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9B18M022

qualtrics: rapid international expansion

Esther Tippmann and Sinéad Monaghan wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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In May 2015, Qualtrics opened the new office for its Europe Middle East and Africa (EMEA) regional headquarters in the heart of Dublin, Ireland. It had capacity for up to 300 people, although at that time Qualtrics employed only about 60 people in Ireland.[[1]](#endnote-1) Plans for global expansion were aggressive—to grow the business by many multiples and to fill the office within three years. Ryan Smith, the chief executive officer (CEO) of Qualtrics, had travelled to Dublin for this event. During his visit, he sought to discuss the approach to quickly building Qualtrics’s EMEA operations with Dermot Costello, the recently hired managing director for Ireland. It was critical to decide on the company’s next steps.

Company Background

Thirteen years after it was launched, Qualtrics, a U.S. software-as-a-service (SaaS) firm based in Provo, Utah, was continuing to experience significant and exciting change. Established in 2002, Qualtrics initially focused on building sophisticated, user-friendly online survey tools. After years of operating the company on little capital and steady growth in revenue, and despite external economic effects including the U.S. financial crisis of 2007/08, Qualtrics’s expanded product offering experienced increasing traction in the market. At this time, many cash-tight companies started to replace their costly market research contracts with cost-effective, do-it-yourself online surveys. Seeing tremendous growth potential, the founders, brothers Ryan and Jared Smith, together with their father, Scott M. Smith, and family friend, Stuart Orgill, took on US$70 million[[2]](#endnote-2) in venture capital funding in 2012 to spur growth.[[3]](#endnote-3) Qualtrics, like many other digital platform companies, had recognized a multibillion-dollar global opportunity that the founders were keen to capture. As a result of its continued success, Qualtrics raised an additional $150 million in fall 2014 to accelerate growth, particularly in international markets.[[4]](#endnote-4)

With the abundant opportunities that international markets presented, Qualtrics’s management was excited but equally concerned about balanced and sustained growth. On the one side, management was conscious of the economics of many software and online-service markets. In these markets, the mantra was to prioritize firm growth over margins and cost structure—to “grow fast or die slow.”[[5]](#endnote-5) However, the company was unwilling to accept that it needed to choose between aggressive growth and maintaining cash-flow positivity. Qualtrics was equally committed to both goals. At the same time, Ryan was aware of the dangers of overly aggressive expansion after the company lived through the dot-com tech bubble of the early 2000s:

We’ve seen companies “fuel the jet.” They put the gas line in the jet [secure major funding from venture capitalists] and they’re paying for the gas and they let it fly. Hopefully, one day, it’ll fly on its own and you can pull the gas line out. But if they got to hold the line out before that thing is ready to fly, it all falls. We’ve seen that in the dot-com bubble.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Indeed, Qualtrics needed to make some difficult and far-reaching decisions regarding its international expansion, especially in relation to its expansion in the EMEA region and the expansion of its regional headquarters in Dublin, Ireland. The company principals wanted to play their cards right by focusing on the most lucrative opportunities within the EMEA region. Also, management, including Costello, was aware of the immense task ahead to quickly develop its regional headquarters in Dublin, Ireland, from which most of its EMEA expansion would be driven and coordinated.

industry background

The versatility and disruptive nature of online survey software, delivered as cloud-based software-as-a-service (SaaS), enabled firms to compete, and indeed, disrupt different markets. An industry born within the digital age, online survey software provided an electronic platform for survey development, use, and analysis for market research, product testing, and customer satisfaction.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Qualtrics had chosen to focus on three markets: market research, customer experience, and employee insights (see Exhibit 1).[[8]](#endnote-8) The market research industry was fundamentally premised on enabling firms to acquire additional information and insights on their target market; consumer preferences for products or product innovations; and potential needs of firms’ existing, or future, customer base. On the other hand, customer experience management related to the process by which firms developed an understanding of consumers’ perception of their product and/or service to build a more extended relationship with their consumer base, including operationalizing responses to customer feedback. Finally, employee insights allowed firms to gauge the level of engagement among their employees, evaluate and review their performance, and acquire insights into potential opportunities for growth and development.

