

Working Paper for IMP 2007

## **Business Relationship Analysis: Between States, Stages and Movements**

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### **Abstract**

It is no longer a new insight that business relationships are long-term and in many cases quite stable. However, with this realization and the growing interest from practitioners and researchers alike in the dynamics of such business relationships, various life-cycle models have been developed to increase awareness about and understanding of how business relationships change over time. A major problem hereby is that the models have overlapping categories making managerial implications difficult to develop. This paper suggests that understanding relationship change over time is about plotting and tracing. The paper develops a framework for understanding the dimensions of business relationships and for tracing change.

### **Introduction**

The increasing interest in business relationships and the increasing purposeful use of relationships has led to an increasing interest in determining a relationship's properties. For that purpose, different life cycle models have been developed (e.g. Ford 1980, Dwyer, Schuhr, and Oh, 1987). Also the governance mode has been under discussion (e.g. Heide and John, Ritter 2007). A major input into this discussion has been the measurement of relationship quality (see Naude and Buttle 2000) including major constructs like trust and commitment. Beyond a mere static measurement of the state of a relationship, interest arose towards understanding relationship dynamics, i.e. the change in state. An early suggestion of dynamics is Ford and Rosson (1982) where different dynamics are distinguished. The challenge remaining is twofold: First, the many different contributions towards understanding relationship quality do not necessarily build on each other. Therewith, there are potential overlaps, gaps and contradictions which a consolidation of these suggestions tries to overcome. Second, a model for tracing relationship dynamics may allow researchers and academics alike to better understand how relationships change or evolve over time.

With the exception of the research in the dissolution of business relationship, primarily from our Finnish colleagues (Halinen and Tähtinen 2002; Harrison 2004; Tähtinen and Halinen 2002; Tähtinen and Havila 2004), most of the relationship literature is focused on change *within* the context of business relationship rather than on the change *of* the relationships (e.g.: Easton and Lundgren 1992; Gadde and Håkansson 1992; Halinen, Salmi, and Havila 1999; Håkansson 1992; Håkansson and Henders 1995).

If a focus on relationship change is to make any sense we first need to ask the seemingly simple question “how can we describe a businesses relationship?”. We need to understand the object of change. If we can understand what the dimensions of a business relationship are, we can view relationship change as change or movement in those dimensions. However it is not easy to define what a business relationship is (Håkansson and Snehota 1995a).

An often noted limitation of IMP research is that there is little attempt made at aligning the concepts used. This means that there is overlap and inconsistency between them and that it is difficult if not impossible to consolidate the highly diversified research contributions of IMP. In many ways the only concepts and models that we share are the Interaction model (IMP Group 1982) and the ARA model (Håkansson and Johanson 1992; Håkansson and Snehota 1995b).

So unfortunately, although there are many contributions to what those dimensions could be, there is so far no real framework that we can use.

Our ambition with this paper is not to provide this much needed consolidation and alignment of concepts, but a more modest one of providing a small first step in this direction. We hope that the framework we develop will provide inspiration for further research and provide a preliminary platform for a dawning connection and consolidation of IMP concepts.

Based on this challenging ambition, this paper will suggest a conceptual framework for identifying, analysing, and understanding how business relationships change with time. The paper is structured in three main sections:

- What are the dimensions which defines a business relationship and its “position”?
- What is business relationship change?
- How can change be traced over time?

### **Dimensions which define a business relationship and its “position”**

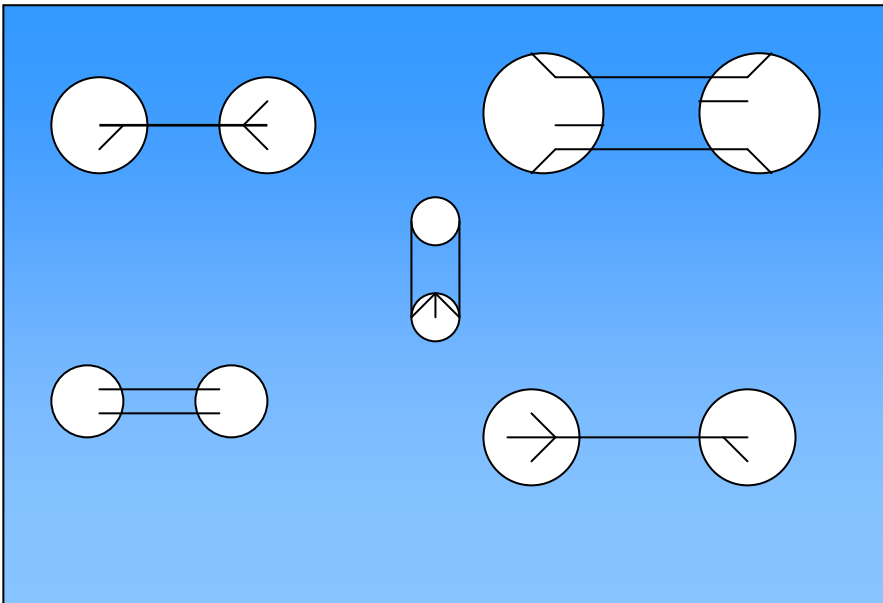
To be able to plot a relationship we need to know what the dimensions of a business relationship are. This seemingly simple question of “what is a business relationship?” however is a bit more difficult to answer as we have already noted.

