Interactions, Relationships and Networks – Past, Present and Future

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Abstract
This paper aims to take a broad overview of business-to-business marketing and critically evaluate the problems and limitations of the research that has been conducted in the past 15-20 years. Based on this analysis a research agenda is identified which the authors believe should further develop knowledge in respect of inter-organizational interaction, relationships and networks.

The Problems and Limitations in Business to Business Marketing
The research of the IMP group into business-to-business (B2B) marketing has been an ongoing, evolutionary process over the last two decades. The initial IMP research group was borne out of a mutual dissatisfaction with the traditional, industrial marketing literature of the 1970's. The group challenged the traditional marketing hypotheses, especially those relating to market characteristics and dynamics, and the tradition of perceiving transactions between companies as discrete and independent (Hakansson 1982). A whole new perception of B2B marketing was born whereby the focus was on the business exchange between companies as an interaction between equally active economic entities, in which information and social exchange occur as well as financial and product/service exchange. They also recognised that economic interdependence between companies would lead to the development of long term relationships (Valla and Salle 1997). These became key concepts in B2B marketing.

Whilst the initial research concentrated on dyadic relationships (Cunningham and Turnbull 1982), subsequent work examined the wider context of relationships (Turnbull, Ford and Cunningham 1996). This research aimed to identify and analyse the network of relationships that would constitute the global exchange system (Easton 1992). This enabled a greater understanding of the focal relationships and the behaviour of the actors within the wider network. Research into networks has led to the development of concepts such as network structure, network dynamics and network position (Hakansson and Snehota 1990). However, despite the vast amount

of research in B2B marketing and the development and evolution of theories and models over the years (as demonstrated in the proceedings of the annual IMP conference since 1984), various criticisms of work in this area have arisen, concerning limitations and problems of both theory and practice.

Ford (1998) highlighted three major limitations of the work,

1. Certain theoretical issues have been avoided which obviously limits the theoretical development. The nature and dynamics of network influence and network change and the implications for strategy of a network view of the world have been omitted. The links between what happens within an organisation and what happens outside it, have not been sufficiently considered. As a result, the reality of what is happening in the business environment and how relationships are changing has not been investigated.

2. There are significant problems regarding the definition and validation of B2B terms and methodology. To date, the majority of the research has been exploratory which has enabled researchers to describe a number of phenomenon, but it is debatable as to their adequacy in actually explaining them. There is now a need for research to validate and/or modify.

   There are problems with the loose use of terms. There are no standard definitions of the various elements/concepts that are used throughout B2B marketing research. For commonly used terms such as trust and commitment there are an abundance of definitions which have varying degrees of similarity. Different terms are sometimes used to describe the same thing. For example in network theory, different authors use the term actor in various ways; it is used to describe the interacting party, the company and in the interaction approach it is used to describe the individual. There are also problems concerning the measurement of these concepts. The scales used to capture these items vary between studies in two ways, the phrasing of the items used and the number of items constituting the scales. The scales are often not published in full or they are only partially published. Clear definition is essential to ensure academics in this important area of marketing area are using a common language. Standard measurements for various concepts and terms would enable research to develop in a more unified manner.

   The network paradigm has different measurement problems, which have significantly increased the complexity of carrying out empirical research. Valla and Salle (1997) stated that in all the business exchange cases studied in the IMP_{II} project, over fifty actors were identified in each case. This prevented comprehensive analysis of the characteristics of each dyadic relationship within the network and their influence on the focal relationship. Research into the complexity of networks is restricted by time and resources.

3. There has been considerable discussion about the relevance of B2B research to managers, particularly at the 15th and 16th IMP conferences. Questions have been asked as to how in touch academics are with the business world; do they, or even should they, relate to the wider realities of business markets and management practice?

The Way Forward – Overcoming the Problems and Limitations of the Past

We believe that there are essentially three issues that need to be addressed to enable further progress to be made in this area.

