

## **Dynamism of supplier's position in project marketing networks**

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### **Abstract**

The present study explores relationships between project marketers and their customers in project marketing context. The purpose of the study is to increase the understanding on supplier's position in project marketing networks. Project marketing is representing a high volume in the international business, and the industrial network approach and the project marketing research cannot fully explain a supplier's position in project marketing networks. Increased knowledge on project networks can also contribute to industrial marketing research more generally.

An entire project marketing process concerning a steel industry case was used as a data source. The data included interviews, correspondence between the supplier and the buyer, and project documents. The data of the case was analyzed with the developed Stage Dimension framework.

Supplier's position in project marketing networks is a hierarchical and dynamic concept including a supplier's position on the highest level. The dimensions of the position concept are intermediate level, and dimensions are based on the underlying components. Supplier's position is composed from four organization related dimensions, and two individual actor related dimensions. The composition of the supplier's position varies during the project marketing process, and consequently the importance of the dimensions is changing over the process.

The study contributes to the research of industrial networks and project marketing. The theoretical contribution of the study is twofold: firstly it proposes a structure of the position concept in project marketing networks, and secondly it proposes the Position Stage Dimension Component (PSDC) model for the development of supplier's position during the project marketing process. In addition to the theoretical contributions there are several managerial implications for planning and implementing marketing strategies in the project context.

## **Dynamism of supplier's position in project marketing networks**

### **Introduction**

This study explores relationships between project marketers and their customers in the project business and project marketing context, and its purpose is to increase understanding of customers' positioning of suppliers in the field of project marketing, and more generally in the project business. The position of a supplier from a project buyer's perspective measures how preferred a supplier is as a business partner compared with other suppliers. While positioning the project suppliers the project buyer arranges the suppliers in his mind in order of preference. In other words, the position measures the probability for business for suppliers in the project. The study concerns the structure of the position concept and its variation during a project marketing process *up to the placement of an order and the signing of a contract for a project*.

Suppliers try to improve or maintain their position in the network in order to be a preferred supplier. In reality though, this may be difficult, as it is not known, how buyers actually assess the suppliers in such a discontinuing, uncertain, and complex project marketing context (Mandjak and Veres 1998), in which both single actors and supply networks compete for a customer's preference. Do the customers' priorities remain the same, or do they change during the course of the process, and who is actually governing the priority on the buyer's side? Being a preferred supplier is vital because actual business opportunity only exists for a limited number of suppliers, and only one of them eventually will secure the contract for a given project.

Why is it then important that knowledge on project marketing and the project business is increased? Project operations are said to be one of the dominating modes of international business (Skaates, Tikkanen and Lindblom 2002; Hajdikhani 1996), and in this respect it is an essential element in industrial marketing, and projects in different forms represent a major proportion of international trade and business activities (Cova, Ghauri and Salle 2002, 4). If projects are dominating economic transactions, the marketing of projects is almost totally ignored in project business conference papers and journals, representing less than 1% of all papers (see e.g. Themistocleous and Wearne 2000; Zobel and Wearne 2000). This means that temporary networks are involved in a great number of economic actions, and respectively a great number of economic actions take place under circumstances, which are not necessarily fully understood. Deeper understanding of the project marketing context benefits specifically the research of projects, managerial practices, and more widely, the understanding of temporary or dynamic and short-term networks, and their positions in them are both central in the network approach and also in business activities in the project business. Owusu (2003, 51) point out that short-term episodes and interactions are the basic analytical unit of INA, which form the analytical bases of longer-term relationships. Relationships are argued to be the key ingredient in industrial marketing, and it is the individual actors who interact in the relationships. Hence, all new findings should benefit from understanding the relationships in the industrial marketing context, especially as the industrial network approach tends to emphasize the importance of longer relationships (c.f. Håkansson and Snehota 1995, Möller and Wilson 1995). Respectively, increased understanding of shorter or new relationships would contribute to the scientific discussion conducted within the industrial network literature, as relationships are one of its central elements. Generally speaking, project marketing literature is so limited that there is room for new findings.