Part of the explanation for this difficulty might be the fact that a lot of the literature, academic as well as practical, seem to focus much more on what the relationship can do for companies (see e.g. for relationship value Anderson and Narus 2004; Eggert, Ulaga, and Schultz 2006; Walter, Ritter, and Gemünden 2001) or activities being performed within business relationships rather than with the actual substance of the concept. But if we are to understand business relationships and manage them, we need a fundamental understanding of what such a relationship consists of.

Further adding to this, there is an understandable but potentially misleading tendency to reify the concept of business relationships. That is to say that business relationships are often seen as objects, almost physical in their nature. We believe that business relationships are highly complex phenomena rather than simple objects. But this makes it challenging to develop a generic model to capture such complexity.

Often a business relationship is depicted as two entities, typically circles, representing two companies connected by a line representing the relationship. But even the simple graphical illustration of a

business relationship may raise some interesting questions. Questions such as what is the length and width of the line connecting the two entities? Companies in a business relationship may be closer or more distant to one another on several dimensions (like the length of the line in the illustration) and a business relationship can be more or less important or strong (like the width of the line). At the same time we realise that business relationships are not identical. This paper is about the different dimensions of business relationships. It is about the length, the width, the anchoring, and fabric of that line, that association between two companies. However, the figure below illustrates a variation in the simple representation of a relationship as a line may guide our discussion of finding differentiating parameters for describing relationships.



**Figure 1: Different business relationships**

And this brings us to our definition of what a business relationship is:

A business relationship is a function of relationship distance, relationship width, relationship fabric, and relationship anchoring.

In the following we will look closer at each of these four basic dimensions of business relationship.

### ***Relationship Distance***

The distance between two parties in a business relationship is probably one of the easiest to illustrate graphically as already mentioned. The length of the line in a graphical representation provides an intuitive picture of distance.

However the distance with regard to business relationships is more than geographical distance because business relationship distance is multi dimensional. Distance can be described as at least four different types of distance: geographical distance, cultural and social distance (also called psychic distance (Ghauri, 1992)), technological distance distance (Hallén, Johanson, and Seyed-Mohamed 1991; Hallén, Johanson, and Seyed-Mohamed 1993), and timing or tempo distance (Ford 1980).

### ***Relationship Width***

The relationship width refers to the scope and extent of the relationship. How many different products or services are exchanged? Or how many different types of exchanges and interactions take place between the two companies?

Some relationships are narrow in the sense that they exist to exchange a single product whereas other business relationships include exchanges of several different products, joint development programs and so on (Håkansson and Östberg 1975).

Also related to the width of a business relationship is the interactions frequency. How often do exchanges take place? Business relationships, like personal relationships can be very close irrespective of the interaction frequency. We do not need to see friends all the time or do business with a particular company very often to consider a given relationship as close and valuable.

Relationship width can be therefore be measured on two dimensions: frequency and scope of interactions. The more products and/or services being exchanged the bigger the scope. And the same can be said for other types of interactions such as social interactions or interactions involving exchange of information: the more different types of interactions the wider the scope.

### ***Relationship Fabric***

The fabric that business relationships are made from has a lot of influence on the strength of that particular relationship. Some relationships are built from materials strong enough to withstand a great stress whereas other relationships can give way like a straw in the wind. In the following we will look closer at what relationship fabric is and how we can identify it. Related words are robustness and resistance.

There are three elements to relationship fabric: one is the power and dependency balance between the two parties (Cook and Emerson 1978; Cook and Emerson 1984; Emerson 1962). In business relationships one company often is more powerful than the other and the other conversely being more dependent upon the first company. Another element is the level of trust that exists between two companies as well as the scope of that trust. And finally the level of commitment of the companies to the continuation of the relationship provides an important element of the relationship fabric (Morgan and Hunt 1994; Wilkinson and Young 1994).

