Step by step interviews
-A technique for studying negative subjects in B2B settings-

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Abstract

Purpose

The main purpose of the paper is to develop a step by step interview technique that is useful particularly when studying negative subjects within business relationships. The interview technique is based on CIT. The focus lies on a process perspective that ranges from getting access to doing follow up interviews. A secondary purpose of the paper is to show how the use of step by step interviews generates rich and deep data that can be used for theory development. The nature of this paper is mostly empirical.

Empirical setting

The empirical background for this paper is two case studies within two different industries in Finland; the industry of natural products and the steel industry. Both cases consist of a group of competitors that are cooperating with each other. The topic of the study is conflicts, and more particularly different elements of conflict situations. Examples of elements are cause, topic, importance and outcome of conflict situations. A total amount of 37 interviews with 13 informants has been made.

Research findings

The findings of this paper indicate that the researcher should follow a step by step approach when carrying out interviews of negative topics in business relationships. Several occasions of contacts between the researcher and the informant are crucial in order to build up an atmosphere of trust. This is particularly important when studying phenomena that generally are perceived as negative. Each meeting between the informant and the researcher should be on a different level. The character of the interviews moves from abstract to detail. The first interview should be on a broad level by giving the informants the possibility to “tell their stories” (Morse 1994, p. 229). Later on, at another occasion, the researcher may use follow-up interviews to gather more targeted information and thereby fill the gaps left by initiating interviews.

Main contribution

The paper develops a practical research technique for studying negative subjects within business relationships. The CIT is applied in a B2B setting and especially modified in order to suit studies of subjects that generally are perceived as negative. Data generation and the interpretation process should follow a step wise pattern. This is particularly crucial when negative subjects are in focus and access and trust play great roles for data generation.

Keywords: business relationships, negative subjects, personal interviews, critical incident technique

Introduction

According to Gummesson (2003) B2B firms live with factors such as chaos and change and therefore this should be considered in research methodologies. Within the field of business networks there has recently appeared different streams of research focusing on negative subjects of industrial relationships, such as dissolution (Tähtinen and Halinen-Kaila 1997, 2000; Stewart 1998; Tähtinen 1998,1999,2002; Alajoutsijärvi, Möller and Tähtinen 2000), conflicts (Håkansson and Våland 2000; Våland 2001,2002) and stress (Holmlund-Rytkönen and Strandvik 2005). All these subjects can generally be perceived as sensitive and therefore the researcher should apply a research technique that enables the gathering of such information.

According to Janesick (1994) access and entry are crucial for qualitative research. She writes that the researcher already at the beginning of the study must establish trust and reliable communication patterns with the informant. This is done in order to get the informant to willingly share opinions with the researcher. Morse (1994) writes that a good qualitative researcher should be prepared to learn to be trusted in the research setting. Vaaland and Håkansson (2000) stress that when examining conflicts, the constructs used by the researcher are crucial in getting access and building trust and openness with informants. Reve (1992) comments on possible biases of his study as he writes that the CEOs may have presented success stories rather than pointing out conflictual aspects of the companies industrial relationships.

When studying negative subjects within business settings the critical incident technique (CIT) is considered as useful. The main reason for this is that it is expected to be easier for the informant to talk about incidents or events instead of directly talking about conflicts. The originator of the CIT is Flanagan (1954). The technique has been developed into several different directions since it was established. Originally the technique consisted of a set of procedures that were used to collect direct observations of human behavior. This was done in order to facilitate the potential usefulness of the observations when it comes to solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles. The CIT involves a certain logics of questioning. Flanagan (1954) particularly stresses that the CIT does not include a single set of regulations governing the collection of data. According to Flanagan (1954) the technique should rather be viewed as a flexible set of principles that should be modified and adapted in order to meet a specific research situation.

Within a business setting the CIT has been used for example by Holmlund-Rytkönen and Strandvik (2005) and Voima (2002). In these studies the CIT is applied within case study research. Easton (1995) writes that a majority of the studies within the business network approach consciously or unconsciously are based on case studies. In case studies personal interviews often have a central position as a method of receiving rich descriptions of a phenomenon. There are a variety of personal interviews that can be used; some are strictly structured, while others are more unstructured. Different research subjects require different types of interviews.

