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**EXPORT QUALIFICATION PROGRAMME (PEIEX): A STRATEGIC  
FACILITATOR FOR OVERCOMING INTERNATIONALIZATION  
CHALLENGES IN TECHNOLOGY ENTERPRISES<sup>1</sup>**

*PROGRAMA DE QUALIFICAÇÃO PARA EXPORTAÇÃO (PEIEX): UM  
FACILITADOR ESTRATÉGICO PARA SUPERAR DESAFIOS DE  
INTERNACIONALIZAÇÃO EM EMPRESAS DE TECNOLOGIA*

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**ABSTRACT**

Internationalization is crucial for SMEs as it opens new markets, enhances competitiveness, and fosters sustainable growth. Export promotion programs play a pivotal role by providing tailored support, addressing barriers, and guiding SMEs in navigating the complexities of global markets, facilitating their successful entry and expansion into international arenas. The PEIEX program in Rio Grande do Norte, aimed to qualify companies for export and internationalization. The program's overarching goal was to enhance the international competitiveness of local businesses by providing tailored support, covering essential aspects of preparation, and guiding entrepreneurs through the development of export plans for specific international markets. The current article aims to identify the main barriers to the internationalization of technology-based SMEs in the state of Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil, to analyse elements that may lead to the development of appropriate support strategies for these organisations. Additionally, it seeks to present the Export Qualification Program - PEIEX by ApexBrasil as a tool enabling technology SMEs to overcome these barriers, based on documentary analysis and a Panel of Specialists from PEIEX-RN, cycle 2020-2022. Results indicated a positive impact on participating companies, showcasing the success of the program in addressing barriers to internationalization. The targeted regions experienced increased engagement, with businesses benefiting from the tailored assistance provided by the program. The methodology effectively guided entrepreneurs, offering valuable insights and support to navigate the complexities

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of global markets. Overall, the collaborative efforts between ApexBrasil and regional businesses demonstrated the efficacy of the PEIEX program in promoting internationalization and enhancing the competitiveness of local enterprises.

**Keywords:** internationalization, internationalization barriers, ApexBrasil, export programs.

## RESUMO

A internacionalização é crucial para as PMEs, pois abre novos mercados, aprimora a competitividade e promove um crescimento sustentável. Programas de promoção de exportações desempenham um papel fundamental, fornecendo suporte personalizado, superando barreiras e orientando as PMEs na navegação das complexidades dos mercados globais, facilitando sua entrada e expansão bem-sucedidas em arenas internacionais. O programa PEIEX no Rio Grande do Norte visou qualificar empresas para exportação e internacionalização. O objetivo principal do programa era aprimorar a competitividade internacional de negócios locais, oferecendo suporte personalizado, abrangendo aspectos essenciais de preparação e orientando empreendedores no desenvolvimento de planos de exportação para mercados internacionais específicos. O presente artigo visa identificar as principais barreiras à internacionalização de PMEs de tecnologia no estado do Rio Grande do Norte, Brasil, para analisar elementos que podem levar ao desenvolvimento de estratégias de suporte apropriadas para essas organizações. Além disso, busca apresentar o Programa de Qualificação para Exportação - PEIEX da ApexBrasil como uma ferramenta que permite às PMEs de tecnologia superar essas barreiras, com base em análise documental e em um Painel de Especialistas do PEIEX-RN, ciclo 2020-2022. Os resultados indicaram um impacto positivo nas empresas participantes, destacando o sucesso do programa em abordar barreiras à internacionalização. As regiões-alvo experimentaram um aumento no envolvimento, com empresas se beneficiando do suporte personalizado fornecido pelo programa. A metodologia orientou efetivamente os empreendedores, oferecendo insights valiosos e suporte para navegar nas complexidades dos mercados globais. No geral, os esforços colaborativos entre a ApexBrasil e as empresas regionais demonstraram a eficácia do programa PEIEX na promoção da internacionalização e no aprimoramento da competitividade das empresas locais.

**Palavras-chave:** internacionalização, barreiras à Internacionalização, ApexBrasil, programas de exportação.



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## INTRODUCTION

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have been exponentially advancing their internationalization processes to increase sustainable competitive advantage (CHANDRA, PAUL & CHAVAN, 2021; MCDOUGALL, JONES, and SERAPIO, 2014). The emergence of businesses inclined towards internationalization, including globally born enterprises, is a consequence of a more diversified global economy in which various organisations, including SMEs, can achieve international success (KNIGHT & LIESCH, 2016). However, this success is not exempt from numerous barriers and risks; smaller enterprises exhibit distinct structures and behaviours, along with limitations in resource acquisition, necessitating specific studies to fully comprehend their intricacies (COSTA et al., 2022b, 2018).

