

"OK. I'll get that to you by Friday"  
The Role of Commitments in B2B Relationships

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**ABSTRACT**

We introduce the new concept of commitments. The nature and characteristics of commitments are described and the ways in which the concept can be used to extend and articulate the ARA framework is illustrated. The role of commitments in interorganisational relationships is also discussed and its relationship to Commitment as generally defined in much IMP research is also considered. Finally the implications of using the commitments concept in B2B research are also set out.

**INTRODUCTION**

In this paper we introduce a new concept, commitments, that bridges the gap between actions and the reasons for those actions taking place, between 'the what' and 'the why' so to speak. Commitments are not however unknown to us. They permeate our lives, as the example in the title of the paper demonstrates. They commit us to endeavour to act in a certain way, but vary in terms of the extent to which they bind us to a/the projected path.

We naturally concentrate, in what follows, on commitments in and between organisations in B2B markets. Given the intrinsic purposiveness of commitments we begin by examining goal structures and means – ends chains in organisations.

The core of the paper is devoted to defining, explaining and articulating the concept of commitments, and we then move on to its application in organisations via a further development of the Actors – Resources- Activities framework as applied to organisations, using quotations from a series of research projects to exemplify their use. Interorganisational commitments are then considered as a further extension to the application of the concept and the relationship of commitments to Commitment, the latter being a pledge to a long term relationship, is then addressed. A short section on the relevance of commitments to network behaviour then follows, and the paper ends in the traditional manner by setting out some of the implications of a commitments approach to research in the IMP tradition.

**EMPIRICAL MATERIAL AND METHODS**

The perspectives developed in this paper emerged from a 30-month longitudinal field engagement. The primary component of the fieldwork comprised a continuous 18-month participant self-observation study by one of the authors during his engagement as an interim marketing director for a B2B promotional goods company. Complementing this auto-ethnographic study, the activities and behaviour of several managers within a multi-billion [B2R2C] global consumer goods company were also studied. Methods deployed in this more traditional study comprised participant observation, non-participant observation and action research. The self-observation [Holbrook, 2002], the longitudinal engagement of the participant observation and the involvement in action research [Watson, 1994] provided a rich variety of data from which the role of commitments in everyday organisational and inter-organisational life

became strikingly apparent, and which allowed their detailed character to be discerned.

### **PURPOSIVENESS**

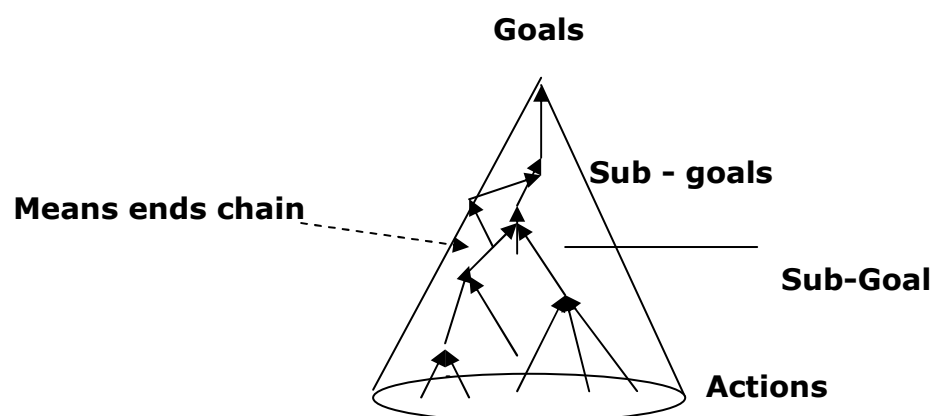
Firm behaviour is goal driven; it has a purpose. Organisations are held together and driven by the reasons for which they were set up and continue to exist. However the purpose may not always be clear or even conscious to the individuals concerned, but it does exist. While goals exist, the ways in which they help determine behaviour is not at all clear. Both organisations and the individuals within them, can describe, publish and share their goals but the means by which they intend to achieve them are usually vague. One way of illustrating this situation is by the use of the concept of means – ends chains, or as we would prefer to describe them, cones.