### ***Relationship Anchoring***

Relationship anchoring describes the extent to which the relationship is connected into a company. To be strong, relationships need to be well anchored into both companies (Walter and Gemunden 2000) and this anchoring has a number of different elements such as the number of people involved, their position in the company, whether they are promoters or opponents of the relationship, their values and beliefs, and the degree to which the company can align these elements how well the relationship activities are coordinated

Relationship multiplexity refers to the number of people involved in the relationship on both sides. The number of people involved in a business relationship is a defining characteristic (Webster and Wind 1972) that has a lot of influence on the strength of that relationship. However, it is not a simple linear relationship. A relationship is not necessarily stronger if it involves a lot of people, just as relationships that involve only two people, one on either side of the relationship, are not necessarily weak and easy to break.

As more people are involved on either side of the business relationship complexity increases and it is not simply a matter of reducing the importance of the single individual. Different people will typically be responsible for different aspects of the business relationships and this means that interpersonal relationships within the two organizations will come into play as well.

It is not uncommon to see different departments within an organization almost competing against one another for power. The purchasing department and product development department for example have different objectives: the purchasing department wants to achieve the lowest possible price, and product development wants the most advanced products. This internal struggle between people in purchasing and people in development will affect the way the company acts and reacts in its business relationships.

Not every person in a company may be positive towards a given business relationship. People may oppose or support certain relationships more or less actively for a number of reasons personal and professional.

People will have different roles and responsibilities in their organisations which will influence the way they view a given relationship. A relationship may be viewed as very positive and actively supported by say a purchasing assistant if the supplier is easy to deal with and provides the expected discounts. That same relationship could be viewed very differently by a production manager if the products delivered cause problems in the production line.

Also the different responsibilities of people may cause them to view relationships differently. A purchasing manager's responsibility and level of authority is different from a purchasing assistant's and they are therefore likely to value different aspects of a business relationship differently.

What we value as human beings depends to some extent on our personal values and beliefs of what is right and what is wrong and thus provides an influence on the extent to which a business relationship is valued or not. At the same time professional traditions may influence what is considered to be right or wrong.

Human beings have memory and experience which are highly influential in our decision making processes. If someone has had a bad experience with a particular company this is likely to influence their perception of the attractiveness of a relationship with this company. Conversely a positive experience with a company possibly even from a former job, is likely to result in a positive attitude towards the relationship.

This all means that business relationships are likely to comprise a variety of people with different perceptions and therefore the relationship will contain promoters and opponents of various degrees. At the same time those promoters and opponents will hold different importance for the relationship because their roles and responsibilities are different. So to understand the relationship we need to understand the constellation of roles of different people, their influence or potential influence on the relationship, which may be connected to organizational position, and the degree to which those people are promoters or opponents of the relationship.

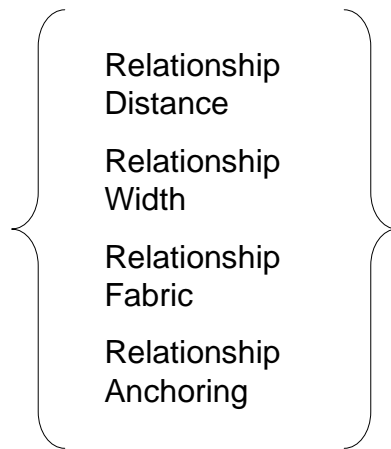
		FUNCTION				
		Marketing	Sales	Production	Finance	Logistics
LEVEL	Top executive management		TR			SD
	Middle management		JG	NN		TE
	Staff				PD ST TQ	

■ Opponent  
■ Promoter

**Figure 2: Relationship Fabric, Promoters - Opponents**

**Position of business relationships**

Having identified these four main dimensions of business relationships, we can illustrate the “position” of a relationship as a point in this 4-dimensional space. This position represents the state of the relationship at a given point in time.



**Figure 3: The state of a relationship as a point in 4-dimensional space**

Establishing this position is the first step to understanding the life-course of a business relationship. It allows us to plot the relationship. Typical combinations of these four elements translate into the stages discussed by various authors (see e.g.: Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh 1987; Ford 1980).

	<b>Pre-relational</b>	<b>Exploring</b>	<b>Developing</b>	<b>Exploiting</b>	<b>Dissolving</b>
<b>Distance</b>	Long	Depends	Shortening	Short	Lengthening
<b>Width</b>	Limited	On	Enlarging	Wide	Decreasing
<b>Fabric</b>	Weak	Existing	Strengthening	Strong	Weakening
<b>Anchoring</b>	None	Situation	Increasing	Varied	Decreasing

**Table 1: Combination of Stages and Dimensions**

Next we want to see how the relationship can be traced over time.