Despite these barriers, technology-based companies in general, especially startups, possess intrinsic conditions more conducive to internationalization, encountering fewer geographical and linguistic barriers supported by a digital business model that fosters knowledge creation and networks at a faster pace, thereby enhancing international competitiveness (KNIGHT & LIESCH, 2016).

Export Promotion Programs focus on information, training, commercial mobility, and financial aid (DORNELAS & CARNEIRO, 2018); their approach typically centres on internal development, international competitiveness, and image promotion (BIANCHI & FIGUEIREDO, 2017). They generally offer services focused on curating sector-relevant information, market research, marketing campaigns, joint financing projects, participation in national and international fairs, consultations on common sector issues, and business promotion within the territory, including hosting sector conventions and business meetings (CARPES et al., 2012).



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Since the establishment of the Brazilian Export and Investment Promotion Agency – ApexBrasil in 1997, several export support programs, notably the Export Qualification Program – PEIEX, have been founded with the agency's support and have succeeded in Brazil. These programs have promoted the country's export culture, increased the international expansion of affiliated enterprises, and diversified the exported products, contributing to solidifying Brazil as a brand by directly impacting all three stages of the internationalization cycle: international insertion, consolidation in international markets, and expansion of international operations (COSTA et al., 2022b; REPEZZA, 2013).

Thus, this article aims to identify the main barriers to the internationalization of technology-based SMEs in the state of *Rio Grande do Norte*, Brazil, to analyse elements that may lead to the development of appropriate support strategies for these organisations. Additionally, it seeks to present the Export Qualification Program - PEIEX by ApexBrasil as a tool enabling technology SMEs to overcome these barriers, based on documentary analysis and a Panel of Specialists from PEIEX-RN, cycle 2020-2022.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

The interest in the study of internationalization has been growing in recent decades, transitioning from being restricted to large enterprises to being relevant for SMEs as well, driving competitiveness and innovation (MUELLER-USING & WEDEMIER, 2020; COSTA, 2020; KNIGHT & LIESCH, 2016).

Companies in general, including Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), are exponentially advancing their internationalization processes (CHANDRA, PAUL & CHAVAN, 2021; MCDOUGALL, JONES & SERAPIO, 2014). The rise of firms inclined towards internationalization, and even globally born enterprises, is a consequence of a more diversified global economy, where various organisations - including SMEs - can achieve international success



(COSTA, 2020; KNIGHT & LIESCH, 2016). However, this success is not devoid of various barriers and risks. Smaller enterprises are not merely scaled-down versions of large corporations; their structure and behaviour differ considerably, necessitating specific studies for a comprehensive understanding of their intricacies (COSTA et al, 2018).

Technology-based companies, particularly startups, generally exhibit intrinsic conditions more conducive to internationalization. They face fewer geographical and linguistic barriers supported by a digital business model, fostering knowledge creation and networks at a faster pace, thereby enhancing international competitiveness. Although global barriers to internationalization have reduced due to globalization, they remain relevant and quite complex, necessitating further studies on overcoming them, especially for SMEs (VENDRUSCOLO & GALINA, 2020; KNIGHT & LIESCH, 2016).

Several researchers indicate that internationalization is primarily a result of entrepreneurial predisposition (THOMAS, PASSARO & QUINTO, 2020; BAUM, SCHWENS & KABST, 2013). Consequently, potential barriers are also related to individual perceptions (KAHIYA, 2017).

For some SMEs, internal barriers - those arising within the companies - are more relevant than external barriers caused by circumstances independent of the company. However, a more in-depth study of the phenomenon is still needed since most studies tend to overlook the internal barriers of internationalization (BAUM, SCHWENS & KABST, 2013).

Based on the content analysis of specialised literature (COSTA et al., 2022a), barriers to internationalization were divided into four main constructs:

- **Strategic Management Barriers:** This concerns strategic planning and entrepreneurs' long-term expectations for business growth and international expansion. The main focus of this construct is the interaction between strategic management and internal and external drivers impacting internationalization.



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- **Networking Barriers:** This refers to individual aspects of entrepreneurs, particularly their relationships with stakeholders. While networking is considered crucial, it is viewed as an independent construct due to its significance. However, strategic management is an important part of the issue.
- **Operational Barriers:** This construct focuses on the internal limitations of the organisation, typically related to the allocation and availability of resources, such as human resources and intellectual capital.
- **External Barriers:** These are difficulties that entrepreneurs cannot control but can be reduced through strategic planning. Trade restrictions, political and governmental barriers, physical and cultural distances are the main research themes.

In the pursuit of overcoming these barriers, The Brazilian Export Promotion Agency (ApexBrasil) has the potential to structure and facilitate the entry of exporters into the foreign market, enhancing the competitiveness of Brazilian companies through integrated sectoral projects that facilitate commercial promotion, internationalization training, and investments in research and physical assets (COSTA et al., 2022b; BIANCHI & FIGUEIREDO, 2017; REPEZZA, 2013).

