A Conceptual Tool for Joint Value Creation in Business Relationships: A Case from the Software Industry

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Abstract

Studying business relationships in different contexts has been one of the major themes in the industrial marketing and purchasing literature for several years. Much emphasis has been given especially on interpreting and making sense of the development of the complex business relationships. One of the recent key areas of interest, arriving from the research on industrial business relationships, is the theoretical discussion on value creation. The underlying idea of this discussion is that the supplier can, by examining the customer's value creation processes, achieve a thorough understanding of the goals and concerns of the customer organizations. In this way, the supplier can provide actions enabling the customer to strengthen its processes. This can lead to joint value creating processes in the business relationships. Since the research done on industrial business relationships has been rather descriptive, less focus has been given on creating practical tools for developing business relationships. The purpose of this paper is to propose a conceptual tool for managing business relationships towards joint value creation. The area of application is the software industry. We use a case involving a large company buying complex software as an empirical example.

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1. Theoretical background

Studying business relationships in different contexts has been one of the major themes in the industrial marketing and purchasing literature for several years. Much emphasis has been given especially on interpreting and making sense of the development of the complex business relationships. One of the recent key areas of interest, arriving from the research on industrial business relationships, is the theoretical discussion on value creation (cf. Normann and Ramirez 1993; Anderson and Narus 1998; Ghoshal, Barlett and Moran 1999; Porter and Kramer 1999).

The concept of *value* is equivocal and has several meanings in business relationships (Ford and McDowell 1999). It is important to separate the value that the *customer receives* from the supplier and the value that the *supplier receives* from the customer relationship. In addition to the traditional understanding of value in economic or monetary terms, for the supplier the value of a customer relationship can also refer to other aspects of value. For instance, Storbacka, Sivula and Kaario (1999) argue that value of the relationship for the supplier can relate to the future business potential value, learning value, reference value and strategic value. Furthermore, Storbacka et al. 1999 point out, that the customer can perceive the value of the supplier in several different levels: in the contact level, in the relationship level and in the overall level. Value in the contact level refer to the actual purchasing situation where as the value in the relationship level refers to the time after the purchase when the offering in use by the customer. The customer also evaluates the relationship on the basis on whether the relationship has supported him to achieve his own goals and this creates value on the overall level. In this paper, we regard value as referring to all the benefits that the customer or the supplier receives in the relationship, regardless of whether these benefits can be measured in monetary means.

The value creation process is the process by which an organization creates value through its business activities (Storbacka et al.1999). This process can be further divided into value creating *sub-processes*. For example, Storbacka et al. (1999) divide six different sub-processes in the customer's value creation process: strategic management, business development, analysis & choice, purchasing, core business activities and follow up. Similarly, analogous sub-processes can be identified from the supplier's value creation process. Organization also have specific goals and concerns connected to these sub-processes and to the activities that are performed in these sub-processes. These goals and concerns are the determinants of the value that is delivered through a certain process or business activity.

In *the joint value creation process* value is created both for the customer and the supplier organizations. The idea is that the both parties adapt their processes to each other so that value can be created for both. The supplier can achieve this kind of relationship in which the value creation processes of the both customer and the supplier are zippered together through integrating it's own business activities to those of the customer's. The idea of joint value creation enables the suppliers to regard their customers in a new way. For example, Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2000) see customers playing an increasingly active role in the value creation in the markets. Therefore, from the supplier's point of view, a customer can be seen as one source of competence based on their knowledge and skills as well as their willingness to learn and experiment in an active dialogue with the seller.

It can be argued that the theories presented on value creation in business relationships have been rather descriptive. The purpose of this paper is to propose a conceptual tool for the development of a business relationship towards joint value creation. We illustrate this by

presenting a case from the software industry, involving a large company buying complex software.

2. Research methodology

We have adopted the single representative case perspective (e.g. Alasuutari 1997) connected to the interpretive paradigm of management studies (see Burrell and Morgan 1979). In the empirical study, the action-oriented research approach (e.g. Neilimo and Näsi 1980), largely based on a social constructionist orientation (see Berger and Luckmann 1966; Czarniawska-Joerges 1993) is adopted.

