

# **DEVELOPING INTERNAL COMMUNICATION FOR MANAGING CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS**

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## **Abstract**

This paper focuses on examining an industrial supplier's internal communication when interacting with customers. We briefly review the existing literature related to internal communication and discuss its role in interacting with customers. To illustrate the complex nature of internal communication, we present a case of communicating customer-related information in the early phases of a customer relationship in a complex matrix organization company delivering material handling solutions for logistics operators. We end with a framework mapping the communication flows between different units in the supplier and customer organizations and discuss the preliminary implications regarding the identified complex nature of internal communication. In the following phases of the research process we will apply social network analysis to study the communication flows between different organizational actors at both interpersonal and inter-functional levels.

## Introduction

Operating with customers in large industrial high-technology companies requires intensive personal interaction, which in turn involves cooperation between different groups of functional experts within and between the supplier and customer organizations (Möller and Rajala, 1999). The management of customer relationships in these organizations is dynamic and fragmented, rather than centralized. The number of units operating with the customer, and their decentralized character put great pressure on inter-unit coordination and communication. This fragmentation is further strengthened by the globalization of operations, bringing localized working practices. It has been found that a customer's satisfaction with the supplier's performance is very much dependent on the smooth management of the interconnections between organizational units and activities (Möller and Rajala, 1999). This tension between a fragmented customer interface and a demand for a consistent customer experience creates a major challenge for managing the internal communication in supplier organizations.

Even though the importance of efficient internal communication and its relation to the consistency of interactions when operating with customers has been acknowledged, the actual processes of internal communication to coordinate the interaction with customers remain relatively under-researched. In this paper we focus on this largely neglected issue in the field of industrial marketing research: development and management of efficient intra-organizational communication practices for managing customer relationships. We examine the internal communication of customer information in a complex matrix organization company delivering material handling solutions for logistics operators.

We build our conceptual framework by reviewing the existing literature on internal communication (e.g. Welch and Jackson, 2005; Scholes, 1997). We integrate concepts from these streams of literature to the IMP (industrial marketing and purchasing) view of interaction in buyer-seller relationships. Within the interaction and network approach, the concept of inconsistency has been used to refer to the ambiguity and lack of clarity in interaction between the actors (Ford, Håkansson, and Johanson, 1986). Inconsistency is an important but neglected aspect of interaction, and one of the most difficult aspects to handle managerially. It has been suggested that the interaction-related problems faced by industrial suppliers are often not necessarily conflict-type by nature, but rather hidden inconsistencies and discrepancies resulting from inefficient communication or variations in short-term goals between organizational units and individuals (Jalkala, Salminen, and Pekkarinen 2007).

On the basis of initial interviews with the case company, we have identified the relevant units and actors carrying out activities in interaction with the customer. At the first stage of the study, we map the internal communication flows between different organizational units involved in the customer relationship and examine the character of communication. At later stages of the study, we are going to use social network analysis to examine the communication flows between the key persons interacting with the customer.

The purpose of the research is to examine customer-related internal communication in a supplier organization. The main research question is: How does an industrial supplier manage its internal communication process related to a specific customer relationship? In order to answer the research question we approach the problem with two sub-questions. First, we examine what kind of social network is formed in the case of managing one specific customer relationship. Second, we identify the relevant key actors in managing the customer relationship and examine how information flows occur between these actors. With the gathered information we make a proposal on how information can be distributed and controlled more effectively, so that the customer becomes aware of a consistently behaving and communicating organization.

Since the relationship and network approaches have become a predominant viable paradigm in industrial markets (Easton, 1992; Håkansson and Johanson, 1992), social network analysis offers an interesting research method to study and understand networks. As Smidts, Pruyn, and Riel (2001) have said that internal communication is a "rather neglected" management instrument, these two aspects form an interesting base to this study, which contributes to both conversations.

## Internal communication and related concepts

Internal communication is regarded as a crucial value-producing process for organizations (e.g. Zahay and Peltier, forthcoming; Ahmed and Rafiq, 2003). In addition to managed communication, internal communication occurs in companies through unstructured processes and informal practices. Previous studies have shown that competent management of internal customer-related knowledge is a prerequisite for successful management of customer relationships (Möller and Rajala, 1999).

