

Personal relationships shaping temporary networks – The influence of critical events between persons in project marketing context

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Abstract

Purpose of the paper and literature addressed – The purpose of the study is to develop a model explaining the change of supplier's network position within a temporary project network during the phases of a turnkey project by studying the critical events in network. The literature addressed includes IMP scholar specifically related to network position. In addition project marketing literature was reviewed and literature concerning personal relationships and critical incidents in business relationships.

Research method –The study is based on literature review and a pilot case study including semi-structured interviews among project purchasing decision makers in steel and paper industries.

Research findings – The literature review resulted in network position construct in project marketing context. In order to increase the understanding in the phenomenon being researched the network position construct was compared with the view of the participants on the network positions. The participants' cognition produced to some extent a different view on the network position. The findings emphasized the relationship between the parties both on the organizational and personal levels, the importance of the supplier's experience and references, solution characteristics and the existence of critical incidents being capable of shaping the perception of the suppliers by the buyers.

Main contribution – The main contribution of the study was the analysis of the dimensions of network position construct within a project marketing context. Even at this point, the study also is able to indicate the contributions available for understanding the importance of personal relationships influencing network position in complex and dynamic temporary networks like in project marketing.

Introduction

In the very complex and dynamic project marketing context, in which both single actors and supply networks compete for customers' preference, network positions of actors are difficult to predict or define. Actors take actions aiming at a more favorable position but often the actions resemble shadowboxing because the elements of the position in the project marketing context are not known. How can a marketer assess, what are the main drivers that form the positions of the suppliers competing for the business? Is it the organizational level factors that compose the positions, or is the supplier's position as a consequence of the cumulative nature of the use of resources to establish, maintain and develop exchange relationships (Johanson and Mattsson 1992, p. 211) as argued in the network literature, or is it the social or personal contacts built that contribute to the success of the marketer? (Skaates and Tikkanen 2003, p. 506; Cova, Mazet and Salle 1996, p. 650). Is it possible that the position of a large organization or even a supply network is greatly influenced by personal relationships or sometimes even depending on individual actors?

Network position is not any novel concept, and it has been studied by numerous researchers earlier. The earliest studies by Johanson and Mattsson (1985), Mattsson and Johanson (1992) and Henders (1992) introduced the basis of the concept and also the dimensions applied even today. Anderson et al. (1998) widened the position concept to dynamism of relationship. Aastrup (2002) focused at applying the concept to a specific industry, transportation. Cova, Ghauri and Salle (2002) have proposed variants of network position aiming at taking into account the specific features of the project context. Personal relationships in business have been researched earlier (e.g. Granovetter 1992; Mainela 2005; Witkowski and Thibodeau 1999) but findings on the influence of personal relationships on network position are very scattered in the literature. In project marketing literature personal level relationships are regarded as important, but the relationship between network position and relationships has not been researched. Instead, the research papers are mainly concentrating on the general aspects of the social relationships, such as trust and commitment.

Projects operations are said to be one of the dominating modes of international business (Skaates, Tikkanen and Lindblom 2002; Hajdikhani 1996), and in this respect it is an essential element in industrial marketing. Deeper understanding of the project marketing context benefits specifically the research of projects, but more widely, understanding of temporary or dynamic and short term networks and positions in them is central in the network approach. Relationships are argued to be the key in industrial marketing and it is the individual actors that interact. Hence, all new finding should benefit the understanding of the relationships in the industrial marketing context.

The purpose of the study is to develop a model explaining the change of supplier's network position within a temporary project network during the phases of a turnkey project by studying the critical events in a temporary supplier network. The study aims at answering the following research questions:

1. *What are the dimensions of the network position construct in project marketing context?*
2. *How are the dimensions of network position related to the different phases of the project marketing process?*
3. *How do individual actors influence the suppliers' network position during the different phases of the project marketing process?*

Literature review

Project marketing context

Cova, Mazet and Salle (1994, p. 30) define a project "as a complex transaction covering a discrete package of products, services and other actions designed specifically to create capital assets for the buyer over a certain period of time". It is appropriate to consider a project as a specific temporary network (Dubois and Gadde 2000; Hellgren and Stjernberg 1995).