In other words, the study has been designed as an explorative-integrative study, i.e. a piece of research in which both an existing theory and the research subjects' own viewpoints and actions are cross-examined, with the potential long-term goal of creating new middle-range or local theory. An in-depth theme interview was concentrated on the case organization, representing a customer company. Secondary material, articles and magazines concerning the software industry also functioned as a significant source of information, against which the comments and opinions of the interviewees were reflected.

3. A Case from the software industry

Description of software development services and enterprise solutions businesses

In this study we view the software industry as consisting of five different businesses (cf. Hoch et al 1999). The most traditional businesses include the software development services/professional services business, the enterprise solutions business and the packaged mass-market software business. The businesses developed in the nineties include embedded software development and internet-based services. The most recent 'segments' that are still in the very early phase of initial forming are related to e-commerce and information content service businesses.

Here limit our study into the first two, professional services and enterprise solutions businesses. Both of these take place in the business-to-business context. With professional software development services we refer to software that is usually built in the form of projects, together with the customer organization. Consequently, the software is always more or less unique. Much emphasis is put on managing the seller's long-term relationship with its customers. Communication between the customer ands seller organizations is intense and regular, and mutual learning and adaptation takes place through several successive projects, where the parties' technical experts and managers are involved.

Enterprise solutions, on the other hand, are complex and expensive software products, which may bear considerable similarities regarding the basic functionality, but often require some level of customization. Moreover, the technical platforms on which the solutions will be executed may vary across customers. At least some level of co-operation between the supplier and customer organization is required with respect to installation, tailoring and/or education, although the amount of interaction is mots often significantly lower when compared with the professional services business. Furthermore, in the enterprise solution business the seller puts much more emphasis on the management of its own product portfolio. The customer market is broader and communication is more one-way, the seller being often the active part. Markets are open and rather competitive, as many of the rival companies are multinational corporations. Marketing and related areas, such as branding, distribution and

life-cycle support for the customer's solution, are important. Sellers create value by copying a basic product for their customers, i.e. by tailoring the basic solution. However, the tailoring presupposes a thorough understanding of the customer's operational processes that the solution must support, or of the customer's own product in which the solution will be incorporated.

It is quite obvious that the logic of doing business differs between the project-oriented professional software development services business and the enterprise solutions business that is closer to producing ready-made software products. Consequently, also, value for the customer is created in different ways, depending on through which way the software the customer buys is produced. In the empirical part, we describe the value creating processes of one customer, related to buying software from sellers representing the two different businesses, and give suggestions on how the organization could use this knowledge to strengthen its own operations.

Customer organization buying software
The customer organization in our case study organization is a professional service firm that carries out most of its work in the form of projects. It works in close in co-operation with domestic and foreign partners, employing about 300 people as a part of a larger corporate structure that consists of some 3000 people. The organization carries out three types of activities: commercial customer-funded activities, joint projects and self-financed projects. Commercial activities are performed according to direct demand from customers. Joint projects are initiated on the basis of need and typically jointly funded by the case organization, industrial partners and public funding bodies. Self-financed projects involve strategic pre-study and research projects aimed at developing competitiveness and acquiring knowledge and expertise to meet the future customer needs.

Need for project management software
As the case organization is relatively large as a service firm and carries out tens of distinct projects annually, it has an apparent need for a project management software. Before 1998, it had relied on packaged mass-market software products available for project management. In particular, MS-Project – the most widespread project management software product – had been used for project planning (design of project time-tables, resource allocation, task structures, etc.). The use of the packaged project management software products, however, was not very intensive. First of all, MS-Project considered very difficult to use in comparison with the respective benefits for the user. As a packaged software product, it included many ready-made features. An external consultant had needed to be hired to produce a user's guide for managing the basic functionality of the product. Still, many of the fancy functions were rather useless for the case organization's project managers.

As a result, the use of the software product in actual project management had been rather limited, it was mainly used for drawing project time-tables that could be showed to customers – many of whom were themselves using the same MS-Project product. Although this product was considered relatively insignificant from the actual project management point of view, the case organization had to continue buying the needed software licenses for running the program, in order to be able to communicate and exchange data with customer organizations.