### **MEANS-ENDS CONES**

Means – ends cones describe the ways that the goals and actions to achieve those goals are connected. Any means ends chain traces the contribution of a particular action to the achievement of a goal. But any end will normally require a large number of inter-linked and interdependent means, in the form of actions, for its realisation. Hence the use of the term means-ends cone, rather than means-end chain to describe this set of relationships. The base of the cone indicates that links from means to ends, can come from any organisational-functional space, however the latter is defined. Means ends cones can be articulated in two ways, as prescriptive and descriptive.

#### **Prescriptive Means – Ends Cones**

Prescriptively Means-Ends cones can describe how a particular goal might possibly be attained. The goal can be partitioned into a series of sub-goals which can, in turn, be further divided into sub sub-goals. For example, in order to maintain a long term relationship with a potential customer we might need to ensure, among other things, that (a) they are satisfied with our delivery performance and (b) that our prices are at least similar to those of our competitors. Super-ordinate goals decompose into a complex cascade of sub-goals, many of which are interdependent.



**Figure 1 Means – Ends Cone**

To ensure that the customer is satisfied with our delivery performance we need to (c) always agree delivery dates with them in advance and (d) coordinate the

actions of the operations, production control and logistics departments. Each of these goals can be further operationalised so that, in principle, the resulting means – ends cone can determine what each employee in the organisation needs to do at 0.800 hours on Monday morning in the pursuit of the super-ordinate objective.

Clearly this vision is utopian in the extreme. It may be possible to come reasonably close to this ideal in straightforward projects in small organisations with a clear cut objective using stable and predictable technologies within simple structures, and with very competent planning and implementation. But in the other 99.9% of organisational situations it is an impossible dream.

There are several problems. The first is that such means-ends chains rely on the ability of the planners to take into account all the factors that might affect the achievement of the goal and choose an option from those available which is most likely to succeed. This, in turn, requires them to forecast the outcomes of all possible sub-goals. Such forecasts will usually depend on events external to the organisation so they are, to say the least, unpredictable. Furthermore while there may be one overall goal for the organisation, as soon as sub goal chains begin to be chosen, their interaction renders the problem of making choices effectively impossible. For example, there will be competition for resources by each sub-goal chain which makes the forecasting of the success or failure of their outcome extremely complex.

### **Descriptive Means - Ends Cones**

The second articulation attempts to suggest what happens in practice. Organisations do set high level goals and more or less achieve them. How is this done? There are likely to be several mechanisms at work.

The first is that since most immediate sub-goals are necessarily imprecise about the means appropriate to any given ends, actors in the organisation can make choices about the means by which they seek to achieve them. For example a sub-goal chain might be to diversify by trying to capture a customer in a particular new market that the firm is seeking to enter. However there are a myriad ways of doing that.

The second option is to ignore the proximate sub-goal in favour of one that subsumes it. In the case of the previous example an alternative option might be to take advantage of an opportunity to form a KAM team to coordinate the activities including the management of deliveries.

A third option might be to modify the diversification goal by persuading the goal setters that it is not a sensible goal and should be replaced.

A fourth option is to simply ignore the sub-goal and hope that either the omission will not be noticed, since the goal was either unimportant or not sensible, or that changes in circumstances render it moot.

This descriptive model clearly provides a rather broad and simplistic perspective on the general ways in which actions and goals in organisations interact with one another. It frames but says little about the ways in which it all seems to work at the level of the everyday, where actions help fulfil and modify goals and goals frame and articulate means.

To bridge this conceptual gap we introduce the concept of commitments. Commitments are the primal and most grounded links in mean-ends cones and it is to a discussion of these links that we now turn.

## COMMITMENTS

### The links of the means end chain

Given the extensive use of the word commitment in the management literature, it is clearly necessary to adequately distinguish the meaning of commitments as the object of managerial conduct. The commitments of the model are commitments with a small 'c' and they have a complex relationship to the affective-behavioural form of Commitment with a big 'C' [ Brickman 1987, Locke et al 1988]. Neither are the commitments of the model necessarily underpinned by any of the fundamental characteristics ascribed to them by Salancik [1977] and Weick's [1995] conceptions; those of individual choice, explicitness, irreversibility and public awareness. In the context of the developed model a commitment is taken to be an undertaking through which someone agrees / accedes to endeavour to do, or forbear, 'something' usually an action. The commitments of the model are objective-laden seeds of action. They are an agreement or pledge to do something in the future. The statement, "OK, I'll get that to you by Friday" of the title is a simple manifestation of a commitment.

