteristic with respect to papers that can be assigned a characteristic (i.e. excludes mixed sample, multidisciplinary and unspecified)

**Table 2.** Research theme by industry and PSF characteristic

remains unclarified: While there is some evidence to support the idea that PSFs choose the FDI mode (Muzio and Faulconbridge, 2013; Poufelt *et al.*, 2014; Ström and Mattsson, 2006), there is also evidence to suggest PSFs choose from a range of other modes such as networks (Salvoldi and Brock, 2019), franchises (Alon and Bian, 2005; Alon and McKee, 1999) and exports (Leo and Phillippe, 2001). Boussebaa and Morgan (2015) propose four forms of PSF internationalisation, but their implications remain to be explored, and it remains unclear how these can be reconciled with traditional mode classifications.

*Integration-responsiveness dilemma.* Our data indicate that this theme is among the most frequently studied in the field and across nearly all types of international PSFs, although mostly in highly professionalised PSFs (see Table 2). In particular, research has explored how firms struggle to implement the “one-firm model” internationally or achieve global integration given the local embeddedness of many professional services (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2016; Muzio and Faulconbridge, 2013). Although PSF characteristics may not have been explicitly highlighted, the dataset provides evidence of their role in the implementation of global integration practices. For example, given the need for customisation of services, international PSFs seem to standardise their managerial practices rather than the services themselves (Brock and Hydle, 2018; Segal-Horn and Dean, 2009). Additionally, the literature provides clues on how other characteristics can hinder global integration, namely the resistance linked with the autonomy of professionals (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2008; Klimkeit and Reihlen, 2015; Segal-Horn and Dean, 2007) or the internal power struggles caused by cost differentials (Boussebaa, 2015a; Boussebaa *et al.*, 2012). Given this evidence, it would appear this topic is ripe for the testing of relationships between characteristics and the PSF’s ability to balance global integration and local responsiveness in larger and broader samples.

*Managing professionals.* By definition, PSFs are highly dependent on the professionals and their knowledge, and the term “herding wild cats” is often used to describe the difficulty of managing professionals, something all the more complex in the international context (Löwendahl, 2005; Suseno and Pinnington, 2017). The dataset highlights the importance of human and social capital (Hitt *et al.*, 2006; Kittler and Schuster, 2010; Suseno and Pinnington, 2018) in the success of international PSFs, and the role of managers in managing professionals across geographies (Benson *et al.*, 2009; Boxall and Steeneveld, 1999; Richardson and McKenna, 2014). Moreover, the role professional values play in firm dynamics has been highlighted, in particular in classical PSFs such as law and accounting (Pinnington and Sandberg, 2014; Spence *et al.*, 2015, 2016). These professional values may, however, vary from country to country, a concept coined as the *varieties of professionalism* (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2007) and which has been empirically explored in the context of law firms (Morgan and Quack, 2005; Muzio and Faulconbridge, 2013) and the Big 4 (Spence *et al.*, 2016, 2017). Nevertheless, the extent to which this affects PSFs (and which PSFs) remains unclear, as this theme has mostly been studied in highly professionalised PSF (see Table 2).

*Managing knowledge.* Unsurprisingly, given the knowledge-intensive nature of PSFs, our dataset illustrates the importance of knowledge flows for international PSFs of many industries (see Table 2) and provides clues on how knowledge is transferred. In particular, it delivers evidence of how PSFs combine practices aimed at managing explicit knowledge with others aimed at stimulating networking and learning spaces to share tacit knowledge (Faulconbridge, 2006, 2007; Hydle *et al.*, 2014). Potential barriers to knowledge transfer are also identified; one such barrier emerging as particularly relevant is the impact of geopolitical and power relations (Boussebaa, 2015b; Boussebaa *et al.*, 2014). Overall, however, research has predominantly focused on process (knowledge flows) and has not paid attention to content—that is, what knowledge can and should be transferred (Sergeeva and Andreeva, 2016), thus limiting our understanding of this key topic for international PSFs, and other firms that look to them as a model for new knowledge management practices.

*Adapting to the global context.* The prominence of this theme in the dataset highlights the relevance of institutions for international PSFs, in particular the need to adapt to different and sometimes conflicting institutional contexts. This seems particularly salient for *classical* PSFs. Their professional nature makes them particularly susceptible to institutional pressures and their international expansion strategy must adapt to multiple institutional contexts (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2016; Muzio and Faulconbridge, 2013). Nevertheless, questions remain regarding why and how institutional complexity affects other types of international PSFs, and how they respond. Recently, attention has also turned to how PSFs act as agents of economic globalisation by shaping institutions (Boussebaa and Faulconbridge, 2019; Suddaby *et al.*, 2007).

