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MANAGING ORGANIZATIONAL FIT FOR SUCCESSFUL SERVICE ALLIANCES

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Structured Abstract

Purpose - This study explores managing structural configuration for service alliance success. The aim of the research is to explore structure fit problems and alignment mechanisms to increase adopting a service alliance strategy.

Design/methodology/approach – A holistic multiple-case study method is used. Data from literature review, informal conversations, interviews and company documents was used to explore experienced problems and their relation to organizational structure.

Findings - The results reveal organizations mainly experiencing formation problems when doing their internal assessment, though few studies on alliance management enhance intra-organizational management. Furthermore, results revealed that organizations should mainly

reconstruct the design of individual jobs and the organization's lateral structure to increase managing a successful service alliance.

Research limitations/implications - Though previous studies and practices suggest a step-to-step approach to gain relationship experiences to increase alliance success, our results indicate that organizations lack institutionalizing collaborative experience. Furthermore, the results contribute to existing structuration theory by enhance understanding of structure influencing alliances and management influencing structure. The research is limited by focusing on establishing vertical service alliances within a sector.

Practical implications – The results recognize central responsibility of, and includes suggestions for, intra-organizational management for strategic potential of service alliance to become realized.

Originality/value – The perspective of this paper is original, which is because few studies explore intra-organizational service alliance management.

Keywords - Relationship Strategy, Servitization, Strategic Service Alliances, Cooperation Risks, Alliance Formation, Alliance Management, Fit Problems, Structure Alignment, Alliance Structure Design, Design Parameters.

Article Classification - Research paper

Introduction

Today, interorganizational cooperation is viewed as a 'conditio sine qua non' for innovation of competitive products and services (Baken et al., 2006). The old model of expecting a corporate in-house team to be the majority provider of new innovative product or services is moving to a new model of proactively building alliances of innovation partners (Taplin, 2007). Within the alliance each organization brings with it a good knowledge. The linkage

between cooperating organizations becomes an innovative breeding ground for generation of new, win-win, business opportunities. Because of their value-creating potential, Schiffrin (2001) suggests that top executives should consider alliances as a key part of the firm's strategy. Despite their increased application, alliance's failure rate is high. There are many reasons for the high failure rate, but most studies show that success depends on overcoming serious problems in the early years (Draulans et al., 2003). In addition, leadership plays a key role to manage these problems for the success of alliance (Jiang, 2007). Most studies on alliances focus on managing the relationship between organizations, for example by creation of trust and experience. In addition, we see in practice that executives often launch their organization into a 'just do it' approach, hoping that by starting small inter-organizational projects, risks and investments remain limited and the success of the alliance will grow by experience. Lessons learned however indicate that these approaches are often sub-optimal (Levering, 2012). To help organizations successful manage the formation of an alliance, this research explores organizations structural configuration. By adopting an intra-organizational perspective on alliance management, we also fill in the literature gap on intra-organizational management influencing interorganizational performance.

Alliance Strategy and Organizational Structure

Alliance Strategy: Towards Service Alliances

Over the last twenty years, organizations have become increasingly interested in IORs in order to successfully face challenges (Zott and Amit, 2010). Most studies on IOR try to classify the type of relationship. For instance, Carleton-Acher et al. (2005) explain that the type of relationships can be categorized according to the intensity of cooperation (from low transactional to high relational) and type of interdependency (from horizontal or pooled interdependency to vertical or sequential interdependency). Furthermore, Kale et al. (2013) distinguish true transactional exchanges as simple, discrete, one-time events, whereas high rela-

