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**Interpersonal Contacts in Business Markets: The Impact of
Information Technology.**

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Introduction

It has long been recognised that interpersonal contacts lie at the heart of business to business relationships (Turnbull, Ford and Cunningham 1996). They serve a number of important functions including information exchange, assessment, negotiation and adaptation, crisis insurance, ego enhancement and social role (Turnbull 1979, Cunningham and Turnbull 1982). These exchanges may positively affect the relationship atmosphere e.g. increase the level of trust, create strong bonds between the interacting parties (Easton 1992) and lead to the establishment of long term relationships (Hakansson 1982). In recent years there has been an almost exponential growth in the development of information technology expanding the range of communication methods available to companies. The functions of face to face contact may now be performed by another medium. Research has compared the performance of various tasks including those of interpersonal contact using different media and whilst the performance of tasks involving information exchange are performed more efficiently using computer mediated techniques (Saunders and Miranda 1998, Benbunan-Fich, Hiltz and Turoff 2002, Murthy and Kerr 2003), problem solving tasks such as negotiation are performed more effectively face to face (Morris, Nadler, Kurtzberg and Thompson 2002, Thompson and Nadler 2002). McGrath and Hollingshead (1993) proposed a model which stated there was an optimal method of communication for different types of task. In a business context do suppliers and buyers select the most appropriate methods of communication to perform tasks including those traditionally performed by interpersonal contact? It is possible in the current high tech business environment that the functions of interpersonal contact are being performed by another communication media. If this is the case and inappropriate media are being used, then the parties involved may not be satisfied with the process or outcome of the interactions which as a consequence may adversely affect the atmosphere of the relationship. The aim of this research is to investigate whether suppliers and buyers are selecting the appropriate media for the task being performed and whether the functions of interpersonal contact are being performed by a newer method of communication.

The remainder of this paper looks firstly at the functions of interpersonal contact in business to business relationships. Secondly it examines the task media fit theory and research comparing the use of different media to perform a variety of tasks. Finally the broad research context is discussed suggesting a model of the communication processes within dyadic relationships followed by more specific research questions.

The Role of Interpersonal Contact in Business Relationships.

There is no doubt in business that interpersonal contact i.e. face to face contact is vital. Business markets are characterised by extensive personal interaction not only between buyers and sellers but between a wide variety of functions both within and between organisations. Effective marketing and purchasing in business relationships often involves specialists from a variety of departments including R&D, production, quality control as well as the marketing and purchasing departments. This network of interpersonal contacts ensures the appropriate information flows between both the organisations and between individuals within the organisations. People within the

network are not passive receivers of information but will actively seek out and initiate personal relationships e.g. buyers will not wait for a suitable supplier to make contact rather they will search for one.

Within relationships interpersonal contact has been found to serve a variety of important purposes which are outlined below (Turnbull 1979, Cunningham and Turnbull 1982).

a) *The information exchange role* – “Soft” information is transferred between contacts and is used to complement “hard” data on price, specifications, terms of contract etc. The exchange of information reduces the degree of perceived risk between buyers and sellers. This exchange is enhanced in face to face situations and allows mutual trust and respect to be established (Cunningham and Turnbull 1982).

b) *The assessment role* – Interaction with potential suppliers in a formal or informal setting allows the buyer to assess their competence by combining their personal judgement with objective facts. It is also important for the supplier to assess the suitability of the customer e.g. are they going to be a short term or long term customer.

c) *The negotiation and adaptation role*- The vast majority of industrial marketing and purchasing involves some form of negotiation and adaptation. The level of negotiation will be limited for standardised products but considerably more in depth for highly complex products. It will cover a number of topics such as price, terms of payment and it will involve various levels of the organisational hierarchy. Further negotiations take place after the initial order when reordering which will concern areas such as after sales service, price increases etc.

