STUDYING CHANGE AND DYNAMICS IN BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS – THE PROCESSUAL CASE STUDY APPROACH

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Abstract

Organisations cannot avoid coping with change. Through their relationships, organisations are continuously exposed to change and, at the same time, generate change. This paper discusses change and dynamics in business relationships and highlights the processual case study approach, which allows researchers to study and understand change and dynamics more profoundly.

Introduction

Change is an evident part of any intra- and interorganisational relationship. Organisations interact with each other and develop relationships in order to exploit and develop their resources (Ford – Saren 1996). As a consequence of interaction between the parties, relationships evolve over time. In fact, business relationships can never be seen as stable structures. They are structures with inherent dynamic features, characterised by continuous processes making them living structures (Håkansson – Snehota 1995; de Geus 1997). From the management perspective, coping with change becomes a problem when there is virtually no possibility of predicting with any accuracy any future state.

We argue that there is still insufficient understanding of the dynamics behind the relationship and network change, especially in turbulent markets. Through these relationships, organisations are continuously exposed to change and, at the same time, generate change. Coping with change in relationships is perhaps the most critical and definitely the most difficult task for management. The inability to deal with the continuing dynamics of change highlights the need for an alternative framework. The present environment of more or less chaotic change requires a response so different from the traditional managerial approach of diagnose-plan-implement-evaluate. A less prescriptive and more analytical approach would further our understanding of the processes involved and enable mangers to adopt a broader perspective on the problems and practice of managing change.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the problems related to change and dynamics, and to highlight an approach which allows researchers to study and understand the dynamics of change more profoundly. This approach is called the processual case study approach. In this approach business relationships are examined from a processual perspective, which means they are perceived to emerge, evolve and dissolve in a continuous and interactive process

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between companies (Halinen 1998). Our intention is to codify some features of the processual case study approach without implying that there is only single way to carry out the inquiries.

Coping with change and chaos

The competitive environment of organisations is undergoing a fundamental change. There is more change to contend with than ever before. The volume, momentum and complexity of change are accelerating. Continuing global proliferation of technology and managerial knowledge, reorganisation of economic boundaries and the emergence of new players promises an even more turbulent and complex competitive environment (Achrol 1991). High environmental volatility indicates that the environment changes rapidly and often in an unpredictable way. Volatility increases risk and makes predicting what will happen in the future very difficult. In highly volatile environments organisations need to adapt flexible structures and management models. Organisations specialising in high technology are particularly prone to these forms of pressure.

Although not all change contexts are turbulent or chaotic by any means, organisations faced with increasingly dynamic, hypercompetitive and complex environments are being advised to concentrate on their core competencies and to develop relationships with others in order to exploit and develop their resources. Specialisation results in interdependence because, as organisations specialise and focus on core competencies, they give up certain capabilities and then rely on other organisations for resources, thus increasing the complexity of relationships. Thereby most of them do not simply become islands of smaller firms but interfirm networks where companies have legally separate identities but are economically interrelated (Sydow – Windeler 1998). Because of the connectedness of business relationships, the changes propagate throughout the network (Håkansson – Snehota 1995). Changes initiated in one part of the network thus tend gradually to involve other parts of it. The amount of change going on in business relationships is at least as striking as their structural stability or continuity.

Håkansson and Snehota (1995) see the management of business relationships as essential, since the role, development, and performance of companies will be further and further explained by their ability to develop relationships. Business relationships tend to vary tremendously between each other, partially due the different requirements, uncertainties and abilities of the companies, and are not simply determined a priori but result from enactment. Business relationships change and evolve over time. Their content, strength and nature are changing through interaction between organisations. Relationships are developed through interaction processes in which parties learn about each other, establish different kind of social and structural bonds, and tend to make some investments[295] in relationship development. Although stability and change seem to be contradictory features in business networks they coexist.

