

Relationship in Service Supply Chain: an Analysis of Intangible Factors in Brazilian Foreign Trade Companies

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Abstract

The current paper has the objective to understand the subjective (intangible) aspects into the network and supply chain relationships, giving more attention to the service industry particularities, between foreign trade companies in Vitória/ES. We are especially interested in motivational and enablers aspects. The research strategy is quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative approach will be accomplished through a questionnaire, that will be send to 140 companies. This phase will identify the companies that will take part in the second research phase, the qualitative one. The qualitative approach will be developed making interviews with those selected firms. For analysing the data we will adopt speech analysis technique. Our main research findings, for now, is the understanding of researchs lacks in subjective/intangible matter, mainly those related to business networks. Besides, there are, also, few empirical works. Our main contribution is to improve the empirical studies on network and supply chain relationship, making possible to expand the theoretical frameworks.

Introduction

The industrial system has been changing tremendously in the last four decades. Therefore, the vast majority of corporations have been adapting themselves to survive and grow, considering the volatility and the uncertainty of new business environment. One of the most important changes in trends and managerial practices that emerged is the organisation/business network, in which firms improve their interaction, making their economic and social relationship more stable and close.

According to Parkhe (1998b, p. 219) "the familiar model of a single company doing all (or even most) things in-house is becoming increasingly obsolete". Following the same perspective, Clegg and Hardy (1998) strengthen the relevance of "organisational focus", affirming that the borders that would enclose the organisation have fell down. The corporations "chains", "conglomerated", "networks" and "strategic alliances" has produced the deprivation of the firms' characteristics. Oliver (1990, p.241) characterizes interorganisational relations as "the relatively enduring transactions, flows and linkages that occur among or between organisations and one or more organisations in its environment".

The interorganisational relationship into the network can be analysed in two different ways. The first one considers the operational (objective / tangible) relations factors, that is, how the operational activities and processes are established and how they run into the networks. As example we can detach communication, performance measurement and control, long-term commitment, strategic orientation and innovation process. The second way should one analyse those not operational (subjective) factors like: trust, cooperation, partner environment, partner reputation, mutuality, power asymmetry management, legitimacy and reciprocity. The second analysis gives special attention to the intangible side of relationship, trying to achieve the long-term supply chain management maintenance and growing.

Parkhe (1998b) emphasizes that simultaneously to the cooperation and competition (co-opetition) strategy, the changing in internal and external alliances environment create a potential changing in which the co-opetition can fall or rise. The most frequent changes, in those environments, are caused by changes in the subjective (intangible) relationship factors, because of their personal, social and cultural influences, growing their volatility.

Our research interest is the subjective (intangible) aspects into the network relationships and on supply chain relationships. However, in the current work, we are interested in understanding the service industry particularities, giving special attention to the service of foreign trade companies in Vitória/ES. First of all, we are trying to empirically identify the possible differences between the subjective relationship factors of the traditional "product supply chain" and untraditional "service supply chain". Besides, we are investigating how the companies, along the foreign trade network/supply chain, manage their third-party and supply relationship.

To achieve that, we are developing research that point out the characteristics of networks we are looking for, developing studies based in the subjective aspects (intangible), making possible to build our theoretical framework. The current theoretical approach has the purpose of summarize the networks subjective aspects that are divided in two groups. The "motivational aspects", composed by the factors that motivate the network relationships structure, compose the first one. The second one is composed by the "enablers aspects", that are the elements that keep and help the mantainance of relationships processes. Following our theoretical approach a questionnaire has being developed and it will be send in June 2006. This is the first phase of research. The questionnaire will help us identify those companies (the focal) and their Third-party for developing the our qualitative research in each one. This qualitative research has the objective to deeply understand the both two aspects detached in theoretical review.

Interorganisational Relationships

The interorganisational relationships are dynamic beginning, developing and changing in time, promoting interaction among organisations, groups and individuals. This interaction process influences the links formation, consolidating the networks which consist of all interactions among organisations in a population, without necessarily concern if it is a dyadic relation, a set of organisations or a set of action (Whetten apud Cunha 2004). These dyadic relationships are the simplest form of an

interorganisational relationship and occur between two organisations that consider each other in defining their roles and expectations (Van de Ven 1976).

It is possible to emphasise the supply chain from the network. Cox, Sanderson and Watson (2001, p. 28) define supply chain as "the extended network of dyadic exchange relationships that must exist for the creation of any product or service that is supplied to a final customer ". Thus, Lambert and Cooper (2000) believe that the chain captures the synergy between integration and management of the organisations that relate with each other in the network. The main advantages gotten in the supply chain are costs' reduction, quality improvement, technologies development and lead times' reduction (New 1997).

