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Looking for a concept...
**Towards a better understanding of
matching**

Work in progress paper

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Abstract

Business relationships make an interactive connection between two organisations; more exactly between two groups of involved people. Connectedness is considered as the essential characteristic of a business relationship. To be connected dimensions must be matching. Our research question is about this matching. What does it mean? How can it be conceptualised? How can it be evaluated and anticipated?

Connectedness dimensions can be categorised in two groups. The first group comprises activity links and resource ties; these are real connections, with more or less clear technical and economic characteristics. Their matching can be described and anticipated by technical and economic terms. In a certain way they have a quasi-deterministic character. Engineering, operations management and logistics are useful to understand this type of matching. The second group consists of actor bonds; these are symbolic connections. They mean and assure the governance of the real connectedness processes (activity links and resource ties). It appears to be much more complicated to describe and perhaps anticipate this type of matching; anticipation may not even be possible. Four concepts seem to be useful to better understand the matching of actor bonds. Perceptions (i.e. Smith and Mackie 1995), mental models (i.e. Day 1994), sensemaking (i.e. Weick 1995) and value (i.e. Anderson and Narus 1999) are these basic concepts.

The subject of this work in progress paper is to bring together the concepts of perceptions, mental models, sensemaking and value and to use these to try to conceptualise the matching between two organisations.

1 Introduction

The French cultural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss discusses three types of social exchange: the exchange of women, this is the problem of kinship (this is the classical field of cultural anthropology), the exchange of goods (this is the problem of economics) and the exchange of meanings (this is the problem of communication). He mentions three structures, the structure of kinship, economical structure and communication structure (Lévi-Strauss 1974). Business markets can be considered simultaneously as both economic and communication structures. Goods and resources build the economic structure and management facilitates communication. Business relationships and business networks form the dynamic structure of business markets and communication is central to these, yet the communication processes (exchange of meanings) within networks and relationships are not well understood.

Business relationships make an interactive connection between two organisations. More precisely, this is between two groups of involved people. Business relationships are the main forms of connectedness in the business world. Based on IMP literature this connectedness can be characterised by three dimensions. Activity links refer to the way in which the various activities performed by two firms in the relationship are co-ordinated and adapted to each other. Resource ties refer to the way in which tangible and intangible resources supporting the activities of two firms in a relationship become oriented toward and integrated with each other. Actor bonds refer to the way in which the parties involved in a relationship perceive and identify with each other (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). By understanding connectedness it is possible to gain insight into the operations of business relationships, as part of this it is essential to understand how the 'connected' dimensions match each other. Matching was included with respect to the structural fit between the interacting parties in the interaction themes section of the Håkansson (1982) book. These early IMP researchers also cite Mattsson (1975) who identified the importance of how well two parties fit together. Thus matching can be seen to be a key, if somewhat neglected, theme of IMP research.

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The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. It begins by discussing the centrality of personal contact in business relationships and proposing that this personal contact requires ‘matching’ of people. Four concepts that seem to be useful in explaining the matching of actor bonds are then introduced: perceptions (i.e. Smith and Mackie 1995), mental models (i.e. Day 1994), sensemaking (i.e. Weick 1995) and value (i.e. Anderson and Narus 1999). A tentative synthesis of these concepts is presented as a conclusion to this paper and as a basis for further empirical research.

2 Personal Contact in Business Relationships

“Personal contacts are the lifeblood of supplier-customer relationships” (Cunningham and Homse 1984:1). In the early IMP work (Turnbull and Cunningham, 1981) the features of relationships including factors such as liking, trust, understanding and co-operation, personal relationships and language barriers were brought into the discourse about business-to-business relationships. This illustrated the importance of social integration and the development of social bonds in business relationships, suggesting that without this personal contact exchange may not take place (Cunningham and Homse, 1984). Cunningham and Homse (1984) point out that there are more than a few instances where when a key contact moves to a competitor the customer account follows. They speculate that social bonds cannot override all other considerations but if the products, prices and delivery reliability are all similar it may be social bonds that are the factor that determines where the purchase is placed. Turnbull (1974) illustrated the importance of multiple points of personal contact between buying and selling