These three markets showed evidence of strong growth as firms sought to become more data-driven in their decision making by integrating technological methods to gather, process, and analyze data in a more comprehensive and instantaneous manner. Online methods of collecting data facilitated the capture of a broader respondent base than was feasible with existing manual methods, especially as the digital revolution had led to a greater use of mobile devices to complete surveys online. Moreover, all of these markets could be disrupted by new technologies, as many of these tasks were traditionally performed by administrative functions or outsourced to expensive third-party providers. In this respect, Ryan estimated that companies spent $30 billion annually on outsourcing research projects to consulting firms.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Depending on the market, Qualtrics faced different competitors. In one sense, Qualtrics had no direct competitors because no other company offered the full suite of products that could bring together insights from multiple internal functions to deliver holistic business insights that cut across market research, employee insights, and customer experience. In another sense, Qualtrics had many competitors because it was competing on three separate fronts: customer experience, employee insights, and market research. Although Qualtrics was aware of competitors, its leadership was clear that they did not pay much attention to them and remained focused on forging their own road.

growth of Qualtrics

The roots of Qualtrics dated back to the 1990s, when Scott M. Smith, then a professor of marketing at Brigham Young University, became passionate about using the Internet to speed up market research[[10]](#endnote-10) (see Exhibit 2). Ryan, in his early twenties at the time, started to work on developing his father’s idea in the basement of the family home.[[11]](#endnote-11) Their goal was simple: to make sophisticated research simple using an online survey product.[[12]](#endnote-12) In pursuit of this goal, they crammed racks of servers into closets of their home, resulting in frequent power outages, until eventually they bought a generator on eBay and located it in their garden. The current management imagined that many candidates, who were invited for an interview with Qualtrics in the early days of operation, never appeared, spooked by the odd-sounding instruction to walk around the house to the basement door. Despite their idiosyncratic office space, by 2006 Qualtrics was generating $1.3 million in revenue with 15 staff while still working from the basement of the Smith home.[[13]](#endnote-13) These early years and the experience of working with little capital embedded a deep sense of frugality and “scrappiness” in the company.[[14]](#endnote-14)

The Qualtrics Product

In terms of its product, the Qualtrics offering was renowned for its sophistication, ease of use, and functionality. Initially, Qualtrics focused on a niche market—universities—which, in many ways, was a result of Scott Smith’s personal experience. This target market allowed Qualtrics to build a top-notch online survey product by responding to the preferences and functionality requirements of demanding users— academic researchers. Although universities remained an important segment for Qualtrics, it now served the three markets outlined above: market research, customer experience, and employee insights.

Its SaaS offering was positioned as an insights platform, built around value propositions that helped businesses gather data that would enable better business decisions. Most of Qualtrics’s revenues came from business customers, including such major companies as JetBlue, GE, Yahoo, and healthcare.gov.[[15]](#endnote-15) Ryan, the CEO of Qualtrics, emphasized that the advantage of the company’s offering related to it being an easy-to-use platform that didn’t require significant training or support, thereby enabling all users to gather valuable insights for their organizations. In addition, one of his favourite selling points was the product’s capacity to provide rapid-response insights or “fast data” to inform companies’ decision making, instead of an overreliance on backward-looking approaches such as “big data.”[[16]](#endnote-16) The strategy seemed to pay off. Qualtrics started to gain more traction in markets than its competitors and generated substantial growth in revenues.[[17]](#endnote-17) In 2015, Qualtrics had more than 7,000 clients running an average of more than 2 million surveys a day on the platform, and the company was cash-flow positive.[[18]](#endnote-18) Having focused primarily on its U.S. expansion, Qualtrics opened additional offices in Washington, DC (in 2014) and Dallas (in 2015).

