

# **Business Partnering – the Role of Alliance Competence**

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents a model of the role of alliance competence in the performance of business to business partnerships. Drawing on theory from social psychology and relationship marketing, the paper explains why some partnerships are more successful than others. The results show that many kinds of competencies are linked to alliance competency and directly or indirectly impact on business partnership performance.

The research highlights the importance of taking a pluralistic approach to the role of alliance competency by including interpersonal, intra-organisational and inter-organisational factors into account. The implications of this research include: (1) the development of a framework for identifying specific strategies to optimise the performance of business partnerships; (2) a basis for identifying both specific and organisational skills gaps and training needs within organisations involved in business partnerships; (3) a framework for selecting, recruiting and appointing people to manage business partnerships.

### **1. Business partnerships as a marketing strategy**

For the purposes of this paper a business alliance or partnership is defined “broadly as collaborative efforts between two or more firms that pool their resources in an effort to achieve mutually compatible goals that they could not achieve easily alone” (Hunt et al, 2002, p.18).

Thus we use the term “partnership” in a broad sense and do not restrict its use to a specific form of relationship with both informal and formal arrangements being considered; e.g. equity and non equity joint ventures, franchise arrangements, customer/supplier partnerships, strategic alliances, co-marketing agreements, technology alliances, export/import alliances and distributorships, research and development co-operation are all considered to be within the domain under study. The focus of this paper analyses partnerships within the context of the dyad within a market context of customer/supplier relationships. The consequences of using a dyadic approach allow one to analyse in detail the competency characteristics that influence the performance of the individual partnership. A limitation however of this approach is that one may lose perspective of the wider network or networks in which the partnership operates. That is, one “may not be able to see the forest for the trees”. The dyad exposes only one part of the network to analysis and ignores the rest. Such a dyad may or may not be representative of the network as a whole. Thus, a thorough analysis of the characteristics which explain the performance of the partnership would need to consider the characteristics which explain the performance of the network and its set of interconnected relationships in which the partnership operates.

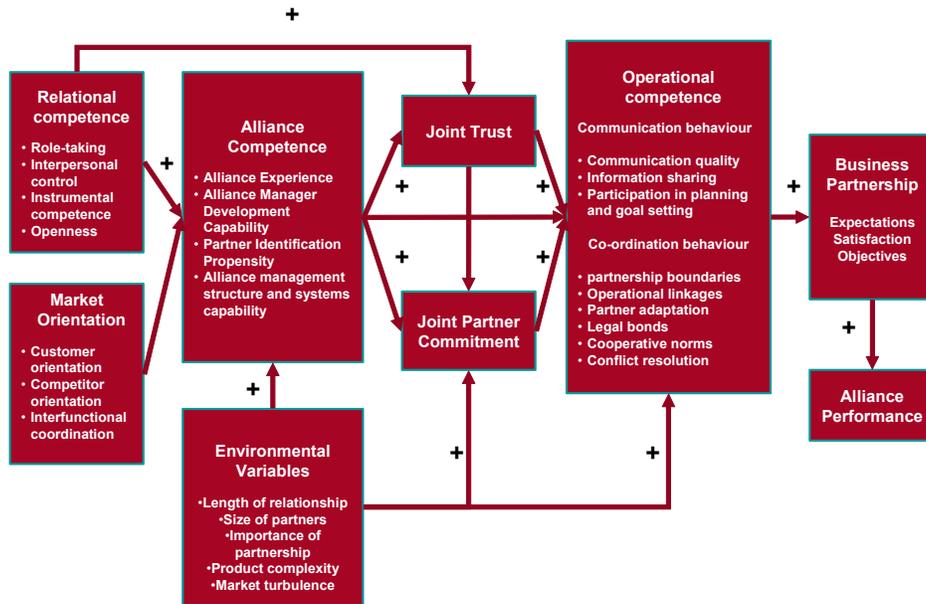
Business partnerships and alliances are being increasingly used to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage. Whilst partnerships might be popular, they are often risky, unstable and vulnerable to failure with less than 50% of alliances performing satisfactorily (Das and Teng 2000).