Only individuals can make commitments, even though at times they may do so on behalf of an incipient or manifest 'macro-actor' [Callon and Latour 1981 ] and to groups of other individuals. No purported 'collective', no macro-actor, be it an organization, department, function or government can make a commitment. By definition commitments are inter-subjective; they have a 'who to whom' character. Actors may make what might be termed joint commitments, where those individuals involved in making a commitment to a third party cannot unilaterally rescind it. However this 'jointness' is itself simply a manifestation of implicit, if not explicit, inter-subjective commitments of the 'committing' parties. Firms do not make commitments to each other; firms become committed by the commitments shaped and sustained by their members

Organisations exist partly because they are vehicles for the coordination of actions by different individuals with specialised skills and resources as well as providing means to exploit economies of scale and scope. They do so in order to achieve their espoused goals. But, as we argued earlier, such coordination cannot be achieved by fiat. It is negotiated on a continuous basis. Commitments provide a normative framework of agreements that guide actions; a negotiated order (Strauss et al, 1963).

Commitments have a number of forms and characteristics, some of which will be described here in order to flesh out the concept. The following forms of commitment dominated our captured empirical material.

Commitments to:

- Execute a physical act e.g. *'Come on Martin, just sign the contract'*
- Execute a cognitive act e.g. *'I'll think about it and get back to you'*
- Allocate resources
  - Financial e.g. *'Zeb OK!!...we'll buy it'*
  - Human e.g. *'I'll put Stewart on the delivery failures full time'*
  - Priorities / sequencing e.g. *'Tony, let's kill this off first eh?'*
- Attention e.g. *'we will need to watch the numbers carefully '*
- Exhibit a certain behaviour e.g. *'not quite the way we see it, but we'll support you'*

- Endeavour to achieve a projected outcome e.g. *'We'll do whatever it takes to get the product there'*

In essence all forms of commitment have this last purposive character, as they all represent commitments to endeavour to take action of a certain form. The purpose of a commitment represents its spirit, and given the turbulence, indeterminacy and complexity of the intra and inter-organizational milieu it is in the 'spirit' of their commitments, not in their detail, that managers need their collaborators and customers to act. The most reliable commitments are not necessarily those made voluntarily, publicly and explicitly but those where the spirit of a commitment is at the centre of its crafting and fulfilment [Sull and Spinoza, 2005]. These we have come to term 'robust commitments'.

Commitments also display other key characteristics, for example, lability; they are "characterized by a ready tendency toward, or capability for, change" [Webster's Third New International Dictionary, 2002]. Commitments do not have the characteristics of irrevocability and stability that permeate many usages of the term [Noble and Mokwa, 1999]. As the following quotes illustrate, commitments are labile:

*"...we actually put our bid in for [the contract]...and got it over [Competitor A]...now in a state where we've got it, but I'm sat here thinking should we have it...cause not sure people support it now"*

*".....we didn't get to know [Customer A] were placing the order which is what I was waiting for....spoke to virtually everyone involved...I'd said they'd have to let me know"*

The accidental, or deliberately malicious, lack of fulfilment of commitments does, of course, contribute to the vulnerability of endeavour. However, most of the lability of commitments derives from the 'changes of mind', 'changes of situation' and 'unexpected outcomes' inherent in the turbulent 'wicked, problem littered, weak situations' [Lenney 2006, Rittel 1973, Mischel 1977] in which the customer and supplier managers are embedded.

Commitments are not isolated but are necessarily connected. In the terms of the model both intra- and inter-organizational relationships are seen as comprising an ever-evolving web of commitments. This conception of commitment webs has resonance with Boden's 'cooperations of convenience' [Boden, 1994 p193], the 'organizings' of Bonoma [Bonoma, 1985 p160], the 'nets of collective action' / 'action nets' of Czarniawska-Joerges [Czarniawska-Joerges 1992 p32; 2004 p779] and the 'macro-actors' of Actor Network Theory [Peltonen & Tikkanen, 2005].