1. **Revisiting Past Research** - After two decades of research, a substantial amount of work has been produced. Despite the work that has been carried out, there are areas where a limited amount of research has been done. It is now time to revisit and explore previously neglected issues in order to deal with challenging research questions. The literature covers a wide spectrum of topics, including relationship development, the functions of relationships and the management of relationships. The driving forces for success in relationships such as trust, commitment and adaptations have been studied quite extensively (Morgan and Hunt 1994, Young and Wilkinson 1997, Wetzels, de Ruyter and van Birgelen 1998, Brennan and Turnbull 1998). In addition to the study of dyadic relationships, more recently networks of relationships have been analysed (Möller, Pasanen and Rajala 2000). However, these areas have been subject to considerable investigation, and need much further conceptualisation (Ford and Ritter 1999). Of particular importance is the need to "revisit" the interaction approach to examine how the major changes in the business environment of the last 15-20 years have impacted on relationship and network management. For example the developments in information technology and e-commerce, globalisation of markets and changing customer expectations (Leek, Turnbull and Naudé 1999).

2. **Is Developing a New Paradigm Necessary?** With the evolution of research in B2B marketing, a natural progression would be the development of a new paradigm which would either be totally new or new in that it builds upon and encompasses past research. Turnbull and Valla (1986), Valla and Salle (1997) and Möller (1999) have all put forward new paradigms. Turnbull and Valla (1986) developed the concept of interactive strategic planning which was the first attempt at integrating the macro market (market segments) and micro markets (individual customer perspectives). The aim of the model was to identify the components of the marketing strategy which allow the company to interact with customers in the market place, to solve customers' problems and respond to specific customer needs. The investment in customer relationships would enable the supplier to establish a position in the marketplace consolidating old relationships and initiating new ones so over time a complex network of relationships would develop.

   Valla and Salle (1997) suggested that it would be logical to put together a wider conceptual framework, "The Total Business to Business Exchange System", which would incorporate the interaction approach and the network approach. The value in a broad model would be that it would allow the bulk of the research findings to be put into an integrated framework. This approach would also clarify the links between constraints and variables that have not been thoroughly investigated as yet, such as the choice between direct selling and intermediaries due to EDI/WWW innovations.

   Möller (1999) has suggested the "Network Capability Framework". Möller's approach is similar to Valla and Salle's (1997) in that he also attempts to develop

a framework which will provide a comprehensive view of business networks and relationships from the managerial perspective. He argues that this demonstrates how different research traditions contribute to the managerial domains identified and thereby we can develop a research agenda focussed on the areas that require further investigation. The "Network Capability Framework" examines inter-organisational marketing on four levels, exchange relationships, portfolios of relationships, firms in networks and industries as networks.

Level One: Industries as Networks – This entails understanding networks how they evolve and how they are structured with the aim of understanding how networks can be managed.

Level Two: Firms in Networks – The second level in the framework is concerned with how the firm relates to its environment. What roles and positions does a firm create, how does it maintain and defend them? How does a firm influence the network? The focal net is the central construct that is used to describe the interrelated group of actors pursuing a joint strategy within a network.

Level Three: Portfolios of Relationships – Firms are centres of resources and *activities.* Firms need to manage their relationships with other companies in an integrated, co-ordinated manner taking into account their own internal resources.

Level Four: Exchange Relationships – The capability of a firm to create, manage and conclude important relationships is vital. The exchange relationships are the individual customer/supplier relationships and form the basic unit of analysis in a network approach to business marketing.

These are not four separate domains, and the issues, research and managerial challenges in each domain are highly inter-related. It is not a general model but more of a research framework with which researchers can position their research.