organizations. Later, Turnbull and Wilson (1987) illustrated the need for both social and structural bonds to ensure that a relationship endures. More recently research attention has again focussed on the importance of personal bonds and relationships in the context of business relationships. For example, Witkowski and Thibodeau (1999) have illustrated the importance of personal relationships and personal bonds when entrepreneurs develop international relationships; they also note that this aspect of relationship development is often neglected. Tellefsen and Thomas (2005) demonstrate the importance of personal commitment and likeability to relational exchange. Iyer et al (2006) speculate that interpersonal relationships are less important than effective processes and outcomes in many cases, however, they do not consider the role of interpersonal relationships in a situation where two firms are offering similar processes and outcomes and at similar prices. Thus we would contend that personal relationships are central to business relationship success and would argue that further research is needed to investigate how these personal relationships work. We would also contend that personal contact does not work without a mental acceptance of each other, i.e. without the matching (of people).

3 Explaining Matching

Different social and management sciences deal with the problem of personal relationships, connectedness between people. Social psychology emphasises the fundamental role of individual and collective perceptions, sociology considers values as one of the basic motivations of the social life. Decision and cognitive sciences highlight the importance of mental models. Researchers into strategy in management sciences are interested by what is in the mind of the managers. Organisational studies answer by making insights into the sense making process. There are four concepts, which we contend can be used to explain matching: perceptions, value, mental models and sense making. They are outlined below.

3.1 Perception

According to the Oxford Dictionary perception is the "ability to see, hear or understand" something; the "quality of understanding, insight" and the "way of seeing or understanding" something. Perceptions are a central aspect of study in consumer behaviour, where it is recognized that people make sense of a wide variety of stimuli from the wider marketing environment. In this context the perceptive process is defined as 'the result of interaction

between stimuli and individual/personal factors' Lewis (2005) pg 66. We select and organize all this different ambiguous sensory information in order to maintain our self-protection functions and "to create models of how the world works. (These are the mental models discussed later in the paper.)

On the different levels of a business relationship perception acts in the same way as we have discussed above. We interpret the given information of our business partner according to our own influencing internal and external factors. Very often the success of a business is tied up with differences of perception and interpretation. The perceptions of managers show very wide variety according to sector of economy, period of time, continent, country, culture, sub-culture, organizational culture, level of position, gender, and education, these elements will be examined briefly below. Perceptions are needed to decrease some uncertainty as technology (Knight 1921), future relationships, competition or markets provide competing alternatives.

Robinson et al. (2000) found that culture and nationality have been shown to cause differences in perception of ethicalness of negotiation tactics, with subjects from Western Europe and to a lesser degree the Asian Pacific Rim more likely to endorse ethically marginal tactics than other groups. Several studies have found that demographic factors impact upon the perception of the ethicality of negotiation behaviors. It has been shown that age, gender, and occupation lead to different perceptions of deception in negotiation (Anton 1990). Women have been found to be less accepting of unethical deception tactics than men (Robinson et al. 2000).

Despite the differences of organizational cultures (OC), there seems to be an agreement that OC includes several levels with a varying degree of awareness on the part of the culture-bearers (Hofstede et al. 1990). The deepest level consists of patterns of basic assumptions that the organizational members take for granted without being aware of them. At the surface level there are the visible and audible patterns of the culture. The intermediate level covers values and beliefs, concerning what *ought* to be done. According to the competing values model (CVM) (Quinn and Rohrbaugh et al. 1983) OC is based on two distinctions: change versus stability and internal focus versus external focus where a reasonable balance is stressed between the opposite orientations.

The subject of perception should be examined as well when concentration is on quality perception. Measures are seldom fully defined and suffer from the inability of a user to consider differences between expectations and perceptions of performance. In addition, expected levels of performance and perceived levels of performance depend on the satisfaction of each group of stakeholders (Boyd et al. 2007).

Hence we can see that perceptions are important factors in determining how we act and thus can be suggested to be highly influential in determining whether or not actors match each other.