Purpose

The main purpose of the paper is to develop a step by step interview technique that is useful particularly when studying negative subjects within business relationships. The interview technique is based on CIT. The focus lies on a process perspective that ranges from getting access to doing follow up interviews. A secondary purpose of the paper is to show how the use of step by step interviews generates rich and deep data that can be used for the development of existing knowledge about conflicts within business relationships.

Theoretical background

Walker (1985) writes that qualitative research is suitable when the topic studied can be regarded as sensitive, which is the case in this study. Morse (1994) writes that qualitative research is only as good as the researcher. According to him it is the researcher's skills, patience and wisdom that play a central role in the gathering of necessary information.

Flexibility is a part of qualitative research (Marshall and Rossman 1989; Miles and Huberman 1994; Glesne and Peshkin 1992). Questions can be modified, added or deleted. In qualitative research the researcher has the possibility to invent or put together new tools or techniques, or to add informants. It is not pre set which interpretive practices to apply. (Merriam 1988; Denzin and Lincoln 2000) “To us it seems clear that research is actually more a craft than a slavish adherence to methodological rules.” (Miles and Huberman 1994, p.5) Eisenhardt (1989) says that the adjustments provide the researcher the possibility to probe emergent ideas or to benefit from special opportunities that appear in a given situation. It is accepted to add methods for data generation during an empirical study because researchers are aiming at understanding each case individually in as much depth as possible (Eisenhardt 1989). Eisenhardt (1989), however, stresses that this opportunity should not be viewed as a license to be unsystematic.

Access

Access is critical when it comes to the choice of the sample. It may not be easy to get access (Bonoma 1985). A central aspect of research success is the gaining of trust. Access refers to the existing possibilities to receive empirical data and information that are based on reality. Access consequently has a great importance in order for the researcher to receive information that is necessary to finish a work or project. Access is also about coming near the studied phenomenon to really figure out what is happening. (Gummesson 1991) According to Janesick (1994) access and entry are sensitive for qualitative research. She writes that the researcher already at the beginning of the study must establish trust and reliable communication patterns with the informant. This is done in order to get the informant to willingly share opinions with the researcher. Morse (1994) writes that a good qualitative researcher should be prepared to learn to be trusted in the research setting. The researcher must also be patient and flexible and wait for acceptance by informants. Access is usually improved if the researcher is able to build a trustful relationship with the informant. It is important to create a trustful relationship already in the beginning of the research process, because it facilitates a natural interpretation of the informant’s state of life. (Janesick 1994)

The researcher has to be careful when empirically examining sensitive topics such as interorganizational conflict. Individuals feel more comfortable discussing about positive and neutral matters, than talking about negative experiences. It is generally easier to express feelings of joy, happiness and success than expressing feelings of failure, grief and bitterness. Vaaland and Håkansson (2000) stress that when examining conflicts, the constructs used by the researcher are crucial in getting access and building trust and openness with informants. Vaaland (2002) argues that there are at least two problems involved when applying the concept of conflict in interaction with informants. Firstly, there is a risk that only manifest conflict will be regarded as conflict and secondly the concept of conflict can be questioned when it comes to building trust and openness with key informants. Reve (1992) comments on possible biases of his study as he writes that the CEOs may have presented success stories rather than pointing out issues related to conflicts of the companies industrial relationships. In his study Vaaland (2002) chose to use the word “friction” instead of conflicts as he was approaching the informants. Friction was considered to be a more neutral and every-day concept than conflict, which generally raises negative feelings and attitudes. Nordin (2006) writes that “the conflict phenomenon is inherently difficult to study, requiring caution when interacting with the interviewees so that the relationship is not jeopardised”. In his study of intraorganizational and interorganizational alliance conflict Nordin (2006) writes that he only talked specifically about conflict when he had a close relationship with the informant. In other occasions he chose to talk about frictional events.

The art of questioning

There are different types of interviews, for example personal interviews, group interviews and telephone interviews. Within business and management research personal interviews are one of the most common methods for data generation (Remenyi et al. 1998). The nature of an interview may vary from totally structured to totally unstructured. Yin (1989) writes that case study interviews most often are of an “open-ended nature” (p. 89), meaning that the researcher can ask the informants for example about their opinions of events. An advantage with an interview is that it enables the researcher to receive a large amount of data within a short period of time. Furthermore there is a possibility of receiving clarifications by asking follow-up questions. (Marshall and Rossman 1989; Patton 1990) Some advantages with personal interviewing are the possibility of receiving depth and detailed information and the potential of the interviewer to influence the situation. This can for example be done by asking clarifying questions.