tional exchanges are new organizational forms such as networks or joint ventures and alliances lie in between. A business strategic alliance can be defined as a shared cooperative strategy in which two or more independent organizations commit, by informal handshake agreements or formal contracts, to share core capabilities to increase companies' competitive value (Arino et al., 2000; Elmuti et al., 2001; Ter Wiel, 2012). An organization might be motivated to form a strategic alliance when it faces strategic gaps in critical capabilities; developing these internally would be too expensive or would take too long. By means of an alliance, unlike conventional sourcing and service agreements, an organization can get access to a subset of another organization's capabilities. Furthermore, the collaborative initiative aims at synergy hoping that the benefits obtained will exceed individual efforts (Ireland, 2002). In addition, the term alliance covers a broad range of relationships, from short-term projects to long lasting relationships (Long et al., 2010). Nevertheless, when an alliance is limited in duration and scope, it is referred to as a transactional instead of strategic alliance (e.g. collaborative advertising or shared distribution) (Harbinson et al., 1998). Strategic alliances are an important driver of global consolidation. They may also become a pivotal tool to maintain a firm's sustainable competitive edge when facing opportunities and challenges accompanying the liberalization of trade (Jiang, 2007). As part of the increased complexity of technological systems, organizations are investing in service alliances. A service alliance is defined as two or more organizations involved in long-term relationships concentrating on service business development and implementation to increase competitive value (Wallin et al., 2012). As a result of cooperation, service becomes a co-created process between customer and supplier and customer and supplier are seen as resources integrators (Lusch et al, 2006). Being resource integrators causes mutual interdependence between enterprises, requiring effective management to reduce high risk of service alliance failure (Cova et al., 2008).

Effective Alliance Management

Effective management includes determining alliance's scope, which is one of the most challenging, comprehensive and critical activities (Joncas et al., 2002). Decisions involve both an internal and market assessment, before formalizing the cooperation by contract negotiations and establishment of governance structure. The internal assessment involves studying the core competence and defining the motivation and objective for cooperation, whereas the market assessment involves defining partner selection criteria - e.g. partners' strengths and weaknesses, cultural norms and values - (Ireland et al. 2002). Few studies however focus on understanding the problems occurring in the formation phases of inward- and outward-looking analyses. Instead, most studies on alliances focus on managing what comes after; the business interaction. These studies thus only explore problems resulting from a clash of operating procedures and leadership attitudes by cultural differences between organizations, rather than within (Briscoe et al., 2012). Nevertheless an alliance strategy requires also internal consistency; there should be coherence between all the activities within the organization so that business processes are working together towards achieving the corporate's and alliance's objectives (Pintelon et al., 2006). This requires organizations to be capable to align or adopt their coordinate of work to changing demands in the task environment (Birkinshaw, 2002). Before exploring organization's alignment capability, it is important to understand how an alliance is intertwined within the cooperating organization.

A Dynamic Perspective on Organizational Structure

Alliances can be highly integrated within the cooperating organization by sharing resources such as management staff, machinery, infrastructure, support functions such as R&D or purchasing. Conversely, others may be more independent from their cooperating organization.

The option is, to separate out individual and alliance activities, so that their are business units responsible for achieving corporate's and others for alliance's objectives. This approach ensures that both activities can occur separately, but it increases organizational inefficiency due to duplication of effort and lack of integration across the activities. For maximizing the value of both business units, management should ensure greater integration and alignment between the activities, involving a high level of work ambiguity. In essential, management should design business structures to align and coordinate work for organization's and alliance's performance. Therefore, we consider organizational structures to be the most determinant factor for successful integration between the corporate and alliance strategy. Structures direct all actions towards the most efficient and effective achievement of the strategic goals (Wolf, 2011). While forming a service alliance, when doing the internal assessment, management needs to analyze and possibly redesign existing organizational structure. Nevertheless, management finds it difficult to (re)design cooperating organization structure for alliance alignment (Douma, 1997). In addition, few studies - like that of Raethe (2011) on interaction between structure and implementing technologies - identified specific mechanism that organizations could use to reconcile alignment. Mechanisms are being applied by organizations for coordinating work and they change when business matures and environment changes (Canning et al., 2004). In fact, if an organization does not change its coordination mechanism when business or environment changes (e.g. new laws and tax regulations), structure fit problems occur (Turnbull, 1998). Internal structure fit problems are caused by a miss-match between the intra-organizational business conduct and corporate strategy. External structure fit problems are caused by inappropriateness of the configuration of the intra-organizational structure for dealing with the organization's environment (Siggelkow, 2001). Fit is also dynamic, in other words changes in the coordination of work can influence the environmental or strategy performance (Douma, 1997). Organizations can use alignment mechanisms to re-

duce internal or external fit problems and therefore they lie at the heart of management's capability (Sydow et al., 2009). For example, to adopt a successful outsourcing strategy, organizations requires centralized control from cooperating organization's headquarters to deal with cultural and technical barriers, since without the strategy will not be efficient as it engenders greater reliance on the suppliers' capabilities (Sako, 2010). If an organization lacks centralized control, management should use a mechanisms such as liaison experts, to gain direct supervision of outsourced performances. Mechanisms influence structure components such as (a) job design or individual positioning (b) meta routines or distribution of manpower (c) planning and control structures and (d) decisions authority (Mintzberg, 1992; Adler, 1999, Brikinshaw, 2002; Raeth et al., 2011).