It is normal in project marketing that one company alone can not provide the entire scope needed to develop a solution to a customer's problem. Thus, resources and capabilities of multiple actors are merged to develop the required offering, and in this way a group of suppliers is functioning as a cohesive unit (Mattsson 1980). In such environment uncertainties exist both on the buyer's and supplier's side (see e.g. Cova, Mazet and Salle 2002; Cova and Hoskins 1997, p. 547). The D-U-C framework by Mandjak and Veres (1998, p. 472) names three key features of project marketing: discontinuity of demand for projects (see also Hajdikhani 1996), uniqueness of each project (in technical, financial and socio-political terms), and complexity of each individual project (in terms of the number of actors involved throughout the supply process).

There are several models for the project marketing process (see e.g. Holstius 1987, Mandjak and Veres 1998; Cova, Ghauri and Salle 2002). In this study the model proposed by Cova, Ghauri and Salle 2002 will be used comprising the following phases in the process: Identification of a need, pre-feasibility study, identification of potential sellers, tender invitations, and negotiations followed by the supplier selection and formal contract. A supplier can have a varying responsibility of total project depending on the type of the project (see e.g. Cova, Ghauri and Salle 2002, 6-8). The supplier selection becomes more critical in turnkey and turnkey plus type projects, in which the supplier is responsible for delivering the complete project, and also some additional activities.

Network position in IMP literature

The concept of network position is used to describe how individual actors in the network are related into each other (Johanson and Mattsson 2002). The definition of network position has been dynamic in the network literature (see e.g. Johanson and Mattsson 1985, Mattsson and Johanson 1992, Henders 1992, Anderson et al. 1998, Aastrup 2002). Each actor in a network is engaged in many relationships with other actors, and these relationships define the position of the actor (Halinen and Törnroos 1998, p. 190). Thus the current position of companies is the outcome of their relationships and the offerings that have been developed, marketed and purchased within them (Ford et al. 2003, p. 27; Håkansson and Ford 2002, p. 136). Johanson and Mattsson (1985) proposed micro and macro positions. Micro positions are defined by the role of the company in relationship to the other firm, its importance to the other firms, and the strength of the relationships with other firms. Macro positions are defined in terms of the identity of the other firms with which the firm has relationships in the network, the role of the firm in the network, and the strength of the relationships with other firms.

The nature of network positions can be characterized in many ways. Investment in positions can itself be seen as the basic task of marketing (Turnbull, Ford and Cunningham 1996, p. 47). Positions can be seen as partially controlled, intangible market assets (Forsgren 1995, p. 22) that can determine the firm's ability to compete (Duysters, De Man and Wildeman 1999, p. 183). Each position is unique and perceived differently by the various actors in the network (Gadde, Huemer and Håkansson 2003, 362; Håkansson and Snehota 1989, p. 196; Salmi 1996, p. 42). A position has both a stable and a dynamic character (Anderson et al. 1998, p. 168), and it is difficult to separate an actor's position and its role (Anderson et al. 1998, 171). The position is determined by the number of exchange relationships that the actor is engaged in (Johanson and Mattsson 1992, p. 211; Ford et al., 2002, p. 7), and network position is a consequence of the cumulative nature of the use of resources to establish, maintain and develop exchange relationships (Johanson and Mattsson 1992, p. 211). Since the position captures the overall perception of a firm's attractiveness as an exchange partner within its network context (Huemer 2003, p. 4), it can be regarded as a central concept for the present study. Network position makes it possible to acquire resources through exchange with other parties in the context (Håkansson and Snehota 1989, p.194), but from a wider perspective also to get access to, mobilize and combine critical resources and processes, promoting innovation and productivity in the network but also within the company (Snehota and Tunisi 2003, p. 19). The position provides the ability to develop further relationships in the network (Turnbull, Ford and Cunningham 1996, p. 48).