There are certain recommendations concerning the logics of questioning in qualitative research. The interview sessions should start with a briefing meaning that the interviewer defines the situation and briefly tells about the purpose of the interview (Kvale 1996). Patton (1987, 1990) prefers to initiate interviews with questions that are easy for the informant to answer. These questions require minimum recall and interpretation from the informant's point of view. A context should be established before turning into questions involving feelings and opinions. One possibility of initiating an interview is to have an informal discussion about an issue that is different from the actual focus of the study. This allows all actors to relax. (Remenyi et al. 1998) Morse (1994) as well as Fontana and Frey (2000) gives the advice of keeping the first interview on a broad level by giving the informants the possibility to "tell their stories" (Morse 1994, p. 229). Later on, at another occasion, the researcher may use follow-up interviews to gather more targeted information and thereby fill the gaps left by initiating interviews. A similar approach is suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as well as Perry (1998).

Critical incidents technique

As a technique for empirically approaching the phenomenon of conflicts within business-to-business settings the critical incidents technique (CIT) is used here. The originator of the CIT is Flanagan (1954). The technique has been developed into several different directions since it was established. Originally the technique consisted of a set of procedures that were used to collect direct observations of human behavior. This was done in order to facilitate the potential usefulness of the observations when it comes to solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles. The technique involves procedures for the collection of observed incidents that have special significance and meet systematically defined criteria. An incident is defined as "any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act" (p. 327). In order to be critical "an incident must occur in a situation where the purpose or intent of the act seems fairly clear to the observer and where its consequences are sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning its effects" (p. 327). The CIT was first applied within a business setting in a study by Miller and Flanagan in 1949. (Flanagan 1954)

The CIT involves a certain logics of questioning. Flanagan (1954) refers to a dissertation from 1949 (Finkle) about critical requirements of industrial foremen. The interview technique used in this study shows an early example of how questions are asked to the informants. The informants in Finkle's study was asked to "think of a time" when something particular occurred. The informant was asked to think both of negative as well as positive situations. Flanagan (1954) particularly stresses that the CIT does not include a single set of regulations governing the collection of data. According to Flanagan (1954) the technique should rather be viewed as a flexible set of principles that should be modified and adapted in order to meet a specific research situation. To be able to study conflicts in relationships between competitors, the Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan 1954) is considered as useful. The main reason for this is that it is expected to be easier for the respondent to talk about incidents or events instead of directly talking about conflicts.

Relationships as such can be considered as a sensitive area, but especially when studying crises, conflicts, failures and dissolutions of business relationships, we need to develop an appropriate research technique for approaching the phenomenon. Sensitive topics usually involve some kind of negative feelings, behavior or attitude, which in a research situation may cause anxiety, resistance and unwillingness to share information. Lee and Renzetti (1993, p. 5) define a sensitive topic as being "… one that potentially poses for those involved a substantial threat, the emergence of which renders problematic for the researcher and/or the researched the collection, holding, and/or dissemination of research data." According to Renzetti and Lee (1993) possible problems, for example methodological and technical, need to be considered at every stage of the research on a sensitive topic. Sensitive topics therefore need sensitive methods. It is a question of finding the right atmosphere at the interview situation, so that both the interviewer and informant feel comfortable.

A practical research technique

Empirical study

The step-by step- interview technique, which will be developed in this section is based on two case studies from groups of cooperation competitors from two industries in Finland: companies manufacturing boxes and chassis for trailers as well as the industry of natural products. The purpose of the work was to develop our theoretical and empirical understanding of the nature of conflicts in intercompetitor cooperation from a business network perspective. The empirical study has been done from year 2003 to 2006. The total amount of informants is 16 and the total amount of interviews is 36. The interview process has followed a step-wise pattern. This is something that is also advocated by Morse (1994). A majority of qualitative studies require multiple interview sessions with an informant in order to receive trustworthy findings (Glesne and Peshkin 1992).