Similarly, research has begun to focus on how PSFs adapt to the local client context. Studies have examined how PSFs build their brand and reputation in international markets (Harvey *et al.*, 2017), and how this has proven particularly difficult for emerging market PSFs (Mathew *et al.*, 2020) and firms with a low degree of professionalisation (Hall *et al.*, 2009). These studies highlight how much remains unknown about how non-“Big 4” PSFs establish their reputation abroad and if and how they differ from other firms in this respect.

### Discussion and future research directions

Building on our findings and the lens of PSF characteristics, we propose the future research agenda discussed below and summarised in Table 3.

#### *Where: research setting*

Our analysis highlighted that despite a broad spectrum of PSF industries appearing in the literature, a number of settings remain unexplored, leaving us with a partial understanding of international PSFs. In particular, attention should shift beyond large, classical, Anglo-Saxon PSFs (“Big 4”) to confirm or refine existing theories in a broader range of international PSFs (Von Nordenflycht, 2010, 2011). Indeed, the dataset provides only two cases of *Professional Campuses* and one *Technology Developers* in von Nordenflycht’s (2010) taxonomy of PSFs. Rather than conclude that no research exists on these types of firms, we reflected on the types of firms that might be included in these categories. For example, software or IT firms are often considered PSFs, but our search for studies on international PSFs did not capture any studies on global software and IT firms, indicating that scholars are not labelling these firms PSFs. Given that these firms share the defining characteristics of PSFs, and therefore findings from such studies could apply to other PSFs (albeit to varying degrees), they should be considered part of the field.

PSF characteristics provide a means with which to define the context of study in a more explicit manner, thus providing clearer boundaries of the applicability of findings. For example, rather than discussing the conclusions exclusively in the context of law firms, a study analysing findings in terms of the high degree of professionalisation of the workforce could shed light on implications for PSFs with the same characteristic (e.g. accounting firms). Indeed, defining the research setting in terms of PSF characteristics rather than industries, allows researchers to identify the broader range of settings to which their findings apply, as well as identify where existing theoretical approaches remain unexplored or untested. This search for generalisability aims to refine theory by clarifying which firms findings apply to, rather than seek universal applicability (Greenwood *et al.*, 2014).

#### *How: theoretical and methodological approaches*

Our analysis revealed that existing research has built on a wide variety of theoretical perspectives, but applied a limited variety of methodological approaches. An opportunity

**Table 3.**  
Research themes: Past  
and future

Theme	Articles (%)	Subthemes identified in dataset (frequency)	Future research questions building on the PSF characteristics lens
(1) PSF internationalisation	25 (23)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Patterns of internationalisation (14)</li> <li>• International success/performance (7)</li> <li>• Growth (2)</li> <li>• Liability of foreignness/outsiderness (2)</li> <li>• Exporting decision (1)</li> <li>• Market entry strategies (2)</li> <li>• Entry modes (2)</li> <li>• Franchise models (2)</li> <li>• Determinants of export success (1)</li> <li>• Role of home and host country networks (3)</li> <li>• Network internationalisation (1)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do PSF characteristics (knowledge-intensity, degree of professionalisation, customisation or low capital-intensity) drive or impede the internationalisation of different types of PSFs?</li> </ul>
(2) PSF foreign operation modes (FOM)	12 (11)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exporting decision (1)</li> <li>• Market entry strategies (2)</li> <li>• Entry modes (2)</li> <li>• Franchise models (2)</li> <li>• Determinants of export success (1)</li> <li>• Role of home and host country networks (3)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which foreign operation modes do PSFs use and why? How do PSF characteristics influence mode choice individually and/or in combination?</li> <li>• What role do PSF characteristics play in <a href="#">Boussebaa and Morgan's (2015)</a> forms of PSF-internationalisation? How can traditional operation modes be mapped against them?</li> </ul>
(3) Integration–responsiveness dilemma	23 (21)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integration and coordination practices (18)</li> <li>• Organisational structure (3)</li> <li>• Global business models (2)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do PSF characteristics affect the integration – responsiveness dilemma? To what extent does a high degree of professionalisation hinder global integration? To what extent does a need for customisation lead to greater local responsiveness?</li> <li>• Given the combination of PSF characteristics, to what extent can PSFs implement a transnational strategy? Considering individual characteristics (e.g. knowledge-intensity or customisation through strong client-interaction) could PSFs serve as an exemplary cases for other firms aspiring to a transnational strategy and why?</li> </ul>
(4) Managing professionals	17 (16)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impact of professions on HRM: habitus, partnership, varieties of professionalism (5)</li> <li>• Social and relational capital (4)</li> <li>• Role of managers (4)</li> <li>• HRM Strategy (2)</li> <li>• Borders to mobility of professionals (1)</li> <li>• Social networks (1)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Considering its degree of professionalisation, how do national varieties of professionalism impact the international management of a PSF?</li> <li>• Can national varieties of professionalism intensify or reduce geopolitical power dynamics?</li> </ul>