Several different concepts have been used to describe the phenomenon of internal information transfer within companies (Welch and Jackson, 2007). According to the concept employee communication (Frank and Brownell, 1989; Argenti, 1996; Smidts, Pruyn, and Riel, 2001), communication is seen as one part of the corporate communication (Argenti, 1996). By van Riel's (1995) definition, corporate communication consists of both internal and external communication. These components are harmonized as effectively and efficiently as possible, to create a favorable basis for relationships with groups the company is dependent on. Another widely used concept is internal marketing, which refers to a management philosophy of treating employees as customers Grönroos (2000). Ballantyne (1997) clarifies the relationship between internal marketing and internal communication by stating that internal marketing is an activity directed towards improving internal communication and customer consciousness. There are also other related concepts discussed in the literature, such as internal public relations (Jefkins, 1988), internal relations (Grunig and Hunt, 1984), staff communication (Stone, 1995) and internal communication (Cornelissen, 2004; Chaney and Christensen, 2001; Scholes, 1997; Bovée and Thill, 2003; Frank and Brownell, 1989). Table 1 summarizes the different concepts related to internal information transfer.

Table 1. Concepts used to characterize internal information transfer

Concept	Author(s)	Definition
Employee communication ( <i>Internal communication</i> )	Frank and Brownell (1989, p. 5-6)	"The communication transactions between individuals and/or groups at various levels and in different areas of specialization that are intended to design and redesign organizations, to implement designs and to coordinate day-to-day activities"
Corporate communication	van Riel (1995, p. 26)	"An instrument of management by means of which all consciously used forms of internal and external communication are harmonized as effectively and efficiently as possible, so as to create a favorable basis for relationships with groups upon which the company is dependant"
Internal marketing	Ballantyne, Christopher and Payne (1995, p. 15)	"Any form of marketing within an organization which focuses staff attention on the internal activities that need to be changed in order to enhance external marketplace performance."
Internal communication	Chaney and Christensen (2001, p.231)	"Employee relations, statements of mission and organizational development."
	Scholes (1997, p. xviii)	"The professional management of interactions between all those with an interest or 'a stake' in a particular organization."
	Cornelissen (2004, p. 189)	"All methods (internal newsletter, intranet) used by a firm to communicate with its employees."
	Bovée and Thill (2003, p. 11)	"The exchange of information and ideas within an organization."

<p>Integrated internal communications</p>	<p>Kalla (2005, p.304)</p>	<p>“All formal and informal communication taking place internally at all levels of an organization.”</p> <p><i>Includes four domains: business communication (Reinsch, 1996), management communication (Smeltzer, 1996), corporate communication (Argenti, 1996) and organizational communication (Mumby &amp; Stol, 1996).</i></p>
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Internal communication has many different definitions. According to Chaney and Christensen (2001, p.231), internal communication is “employee relations, statements of mission and organizational development”. They argue that internal and external communications are not separated by making a notion of fuzzy organizational boundaries. Scholes (1997, p. xviii) takes the stakeholder perspective and defines internal communication as “the professional management of interactions between all those with an interest or ‘a stake’ in a particular organization”. Scholes’ definition is useful because of the strategic approach and focus on the stakeholders (Welch and Jackson, 2007). Cornelissen (2004, p. 189) focuses more on the methods and takes a tactical perspective. He defines internal communication as “all methods (internal newsletter, intranet, etc.) used by a firm to communicate with its employees”. On the other hand, this approach lacks the strategic aspect of internal communication (Welch and Jackson, 2007). Bovée and Thill (2000, p. 7) define internal communication in less detail: “the exchange of information and ideas within an organization”.

Kalla (2005, p.304) sees a multi-disciplinary interest in internal communication and uses the concept of “integrated internal communications”. Her definition is “all formal and informal communication taking place internally at all levels of an organization”. Kalla bases the concept on the following four communication domains: business communication (Reinsch, 1996), management communication (Smeltzer, 1996), corporate communication (Argenti, 1996), and organizational communication (Mumby and Stol, 1996). Business communication contains the communication skills of all employees (Bovée and Thill, 2003), management communication focuses on the development of the manager’s communication skills and capabilities (Smeltzer, 1996), corporate communication deals with the formal corporate communication function (Argenti, 1996) and organizational communication provides a context by emphasizing more philosophically and theoretically oriented issues (Mumby and Stol, 1996). According to Kalla (2006) all these domains are necessary when communication is studied, because none of them alone addresses all the necessary aspects of internal communication.