Role dimension can be applied in multiple ways, and it is said to be in conjunction with importance (Henders' 1992, p. 90-91). Henders' definition of a role as "an activity of the firm in the network" (see also Hallen and Lundberg 2004, p. 8) is consistent with the network approach generally (activities, actors, resources). The importance of an actor in the network is a measure of the extent to be able to initiate change in network (Henders 1992, p. 91), or the power to influence the network (Thorelli 1986, p. 40). Henders (ibid) has also proposed that it represents the percentage of required resources for the network held by the actor, and respectively the greater adjustment is required to replace the actor's resources. The strength of relationships in the network can be tied to volume importance but also to the age of relationship (Henders 1992, p. 96-97). Hallen and Lundberg (2004) used ordinal scales for development of relationships between actors instead of numeral scales. Identity is *the individual characteristics by which something is recognized or known* but in the position context meant to capture the perceived attractiveness (or repulsiveness) of a firm as an exchange partner due to its unique set of connected relations with other firms, links to their activities, and ties with their resources. It refers to how firms see themselves in the network and how they are seen by other network actors (Anderson, Håkansson and Johanson 2002, p. 217). Identity conveys a certain competence, because it is based on each actor's perceived capability to perform certain activities, and it has certain power content, because it is based on the particular resources that each actor possesses (Henders 1992).

Network position in project marketing literature

Project marketers can by identifying and positioning themselves in relationship networks anticipate demand conditions and develop a competitive position which most closely reflects their distinctive competences (Cova and Hoskins 1997, p. 549). In this respect there are reflections both from the IMP literature and Dynamic Capabilities View (DCV) ideas originating from the core competence concept (Hamel and Prahalad 1990). What is actually different in the perspective by Cova and Hoskins (1996) compared with the position discussion in IMP literature, is that it gives equal value to both

relationships between organizational and individual actors. Cova, Ghauri and Salle (2002, p. 36-37) have defined two features of a supplier's position in project context: relational position and functional position. The functional position can be regarded as the capability to elaborate differentiated solutions either on the market level or on the specific project or customer level. The relational position is argued to be the result of the investment to relationships during the early phases of the marketing process and tender preparation with the customer's personnel and others within the project network.

Network position construct derived from earlier research

Identity dimension as a measure of attractiveness of an exchange partner (Anderson, Håkansson and Johanson 2002) can be seen as a factor either decreasing or increasing the uncertainty related to the supplier (Figure 2). Role dimension referring to activity in network by the actor (Henders 1992) can also in the project context be linked to the temporary network, in which an actor can act e.g. as responsible for the turnkey project. Importance dimension, change initiation capability, is included as in earlier research (Henders 1992; Thorelli 1986). The relationship aspects of both IMP (age, volume importance) and project marketing literature (investment in relationships) can be merged and the result comprises both the organizational level relationships and the personal levels. Henders' (1992) interpretation of strength of relationship based on transaction volume does not seem to fit too well to project marketing context. Often the criticality of the project in the buyer's activity chain, and consequent supplier uncertainties (Cova, Ghauri and Salle 2002) are more important than the pure transaction value. Instead, the relationship should take a wider perspective and take into account also the access to resources via relationships. The functional position proposed in the project marketing literature brings the project and solution specific perspective to the concept.

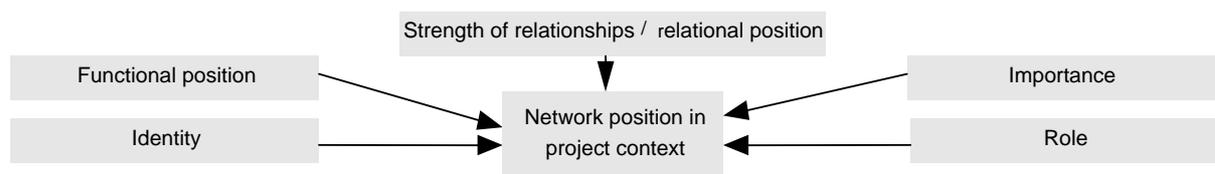


Figure 1. Dimensions of network position derived from literature.

Critical events

A critical incident is a positive or negative 'event' with certain perceptual and chronological parameters that is memorable to the individual concerned and has perceived significance on a basis of their influence over the content and process of relationship development in personal or business terms, or both (Cope 2003, p. 8). For example, a negative critical incident may result in the termination of a relationship and a positive critical incident may result in a stronger and deeper relationship.