The earlier research concerning actors' positions in business networks falls short of explaining how the suppliers' positions are constructed from the project buyers' perspective. Earlier

studies by Johanson and Mattsson (1985), Mattsson and Johanson (1992) and Henders (1992) introduced the basis of the concept based on the dimensions of an actor's role and identity in the network, and strength of relationships with other actors in the network widened by Johanson and Mattsson (1985) with micro and macro positions. Micro refers to links between individual units and macro to an organization's links to aggregated levels in the network (Wynstra 1994). Johanson and Mattsson (1992) further included in the position concept the link between resources and relationship development. Earlier research on the subject is valuable, as it has enabled further developments. However, it does not seem to model the reality in the project marketing context accurately enough, as for example the project specific solution is not taken into account and the complexity of position cannot be modeled with so few dimensions. A project does nothing more than provides a solution to a customer's specific problem, and no matter how important an actor (a supplier) is in the traditional sense, if the actor cannot solve the customer's problem, the supplier's position is marginal. Another problem for applying the traditional concept of network position in project marketing regards the personal relationships. The earlier research on the network position does not discuss relationships between the individuals in the network. Anderson et al. (1998) widened the breadth of meaning of the position concept to include dynamism of relationships in business networks, and suggested that dynamics in business networks can be explored by their position and role framework in which position represents stability, and role a change process. Even though the expansions to the position concept were interesting and valuable, they did not provide a means by which to understand the position concept in the project marketing processes.

Cova, Ghauri and Salle (2002) have proposed variants of network position, with the aim to take into account the specific features of the project context. They suggested that functional and relation aspects should be included in the position concept. Functional position represents the solution specific elements, and relational position includes personal level relations between individual actors in a project. Cova, Ghauri and Salle (ibid) argue that relational position concerns the earliest stages of a project, and sometimes even the time, before an actual project even exists. Personal ties which have been formed can therefore be argued to be an important factor in attaining a favorable position. The relational position proposed (ibid) has not been explained in detail, and its presence during the entire project marketing process has not been described. Personal relationships in business have been researched earlier (e.g. Granovetter 1992; Mainela 2007; Witkowski and Thibodeau 1999), but findings regarding the influence of personal relationships on network position are scarce in the literature. In project marketing literature personal level relationships are regarded as important, but the relationship between network position and relationships has not been researched. Instead, research papers have mainly concentrated on the general aspects of the social relationships, such as trust and commitment (Gustaffsson 2002; Blomqvist 1997; Håkansson and Snehota 1995, 32), the importance of which cannot be underestimated.

It is justified in concluding that although the network position concept has already been researched earlier, the dimensions of the position concept have more or less been taken as given ever since the first research was undertaken. Even though there have been a number of attempts to expand understanding of the phenomenon (e.g. Aastrup 2002; Cova, Ghauri and Salle 2002), the current understanding is scattered and partial. None of the earlier suggestions alone can explain the formation of a supplier's position in temporary project networks and project marketing processes, in which joint construction of demand is common, when a supplier tries to make the customer's demand his/her own and construct it together with the client in the course of interaction between them (Cova and Crespín-Mazet 1996, 350). We can also conclude that personal relationships and trust as isolated phenomena have been researched. However, the meaning behind those elements concerning how suppliers are positioned from a buyer's perspective remains to be explored in detail. It can be argued that there exists a gap in the current knowledge.

The objective of the research is to develop a model explaining the dimensions of a supplier's network position within a temporary project network during the phases of the project marketing process. The first research question is:

**1. How is the supplier's network position composed in the project marketing network during the project marketing process up to and until contract placement?**

The second research question is:

**2. How does the composition of the supplier's position in a project marketing network change between the stages of the project marketing process?**

The study contributes both theoretically and managerially. The first theoretical contribution of the study concerns the proposed new structure of the position concept. The second theoretical contribution of the present study concerns the dynamic nature of the position concept. The managerial contributions of the study concern the composition of the supplier's position in the project marketing network, the dynamism and governing dimensions during the project marketing process.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Next after the introduction network positions of actors in business networks are discussed. Then a research design is introduced. Thereafter the results of the study are presented and finally conclusions are drawn.

