

Early buyer-supplier interaction in public procurement context

- Dyadic perceptions

Work-in-progress paper

1 Introduction

Relationships are seen to develop as the product of interaction and exchanges between the counterparts (Ford 1980), and during the past years, academics have paid remarkable attention to interaction in the context of long-term buyer-supplier relationships (Guercini, La Rocca, Runfola & Snehota 2014). However, interaction related to first time and short-term exchange has obtained limited attention. Particularly interaction in the public procurement context, which is typically transactional due to strict regulations and legal requirements (Arlbjørn & Freytag 2012), is scarcely researched (Igarashi, De Boer & Fet 2013). Public sector actors are claimed to be inexperienced in developing relationships with private companies (Erridge & Greer 2002), and the focus in the public procurement process is often on price and value is based on single transaction (Wang & Bunn 2004). Yet, price-oriented purchasing strategies are not always fruitful with suppliers that are limited in availability, and with suppliers that create competitive advantages for their customer (Hüttinger, Schiele & Veldman 2012). Prior research has noticed the importance of creating worthy relationships with potential suppliers that may be important in cases of emergency, or when facing problems with the current suppliers (Gelderman & Semeijn 2006).

Public buyers have recently been enhanced to interact with the suppliers before the actual competitive tendering (Torvatn & de Boer 2017). Early interaction with potential suppliers can increase the chances of finding solutions for cost savings and create an environment of trust that can facilitate realization of opportunities (Uyarra 2010). For example, early supplier involvement studies highlight interaction with suppliers at the early phases of product development and innovation initiatives (e.g. Handfield et al. 1999). Mariotti and Delbridge (2011 p. 514) discuss putative relationships, which have the opportunity of, and potential for, further development. However, academic studies focusing on the early phases of buyer-supplier relationship are scarce, both when it comes to private sector (Edvardsson, Holmlund & Strandvik 2008) and public sector research (Igarashi et al. 2013).

In the current study, we explore buyer-supplier interaction at the early phases of procurement process, focusing on two separate phases: pre-tender phase, and contract implementation. In the pre-tender phase, interaction occurs between the buyer and potential suppliers, and there is no product or service exchange. Contract implementation implies interaction between the buyer and selected suppliers, and it takes place before the final signing of the contract. In public procurement context, gaining mutual understanding of forthcoming cooperation is important, because it may be problematic to adjust the content of the contract after it has been signed.

Both buyers and suppliers are active participants in a relationship, and they may have different perception of the quality of the interaction (Holmlund & Strandvik 1999). Thus, it is important to include both the parties' perceptions when studying collaborative efforts (Whipple, Wiedmer & Boyer 2015). From a relational perspective, interacting parties' mutual perceptions are visible and challenged in every business relationship (Corsaro & Snehota 2010). Medlin (2004), for example, emphasizes the understanding of the sources of disagreement between

customers and suppliers in order for the relationship to survive. However, there is only a limited number of academic studies that consider both the buyer's and supplier's perceptions of a relationship (Corsaro & Snehota 2011). The majority of empirical research on buyer-supplier relationship has focused on one perspective in the dyad, and most often the focus is on the buyer's perspective (Brito & Miguel 2017). Thus, in this study, we take a dyadic perspective, and investigate buyer-supplier interaction at the early phases of public procurement process. The focus is on social exchange and information exchange.

As a method, we apply embedded case studies of interaction in the context of a municipality's catering services tendering. We contribute to inter-organizational relationship and network research by investigating buyer-supplier interaction at the early phases of (potential) exchange relationships in the context of public procurement. Our findings show that there are remarkable differences in the buyer's and suppliers' perceptions of their mutual interaction.

We start this paper by discussing the theoretical foundations of the study. Second, we describe the methodology and data collection and analysis procedures. Finally, we discuss the preliminary findings of the study.