In the present study, we approach the phenomenon of internal communication by viewing it as the “management of interactions between all those with an interest or ‘a stake’ in a particular organization” (Scholes 1997). For the term stakeholder, we follow the definition of Freeman (1984) for stakeholders as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the firm’s objectives”. However, as we focus on the internal communication processes related to managing a specific customer relationship we limit our attention to those stakeholders who are involved in the interaction with the customer. Thus, we use the internal communication concept to refer to the management of interactions between groups or individuals within an organization, who are involved in interaction with the customer.

**Role of internal communication in managing customer relationships**

In addition to the notion of Ritter and Gemünden (2003) of integrated internal communication structure as an important part for the development of a firm’s networking ability, many others have also found that internal communication has an effect on customer relationships and the company’s profitability (Möller and Rajala, 1999; Adebajo, 2001; Smythe, 1996; De Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2003; Peters and Fletcher, 2004).

Möller and Rajala (1999) have found that marketing activities are being increasingly spread out among several organizational units, like multifunctional teams, account management systems, and forms of business process. Since the amount of stakeholders is increasing and their influence over different sales process phases is getting wider, the role of communication between them is increasingly important. The management of fluent communication between organizational actors involved in customer relationships presents a major challenge,

and account managers have a key role as boundary spanners and coordinators of the interaction between the company and its customers (Möller and Rajala, 1999).

Smythe (1996) notes that the speed of the business cycle has increased, and thus the decision making has to be faster as well. He remarks that the decision makers need extensive information around the organization more quickly, so that customers' needs can be satisfied better. According to Smythe, by developing internal communication, information and knowledge can be transferred effectively to the decision maker, through which the speed of the decision making and its quality can be increased. According to Smythe (1996) the transparency of decision making is also increasing through the development of internal communication. Furthermore, this transparency improves also the psychological health of the organization, reflecting positively on the customer relationship.

Customer satisfaction has today a more and more significant impact on the financial success of an organization (Adebanjo, 2001). For example Galbreath and Rogers (1999) found that 98 per cent of dissatisfied customers switch to a competitor without complaining, while "totally satisfied" customers repurchase six times more likely a company's products than merely satisfied customers. Adebanjo (2001) argues that observations of the customers have to be communicated to all the relevant departments and individuals in the organization, so that the customer needs can be satisfied effectively. According to him, effective internal communication ensures that all necessary information is transferred to the stakeholders.

Internal communication has also an important role in developing and maintaining the company brand. It has been found that successful brands depend on good internal communication programs (Clever, 1999) to support greater consistency, at whatever point the customer's contact with the organization occurs (Camp, 1996). De Chernatony and Segal-Horn (2003) state that effective internal and external communication is one way to improve customer perceived consistency. Peters and Fletcher (2004) also see the communication within and between organizations as a way to improve marketing effectiveness.

## **Research setting**

The case study methodology (Yin, 1984; Eisenhardt, 1989) was adopted as the basic research approach for the study, because relatively little priori information existed about the focal phenomenon: internal communication concerning customer information in a complex matrix organization. The data has been collected through personal interviews and enquiries, as well as with the help of company internal documents and archival organizational data. To analyze the gathered case data we have used the social network analysis method, described below.

Social network analysis is a research technique that clarifies the relationships between different actors, for example people and organizations (Mead, 2001). Phillips and Phillips (1998) define a social network as a group of social actors that interrelate or exchange information with one another. Studying the research problem with the social network technique offers an interesting insight into how knowledge is spread throughout a community. In the field of industrial marketing, social network analysis has been applied to study e.g. firms' network positions (M'Chirgui, 2007), interaction in a building owner-centered network (Tuomela, Heimbürger, Nummi, and Toivonen, 2005), and an industrial buyer's purchasing linkages (Buckles and Ronchetto, 1996). For example Tuomela et al. (2005) have studied how a Finnish building owner organization manages multi-level interaction in the alliance network. They selected the social network analysis because of the need to understand the process of value creation and the channels of knowledge flow on and between strategic and operational levels through the informal network of the dyadic alliance between the user and the owner of the building. M'Chirgui (2007) analyses in his paper the role and influence of particular firms on the formation of inter-firm partnership in the smart card industry. His paper contributes to the body of literature on inter-organizational network ties. Therefore he uses social network analysis as a method that can be used to analyze the relationships between firms.