### **Network position of actors in business networks**

The concept of network position has varied in the network literature since the introduction of the network approach in the 80s (see e.g. Johanson and Mattsson 1985, Johanson and Mattsson 1992, Henders 1992, Wynstra 1994; Anderson et al. 1998, Aastrup 2002). Each actor in a network is engaged in many relationships with other actors, and these relationships are argued to define the position of the actor in the network (Johanson and Mattsson 1992, 211; Turnbull, Ford and Cunningham 1996, 12; Halinen and Törnroos 1998, 190); Ford et al., 2002, 7). Thus, the current position of companies is the outcome of their relationships and the offerings that have been developed, marketed and purchased within them (Håkansson and Ford 2002, 136; Ford et al. 2003, 27) but position is also related to actors' abilities to act in industrial network, and their control of resources and capabilities to establish, maintain and develop exchange relationships influences the position of an actor (Johanson and Mattsson 1992, 211; Aastrup 2002; Ford et al. 2003). Development of position according to Henders (1992, 53) can be measured either with snapshots or as a process.

The nature of network positions can be characterized in many ways. Investment to positions can itself be seen as the basic task of marketing (Turnbull et al. 1996, 47). Positions can be seen as partially controlled, intangible market assets (Forsgren 1995, 22) that can determine a firm's ability to compete (Duysters et al. 1999, 183). Each position is unique and perceived differently by the various actors in the network (Håkansson and Snehota 1989, 196; Salmi 1996, 42; Gadde, Huemer and Håkansson 2003, 362). A position has both a stable and dynamic character (Anderson et al. 1998, 168), and it is difficult to separate an actor's position and its role (Anderson et al. 1998, 171; Nikkanen 2003). A position can also be regarded as the overall perception of a firm's attractiveness as an exchange partner within its network context (Huemer 2003, 4), and the location of power that influences the network, and the power can be based on economic base, technology, expertise, trust, and legitimacy (Thorelli 1986, 40).

Trust is regarded as a critical factor in long-term relationships such as strategic partnerships (Hadjikhani and Håkansson 1996, 445; Axelsson and Easton 1992, 197; Forsgren 1995, 24; Ford et al. 2003, 40) but from the project marketing perspective a logical question would be: What is the meaning of trust in new or shorter-term relationships? One could argue that it is extremely important taking into account the circumstances of projects: discontinuity of demand, uniqueness or requirements, and complexity of the set up (Mandjak and Veres 1998). According to Laage-Hellman (1997) actor bonds are particularly important to horizontal relationships (relationships between suppliers), since there is usually no exchange of products, which produce activity links and resource ties. The substance function of a relationship has three aspects: actor bonds, activity links and resource ties (Ford et al. 2003, 39). Actors in the network are connected with actor bonds, which also influence how the actors perceive each other and how they form their identities in relation to others. Bonds are established in interaction, and in many cases between individuals, and are said to reflect the interaction process in which becoming aware of and learning about each other takes place (Håkansson and Snehota 1995, 27; Ford et al. 2003, 39), and may have different nature: economic, legal, technical, cognitive, social, planning and time (Salmi 1995, 27). A relationship may also have an effect on other relationships. The effect has been called indirect, secondary or network function of relationships (Ritter 2000, 318; Laage-Hellman 1997, 24-25; Håkansson and Snehota 1995, 24-25; Johansson and Mattsson 1992).

Johansson and Mattsson (1985) defined that the concept network position comprises four dimensions referring to a firm in the network (see also Henders 1992; Hallen and Lundberg 2004; Anderson, Håkansson, Johansson 2002; Håkansson and Snehota 1995). The dimensions are: the identity of connected firms, the role of the firm in the network, the importance of the firm in the network, and the strength of inter-firm relationships.