Step 1: Initial phone call

The generation of access has followed a step-wise pattern. During the first contact occasion with an informant, which always was done by phone, I presented my research interest as cooperation between competitors and asked if the informant would approve to take part in an initial meeting where we would discuss more. First in the end of the phone call I told the informant that a specific focus of the study is incompatibility or conflicts in cooperation between competitors. It was first at the initial meetings that I told the informants more thoroughly about the details of interest related to this topic. In order to receive access and build up a trustworthy relationship with an informant I stressed both the focus on ”everyday” conflicts and the provided anonymity of all informants and companies. During the first initial meetings I used the term friction instead of conflict, but as I proceed I noticed that it felt better to be honest and straightforward from the beginning. In order to receive access both to the companies and to the studied phenomenon it was enough to stress the everyday nature of the meaning of a conflict, to provide anonymity and to be in contact with the informant during several occasions.

Step 2: Initial meeting

The initial phone call was followed by an initial meeting (IM). The initial meeting was usually held at the informant's office. The IM started with an information guide. At the IM I went through the guide together with the informant and each of us had a guide of or own. It was only at one occasion that the informant requested to receive some information by e-mail before the IM and then the guide was sent be e-mail in advance. The guide briefly contains all the relevant information about the study, namely my contact information, the focus of the study, method and timetable. In relation to case 1 the guide also contained a list of possible benefits for the participating companies. This part was, however, left out in case 2. A general belief is that companies are more willing to participate in studies of which they get something in return. I, however, found out that participation in the study was not directly dependent on the gains received from it. If it is hard for the researcher to come up with any relevant advantages provided to the companies, nothing should be promised. This is only one example of how a researcher may learn, develop and refine the research instruments a long the way when carrying out the study.

With hindsight another disadvantage can be found with the original guide. When initially contacting the informants I presented my research topic as cooperation between competitors. It was the guide at the initial meeting that firstly revealed the focus on conflicts. The step between the initial phone call and the initial meeting can be considered as too high and therefore it might be appropriate to smoothen it down. The dilemma is to find the right balance between being totally honest to the informant so that he or she receives enough information for knowing if the company is interested in participating in the study and not to give too much information so that participation perhaps seems time-consuming or the topic seems complicated. It is recommendable to start the IM with some form of guide containing relevant information about the study, but I would like to suggest some changes to the guide used in this study. Firstly the topic of the study could have been presented at a more abstract level, meaning that the specific research questions should not be mentioned to the informants. The risk with showing the questions to the informant is that the topic seems complicated and hard to get a grip of. These questions are anyhow asked as follow up questions during the following interview, which is the conflict incident interview.

After going through the interview guide I usually told the informant to tell about three general topics: the company's background, competitors and what kind of relation they have with them. This was, however, done differently in case 1 and in case 2. In every interview I had an interview guide that was only used by myself and thereby not shown to the informants. In case 1 this guide varied from interview to interview, while the same guide was used for every meeting in case 2. Despite of the guide used I was still focusing on getting answers to the three general topics presented above. A reason for doing it differently in case 1 and case 2 is that in case 1 the informants knew which other informants and companies that were participating in the study, while in case 2 the informants did not have any knowledge of the other informants or companies. In case 1 it was therefore easier to be open-minded and perhaps ask more specific questions, for example to mention some of the other participating companies. As anonymity was a key criterion in case 2, it was considered as more appropriate to use exactly the same guide at each meeting. The amount and content of the follow up questions varied to a great extent from interview to interview. At the end of the initial meeting I asked the informants if they would be willing to participate in another personal interview focusing on conflicts at a more deeper level. This is also suggested by Glesne and Peshkin (1992), who write that the researcher should pave the way for the following interview at the end of the present interview.

Step 3: Conflict incident interview

The following step in the research process is to meet with the informants once again and carry out an interview that is based on the critical incidents technique. In this case the topic of the study is conflicts and therefore this step is called conflict incident interview (CII). The logic of the conflict incident interviews can be described by the following quotations: "The shorter the interviewer's questions and the longer the subject's answers, the better." (Kvale 1996, p. 145) and "Talk little, listen a lot" (Wolcott 1994, p. 348). The basic idea of the critical incident interview was that it should contain only one question that would be written in print and showed to the informants. This is the conflict incident question that was shown to the informants:

> The title of this study is: "The nature of conflicts in intercompetitor cooperation" and it is directed at identifying and analysing situations of conflicts in cooperation between competitors.
>
> Conflict occurs when at least one of the actors perceives incompatibility in relation to the other actor/s, concerning something that the first actor finds important.
>
> I will now ask you to describe situations when you have perceived incompatibility in cooperation with competitors. Please describe the situation in a detailed way as possible, from the beginning to the end.