Larsen (1999) affirms that an increasing number of relationships in the chain are based on the partnership. In this way, when cooperative, the dyadic relationships are what we call partnership. Boddy, Macbeth and Wagner (2000, p. 1004-1005) define partnership as "a situation in which there is an attempt you build close, long-term links between organisations in supply chain that remain distinct, which choose to work closely together". In other words, the partnership is an interorganisational relationship in which cooperative behaviors practices are encouraged instead of adversative. Veludo, Macbeth and Purchase (2004) complement affirming that, from partnership, one expects that the development of complementary capacities, information sharing and jointly planning occur more commonly than usual.

Following this thinking, Cox (2004) points out that the relationship among buyers and suppliers (supply chain), in the last years, mainly after the incorporation of the Japanese models in the West, has been analyzed through a more transparent, collaborative and long term perspective. However, this author detaches that controversies exist in what concerns uncertainty and variability of the demand and dominance (power) of buyer over supplier.

The partnership is also seen as a relationship in which decision-making are shared among the partners and where they reach strategic objectives that they would not reach alone. Those involved in a partnership evaluate the benefits that can get from its partners: if positive, the relation is kept; if negative, those partners are discarded (Ho 2006). Finally, an alliance or partnership of success must be based on trust, loyalty, "win-win" relationships (when all the parts have benefits), common objectives, cooperation, and in open and positive negotiations (Chandra and Kumar 2000; Gronhaug, Henjesand and Koveland, 1999).

Motivational Aspects

Interorganisational relationships, mainly when cooperatives, are supported by several aspects, that arise from relationships and keep them. We call those aspects as motivational, they are the reasons or contingencies that impel organisations to have relationship. Oliver (1990) detaches two assumptions for the interorganisational relationships:

- The organisations take conscientious and intentional decisions with specific intention, therefore a variety of conditions can limit or influence its choices;
- The reason/contingencies explain the reason organisations engage in the relationship from a managerial perspective (top-management), despite the fact relationships normally occur among sub-units of two organisations or even though among individuals in a lower hierarchic level.

Considering those assumptions, Oliver (1990) defines the determinant contingencies of the interorganisational relationships as: necessity, asymmetry, reciprocity, efficiency, stability and legitimacy.

1) Necessity: "An organisation often establishes linkages or exchanges with other organisations in order to meet necessary legal or regulatory requirements" (Oliver 1990, p. 243). This happens, for example, when a government agency demands a license for the purchase of a specific product. Thus, a company can be associated with other which possess such license, while its own documentation does not meet the legal requirements.

2) Asymmetry: The contingency of asymmetry refers to the potential of an organisation to exercise power or control over other organisation or its resources. According to Oliver (1990), power is a function of the organisation's size, the control it has over interorganisational exchanges, the ability to choose a strategy of individual action, the effectiveness of the coercitive strategies and the concentration of raw materials an organisation possesses. Pfeffer and Salancik (1978, p. 67) detach that "one source of conflict in interorganisational field derives from resource scarcity", because the control of an organisation's resource points out the power relations and demonstrate the existing asymmetry among organisations.

3) Reciprocity: In opposition to the contingency of asymmetry, the reciprocity concept is related to "cooperation, colaboration, and coordination among organisations, rather than domination, power and control" (Oliver 1990, p. 244). This contingency has the intention to reach common objectives and benefits. We can stress the formation of horizontal networks, which are constituted by independent companies, but coordinate, jointly, certain activities of cooperation to benefit itself individually, without the privation of its autonomies. One of the benefits of this relationship is markets propection.

4) Efficiency: Organisations seek to relate to others, most of the times, in search of productivity and costs' reduction. The Transaction Costs Theory is consistent with the purpose of the contingency of efficiency, once it considers that one of the main objectives of organisations is to minimize the costs in resources' exchanges within the environment and other organisations, saving time and economic resources (Williamson 2002).

5) Stability: Oliver (1990) also detaches that the formation of organizacionais relationships is an adaptative reponse to environmental uncertainty, in search of stability and previsibility. Parkhe (1998b) affirms that uncertainty is linked to the information quality one organisation possess. In other words, when an organisation provides other with complete and accurate information, probably less uncertainty will be generate and, thus, more stability.

6) Legitimacy: The formation of interorganisational relationships for purpose of increasing legitimay can occur by means of organisation's motivation to demonstrate or improve its reputation, image, prestige or congruence with existing norms in its institutional environment (Oliver 1990). The Institucional Theory understands that organisations seek for legitimacy by adopting structures and processes socially accepted as rules. "The impact of these institutionalized elements in the organisations and situations is enormous. These rules define new organisational situations, redefine the old ones and specify the meaning of copying them "(Meyer and Rowan 1991, p. 45). In this way, the environmental pressures motivate organisations to increase its legitimacy, and this can happen also from the relationship with organisations that has reputation in the market.