The identity of an actor in a network is derived from its attractiveness (or unattractiveness) as an exchange partner (Anderson, Håkansson and Johansson 2002, 217), and it sets the stage for the firm's opportunities or constraints. Actor's identity consequences on actor's

possibilities to act as it is based on each actor's perceived capability to perform certain activities, and it has certain power content, due to it being based on the particular resources each actor possesses (Henders 1992). Bonner, Kim and Cavusgil (2005) have argued that identity can be viewed as an important strategic capability that enhances the value of a firm's relational assets.

Role according to Henders (1992, 90) can be applied in multiple ways. Role is said to be connected to importance. Sociologists define role as a typified response to a typified expectation. Henders' own definition of role as being "an activity of the firm in the network" (see also Hallen and Lundberg 2004, 8) is on the whole consistent with the network approach (activities, actors, resources). The importance of an actor in a network is a measure of the extent to which it can initiate change in the network (Henders 1992, 91), or preserve or destroy stability. Henders (1992) has also proposed that it represents the percentage of required resources for the network held by the actor, and respectively the greater adjustment is required to replace the actor's resources by other actors.

According to Henders (1992, 96-97), the strength of relationships in a network can be tied to the importance of volume and also to the age of the relationship. Each actor in a network is engaged in many relationships with other actors, and these relationships define the position of the actor in the network (Halinen and Törnroos 1998, 190). Thus, the current position of companies is the outcome of their relationships and the offerings that have been developed, marketed and purchased within them (Håkansson and Ford 2002, 136; Ford et al. 2003, 27).

Turnbull, Ford and Cunningham (1996, 13) have proposed three additional dimensions for the position concept: access to resources of other network members, reputation, and expectations. Reputation is a function of other network members' experience and trust in that new offerings will

have a certain quality. Reputation includes a company's ability to exercise leadership, or to influence the decision making of other network members.

Aastrup (2002) argued that position as a structural concept for understanding actors' abilities to act in industrial networks includes the structures of dependency and the structures of consensus and consistency based on the actors' network logics and their control of resources and capabilities.

Table 1 sums up different views of the network position concept and their central dimensions.

Table 1. Different views of the network position concept and their central dimensions.

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Elements of the concept</b>	<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>Description</b>
Johanson and Mattsson 1985	Micro position Macro position	Identity, role, importance, strength of relationships	Micro: link between individual actors Macro: actor in relation to network
Mattsson and Johanson 1992	Limited position Extended position	Identity, role, importance, strength of relationships  Function in the production systems (qualitative) relative importance of the resources controlled by the actor (quantitative)	Consequence of the cumulative nature of the use of resources to establish, maintain and develop exchange relationships
Henders 1992	Multidimensional	Role, importance, strength of relationships	How an actor fits into an industrial system in multiple roles
Turnbull, Ford and Cunningham 1996	Portfolio of relationships, obligation, rights	Access, reputation, expectations	Network position is both an outcome of past relationship strategy and a resource for future strategy
Anderson et al. 1998	Position, static element Roles, dynamic element	Expectations (position) Actor's intentions (role)	Different roles change the positions of an actor and are thus inseparable concepts
Aastrup 2002	Acting base of an actor	Dissensus /consensus of relationships Network logics Dependency in relationships	Sensitising concept: base for acting in network structures (thus enabling and constraining future practices)

Project marketing literature provides some additional perspectives on the concept. Position is argued to include both a relational and a functional position in the project marketing context (Jansson 1989; Cova, Ghauri and Salle 2002, 36-37).