The constituent commitments of these commitment webs are very often tightly coupled, not least in the temporal dimension:

*"global went off their timeline again...everything kinda feeds off advertising 'n what global are doing..y'know..if you're not clear on that then that will knock back on everything else that you do...how do we get right and ready all the relevant materials to do a compelling account presentation for the sell-in that's due if we haven't got... well everything....there's a real knock-on effect"*

Even if the scope and degree of specification of the individual constituent commitments of an array of commitments constituting a particular 'web' are reasonably comprehensive and tight, the overall scope and degree of specification of webs of commitments is most often somewhat loose. This is a result, one might say, of the commitment web equivalent of engineering-tolerance stack-up as these webs of commitments are pervaded by connectedness and interdependency in all their dimensions.

*"..there's been a load of confusion ..it's not turned out the way we envisaged..basically now it's too late to fix anyway, we've got to use what was approved not what [Retailer F] now wants...they should be here on Friday, if we get them back you will be able to use them...but [Simon] isn't in 'til Friday now so can't ...don't know when [Retailer C] coming back on it now anyway so can't hang it together now, [Paul] may know..the windows are due in on the fifteenth..[much laughter]"*.

The loosely specified but tightly coupled character of their constituent commitments means commitment webs are highly precarious – they afford no ease or assurance in any dimension. When they are effective, they are effective not because they are reliable, but because they are constantly conducted and modulated.

It is clear from what has gone before that we see commitments as a powerful perspective on both intra- and inter-organisational behaviour. However it would not be sensible to build a new approach to 'inter-organization' theory without considering what already exists. The Actors- Resources – Activities model (Håkansson H and Snehota I (1995), Easton G. and Araujo, L. (1994), Gadde, L. E. Huemer, L, and Håkansson, H (2003) has proved to be very helpful and stimulating way of relating three important constructs that help us further understand both organisational and interorganisational behaviour. We therefore further articulate the ARA model adding commitments, not as a fourth and further element, but as a way of better relating them.

## **ACTORS- RESOURCES- ACTIVITIES MODEL AND COMMITMENTS**

### **Resources and Resource Ties**

Commitments are stock entities and not actions and exist primarily in the minds of organisational actors. They may also be encrypted in physical resources such as emails, meeting minutes or on post-it notes. All forms of commitments are in essence 'resource deployments, of some form or other, to achieve a certain outcome'. Commitments give access to what might be termed second order resources. They are however themselves resources of a particular kind; resources with a normative label. The phrase "to have all one's ducks in a row" suggests that an actor has all the means to achieve a particular end. These are promises and agreements made that if held to, endeavour to achieve, but do not guarantee, success.

Commitments can be primarily dyadic or net based. An actor can make a commitment to another actor or to a group involved in a project. In practice the distinction is rather subtle since in the first case it is assumed that the fulfilment of the commitment ends an actor's involvement. In the second case actors are involved in a web of commitments such that there are likely to be interactions among commitments and the actors individually or jointly

responsible for meeting them. More generally it can be argued that the purposeful nature of organisations is best represented by sets of overlapping and continually changing webs, possibly even cones, of commitments.

#### Actors and Actor Bonds

Actors are driven by their personal interests which will be a mixture of those that relate to their own wellbeing and by the, often conflicting, perceived and actual interests of the organisation. As a result actors cannot be seen as simply cogs in a corporate machine. What actions they will and will not commit to is therefore another source of variability in organisational behaviour.

At any one time actors have a portfolio of commitments, some of which are self commitments but most will be commitments to other individual and group actors. They have the continuous task of deciding how to allocate their resources, mainly their time, among their commitments.

But actors also have bonds which connect them more or less permanently to other actors within the firm. Some of these bonds will be informal and others formal, corresponding to the authority structures in the firm. The nature of webs of commitments will be strongly affected by the character and strength of actor bonds and conversely actor bonds will be, at least partly, influenced by the histories of past commitments and their fulfilments and the state of current commitments. It is clear for example that in many cases commitments are conducted and fulfilled through informal networks of actor bonds as well as through the formal organisational authority structures.