Enabler Aspects

The interorganisational relationships enablers influence the development and the maintenance of relationship. Frequently they are immersed into negotiations procedures, agreements and job routines. The enablers we have used to support our research are: power and governance, trust, commitment, reputation, information exchange and conflict resolution.

Power and Governance

One of the aspects in interorganisational relationships is the power asimetry among the chain links. When an organisation takes part in a chain, it must know its position in the alliance. According to Cox (1999), the power is related with the relative capacity of a resource owner to appropriate value for himself, in terms of amount and sustentabilidade, from the participation in the chain. Basically, this author emphasizes the ability of retaining power over its suppliers and in mitigating dependence of them is extremely important for the organisation's position in the relationship and, consequently, for dominance it will exercize over other organisation.

Organisations make an effort to position themselves strategically, in order to retain suppliers' and partners' resources that are difficult to imitate and from which they can construct barriers to protected themselves. Toyota is an example of this. From the moment they perceived the market could imitate their products quickly, they strategically change their position before their suppliers, even buying part

of those companies. In this way, besides reducing its costs, Toyota could influence even strategic decisions of its suppliers (Cox 2004).

Still, a study of Cox (2004) concludes that supplier development and supply chain management has the chance of a better outcome when buyers possess dominance over suppliers or, when at least a power interdependence exists, that is, when the relation among buyer-supplier is the same as that of supplier-buyer. Still, according to Cox, Sanderson and Watson (2001, p. 34), "the power regimes perspective provides a way of thinking about who gets what, where, how, and when in the supply chain".

In opposition to this idea, Kumar (1996) questions what is better: the use of fear and intimidation, and, therefore, power, or the development of trust relations. He demonstrated that the use of power in relations can be interesting in short term relationships, but detaches that when a part explores its advantage on the other, the last search for solutions to resist. In contrast, in case that they choose to work together, they have much to gain jointly.

Power also manifests itself through the governance that exists in interorganisational relationships. As Williamson (2005) says, interorganisational relationship can be described as a manner to facilitate the buying and selling relation, by means of products' or services' standardization and establishment of balanced prices for both parts. Therefore, it is necessary to manage this relation and the governance does that one. Thus, governance is an intervention for conflict resolution and for attaining mutual profits. Still, according to Williamson (2005), governance is important for the complex transactions, where restrict requirements are enclosed in the process. The author says also that governance usually is examined through two analytical levels: the formal responsibilities (politics, laws, contracts, etc.) e the informal ones (arranged with the customers).

Governance mechanisms can be related to the markets or to the hierarchies. The first ones depend on the prices, the competition and contracts to keep all the interested parts in a transaction informed of its rights and responsibilities. The hierarchic forms of governance are coordinated by an authority who congregates the interested parts in the transaction and informs them of its rights and responsibilities (Williamson 2002).

It is important to point out that networks, supply chains and interorganisational relationships just can be understood and conducted if organisational actors understand the power and dominance structures that exist. Despite this, the use of power in partnership relationships is contradictory, because one of the conditions for this kind of relationship is that they must be developed in a "win-win" manner.

Trust

The term trust has several concepts in literature, each one emphasizing a particular aspect of the relationship. Sahay (2003, p. 556), from more than a dozen of trust concepts found in literature, suggests that trust is "an expectancy of positive (or non negative) outcomes that one can receive based on the expected actions of another party in an interaction characterized by uncertainty". In this way, Parkhe (1998a) detaches that there are two types of uncertainty. One concerns to uncertainty regarding to future events and the other refers to uncertainty related to the other part's reaction of these future events. Thus, trust is an expectation based on partner's future actions and on partner's behavior over future uncertainties, this means that the organisation is exposing itself by relating to others (Sahay 2003).

During the partnership building process, there is an initial period of "honey moon", until an unexpected problem happens, solved in an unsatisfactory way for one of the parts. Thus, uncertainty and unpredictability can provoke interferences in trust among organisations in supply chain. Zucker (apud Parkhe 1998b, p. 222) makes an interesting relation between trust and distrust: "trust and distrust do not share a direct, simple relationship. Violation of expected behaviors produces a sense of disruption of trust, of profound confusion, but not of distrust". Distrust only arises when there is suspicion that expectation were violated intentionally, and that such violations are likely to occur repeatedly.