Qualtrics’s Organizational Culture

Qualtrics management believed that it had created a special organization. Its unique characteristics included its customer orientation and sales culture.[[19]](#endnote-19) The goal was to have everyone focused on the customer. For example, during the early days of the company, if a customer called for assistance and had to wait longer than three rings for the phone to be answered, a red siren flashed and low-pitched bells rang in the office, alerting the entire company to drop what they were doing to pick up the phone and help a customer.[[20]](#endnote-20) The workplace also had a distinctly casual atmosphere, where employees wandered around in jeans and T‑shirts,[[21]](#endnote-21) and employees described the organization as “fun,” “energizing,” and “stylishly nerdy.”[[22]](#endnote-22) At the same time, Qualtrics was extremely results-driven with a heads-down, hard-working approach.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Ryan was a great believer in radical transparency, and ensured that vast information on critical decisions and day-to-day operations were accessible to everyone within the organization.[[24]](#endnote-24) This transparency included, for example, visibility of employee performance, allowing staff to approach top performers to learn from their expertise. On the Qualtrics intranet, available to any company employee, each team and department listed its quarterly goals; and each individual, from the CEO to the newest intern, listed their weekly activities and reported on how they had done the previous week.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Hiring talented people with a tight person-organization fit was critical to Qualtrics management to ensure a high level of brainpower was available within the organization to work out any business challenge or problem.[[26]](#endnote-26) Although Ryan was not concerned about the culture of Qualtrics changing as the firm expanded, he wanted to ensure that every decision made within the company bettered the organization.[[27]](#endnote-27) Given the rapidness of change in the technology industry, Ryan also knew that Qualtrics needed to remain entrepreneurial and innovative: “We were successful in the basement, we built a profitable company that’s valued over a billion dollars. . . . But we know that none of that’s going to matter anymore. How are we going to compete in the future? Our business is really like many start-ups in a row.”[[28]](#endnote-28) As Qualtrics focused on international expansion, embedding entrepreneurship in its international offices to the same degree as it was part of the culture at the headquarters in Utah[[29]](#endnote-29) was integral to delivering on its long-term vision.

Qualtrics’s Sales Model

The heart of Qualtrics was its engineering and development department where new products were innovated. In addition, Qualtrics had developed a large, high-performing, and proactive sales organization that was responsible for much of the company’s progress thus far.[[30]](#endnote-30) Indeed, management believed that Qualtrics succeeded first and foremost because of a great product and an unparalleled sales force.[[31]](#endnote-31) Qualtrics largely used an inside-sales model, whereby salespeople located in the organization’s offices engaged remotely with the customers over the phone. This cost-effective approach originated out of necessity during the early years of Qualtrics when there were insufficient funds for travelling to meet with customers face to face.[[32]](#endnote-32)

Although Qualtrics had an effective inside-sales machine and trained young, motivated graduates into their sales roles, the reliance on an inside-sales model could face limitations when dealing with large businesses for high-value and more complex enterprise deals, where personal interactions were critical to closing deals. Qualtrics management was also aware that many competitors invested in hiring seasoned field sales executives and that its inside-sales model might need adaptation when serving international markets on a larger scale and with greater geographic scope.[[33]](#endnote-33)

Qualtrics Funding

In 2006, Qualtrics moved into a more conventional office space in Provo. In light of steady revenue growth, Ryan convinced his brother Jared to join the company in 2009 to oversee the engineering and product efforts. It wasn’t an easy task, as it required Jared, acclaimed to be one of the elite engineers in Silicon Valley,[[34]](#endnote-34) to quit a senior high-powered job at Google where he had previously helped in setting up the Europe Middle East and Africa (EMEA) and Asia-Pacific (APAC) operations.[[35]](#endnote-35) Jared had, for example, worked for several years in Beijing to help run the Google China office.[[36]](#endnote-36) During this period, Ryan also warmed to the idea of seeking venture capital funding to support Qualtrics’s next growth phase. Pursuing venture capital funding was a far-reaching decision for the four founders, who had treated their equity as gold and strongly preferred to maintain their financial and operational independence.[[37]](#endnote-37) Moreover, as the company was not necessarily in need of cash, this decision altered its approach to seeking investment. In fact, Qualtrics was in such a strong position that it had its choice of experienced investors who would act as a sounding board for major decisions.[[38]](#endnote-38)

In 2012, Qualtrics signed a deal with Accel Partner’s Ryan Sweeney (whom Ryan Smith had known for three years), and Sequoia Capital’s Bryan Schreier (whom Jared had known for seven years and was part of the team that had set up and scaled Google’s EMEA operations).[[39]](#endnote-39) Both Ryan Sweeney and Schreier became Qualtrics board members. The two venture capital firms offered to invest $100 million, but Qualtrics ultimately decided to scale it back to $70 million. To further accelerate growth, Qualtrics raised an additional $150 million in fall 2014, led by Insight Venture Partners, Accel Partners, and Sequoia Capital. This deal valued Qualtrics at more than $1 billion.