d) *The crisis insurance role* – Some interpersonal contact initially appears to take place for no apparent reason. However on further investigation such contacts are deliberately established as a form of crisis insurance. These contacts are utilised when a major problem occurs which cannot be resolved through the traditional channels. A senior purchasing executive might regularly meet, albeit infrequently, with the board of directors of supplier companies to establish a personal relationship with them; these relationships are used in crises to obtain rapid or dramatic action. Not all contacts are established at a high level e.g. a salesperson may establish good interpersonal relationship with a secretary to ensure he/she will get an appointment with the buyer.

e) *The social role* – The majority of the roles of interpersonal contact serve clear organisational and personal purposes, however there are some that exist purely for private, social reasons. People meet within the work environment and if they like each other a social relationship will develop.

f) *The ego-enhancement role* – Ego enhancement occurs when the individual establishes a contact with a senior person or people in the buyer/supplier organisation as they believe it will enhance their status within their own organisation. These contacts are more tenuous than the others.

The performance of these functions in a face to face situation leads to both tangible and intangible positive outcomes. With regard to tangible benefits, interpersonal

contact has been found to increase sales performance (Ahearne, Gruen and Johnson 1999) and lead to innovative developments (Walter 1999). In terms of intangible benefits, research has found interpersonal contact to lower buyers' perceived risk (Cunningham and Turnbull 1982) and improve supplier credibility (Cunningham and Turnbull 1982). Face to face contact has been found to be crucial in establishing trust and building long term relationships (Hakansson 1982). The presence of trust within a business relationship will affect various aspects of a relationship for example it may affect what kind of information is exchanged i.e. a supplier or buyer may be more inclined to exchange confidential information face to face, it will also affect negotiations and adaptations i.e. a supplier may be more willing to adapt a product if they know and like the buyer. Interpersonal contact is also vital in problem solving and demonstrating commitment (Hakansson 1982). However Halinen and Salmi (2001a, 2001b) state that interpersonal contact can have negative outcomes i.e. it can act as an inhibitor hindering the maintenance and development process of a relationship.

Face to face contact has a number of important functions which in turn has a number of tangible and intangible benefits. However the research on interpersonal contact was performed a number of years ago. With the advent of new technology it is debatable as to whether interpersonal contact is still used to perform the same functions as it was then. New communication media are potentially being used to perform the same functions but it is debatable as to whether their use is having a positive or negative effect on business relationships.

The Affect of IT on the Performance of the Functions of Interpersonal Contact.

Interpersonal contact as previously discussed has a number of important functions. Since this research was carried out in the early eighties, there have been huge developments in the use of information technology which have lead to an increase in the number of methods that companies can use to communicate and perform the various functions of interpersonal contact. Research has not directly investigated whether new information technology is actually being used to carry out these functions. However, various studies have investigated the most effective method of communication for carrying out certain tasks and compared face to face and computer mediated performance of tasks which are discussed in more detail below.

Research has examined what media is the most effective for performing which task and has developed the media richness theory. If a company is using an appropriate medium to perform a certain task then theoretically the process and outcome of the task will be more satisfying for the parties involved than if an inappropriate medium is used. Media richness theory suggests that the performance of a task will be improved when the task information processing requirements are matched with a communication medium that can convey the richness of the information. Face to face interaction is the richest medium; it allows quick, mutual feedback, allows the simultaneous communication of a number of cues including body language, facial expression, tone of voice and contains emotion. The telephone, addressed written documents and unaddressed documents follow in descending order (Suh 1999). A lean medium such as a memo is adequate for the exchange of a straightforward message. A rich medium such as face to face contact is necessary for resolving a problem e.g. negotiations (Suh 1999). McGrath and Hollingshead (1993) suggested a

task-media fit model as a modification of the media richness theory (see Figure 1). This model suggests that certain types of media are more appropriate for certain types of tasks.

Figure 1: McGrath and Hollingshead's (1993) Task-Media Fit Model.

