

Katarina Sarlija¹, Stockholm School of Economics, Stockholm
Hans Kjellberg², Stockholm School of Economics, Stockholm
Per Andersson³, Stockholm School of Economics, Stockholm

Launching Proceedo - A study of commercial exchange in the making

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¹ Katarina Sarlija, Stockholm School of Economic, Department of Marketing, Distribution and Industry Dynamics, P.O. Box 6501, S-113 83 Stockholm, Sweden, voice +46-8-736 95 38, Fax +46-833 43 22. e-mail: kursass.310@hhs.se

² Hans Kjellberg, Stockholm School of Economic, Department of Marketing, Distribution and Industry Dynamics, P.O. Box 6501, S-113 83 Stockholm, Sweden, voice +46-8-736 95 23, Fax +46-833 43 22. e-mail: dhk@hhs.se

³ Per Andersson, Stockholm School of Economic, Department of Marketing, Distribution and Industry Dynamics, P.O. Box 6501, S-113 83 Stockholm, Sweden, voice +46-8-736 95 35, Fax +46-833 43 22. e-mail: dpa@hhs.se

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore the process of commercial exchange. The empirical setting is the launch of a new computerised procurement system, Proceedo.com. Since 1999, we have followed the efforts to make real this software solution that is to help the user-companies save money when procuring non-production-related (NPR) goods. These efforts have included establishing relations with customers, venture capitalists, suppliers and employees as well as developing the actual application.

Influenced by work within the sociology of science and techniques (for an overview, see Biagioli, 1999), we attempt to apply what has been called a *modest sociology* (Law 1994) to the study of business processes. Thus, we shift from the substantialist view characteristic of most research in marketing, to a relationist view (Latour 1996; Law 1994; Kjellberg 2001). That is, our analytical starting point is relations rather than things (or beings, or essences); things acquire their characteristics in relation to others, they are effects of associations. Hence, we do not distinguish à priori between product development and exchange, product and service, actors (humans and organisations) and resources (knowledge and artefacts), etc. Rather, we view such distinctions as *outcomes of a recursive process of interdefinition* (Law 1994) that defines the involved parties, the content and form of the exchange, and leads to some agreement to engage in commercial exchange. To study this process, we borrow two methodological resources from the sociology of science and techniques: the principles of *relationism* (Latour 1996, and Law 1994) and *symmetry* (Bloor 1976; Callon 1986).

In practice, our primary methodological rule has been to *follow the actors* in their efforts to construct the world, without passing judgements as to how they do this. Based on interviews, observations on site, documents, sales presentations and other remnants we attempt to retrace the links forged between entities over time.

Our story about Proceedo.com is thus a story about efforts to construct commercial exchange. It includes efforts to stabilise entities, such as *the buyer* and *the seller*, and reach an agreement of some sort as to what constitutes *the offer*. Further, the parties attempt to stabilise the use of the offer, that is, they try to configure *the user*. However, these entities are constantly being re-configured. The relations forged between entities rest on some form

of balance. If this balance is upset, for whatever reason, the relations are re-appraised. Such reconfigurations also seem to depend on other processes in which the parties are involved.

The paper will be organised as follows: First, we discuss the shift from a substantialist to a relationist ontology and its methodological consequences. Second, we reconstruct the efforts made to launch Proceedo.com. Third, we discuss theoretical implications concerning the process of commercial exchange that follow from our study.