Rapid international expansion

Ryan had a strong vision of Qualtrics becoming a global firm.[[40]](#endnote-40) However, in 2013 only 3 per cent of revenues came from outside the United States, with 10 per cent of Qualtrics customers located in Europe.[[41]](#endnote-41) Before Qualtrics expanded to Europe, multilingual sales reps would work European hours in the Provo headquarters, starting their sales duties early in the morning to bridge the time zone differences between the United States and Europe. This model followed Qualtrics’s philosophy of “nail it, then scale it,” so when the decision was made to expand internationally, there was already a strong base group of customers and referrals ready to go.

Initially, Qualtrics opened a small office in Dublin in fall 2013. Dublin was an attractive location for Qualtrics because of the city’s technology ecosystem, the availability of a multilingual and well-educated workforce, and its proven track record as an EMEA regional headquarters location for technology firms such as Google, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter.[[42]](#endnote-42) Believing in the “nail it, then scale it” model, the Dublin office initially served as an experiment, with one person working from the cheapest office that Qualtrics could find to prove the potential in the EMEA market. Around this time, Costello, a seasoned executive experienced in developing regional operations for software firms, was hired to oversee this expansion. Similarly, John D’Agostino, an experienced executive in growing and leading international sales operations, was hired as executive vice president of Global Sales at headquarters. The Dublin office quickly grew, so much so that it ran out of space! In May 2015, about 20 months after first locating to Dublin, Qualtrics Dublin moved into a large office in a prime city centre location. [[43]](#endnote-43)

At this time, Qualtrics employed 700 people, most of them at the Provo headquarters,[[44]](#endnote-44) and had 60 people working in the Dublin offices. Both the Provo and Dublin offices were ready to scale up: wide expanses of open floor space were ready to be filled with new hires.[[45]](#endnote-45) The Dublin office had capacity for 300 employees.[[46]](#endnote-46) Although Dublin was, thus far, the only international Qualtrics office, Qualtrics management saw opportunities beyond the EMEA region. One of its next moves, for example, was to set up an office in Sydney, Australia.[[47]](#endnote-47)

At this time, Ryan mentioned: “I feel we’re only 10% of where we can go”[[48]](#endnote-48) and it was his intention to “go big.”[[49]](#endnote-49) Qualtrics was in “hyper-growth mode”[[50]](#endnote-50) and ready to scale and grow aggressively internationally. Ryan and Costello weren’t interested in cautious and slow international growth, typical for many other firms. Rather, they wanted to capture the potential illustrated by the Dublin office and internationalize across the EMEA region at a highly accelerated pace. It was their target for EMEA to generate 30 per cent of total revenue in five years, which would require a yearly growth by many multiples. Ryan was committed to taking a “big bet.”[[51]](#endnote-51)

The Next Steps

It was now Costello’s task to deliver on these bullish targets for the EMEA region, and he knew that a clever approach was needed to achieve these goals. A couple of decisions had to be made.

By May 2015, the Dublin office performed sales (mostly inside sales and field sales) and support activities, and it relied on the U.S. headquarters to supply the other value chain activities, such as product engineering, localization, marketing, and financial/legal undertakings. However, it seemed that the existing structure could quickly become inadequate. To support such a significant EMEA business, a largely self-sufficient European business would be required, whereby Dublin was the hub with satellite offices in selected countries across the region.[[52]](#endnote-52) This model raised the question of which value chain functions Costello should prioritize in developing and the optimal time for building out these functions. For example, although Qualtrics had started to localize its software for some European markets, as expansion broadened, more country-localized versions needed to be added. Doing so involved not only translation challenges but also technical adjustments. For example, within the online platform, tailoring the system to a European audience required specific additions, such as ensuring the appropriate punctuations for decimal-denominated numbers and Microsoft Excel integrations. Within the current model, such localization requests needed to be sent to headquarters, as was the case for marketing, legal, and finance support. Given the growth of the business in EMEA, these requests became more frequent. Dublin time was seven hours ahead of the time in Provo, Utah, thereby requiring extensive efforts to manage the time zone differences.

Another activity was recruitment, which was currently handled by a local external provider. However, given the importance of recruiting the appropriate talent (and much of it in a short time period), questions arose about whether this hiring should be performed in-house. Yet, doing so would require significant investment and diverting resources from building out the sales team, which was ultimately the key driver for revenue generation. Questions also surrounded the scalability of an intense on-boarding program that often saw new hires spending some time in the Provo offices.