Research Framework

This research combines a dynamic capability and relationship-based view on strategy into an overarching view, by exploring intra-organizational capability to enhance the interorganizational relationship. Few studies contributed to understanding ambidexterity of existing organizational structure for successful managing alliances. The aim of the research is to explore fit problems and mechanisms to increase management's success. The research framework can be seen in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1

Methods

Context and Design

Our research was conducted by a holistic multiple-case study. We studied the structural configuration of 9 multinational actively seeking to establish service alliances. A qualitative case study method was considered appropriate to deepen insight into the relation of organizational structure and managing alliance. We focused specifically on multinationals within one single sector, being the maritime industry. This way, we avoided the impact of structural differences across industries. We chose the maritime industry, since this sector increased efforts of forming service alliances as a strategy to increase efficient and predictive maintenance (Dinalog, 2014). As one manager reported: „*Previously, investing in service was viewed as increasing overhead but recently we are becoming aware that our strategy should include services since more and more customers validate us on the level of service*” (CP). The sector mainly deployed vertical service alliance initiatives; relating to the value chain of naval system manufacturers, shipbuilding companies, service suppliers, and shipping companies.

Sampling and Data Collection

We gathered information from three asset owner, three OEMs and three service suppliers. Within the 9 cases, we conducted approximately 20 face -to-face interviews and informal conversations to gather richness data. By using a snowball approach, we were able to interview managers from all ranks of the organization and from different value components, such as purchase managers, service managers, lawyers and senior executives about their experiences regarding structural adaptation for adopting alliance’s strategy. All interviewees were asked about their work history, their roles in inter-organizational cooperation and their experience of changeovers. Interviews were set up by a semi-structured protocol in order to give room for the interviewee’s experience and written in the interviewee’s native language

(Dutch) to prevent misperception of research questions. To ensure accurate information was provided, the interviewees were assured that their names and the organizations' names would not be disclosed. For the validity and reliability of the data, interviewees were asked to read and revise the transcription when needed. As additional mean, we triangulated the data by secondary data (Yin, 2012), gained by examining a broad range of company documents, maritime sector newspapers, and minutes form management meetings.

Data Analysis

To analyze how organizations' structural configuration changes while adopting alliance's strategy, we explored both initial fit problems experienced and management's actions. We adopted a method of content analysis of our data. It is „*A systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding.*” (Stemler, 2013). First, we created coding frames by combining experienced problems of structural configuration by the previous described definitions for internal or external fit problems. Second, by taking a micro perspective on structure we compiled problems and presented them in a table, which displays the relation of problems to structure components. Third, cross-case analysis was conducted in order to identify key alignment mechanisms across case examples. Table 1 shows the table that was constructed.

Insert Table 1

To ensure the anonymity of reported responses, each organization was allocated a 2 letter case code descriptor. In order to distinguish asset owners from OEM's and service providers, the codes are successively made bold, italics or underlined. Since people also tend to present

problems experienced by others as their own, the results explicitly do not represent how often a certain problem is experienced to avoid perception of severeness.

Findings and Analysis

According to the table 1, while adopting service alliance strategy managers most experience internal fit problems related to structural component of job design. The component of job design or individual position constitutes distribution and regulation of tasks and behavior of employees. In other words, - see problems number 2 and 5 - when adopting a service alliance strategy managers mainly experience both a mismatch regarding the flexibility to assign additional service tasks, and resistance of employees due to lack of job enrichment. In order to enhance successful adaptation of alliance's strategy, managers should put effort in redesigning the job construction. Another notable result regarding internal fit is that most are experienced by top management and by OEMs. Regarding the first, we assume this is because top management is first involved implementing a new strategy. Regarding the last, we assume that OEM's experience more internal fit problems due to tension between alliance's service strategy and corporate's manufacturing strategy - requiring an ambidexterity of structure-, since maintenance is often already an integrated policy within asset owners' or service providers' business strategy.