The most widely applied concepts in social network analysis are network density and centrality (Wesserman and Faust, 1994). The density of a network is a measure of the connectedness in the network, whereas centrality indicates the degree to which an actor has succeeded in developing a dominant position in the overall network (M'Chirgui, 2007). Johanson, Mattila, and Uusikylä (1995) note that one concept closely related to the concept of centrality is centralization. Whereas centrality is a feature of one specific actor in the

network, centralization is a feature of the whole network. It illustrates how much the network is centralized around certain actors. Freeman (1979) divides centrality into narrow centrality and broad centrality. Narrow centrality means that an individual actor has many connections to close actors. Broad centrality means that an individual actor has an essential position in the overall network. Figure 1 illustrates the basic types of network structure.

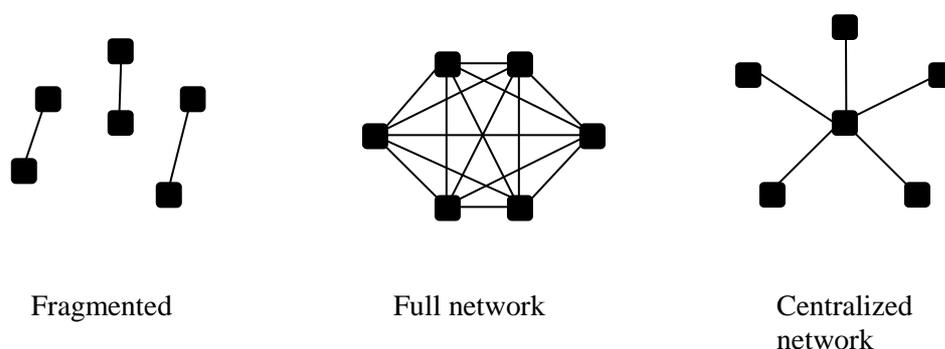


Figure 1. The basic types of network structure (M'Chirgui, 2007)

The first type of these networks contains three dyads. M'Chirgui (2007) defines a dyad as a pair of actors and the tie(s) between them. In the first example in Figure 1 these three dyads are not connected to each other. Furthermore, in this first example three cliques, “a sub-set of points in which every possible pair of points is directly connected by a line and the clique is not contained in any other clique” (Scott, 2000), can be distinguished. The next example in Figure 1, depicts a full network or a complete network. In the full network all the actors are related to each other. The third type of these networks is a centralized network, where one actor is connected to others, which are otherwise unconnected (M'Chirgui, 2007). The network can be measured with many different concepts, and centrality is one of them. Wesserman and Faust (1994) introduce three measures of centrality: degree, closeness and betweenness. Degree centrality reflects the total number of collaborative ties, in other words, degree centrality indicates how many connections an actor or a node has out of the maximum number of connections. Betweenness centrality measures the extent to which a particular actor has ties with the various other actors in the network. Wesserman and Faust (1994) note also that an actor with few ties may play an important role in the network. The third measure of centrality is closeness, which measures the centrality of a point by summing the geodesic distances from that point to all other points in the network.

### *Case company LogiTech*

The case company LogiTech (*fictitious name*) is a large international organization producing heavy cranes and other material handling equipment for logistics operators, such as ports, harbors, shipyards and the offshore industry. Besides developing innovating technologies, the company sets high emphasis on delivering qualified and consistent service to its customers. When selling to a new customer, the sales process from beginning to delivery can take from somewhat over a year to several years. The marketing and sales function takes care of the pre-phase of the customer relationship, which includes verifying all the decision makers in the customer organization, “value matching” with the customer, and possible reference visits. Marketing and sales is mainly responsible also of the following tendering and negotiation phase. When a contract is achieved, the project organization takes over the responsibility of coordinating and conducting the actions of the project delivery, including engineering, purchases, manufacturing, transportation, and commissioning. The delivery takes up from 7 months to a year and ends with hand-over and training. The project organization has also the main responsibility during the warranty period after project completion, which includes repairs, spare parts and customer support. After the warranty period, the local service organization takes the main responsibility of coordinating the maintenance and post-implementation actions with the customer. The maintenance service function is localized into market area-based units, with 330 service depots in 38 countries. LogiTech was selected as our case company because it illustrates the complexity of internal communication well. The case we use in this study is positioned in the tendering and negotiation phase.