Kumar (1996) detaches other point of view. For him, what really distinguishes trust from distrust is the ability of the parts of 'make a vote of faith': the parts believe that each one is interested in the welfare of the other and that none will act without considering the impact of this action in the other. Still,

according to Kwon and Suh (2004), while trust provides the partners with an open communication and inclination to face risks, the lack of it provokes the increase of transaction costs.

Trust, then, reflects "confidence" and "vulnerability". It is the belief of the partners that one will not explore other's vulnerabilities and will not use of opportunism. Currently, trust is seen as one of the most important factors for the development and maintenance of relationships among organisations, and therefore, it is of great relevance that organisations and actors give attention to this element in the relationships' construction.

Commitment

Morgan and Hunt (1994, p. 23) conceptualized commitment as "an exchanging partner believing that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it; this is the committed party believes the relationship endures indefinitely", emphasizing that commitment is a central element in the relationships.

For Anderson and Weitz (1992, p. 19), commitment to a relationship is "a desire to develop a stable relationship, a willingness to make short-term sacrifices to maintain the relationship, and a confidence in the stability of the relationship". Those authors had developed a model where the commitment is a function of the perception that one has of the other's commitment, the assets specificity or investments that demonstrate devotion of the party and other factors, such as the communication level, reputation and relationship's history.

Still, commitment, when added to trust, encourages managers to work in a cooperative way with partners and to resist short term alternatives, investing in the long term relationship they already possess. In summary, these two elements conduct the relationship to cooperation, providing efficiency and productivity (Morgan and Hunt 1994).

Reputation

Reputation is another aspect linked to trust. This relation exists because sometimes trust that exists between partners is based on the reputation of both parties or of one of them. Reputation, for Parkhe (1998a) represents a sequency of passed behaviors that had been accumulated and generate a certain expectation on the partner's future behaviors. As better is the consideration of those passed behaviors, as better is the partner's reputation.

Reputation is defined by Sahay (2003) as the belief that the partner is honest, that means, the recognition of his honesty. Honesty (when the partner acts as accorded) and integrity (when the partner acts as moral and ethical code) compose the trustworthiness. Trustworthiness, then, according to Barney and Hansen (1994), is the merit of other's trust, is the reputation of trust. Thus, reputation is passed by partners to other possible partners and is responsible for the development of the partnership's credibility. This way, trust is an attribute of a relationship between partners and trustworthiness is an individual attribute of the partner.

An organisation's credibility in the market, besides being resulted of its reputation with the main agents with whom it relates (supplying, customers, partners, etc) (Anderson and Weitz 1992), is also resulted of organisation's reputation with the community, which form the image and legitimacy of the organisation (Castro, Sáez and Lopez 2004). Hall (apud Houston 2003) affirms that reputation provides the market with information related to quality, integrity and oportunistic behavior and that it has a essential strategic paper and great impact in organisation's success.

This way, it is emphasized that organisation's reputation is directly linked to the credibility and trustworthiness that it has within other links of the network, being important in the search of new markets and the formation of new relationships.

Information Exchange

For Bowersox, Closs and Stank (2000) information is power. Therefore, the authors affirm that the information exchange between organisations is the key to open the doors of relationships's success. However, many of them are reluctant to share informations and it can cause trust inhibition (Handfield

et al. 2000). Still, partners who provide other parties with accurate, complete and timely information, besides reducing uncertainty and vulnerability, have great possibilities of achieving the partnership's Goals (Anderson and Weitz 1992; Mohr and Spekman 1998; Parkhe 1998b).

Communication among organisations also can be understood according to three aspects: the quality, information exchange level and participation. Communication quality is related to the relevance and credibility of the information. Information exchange level relates to the content of the exchanged information (operational or strategical). Participation relates to jointly planning and establishment of goals (Mohr and Spekman 1998).

For Bowersox, Closs and Stank (2000), four changes should occur when there is information exchange. The first one is related to the establishment of trust, which increases the volume of information exchanged. The second change depends on the managers' agreement that benefits do not emerge only from sale, but also from information exchange. Information confidentiality between is the third change and this means that information exchanged must be kept in the participant organisations, what results in conflicts reduction. Finally, the fourth change is related to the process: information exchange can be operationalized through systems the organisations possess, employees who work in both organisations, third-party, in other words, the process can occur in many ways since organisations are willing to share informations.

This aspect of the interorganisational relationships, the information exchange, can be seen as a factor of organisation's exposition, but it is one of the key elements for relationship' success and also one of the enabler aspects of trust.