The functional position translates the role and the power (see also Thorelli 1986) that an organisation exerts (i.e. the capacity to influence other actors in the market seen as a network). Translated in terms of available resources, the more resources a company has (technological, relational, financial, human), either directly or through its relations with other actors, the stronger the company's position is. The functional position therefore represents the capacity to elaborate differentiated solutions, on a global level, for the market and, on a specific level, for the customer's project (Cova, Ghauri and Salle 2002, 37; Cova, Salle and Vincent 2000, 556). Gustafsson (2002, 414) adds to the functional perspective of the marketer by saying that "the impression that the supplier with the best position is the one most capable and willing to deliver a functioning product" is dominant. This impression is partly based on the direct experience during the purchase phase (concerning characteristics of proposed solution and support available after the project) as well as

on reference projects (Salminen 1997; Salminen 2001; Salminen and Möller 2006), which also reflect the supplier's reputation to manufacture, deliver and install and continuously maintain the organization needed to achieve a functioning project (Gustafsson (2002, 182).

The relational position is the result of 'relational investments' during earlier phases of the project marketing process, which include contacts with actors in the project network, with informants from the customer's buying decision centre who are involved in the project, contacts not directly related to the project, but in some cases also contacts involved in other projects in order to develop a good network position (Cova, Salle and Vincent 2000, 555). Cova, Salle and Vincent (2000, 556) use relational position almost as a synonym of network position. Table 2 sums up the different views on the position concept in project marketing literature.

Table 2. Different views on position concept in project marketing literature and central dimensions used.

Authors	Elements of concept	Dimensions	Description
Jansson 1989; Cova, Salle and Vincent 2000; Cova, Ghauri and Salle 2002	Solution to the problem, relationships to project network	<u>Functional position:</u> Capacity to elaborate differentiated solutions <u>Relational position:</u> Strength and quality and coverage of relationships to project network actors	Capability to solve buyer's problem and build relationships with other actors in the project network
Gustafsson 2002	Solution to problem and its implementation, suppliers trustworthiness	<u>Performance</u> (cost and other perspectives), <u>role</u> , <u>identity of supplier</u> , <u>commitment</u>	Capability to supply current project and willingness to engage in a long-term relationship with the buyer

## Research design

This section discusses and sums up the Stage-Dimension (S-D) framework of the present study. The framework is a synthesis of a conducted pilot case study (data collection from four companies, six informants representing three industries) and literature review. The S-D framework is presented in Figure 1. The central concept of the framework is the network position (e.g. Mattsson 1985, Johanson and Mattsson 1992, Henders 1992, Wynstra 1994; Anderson et al. 1998, Aastrup 2002), and specifically a supplier's position in project marketing networks (e.g. Cova, Ghauri and Salle 2002; Cova, Salle and Vincent 2000; Gustafsson 2002). A Project supplier's position in project marketing networks is defined here as *the dynamically changing preference as a supplying business partner from project buyer's perspective*. A project supplier's position is valid within the boundaries of the project network (e.g. Hellgren and Stjernberg 1995; Dubois and Gadde 2000; Lundin and Steinhórsson 2003).

A position possessed by a supplier is not stable, but instead it is a dynamic in character and depends on the stage where the marketing process takes place (e.g. Cova, Ghauri and Salle 2002; Ford et al. 2002; Anderson 2001; Jansson 1989). Project supplier's position shifts due to incremental and radical changes (e.g. Håkansson and Snehota 1995; Ford et al. 2003; Halinen, Salmi and Havila 1999; Havila and Salmi 2000) occurring all the time in a network. Thus the

project marketing process (e.g. Holstius 1987; Cova and Holstius 1993; Cova, Salle and Vincent 2000; Cova, Ghauri and Salle 2002b) anchors the supplier's position to the different stages of the process. From the different existing process models the one by Cova and Holstius (1993) was applied here because of its buyer perspective, the importance of which was described in the introduction. The applied process model (Cova and Holstius 1993) compared with others (e.g. Cova, Salle and Vincent 2000; Mandjak and Veres 1998) is more detailed and expected to result in deeper analysis. Each stage of the project marketing process shapes the perceptions of the project buyer, and consequently how the suppliers are positioned within the project marketing network.