Managing business relationships is not simply a linear process. Instead, it is about coping with different circumstances with varying aims, expectations and ways of dealing with each other, some of which will be constructive and some of which will only damage the relationship. Whether people perceive change as positive or negative depends not only on the

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[295] Turnbull et al. (1996) argue that such investments are made only if the outcome for the relationship is perceived to be satisfactory, either now or potentially in the future. Investments are made not only to intensify the relationship and to demonstrate the interest that the partner has in developing a strong relationship but also with faith that the other partner will reciprocate.

actual outcomes of the change but also on the degree they believe they exert in the situation. We seem to be more comfortable with change when our ability and willingness to change can help determine the outcome of events. Changes initiated for whatever reason affect parties and cause reactions and counter-reactions. Parties will either promote or absorb change. Either case requires that companies understand the dynamics not only in the single relationships but also in the network as a whole, since any action will have both external (outer context level) and internal (inner context level) impacts. Studying dynamics of change clearly requires the analysis of contextually embedded practices, how relationships and networks evolve and change over time. The precise choices about what parts and how many levels of context to bring into the study are likely to be shaped by the content of the research problem and the constraints of the study.

Process of change

Processes of change are both constrained by contexts and shape contexts, either in the direction of preserving or altering them. Processes of change can be either slow and gradual or swifter and more radical, although gradual changes are more common but less visible (Hertz 1996). There also remains the question of how much change is actually occurring. Generally the change process can be divided into manageable portions (figure 1), which are conception of a need to change, process of transition and operation of new practices (desired state).
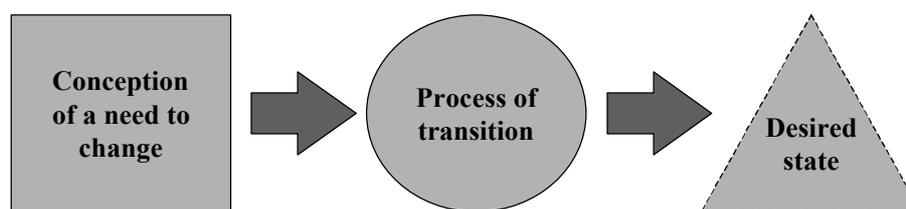
Figure 1. Stages of change process

In particular, the conception of a need to change is interesting since organisations seem to have two different strategies, which are either reactive response to external or internal pressures or proactive initiated change through a belief in the need for change to meet future competitive demands. This discussion turns us to the triggers of change that are factors which may conspire to initiate change both internally and externally, regardless of whether these are seen as needs, opportunities or threats. The explosion of knowledge, continuing globalisation, changing government legislation and social expectations, technological innovations and discontinuities in previously predictable patterns of change create both threats and opportunities for organisations. Technological obsolescence and the need to introduce new technology represent factors that are especially relevant to organisations. Factors often overlap and a change in one will often require change in another. Moreover, internal and external triggers to change are often interdependent. For example, a push for a change in technology may result from competitive pressure. Once a need for change has been identified, the complex, often non-linear and 'black box', process of managing the transition commences. The final timeframe is taken to refer to the period when, following the implementation of change, new desired practices begin to emerge.

Processual research – Catching the dynamics

Whilst there is a growing recognition of the need to examine the dynamic process of change, the intention is not to model the pathways that environmental change or disturbance may take, but, rather, to develop a framework for understanding the process and context of change. Critical are not just the processes but also the underlying logic that gives the meaning and significance to these processes. Processual research requires interpretation of patterns in events, especially when they occur in socially meaningful time cycles, and the logic which may explain how and why these patterns occur in particular chronological sequences (Pettigrew 1990). While some of these processes are linear, directional, cumulative and perhaps irreversible, the others are more non-linear, radical and transformational (Sztompka 1993). The processual approach challenges the rational, linear theories of planning and change where actions have been seen as ordered and sequenced in order to achieve rationally declared ends and where actors behave mechanistically and altruistically in the pursuit of goals (Pettigrew 1997). Instead, processual research explores often complex, haphazard and contradictory ways in which the phenomenon emerges and aims to construct a model that allows for an appreciation of conflicting rational models, objectives and behaviours.