(continued)

Theme	Articles (%)	Subthemes identified in dataset (frequency)	Future research questions building on the PSF characteristics lens
(5) Managing knowledge	13 (12)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Global learning spaces (7)</li> <li>Types of knowledge (2)</li> <li>Knowledge transfer and performance (1)</li> <li>Knowledge management and expatriation (1)</li> <li>Barriers to knowledge transfer (1)</li> <li>Micro-processes of experiential learning (1)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What knowledge is relevant to international PSFs? How is this knowledge best shared or transferred and what barriers exist to these processes? Do the other PSF characteristics affect these knowledge flows and how?</li> <li>To what extent are the knowledge management practices of transnational PSFs applicable to other firms?</li> </ul>
(6) Adapting to the global context	18 (17)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strategic responses to institutional context (10)</li> <li>Home market/industry factors (2)</li> <li>Specific PSF business environments (1)</li> <li>Role of global PSFs in shaping the global business environment (1)</li> <li>Adapting to the local client context (4)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do PSFs differ in their interaction with institutions based on their degree of professionalisation?</li> <li>How do PSFs manage the value creation process with international clients? What role do PSF characteristics (in particular knowledge-intensity and customisation) play in this process?</li> </ul>
<i>TOTAL</i>	108		

Table 3.

exists, therefore, to enrich the field not only with greater methodological diversity but also with different forms of theorisation (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2021), and PSF characteristics can help reveal fertile paths for more pluralistic and holistic future research.

First, by comparing PSFs at different levels on the continuum of a particular characteristic (e.g. high versus low degree of professionalisation) it becomes possible to compare international PSFs and explain the heterogeneity among them (Malhotra and Morris, 2009; Von Nordenflycht, 2010). For example, the strategies law firms use to adapt to institutional complexity might be compared to those used by consulting firms. Such comparative research could include qualitative and/or quantitative methods to explore and test if and when logical relationships exist between PSF characteristics and international management phenomena (Boddewyn, 1965; Greenwood *et al.*, 2014).

Second, given the complex nature of international management and probable interdependencies between PSF characteristics, a configurational approach could prove insightful (Fainshmidt *et al.*, 2020). For example, how different combinations of PSF characteristics (and/or indeed other factors) might lead to a given operation mode choice. Moreover, these operation modes are likely to change over time and the adoption of a process approach would surely produce novel findings regarding how international PSFs are managed.

#### *What: research themes*

The application of the PSF characteristics lens enabled us to identify promising avenues for future research, which are discussed below.

*Internationalisation process of PSFs.* We propose that the drivers and barriers to PSF internationalisation should be analysed through the characteristics lens. For example, it is commonly accepted that PSFs will follow their clients abroad, perhaps due to the trust built between client and PSF during the customisation process. However, to achieve a sustainable international presence, PSFs will need local clients, which may be difficult due to knowledge asymmetry (Dou *et al.*, 2010). Additional barriers also appear to stem from the professional nature of services: evidence from law firms shows that the regulation of professions generates internationalisation barriers that need to be overcome (Faulconbridge *et al.*, 2012; Morgan and Quack, 2005; Muzio and Faulconbridge, 2013). However, these drivers and barriers need to be explored and tested in different settings to establish to what extent they affect different types of PSFs (e.g. with different degrees of professionalisation).

*PSF foreign operation modes.* PSF characteristics may also provide clues to resolve the contradictions and open questions regarding PSF operation modes. For example, scholars have posited that PSFs favour the FDI mode to facilitate knowledge transfer that is so central to their activity (Dunning, 1989; Erramilli and Rao, 1993). While many PSFs do choose FDI, our dataset also showed a number of alternative mode choices. Examination of these choices through the lens of other characteristics (e.g. degree of professionalisation) can provide additional insights: Highly professionalised PSFs face jurisdictional boundaries limiting the ability of professionals to practice in other places and/or share knowledge across subsidiaries, so they may need to internationalise through networks and alliances (Salvoldi and Brock, 2019); while other professionals can resort to a fly-in, fly-out (export) mode (Deprey *et al.*, 2012; Winch, 2008, 2014). Similarly, customisation requires face-to-face interaction, but deeper analysis will undoubtedly reveal a range of options for partial remote provision and potential mode combinations (Ball *et al.*, 2008), i.e. exports and a local presence (FDI or partner) (Boojihawon, 2007; Faulconbridge, 2009; McQuillan *et al.*, 2018). These illustrative examples from our dataset point to the need to further explore how individual and combinations of PSF characteristics influence foreign operation mode choices.