3.2 Value

The authors dealing with history of economic theory (e.g. Landreth 1976, Baslé et al. 1988, Baslé et al. 1993) state that value has, in some form, always preoccupied the economists. Adam Smith has introduced the categories of natural price and market price, expressing thereby the differences between value and price. Natural price is fundamentally the value of the product expressed in money, while market price develops based on the given demand-offer conditions (Madarász 2000). Thus, from the point of view of the manufacturer, the content of value is productive work. However, "value has two different meanings, and sometimes expresses the utility of some particular object, and sometimes the power of purchasing other goods which the possession of that object conveys. The one may be called 'value in use'; the other, 'value in exchange'. The things which have the greatest value in use have frequently little or no value in exchange; and on contrary, those which have the greatest value in exchange have frequently little or no value in use" writes Smith in the fourth chapter of the *Richness of Nations* (Smith 1992:37). Later, Ricardo further developed Smith's thoughts, while Marx considered the work-value theory of the classical as the starting point of his own theory of value added.

Otherwise value cannot be considered an inner characteristic of the product though. "Already in his study of 1730, Bernoulli wrote that value is not an inner attribute of things, but [value] is determined by the relationship between the evaluating person and the evaluated thing " (Bekker 2000:302).

In sociology there are many different approaches to values. According to one definition, "values are general principles, fundamental orientations and collective preferences in the beginning, or rather the expressions of beliefs. The determination of goals is done in every society based on the viewing of what is desirable and is demonstrated through collective notion images. These values, which become settled in ideology when being systematically arranged, appear very often as unchangeable attributes, as stable nuclei, as a total of independent variables" (Boudon et al. 1999:52). Max Weber differentiates aim values and asset values. Aim values set the actions to be followed for society and individuals, as a result of which reality is transformed. Asset values evaluate the actions' modus.

Using the different value theories of economics, sociology and social psychology, we can determine the important role of value in the life of individuals and of groups. The complexity of value comes from the fact that, on the one hand, *value is always perceived and depends on the individual's or the group's decision, it influences essentially the individual's or the group's behaviour, and on the other hand, value is also an objectified, historical and social category.* "Value is first usefulness, but also the determining factor, the compass of behaviour" (Mandják 2003:34).

Simplifying to a great extent, we can say that we can consider the utility side of value as the economic component of the concept, and the compass nature of it as the social component. Thus, we can understand value as a complex phenomenon that is made up of economic and social components, that is in all cases perceived, therefore subjective. However, value always depends on the given social and economic situation and in this coherence, it is socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann 1998) and interiorised by the individual. At different levels of society, individual, group, society, value has different meanings and appears in different ways.

3.3 Mental models

The expression of mental models is widely used in cognitive sciences, psychology, knowledge management, strategy and in economics. Although it generally means an ensemble of thoughts and way of thinking about the individuals' surroundings, there are quite different discussions of its contents. It is not always clear, for instance, if perceptions are part of

mental models, or if they are there to feed the model. Anyway the essential matter is, using the words of Day (1994), what is in the mind of managers?

In knowledge management the term is used as the "representation in the mind of real or imaginary situation" (www.tcd.ie). To put it properly, "the mind constructs small-scale models of reality that it uses to anticipate events" (www.tcd.ie). 'It is a kind of internal symbol or representation of external reality' (Markham 1999). Mental models build on:

- perception
- knowledge of prior experience,
- schema segments, and
- problem-solving strategies

As discussed above perception is quite complex psychological phenomenon. Prior experience does not need extensive explanation. The schema segment concept refers to a set of diagrams to describe the various combinations of premises and possible conclusions (Markham 1999). The problem solving strategies concept means some sort of general ideas that might work for a number of problems (Johnson-Laird 1983). All these factors play a significant role in understanding one's mental model.

In economics mental models are important issue for heterodox economists. Original institutional economics considers the individuals' mental model as a cognitive framework. Instinct, habit and patterns of behavior are the building blocks of the mental models (Wrenn 2006). Marxist thought argues that the labor is the basic foundation of mental models. Mental models deal with the role individual plays, the opportunities for him or her and their perceptions of the world. These mental models are "conscripted by social structure" (Wrenn 2006:485). New institutional economics is interested in mental models mainly with respect to decision making. "Mental models consist of loosely connected, context-dependent frameworks; exist in the form of the individual's perception of reality; and are based on reference to patterns as opposed to a logic system" (Loasby 2001:393). Nobel Price winner Douglass North emphasizes that "different cultures form different mental models based on generational inheritance of customs and norms of the informal institutional structure" (North 1994:363-4). The research of Herbert Simon into bounded rationality (i.e. Simon 1992) proves the ontological nature of the filtering data through mental models and mental model construction (Loasby 2001). "The cognitive processes that inform the construction of mental models vary not only according to person but also according to socialization and culture.