While in some studies the interest is only in the results of the process, not the process itself describing how things change over time, the difference in processual research is that it is capable of generating sound knowledge, not only of processes and outcomes but also of why and how outcomes are differentially shaped by processes (Van de Ven 1992; Pettigrew 1997). The focus in processual research is on the temporal and interconnected nature of change, and the influence of subjective attitudes and perceptions and outcomes of change. The ontological assumptions of social reality guiding the processual research include an explicit recognition that change is multifaceted and that social reality is a dynamic process (Sztompka 1991). Social process is constructed and created by human agents (individual or collective) through their actions. Action occurs in the context of encountered structures, which it shapes in turn, resulting in the dual quality of structures and actors (Giddens 1979). The interchange of action and structure occurs in time and is cumulative, so that the legacy of the past is always shaping the emerging future. Thus any theoretically sound and practically useful processual research should explore the context, content and process of change and dynamics together with their interconnections through time (Pettigrew 1990).

In marketing theories the widely-used life-cycle theory offers a simple, but quite clearly insufficient, model for understanding these phenomena. With turbulent markets and the dynamic nature of change in today's business world, it no longer makes sense to implement predetermined approaches for 'freezing' changed behaviours. Halinen (1998) argues that existing process theories could be used more broadly and purposefully to advance theory development in interorganisational research settings. Longitudinal methodology, which allows the present to be explored in relation to the past and the emerging future, would be essential to build better models of dynamic phenomena. This methodological perspective would undoubtedly offer interesting insights into the dynamics and would also serve the managerial needs for comprehensive conceptual models.

Case study design – Search for holistic explanations

With the growth in academic and managerial interest, and the publication of case studies, the value of longitudinal, contextual approaches to understanding the dynamics of change is gaining increasing recognition. Case study is a commonly used strategy in business and

management research since it allows for a processual, contextual and longitudinal analysis of the various actions and meanings which take place within these settings (Yin 1991; Hartley 1994). Case study searches for rather holistic explanations of the phenomenon and, due the flexibility in design and open-ended nature in data generating that allows the case to be examined in considerable depth, has an important function in building theory (Eisenhardt 1989; Gummesson 2000).

A case study allows the investigator to concentrate on specific instances in an attempt to identify detailed interactive processes which may be crucial, but which might be transparent to the large-scale survey. The case study approach seems to be appropriate for understanding the dynamics in settings where the phenomenon under scrutiny is embedded in complex relationships with its context, and the existing body of knowledge might be insufficient (Bonoma 1985; Dubois – Gadde 1999). In business and management studies it is essential to understand the context within which the research is being conducted by considering social and cultural factors that impinge on the research problem. In case studies no attempt is made to isolate the phenomenon from its context but the phenomenon is of interest precisely because of its relation to its context (Johnston et al. 1999). The fact that learning from a particular case is conditioned by the environmental context should be considered as a strength rather than a weakness.

However, the fact that a certain method is considered appropriate does not automatically guarantee high-quality research (Easton 1998). Case studies are often criticised for not discussing the method in enough detail and for the problems in understanding the method because of lacking standards. However, there is nothing about a method per se which makes it weak or strong. These problems are no different from other research strategies but in case study research they have been less frequently documented and addressed. The potential strength of any approach depends on how the researcher attends to the potential weaknesses of the method (Johnston et al. 1999). Thus a clear research design should established in order to clarify how the research was carried out, how the data was collected, how theory and empirical data were linked, and how the conclusions were reached. The researcher should also provide readers with information about what is being studied and why the research is being carried out. The study can only be evaluated accurately if its procedures are sufficiently explicitly described so that readers can assess their appropriateness (Strauss – Corbin 1990). If properly conducted, a case study can provide a deeper understanding, a fuller contextual sense of the phenomenon and an explicit provocation toward theory building (Bonoma 1985).