In the late nineties the management of the case organization became aware of an increasing need for a more comprehensive project management system by which a standardized method for documentation in the organization could be achieved. This was very much due to the fact

that at that time it had established an ISO9001-based quality system, i.e. standard operational procedures had been described for planning and managing of projects. Yet, almost all technical and project management documents were handled internally and with the customers in written form. A project management system that would both support the standard operational procedures and allow for electronic exchange of project documentation was seen as useful. Moreover, such a system would pave a road for systematic collection of project data, based on which new projects could better be planned and managed. A general project library would also help to share information inside the case organization between different projects and in individual projects between the case organization and the customer. MS-Project did not give any support for these needs at all.

Search for the best solution: a software product or a tailored system?
When buying a complex software, an organization often has a choice of either selecting an enterprise solution system or buying a unique software. An important pre-assumption in the case organization, as described above, had been that a packaged software product would be inexpensive, easy to use and well-aligned with the customers' corresponding solutions. Thus, the organization had initially purchased licenses for a packaged software product, MS-Project.

However, this decision had resulted in increasing dissatisfaction among the main users of the software product, namely project managers. In addition, there were considerable expenses due to the fact that many of the routine project planning and management tasks were carried out manually, using word processing tools, spread sheets, e-mail etc. non-integrated replacements for the intended project management system. There was a corporate-level enterprise solution system available e.g. for recording daily working hours and billing projects, but information could not be transferred automatically from the project management tools or to the project management tools to this system. The same information was recorded manually in different forms in many different places. This kind of a situation is often one of the key triggers for an organization to consider buying an integrated solution that makes it possible to store the information only once and to streamline the processes where the information is produced and consumed.

Indeed, in 1999 the case organization made a decision to purchase a project management software from a professional software development service company, i.e. a system that is produced within a project and is highly customized to meet the customer's requirements. It was also agreed that the tailored software should be build on the Lotus Domino platform, providing a browser-based common user interface to a Lotus Notes based system by which project-related information could be stored and the operational project planning and management procedures supported.

There were several reasons for choosing a customized system. First and most important, in late 1998, no single ready-made software product could be found that would have fulfilled the specific needs for the project management system. Experiences from the existing software products were discouraging. Such "small" product as MS-Project could not provide the needed level of operational support and security with respect to the access to and exchange of documentation. "Big" enterprise solutions, such as SAP or R³, were considered as much too expensive for an organization carrying out less than a hundred projects a year – i.e. the number of main users of the system. Another factor that also encouraged the case organization to buy a customized project management solution was that it preferred to own the property rights for the software.

This was considered as important, since the case organization wanted to be able to further develop the project management software according to its needs, and possibly even create a software product of its own that could be sold to its own customers – who were expected to have similar needs in the near future. The decision was also backed up by the buyer's belief that installing and using a commercial software product would require radical changes in the organization's existing processes, if it were used for full benefit. The case organization did not want to purchase again a software product that would not really to be used, due to the difficulties in learning its features and in integrating it with the operational procedures and other support systems.

By building the software according to its own requirements, the case organization could ensure that the software strengthens its project management competence and does not require too many changes in the procedures by which projects were being planned and managed - radical changes would mean extra costs. Also, the buyers of the software – the line managers of the case organization - did not want to force the project managers to operate in certain way. By installing the new software they rather wanted to offer a possibility to work more efficiently and facilitate continuous improvement of the project management routines. Finally, the question of the expected quality of the software also had a certain effect. Normally in the case of professional services, the seller gives a guarantee for the software, whereas with packaged solutions there is no certainty of whether the software product will really 'fit' to the buying organization – consider the experiences from the use of MS-Project described above as a good example. The decision to have the software built on the top of the Lotus Domino platform made the actual selection of the software supplier easier. The seller organization, a large software services company, was chosen as it had the required Lotus Domino knowledge and the parties had had some co-operation also prior to this deal. The contract price was around $20 000.

Installing and using the tailored software

The building and installation of the tailored project management system software, called INTREX, took about six months. It was clear already in the beginning that building of this software together with the seller organization would require a lot of work and knowledge in terms of e.g. the operational procedures to support and the project documents and data to be managed also from the employees of the buyer. Anyhow, the amount of work and especially knowledge that was needed were underestimated.