There are elements of both stability and change in business networks (Halinen, Salmi and Havila 1999, p. 780). Change in networks has been regarded as a result of continuous networking process which can be detected from the connecting of actor bonds, activity links and resource ties within a business network (Håkansson and Snehota 1995, p. 283-284). Radical changes have been regarded as a rare phenomenon (Easton 1992, p. 24). The concept of the critical incident has been used in studies of business relationships to refer to events that have a decisive effect on relationship development, either positive or negative (Halinen, Salmi and Havila 1999, p. 272; Holmlund 2004). It is not the mere event that is critical, but the way that actors perceive and react to such an event. Losing trust in a dyadic business relationship may turn out to be critical for the dyad, or ignoring the other part of the dyad either by not responding to communication or communicating incorrectly (Alajoutsijärvi, Möller and Tähtinen 1998). A critical event can also take place on an individual actor level due to persons not showing trustworthiness or commitment (Havila and Salmi 2000, p. 116). In project business context the behavior of individuals has been reported to trigger critical events in contexts regarding significant knowledge transfer (Strang 2005, p. 81; Lindsay et al. 2003).

Edvardsson and Roos (2001) have argued that in order to be able to analyze the criticality of critical incidents from the customer's perspective, one must understand the significance of critical incidents in the light of human memory mechanisms and judgement processes. Roos (2002, 202) states that when critical incidents are considered from a relationship perspective, the criticality becomes the main issue, because it concerns the question of relationship stability, in which the extremes are seen in terms of

continuing or terminating a relationship. Edvardsson and Strandvik (2000) argue that critical incidents are embedded in the relationship, and interdependent context dimensions should be used: the time dimension, and the situational dimension. Roos (2002) proposes that a customer relationship is broken down into a trigger, an initial stage, a process, and a consequence.

The role of personal relationships in business relationships

Economic actions are embedded in social relations (Granovetter 1992), and building trust is a crucial element in a social exchange process (Hallen, Johanson and Seyed.Mohamed 1991, p. 31). Development of personal relations is usually seen to be an outcome of business exchange, hence result of interactions. Business parties gradually build up mutual trust in each other through a social exchange process. Parties in a relationship can demonstrate their trustworthiness by committing themselves to the exchange relationship, and one important way of showing commitment is to adapt to the other (Hallen, Johanson and Seyed-Mohamed 1991, p. 31). Thus, when trust exists, the partners believe that relationship-specific investments can be made with limited risk because both parties will refrain from the use of power or exploiting changed circumstances to obtain individual benefit (Nielson 1998, p. 445). Granovetter (1982) has argued that the ability of a person to trust another is prevented if there are no personal ties between them. In the interaction model interpersonal contacts are identified as performing vital roles in problem solving, in exchanging social values and information, and in demonstrating commitment and credibility. Personal contacts are means of distance reduction (Ford, 1980), which is emphasized in interaction between firms of different countries. The absence of good personal interaction may endanger the overall relationship. The personal characteristics, private relationships and whole personality of the manager, are strongly and willingly involved in the business processes (Mainela 2005, p. 3). Witkowski and Thibodeau (1999) argue that personal bonding requires reputation, shared expectations, foreign language proficiency, and family or ethnic ties. Personal bonding process takes place through communication at a distance and visits, and in case the process is fruitful, three meanings of personal bonds can evolve: friendliness, comfort level and trust (Tomkins 2001). Usunier (1990) has argued that trust is a prerequisite for successful project marketing. One very important phenomenon in project marketing, based on the strength of the personal relationships, is access to information (Björkman and Kock 1995).

Pilot case study

The objective of the pilot case study was to increase understanding, how the initial view of the network position based on the IMP and project marketing literature represents project purchase decision makers' perspective to suppliers' network positions. Three of interviewed participants represented Dutch steel industry, and three came from three different companies in the Finnish paper industry. The semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed with qualitative data analysis software. Qualitative content analysis was used and extended to an interpretative analysis of the underlying meaning by means of the circular process of understanding. The statements that correspond to a specific theme were identified and transformed into meaningful units and then coded into themes and sub-themes. The findings comprised four themes: "relationship", "supplier experience", "solution excellence", and "incidents influencing supplier perception" by the customers.