Different mental models therefore select different input to process and would process the same data input (if so selected) differently" (Wrenn 2006:487-8).

We would contend that mental models are important to B2B relationships. This is because the relationship is strongly tied to the partners' mental models. Using and analyzing our partner's models may provide insight into how our partner is thinking of us. On the basis of this, we can attune our supply to his demand and so predict the future of our business relation.

3.4 Sensemaking

Sensemaking became interesting for communication scientists in the early 1970s. "Since sensemaking has been under development since 1972, it cannot be explained in a few sentences. It is important to know that the project has been based on three central assumptions regarding communication practice: a) That it is possible to design and implement communication systems and practices that are responsive to human needs; b) That it is possible for humans to enlarge their communication repertoires to pursue this vision; c) That achieving these outcomes requires the development of communication-based methodological approaches" (Weick 1995: 61).

The core assumption and statements regarding sense making theory are that it is an approach to designing and implementing a communications system, which is based on the following philosophical assumptions (Weick, 1995). The seven aspects of sense making are that it: is grounded in identity construction; is retrospective (retrospection makes the past clearer than the present or future; but it cannot make the past transparent); enactive- sensible environments; social; ongoing and focused; is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. It is about "imagining and speaking differently" (Weick, 2006: 1724).

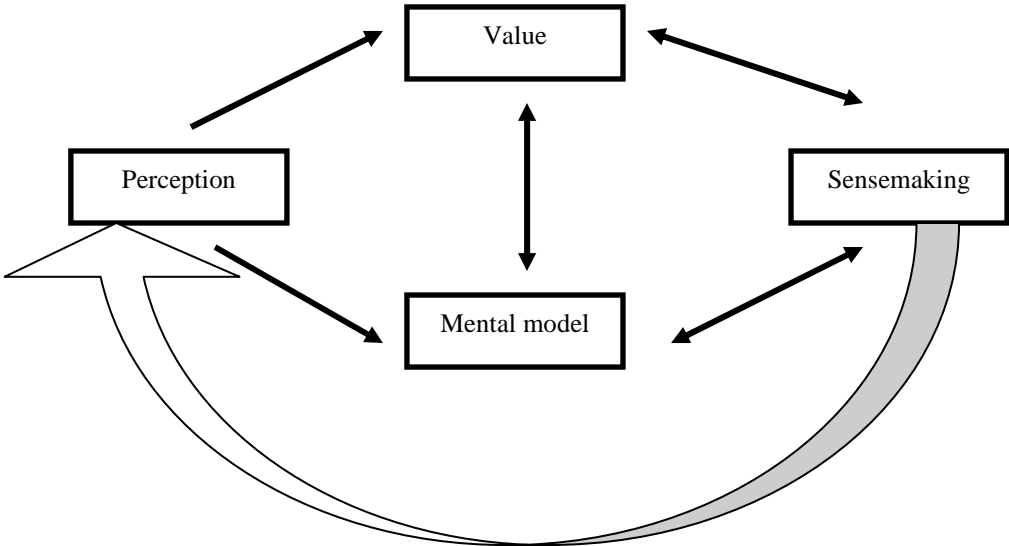
Thus we need to ask what does sensemaking mean in organizations? In dealing with organizational issues, sense making requires us to look for explanations and answers in terms of how people see things rather than structures or systems. Sense making suggests that organizational issues - 'strategies', 'breakdowns', 'change', 'goals', 'plans', 'tasks', 'teams', and so on are not things that one can find out in the world or that exist in the organization. Rather, their source is people's way of thinking" (Weick 1995:62). Neill, McKee & Rose (2007, forthcoming) provide a useful definition of sensemaking, taken from Sackman (1991) where sensemaking provides the 'standards and rules for perceiving, interpreting, believing, and

acting that are typically used' (Sackman, 1991, quoted by Marshall et al 2007:33) forthcoming). They also note the importance of sensemaking when organizations are faced by complexity; we would suggest that this is especially significant when new relationships are being formed. Vlaar et al. (2006) have also recognized that relationships face 'problems of understanding' and that the high levels of uncertainty and ambiguity that exist in early relationship stages exacerbate this. They believe that sensemaking processes provide a mechanism for understanding these issues in relationships.