Increasing potential richness required for task success		Communication Media			
		Increasing potential richness of information			
Task type(s)		Computer text systems	Audio systems	Video systems	Face to face communication
↓	Generating ideas and plans	Good fit	Marginal fit <i>Info too rich</i>	Poor fit <i>Info too rich</i>	Poor fit <i>Info too rich</i>
	Choosing correct answer: intellectual tasks	Marginal fit <i>Medium too constrained</i>	Good fit	Good fit	Poor fit Info too rich
	Choosing preferred answer: judgement tasks	Poor fit <i>Medium too constrained</i>	Good fit	Good fit	Marginal fit <i>info too rich</i>
	Negotiating conflicts of interest	Poor fit <i>Medium too constrained</i>	Poor fit <i>Medium too constrained</i>	Marginal fit <i>Info too lean</i>	Good fit

Various studies have compared the use of differing media for differing tasks and the results largely reinforce the importance of face to face contact. A number of the studies are outlined below.

The efficiency of negotiation, a function of interpersonal contact, has been investigated using a variety of media. Rutter (1984) carried out negotiation experiments with differing visual and physical presence cues. He found that moving from face to face contact to audio contact only i.e. as physical presence cues and visual cues were removed, communication became increasingly psychologically distant, more depersonalised, increasingly task oriented, less spontaneous and less collaborative. The respondents were more likely to compromise in a face to face situation than when using electronic methods of communication. A considerable amount of research has compared negotiation processes carried out via e-mail and face to face contact (Morris et al 2002, Thompson and Nadler 2002). The amount of information exchanged differs between face to face and e-mail situations. In face to face situations, there is greater degree of "turn taking" between the participants which leads to increased discussion and a greater amount of information being exchanged (Morris et al 2000, Thompson and Nadler 2002). People meeting face to face take the opportunity to ask questions to clarify issues and also mutually correct each other whereas in electronic negotiations people make assumptions and attempt to interpret the other participant's behaviour (Morris et al 2002).

Tickle-Dengen and Rosenthal (1990) found face to face contact lead to a greater rapport between participants which improved the outcome of the negotiation. They also found rapport to be a powerful determinant of the establishment of trust.

Negotiators who attempted to build rapport engendered more positive emotion and trust than negotiators who attempted to dominate (Tiedens, Thompson, Morris and Nadler 1999 op cit Thompson and Nadler 2002). Persuasion strategies which are obviously vital in negotiation were found to be more effective in face to face situations. These strategies included the reward strategy - persuading others by offering rewards, the punishment strategy - persuading others by threatening negative consequences, the logic strategy - persuading others using a logical argument and an the emotion strategy - using an emotional argument to obtain what is required (Wilson 2003). The reason for face to face interactions greater effectiveness is due to the fact that computer mediated communication constrains the transmission of nonverbal communication which presents barriers to persuading, negotiating and decision making and decreases message comprehension.

Negotiations via electronic media are not so constrained by the etiquette and social norms of face to face visits. People negotiating via e-mail are more likely to show feelings that would otherwise be masked in a socially appropriate way. E-negotiators have a greater tendency to imperil their relationships by making more threats and issuing more ultimatums than face to face negotiators (Morris et al 2002); in fact they are eight times more likely to have a disagreement than face to face negotiators (Dubrovsky, Kiesler and Sethna 1991). This confrontational approach is due to the negotiator paying more attention to the content of the e-mail and less attention to the etiquette and norms of the situation. Negotiators interacting via e-mail were also more likely to suspect the other party of lying or deceiving them compared to face to face negotiators, yet e-negotiators were no more likely than face to face negotiators to lie (Fortune and Brodt 2000). Interactions via e-mail lack the rapport established through face to face meetings which encourages feelings of anonymity and social distance leading to the impression that the relationship is temporary and fleeting (Kiesler and Sproull 1992).