The theme "relationship" diverged into three sub-themes: *relationship history*, *investment in relationship* and *trust in people*. *Relationship history* refers to earlier transactions between the parties, and especially results of transactions. A successful project in the past results in a strong positive relationship which provides both parties an advantage in the case of a new project. The buyer's supplier uncertainty is low, and the supplier can utilize existing bonds between the actors. On the other hand, any failures in the past increase supplier uncertainty and create a barrier for new business activities. Second sub-theme of relationship was the supplier's *investment in the relationship*, which in the customers' cognition was equivalent to being important to the suppliers. The suppliers can show commitment by allocating resources to project development, reacting rapidly to new turns in the process, and involving top management in the relationship building. The third sub-theme of relationship is *trust in people*. In the interaction during the different phases of a project there is a personification phenomenon. A project takes the "face" of the supplier or suppliers and respectively, what will happen in the future depends on the "face". The question, whether one can rely on the supplier's personnel, was reflected heavily in the interviews. They look for confirmation that they have a counterpart, who is able to manage the project and cooperate fruitfully with the buyer's organization

The theme “experience” concerns demonstrating versatile history both in the industry and problem in question. The stakes from the customers’ perspective are high, because in the participants’ industries all projects related to the main activity chain are critical, and their business fully depends on the suppliers’ skills to provide working solutions. The customers expect to have “hands on evidence” on earlier success in the form of references and financial stability. The suppliers’ main objective in reference utilization is to show credibility as a source of projects.

The theme “solution excellence” turned out to be multi-faceted. Firstly the customers are looking for proven solutions, and secondly for innovative concepts providing some advantages. One element of the solution is the implementation process. All participants shared the view that networking is today’s trend, and it is unavoidable in the project context. As long as the members of the supply network add value to the project, their presence and participation is justified, but a supply network requires a clear vision about the management of the activities. There has to be one clear leader in the coalition and the leader is also responsible for the performance of the project network. The buyer regards such a network as a single unit and comparable with an organization being able to deliver a project alone, but for most participants a single organization with wide in-house resources and capabilities is preferred.

The fourth theme found was the “incidents influencing supplier perception”. The interactions between the suppliers and the buyer provide a lot of opportunities for the parties to shape their opinions of the other party. The buyer is continuously evaluating the cooperation capability of the supplier’s personnel, and pays attention to both negative and positive signals. In the worst case the buyer may evaluate the whole supplier network based on a single member in it. Being able to work in a team, as part of the project network, is essential. Disagreement between the parties aiming at winning a project is a serious negative signal. A single incident may give an impression that the relationship between the partners is not working correctly. The role of a person representing a marginal part may be emphasized, especially in the case of negative signals, like the following extract indicates.

“It is of course bad that the whole company is personalized in this one individual but in a major project there are so many procurement actions, negotiations, and others, and the first impressions and decisions made with a hectic schedule...the influence of the sales persons is rather remarkable.”

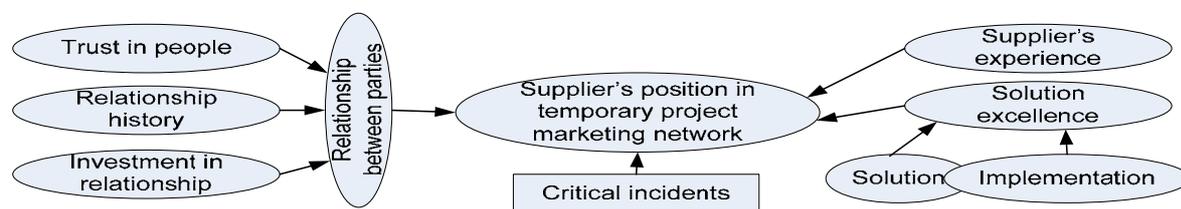


Figure 2. Pilot case study findings, themes related to networks positions.