3. **Striving for greater managerial relevance** – There has been some discussion at the 15th and 16th IMP conferences (Brennan and Turnbull 1999, Brennan and Turnbull 2000, Easton 2000) regarding the managerial relevance of research in the B2B marketing area, and a number of questions have been raised. Was the IMP research relevant in the past, is it relevant now or has its relevance disappeared? Past research in this area has been accused of being merely a description of reality, the relevance of which has faded as changes in the business environment have occurred (Easton 2000). This accusation has lead to the suggestion that research has failed to identify the causal mechanisms in business relationships. This criticism is not, of course, just limited to B2B marketing; there are a number of general theories in marketing e.g. OBB models such as Sheth's model (1973) encompass a wide variety of variables and are more descriptive than prescriptive. However, at the opposite end of the scale there are numerous journal papers which contain mathematical or statistical data describing specific situations which are concerned with optimising prescriptions e.g. optimum allocation of a budget providing the constraints and cost functions are linear. The specific conditions described in these papers are rarely met in practice (Easton 2000). The relevance of the research may not be the real problem; the perceived lack of relevance may be the failure of researchers to transfer knowledge from academia to industry.

Given the substantial body of research that is now extant, there should be the knowledge to create tools which could readily be used in industry but a lack of interest by both parties may have prevented this – a case of relevance lost. Alternatively poor communication may prevent the two parties from co-operating

and lead to the view that academics do not understand the realities of being a marketing manager or a buyer and therefore they are unable to prescribe specifically the actions that often need to be performed. Academics may be reluctant to offer help to industry for fear that the help they do offer may be perceived as irrelevant.

Is the irrelevance of research in B2B marketing widely perceived in academia? Brennan and Turnbull (2000) investigated the factors effecting academics' perceptions of the relevance of research in B2B marketing. The sample of academics perceived their own research to be of greater relevance than the research of the general B2B academic community. Respondents with no non-academic experience were more pessimistic about the relevance of the research than respondents with non-academic experience. Interestingly, academics with consulting experience were more pessimistic about the relevance of research than academics without consulting experience. As academic seniority increases, perceived relevance of both research in general and their own research decreases. These results paint a somewhat gloomy picture but quite an interesting one, i.e. cynical professors who have done consulting, think everyone else's work is irrelevant but theirs. Of course academics will have different perspectives on whether their work should in fact be applicable to real world managers or whether their aim is to do pure research. It would be interesting to investigate managers' perceptions of how relevant academic research is to them, and how they deal with their business relationships, whether they use any academic theory and what kind of input they would appreciate from academics.

Relevance in research of course need not be an immediate achievement or indeed an objective at all. The development of theory, the establishment of definitions and measurements may eventually lead to a state where the gradual accumulation of knowledge enables academics to become more practitioner oriented. Watson and Crick for example in discovering the structure of DNA in 1961 may not have had any idea that it would lead to the development of DNA fingerprinting by Alec Jefferies in 1984 or have realised how useful that procedure would become. There are very many other examples of how theoretical development leads to practical application over time. Many people believe that the "raison d'etre" of academics is to pursue knowledge for its own sake without necessarily trying to define "practical" outcomes. There is of course, an equally strong tradition, particularly in engineering and medicine, where the major stimulus for research derives from the need for application.

Essentially therefore, there are three ways of taking research in B2B marketing forward, revisiting past research and building upon what has already been achieved, developing new paradigms and/or increasing the managerial relevance.

Revisiting Past Research – Re-examining Not Redoing
As previously noted, the initial IMP research performed in the late 1970's was carried out in a very different environment to the one in which business is being carried out in the new millennium. Interactions and relationships evolved out of that environment, network theory in the B2B context did not even exist. An important question then is the degree to which the current environment would produce a different picture of