In reality each interview turned out to be unique, because of the personality of the informant, the company's involvement in cooperation between competitors and the informant's interpretation of situations involving conflicts. Different informants need to be approached differently, meaning that everybody is told some basic issues, but some are told more based on the circumstances (Glesne and Peshkin 1992).

In order to understand the studied phenomenon openness to the informants was needed. In some interviews more follow up questions were needed than in other interviews. The content of the follow up questions varied depending on what had been told at the initial meeting and how much the informant was able to tell based on the text presented above.

Some informants were more extrovert, talkative and capable of expressing themselves than others, who were more introvert, quiet and sometimes find it very hard to come up with conflict situations. The length of the IMs varied from about 15 minutes to 2,5 hours. At some meetings I did not have to ask more than a couple of questions while at others it sometimes felt like a "rope pulling". In one case it turned out so that an informant claimed that the company was not involved in any kind of cooperation with a competitor and that the company therefore maybe was not right for my study. The fact is that I knew that the company was relevant for the study, as it had been mentioned as a competitor and cooperating partner by another company involved in the study. The consequence of this was that the interview questions both for the initial meeting and for the conflict incidents interview did not seem relevant for the particular interview. In order to capture the relationship between the company and the other company, which considered the first company as a competitor, I suddenly quickly had to change the focus of my interview guide. I decided to ask the informant to instead tell me about relations with other companies, i.e. customers, and in this way I was able to identify the company that considered the informant's company as a competitor.

Actually only one of the informants responded to the conflict incident question as I had expected everyone to do. After reading the interview guide and thinking silently for a while the informant started to tell about conflict situations in relation to competitors in a very systematic manner by numbering the situations from one to seven. Most informants, however, needed some help in form of follow up questions in order to get started. If the informants did not know how to begin a fruitful method turned out to be to ask them to think about conflict situations in relation to each company they mentioned at the initial meeting, with whom they cooperate. I sometimes assisted the informant by writing the names of the companies on a separate sheet of paper. I started to write the name of one company and asked the informant to tell about conflict situation in relation to this particular company and thereafter I wrote the name of another company. A potential danger with simultaneously writing the names of all competitors is that the informant may start thinking about the next company before reflecting enough about the previous. There is consequently a risk of loosing information when moving forward too fast. An advantage by writing out and thereby visualizing the names of the competitors of interest is that the interviewer is able to help the informant to stick to the central theme of the interview.

Generally the informants at first had difficulties in telling about conflict situations in such a detail so that follow up questions could be avoided. Sometimes the informant briefly reflected upon a conflict situation during the IM and if he or she did not go further into that situation during the CII I deliberately drew the attention to the particular situation by directly asking about it.

The information received at one interview was consequently used for the next interview. This is probably something that every researcher faces, who studies business relationships and takes the perceptions of all actors involved into consideration. Both advantages and disadvantages can be found here. Generally we can assume that the more interviews a researcher does within a certain case consisting of a group of informants (companies) the more pre-knowledge the interviewer has before approaching the next informant. The information may for example concern the industry in general or specific facts about the relationships within the case. This furthermore means an unbalance in pre-knowledge when approaching different informants. In practice it could mean that the researcher has a lot of secondary[1] information about specific conflict situations that a company has been involved in before having an IM with the informant representing that particular company. This provides the researcher with great possibilities of setting follow up questions at the interviews with the aim of catching these specific conflict situations. The total information of a conflict situation becomes richer as it is reflected on from several companies' points of view. On the other had there is a risk of focusing too much on pre-knowledge and thereby maybe missing other relevant conflict situations. The nature of the interviews perhaps moves from being more open when the researcher has scarce pre-knowledge about the case to being more structured as the researcher has learned more.