Conclusions

According to the pilot case study the importance dimension seems to be less significant in the project marketing context. All those suppliers which are regarded as potential, and take part in the process, are important, and respectively can influence the stability of the temporary project network and initiate change (see e.g. Henders 1992, 91). The pilot case neither supported nor disaffirmed the other aspect of importance, namely the replaceability of actor’s resources. The tendency among project buyers is to be able to compare suppliers and solutions, and one actor having a unique resource is not preferred but this issue requires additional data and further studies. Two of the dimensions proposed by the literature review intertwined into a cohesive dimension, and were supported by the pilot case study: functional position and role. The theme solution excellence described the overall solution to the customer’s problem and had two aspects. Firstly, the solution has to be proven and reliable, and secondly in the case of a supply network there has to be a clear plan with well defined actor roles for realizing the solution in practice. Hence, the roles seemed to refer to the supply network roles internal to the network. The roles of the network members have to be clear and justified, and they are part of the solution. There has to be a leading member and all of the other members clearly have to add value to the solution. The identity dimension was supported by the pilot case study as well. However, the participants all emphasized mainly one element in the dimension: experience. Experience turned out to be the most valuable resource a supplier can have in the project context, together with an earlier

successful project relationship with the buyer. The identity required from the suppliers is based on demonstrated experience and success in similar industries and solving similar problems, and the experience is demonstrated with references (see Salminen and Möller 2006).

The relationship dimension was more multifaceted than could directly be expected from the literature review. In customers' perception scale existing relationship based on success in a joint project was outstanding, because it could decrease significantly the supplier uncertainties (see e.g. Cova, Mazet and Salle 2002). In this respect the metrics (volume, age) by Henders (1992) are not directly applicable. The other elements of the relationship were related to the commitment of the supplier to invest in the relationship, personal level relationships, and especially trust between the individuals (see e.g. Hallen, Johanson and Seyed-Mohamed 1991, 31). A project is personalized to the key individuals, and this aspect has not been reported in earlier researches.

One of the findings of the pilot case was that change initiating events, as such critical incidents, can be important in the project marketing context. It turned out to be much easier to destroy a relationship than to build it. The incidents which the customers perceived very negatively were related either to the supply network's internal relationships or directly to the key individuals of the suppliers. A single incident can influence on the buyer's perception in such a way that there is no common future for the two.

Table 1. Summary of pilot case findings.

Dimensions derived from literature	Supported	Comments
Importance	No	
Functional position	Yes	
Role	Yes	Roles of actors part of solution
Identity	Yes	Experience and references emphasized
Strength of relationships/relational position	Yes	Much wider dimension than expected

Research methodology

The research approach will be systematic combining (Dubois and Gadde 2002), in which, neither induction nor deduction alone is used. Instead, theoretical framework, empirical fieldwork, and case analysis evolve simultaneously. Dubois and Gadde (ibid) argue that systematic combining is especially suitable for theory development in single case studies. Case studies are capable of capturing the dynamics of the studied phenomenon and providing a comprehensive view of a situation or an object of study in its specific context (Easton 1995; Eisenhardt 1989). Case studies are especially suitable for studying industrial networks, such as temporary project networks (Easton 1995).

Research question one will be answered by using a literature review and by conducting a case study. The participants of the first case study will be from industries, in which major projects are frequently purchased by experienced project personnel. Paper and steel industries, like in the pilot case, provide a context with projects very critical to the users' activity chains, and provide kind of a deviant case approach. Participants should be familiar with purchasing turn key projects, in which the suppliers' scope includes the total project and respectively the uncertainties and risks related to the suppliers are bigger than in other types of projects. The participants will be from different countries in order to have a wide perspective to the dimensions of the network position. Research questions two and three will be answered by conducting a single case study, where the unit of analysis is the dyadic relationship between the marketer and the buyer in a temporary project marketing network. A major turn key project in either paper or steel industry supplied by a supplier network provides an environment for a fruitful data collection for the purpose of the study. The interviews will be analyzed with interpretive content analysis like in the pilot case study.

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