interactions, relationships and networks. There are two types of change that have affected business interactions, internal and external changes (See Figure 1).
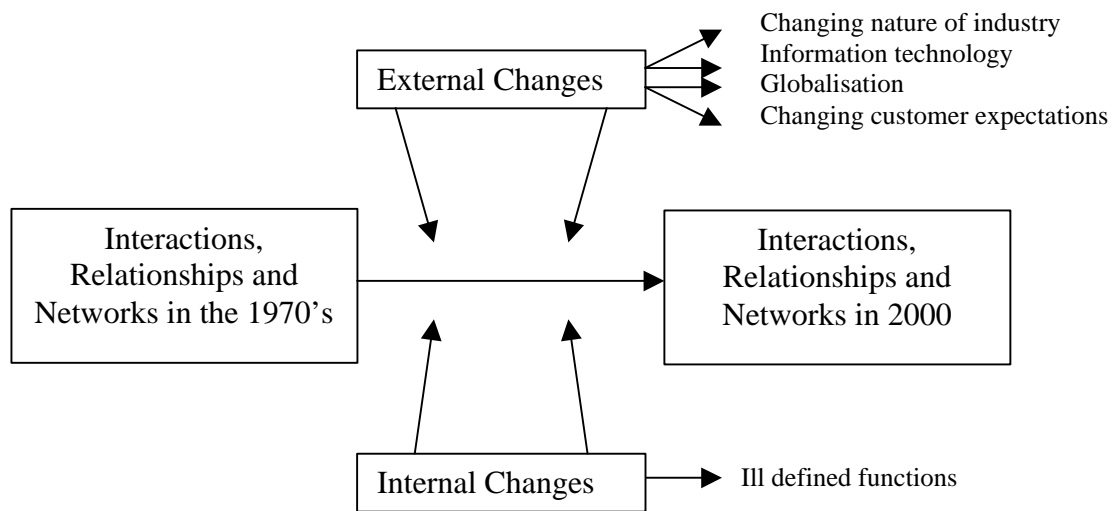

Figure 1: The external and internal changes, which have occurred since the 1970's affecting business relationships in 2000.

External changes – A number of external changes have occurred since the 1970's which will have impacted on current business relationships (See Figure 1). These include *the changing nature of industry, the developments in information technology, globalisation, and changing customer expectations,* each of which are examined in more depth below.

a) The Changing Nature of Industry - The nature and structure of industry in the developed economies has changed substantially. In the early seventies the business world was considerably different to today's business world, and manufacturing still played a major role in most economies. The last twenty years has seen a decline in manufacturing and huge growth in the services sector.

As the demand for technological innovation and economic efficiency has increased the complexity of relationships has grown. In particular, we have seen the emergence of single sourcing and supply chain management, which have impacted hugely on how relationships are managed (see, for example, Magretta, 1998). In addition, instead of straightforward buyer-seller relationships, there are strategies such as joint ventures, strategic alliances and supply chain management which have changed the nature of interactions and relationships.

b) The Effect of Information Technology - Since the early seventies there has been a huge explosion in the growth and application of information technology. At the organisational level, IT has led to the loss of jobs, i.e. people have been replaced by machinery, and it has also created jobs e.g. people are required to maintain and keep computer systems running. In addition, it has also altered the nature of many jobs e.g. stocktaking and most administrative tasks are carried out using a computer. IT has probably affected all organisational departments. It has also affected relationships in

that it has facilitated both an increase in disintermediation and, used innovatively, has led to new forms of relationships becoming possible (Naudé and Holland, 1996). In addition, the increase in manufacturing resource planning (MRP)/enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems as well as in Interorganisational Information Systems are affecting inter-company relationships in a fundamental way.

Computers have lead to the creation of the Internet, a new market place for selling and buying products worldwide. In 2001, e-commerce in the UK is estimated to be worth £27,587m, £24,087 of this was business consumption and £3,500 was for home consumption. In 2005 it is forecast that e-commerce in the UK will be worth £291,667mn, with £274,167mn of this being business to business and £17,500 for consumer (Key Note 2000). The Internet has the potential to be a positive influence on company's marketing actions and their interactions with customers and suppliers.