Established in 1997 as an Export Promotion Organisation (EPO), ApexBrasil has played a pivotal role in fostering Brazil's export culture and enhancing international expansion. Numerous export consortia, supported by ApexBrasil, have succeeded in promoting Brazil as a brand, impacting all three stages of the internationalization cycle (REPEZZA, 2013). Notably, ApexBrasil has been a driving force behind the PEIEX program (Export Qualification Program) since 2008/2009, leading various essential programs and providing expected services for export promotion, including specialised training and coaching on exporting fundamentals (COSTA et al., 2022b; DORNELAS & CARNEIRO, 2018).



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The agency plays a key role in supporting Local Productive Arrangements (LPAs) and Integrated Sector Projects (ISPs), fostering commercial networking and providing access to technical consultancy and experts. ApexBrasil's sectoral projects span across Brazil, contributing not only to export and internationalisation but also to fundamental branding management. Sectoral branding aims to identify competitive advantages and position sector attributes in the minds of customers and consumers, fostering experimentation and loyalty (COSTA et al., 2022b).

The PEIEX - Export Qualification Program - launched at the end of 2008/2009, is the most relevant training and business qualification program for exportation in Brazil. It leads many other initiatives by ApexBrasil, providing the expected services of export promotion programs, such as specialised training and consultancy on export fundamentals and the development of tailored export plans (COSTA et al., 2022b; FREITAS, ARAÚJO & COSTA, 2022; DORNELAS & CARNEIRO, 2018).

Implemented through regional collaborations, the Potiguar University (UnP) in *Rio Grande do Norte* partnered with ApexBrasil to apply the PEIEX methodology. The ongoing 2020-2022 PEIEX-RN cycle aimed to qualify 150 companies, focusing on the regions of *Natal*, *Caicó*, and *Mossoró* (ARAÚJO, ARAÚJO, & COSTA, 2023; PEIEX-RN, 2022). Due to positive outcomes, the programme was extended by six months until October 2022, with the target increased to 186 companies, including 124 companies in *Natal* and the surrounding area, 31 companies in the *Seridó* region (*Caicó* and neighbouring cities), and 31 companies in the *Alto Oeste* region (*Mossoró* and neighbouring regions).

The process of onboarding new companies into the programme comprises the following steps (PEIEX-RN, 2022; ARAÚJO, ARAÚJO & COSTA, 2023; COSTA & ARAÚJO, 2022; COSTA et al., 2021):





a) Identification and selection of companies: In the initial goal of PEIEX-RN, cycle 2020-2022, which aimed at 150 companies, with no specific target for service or digital business companies. Companies were selected by the extension technician and approved for assistance by the team monitor.

b) The assistance involves a work plan with 18 key points covering essential aspects of preparation for export and internationalization.

c) During the assistance, entrepreneurs are introduced to support material developed by ApexBrasil, offering relevant information about internationalization.

d) At the end of the assistance, an export plan focused on a specific international market is developed and presented for the entrepreneur's approval, concluding the assistance cycle.

e) Post-attendance, entrepreneurs are introduced to sector-specific projects relevant to their industry. Depending on the company's maturity, it may also participate in business matchmaking events and other initiatives sponsored or conducted in partnership with ApexBrasil, thereby integrating into a more structured business ecosystem.

## METHODOLOGY

The four main barriers to internationalization were identified by Costa et al. (2022a) through a systematic literature review (TRANFIELD, DENYER, & SMART, 2003): a) Strategic Management Barriers; b) Networking Barriers; c) Operational Barriers; and d) External Barriers.

Following Saunders, Lewis and Thornhil (2016), exploratory research was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The research focused on executive directors and owners of technology-based SMEs located in *Natal, Rio Grande do Norte*. Employing a non-probabilistic convenience sample,





data from 24 companies in RN were analysed from March to June 2020. A four-point Likert scale was utilised for the questionnaire.

To triangulate the obtained information, a panel of experts was organised (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016). This panel comprised the six extension technicians from PEIEX-RN. With a total duration of 90 minutes, these experts assessed the barriers presented in the research. Drawing on their substantial service experience, the experts highlighted PEIEX activities and other incorporated services from ApexBrasil that, in their view, could contribute to overcoming the perceived barriers. This approach, leveraging the panel's expertise, provides a more in-depth and contextualized analysis of research results, aligning with best practices in social research.

## RESULTS

The results obtained from the literature review as well as the surveys are presented below followed by the panel of specialists' insights.