In the partnering literature four major themes have emerged to explain partnering performance: (1) The relational exchange view which argues that successful partnerships result from relationships that exhibit characteristics such as trust, commitment, co-operation and communication (e.g. Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh, 1987; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). A firm’s relationships are a valuable firm resource (Håkansson, 1987) ; (2) The resource-based view

which argues that successful alliances result from the partners bringing complementary resources to the alliance and developing idiosyncratic resources during the life of the alliance (Jap 1999; Barney 2001). A firm's relationships provide benefits to the firm such as through the provision of valuable functions, the creation of resources and access to those resources and competencies. (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995; Walter, Ritter & Gemunden, 2001; Ritter, Wilkinson & Johnston, 2004); (3) The competence-based view which argues that firms which operate successful alliances have developed a core competence (Dodgson, 1993; Sivadas & Dwyer, 2000) and as such possess an organizational capability for securing, developing and managing alliances (Lambe et al 2002; Sivadas and Dwyer 2000) and (4) the competitive advantage view which argues that successful alliances result from firms that compared to the competition, can produce superior value or reduce costs (Day 1995; Hunt 1997, 2000; Hunt and Morgan 1997; Dwyer and Singh, 1998).

A key underlying characteristic of all of these views are the competencies or capabilities required to facilitate partnering success. In each of the above views there are a number of specific competencies which either the relationship manager and/or the organization must possess to facilitate the success of the partnership. However, the list of competencies or capabilities required and their importance to the partnering process is far from clear. As a result, these competencies need to be carefully examined within a broader theoretical framework and cross-validated for future managerial and academic uses.

Combining the relational exchange theory and the competence based view we develop hypotheses that offer an integrated model of partnership performance (see Figure 1). In this model it is the firm's market orientation and alliance manager's interpersonal relational competence which are key antecedents to the development of the alliance competence. Firms with higher levels of alliance competence are then in a position to carry out the day-to-day-operational tasks required to ensure the successful achievement of the partnership's goals.



**Figure 1 – Conceptual Model of Business Partnering Competence**

## 2. The competency domains of business partnering

An analysis and synthesis of the empirical and conceptual business partnering literature identifies four key competency domains which can be used to explain business partnering performance: (1) market orientation, (2) relational competence, (3) joint alliance competence and (4) operational competence. In the context of this paper these four kinds of competencies can exist at both the general and the specific levels of operationalization. For example relational competency is defined as “the characteristics of the individual that facilitate the acquisition, development, and maintenance of mutually satisfying relationships” (Hansson et al 1984, p 273). Thus, relational competence is a general competency that operates at the interpersonal level and impacts all business to business partnerships and relationships. However, in the context of a specific business partnership the manager’s relational competence will be adapted to suit the specific requirements of that partnership. The same kind of logic can be applied to market orientation, alliance competence and operational competence.

### 2.1 Market orientation

In this paper we conceptualize that market orientation is a key antecedent to the development of alliance competence by providing an environment which facilitates the development of skills essential to the successful acquisition, development and maintenance of mutually satisfying partnerships. Market Orientation has been defined as the “organization culture that most effectively and efficiently creates the necessary behaviour for the creation of superior value for buyers and, thus continuous superior performance for the business” (Narver and Slater 1990, p21). The three dimensions of market orientation are (1) customer orientation, (2) competitor orientation, and (3) inter-functional co-ordination. High levels of market orientation have been linked with above average levels of performance in both consumer and industrial markets under most conditions (Bisp 1998).

## **2.2 Relational competence**

Webster (1992) argued that to sustain long-term business partnering relationships, managers needed to place increased emphasis on relationship management skills. This raises the question of what do we mean by relationship management skills? Walter (1999) for example, defined relationship management tasks to include (1) searching for appropriate actors in the two firms, (2) bringing these actors together, (3) exchanging information, (4) coordinating activities between the two firms, and (5) getting negotiation results. Helfert and Gemunden (1998) identified a set of three relationship tasks: exchange, coordination and adaptation activities. Sivadas and Dwyer (2000) identified “cooperative competency” which included communication (i.e. exchange of information) and coordination. In terms of the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group (IMP) interaction framework we can infer that relational competence develops over time through the interaction of actor bonds, resource ties, and activity links (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995; Ritter et al 2004).

In the context of this paper the kinds of skills or competencies identified by Walter (1999), Helfert and Gemunden (1998) and Sivadas and Dwyer (2000) operate at three distinct levels.