*Integration-responsiveness dilemma.* Our analysis revealed that this topic has received sufficient attention to allow for comparison and integration of results. Moreover, we

discussed how PSF characteristics (e.g. professionalisation or customisation) have played an important role in explaining the resistance firms experience to global integration and as such findings can be tested in broader settings to confirm or refine existing theories. Another relevant avenue is the open debate on the extent to which PSFs are and should be considered prime examples of the *transnational* firm, given the role of PSF characteristics in the struggle to balance global integration and local responsiveness (Boussebaa, 2015a; Klimkeit and Reihlen, 2015).

*Managing professionals.* Our findings pointed to a promising path forward, namely the impact of *national varieties of professionalism* on the management of professionals in the international PSF and the resulting organisational arrangements (Boussebaa and Morgan, 2015; Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2007). Indeed, the diversity of habits and expectations of professionals could contribute positively or negatively to the firm's international success, and its impact would be expected to vary based on the degree of professional intensity (Spence *et al.*, 2016). Of particular relevance would be the effects of these varieties of professionalism on the neo-colonialist power struggles that have been identified in international PSFs (Boussebaa *et al.*, 2012; Sayed and Agndal, 2020).

*Managing knowledge.* Our analysis identified an important gap in the literature, namely that knowledge has largely been treated as a monolithic concept, with the exception of differentiating between explicit and tacit knowledge. However, we know from the broader IB literature that firms require and build different types of knowledge to compete in international markets (Fletcher *et al.*, 2013), and from the dataset that PSFs apply both technical professional knowledge and experiential knowledge in the provision of services (Faulconbridge, 2006; Malhotra and Morris, 2009; Werr and Stjernberg, 2003). A deeper understanding of *what* knowledge international PSFs are sharing and *how* they do so could help identify the most effective transfer mechanisms, provide a means of comparison of PSF knowledge management strategies, and clarify to what extent lessons from international PSFs are applicable to other multinational firms.

*Adapting to the global context.* Research on the interaction between PSFs and the global context, in particular with institutions and clients, has already placed PSF characteristics at the heart of its analysis. Future research could explore the applicability of these findings in broader research settings, e.g. to determine whether PSFs with a lower degree of professionalisation (e.g. consulting or technological firms) will be affected by institutions in the same way as highly professionalised PSFs, or whether they will behave more like other service or manufacturing firms. Similarly, given the focus of the value creation perspective on knowledge co-creation with clients (Fosstenlökken *et al.*, 2003; Löwendahl *et al.*, 2001), this approach seems particularly apt to analyse the role of customisation and knowledge-intensity in the interaction between PSFs and their international clients.

## Conclusions

This literature review has attempted to paint a picture of what is known about the management of international PSFs. Like any picture, it is a (limited) reflection of reality. First, our focus on studies that explicitly referred to PSFs, due to the conceptual ambiguity, may have excluded potentially relevant studies and therefore our findings should be interpreted within the boundaries we defined. Second, it is difficult to fully eliminate subjectivity in the coding and content analysis process. Where possible, we have built on existing categorisations and where no such previous categorisation existed, emerging themes were discussed between the authors, who have different backgrounds, experience and thus perspectives on the data.

Despite these limitations, we contribute to the fields of IB and PSFs by taking stock of the extant literature on the international management of PSFs and highlighting promising

avenues for future research. In particular, we propose that PSF characteristics should play a more prominent role in future research. Not only do PSF characteristics provide a means to explicate the contextual boundaries of a study and its considerations of generalisability, but they also provide a means to explore and explain the heterogeneity of PSFs, thus enabling confirmation and/or further refinement of existing theories and more fine-grained explanation of the behaviour of different international PSFs. As a result, this study proposes a PSF characteristic-based research agenda that contributes to the conceptual, methodological and theoretical development of the field.

Our proposal to bring PSF characteristics to the forefront of research includes important managerial considerations. Research explaining and predicting how PSF characteristics will influence a firm's internationalisation can help managers understand the decision alternatives available to them and better evaluate which are more likely to succeed in their context. Additionally, this approach provides managers with clues regarding the types of firms they might learn from (i.e. those with similar characteristics) and to what extent they may serve as an example for others.