#### Activities and Activity Links

Commitments help to, but do not totally, determine actions. Traditionally activity links in the ARA model have drawn attention to ways in which rather constant patterns of activities occur in organisations. These patterns are evident in the routines organizations require to be performed since they help make the activities and their results both more efficient and effective. Routines can therefore be regarded as involving somewhat institutionalised commitments together with their fulfilment activities. Systems, rules, policies, and procedures, among other mechanisms, are all utilised to mitigate the precariousness of commitment webs in any repetitive activities. However, when these are developed or develop spontaneously to deal with substantive inter-organizational issues they are often more like dance routines than military marches, well rehearsed, but with substantial scope for improvisation [Feldman, 2000].

However the majority of the most important actions in organisations are non routine as are the commitment webs from which they derive. As a result these commitment webs are crafted but then modulated constantly in response to unexpected events, and to the results of the ongoing attempts to fulfil the original commitments. Commitment webs and the impact of the endeavours to fulfil their constituent commitments are in a structurational relationship [Giddens, 1984]; each emerges from the other.

Our empirical studies suggest that managers spend the vast majority of their time in the sustaining of commitments. They exhibit considerable resilience and determination in terms of "keeping things on track" under a veritable hail of change resulting from "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune". This commitment sustaining strand of their conduct is relentless and, as can be seen in Figure 2, comprises several threads. The display represents part of a



newly developed model of marketing managerial work which is to be presented elsewhere.

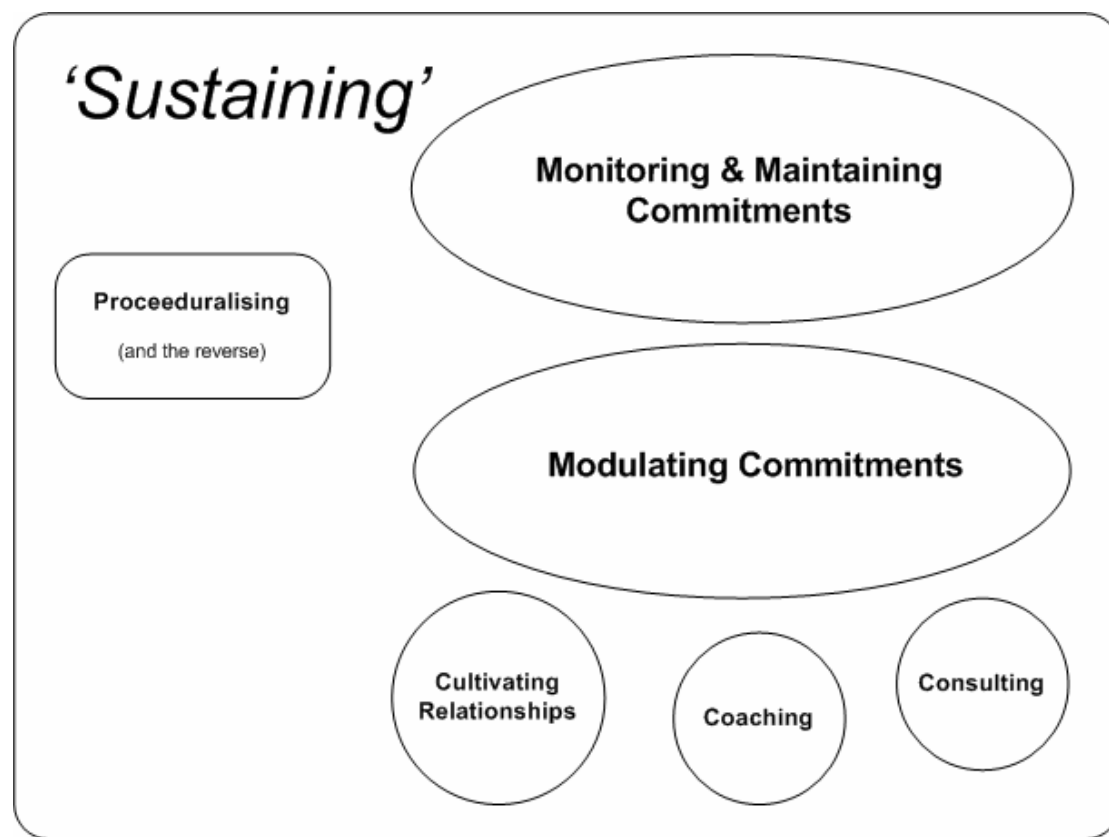


Figure 2 Sustaining Commitments

Commitments are constantly being, both formally and informally, monitored and chased, i.e. maintained, in all their dimensions:

*"...lots, 'n lots, 'n lots of calls...a whole day of calls..talking to people, getting things done, making sure things were happening, chasing and chasing things..."* [Alan Interview 5 Part 1; 35.27]

It was strikingly evident from our fieldwork that very often the achieved result of action taken, and even the action itself, differed substantially from that that was envisaged in its initiation. As Boden rightly concludes:

*"What 'looks good' or practical or desirable at T1 often looks different a few days or weeks later, in the light of intervening information and events."* [Boden, 1994 p191]

The monitoring and maintenance of commitments is therefore accompanied by their continual modulation in the face of exigencies, discrepancies and unintended consequences of one form or another:

*"...we originally said we were gonna put their [the retailer's] logo on the advertising..but we became less keen because as it ended up it was part of a bigger brand campaign and we had to back-track a little bit with the*

*customer...we counterbalanced it with a real positive..we've sited the 'six-sheets' [posters] outside their sites.."* [Katie Diary Trace Interview 5; 42.23]

*"..what I'll try to do then is on the basis of this, I'll try to bail us out of the second lot of product the customer requested..if I can....this is another one where they'd probably have ordered just 200 but when everyone gets in a room and gets excited it goes to 1500..and everyone was right up for it at the time..then now all of a sudden!..."*

[Product Manager Sector A (Brad) in Zeb Work Shadow 2004\_05\_04/10.26; 1.10.31]

Modulations can at times represent a re-crafting of an entire commitment web:

*"[Thursday].. manage to get the [customer's] MD to say yes, to sign off two and half million pounds, got the FD to say yes, got our Euro-Marketing Director to say yes. so we all said yes... by the Monday we then had to ..."*

[Zeb Diary Trace Interview 3: 14.02]

Compliance with norms (e.g. authority), contracts, procedures, policies and the seeking of continuance may be heavily represented in rationale for the acceptance and fulfilling of commitments, but the influence of affective factors is strong:

*" I'm only doing this for you guys y'know; if it was any other supplier I'd..."*

In the turbulent inter-organizational commercial milieu the strong but flexible commitments generated by affective rationale are invaluable And, as is well documented, the cultivating of relationships both within and between organizations is a pervasive activity; these are endeavours to achieve a context that is conducive to the crafting of robust commitments.

#### The ARA Model and Commitments

For each element, and at each level, of the ARA model commitments thinking helps to explain why what occurs does so. Put another way, it interweaves purposefulness into the ARA model and suggests how it might drive behaviour. Actors have interests some of which are personal and some of which are organisational in nature. The organisational commitments are created partly by institutionalised commitments and partly by commitments to sub goals that link, not necessarily in any hard and fast way, to organisational goals. The latter require both commitments by actors to certain fulfilment activities some of which will be conducting commitments of others. These others may be in their formal or informal networks of relationships.

### **INTER-ORGANISATIONAL COMMITMENTS**

It can be argued that interorganisational actions are governed by, and govern, commitments in a way similar to the way in which this occurs within organisations.

At the lowest level of commitment, actions will result from institutionalised interorganisational **routines** such as call offs of products made by customers to suppliers and such actions may even be entirely computerised. Examples of

these kinds of routines are generally only interesting when they need modulating.

*"Activity was due to start middle of July, that's what we'd told the retailers,... but then there was feedback from the factory...there were problems..wouldn't hit UK 'til end July...all the media had been booked so..."*

[Katie Diary Trace Interview 6 Part 2: 15.04]

In a somewhat less routine situation, and at the most atomistic level, dyads comprising **individuals** from each organisation will make commitments to each other.