Modern technology has increased the number of methods of communication available. In addition to telephones and faxes, there are e-mail, the Internet and audio and video conferencing. The use of these new methods of communication may change the interaction process. These methods all have a number of advantages, for example they have increased the speed of communication and they are increasingly available in companies around the world. At present IT is enhancing communication between companies. However, as its use increases in the future, the interaction between companies may become de-personalised to a certain extent, which will have an adverse impact on the interaction approach, the atmosphere of a relationship and the ease of managing relationships (Leek, Turnbull, Naudé forthcoming).

c) The Effect of Globalisation – The continuing increase in world trade, the increase in effective communication through IT such as the Internet and satellite TV, along with people's greater experience of foreign travel due to reduced prices, has effectively led to globalisation. People have learned about products available in different countries, which has led to changing product demand. This demand has been met in various ways. Companies have set up their branches in foreign countries, franchised their company or exported their product, so unfamiliar parties have been brought together by globalisation. It is anticipated that there has been an increase in the contact between foreign and domestic companies which has probably led to an increase in the awareness of problems arising from the interactions between two cultures. Different values, work ethics, religion and other culturally defined forces significantly influence how organisations conduct business. The interactions and atmosphere between companies will be affected by the political, social and economic environment of not only each party's country but by other countries e.g. UK organisations are affected by European legislation as well as UK legislation.

d) Changing Customers' Expectations - A combination of globalisation along with the huge improvements in what can be achieved using technology in terms of both processes and the final product, has effected consumers' expectations and demands. It is generally more economically sound to retain current customers rather than attempt to win new ones, and therefore suppliers may find themselves having to meet with the greater expectations of their current customers. The importance of retaining customers may have led over the years to increasingly complex interactions between the companies to prevent the customer from easily changing supplier.

Internal Changes – Within companies the main internal change that has occurred is the blurring of boundaries between various functions. In the past, companies had clearly identifiable functions such as "sales", "purchasing" and "new product development" but the boundaries between these and other functions has reduced or disappeared over the years. People from various departments have become involved in the buying and selling processes e.g. people from Research and Development will use their technical knowledge to sell the advantages of their product to potential buyers, people using the product will specify their requirements to the people doing the purchasing etc. The number of people from each party involved in the interaction process has increased which has made the interaction process and atmosphere in the relationship potentially more complex. People from different departments may have different agendas, personalities and past experiences so there is greater potential for disagreement that will adversely effect the interaction processes, atmosphere and thereby the whole relationship. These influences will have an impact on relationships, interactions and networks in the new millennium.

These external and internal changes which have occurred since the 1970's will have affected how business is carried out in the new millennium which now leads to two main questions (see Figure 2),
- what are the impacts of the external and internal changes on B2B relationships ?
- what are the impacts of the external and internal changes on managers, and how do they manage these new relationships?
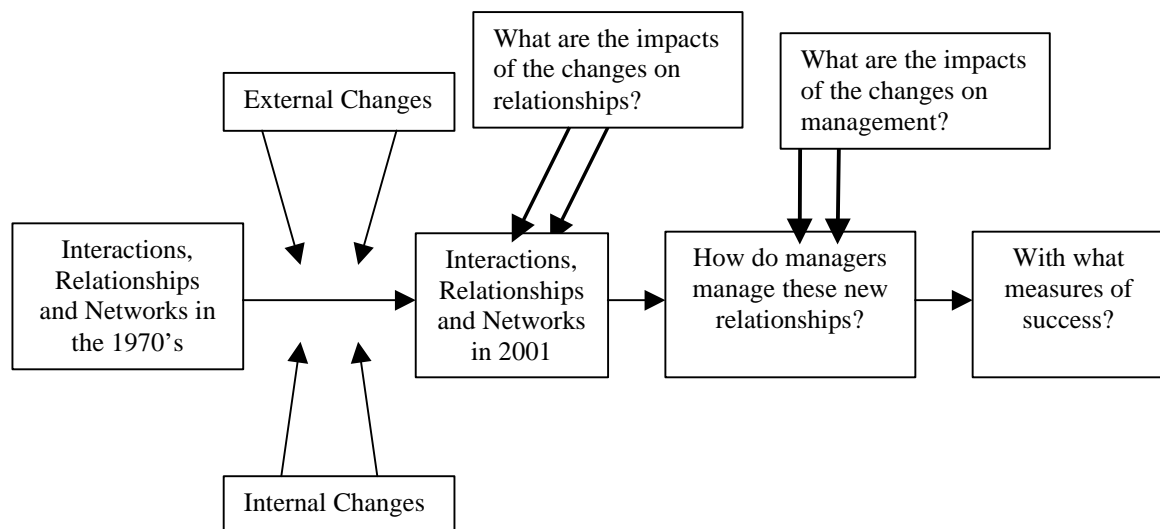
Figure 2: The impact of the external and internal changes which have occurred since the 1970's.