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Early buyer-supplier interaction

Inter-organizational relationships develop in interaction. Studies of relationship development in the private sector typically include phases during which relationship begins, develops, "sleeps", and terminates. The first phase of a relationship has been named, for example, "relationship initiation" (Edvardsson et al. 2008), "awareness phase" (Dwyer, Schurr & Oh 1987:15, Heide 1994), "pre-relationship phase" (Ford 1980), and "searching process" (Batonda & Perry 2003). Edvardsson et al. (2008:340) define relationship initiation as a phase where the companies of a potential relationship recognize each other. Batonda and Perry (2003) describe the "searching process" as a first phase of a relationship, including search and trial for potential exchange partners. Ford (1980) calls the second phase as "the early stage", which is a testing period for potential suppliers. According to Dwyer et al. (1987) the parties estimate and test the goal compatibility, reliability and performance of the counterpart in key sub-processes during the second, "exploration phase". In Wilson's (1995) model, the second phase of relationship development may be featured by the underpinnings for generating common understanding and sanctioning.

In the competitive tendering, public actors carry out activities that are similar to the activities in the relationship development studies conducted in the b-to-b context. In the pre-tender phase interaction, the buyer gains understanding of the opportunities on the supplier market, and the potential suppliers learn about the customers' demands and needs (McKevitt & Davis 2015). However, the operating framework and culture of the public sector, and the lack of buying capabilities have hindered the development of inter-organizational relationships with the private sector (Erridge & Greer 2002, Lian & Laing 2004). For example, public actors are subject to public procurement law, which requires some activities to be applied to a very limited extent (Patrucco, Luzzini & Ronchi 2017). The pre-tender phase is the least regulated when it comes to interaction with the suppliers, as long as all the suppliers are treated equally (Arrowsmith 2014). Contract implementation implies a series of negotiations between the public buyer and the selected suppliers(s) before the final signing of the contract. Thus, the

counterparts are likely to have little experience of its other, and the actions of the supplier and buyer in the future will be inclined by their initial assessment of the performance and potential of their partner (Ford 1980).

Relationship between buyers and suppliers consist of both short-term facets and long-term processes, in which the participants, the elements and processes of interaction, the environment, and the atmosphere describe and influence the interaction between buyer and supplier (Håkansson 1982). Short-term facets of a relationship consists of episodes, which refer to distinct exchanges of goods or services, technical, economic, financial or organizational information, and social contacts. The episodes involve both actions and their outcomes, for example technical discussions, deliveries, or phone calls. In long-term processes in a relationship, the counterparts make adaptations in processes and in the roles and responsibilities (ibid.). The traditional use of these two aggregation levels of interaction is argued to offer only a narrow analytical depth when they are applied to describe the contents of a relationship (Holmlund 2004). Thus, it is important to analyze both the individual interaction episodes and the relationship in general (e.g. Ford 1980, Schurr, Hedaa & Geersbro 2008).

2.2 Information exchange and social exchange in the early interaction

The exchange of a service or a product is seen as the driving force behind buyer-supplier interaction. However, at the early phases of a relationship, information exchange and social exchange are essential elements for gaining trust and mutual understanding.

Information exchange can be defined as “*the bilateral expectation that parties will proactively provide useful information to the partner*” (Heide & John 1992 p. 32). Information exchange designates the intensity, frequency and openness of information shared to attain mutually valuable outcomes (Wang & Bunn 2004). Public buyers can benefit from ex ante information exchange in two different ways; they can learn to know the potential suppliers and they can deal with technical complexity of the purchased service (Waara 2008). Open communication and information exchange enhance trust building, commitment, and the willingness to engage in knowledge sharing and close interactions (Håkansson, Havila & Pedersen 1999). However, in public procurement context, encouraging the type of interaction that might lead to a profitable information exchange may be challenging. For example, the equality principles include compulsory documentation and distribution of all the information gained from a supplier to all the potential suppliers (Arrowsmith 2014, Warland & Mayer 2017). Thus, the fear of knowledge spillover can impede information exchange (Melander & Lakemond 2015). Ensuring potential suppliers that knowledge will be protected – while simultaneously encouraging them to contribute valuable knowledge to the collective good – is a challenge. A further challenge in information exchange during the pre-tender phase interaction is the uncertainty about the future of the cooperation. Axelrod (1984 p. 125), for example, claims that only continuing interaction makes it possible for cooperation based on reciprocity to be stable. He suggests that to enhance cooperation, the contact can be made more frequent by breaking conceptual issues into smaller pieces.