For idea generation tasks i.e. ones which simply require information to be conveyed Murthy and Kerr (2003) found computer mediated teams performed better than face to face teams. Computer mediated communication increases the speed which information can be acquired, processed and presented (Saunders and Miranda 1998, Benbunan-Fich et al 2002). Generally it has been found that more information is conveyed and more issues are discussed via computer mediated communication (Saunders and Miranda 1988, Benbunan-Fich et al 2002, Murthy and Kerr 2003). Benbunan-Fich et al (2002) also found that the group communicating via computer only submitted a longer and more complete report than the face to face group. Murthy and Kerr (2003) found that face to face teams performed better for an intellectual, problem solving task than the computer mediated team.

Generally in terms of the flow of information IT has been found to increase not only the frequency of communication but also the clarity of the information (Carr and Smeltzer 2002, Leek, Turnbull and Naudé 2003). Clarity improved because the information was stored and freely available to the respondent. Clemons and Row (1993) found the increased flow and timeliness of information lead to improved coordination between organisations.

Despite the positive outcomes of some of the computer mediated tasks people tended to be more satisfied with the face to face process (Suh 1999, Benbunan-Fich et al

2003, Wilson 2003). Suh (1999) looked at the use of four different communication modes to perform a negotiation and intellectual task and found in terms of the actual process the face to face group was more satisfied followed by the video, text and audio groups. Interestingly outcome satisfaction was not effected by the media used. Karan, Kerr, Murthy and Vinze (1996) found no difference in satisfaction between the computer mediated groups and face to face groups.

As stated previously, interpersonal contact is thought to be a major way of establishing trust. However it is postulated that the use of IT will affect the degree of trust within business relationships. Alge, Weithoff and Klein (2003) found teams working in a face to face situation had a higher degree of trust and openness than computer mediated teams. Valley, Moag and Bazerman (1998) investigated the level of trust between buyers and sellers in negotiations via face to face, telephone and written interactions. It was found that the greatest degree of trust between buyers and sellers was in face to face interactions followed by telephone interactions and finally in written interactions. Interestingly, in telephone negotiations buyers trusted the sellers when the sellers were in fact acting in a self interested manner i.e. the buyers' trust is misplaced. Ritter Müller and Gemünden (2001) found a buyer's satisfaction with IT has a positive impact on the perceived trust in the relationship.