Research process – A voyage of discovery

Research process is sometimes described as a voyage of discovery during which the researcher learns as much about research methodologies as about the subject and phenomenon being researched, and may even learn something of him or herself. Unfortunately, there are still few guidelines available to researchers who are interested in studying the processes of change. As a consequence, researchers undertaking processual studies have been developing their own methods through trial and error. The research process itself can be seen as a constant chain of choices, where selection of a meaningful alternative always happens under uncertainty and constraints. The best methodological approach can never truly be determined beforehand since prior determination of all potential advantages and limitations is more or less impossible. The researcher is, however, obligated to discuss the reasons behind these choices and the potential advantages and limitations related to them,

how the choices might have affected the conclusions, and any other design issues that are relevant for interpreting and understanding the research results.

In processual case studies the real creative process of research takes place in a constantly iterating cycle of deduction and induction (Pettigrew 1997). In this interactive process, where the researcher is constantly going back and forth from one type of research activity to another, the preliminary analytical framework will be affected by what is discovered during the data generation and interpretation (Coffey – Atkinsson 1996; Dubois – Gadde 1999). This kind of process sounds more convincing than 'pure induction' since few researchers enter the field with an empty head waiting to be filled with evidence. On the other hand, tightly and predetermined conceptual frameworks may restrict the researcher and impose a gap between the perspectives of the researcher and the persons from the reality under scrutiny (Miles – Huberman 1994). In theory development the researcher should not be unnecessarily constrained by having to adhere to previously developed theory. On the other hand, too loose framework might lead to indiscriminate data collection and data overload. Thus it is important to enter into research settings with some theoretical background (Strauss – Corbin 1990). However, there is no need to review all of the literature beforehand and usually the researcher is not even able to identify all the relevant literature since the empirical fieldwork parallels the theoretical conceptualisation (Dubois – Gadde 1999). Openness to different possibilities is an intellectual requirement for the researcher.

Case selection – The essential decision
Case selection is one of the most essential decisions since the strength of a case study is very much dependent on the criteria set for the selection of concrete cases. When the essential characteristics of the cases are known, it is possible to define the limits and potential for generalising the findings more accurately (cf. Eisenhardt 1989). In case selection the researcher faces the problem of defining the unit of analysis and the boundaries of the case. Determining the unit and boundaries seems to be a substantial problem, especially in network studies where everything seems to be related and even affecting everything. Therefore, the purpose of the study and the development of the analytical framework should always direct the unit definition and expansion of the case boundary. Whatever the boundaries of the case and the unit of analysis (e.g., a project, a stream of activity, a relationship or a network), they have to be explicitly defined and contextualised (Pettigrew 1997).

In order to select a case, the researcher should establish a rationale for purposeful sampling strategy, and justify the sampling procedures and decisions accordingly, so that readers have the appropriate context for judging the sample (Yin 1991; Creswell 1998). In our view the logic of purposeful sampling should be in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth (see e.g., Patton 1990), since they have an ability to provide a great deal of knowledge about issues of central importance to the research. Random or representative sampling is not usually preferred because the researcher's major concern is not to generalise the findings of the study to a broad population or universe but to maximise the discovery of patterns and problems that occur in the particular context under study (Erlandson et al. 1993). In addition, Gummesson (2000) maintains that one of the researcher's biggest challenges is access to empirical reality. Poor access and trust might even threaten the whole research process.

In case studies an increased number of cases has sometimes been seen as an increase in explanatory power. However, researching a greater number of cases with the same resources usually means more breadth but less depth (Easton 1998). Although multiple-case studies can

provide conditions for testing the developed theory, Wolcott (1994) speaks for single-case studies and criticises multiple-case studies by arguing that they often diminish the total attention that can be devoted to individual cases, forsaking the opportunity for a thorough study. This argument seems to be something easy to agree with. While comparisons of cases[296] in multiple-case studies might lead to the emergence of new theory in the form of general patterns, comparisons in single-case studies are made between existing literature and the researcher's own experience, and these comparisons might lead to the emergence of more creative theory.

Generating insights – The perspective business

Pettigrew (1990) argues that research is a social process, not just a technical task. Researchers are in the perspective business, which means that the researcher has the privilege and benefit of listening to all sides of a drama. With that privilege comes the scientific and ethical responsibility to present all significant views before offering the research's perspective. The interplay between multiple perspectives allows gaining a more comprehensive understanding of a complex phenomenon, since any single perspective would invariably offer only a partial account (Van de Ven – Poole 1995). Working out the relationships between such seemingly divergent views involves enormous work but might provide opportunities to develop new theory that has stronger and broader explanatory power.