Social exchange refers to the interpersonal relationship that are created between the members of buyer and supplier organizations, which facilitates problem solving and creates trust between the counterparts (Ford 1980). Errigde and Greer (2002) emphasize, in particular, the need to develop social capital to reduce the commonly shared culture of distrust. Social capital provides a supportive environment for cooperation because of the growing need for communication and

feedback mechanisms. For example, positive social values, such as supporting local and domestic entrepreneurs (as required in the EU law) would require deeply channeled buyer-supplier relationships and knowledge of these suppliers' resources (Loader & Norton 2015).

Informal socialization in early phases of a relationship is an effective way to improve interaction and cooperation between companies (van de Vijver, Vos & Akkermans 2011 p. 37). An important way to encourage cooperation is to arrange that the interacting individuals will meet each other again, will be able to recognize each other from the past, and will recall the counterpart's past behavior (Axelrod 1984). Public buyers must, however, have to be careful in their daily dealings with suppliers, as the appearance of favoritism or unethical tendering practices can damage one's professional reputation (Hunsaker 2009) and the suppliers' willingness to participate in tendering.

3 Research methodology, data collection and analysis

This study is a part of a larger research project related to public-private cooperation in the procurement context. The aim of this specific study is to investigate buyer-supplier interaction at the early phases of public procurement process, focusing on social exchange and information exchange. This study responds to calls for longitudinal studies in inter-organizational contexts (Dubois & Gadde 2002, Evers, Marroun & Young 2016). A longitudinal case study offers a single setting with multiple observations over an lengthy period in a particular context (Eisenhardt 1989, Pettigrew 1997). Thus, our data allows us to investigate buyer-supplier interaction in depth, both on a real-time and retrospective basis. An exploratory and qualitative approach is justified, because early buyer-supplier interaction in the public procurement process is an under-researched area (Igarashi 2018). A systematic combining approach (Dubois & Gadde 2002) was applied, where the context and boundaries of the phenomenon were built gradually as theory interacted with method and empirical observations.

This study applies information gained from two catering tendering (hereafter, Catering A and Catering B) in a Finnish municipality (hereafter, Municipality) between June 2014 and November 2017. The Municipality decided to outsource all its catering services, and apply so-called market dialogue practices to interact with the potential suppliers prior to the actual tendering (Alhola, Salo, Antikainen & Berg 2016). The Procurement Unit (hereafter: PU) was responsible for organizing the market dialogue, which consisted of a wide range of interactions between buyer and suppliers. Longitudinal data were gathered from both buyer and the suppliers during the pre-tender phase and during the contract implementation. In the pre-tender phase, we observed information sessions and technical dialogues to which the PU invited all the potential suppliers (Table 1). Furthermore, we conducted several in-depth interviews with the PU personnel and the potential suppliers (S1-S7) involved in the pre-tender phase. To study the interaction during the contract implementation, we conducted in-depth interviews with the PU personnel responsible for the implementation, and with the selected suppliers (S1 and S2). Furthermore, throughout the research project, we arranged workshops with the Municipality, and studied the documents created during the tendering.