A central issue in critical incidents studies is the informant's ability to remember situations of the past. In this study the initial meeting served as some kind of "recall" that could inspire the informant to prepare for the topic in the critical incidents interview. This is again an advantage with using initial meetings when empirically examining critical incidents of sensitive topics. A suggestion for improving the critical incidents technique in future research would be to already at the initial meeting give the informants as "home-work" and to show the conflict incident question. A pre-requisite for this would be that the length of time between the IM and the CII should not be more than a couple of days. Another possibility would be to leave the informant alone for approximately ten minutes after the conflict incident question has been showed, so that he or she would be given a silent and calm time of his or her own to reflect about conflict situations. One the other hand, a possible danger with revealing the core of the interview to the informants well in advance is the missing out of interesting situations, that for some reason or another by plan are left out by the informant. These situations may easily come up to the surface when being surprised. Bias in case studies, especially concerning business and management studies, is that the informants are unable to recall events and that they are afraid of revealing information that may provide difficulties for themselves and/or the company as a whole. (Remenyi et al. 1998) One way of trying to overcome this dilemma is here done by providing both the informants as well as the companies with anonymity.

[1] Secondary means that another informant provides the information.

Timing and sequence

It is furthermore worth thinking about the time between the IM and the conflict incidents interview. In this study the time that elapsed between these two occasions varied from approximately 1 minute to 5 weeks. Ideally the interviews should be held about the same time from each other, but practically this is not always possible. The advantage with a very short time period between the two interview occasions is perhaps both for the interviewer and the interviewee that the happening quickly is all and over and other things can thereafter be concentrated on. Considering the fact that the informants in this study represented companies in several different cities from Kokkola in Western Finland to Turku and Helsinki in Southern Finland it was sometimes more convenient for me to carry out both interviews during one visit to the particular city. Generally the interviews with companies in Western Finland took place within a longer time span than in companies in Southern Finland. Concerning the optimal time span between the IM and the CII the desired connection between these two has to be thought of. Ideally the tape from the IM is typewritten and at least briefly analyzed before the CII. In other cases there is risk that the interviewer fails to ask relevant follow up questions at the CII and thereby looses relevant information. One danger with a too short time period, i.e. from a couple of minutes to a couple of hours, between the IM and the CII is tiredness. Thinking about the fact that an IM usually lasted for about one hour and the CII about 1,5 hours the total time is about 2,5 hours. In this study it also turned out so that the IMs and CIIs that were done on the same day directly after each other lasted for a shorter time period in comparison if they were held on separate days. At some occasions the IM and CII were kept on the same day directly after each other. Then there is the risk of not as a researcher being able to reflect on the information received at the IM in order to ask relevant follow up questions at the CII. An advantage with keeping the IM and the CII on the same day is that these were in general more focused in comparison with when they were kept on different dates. Unnecessary replication of information was avoided. Again one threat with a too long time span between IM and CII is that the trust and friendly climate usually built up at the IM somehow needs to be re-activated at the CII. The informant has perhaps forgotten the scope of the study and what was discussed at the IM.

Another aspect that needs to be reflected upon is the sequence of the IMs and the CIIs. Basically there are three different possibilities. Firstly the researcher could start with IMs in each company and thereafter continue with CIIs. Secondly one could do both the IM and the CII in one company before continuing to the next. The third possibility is not to follow any pattern at all and mix IMs and CIIs. In practice this means that sometimes both occasions can take place in one company before turning to the next and sometimes only the IM is held in one company and both the IM and the CII in another before turning to the third company or the first again. Here there are many different possibilities.

Here both the first and third method has been used in different cases. In case 1 the IMs were held in each company before the CIIs. In case 2 the IMs and CIIs do not follow any pattern. For practical reasons this was considered as most convenient, as the companies are located in cities in different parts of Finland. It would have been both costly and time consuming to travel two times to the same company, firstly to have an IM and thereafter the CII. In this case the IM and the CII were most often carried out in two days or even on one day with a pause of approximately one hour between the occasions. Based on the experiences from this empirical study I would suggest that an optimal time span between the IM and the CII would be 1 to 2 days. If possible, it is desirable to start by having initial meetings with all informants before having critical incidents interviews.

An advantage with method one is that the interviewer receives general information from all companies involved in cooperation, before carrying out CIIs in each company. In this way the study reaches a certain balance. With some pre-knowledge of each company the researcher may have the greatest possibilities of asking follow up questions at the CIIs. A disadvantage with the second method is that the researcher has more or less lost his or her opportunities to meet the informant again, although interesting aspects about the company and its cooperation with competitors would come up in either IM or CII with other informants. The third method can be taken into consideration for use when the informants amount up to certain number and they are physically far away both from the interviewer and from each other. The advantages arising out of this method is saving of time and money. The disadvantages are that the time between the IM and CII sometimes can be too short and that relevant information may be missed due to the fact that an IM has not yet been held in another company.