Having already used a tailored project management system would probably have reduced the amount of difficulties that the case organization had especially in the use of INTREX after the installation. Certain smaller bugs were detected from the software within the guarantee period of six months. The supplier took care of those flaws. After the guarantee period, however, the case organization noticed several errors in the software system. The seller has not been interested in correcting these errors. It has only made some 'sophisticated guesses' of where the fault might possibly be found in the software.

Naturally, the buying organization sensed the reluctance of the seller to correct the errors in the project management software. Consequently, it decided to systematically reduce its dependency on the seller as a source of knowledge and information with respect to the developed software. The buyer was not disappointed to the price that they had paid for the system, though, $20 000 seemed as a reasonable price for such a complex software system.

What they were clearly disappointed on, however, was the after sales service and back up of the supplier.

The future of INTREX
As mentioned above, one of the arguments of the case organization for buying a tailored software system was to get the proprietary rights for the software. This means that the buyer can change and develop the software further for its own use. At the moment, the case organization is planning to start a pilot project, in which the bugs of INTREX will be corrected, the software will be further developed and possible even productized into a commercial software product. The work will not be done solely by the case organization, but it is currently looking for a partner that would have the required Lotus Domino knowledge and interest in productizing the software. The original supplier of INTREX, however, is not considered as a potential partner any longer. The fact that INTREX is build on a commercial platform, clearly makes it easier to find a new partner and, on the other hand, reduces the dependency of the buyer on the initial software seller.

In the beginning of year 2000, at the same time when the case organization is sketching the pilot project for INTREX, there already exists software products in the enterprise solutions market that quite well match the features of INTREX. The price of these products is somewhat higher than what was paid for the tailored system. The future of the tailored INTREX system thus relies heavily on the buyer's own capabilities to develop system further. As far as enterprise solutions are concerned, new versions are normally brought into the market at relatively constant time interval.

4. Identifying and analyzing the Customer's Value Creation Processes

According to the case description above, we have identified the value creation process for the customer organization both in the case of buying tailored software from the development services business and acquiring an enterprise solution. While the former is based on actual experiences, the latter is based on a scenario constructed as part of the interview for buying an enterprise solution instead of the tailored system. We present these value creation processes in four different sub processes: search for best solution, production and implementation, utilization and further development of the software. The description of value creation processes includes both positive and negative factors, that is, the value crating factors as well as those concerns of the customer that affect the value creation at each of the stages.

When a piece of software is produced through a project, the customer can usually considerably influence the outcome of the project. In the search for a best solution stage, in order to determine the requirement for the software, the case organization had to carefully examine its own needs, the existing processes and competence that it wanted to strengthen by using the software. Therefore, it can be argued that value is created in terms of increased knowledge concerning the buyer's own operations. Also, knowledge was created through intensive contract negotiations concerning the project between the seller and customer organizations. When searching for the best solution from packaged enterprise solutions, however, more emphasis is put on the features of the product as very little of these features can be affected by the customer organization. Thus, focus is on evaluating and comparing existing software product alternatives.

In professional services businesses the production and implementation stage meant increased knowledge for the case organization concerning its own operations and competence. Also, the cooperation with the supplier organization was deepened. Problems can be created for the customer organization as this stage may take a considerably long time in professional services business. As regards to enterprise solutions, the production and implementation time is usually shorter since the software does not have to be designed and built from the beginning. However, much training might be needed, as the use of the software requires new skills in the customer organization. With project business this kind of knowledge is often created during the system specification and implementation phase.

During the utilization stage, value was created as the software strengthened the case organization's existing competence, e.g. more effective use of its quality system. Also, an important point is that no radical changes had to be made in the existing procedures and thus, the project managers were not forced to change the way they were used to work. There were few useless features in the software that did not create value for the customer.