While there are various methodological alternatives for studying the dynamics of change, we tend to concentrate here on longitudinal studies using retrospective and real-time methodology. Both retrospective and real-time studies have their strengths and weaknesses. Retrospective study makes possible the identification of continuities, different development periods and cycles (Halinen – Törnroos 1995). In retrospective studies there is, however, a danger of rationalising different occurrences and re-interpretations. In real-time studies the research becomes involved in process, which allows to examine events more closely. Again there is a danger in real-time studies since this methodology tends to draw attention to the complexity of events and to minor changes. The combination of the two methodologies allows the major biases of each approach to be overcome (Halinen 1998).

One of the great advantages of data collection in a case study approach is the possibility of making use of many multiple sources of evidence (Yin 1991). Although the use of multiple sources of evidence can sometimes be problematic due the contradictions in the data, it also allows evaluation ofthe results from different perspectives, which can increase understanding of the phenomenon. In processual case studies there are three essential approaches to generate insights from different perspectives that will be discussed further. Each of these approaches has advantages and limitations, and calls for slightly different skills and methodological procedures. In our view use of multiple sources is highly recommended in processual studies since obtaining evidence on managerial action is sometimes difficult and organisations may have contradictory expectations for the research.

The first approach to generate insights is the interviews. Through the interviews the researcher can focus directly on the topic and retrieve perceived causal inferences. The interviews have a special ability to highlight occasions where the feeling and evocation is high and the factual detail low. In processual case studies the interviews can be used to collect data on what individuals identify as being a particularly memorable moment or

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[296] In multiple-case studies each case should be selected to complement others, so that each case would provide either similar or contrasting results but for predictable reasons (Johnston et al. 1999).

incident (Dawson 1997). These events can then be recounted and the respondents' actions, motives and evaluations recorded. A major concern with this method relates to recall and the tendency for individuals to rationalise past action. Sometimes, the informants might also just provide some socially acceptable answers or something they think that the interviewer might want to hear (Johnston et al. 1999).

While interviews are usually the best way to obtain descriptions and interpretations of others, the second approach, the observation, provides access to processes and can confront the researcher with discrepancies between what people have said in interviews and casual conversations and what they actually do. The combination of observation with interviews enables the cross-validation of data and the integration of contextual and temporal observations with the more perceptional and attitudinal data gathered from interviews (Whyte 1991). Dawson (1997) argues that the evidently most effective way of revealing tacit knowledge is through careful and patient observation and interviewing. The major problems in observation have to do with the potential biases produced (Johnston et al. 1999).

The third approach, the documentary evidence, can provide a useful reference source for constructing a chronology of key events, since documents can provide more precise and consistent longitudinal data and can be obtained unobtrusively (Dawson 1997). Documentary evidence can also be considered to be more objective since it is generated outside the influence of the study (Johnston et al. 1999). Although documentary evidence can be used to add empirical depth and to enable verification of theoretical explanations based on other data sources, access to documentary evidence can sometimes be quite difficult to gain or might even be deliberately blocked. The use of documentary evidence must also be closely scrutinised since much of documentary evidence has been edited to reflect a desired image (Johnston et al. 1999).

Interpreting data – Generating theoretical contributions

Researchers are always looking for simple theories and concepts that explain a lot of things but profound understanding and theoretical contributions do not happen by chance. There has to be a drive, an urge and a motivation to create understanding. In case studies generating and interpreting data is, to a great extent, an overlapping process (Eisenhardt 1989). Interpreting data is all about bringing order, structure and meaning to the collected empirical material. The purpose of interpretation is to understand the higher abstraction level phenomena, which may appear in various concrete forms (Alasuutari 1995). Empirical findings should, however, never be treated as results as such. Instead, they should be treated as clues, which should then be interpreted in order to get behind these findings. The interpretation process is a messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative, fascinating and iterative process resulting in either the depth and strength of explanation growing or the explanation being rejected (Marshall – Rossman 1989). In order to go beyond the substantial level the researcher has to speculate about the data in order to generate ideas, link ideas with those of others and move conceptually from the research setting to a more general level of analytic thought (Coffey – Atkinsson 1996).