That is: (1) relational competencies operating at the interpersonal level, (2) alliance competencies operating at the organizational level and (3) operational competencies operating at the dyadic relationship level.

Therefore, in the context of this paper interpersonal relational competence has been identified as a key explanatory variable of partnering performance. This is so because alliance managers face a multitude of potential interpersonal situations as they seek to manage relationships with their business partners. Those alliance managers with a wider range of potential interpersonal responses may have the resources and the ability to more effectively deal with difficult alliance issues as they arise. Therefore at the interpersonal level relational competence has been defined as “the characteristics of the individual that facilitate the acquisition, development, and maintenance of mutually satisfying relationships” (Hansson et al 1984, p 273, Carpenter 1993). Bond (1997) and Phan (2002, 2003) identified four key skills that were relevant to relational competence: (1) role-taking – the ability of people to put themselves in the place of the other partner, (2) interpersonal control - refers to one’s sense of control in interactions in dyads and groups, (3) instrumental competence – the belief that one is generally capable, skilled and accomplished, and (4) openness - the extent to which the relationship discloses information of either a personal or an organizational nature to another. In this paper we conceptualize that the interpersonal relational competence of the relationship manager is a key antecedent to the development of firm’s organizational alliance competence.

### **2.3 Alliance competence**

Lambe et al (2002) argued that the perceived level of competence jointly held by both partners could be used to explain business partnering performance. More specifically Lambe et al (2002 p143) argued that alliance competence was “the organizational ability for finding, developing and managing alliances” They argued that joint alliance competence had three

specific facets: (1) alliance experience, (2) alliance manager development capability and (3) partner identification propensity. The importance of the role of alliance management was further clarified by Kale et al (2001, 2002) who argued that alliance management structure and systems capability were also important explanatory variables of partnering performance. In this paper we conceptualize that joint alliance competence is therefore composed of the following four sub-order facets of (1) alliance experience, (2) alliance manager development capability, (3) partner identification propensity and (4) alliance management structure and systems capability. In addition, we conceptualize that joint alliance competence is a key antecedent to the successful day-to-day operational management of business partnerships (i.e. defined from subsequently as operational competence') which in turn is an antecedent to the performance of business partnerships.

## **2.4 Operational competence**

The ability to successfully manage the day-to-day operational activities of business partnerships requires that we consider a variety of operational competencies. A synthesis of relevant empirical and conceptual research reveals two higher order constructs which form the basis of operational competence within the context of this paper. These two higher order constructs have been conceptualized as (1) the ability of the partners to communicate effectively day-to-day partnering activities, tasks and goals or defined as 'communication behaviour' and (2) the ability of the partners to effectively co-ordinate day-to-day partnering activities, tasks and goals or defined as 'coordination behaviour'.

### **2.4.1 Communication behaviour**

The ability to effectively communicate with a business partner has been identified as a key driver of relationship performance (Mohr and Spekman 1994, Morgan and Hunt 1994, Monczka et al 1998, Cannon and Perreault 1999, Phan 2002). In this paper we define communication behaviour to include quality of communication (Mohr and Spekman 1994),

information sharing (Anderson and Narus 1990; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Cannon and Perreault) and participation in planning and goal setting (Mohr and Spekman 1994; Monczka et al 1998; Phan 2002).

#### **2.4.2 Coordination behaviour**

The ability to effectively coordinate activities between each business partner has been identified as a key driver of relationship performance (Mohr and Spekman 1994, Morgan and Hunt 1994, Monczka et al 1998, Cannon and Perreault 1999, Phan 2002). Specifically, coordination behaviour has been defined as “the set of tasks each party expects the other to perform” (Mohr and Spekman 1994, p138). Analyzing and synthesizing the available empirical and conceptual research we have identified six facets of coordination behaviour which we label (1) partnership boundaries (Mohr and Spekman 1994), (2) operational linkages (Cannon and Perreault 1999), (3) partner adaptation (Cannon and Perreault 1999) and (4) legal bonds (Cannon and Perreault 1999), (5) Co-operative norms (Cannon and Perreault 1999) and (6) Conflict resolution (Mohr and Spekman 1994).