Table 1: Data collection methods

<i>Case</i>	<i>Method</i>	<i>Duration</i>	<i>Time</i>
Catering A	<i>Observations</i> -1 information session -5 technical dialogues	60 min 90 min each	Sep-Dec 2014
Catering B	<i>Observations</i>		

	-1 information session -7 technical dialogues	60 min 60 min each	Oct-Nov 2015
Catering A Catering B	Municipality and PU personnel <i>Thematic interviews, regular workshops, Skype meetings, e-mails</i>		Jun 2014-Nov 2017
Catering A	Potential service providers -5 <i>interviews</i>	30-60 min	Sep-Oct 2015
Catering B	-7 <i>interviews</i>	30-90 min	Mar-Apr 2016
Catering A	Selected service providers -1 <i>interview</i>	60 min	Nov 26 2017
Catering B	-2 <i>interviews</i>	80/75 min	Nov 2017
<i>Example documents</i>	Initial and final RFQs, contract draft, service definition, service processes, assessment of quality, pre-prepared material for technical dialogues		

We applied content analysis when we studied notes from the observations and the interview transcripts. Our units of analysis are buyer-supplier interaction, and we apply a dyadic view to scrutinize perceptions from the both sides. Following Holmlund and Strandvik (1999), we categorize the buyer's and suppliers' perceptions as positive, neutral, or negative. Examples of negative perceptions are statements and observations related to busy and stressed atmosphere, lack of time for discussion, and poorly planned meetings. Positive perceptions relate, for example, to relaxed atmosphere, and obtaining useful information.

4 Preliminary findings

During the pre-tender phase, the PU organized activities where the PU, together with some of the Municipality's personnel, had the opportunity to interact with the suppliers. These interactions consisted of both face-to-face meetings, written communication, and facility presentations. In the Catering A, the PU organized first an open information sessions to all the interested suppliers to inform about the requirements for the purchased services. In the information session, the potential suppliers had the possibility to sing in face-to-face technical dialogue with the actors involved in the catering services to discuss the tendering more in detail. The content of these dialogues was identical to ensure equal treatment of the potential suppliers. After the dialogues, the PU sent the preliminary Request for Quotation (RFQ) to the potential suppliers for comments. The final action before the tendering was a written procedure where the suppliers had an opportunity to pose clarifying questions if something was unclear in the RFQ. In the Catering B case, the pre-tender phase proceeded in similar way, except for the written procedures (suppliers' comments and clarifying questions), which were replaced by a facility presentation.

Catering A contract was awarded to S2, and Catering B contract was divided between S1 and S2. S2 was the incumbent supplier that before the outsourcing took care of the municipal catering services as a limited company owned by the Municipality. In the contract implementation, which was arranged after the contract award and before the final signature of the contract, the PU, internal customers and the selected supplier organized numerous face-to-face meetings. These negotiations formed an extensive entity of interactions with the purpose to verify that the terms of the contract were applicable in the daily operations. In both the cases, the contract implementation implied a 2-3 month intensive period of weekly negotiations, meetings, e-mail and telephone conversations.

We observed major differences in the buyer's and the potential suppliers' perceptions of interaction related to both information exchange and social exchange. The buyer perceived most of the pre-tender phase interaction as either neutral or as positive, whereas all the potential

suppliers were more critical towards the quality of these interactions. For example, the suppliers perceived that they were not listened, and they did not get enough information on which they could base their tenders. When it comes to social interaction, the suppliers did not find the atmosphere supporting. The PU, on the contrary, was convinced that in general, the atmosphere in the technical dialogues was relaxed and open. Table 2 provides some examples of the buyer's and the potential suppliers' perceptions.

Table 2: Perceptions of information exchange and social exchange during the pre-tender phase.