The Impact of Changes on Interactions, Relationships and Networks - The changes that have occurred since the 1970's will have changed the nature of interactions, relationships and networks. Research is largely based on incremental changes, developing and building on past knowledge. However the changing business environment may have led to the knowledge upon which current research is based being flawed or wrong. It is essential therefore to revisit the basics of B2B marketing,

to examine how they have been affected by the changes. A number of questions have become pertinent.

- Relationships both within companies and between companies have potentially become more complex which raises a number of questions.
    - *How many departments are involved with the marketing/purchasing function within the company? How many people does this involved within the company? How do the individuals coordinate their negotiations with suppliers/buyers i.e. who interacts with whom? Who carries out the various information, social, product, financial exchanges i.e. what roles or functions do the individuals play? How has the relationship atmosphere been affected?*

- The information technology revolution means there are more methods of communication available now than there was in the past. Long term relationships between companies, which were the norm, were established through face-to-face contact where various types of exchange would occur, information, social as well as product and financial. How has the information technology revolution affected interactions, relationships and networks between companies?
    - *Do companies utilise the new methods of communication available? Have the new methods replaced any of the older methods of communication or are they an additional option? Has the introduction of newer methods led to a decrease in the number of face-to-face meetings? What are the advantages and disadvantages of the new communication methods? How has the relationship atmosphere been affected by the IT revolution? For example have relationships become less trusting? How has IT changed the structure of networks?*

Many companies believe that e-mail, intranets, extranets, the Internet and audio and video conferencing have increased the speed and accuracy of communication. IT has not had a negative effect on relationships between companies. Companies do not feel that IT has reduced the need for face-to-face meetings, or reduced the need to visit suppliers and customers. Also companies do not feel that IT has led to more formal relationships (Leek, Turnbull and Naudé forthcoming).

E-commerce, which has taken the business world by storm over the last two or three years, has also raised questions.
- *How widespread is Internet use? What is it being used for? Could its use be improved? How is it enabling and constraining relationships?*

Leek, Turnbull and Naudé (forthcoming) found that the Internet had enabled the majority of companies to find information about their suppliers or customers and to find information about their competitors. IT has affected the vast majority of companies in some way and will lead to numerous other questions being raised.

- With increasing globalisation various questions have become pertinent.
    - *Have cultural issues become more important to companies in overseas markets? What measures have companies taken to address culture and give themselves competitive advantage?*

- Technological advances have lead to customers becoming more demanding which once again will impact on interactions, relationships and networks.

- *How have customer's expectations changed? Are suppliers' perceptions of changing customer demands the same as the customers themselves?*

These are just a few questions raised by the changes which have occurred in the environment, a subset of the full range that need to be addressed.