### **Business Relationship Change**

It seems logical and perhaps even common sense, to view business relationships in a life-cycle model perspective. Several models have been suggested such as Ford (1980) and the paper by Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh (1987). Although these contributions have provided salience to applying life-cycle models to business relationships, authors do admit that their models are neither prescriptive nor normative. This means that the models do not insist on the necessity of business relationships to progress or even to develop in a forwardly fashion over time. The models suggest that indeed business relationships may move backward rather than forward in a steady fashion.

But despite the recognized limitations of the life-cycle models they do provide a starting point for understanding relationship change.

Ford (1980; 1998) speculates how the business relationship develops through time. Noting that analysing a relationship from single *episodes* will only provide a partial picture and that analysing the overall *atmosphere* will provide an incomplete picture, Ford presents a 5 stage life-cycle model describing some typical episodes connected with each stage. The model thus connects the atmosphere with the episodes. Episodes are what constitute the relational atmosphere, but the episodes are influenced or mediated by the atmosphere as well. In a sense the atmosphere provides and shapes our expectations and sensitivity:

Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh (1987) also propose that relationship development can be described using a 5 stage life-cycle model. Their stages are labelled: *awareness, exploration, expansion, commitment, and dissolution*. But it recognizes the same limitations as Ford does.

Testing of Dwyer, Schurr and Oh has in fact shown empirical evidence (Jap and Anderson 2003) that the state of the business relationship will depend on the path to that state. I.e. the state of a business relationship will depend upon whether the relationship progress to into this state or whether it regressed into it. Relationships that progressed through the phases outperformed the relationships that had regressed. That is, relationships which had “gone backwards” did not perform as well as those which had progressed or “moved forward” into a given phase.

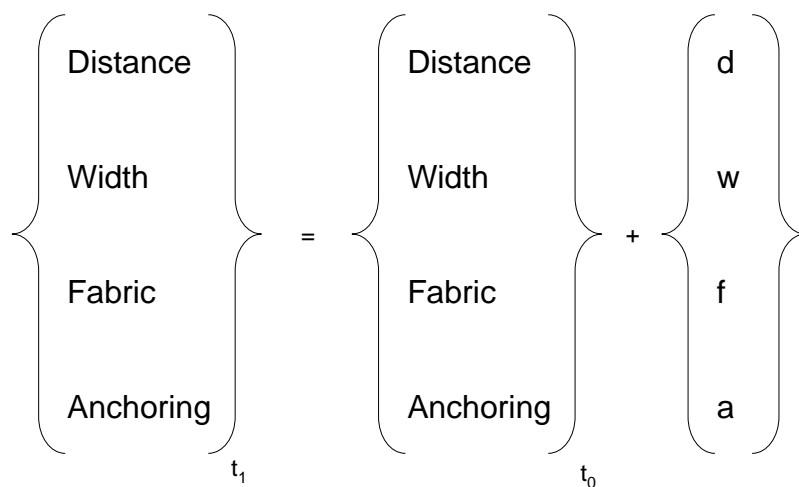
Both models give little attention to what defines the boundaries between different phases or stages just as the question of what makes a relationship change between stages is not illuminated. The life-cycle models are useful as a starting point because they suggest that relationship do change over time and they provide some dimensions of that change such as distance, commitment, experience, and trust to name a few, but we suggest that the concept of a life-course rather than the life-cycle is more applicable to business relationships.

### **Tracing Change over Time**

When we want to understand change or evolution of a business relationship we need to understand change in one or more of those dimensions over time. Change or movement of a business relationship is a multi-dimensional concept rather than an aggregate or a one-dimensional concept. Business relationships potentially move in many dimensions over time, but on the most abstract level business relationships move with respect to the four dimensions of relationship distance, relationship width, relationship fabric, and relationship anchoring.

Change is not the opposite of stability in business networks (Easton and Araujo 1999). In order to create a foundation or a context in which change can occur, there need to be at the same time an element of stability. And stability is increased by adjusting, adapting, or changing as the situation dictates. Actors in business relationships act towards increasing their control over resources to provide the stability necessary to provide profits (Gadde and Håkansson 1992). As all actors in a network act, there is wish for local stability, and at the same time this wish means that things change in the network. It is a paradox of business relationships that change requires stability at the same time as stability requires change (Håkansson and Snehota 1995a).

Change of business relationships is defined by the change in position in the four dimensions over time.