## Preliminary findings and expected results

Based on preliminary findings in the case company LogiTech, we have mapped the communication flows between different organizational units involved in the customer relationship with a large multinational customer (MPP) (Figure 2). In this case, LogiTech has a customer relationship with MPP, which has four container terminal sites and one logistic terminal site. The logistic terminal and three container terminals are located in Russia and one container terminal is located in Ukraine. The headquarters of MPP locates in Moscow. The headquarters of LogiTech is located in Finland, with regional offices, concerning this case, in Russia and Ukraine. During the case there was also a reference visit to another customer of LogiTech in Spain. It is obvious that there are many actors involved to the case. When both LogiTech's stakeholders and the contact persons in MPP are taken into account, there were more than 60 stakeholders involved during the case. It has to be noted however, the case framework consists of internal stakeholders only. The case framework is depicted in Figure 2 with a dash line. Figure 2 depicts also the flows of information and their intensity.

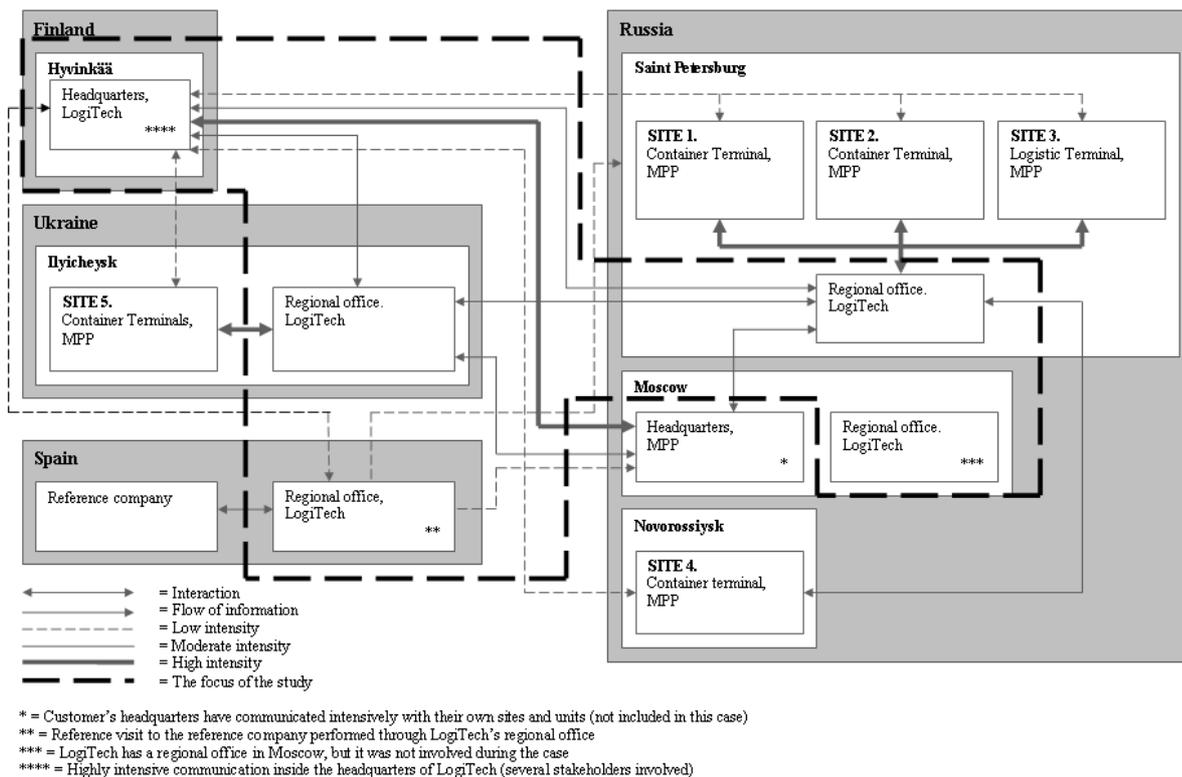


Figure 2. The case set-up

Through preliminary interviews and data analysis, we have identified that there are several different stakeholders communicating with the customer, which can lead to perceived inconsistency by customers (Ford, Håkansson, and Johanson, 1986). Another interesting interaction is between the regional offices and the customers. A challenge is that people in LogiTech's headquarters do not necessarily know what the regional office and the customer have discussed. The phenomenon occurs both in Russia and Ukraine. The communication between the Russian and Ukrainian regional offices is also partially unknown to LogiTech's headquarters. These phenomena are seen to be the effect of language barriers and geographical distances. As one interviewee said, "communication inside regional borders is executed properly, but communication between regions is a challenge". On the other hand, another interviewee said that the fluency of communication mostly depends on persons and their characteristics.