#### Note

1. A complete list of articles included in the dataset may be requested from the corresponding author.

#### References

- Aharoni, Y. (1993), "Globalization of professional business services", in Aharoni, Y. (Ed.), *Coalitions and Competition: the Globalization of Professional Business Services*, Routledge, London.
- Aharoni, Y. (2000), "Introduction setting the scene", in Aharoni, Y. and Nachum, L. (Eds), *Globalization of Services. Some Implications for Theory and Practice*, Routledge, pp. 1-22.
- Alon, I. and Bian, K. (2005), "Real estate franchising: the case of Coldwell Banker expansion into China", *Business Horizons*, Vol. 48 No. 3, pp. 223-231.
- Alon, I. and McKee, D. (1999), "The internationalization of professional business service franchises", *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 74-85.
- Anderson, E. and Gatignon, H. (1986), "Modes of foreign entry: a transaction cost analysis and propositions", *Journal of International Business Studies*, Vol. 17 No. 3, pp. 1-26.
- Ball, D.A., Lindsay, V.J. and Rose, E.L. (2008), "Rethinking the paradigm of service internationalisation: less resource-intensive market entry modes for information-intensive soft services", *Management International Review*, Vol. 48 No. 4, pp. 413-431.
- Bartlett, C. and Ghoshal, S. (1989), *Managing across Borders: the Transnational Solution*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston.
- Bello, D., Radulovich, L., Javalgi, R.G., Scherer, R. and Taylor, J. (2016), "Performance of professional service firms from emerging markets: role of innovative services and firm capabilities", *Journal of World Business*, Elsevier, Vol. 51 No. 3, pp. 413-424.
- Benson, G.S., Pérez-Nordtvedt, L. and Deepak, K.D. (2009), "Managerial characteristics and willingness to send employees on expatriate assignments", *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 48 No. 6, pp. 849-869.
- Blagoeva, D., Jensen, P.Ø. and Merchant, H. (2020), "Services in international business studies: a replication and extension of merchant and gaur (2008)", *Management International Review*, Vol. 60 No. 3, pp. 427-457.
- Boddewyn, J. (1965), "The comparative approach to the study of the Americas", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 8 No. 4, pp. 261-267.
- Boddewyn, J., Halbrich, M. and Perry, A. (1986), "Service multinationals: conceptualization, measurement and theory", *Journal of International Business Studies*, Vol. 17 No. 3, pp. 41-57.

- Boojihawon, D. (2007), "Network dynamics and the internationalisation process of small advertising agencies", *The Service Industries Journal*, Vol. 27 No. 6, pp. 809-829.
- Boussebaa, M. (2015a), "Control in the multinational enterprise: the polycentric case of global professional service firms", *Journal of World Business*, Vol. 50 No. 4, pp. 696-703.
- Boussebaa, M. (2015b), "Professional service firms, globalisation and the new imperialism", *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, Vol. 28 No. 8, pp. 1217-1233.
- Boussebaa, M. and Faulconbridge, J. (2019), "Professional service firms as agents of economic globalization: a political perspective", *Journal of Professions and Organization*, Vol. 6 No. 1, pp. 72-90.
- Boussebaa, M. and Morgan, G. (2015), "Internationalization of professional service firms", in Empson, L., Muzio, D., Broschak, J. and Hinings, B. (Eds), *Handbook of Professional Service Firms*, Oxford University Press, pp. 71-91.
- Boussebaa, M., Morgan, G. and Sturdy, A. (2012), "Constructing global firms? National, transnational and neocolonial effects in international management consultancies", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 33 No. 4, pp. 465-486.
- Boussebaa, M., Sturdy, A. and Morgan, G. (2014), "Learning from the world? Horizontal knowledge flows and geopolitics in international consulting firms", *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 25 No. 9, pp. 1227-1242.
- Boxall, P. and Steeneveld, M. (1999), "Human resource strategy and competitive advantage: a longitudinal study of engineering consultancies", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 36 No. 4, pp. 443-463.
- Brock, D. and Hyde, K. (2018), "Transnationality – sharpening the Integration-Responsiveness vision in global professional firms", *European Management Journal*, Vol. 36 No. 1, pp. 117-124.
- Buckley, P.J. and Casson, M. (1976), *The Future of the Multinational Enterprise*, Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Bunz, T., Casulli, L., Jones, M. and Bausch, A. (2017), "The dynamics of experiential learning: microprocesses and adaptation in a professional service INV", *International Business Review*, Vol. 26 No. 2, pp. 225-238.
- Cornelissen, J., Höllerer, M.A. and Seidl, D. (2021), "What theory is and can Be: forms of theorizing in organizational scholarship", *Organization Theory*, Vol. 2, pp. 1-19.
- Deprey, B., Lloyd-Reason, L. and Ibeh, K. (2012), "The internationalisation of small- and medium-sized management consultancies: an exploratory study of key facilitating factors", *The Service Industries Journal*, Vol. 32 No. 10, pp. 1609-1621.
- Dou, W., Li, H., Zhou, N. and Su, C. (2010), "Exploring relationship satisfaction between global professional service firms and local clients in emerging markets", *Journal of International Business Studies*, Palgrave Macmillan, Vol. 41 No. 7, pp. 1198-1217.
- Dunning, J.H. (1989), "Multinational enterprises and the growth of services: some conceptual and theoretical issues", *The Service Industries Journal*, Vol. 9 No. 1, pp. 5-39.
- Empson, L., Hinings, B., Muzio, D. and Broschak, J. (2015), "Researching professional service firms", in Empson, L., Muzio, D., Broschak, J. and Hinings, B. (Eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Professional Service Firms*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 1-22.
- Erramilli, M.K. and Rao, C.P. (1993), "Service firms' international entry-mode choice: a modified transaction-cost analysis approach", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 57 No. 3, pp. 19-38.
- Fainshmidt, S., Witt, M.A., Aguilera, R.V. and Verbeke, A. (2020), "The contributions of qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) to international business research", *Journal of International Business Studies*, Palgrave Macmillan, Vol. 51 No. 4, pp. 455-466.
- Faulconbridge, J. (2006), "Stretching tacit knowledge beyond a local fix? Global spaces of learning in advertising professional service firms", *Journal of Economic Geography*, Vol. 6 No. 0, pp. 517-540.
- Faulconbridge, J. (2007), "Relational knowledge networks in transnational law firms", *Geoforum*, Vol. 38 No. 5, pp. 925-940.