4 Discussion

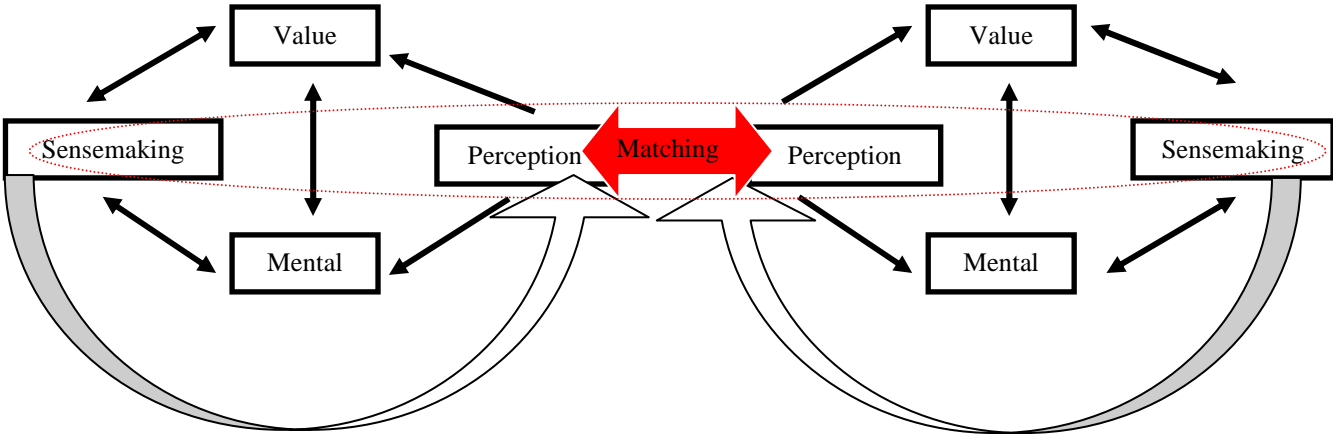
Clearly there is synergy amongst the four concepts we describe. The figures below show our hypothesized connections among these basic concepts and a possible conceptualisation of the matching concept in business relationships. We would argue that sensemaking is an appropriate concept to utilize in this context because of the manner in which it forces us to consider the manner in which perceptions and cues are interpreted and how this interpretation is shaped by our mental models and understanding about value. (See figure No 2.) Although a relatively new introduction into business-to-business fields, sensemaking is widely adopted by organization behaviour researchers, e.g. Adobar (1995) who has used sensemaking to help interpret the trust development process in biotech and pharmaceutical alliances. Therefore, we argue that it would be beneficial to include it in our conceptualizations of business-to-business relationships development.

Figure No 1 Dynamic conceptualisation of sensmaking



Möller (2006) has also noted the importance of matching customers’ and suppliers’ perceptions of values creation; this strengthens our inclusion of both perceptions and value in our model of matching. (See Figure No. 3.)

Figure No 2. Model of matching in business-to-business relationships



5 Conclusion

Our tentative findings above suggest that matching is a useful concept to introduce into the business-to-business relationship arena. It allows us to develop our conceptualization of actor bonds and gives us a mechanism to explore these further. We conclude this WIP paper with a tentative definition of matching, as follows:

Matching is the successful outcome of the process in which each party in a relationship uses sensemaking to integrate their perceptions of the other party’s intent with respect to the relationship in the context of their mental models and understanding of value. By inference we can also suggest that mismatching and no-matching also can occur when both sides do not have appropriate perceptions and the results of their sensemaking are not equivalent or are unequal.

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