In the case of an enterprise solution there might be several add-on services or features that the customer does not really appreciate and that may even make the use of the software more complicated. The problem at least in the case studied in this research was that the supplier's guarantee only covered the point where the software was installed and tried in the customer organization, but did not ensure well enough the continuous functionality of the software. After the guarantee period, the customer still found relatively severe bugs in the software that it had to eliminate without the help of the supplier. When a commercial software product is bought, the existence of errors that would disturb or restrict the use of the software is much less unlikely. The producer of the packaged software normally guarantees the operational functionality of the software, but not the adaptability of the product to the customer organization.

Although in the utilization stage the software is already delivered to and owned by the customer, in the professional services sector the customer organization is at least to some extent still dependent on the seller's knowledge and services. In the presented case the dependency on the seller was reduced by selecting a relatively widely used and commercial platform for the software that can be exploited also by other suppliers. When buying an enterprise solution, the dependency is of course weaker, as several companies have the knowledge concerning the purchased software.

The last key difference in the utilization of the software between the two alternatives concerns the possibility to combine the software with other systems and integrate together systems built on other platforms. In the case organization, INTREX could not replace MS-Project. The use of MS-Project had to be continued, in order to have a link to the customers' project management systems, since MS-Project was still being used by most of the case organization's customers. A widely used commercial software package can become a de facto standard, and thus facilitate exchanging information with other parties' systems.

The stage of software development is clearly somewhat overlapping with the utilization stage. The need to further develop the acquired software can emerge right after the implementation, because it is difficult to fully pre-specify complex systems. New versions of enterprise solutions are, as mentioned above, introduced to the markets at regular intervals. Thus, continuous upgrading of the software is ensured. On the other hand, the customer organization can seldom influence on exactly how or even to which direction the software is

being developed. With tailored software the situation is different. For example, the case organization owns all rights to INTREX, and can thus change the software as it wishes. Developing the software by itself is, however, too difficult and time consuming for the case organization, and it needs another expert company to cooperate with. In more general terms, further development of a tailored piece of software depends often highly on the willingness of the initial supplier to take part of the process. Also the development of the basic architecture has an effect, e.g. the future of INTREX depends on how browser type user interfaces will evolve.

Figure 1 summarizes the two value creating processes.