- Faulconbridge, J. (2009), "The regulation of design in global architecture firms: embedding and emplacing buildings", *Urban Studies*, Vol. 46 No. 12, pp. 2537-2554.
- Faulconbridge, J. and Muzio, D. (2007), "Reinserting the professional into the study of globalizing professional service firms: the case of law", *Global Networks*, Vol. 7 No. 3, pp. 249-270.
- Faulconbridge, J. and Muzio, D. (2008), "Organizational professionalism in globalizing law firms", *Work, Employment and Society*, Vol. 22 No. 1, pp. 7-25.
- Faulconbridge, J. and Muzio, D. (2016), "Global professional service firms and the challenge of institutional complexity: 'field relocation' as a response strategy", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 53 No. 1, pp. 89-124.
- Faulconbridge, J., Muzio, D. and Cook, A. (2012), "Institutional legacies in TNCs and their management through training academies: the case of transnational law firms in Italy", *Global Networks*, Vol. 12 No. 1, pp. 48-70.
- Fletcher, M., Harris, S. and Richey, R.G. (2013), "Internationalization knowledge: what, why, where, and when?", *Journal of International Marketing*, Vol. 21 No. 3, pp. 47-71.
- Fosstenlökken, S.M., Löwendahl, B. and Revang, Ø. (2003), "Knowledge development through client interaction: a comparative study", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 24 No. 6, pp. 859-879.
- Gaur, A. and Kumar, M. (2018), "A systematic approach to conducting review studies: an assessment of content analysis in 25 years of IB research", *Journal of World Business*, Vol. 53 No. 2, pp. 280-289.
- Gioia, D.A., Corley, K.G. and Hamilton, A. (2012), "Seeking qualitative rigor in inductive research: notes on the gioia methodology", *Organizational Research Methods*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 15-31.
- Greenwood, R., Li, S.X., Prakash, R. and Deephouse, D.L. (2005), "Reputation, diversification, and organizational explanations of performance in professional service firms", *Organization Science*, Vol. 16 No. 6, pp. 661-673.
- Greenwood, R., Hinings, C.R. and Whetten, D.A. (2014), "Rethinking institutions and organizations", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 51 No. 7, pp. 1206-1220.
- Hall, S., Beaverstock, J., Faulconbridge, J. and Hewitson, A. (2009), "Exploring cultural economies of internationalization: the role of 'iconic individuals' and 'brand leaders' in the globalization of headhunting", *Global Networks*, Vol. 9 No. 3, pp. 399-419.
- Harvey, W.S., Tourky, M., Knight, E. and Kitchen, P. (2017), "Lens or prism? How organisations sustain multiple and competing reputations", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 51 No. 4, pp. 821-844.
- Hitt, M.A., Bierman, L., Uhlenbruck, K. and Shimizu, K. (2006), "The importance of resources in the internationalization of professional service firms: the good, the bad and the ugly", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 49 No. 6, pp. 1137-1157.
- Hydle, K., Kvalshaugen, R. and Breunig, K. (2014), "Transnational practices in communities of task and communities of learning", *Management Learning*, Vol. 45 No. 5, pp. 609-629.
- Jensen, P.Ø. and Petersen, B. (2014), "Value creation logics and internationalization of service firms", *International Marketing Review*, Vol. 31 No. 6, pp. 557-575.
- Jewell, C., Flanagan, R. and Lu, W. (2014), "The dilemma of scope and scale for construction professional service firms", *Construction Management and Economics*, Routledge, Vol. 32 No. 5, pp. 473-486.
- Johanson, J. and Vahlne, J.-E. (1977), "The internationalization process of the firm - a model of knowledge development and increasing foreign market commitments", *Journal of International Business Studies*, Vol. 8 No. 1, pp. 23-32.
- Johanson, J. and Vahlne, J.-E. (2009), "The Uppsala internationalization process model revisited: from liability of foreignness to liability of outsidership", *Journal of International Business Studies*, Vol. 40 No. 9, pp. 1411-1431.