With regards to the strategic barriers, the majority of companies have not formulated internationalisation strategic plans, signifying that leaders are not adopting an international approach. This oversight may lead to the squandering of potential competitive advantages and complicate the internationalisation process. The PEIEX-RN, within its export plan, holds a pivotal element to aid entrepreneurs in overcoming these strategic barriers by incorporating an export-oriented mindset into their planning. Costa et al. (2021) highlight that the export plan functions akin to the company's business plan, providing a functional summary of all aspects of the work plan in an individualised manner, focused on a specific market and product (service). This approach establishes a strategic and operational framework, constituting one of the guiding elements for developing the strategic management of the served companies.



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Concerning networking barriers, a prevalent issue amongst companies is the absence of structured networking, often being accidental and passive. This may result from a lack of networking planning coupled with the absence of an international expansion strategy. Furthermore, interviewed entrepreneurs, while seemingly possessing suitable profiles for leading the internationalisation process, lack substantial experience, possibly due to their age or the novelty of their businesses in the market, resulting in a more regionally oriented expansion approach (COSTA et al., 2022a). In this context, PEIEX proves crucial as additional support for companies interested in participating in export promotion services offered by ApexBrasil. This includes participation in trade fairs, business rounds with foreign buyers, and other networking and promotion opportunities (CRUZ, BUSSOLO & IACOVONE, 2018; DORNELAS & CARNEIRO, 2018).

In the case of PEIEX-RN, Costa et al. (2021) pointed out that, during the service to technology companies, various efforts were observed, in collaboration with the technicians, aimed at overcoming networking difficulties. These efforts included seeking technology transfer with partners to enhance products and processes, as well as developing strategies for content generation.

Regarding operational barriers, the study revealed that these seem to be the least significant according to interviewed entrepreneurs. It is essential to note that this perception is in relation to the company's performance in the local market, as only 17% had international commercial experience (COSTA et al., 2022a). To overcome operational barriers, PEIEX acts as a catalyst in the ecosystem, introducing the served companies to various institutional partners. By October 2021, PEIEX-RN had already facilitated over 400 connections between entrepreneurs and institutional partners, maximising the export strategies and operations of the companies. Key partners in the operational sphere include Banco do Brasil (foreign exchange management, financing and credit lines, risks and guarantees for international operations), SEBRAE (visual identity,



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management systems, and planning), Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply (phytosanitary certifications), INPI (trademark and patent registration), and FIERN (certificates of origin, logistics consulting) (FREITAS, ARAÚJO & COSTA, 2022).

Lastly, concerning external barriers, these appear to be the most significant for the respondents. All analysed companies exhibit general deficiencies, particularly in dealing with foreign exchange management and a lack of knowledge about commercial agreements, legal and tax barriers (COSTA et al., 2022a). PEIEX addresses these issues through content production strategies throughout the cycle. To assist entrepreneurs in overcoming these external obstacles, twenty training sessions were conducted among the served entrepreneurs and the general public. Additionally, entrepreneurs received timely and objective information through social media content creation. A considerable potential for information and knowledge management is created when combined with referrals to partner institutions, preparing entrepreneurs to understand and mitigate external risks (COSTA et al., 2022b; FREITAS, ARAÚJO & COSTA, 2022).

## CONCLUSION

The barriers to the internationalisation process are diverse and multifaceted, but can be summarised into four major constructs based on the content analysis of relevant scientific literature: a) strategic management barriers (lack of mission, vision, and strategic orientation, low entrepreneurial orientation, and lack of leadership); b) networking barriers (failures in connecting the company with its stakeholders, often exacerbating the effects of other barriers); c) internal and management barriers (lack of financial resources, low utilization of human capital, technical constraints, low competitiveness); and d) external



barriers (political, economic, social, environmental, and cultural) (COSTA et al., 2021a).

The analysis of company data revealed that despite managers having academic qualifications and a general inclination to lead the internationalisation process, they lack significant experience, potentially posing challenges. There was also a noticeable absence of global strategic planning; internationalisation initiatives seemed scattered, suggesting a lack of leadership regarding internationalisation goals. The absence of planned and systematic networking resulted in difficulties for companies to expand internationally.

External barriers are not adequately addressed by entrepreneurs/managers; often, they are even unknown, with a lack of risk mitigation planning and unsatisfactory knowledge management.

Given the presented data and the potential of PEIEX to address each of the barriers outlined, it is concluded that the program has much to contribute to technology companies as well, with significant potential for impact in this sector. Additional information about ApexBrasil is that it is a Brazilian government agency responsible for promoting Brazilian exports and attracting foreign investments. ApexBrasil plays a crucial role in supporting companies, including SMEs, in their internationalisation efforts by providing various services, such as training, market intelligence, and participation in trade promotion activities. The agency aims to strengthen the competitiveness of Brazilian businesses in the global market.

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