At the moment, we have become familiar with the case set-up by analyzing the relevant data collected in the case company. Based on our preliminary findings, it is expected that the network is very complex and the communication is centered on a few stakeholders. Thus, it is expected that the centralization of the network is high. Examining at the single stakeholder level, it is presumed that the centrality of some nodes is also going to be high. The reachability of the network is presumed to be good, but the distance between nodes can in some cases be substantial. Especially distance is expected to be substantial between some nodes in separate

regional offices. The most centralized nodes are expected to locate in LogiTech’s headquarters, and if the case is examined externally, other much centralized nodes are expected to be located in the customer’s headquarters. One interesting thing that this study is expected to be revealed is the communication between the regional offices and the customer sites.

**Following steps in the research process**

Next, we will continue this study with more in-depth data collection. Preliminary data will be collected by interviews and archival analysis. With the collected data, the key stakeholders of the case will be identified. After the key stakeholders are identified and their position, as well as their location in the company is revealed, an enquiry will be sent to them for the final data. To analyze the data of the enquiries, we will apply the social network analysis method with the help of UCINET software. The data of the interviews, and partly of the enquiry will be analyzed with within-case analysis. The social network analysis of the communication flows within the case company will be performed at the personal level, and an insight at the functional level achieved through personal level actors. The reliability and validity of the study will be improved by using several data collection and analysis methods. Figure 3 below depicts the research process.

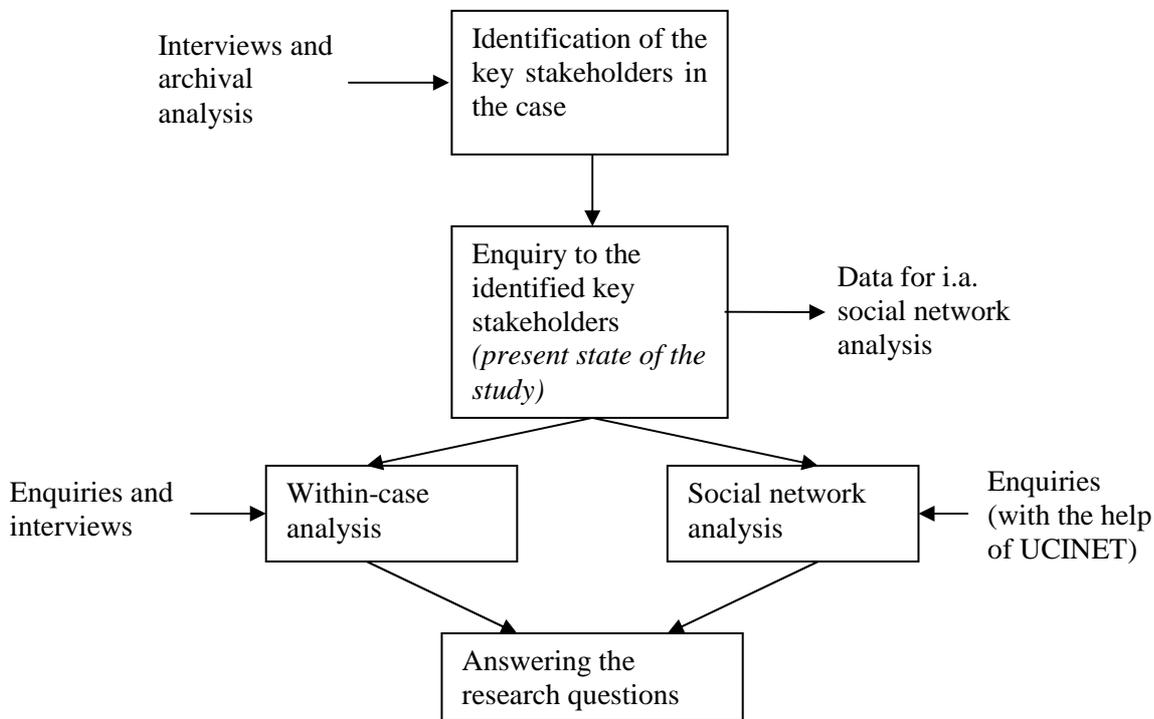


Figure 3. The research process.

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