Conflict Resolution

Thomas (1992) defines conflict as the process that initiates when a party perceives others' frustration, or is frustrated by the other, for some reason. This author developed a model that relates four variables of conflict. They are: behavioral predispositions (seen as the party 'style'), social pressures (influences of the society), incentive structures (the degree of interest of the third-party in the conflict) and rules and procedures (which constrain the process).

Applying this concept to interorganisational relationships, one can say that conflict can difficult one's disposition in dedicating to the other, or even though to trust the other. According to Gaski (apud Anderson and Weitz 1992) conflict is one of the most studied phenomem in supply chain, because it has a great potential to destroy the organisations' relationships.

Conflict occurs because of organisation's dependence on others, or on other's resources. Interdependence between organisations appears when an actor does not control its total necessary conditions for the achievement of objectives or attainment of desired results from an action according to Pfeffer and Salancik (1978). Bengtsson and Kock (1999) affirm that the formal or informal agreements, based in social norms and trust, adjust the distribution of power and dependence between organisations and, for this reason, conflicts are rare.

Analysing the conflict resolution, Mohr and Spekman (1998) affirm that when organisations decide to solve problems jointly, a satisfactory solution for both parties usually is reached, emphasizing that this kind of attempt is more constructive than the use of coercion or power. Therefore, a positive solution depends exclusively on the parties involved, and influences the success of the partnership.

Context and methodology

Vitória is the capital of Espírito Santo, a state located in South-Eastern of Brazil, having 6 ports within an area of 70km. The metropolitan region, called Great Vitória, has approximately 2 million of inhabitants. Approximately 140 foreign trade companies, associated to Espírito Santo Foreign Trade Companies Union – SINDIEX, compose the universe of our research.

The current research strategy is quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative approach is going to identify those companies in which we are going to develop the qualitative research. This first phase is necessary because there is little information about them. The research instrument (questionnaire) is presented in the end of paper. We are now finishing the procedurings to, send it in May or June 2006.

It has the purpose to identify in which way the companies understand the partnership “motivational and enabler aspects” related to their third-parties, with the objective to identify focal company (ies) and its (their) partners. We have only 140 companies, therefore we are going to send the questionnaires to all of them, and we will not make a sample.

After that, we will do qualitative research, making interviews with the selected firms, using speech analysis technique for data analysis. The interviews will be made in August/September 2006. We are using mainly Gillham (2000), Oppeheim (2003) and Yin (2001) for the research instruments development.

Research findings

We would like to emphasise and detach that most of organisation's network studies have their main focus, in majority, on the objective approach. However, the interest in subjective/intangible approach (focus of current paper) in business networks has been increasing in the last few years. Yet, the number of empirical works is far less than the theoretical ones. Moreover in Brazil, few researches have been developed, even theoretical or empirical, in supply chain collaboration, which undertake the subjective aspects.

Main Contributions

Our theoretical contribution is to understand trust into the organisations networks/supply chains. To understand in which sense organisations' reputation in its business environment contributes to the trustworthy in their relationship. To comprehend how the power asymmetry is managed in supply chains in which there are companies with great difference of sizes. To determinate how the local aspects influence the relationships among companies.

We have observed that the researches on supply chain management, in general, emphasize industrial companies analysing the “product flow”. Few works have been made in “service supply chain” in which the most important product is the information. Therefore, this is the main managerial contribution of this paper. As complement, those foreign trade companies have great importance for our economy besides having relevant social magnitude for our City, because of the lack of industrial firms around here.

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Questionnaire

Dear Sir / Madam

For answering the following questions, please, think in a **Third-Party (TP) or supply** that you consider very important to your firm growing. We are, especially, interested in understanding a little bite more about your relationship with those third part.

My company have relationship with the Third-Party(TP) for:					
<input type="checkbox"/> < 2 years	<input type="checkbox"/> 2-5 years	<input type="checkbox"/> > 5 years			
	Totally Disagree	Disagree	Do not agree nor disagree	Agree	Totally Agree
I work cooperatively with my Third-Party (TP) seeking for the achievement of common objectives and mutual benefits.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I work cooperatively with my TP, but the risks are individual, of each company.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have a formal contract with my TP, that organize the operations.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I negotiate price concerning if the price I pay is enough to TP survives in long term.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
During uncertainty periods, the TP is always ready to support my firm in that I'm needing.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Usually my TP fulfills those promises it makes, even if they are not inside contract.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have some doubt about information reliability coming from my TP.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I believe that my TP works ethically and honestly.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The TP works competitively in price as well as in quality.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I and TP exchange, in detail, operational information.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My TP and I plan jointly the attendance of new customers.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I and TP solve operational problems doing periodic meetings.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
If the penalty is inside formal contract I don't care about solving our operational problem using the informal (meeting) way.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>