The Impact of External and Internal Changes on Managers. We have argued so far that significant changes in both external and internal factors are likely to have affected how relationships have evolved over the past two or three decades, and that research needs to be undertaken to identify these changes. Whatever the extent of these changes, the section above has identified a number of issues surrounding the management of relationships that need to be better understood by today's manager. However, as argued in Figure 3, we argue that the changes in interactions, relationships and networks between companies will inevitably also have resulted in the modification of managers' attitudes and behaviours. As researchers, we are interested in how the modified attitudes and behaviours are expressed in managing these "new relationships."
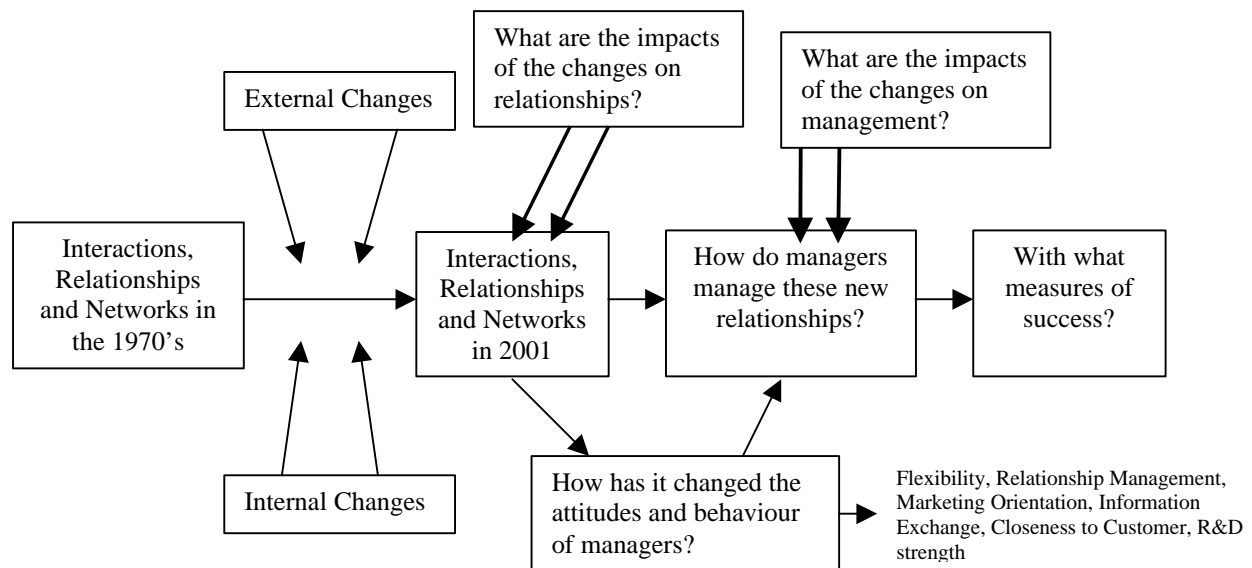

Figure 3: The Impact of Internal and External Influences on Business Relationships

If we are correct in our belief that both the nature of relationships and also how best to manage them has changed, then so too will the skills necessary to do so, and these need to be better understood. We believe that managers will need to be increasingly flexible if they are to cope with the broader range of relationships that may occur as a result of the changes, and also because of the blurring of organisational roles identified above. Managers are likely to have to spend more time on managing the increasingly complex relationships (note the recent emergence of CRM systems as a managerial topic), and hence also on managing the customer orientation of all staff ('internal marketing orientation') rather than just those traditionally seen as being on the buyer-supplier interface.

In addition, we also regard it as likely that these fundamental changes in relationships will have an affect on how the task of managing itself is seen. If relationships are

regarded as increasingly important but also as increasingly complex, then success in relationship management itself becomes a key managerial task, one that is linked to overall corporate success. And all of which, of course, means that managers will need to understand how the basic building blocks of their important relationships and networks have changes over the recent past - our starting point in Figure 1.

In conclusion, it seems to us that if the study of interactions, relationships and networks is indeed to have a future, then future work in the area needs to focus on three important questions:

- What has changed?
- What are the impacts on relationships?
- What are the impacts on managers?

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