- Kittler, M.G. and Schuster, T. (2010), "The impact of human and social capital on the internationalisation of German consulting firms", *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation Management*, Vol. 12 No. 2, pp. 138-155.
- Klimkeit, D. and Reihlen, M. (2015), "Local responses to global integration in a transnational professional service firm", *Journal of Professions and Organization*, Vol. 3 No. 1, pp. 39-63.
- Kundu, S.K. and Merchant, H. (2008), "Service multinationals: their past, present, and future", *Management International Review*, Vol. 48 No. 4, pp. 371-377.
- Leo, P.-Y. and Phillippe, J. (2001), "Internationalisation of service activities in the Haute-Garonne", *The Service Industries Journal*, Vol. 21 No. 1, pp. 63-80.
- Løwendahl, B. (2000), "The globalization of professional business service firms. Fad or genuine source of competitive advantage?", in Aharoni, Y. and Nachum, L. (Eds), *Globalization of Services. Some Implications for Theory and Practice*, pp. 142-162.
- Løwendahl, B. (2005), *Strategic Management of Professional Service Firms*, Copenhagen Business School Press, Copenhagen.
- Løwendahl, B., Revang, Ø. and Fosstenlökken, S.M. (2001), "Knowledge and value creation in professional service firms: a framework", *Human Relations*, Vol. 54 No. 200107, pp. 911-931.
- Magnusson, P., Westjohn, S.A. and Boggs, D.J. (2009), "Order-of-Entry effects for service firms in developing markets: an examination of multinational advertising agencies", *Journal of International Marketing*, Vol. 17 No. 2, pp. 23-41.
- Maister, D.H. (1993), *Managing the Professional Service Firm*, Free Press Paperbacks, New York.
- Malhotra, N. and Morris, T. (2009), "Heterogeneity in professional service firms", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 46 No. 6, pp. 895-922.
- Mathew, N., Javalgi, R.G., Dixit, A. and Gross, A. (2020), "Drivers of emerging market professional service firm success: the role of internal firm competencies and capabilities", *Management Research Review*, Vol. 44 No. 4, pp. 547-567.
- McQuillan, D., Sharkey Scott, P. and Mangematin, V. (2018), "From outsider to insider: how creative professional service firms internationalise", *International Marketing Review*, Vol. 35 No. 5, pp. 869-888.
- Miles, M.B., Huberman, M. and Saldana, J. (2013), *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*, 3rd ed., SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, Calif.
- Morgan, G. and Quack, S. (2005), "Institutional legacies and firm dynamics: the growth and internationalization of UK and German law firms", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 26 No. 12, pp. 1765-1785.
- Muzio, D. and Faulconbridge, J. (2013), "The global professional service firm: 'one firm' models versus (Italian) distant institutionalized practices", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 34 No. 7, pp. 897-925.
- Pinnington, A. and Sandberg, J. (2014), "Competence regimes in professional service firm internationalization and professional careers", *Group and Organization Management*, Vol. 39 No. 5, pp. 561-591.
- Poufelt, F., Smith, I.S. and Christiansen, K.G. (2014), "When West meets East: the case of a Scandinavian consulting firm's expansion into India", *European Journal of International Management*, Vol. 8 No. 4, pp. 373-391.
- Radulovich, L., Javalgi, R.G. and Scherer, R. (2018), "Intangible resources influencing the international performance of professional service SMEs in an emerging market: evidence from India", *International Marketing Review*, Vol. 35 No. 1, pp. 113-135.
- Richardson, J. and McKenna, S. (2014), "Towards an understanding of social networks among organizational self-initiated expatriates: a qualitative case study of a professional services firm", *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 25 No. 19, pp. 2627-2643.
- Rugman, A. and Verbeke, A. (2008), "A new perspective on the regional and global strategies of multinational services firms", *Management International Review*, Vol. 48 No. 4, pp. 397-411.