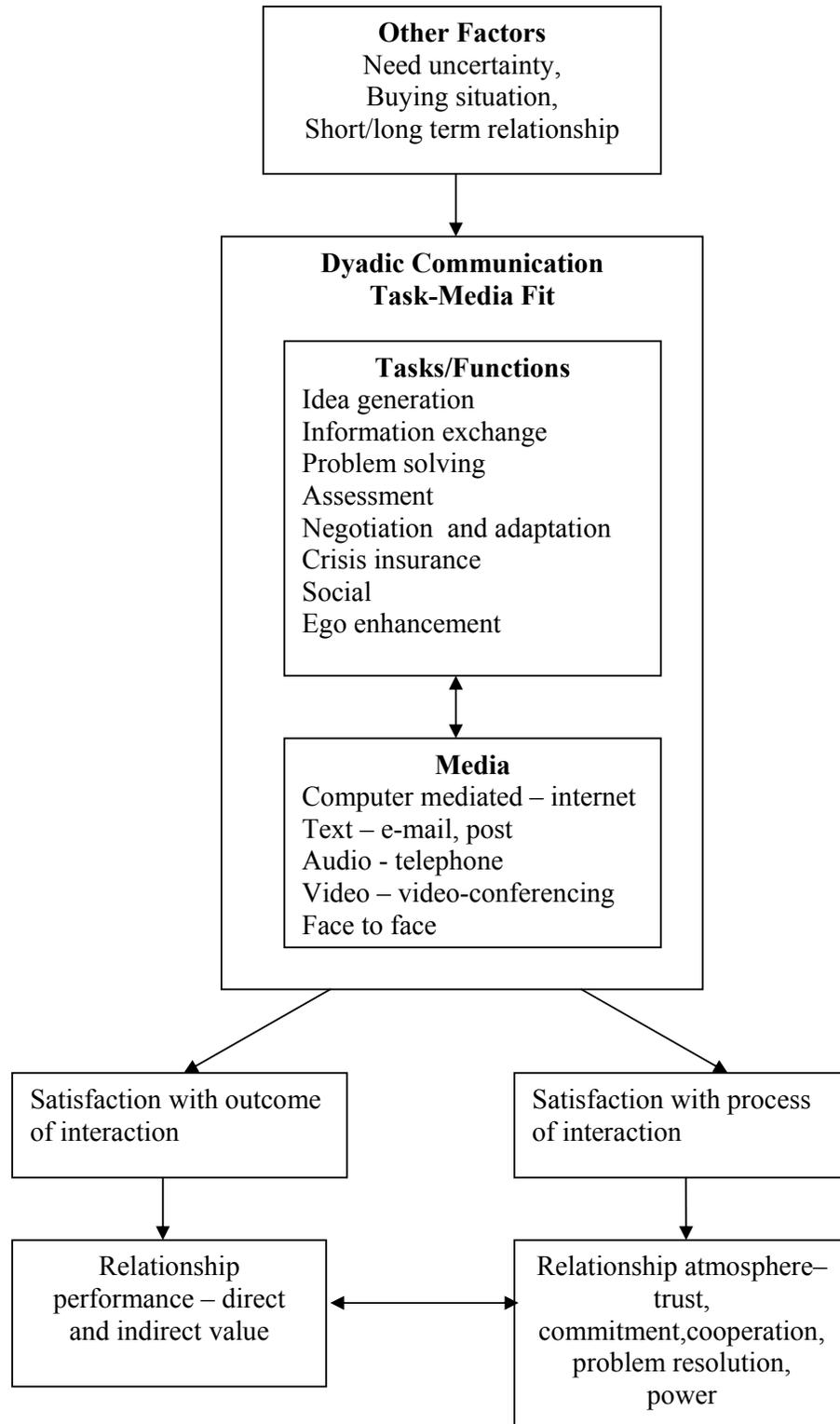
It is likely that some functions of interpersonal contact may be performed via new media. The evidence suggests that negotiation is performed more efficiently face to face than via computer mediated communication. In such situations it is important for the parties involved to have all the cues e.g. tone of voice, body language etc. which will enable the parties involved to arrive at a satisfactory outcome. Information exchange however seems to be performed more efficiently through computers. Computers enable information to be gathered from a variety of sources and to be processed more thoroughly than in a face to face situation. The performance of the other functions of interpersonal contact e.g. the assessment role, using computer media has not been investigated.

The Broad Research Context:

Whilst the research on comparing the performance of different tasks using a variety of media is very interesting, it has certain limitations within a business context. Much of the research is carried out using undergraduates or post graduates as the respondents (Karan et al 1996, Valley 1998, Saunders et al 1998, Suh 1999, Morris et al 2002, Benbunan-Fich et al 2002, Wilson 2003) so it is debatable as to how applicable it is to businessmen and women. Whilst many of the tasks used are set within a business context e.g. the calculation of inheritance tax (Suh 1999), calculating audit risk (Karan 1998), choosing a software supplier (Saunders 1998), some tasks are not e.g. discussion of a case study in computer ethics (Bebunan-Fich et al 2002). Finally the tasks are being performed either between two individuals or within one group with members varying from three to six e.g. (Valley 1998, Suh 1999, Alge et al 2002, Benbunan-Fich 2002, Morris et al 2002 Wilson 2003). In a business context tasks are performed between different groups of people often from different organisations with different goals.

Figure 1 below broadly encompasses the communication processes in dyads and draws together research on the functions of interpersonal contact and the task media fit model.

Figure 1: The Communication Processes within a Dyadic Relationship.



At the centre of the model is the theory that people within business dyads will select the most appropriate communication method for the task at hand, according to

McGrath and Hollingshead's (1993) task media fit model; so for example when choosing a preferred answer e.g. a judgement task people should choose audio or video systems i.e. a telephone or a video phone, when negotiating people would be expected to choose face to face interaction.