Incremental change, or evolution or continuous process has been regarded as the main mode of network change (Easton 1992, 24; Håkansson and Snehota 1995, 281-284), and Håkansson and Snehota (1995, 283-284) have argued that the continuous networking process, comprising the connecting of actor bonds, activity links and resource ties, causes changes. By contrast, critical events that result from the interplay of different change forces trigger radical change in dyads and may cause breaks in connections: actor bonds, activity links and resource ties (Flanagan 1954; Edvarsson 1990; Halinen 1997; Halinen, Salmi and Havila 1999; Holmlund and Strandvik 1999; Edvarsson and Strandvik 2000; Owusu 2003).

The S-D framework combining proposed dimensions of project supplier's network position, stages of project marketing process, and elements of change were used to analyze the selected project marketing process from UK steel industry. The case concerned developing and marketing solution for handling of steel products in a major steel mill starting from the first meeting with suppliers until the supplier selection and contract. The case was assessed to be representative because: it concerned a temporary network and significant capital investment, the researcher had access to the project buyer organization and versatile data, and the process followed the chosen process model and the process was easily memorable as it had taken place recently. The unit of analysis of the present study is the stage of the project marketing process according to the dimension-stage research framework presented in Figure 1. Each of the 11 stages was analyzed by using the developed S-D framework.