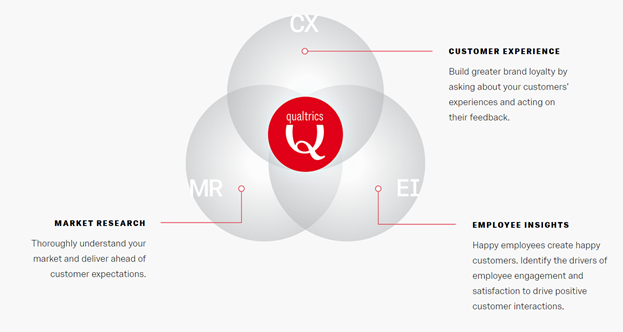
Also, when setting up the EMEA headquarters, Qualtrics saw the value in experimenting with different country markets, using small-scale efforts initially to gauge the receptiveness of various country markets to its offering. Costello and his team also had a feeling that large markets and countries that were early adopters of technology would be high-potential opportunities. They noticed that the EMEA market was generally receptive; however, certain countries seemed to be easier to crack than others, and Qualtrics saw early wins from its initial efforts. In addition, certain countries were sensitive about data security and showed some reservation toward SaaS offerings, while customers in other countries were price-sensitive and hesitant to pay price premiums. To effectively allocate resources, a more selective approach was required that prioritized certain markets. This approach would allow Costello to focus resources and build sales and support teams for countries that showed the greatest potential. The issue was how to prioritize this approach to ensure the most lucrative markets were selected first (see Exhibit 3 for a list of some countries and indicators). Also, certain urban areas such as London (United Kingdom) seemed particularly attractive, given some significant customer wins and the presence of many large firms within a tight geographic radius.

Decisions also needed to be made in relation to the company’s go-to-market approach. For example, in Eastern European markets, the Qualtrics pricing model, positioned in the middle to upper market, was perceived by many companies as uncompetitive, leading to questions of adaptation. Moreover, if Qualtrics envisioned larger and more complex deals with enterprise customers, would it be sufficient to rely mostly on a young, inside sales team, or would it be worthwhile to hire more seasoned sales reps and open offices across Europe to avoid time-consuming travel between Dublin and the European locations?

Last but not least, retaining the entrepreneurial culture was paramount, including, in particular, the entrepreneurial “scrappiness” and “self-service” culture that was at the heart of Qualtrics. Yet, transitioning toward a multinational corporation would increase not only the scale of the business but also its internal complexity, which could hamper the flexibility, nimbleness, and agility needed to continuously recognize and exploit opportunities. This internal complexity also raised the question of how these entrepreneurial cultural values could be deeply embedded within a rapidly growing EMEA business, where structures and processes needed to be developed to grow the business and integrate a considerable number of new hires.

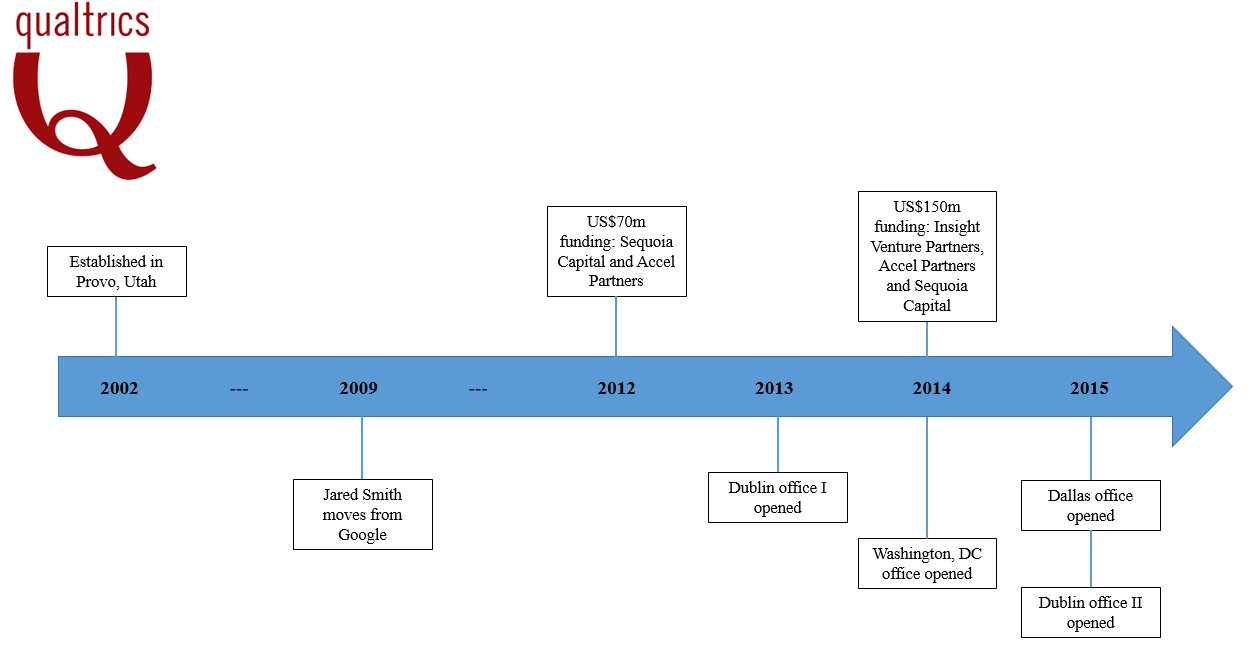
As Ryan and Costello celebrated the opening of their new office in Dublin, Costello was highly cognizant that he needed to quickly decide on and execute Qualtrics’s next steps to pave the way for delivering on the ambitious growth targets for the EMEA region.