#### **2.5 Trust**

Trust is a property of a partnership that is built up over time and has various dimensions. It is a kind of resource that can be used but is also a resource that is created and/or dissipated through partner interaction. The role of trust in providing the ‘glue’ that binds business partnerships together has been enhanced particularly in view of the spread of the “networked organization” (Morgan and Hunt 1994, Achrol 1991). The growth of the networked organization has resulted in groups of organizations being “held together and coordinated by means of norms of sharing and commitment based on trust” (Morgan and Hunt 1994, p20). In this paper we distinguish between the different kinds of trust held ‘jointly’ by the alliance partners. Lambe et al (2002”, p146) argues that “partners in an alliance where both partners have an alliance competence will work together more effectively than partners in an alliance

in which only one (or none) of the alliance partners has an alliance competence. We apply the same logic of joint alliance competence to trust. That is, we argue that partners which both exhibit high levels of trust will work together more effectively than partners in an alliance in which only one (or none) of the alliance partners has a high level of trust. The kinds of trust considered in our paper are (1) Contractual trust – will the other party carry out its contractual agreements? (2) Competence trust – is the other party capable of doing what it says it will do? (3) Goodwill trust – will the other party make an open-ended commitment to take initiatives for mutual benefit while refraining from unfair advantage taking? (Sako 1991; Sako and Helper 1998). In this paper we argue that trust acts in a mediating role between alliance competence, operational competence and partner commitment. That is, we argue that without sufficient trust the partnership will find it difficult to conduct the day-to-day interactions required to make the partnership successful. We further argue that without sufficient trust the partners will find it difficult to become committed to the goals and performance standards required to make the partnership successful.

## **2.6 Commitment**

The ability of the partners to commit to the partnership is a key influence on both alliance competence and partnership performance (Lambe et al 2002). It is also an outcome of interactions and the type of competence firms have to deal with each other. Commitment has been referred to as the willingness of the partners to exert influence on behalf of the relationship (Monczka et al 1998) and is demonstrated by committing resources to the relationship such as, time, money or facilities. It has been demonstrated that joint senior management support (Harrigan 1985) and commitment strongly influences the development of firm wide alliances (Lambe et al 2002). The committed party believes the relationship is worth working on to ensure that it endures indefinitely (Morgan and Hunt 1994). Partners

who are more committed will exert effort and balance short term problems with long term goal achievement (Mohr and Spekman 1994). We also argue that partners which both exhibit high levels of commitment will work together more effectively than partners in an alliance in which only one (or none) of the alliance partners has a high level of commitment. This paper conceptualizes that trust must be present before the partners will be committed to a partnership. It further argues that alliance commitment must be present before the partners will be able to effectively engage in the day-to-day management of the partnership.

### **3. Exploratory Research**

The model was developed based on a review of the literature, as outlined above with input from 12 exploratory in-depth interviews with business partnership managers in the building and automotive components industries who were regarded as leading practitioners in the field of business partnering and alliancing in an Australian context. The range of questions asked during the in-depth interviews probed each of the following concepts identified in the literature review and their influence on alliance performance: relational competence, market orientation, alliance competence, trust, commitment, communication behaviour, coordination behaviour.

As we said before, we are aware that one of the limitations of using this kind of dyadic approach is that the dyad exposes only one part of the network to analysis and ignores the rest. That is, we recognise that a thorough analysis of the characteristics which explain the performance of the business partnership would also need to consider the characteristics which explain the performance of the network in which the alliance/partnership operates.

In the following we summarise the main outcomes of our exploratory research and the hypotheses that arise.

#### **3.1 Interpersonal relational competence**

The respondents indicated that managers responsible for the performance of a partnership needed to possess certain relational skills to successfully maintain the relationship including

the ability to put himself or herself in the place of the other partner (known as perspective taking), the ability to be open and honest (i.e. known as openness) and the ability to trust and be trusted by the other partner. All of the respondents viewed themselves having a strong level of interpersonal control in the relationship with their partners (i.e. known as interpersonal control) and a strong belief in their capability to successfully manage the day-to-day activities of the partnership (i.e. known as instrumental competence).

Hypothesis 1: The greater the degree of relational competence, the greater the degree of alliance competence and the greater the degree of joint trust.

