

The Value of In-Region SCM Support

Your strategic supplier speaks a different language. They operate in a commercial and industrial environment that is far less developed than in the West. Business principles taken for granted in the West are not engrained into commercial practices across the local China and Asia industrial base. Quality standards vary widely and common disciplines like MRP inventory management, standard cost, and true SPC quality control are not common. You manage a China supply base from 7,000 miles and 12+ time zones away by e-mail, semi-annual trips and occasional early morning or late-night calls. Is this really a formula for success?

Most supply chain management (“SCM”) professionals would logically see unacceptable risk in this scenario. But this is exactly how a high percentage of Western companies elect to manage China and Asia-based suppliers. After more than two decades of working with over 250 Western companies doing business in China and Asia, it is our conclusion that for any strategically important buy, local real-time and direct tactical supply chain management support is highly advisable. If a foreign company’s business model is dependent on the stability and performance of an international supplier base, some form of local professional human interface is a critical success factor. Without this local capability, a Western company is gambling with its future.

Consider for a moment how a Western company – a U.S. company for example – manages suppliers in their home country. Most probably, the Company’s SCM and perhaps engineering staffs scan the local market constantly seeking to optimize the supply chain options. Local calls facilitate communications during normal business hours. A common language and consistent business systems lubricate the customer-supplier relationship. If problems occur – and they are inevitable even with the best of suppliers – local proximity expedites and enables problem resolution. Finally, supplier sales staff often conducts periodic meetings with the Company’s supply chain and engineering departments to talk about problems, new opportunities, and developments that directly impact the business relationship. This is possible because there are local

customer and supplier personnel communicating on a real time, local basis. The result is an organic and rich optimization of the Company supply chain.

Almost none of these advantages exist if a company chooses to manage foreign suppliers remotely. The result is significant added risk to supply chain security.

There are two ways to overcome this challenge. The first option is establishing a dedicated small team of local supply chain professionals employed by the Company, trained on the product and business needs. The team is focused only on optimizing the Company’s supply chain performance. The second option is contracting with a third-party organization whose interests are directly aligned with the Company. Each of these options has advantages and disadvantages, but both provide enhanced local supplier base oversight and can be effective solutions to the challenge.

Establish an Internal Dedicated Local SCM Team

The most common reaction to the option of a dedicated SCM Team in country is that it is too costly and difficult to manage. However, the costs of operating a team in country can be far lower than most Western companies perceive and there are simplifying approaches to managing the team. If only a small team of supply chain professionals is needed locally, it is generally hard to financially justify extensive internal administrative support structure and facilities. The good news is that there are effective options that allow you to capture the value of a dedicated internal team at much lower cost than generally expected.

For example, various service providers in China (including China Centric Associates) that offer facilities and support reduce operating expenses. Such services can provide support in:

- Office Space – furniture and infrastructure
- Human Resource – recruiting, employment contracts, local benefits, payroll, employee handbook
- Accounting - local accounting reporting, tax filing
- IT Support
- Administration
- Regulatory compliance oversight
- And more depending on the service provider.

This frees up internal dedicated SCM staff to focus exclusively on the desired SCM activities.

Whether a company establishes its own office or uses one of these partnering services, a dedicated, internal team of supply chain professionals located in country provides maximum company control and positioning with the supplier base.

While less costly than most Western companies probably expect, the downside is that it is inevitably higher cost than a complete third-party SCM service provider structure and the HR challenges (supervising and monitoring the internal dedicated SCM team) from halfway around the world cannot be avoided.

Employ a Third-Party Supply Chain Service Provider

The second option is to contract with a true BPO third-party to perform all local SCM activities. To be clear, this is not a suggestion to use a trading company or a broker. Strategically important purchases should ALWAYS be structured with a direct transactional relationship (P.O.'s, Shipments, Payment) between suppliers and the Western company. The key to success is structuring the relationship with the BPO Third-Party SCM service provider so that there is a strong mutual alignment of interest. If these relationships are structured successfully, the advantages are that no legal entity is required and the total cost of SCM activities can be minimized. The trade-off is that there is a somewhat lower level of control with this complete third-party path.

The Path Forward

Done carefully, either of these options can be successful and both are major improvements in value and capability over not having in-country supply chain support or using a buy-resell broker or trading company. If a Company's international supply requirements are critical and strategic to the success of the Company, it is strongly advised that one of these two options be selected and that local supply chain management support resources be established.