Exhibit 1: Qualtrics’s target markets



Source: “Customer Experience,” Qualtrics, 2016, accessed January 15, 2017,<https://www.qualtrics.com/customer-experience/>.

Exhibit 2: Qualtrics’S national and international expansion



Source: Created by the case authors.

Exhibit 3: Country indicators for qualtrics’s expansion plans (2014)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **United Kingdom** | **DACH**  (Germany, Austria, Switzerland) | **France** | **Spain** | **Italy** | **Benelux**  (Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg) | **Nordics**  (Sweden, Denmark, Norway) | **Eastern Europe**  (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovak Republic) | **MEA**  (South Africa, United Arab Emirates, Israel) |
| **GDP (US$ trillions)** | 2.900 | 1.670 | 2.800 | 1.300 | 2.100 | 0.492 | 0.472 |  | 0.354 |
| **GDP growth rate (%)** | 3.07 | 1.41 | 0.64 | 1.36 | 0.09 | 0.02 | 0.02 | 0.03 | 0.03 |
| **Ease of doing business rank** | 10 | 26 | 38 | 52 | 65 | 41 | 9 | 56 | 33 |
| **Early traction**  (early adopter of Qualtrics offering) | Fast | Slow | Fast | Average | Average | Fast | Fast | Slow | Average |
| **Attitude toward SaaS**  (especially in relation to data security) | Positive | Sensitive on data security | Positive | Positive | Sensitive on data security | Positive | Positive | Average | Average |
| **Price-sensitivity**  (willingness to pay a price premium) | Solid | Solid | Solid | Solid | Solid | Solid | Solid | Price sensitive | Price sensitive |
| **European Union membership** | No | Switzerland is not an EU member | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | No |
| **Euro currency** | No | Switzerland does not use the Euro | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Only Slovak Republic | No |
| **Typical flight time**  (Dublin – Capital) | 1 hour, 5 mins | 2 hours, 8 mins | 1 hour, 28 mins | 2 hours, 18 mins | 2 hours, 51 mins | 1 hour, 28 mins | 2 hours, 32 mins | 2 hours, 47 mins | 7 hours, 52 mins |

Note: GDP = gross domestic product; SaaS = software as a service; unless otherwise indicated, the information indicated for this sub-region refers to the average of the included countries.

Source: Created by the authors using: “World Bank Databank,” The World Bank, 2017, accessed January 16, 2017, http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD; “World Bank Databank,” The World Bank, 2017, accessed January 16, 2017, http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG; Doing Business, *Understanding Regulations for Small and Medium Enterprises* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank), 2013, accessed January 15, 2017, www.doingbusiness.org/reports/global-reports/doing-business-2014; “Travel Math Calculator,” Travel Math, accessed January 15, 2017, www.travelmath.com/; information provided by Qualtrics management.

Endnotes

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50. “Qualtrics Tour: Not Your Average Office,” YouTube video, 5:28, posted by Qualtrics, July 16, 2015, accessed July 18, 2016, https://youtu.be/5qYKKzuQds8. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Smith, op. cit. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Anders, op. cit. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)