### **3.2 Market orientation**

The firm's market orientation or its responsiveness to both market and customer needs appeared to be taken as a given. That is, respondents viewed all of the partnerships as important to the success of their company and in all cases they were strongly committed to the relationship and their appeared to be strong levels of interfunctional co-ordination. Therefore, it was taken for granted that they would be particularly responsive to the needs of those partners. This strong drive to be responsive to partner needs appeared to be a major factor in facilitating the pursuit of alliance competence. In other words, the partners could only be responsive to partner needs if they possessed the required level of relationship competency

Hypothesis 2: The greater the degree of market orientation, the greater the degree of alliance competence.

### **3.3 Organisational alliance competence**

Respondents clearly perceived they were competent in managing their alliances but they had some difficulty in overtly defining and articulating the kinds of skills needed to ensure that they could successfully manage these alliances. This is interesting and probably reflects many areas of business in which managers have built up an extensive body of tacit knowledge but never actually documented the alliance process. With further probing however, respondents

did identify significant evidence of documentation including contract documentation and partnership agreements. These agreements often included details of risk and reward sharing, required performance standards and reporting of performance against those standards. It is clear from discussions with respondents that much of alliance experience is tacit and acquired in a learning-by-doing mode (Anand and Khanna 2000; Day 1995) or through formalised training where experience builds over time, often with many mistakes acquired during the process (Lambe and Spekman 1997). Respondents identified alliance experience and training as important components of alliance competence and such training was usually conducted on an as needed basis. In terms of alliance management and control structures all of the respondents relied on a range of existing management systems and routines (e.g. quality management, order entry, invoicing, stock management, warehousing and logistics, procurement, inspection and testing) to manage the day-to-day requirements of the partnership. In addition, the respondents used the contract requirements, regularly scheduled meetings between the partners and the stored value of joint partnership trust and commitment to keep the partnership under control. The regularly scheduled meeting were also used as a basis for identifying issues, sharing concerns and integrating partnership requirements into organizational routines. It has been suggested that these organizational routines are best captured by a dedicated alliance function and that such a function enhances the probability of alliance success (Kale, Dyer and Singh 2002).

Hypothesis 3: The greater the degree of alliance competence, the greater the degree of joint partner trust, joint partner commitment and operational competence.

### **3.4 Operational competence**

#### **3.4.1 Communication behaviour**

All respondents viewed effective communication with their business partner as essential to both the current and continued success of the partnership. All respondents shared all

information relevant to the partnership with their partners in an open and cooperative spirit. All respondents participated in partnership planning and goal setting. A typical reply by one respondent was “in an alliance contract, communication is obviously a key thing and good open honest communication is absolutely necessary. Hidden agendas, keeping stuff to yourself, not putting issues on the table are all unacceptable. We have planned relationship building workshops during alliance contracts which enable people to have their say in an open and free manner; put their issues on the table. The team discusses those issues and we have a monthly questionnaire which we use to see how people are feeling about the job. We call them monthly health checks.”

### **3.4.2 Coordination behaviour**

Whilst none of the respondents had formally codified their approach as to the basis of partnership coordination, the rules of engagement and the partnership boundaries with respect to the set of tasks each party expects the other to perform were all well established. That is, everyone knew their role and responsibility in relation to partnership matters. There were occasions however, when these rules and boundaries were upset, such as when relationship managers were replaced, or competitive threats emerged.

As to the question of operational linkages between the systems, procedures and routines of the partners those respondents which had their own manufacturing plants essentially used their own systems, procedures and routines. Some partner adaptations were however often required in these organisations in relation to inspection and testing requirements during production or installation quality management, production planning and scheduling, order entry specifics, invoicing procedures, stock management, warehousing and despatch requirements, raw materials procurement.

On the other hand, those respondents who were involved in joint venture arrangements in the building industry generally viewed operational linkages along the following lines: “The way

you establish your project systems is that you look at all the different project systems of the participants and choose the best one or create a new one which is a hybrid of several systems for that. So, in other words you are creating a virtual organisation with the best of all of the systems of the other participants which as you can well imagine can create some powerful and very sophisticated systems.”

All respondents agreed that legal bonds were an important basis of partnership control and that these bonds were established through the development of such things as formal partnership agreements and contracts. However every respondent agreed that legal bonds were not a substitute for trust and that joint partner trust was the most critical component in the building of a successful relationship.

All respondents agreed that both organizations must have shared goals and have an agreed set of norms about acceptable kind of behaviour in the partnership.