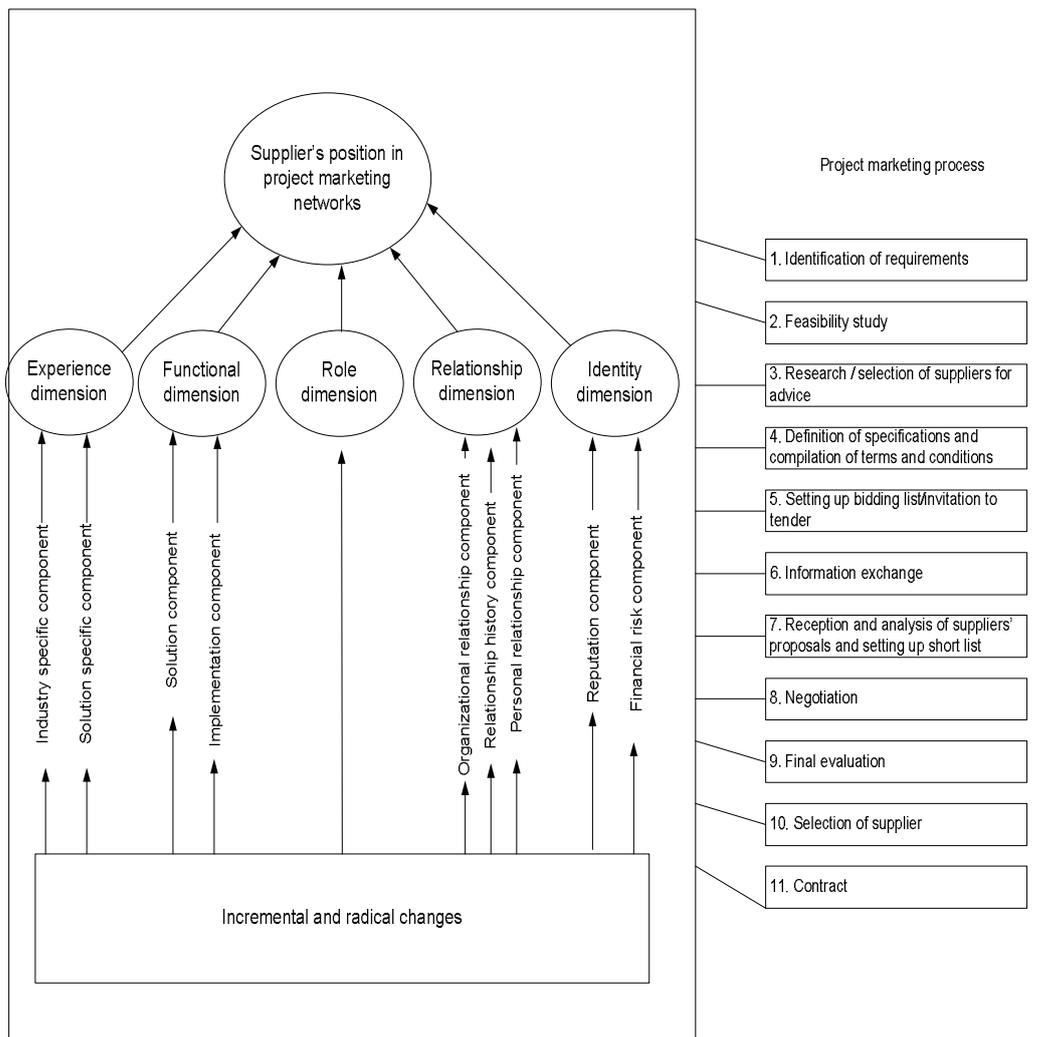


Figure 1. Stage-Dimension (S-D) framework for studying network position of suppliers during the project marketing process

### Methods of data collection and analysis

Data sources included interviews, correspondence between the focal company and the UK case company, project documentation, diaries by the agent of the focal company, and the researcher's observations, experiences, and notes. Table 3 gives a summary of the data sources and their purpose and usage. Decision makers in the project were interviewed. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and saved in a database together with other textual data (emails, project documentation). Transcriptions, emails and project documents were coded in the NVivo7 program.

Table 3. Data sources and their purpose and usage.

Data source	Amount of data	Purpose and usage
Interview transcriptions	6 informants, decision makers	Primary source of data, interpretation on informants' cognition on relevant factors concerning research problem
Correspondence between focal	300 messages	Means for defining exact time and chronology of events, means for comparing interpretations of interview data, means for providing indirect

company, case company and other actors in the project marketing network		evidence on informants' cognition, means for providing additional depth in the analysis
Project documentation by case company and focal company	400 pages	Means for providing detailed data for case description and comparison of e.g. criteria and requirements by the case company with interpretation from other data sources
Diaries of focal company's agent in the UK	Covering all meeting and contacts	Means for verifying time and chronology of events, means for gaining access to unofficial communication between the case company and actors of the focal company
Researcher's observations, experiences, and notes	Researcher witnessed whole process	Means to enable accurate case description, means for making justification on the value of pieces of data, means for providing insight into focal company's actions and objectives during the process

The project marketing process and data was divided into stages according to the framework as precisely as possible. If stages were embedded or happening concurrently and the separating of data were not possible, such stages were analyzed and reported together as combination stages. Therefore, the resulting framework includes six stages instead of the original framework's 11 stages. Then the data for each stage was analyzed.

The first coding procedure followed open coding principles (Straus and Gorbun 1990, 61-74). Open coding includes two analytical procedures: the making of comparisons and the asking of questions (ibid, 62). Conceptualizing the data becomes the first step in the analysis (ibid, 63). Conceptualization means taking apart an observation, a sentence, a paragraph, and giving each discrete incident, idea, or event a name that stands for or represents a phenomenon. By asking questions about each one, and comparing incident with incident, similar phenomena are given the same names (ibid). Hence, codes were conceptually created both from the empirical data and from experiential data, particularly the information derived from the reviewed literature. There were two types of codes: sociologically-constructed codes which refers to codes derived from experiential data, and *en vivo* codes, which are derived from the empirical data (c.f. Strauss 1987, 34). Another part of the open coding process was the developing of categories, during which coded data was organized and categorized into emerging core categories and sub-categories, and subsequently relationships between them emerged (Strauss and Gorbun 1990, 69-70). One essential part of categorization in the present study was to relate categories and sub-categories to the phases of the project marketing process. As a result of the open coding process categories representing properties can be dimensionalised, and the dimensions represent properties of a property along a continuum (ibid, 69).