Step 4: Follow up phone call

Usually the contact between the interviewer and the informant ends with the personal interview, but here it is suggested that especially when studying negative topics it is essential to follow up interviews with phone calls. Telephone interviews are expected to become more and more common (Emory 1980). It is not necessary to personally meet, because the interviewer and the informant have already met two times and a phone call is time saving for both parties. The main idea with the phone call is to reflect about what has occurred in cooperation with other companies, with a focus on major situations. The second purpose with the follow up phone call is to ask the informant to tell about situations of interest to the focus of the study, which in this case is conflicts. The time between the conflict incident interview and the follow up phone call may vary depending on the spectrum of the study. In the study referred to in this paper the time was approximately one year. The follow up phone calls turned out to provide opportunities of recognizing new conflict situations, conflict situations that had reached an outcome and conflict situations that had not yet reached an outcome. In some situations clarifications to previously mentioned conflicts were made.

Implications for theory development

Most of the existing research within the interaction-and business network approach is based on companies that are operating on different levels within the same value chain, as a buyer and a supplier. Intercompetitor cooperation, i.e. cooperation between companies occupying the same level within different value chains, has not been studied to the same extent (Bengtsson and Kock 1999; Easton and Araujo 1992; Hu and Korneliussen 1997; Johnsen and Johnsen 1998; Reve 1992). Scholars within the business network approach have usually described industrial relationships as long term, consisting of mutual commitment and trust. “Some of the early writings using the interaction approach seem to have over-emphasized the closeness and co-operative aspects of business relationships.” (Ford 1998, p. 8). Also Holmlund-Rytkönen and Strandvik (2003, 2005) calls for more research within the field of issues that may decrease the strength of business relationships. Although the overall nature of an industrial relationship is built on cooperation, commitment and trust, there are still continuous situation-based changes occurring within the relationship. The focus of the study that this paper is based on, is related to two aspects, which traditionally may have a negative or sensitive meaning. That is intercompetitor cooperation and conflicts. In order to study conflicts in intercompetitor setting the step-by-step technique described in this paper has been used. It is extremely important to build up a relationship of trust between the interviewer and the informant when negative topics are in focus. A trustworthy relationship can only be build through multiple occasions of contact between the interviewer and the informants. Each step is on a different level and each step paves the way for the next step. New information is gathered in every step, which furthermore means that there are multiple possibilities for new insights leading to theory development. The step-by-step interview technique also provides increased opportunities for trustworthy findings. Firstly issues may be reflected on at a deeper level from one interview to another. Secondly more information is received through several interview occasions in comparison with having only one interview. When the researcher is faced with more information about the topic he or she has got better chances of receiving a holistic understanding about the phenomenon.

Summary and concluding remarks

In several ways a process pattern has been followed in this study (Pettigrew 1997). From a general point of view a process or longitudinal pattern is always desirable when studying business relationships. Thereby the researcher is able to identify the dynamics of the studied phenomenon. Firstly a process perspective is here applied as far as the *contact* with the informants is concerned. Initial contact was attempted by phone, second contact at an IM and third contact through a CII. A fourth or even a fifth contact was taken by phone. Also the *content* of these contact situations differed and followed a process perspective by moving from a general to specific level. During the first phone call most often cooperation between competitors was mentioned as a general research topic of the study. At the IMs aspects such as background information about the company as well as its relations to competitors were reflected upon. The CIIs lasted longer and focused solely on the details of different conflict situations. Fourthly the informants were phoned afterwards in order to specify a certain conflict situation or to describe conflict situations during a certain point of time.

Openness turns out to be a key aspect when doing research about sensitive topics. The researcher needs to be open to the informant and to the research instrument used. Openness furthermore means that the research instrument or guide can and perhaps should be changed or modified from interview to interview depending on the interview atmosphere. This change most often has to do with degree of openness on one hand and degree of structure on the other. The interview atmosphere contains the personality of the informant, the researchers pre-knowledge about the case and the company's position within the case. Change of the instrument can be considered as both natural and desirable if it assists in enhancing the understanding of the researched phenomenon. In other words, no matter how a certain interview is carried out it is acceptable as long as it is considered the most appropriate way of enhancing the total understanding of the studied phenomenon. The informants and the companies should be provided anonymity but the meaning of anonymity should be discussed and agreed upon.

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