All respondents agreed that the best way to resolve conflict both in theory and in practice was through a cooperative problem solving approach and most respondents had a formalized conflict resolution approach to achieve these ends. It was also clear that in addition to the conflict resolution process the existence of strong social bond between the parties to the dispute was a necessary pre-requisite for successful conflict resolution.

Hypothesis 4: The greater the degree of alliance operational competence, the greater the degree of alliance performance.

### **3.5 Trust**

All respondents regarded trust as a critical element of any partnership. One respondent’s comment was typical of the importance of trust: “You are exposing your company’s potential faults and weaknesses. You’re letting your partner and your client into your business, warts and all. It’s certainly the concern. As I said before we have given the alliance all our systems and procedures. We’re trusting that they maintain the confidentiality etc, of

those systems and procedures. But we trust that they will do that. There is no confidentiality agreement and financially we are also in the hands of our partners. It's not so much our main partner but our other partners. Our financial success is dictated by how our other partners perform. We've got no other commercial comeback to our partners if they don't perform. So our outcome is totally in the hands of other organizations. And I guess that's another example of how trust manifests itself in the alliance.”

Hypothesis 5: The greater the degree of joint alliance trust, the greater the degree of joint alliance commitment and the greater the degree of alliance operational competence.

### **3.6 Commitment**

All respondents regarded commitment as a critical element of any partnership. A high level of partner commitment symbolised that each partner would be prepared to provide whatever resources were needed by the partners (e.g. time, money or facilities) to ensure the success of the partnership.

One of the respondents identified the volatile nature of commitment, the relationship between trust and commitment and the relationship between commitment and conflict resolution as follows: “Commitment intensifies when work comes in then we are under pressure. The relationship gets strained at times I guess but we get through it. Quite often there will be a couple of scenarios whereby they have ordered things but forgotten a couple of drawings and all of a sudden they realize that they have not ordered this material and provided the drawings. We get through it with high level of trust because they know that we are going to bend over backwards to do it for them. Because they know that they are a customer that we value greatly and although we might have a 10 day lead time we will do it for them in three days because we know they are people we have got to help get out of a problem.”

Hypothesis 6: The greater the degree of joint alliance commitment, the greater the degree of alliance operational competence.

### **3.7 Environmental and situational variables**

Our model includes the following environmental variables which have been identified as being positively related to partnering performance: length of the relationship (i.e. in terms of number of years), size of the partners (i.e. in terms of number of employees), importance of the partnership (i.e. in terms of the share of sales turnover represented by the partnership), product complexity and market turbulence (Cannon and Perreault 1999). We recognise that for environmental and situational variables it is possible that the relationship could also have a bi-directional impact on the other competency variables due to the likely feedback effects. That is, as partner commitment, alliance competence and operational competence increase these changes are likely to reinforce the length of the relationship and the importance of the partnership. That is, the relationships could be bi-directional with one reinforcing the other.

Hypothesis 7: The greater the (length of the relationship, the size of the partners, the importance of the partnership, the degree of product or service complexity and the degree of market turbulence), the greater the degree of (alliance competence, joint alliance commitment, alliance operational competence).

In summary this paper conceptualizes a model of the role of alliance competence in the performance of business to business partnerships that combines the relational view of the firm and the competence view. It shows that the interpersonal skills of the alliance manager and the prevailing marketing culture (orientation) of the firm can facilitate the adoption of appropriate organisational infrastructure and alliance competency to provide an environment in which both trust and commitment are built to ensure that the day-to-day management tasks (operational competencies) of the partnership are carried out successfully. The purpose of the model is to demonstrate the relationships between the constructs considered to date as shown in Figure 1.

#### **4. Conclusions**

This paper conceptualizes a model of the role of alliance competence in the performance of business partnerships based on the interaction of the four key domains of market orientation, relational competence, joint alliance competence and operational competence.

This paper highlights the importance of taking a pluralistic approach to the role of alliance competency by including interpersonal, intra-organisational and inter-organisational factors into account. The implications of this research include: (1) the development of a framework for identifying specific strategies to optimise the performance of business partnerships; (2) a basis for identifying both specific and organisational skills gaps and training needs within organisations involved in business partnerships; (3) a framework for selecting, recruiting and appointing people to manage business partnerships. Data collection to test the validity of the conceptual model is currently underway.

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