*'Don't worry I'll fix it, I'll get Simon (sales rep) to go into Hi-Street (the customer) and convince them that they (the buyer) should pull the order forward into this quarter'.*

However in comparison with intraorganisational relationships the actors, buyers and sellers, involved are **representatives** of their organisations, not just their departments or groups. As such they are acting in boundary spanning roles and are, as a result, both more constrained and more empowered by their situations. They are constrained in relation to the other actor since they are governed by the goals of their own organisation and the commitments that those goals entail. They are however also empowered, particularly customers in this case, since they represent the goals of, and commitments to, the other organisation within their own organisation and therefore speak for it and the implied or actual commitments.

*"the sales guys never want to say no to the key accounts"*

[Katie Diary Trace Interview 5: 58.51]

*" ...[the retailers] are starting to flex their power....we have to make some strategic calls....how much do we bow to them,...how much do we say 'no' or 'you've got to take it or we'll give it to someone else'"*

[Katie Subordinate-B Interview: 30.49]

*"...[certain retailers] strongly believe that they know how we should run our brand and communicate to customers...that's the conflict"*

[Katie Subordinate-B Interview: 31.51]

*".. if [a big retailer] says 'I want that story'...there's important and worthwhile debate about is that the right place for that story...but usually the answer is.. if they write a big enough order....most principles can be traded if there's enough on the order form.."*

[Adam Diary Trace Interview 3: 40.42]

Within each organisation there are **groups of actors** working towards group goals, with networks of joint commitments which will involve the partner organisation. Examples of such groups include Key Account Management and research and development departments in suppliers and purchasing and engineering departments in customers. In each case there will usually be a number of actors from each intraorganisational group involved with other actors in the counterpart organisation.

" [Sales] come to us and say we got a gap with this account,... a product opportunity here, is there anything you can do to support it..there's a big gap with what we're trying to achieve..need gap filling initiatives... [Katie Diary Trace Interview 2: 12.45]

A key decision area for these groups in B2B markets is how to manage a portfolio of customers or suppliers.

"..the sales director feels a certain nervousness...about the reaction of our core retailers if we opened up with new accounts [Z] and [Q]...in a different channel...but the target consumers are turning away from the [core] retailers...we have to address where we are gonna go to pick up that consumer again"

[Adam Interview 3: 14.35]

" ...the retailers are very sensitive to what their competitors are doing...we can't be seen to be out there with a brand campaign, or a particular [product], that isn't available to all the retailers...its about seeing the big picture"

[Katie Subordinate B Interview: 18.40]

There is also likely to be a continuum of **types of commitment nets** involved. At one end the commitment net will largely be confined to one organisation with an overall, albeit major and clearly specified project based commitment to the other organisation, for example the prototyping of a new component or the sell-in of a major re-branding programme to a retailer.

"..I can't go it alone...it's a team...we'll only get this one opportunity..when we get through this [retailer's] door it has to be a fully integrated approach and concept...it has to be marketing, us [Product sector B], the [Product Sector A] guys..oh yeah 'n sales...need to go in all as one with an integrated concept"

[Sara Diary Trace Interview 4: 07.48]

At the other end of the continuum there will be joint commitment nets between organisations which, however, don't always connect or lead to the desired outcome.

"even though it was all agreed....short of actually physically going out and putting it into every store ourselves there's no way you can guarantee it's gonna happen!"

[Katie Subordinate-B Interview: 14.21]

"..we feel so in the spotlight all the time, not only do we implement the campaign,... not only do we have to communicate it internally, and get 'buy-in' internally, you need to win support... almost market it internally, you need to get 'buy-in' from the sales team, from the consumer marketing guys as well, but then you have to get 'buy-in' from the accounts, and then eventually the consumers going to these accounts"

[Katie Subordinate-B Interview: 24.12]

*"...the [Lo-Street] women's buyer is saying one thing and telling us to go jump, their marketing guy is out of the loop, but according to our account manager their MD is with us on this, even though their market research findings run largely contrary to it...but our sales guy ain't the most trustworthy..what to do..I could push it but if I upset the buyer she'll possibly stuff us next month...but we need the order..or do we really?....*