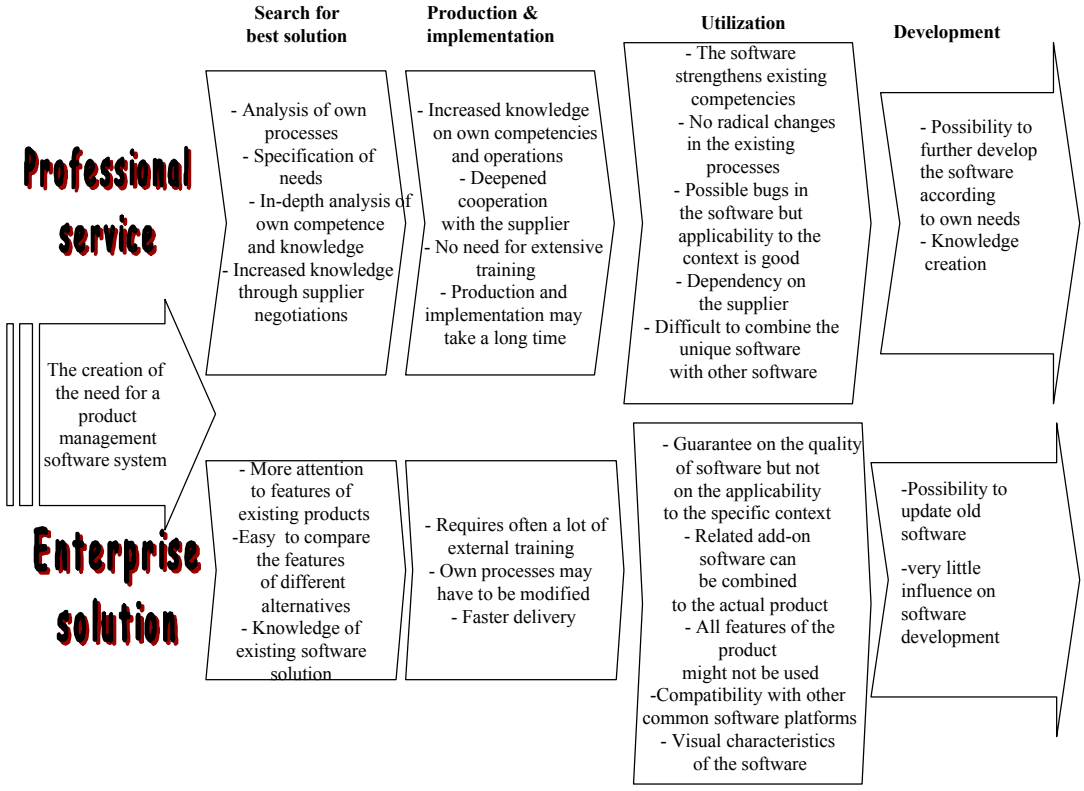

Figure 1: The customer value creation processes for tailored software and enterprise solutions.

5. The implications for the supplier

How can a supplier benefit from this kind of an analysis and comparison between the value creation processes of customers buying either tailored software or enterprise solutions? We argue that the analysis enables the supplier to develop a combination of add-on services and product features to the total offering that create the highest possible value to the customer organization. As an example, important lessons can be learned from the value creation process discussed above. On the basis of our case presentation, it can be argued that in the stage of searching for the best solution a service supplier aiming at producing a tailored software system should concentrate on identifying the key processes and competence of the customer. This should also be communicated to the customer during the negotiations. Great emphasis should be put on how the developed software will support the customer's operational processes. The supplier of an enterprise solution could instead take an advantage of the fact that the existing features and the applicability of the software can be explicitly expressed to the customer, and that the further development of the solution can be ensured.

In the production and implementation stage of customized software, the supplier should focus on designing a software that fits as perfectly as possible with the customer organization, so that minimal modifications are needed in the operations, structures and practices of the users of the software. As is typical to project business in general, in the specification and implementation of tailored software, the supplier should aim at deepening the level of the cooperation in the mutual relationship. On the contrary, the supplier of an enterprise solution could benefit from understanding how to minimize the customer's need for external training.

Furthermore, as successful software delivery and installation are important value creating characteristics of enterprise solutions, the supplier of tailored software should aim at delivering and implementing the software as 'smoothly' as possible. It might be less important to shorten the actual time span than to plan for a delivery process so that the customer processes can be associated with the software as early as possible during the production and implementing process. This would enable the customer to evaluate and test use the software at an early stage. Enterprise solutions include usually a large set of features. However, as many of these may not be crucial for a specific customer, resources that are used for developing these are somewhat sacrificed in vain.

In the utilization stage, the supplier should focus on the actual usability of the software, from the customer's point of view. The customer organization and its personnel should find it easy to start using the software and the efforts required from the user should be as low as possible. As the case that we have studied clearly expresses, a rather long after-sales support may be needed for tailored software systems. In the enterprise solutions the guarantee time is usually long and main errors have been eliminated. It would be useful for the customer value creation that such a guarantee is also included in tailored software produced as a professional service.

One of the value creating features of enterprise solutions is also compatibility with other applications and platforms that are in use either in the customer organization or in other organizations with which the customer is in contact. Such a value creating feature in tailored software could help ensuring the continuity of the customer relationship. In enterprise solutions, there are usually features and add-on services that are less useful for the customer. This should be avoided when supplying tailored software.

The supplier needs to take the further development of the software into account already during the initial software development and delivery. In the case of tailored software, the

software development project should be planned so that the customer receives additional value through continuing development projects. In the case that we have studied, the customer was planning to add functions to the project management software, but as the supplier did not succeed well enough during the initial project, the supplier was no longer a good candidate partner for further development. If the supplier is involved in mutual knowledge creation and sharing, it possesses better prospects for winning further development projects.

The lesson that can be learned from the value creation process of a customer buying enterprise solutions is that the software should be built on a platform that is open and allows for new releases of the solution.

The lessons discussed above are illustrated in figure 2.