**Figure 4: Change vector of business relationships**

Figure 4 shows how a change of a business relationship from  $t_0$  to  $t_1$  can be seen as a vector of change or the difference between the two positions at  $t_0$  and  $t_1$  respectively. This means that we can now trace the life-course of a business relationship through the 4-dimensional space of distance, width, fabric, and anchoring.

Next we will study what drives that change. We suggest that there are four drivers of change: entropy, the actions and intentions of actor A, the actions and intentions of actor B, and the environment.

### **Entropy**

Business relationships, although long term, stable, and durable, are not static (Halinen, Salmi, and Havila 1999 p. 784). Often the term stability is associate with something that does not change and things that do change are in-stable. In business stability is not the absence of change just like change does not equal in-stability. As activities are carried out within a business relationship the relationship itself will change either gradually or more radically to the extent that the relationship is broken or severely impacted by what has happened. Change is a fundamental aspect of business relationships (Easton and Lundgren 1992; Halinen, Salmi, and Havila 1999; Schurr, Hedaa, and Geersbro forthcoming). Without change, as in the constant activities going on within the relationship, there would not be a relationship. It would fade away and die. Business relationships will degrade over time if they are not supplied with energy either from the actors involved or from the outside network. We refer to this phenomenon as *relationship entropy*; a natural tendency towards dissolution and decay (Thorelli 1986).

One typical example of relationship entropy is when a customer decides to find a new supplier and the old supplier asks why the customer wanted to change and the answer is “well, we were not dissatisfied and we did not experience any problems, but you never showed an interest in us and we never heard from you”. And the supplier thought all was well because the customer never complained!

Some times a few problems and issues now and again can be useful because they provide an opportunity or a reason for interaction. Solving a customer's problems is an excellent way of showing an interested in the relationship and adding energy into it.

### ***The actions and intentions of the actors***

Many actions on the part of the two business partners will influence their relationship directly or indirectly. But also the partners' intentions with the relationship may change and hence their perception on the attractiveness of the relationship may change over time (Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh 1987; Schurr, Hedaa, and Geersbro forthcoming).

Companies may seek to change their relationships directly and intentionally but the result is not always predictable because other factors, not to mention the business partner's actions, also influence the business relationship. One of the few actions that can be taken unilaterally is the decision by one of the partners to exit the relationship (Alajoutsijärva, Möller, and Tähtinen 2000; Tähtinen and Havila 2004). All other actions must be seen bilaterally.

### ***The environment***

The events that take place in the environment of a business relationship may change that relationship because the relationship is embedded in this wider context. Changes in other relationships may spill over and cause change or more general societal or industry wide changes may have an impact on the relationship (Ritter 2000).

Market structure may change as a result of new players entering the market or because of players exiting the market. Legislative changes may require that business relationships must change as a consequence or in response to the legal changes (Ford 1980).

## **Managerial implications**

A life-course perspective, combined with the framework presented here, allows business managers a much deeper understanding of how relationships change over time than existing life-cycle models.

The insight that business relationships not necessarily develop in an orderly progressive fashion but might also regress or fail to develop all together, has been noted by the proponents of the life-cycle models however, those models fail to provide the perspective explicitly provided by the life-course perspective which this framework include.

Considering several dimensions, rather than simply the overall development of the business relationships, will help managers understand and cope with a multifaceted nature of business relationships. With the framework managers can now understand how specific relationships change or failed to change on specific dimensions. This allows managers to contemplate not only where specific relationships are, with regard to a life-course, but also to consider alternative courses and future positions. Managers will be able to understand how their own actions combined with the partner's actions, the environment, and entropy all contribute to the actual relationship course. In short, managers will be able to plot their relationships and trace the course they have taken and map out possible courses they could take.

## **Research implications**

In order to make research results comparable, measures need to be comparable. It is therefore important to develop a general model into which different aspects can be brought into. As such, the development model may prove its worth by guiding meta-analysis towards a more comprehensive, consolidated knowledge base of relationship and networks.

In addition, a similar logic can be developed to capture network dynamics.

The framework we have developed suggests a number of areas worthy of further study. First of all it will be interesting to see some empirical studies to test the value of the framework. It will also be interesting to see what such empirical studies may produce in terms of the dynamic nature of business relationship. Does it make sense to focus on the relationship itself as the unit of analysis rather than focus on the content of the relationship?

Further research may also want to investigate whether the 4 dimensions, that we have suggested as the main dimensions, is enough to completely identify the state of a relationship.

Finally it would be interesting to see future research applying the framework in a wider consolidation of the extant research already carried out in the field of business relationships within IMP for example.

## **Conclusion**

The multitude of contributions has confused research into relationships and their dynamics more than they helped. This paper hopefully contributed to combining different contributions into a new and better understanding of business relationships.

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