Furthermore, according to the table most external fit problems are related to the component of performance control. The component of performance control or lateral structuring, constitutes constructing quality, stability and consistency with the organization to enhance optimal performance and to meet good employment practices. In other words, when adopting a service alliance strategy, managers mainly experience a mismatch regarding existing organizational structure to deal with requirements out of their environment, such as customers', the

alliance partner's and trade unions'. As can be seen by problems number 9 and 10 - most of these stakeholders require performance metrics giving them insight to support business changes.

This is also addressed by an alliance manager saying: „Data talks, an organization should be able to prove the conduct of work before being able to change the way of work” (NR).

Furthermore, in reference to problem number 6, we experience organizations lacking institution of relationship experiences to manage knowledge. We observed within the 9 multinational no procedures made of relationship experiences between the alliance partners. Moreover, we did not find experienced alliance managers. This management shortfall, is endorsed by an alliance manager reporting: „*Relationship management at all levels, as I see it, takes a back seat*” (NR). In addition, organizations are observed as being skeptical about applying relationship experiences, as one manager explained: „*If I, as being an operational-engineer, have a trustworthy and high-effective relationship with one of our suppliers, they ask me what benefit I attain from it personally*” (NR).

Another notable result regarding external fit, is that most problems are experienced by lower management and by asset owners. Regarding the first, this is because it is in particular tactical management's responsibility to assess performance risks. Regarding the last, we assume that mostly asset owners experience external fit problems, since they are particular lacking service performance metrics. We are supported in this believe, by a manager saying: „*All business processes were not provisioned for alliance. Practices were not prescribed to control service quality and actual work was not registered to control efficiency. Potential for audits was thereby limited, reports were lacking and process control was limited*” (NR)

Discussion and Conclusions

Contributions of the Research

This exploratory study explored the structural configuration of maritime organizations while adopting a service alliance strategy. The results from our literature review reveal organizations experiencing problems forming a service alliance when doing the internal assessment, though few studies on alliance management enhance intra-organizational management. In addition, by empirical research, our case studies revealed that organizations should mainly reconstruct the design of individual jobs and the organization's lateral structure to increase managing a successful service alliance. As such, we suggest provision of service training and alliance information to improve employee's motivation working for a service alliance. To be more concrete, we suggest establishment of an alliance board, included with functional experts given decentralized responsibilities over alliance's decisions. Having such a board enables direct supervision over aligned business processes and contributes to institutionalizing of collaborative experiences. Furthermore, we recommend using supporting information technologies between organizations to give insight in process performance, hence increase stakeholders' trust.

As such, the conclusions of our research have contributed to theory as follows. First, though previous studies and practices suggest a step-to-step approach to gain relationship experiences to increase alliance success, our results indicate that organizations lack institutionalizing collaborative experience. Second, our results recognize central responsibility of intra-organizational management for strategic potential of the service alliance to become realized. Third, our results contribute to existing structuration theory by understanding structure influencing alliance strategy and management modeling structure to manage work ambiguity. Our research has implications for practice as well. In addition to our results, - since alignment mechanisms are highly interrelated and inter-influential between structure constructs - we

suggested the usage of few but appropriate mechanisms to preserve the balance between change and stability.

Limitations and Future Research

Our research was restricted by focusing on the maritime sector. Future research might explore cross-industry establishment of alliances to increase understanding of interindustry structural differences. Our results included suggestions to redesign structure. Their appropriateness might however change over time as a result of environmental changes or changes in the policy of the organization. Nevertheless, the results have demonstrated potential for follow-up research to test and develop parameters into mechanism „with teeth” (Collins, 2000) that contribute to pluralistic structures for ambidexterity (Adler et al., 1999). In other words, to increase managing successful service alliance without creating unpleasant results to corporate strategy (Schultz et al., 2006). In follow-up research, we will perform action research by conducting longitudinal multiple-case studies to interactive redesign organizational structures. The aim is to develop a checklist for organizations, on the basis of which they can decide how to alter their structure to increase fit for successful service alliance.

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