According to Whetten (1989), theoretical contributions can be made in several ways: by adding or subtracting concepts from an existing model; by borrowing perspectives from some other field in order to challenge the underlying rationales supporting accepted theories; or by applying an old model in a new settings. Discussing both conflicting and supporting findings is important not only for validity reasons but is also a good vehicle for continuing the development of the emergent theory. If the evidence is found conflicting, the evidence should

be evaluated and its impact must be assessed (Johnston et al. 1999). Sometimes, the evidence might represent a case-specific problem that can be easily rationalised as such. There are also situations when the researcher is not able to find evidence in the data due insufficient data or unrecognised patterns. The iterative research process, however, offers the researcher an opportunity to turn to deductive thinking and hypothesise potential alternatives, and then go back to look for supporting evidence. We see a dialectical relationship between data and theory that reinforce each other. Both are required to make any real scientific progress.

Case studies are often criticised for lack of generalizability (Yin 1991). In case studies the empirical reality is often studied in terms of a few research objects, since the purpose of these studies is not to make statistical generalisations but to promote profound understanding and analytical generalisation (see e.g., Pihlanto 1994). Social phenomena are far too often too variable and context-bound to permit any significant statistical generalisations (Bonoma 1985). Detailed investigation of the case and context can reveal aspects which can be proposed as general or as peculiar to the specific case. Profound understanding of the case helps to specify the conditions under which certain aspects of the phenomenon can be expected to occur. In studies aiming at developing a theory credibility of the theory should be won by integration, relevance and workability, not by illustrations used as if they were proofs (Yin 1991). After all, the purpose of processual case studies is not to create uniform theoretical laws but, rather, conceptual tools to be combined with managerial wisdom.

While there seems to be ongoing debate about reliability in case studies. Especially in the form of replicability, which can be problematic in processual studies. The validity of case studies should be understood as a fit between theory and reality (Gummesson 2000). In case studies validity can be considered as a continuous process which is integrated with theory and requires the researcher to continuously assess his/her assumptions, revise results, retest theories and reappraise the given limitations that have been set for the study. A carefully worded report of the research design and procedures can improve the validity of the research process and show how the research data was generated and how the researcher was able to obtain the conclusions. In this way the reader can evaluate what factors might have affected the conclusions and how reliable the conclusions are (Alasuutari 1995). The validity of the research results can be enhanced further by different methodological approaches producing convergent findings about the same empirical domain. Assumption behind the triangulation rests on the premise that the weaknesses of one method can be strengthened by the counterbalancing strength of another (Jick 1979; Cunningham 1997). Triangulation may be used not only to examine the same phenomenon from multiple perspectives or with different methods but also to enrich our understanding by allowing for new or deeper dimensions to employ.

Conclusions

One of the most important lessons that can be learned from the processual approach is that change is mostly a non-linear dynamic process which should not be characterised simply as a rational series of decision-making activities and events. The processual approach challenges the rational, linear theories of planning and change and, instead, tries to explore the often complex, haphazard and contradictory ways in which the phenomenon emerges, and aims to construct a model that allows for an appreciation of conflicting rational models, objectives and behaviours.

Coping with change constitutes a major challenge for management. There is nothing more difficult to handle, more doubtful of success and more dangerous to carry through than change. Due to specialisation and interdependence, organisations are continuously exposed to change through their relationships and, at same time, generate change. Change should not be defined as a one-off process but seen as a dynamic and ongoing process composed of various critical events and activities that are likely to influence both present and future. Apart from its analytical and explanatory value in particular cases, the processual case study approach sensitises us to the fact that change is indeed a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Although longitudinal in-depth case studies provide a robust methodology for cross-referencing and checking data validity and furthering our knowledge of change and dynamics, the major weakness of this approach stems from the overloading messiness and complexity of a multilevel analysis.

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