Buyer's perception	Suppliers' perception
Information exchange	
<i>Neutral:</i> "the information session is more about, that we tell about the forthcoming tendering"	<i>Negative:</i> "I did not get much out of it. It was somewhat messy. There was something wrong. I thought to ask something, but the time was short" (S3)
<i>Positive:</i> "(in the technical dialogues) we obtained good information and also information that we could not even ask, we got kind of bites to the RFQ. So we were pleased with the results"	<i>Negative:</i> "(in the technical dialogues) we said how we thought it would be good to do it, but our suggestions were not acknowledged" (S7)
<i>Positive:</i> "(with the help of the written procedures) it became clearer that the RFQ is such that we will get tenders, because it is important here"	<i>Negative:</i> "it (the written commenting) comes somehow very late, because there are a lot of issues to ask, a lot of contradictions, which need answers before we can proceed without bidding process" (S2)
Social exchange	
<i>Neutral:</i> "no one will discuss there (in the information session) anyway"	<i>Negative:</i> "The big occasion (information session) where they told, there everyone like glared at one another" (S1)
<i>Positive:</i> "we tried there (in a technical dialogue) that it would be kind of relaxed discussion, so that it would give better results, I think it was relaxed and open discussion"	<i>Negative:</i> "we were terribly many there (in the technical dialogue), round a big table... and a terrible timetable, and when one (supplier) was leaving, the others came in" (S6)

The PU and the selected suppliers perceived also the contract implementation interaction differently (see table 3). PU and S1 had no prior experience of working together. The information exchanged during the pre-tender phase had not been sufficient, and there were a number of misunderstandings and missing information in the contract. However, S1 regarded the faults in the contract as a good motivation for intense interaction, and thereby a way to get closer to the buyer.

PU and the S2 had a long relationship history. However, there were changes in the service processes, which caused problems. For example, meals that were earlier portioned in a central kitchen, were to be portioned by the personnel in the hospital unit. The personnel was not aware of the changed practices, and this work was not scheduled in their daily routines. The PU agreed that the changes may not have communicated clearly enough.

Table 3: Perceptions of information exchange and social exchange during the contract implementation phase.

Buyer's perception	Supplier's perception
Information exchange	
<i>Negative:</i> "I have been in situations, where I have had to say that I don't know why this has been put in the contract like this..." (S1 implementation)	<i>Positive:</i> "Those meetings were very fruitful, we always looked at some of the sections and I asked that, what did you mean by this?" (S1)

<i>Negative:</i> “even though we had agreed everything with the Supplier 2, there were a lot of surprises there, they were supposing that thing would run as earlier”	<i>Negative:</i> ”Information exchange may have been better if there had been the same persons” (S2)
Social exchange	
<i>Negative:</i> ”there are a hundred new issues every day... We have even questioned that should we not at all have accepted it (S1) as a supplier”	<i>Positive:</i> “if the deal would have been perfect, we would have implemented it, and we would not know each other this well” (S1)

The main challenge in both the cases was changes in personnel between the pre-tender phase and the contract implementation. Due to these changes, detailed understanding of what had been agreed before the contract award was missing.

5 Discussion and conclusions

The aim of the pre-tender interaction was to create relationships for the future and not only with the winner, but also with those suppliers that would not be awarded the contract this time. A member of the PU put it this way: “*One of the goals is to reach a mutual understanding on different things that concern the potential cooperation and, in general, to reach sort of a partnership even if that company won’t win this time*”. However, the preliminary analysis reveals very little signs of interaction that would have strengthened relationships with the suppliers. Thus, our findings confirm prior findings stating that pre-tender phase interaction is formal, and the competitive setting and the requirements for equal treatment of the suppliers restrict open information exchange and socializing. As long as there is no indication of future cooperation, the suppliers, too, are careful in exchanging information. Short-term interaction prevents trust building, and the suppliers even questioned the necessity of pre-tender phase interaction. With the selected suppliers, the interaction was less formal and required extensive sharing of important service related information, and the creation of personal relationships between the counterparts. One could even claim that formal interaction with no reciprocity can be harmful for existing relationships, as the incumbent supplier puts it: “*Our normal nice discussion, it like died in those situations (technical dialogues)...we meet often (during the contract period) and we have excellent cooperation, we talk openly and then, when we have the tendering, then (in the pre-tender phase) we do not talk at all*” (S2).

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