- Saldaña, J. (2013), *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 2nd ed., SAGE Publications, London.
- Salvoldi, R. and Brock, D. (2019), "Opening the black box of PSF network internationalization: an exploration of law firm networks", *Journal of Professions and Organization*, Vol. 6 No. 3, pp. 304-322.
- Sayed, Z. and Agndal, H. (2020), "Neo-colonial dynamics in global professional service firms: a periphery perspective", *Culture and Organization*, Taylor & Francis, Vol. 26 Nos 5-6, pp. 425-443.
- Segal-Horn, S. and Dean, A. (2007), "The globalization of law firms: managerial issues", *International Journal of Service Industry Management*, Vol. 18 No. 2, pp. 206-219.
- Segal-Horn, S. and Dean, A. (2009), "Delivering 'effortless experience' across borders: managing internal consistency in professional service firms", *Journal of World Business*, Vol. 44 No. 1, pp. 41-50.
- Sergeeva, A. and Andreeva, T. (2016), "Knowledge sharing research: bringing context back in", *Journal of Management Inquiry*, Vol. 25 No. 3, pp. 240-261.
- Sharma, D. (1989), "Overseas market entry strategy: the technical consultancy firms", *Journal of Global Marketing*, Taylor & Francis Group, Vol. 2 No. 2, pp. 89-110.
- Skjølsvik, T., Perner, F. and Löwendahl, B. (2017), "Strategic management of professional service firms: reviewing ABS journals and identifying key research themes", *Journal of Professions and Organization*, Vol. 4 No. 2, pp. 203-239.
- Spar, D.L. (1997), "Lawyers abroad: the internationalization of legal practice", *California Management Review*, Vol. 39 No. 3, pp. 8-28.
- Spence, C., Dambrin, C., Carter, C., Husillos, J. and Archel, P. (2015), "Global ends, local means: cross-national homogeneity in professional service firms", *Human Relations*, Vol. 68 No. 5, pp. 765-788.
- Spence, C., Carter, C., Belal, A., Husillos, J., Dambrin, C. and Archel, P. (2016), "Tracking habitus across a transnational professional field", *Work, Employment and Society*, Vol. 30 No. 1, pp. 3-20.
- Spence, C., Zhu, J., Endo, T. and Matsubara, S. (2017), "Money, honour and duty: global professional service firms in comparative perspective", *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, Elsevier, Vol. 62, pp. 82-97.
- Ström, P. and Mattsson, J. (2006), "Internationalisation of Japanese professional business service firms", *The Service Industries Journal*, Vol. 26 No. 3, pp. 249-265.
- Suddaby, R., Cooper, D. and Greenwood, R. (2007), "Transnational regulation of professional services: governance dynamics of field level organizational change", *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, Vol. 32 Nos 4-5, pp. 333-362.
- Suseno, Y. and Pinnington, A. (2017), "The war for talent: human capital challenges for professional service firms", *Asia Pacific Business Review*, Routledge, Vol. 23 No. 2, pp. 205-229.
- Suseno, Y. and Pinnington, A. (2018), "Building social capital and human capital for internationalization: the role of network ties and knowledge resources", *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, Vol. 35 No. 4, pp. 1081-1106.
- Tranfield, D., Denyer, D. and Smart, P. (2003), "Towards a methodology for developing evidence-informed management knowledge by means of systematic review", *British Journal of Management*, Vol. 14, pp. 207-222.
- Tung, R. and Van Witteloostuijn, A. (2008), "From the Editors: what makes a study sufficiently international?", *Journal of International Business Studies*, Vol. 39 No. 2, pp. 180-183.
- Uner, M., Cetin, B. and Cavusgil, T. (2020), "On the internationalization of Turkish hospital chains: a dynamic capabilities perspective", *International Business Review*, Elsevier, Vol. 29 No. 3, p. 101693.
- Von Nordenflycht, A. (2010), "What is a professional service firm? Towards a theory and taxonomy of knowledge-intensive firms", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 35 No. 1, pp. 155-174.

- 
- Von Nordenflycht, A. (2011), "Let's get testing: making progress on understanding professional service firms", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 36 No. 1, pp. 184-187.
- Von Nordenflycht, A., Malhotra, N. and Morris, T. (2015), "Sources of homogeneity and heterogeneity across professional services", in Empson, L. (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Professional Service Firms*, Oxford University Press, Corby, p. 520.
- Werner, S. (2002), "Recent developments in international management research: a review of 20 top management journals", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 28 No. 3, pp. 277-305.
- Werr, A. and Stjernberg, T. (2003), "Exploring management consulting firms as knowledge systems", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 24 No. 6, pp. 881-908.
- Winch, G. (2008), "Internationalisation strategies in business-to-business services: the case of architectural practice", *The Service Industries Journal*, Vol. 28 No. 1, pp. 1-13.
- Winch, G. (2014), "Strategic business and network positioning for internationalisation", *Service Industries Journal*, Vol. 34 No. 8, pp. 715-728.
- Yin, R. (2016), *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*, 2nd ed., Guilford press, New York.

**Corresponding author**

Ciara O'Higgins can be contacted at: [ciara.ohiggins@deusto.es](mailto:ciara.ohiggins@deusto.es)

---

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:

[www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm](http://www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm)

Or contact us for further details: [permissions@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:permissions@emeraldinsight.com)