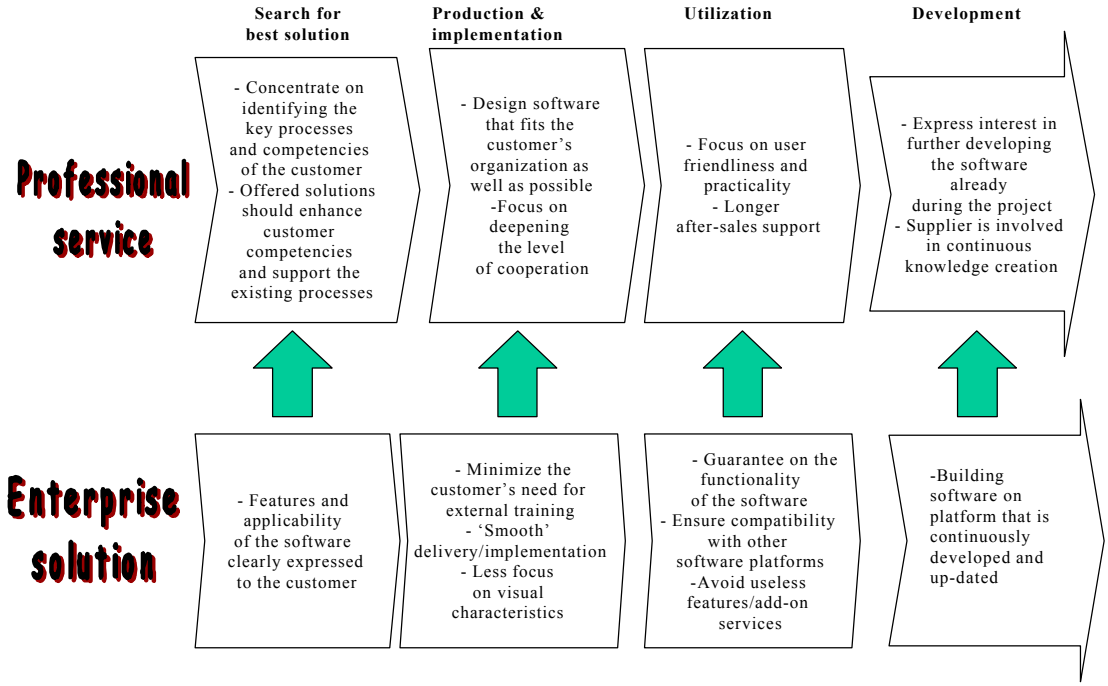

Figure 2. Suggested actions in the supplier's operations on the basis of the customer's value creation processes in the two businesses.

5. Discussion

The aim of this paper has been to propose a conceptual tool for managing business relationships towards joint value creation. In order to illustrate how value creation can be used as a practical management tool we presented a case from the software industry involving a large company buying complex software. Based on the case description we analyzed how the customer's value creation processes varies in the two different ways of buying the software as a development service and as buying the software as an enterprise solution. Through an understanding the customer's value creation processes, we have identified those supplementary services and product features that create value. We argue that these features should be the ones on which the software offering is based. In addition, we have identified

some additional services and product characteristics that may not create value for the customer and consequently should be given less attention to. Although the presented arguments are based on one case presentation, the analysis provides several useful points also in more general terms, regarding customer-supplier relationships.

We argue that the approach of examining the value creation processes of a customer buying the same solution in a customized or more productized form can provide useful considerations for suppliers in different industries. Through this kind of an analysis the supplier can identify the most effective and valuable combination of product features and additional services. This way, the offering provides the customers with superior value and also the supplier's gains are maximized.

Furthermore, on the basis of our analysis it can be concluded that customers are in all cases an extremely important source of competence for the supplier. For example, by giving more attention to the mutual software development process, the supplier of INTREX might have had a chance to develop the system further together with the customer organization into a commercial software product. This could have created a new source of competence for the supplier organization. The supplier's poor understanding of the customer's value creation processes resulted, in practice, in the finishing of the relationship. Although both parties are still capable of using the respective competence for their own benefit, the possibility to gain more than the sum of the competence by further collaboration was lost. In this paper we concentrated on identifying the value creation of the customer organization. However, the presented kind of systematic identification of the creation of value of both the customer and the supplier would encourage towards an equal dialogue in the business relationship and 'zippering' of business processes between the customer and the supplier.

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