If the "right" method of communication is used then satisfaction with the process of the interaction should be high, along with satisfaction with the outcome of the interaction (See Figure 1). Satisfaction with the outcome of the interaction process should in turn lead to a better relationship performance i.e. the relationship should convey greater direct value through competitive advantage and/or greater indirect value e.g. through joint product development, innovation or market access. Satisfaction with the process of interaction should increase the level of general satisfaction with the relationship, potentially creating higher levels of trust, commitment, increasing the willingness to cooperate and resolve problems and decreasing the inclination to wield power. There may be an element of tautology with regard to the elements of the relationship atmosphere.

There are a number of miscellaneous contextual variables which will influence the method of communication used. The degree of need uncertainty may influence the type of communication used. In a high uncertainty situation a supplier may prefer to spend time with the buyer face to face going through their products in order to decide which would satisfy their requirements. The type of product being purchased may influence the type of communication used. If a new product is being purchased then face to face contact may be required to determine if it will satisfy their requirements. The stage of the relationship lifecycle may influence the type of communication used. Face to face contact may be quite frequent at the start of the relationship but decrease as it becomes more established. Varying degrees of risk will be associated with the contextual factors, for example the risk will be greater purchasing a new product than reordering one previously purchased. Face to face contact was found to be a major method of reducing risk in business relationships in the past which may still apply in the current business environment. There are various kinds of risk, functional, financial, physical, psychological, social or time. Does each kind of risk necessitate interpersonal contact or can they be reduced through other methods of communication?

The Current Study: Investigating the Task Media Fit in Buyer-Supplier Relationships.

The model in Figure 1 poses a large number of research questions. However, the primary focus of this research is to investigate a section of the model, the task media fit in dyadic buyer – seller relationships i.e. do buyers and suppliers actually select the appropriate media for the task according to McGrath and Hollingshead's (1993) model. The tasks defined by McGrath and Hollingshead (1993) are quite broad and overlap to some extent with the functions of interpersonal contact which could also be perceived as tasks. Turnbull's (1979) original research into personal contacts was carried out prior to many of the developments in IT. These developments in IT may mean that some of the functions of interpersonal contact are carried out through newer communication methods. The aim of the research is to determine what methods of communication are utilised for what task. With regard to the functions of interpersonal contact this research aims to determine whether these are now being performed using another method of communication, for example information

exchange may occur via e-mail. In order to address these issues more specific questions such as those outlined below need to be investigated.

- Do people select e-mail for idea generations tasks?
- Do people select e-mail for information exchange?
- Do people select an audio or video communication method for tasks which require selecting the correct answer?
- Do people select audio or video communication methods for tasks which require choosing a preferred answer?
- Do people choose face to face interaction for negotiation tasks?
- Do people choose face to face interaction for assessment tasks?
- Do people choose face to face interaction for crisis insurance?
- Do people choose face to face interaction for social role?
- Do people choose face to face interaction for ego enhancement?

Research Methodology

Figure 1 provides a list of tasks or functions which encompasses the functions of interpersonal contact and general types of tasks used in previous research. There are two problems with this list of tasks. Firstly the list may not be exhaustive. Secondly, the tasks may be too broad. As a first stage to this research it would be necessary to interview suppliers and buyers to discuss the kinds of tasks they perform in their day to day work and to find out whether there are any that have been omitted from the list. Some of the tasks are broad e.g. information exchange therefore during the interview it would be necessary to find out whether these can be broken down into a number of further categories which are more specific. The information being exchanged may vary from being relatively unimportant e.g. confirming a delivery date to being very important e.g. providing the supplier with the performance specifications for a product which may influence the method of communication chosen. People may prefer to meet face to face when exchanging important information whereas e-mail or telephone may be adequate for relatively unimportant information.

On completion of a number of qualitative interviews a questionnaire could be developed for a large scale survey.

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