Fulfilment of commitments can result in a different form of commitment, ones that mould future buyer – seller relationships. **Adaptations** are one such thing, being long term relationship specific investments that in a sense represent commitments of various kinds. Certain adaptations are physical such as the purchase of a particular machine by a supplier to service just one customer. Some are legal, for example the creation of a contract which commits, although often in rather vague terms, both parties to carry out certain actions in particular ways. In a formal sense legal contracts act as frameworks within which rather specific commitments are made. Commitments that act against the spirit of the contract occur although many if not most would be outside their terms. Some commitments act as social institutions that determine the forms of interorganisational routines, as described earlier, and the ways in which partners in long term relationships behave in relation to specific acts, for example how salespeople are treated and what priority a particular customer gets.

### **commitments and Commitment**

There is one final major commitment; Commitment to the ideal of the creation and continuation of a long term relationship. We suggest that this should be designated Commitment with a large C. It is comprised of a mixture of individual attitudes and affect as well as culturally determined interorganisational norms. There is a substantial organisation studies literature that deals with Commitment .

Commitment usually requires, as a necessary but not sufficient condition, the fulfilling of commitments and will, of course, vary with the successful / unsuccessful fulfilling of commitments over time. We therefore envisage a hierarchy of commitments which at the bottom comprise relatively short term, small scale, clearly defined interorganisational commitments which if fulfilled build to larger scale, longer though less well defined commitments, some of which become manifest in adaptations, and finally to Commitment which is a long term but ill defined expectation that the partners are, in effect, bound to one another. This is the sense in which Commitment is used in most of the IMP research.

Commitment is both an emergent property of commitments and the context within which commitments are conducted and fulfilled. Moreover Commitment is not a uniform characteristic of buyer-seller relationships. It can vary in a number of respects. As already mentioned the strength, measured in terms of how easily the relationship can be broken, of Commitment can obviously differ between different B2B relationships but also over time in the same relationship. In addition Commitment may vary within each of the partners across different departments, groups and individuals and so its impact upon actions will often be difficult to predict. This is a point that is rather overlooked in research into Commitment using single informants.

## **COMMITMENTS AND NETWORKS**

At a network level commitments are likely to be a key source of network coordination and as such would require each of the actors to commit to other actors. The flow through nodes model (Easton and Lundgren, 1991) could be used in this context since, for example, a commitment by a customer to a supplier might then require a commitment to the supplier's vertical or complementary supplier and so on which in turn might create new, distant but not unconnected commitments in competitor firms who discover that this is happening.

The strength and character of such commitments will however be modified, and most likely attenuated, by their translation through the network. Their character will necessarily be different since a commitment would not be passed on in its original form if it could be fulfilled by the original partner. For example a customer requirement for a piece of equipment could be translated into a commitment by a supplier which could, in turn, be translated into a series of internal commitments to the customer in that supplier. As a part of these processes, components for the equipment would then be sourced and converted into a series of commitments by and to the suppliers' suppliers. The fulfilment of the equipment order then becomes dependent upon a series of interorganisational commitments of varying character and strength. This could result, in extremis, in a very strong or very weak vertical commitment net or, more likely a combination of strengths and weaknesses and in varying characteristics such as delivery reliability and service quality. The actors at any stage in the supply channel are required to manage both downstream and upstream commitments and indeed their management requires a set of commitments the priority of which they will have to determine.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

The concept of commitments offers new ways to conceptualise B2B relationships and to research those relationships. In the former case it introduces teleology, the study of purposive action, into the concepts and frameworks that researchers in the IMP use. The primary reason for doing this is that it links structure and process to actors' behaviour. It treats industrial networks as purposive entities and helps explain why things happen by providing a layer of explanatory mechanisms via the commitment concept.

In the latter case it offers the possibility of extending existing research practices from descriptions of past and present organisational and interorganisational behaviours via elicitation of commitments to the reasons why those behaviours took place in the ways and at the times they did.

Finally it could throw light on the nature of both organisational and interorganisational Commitment and the relationships between the two. It would, as a by-product perhaps, help to link the largely aggregate level quantitative research on this subject to the disaggregated level case based research dealing with this phenomenon.

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