After the open coding procedure axial coding was conducted (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 96-115). The list of open codes was re-coded and categorized into core categories, which represent the underlying components of the dimensions of the position construct. Components that emerged were analyzed and connections between components and relevant dimensions were formed. The dimensions were first looked at with the *priori* model, but if there were components, which result in an emerging new dimension, it was created. Hence, a structure comprising dimensions and underlying components was achieved. Changes in the position construct between stages were the result of comparing the governing dimensions and the underlying components of the position construct.

## Results of the study

According to the results of the study supplier's position in project marketing networks turned out to be a rather dynamic concept as the governing dimensions constituting the network position varied between the stages of the marketing process. The following Table 3 sums up the development of a supplier's position in a project marketing network during a project marketing process.

Table 3. Detailed view of governing dimensions and underlying components during project marketing process (proposed PSDC model of supplier's position in project marketing network).

Stage	Governing Dimensions	Components of dimension
1. Identification of requirements	Functional dimension Experience dimension Identity dimension Relationship dimension Personal supplier dimension Personal buyer dimension	Solution to problem Starting point Solution finding Experience References Trustworthiness Known in industry Customer orientation Investment in relationship Trustworthiness Professionalism Personal touch Personal motives
2. Feasibility study & research & selection of suppliers for advice	Functional dimension Relationship dimension Identity dimension Personal supplier dimension	Solution to problem Trust in solution Feasibility Customer orientation Investment in relationship Joint construction Cooperation capability Trustworthiness Professionalism Good guy Skills
3. Definition of specifications and compilation of terms and conditions	Functional dimension Personal buyer dimension	Solution to problem Trust in solution Feasibility Personal motives
4. Setting up bidding list & information exchange	Functional dimension Relationship dimension Identity dimension Personal supplier dimension Personal buyer dimension	Competence as supplier Detailed solution Feasibility Confidence in supply Delivery time Customer orientation Investment in relationship Relationship history Trustworthiness as supplier Values Professionalism Individual actor personality Personal scoring Personal motives
5. Reception and analysis of	Functional dimension	Detailed solution Confidence in solution

suppliers' proposals and negotiation on all points	Experience dimension Relationship dimension  Personal supplier dimension  Personal buyer dimension	References Customer orientation Trustworthiness Relationship history Professionalism Trustworthiness Personal scoring Personal motives
6. Final evaluation, selection of supplier and contract	Functional dimension Relationship dimension  Identity dimension Personal buyer dimension	Confidence in implementation Solution to problem Known performance Trustworthiness Relationship history Resource base Personal scoring Personal motives

A customer can practically be lost at the very beginning of a project, which is represented by the stage 1, **Identification of requirements**, and therefore an urgent need for information governs the customer's actions and mind. The customer is looking for a solution to a problem and the functional dimension covering various aspects of solution to problem is at the top of the cognition. Suppliers propose different approaches and the customer tries to find the most attractive ones, beginning with the most obvious ones that they may by themselves considered as a solution (starting point). The customer tries to comb the markets and the relevant industries in order to find suppliers, which are known in the industry and have experience in solving similar problems in the industry. Hence, the experience dimension is vital, and experience to prospective buyers can be demonstrated with references. Seeing or hearing about a supplier or a reference project for others in the industry can significantly change how a supplier is perceived by the customer, and therefore the identity can shape the supplier's position. The identity of a supplier is based on reputation related factors, such as how well the industry is aware of the supplier and how much confidence in the supplier is present, and trustworthy the supplier is seen. Once a supplier with an attractive solution and experience in solving similar problems is found, the customer starts evaluating the supplier's willingness to develop the relationship, and invest in it. An existing relationship can either be an advantage or a disadvantage depending on the buyer's experiences on it. The buyers expect that a supplier sees the relationship important and puts efforts in developing it and a supplier invests in it. A relationship will develop, if trust in the supplier is built. A supplier's position is not only depending on organization level dimensions, but personal matters are as well important. Supplier's individual actors interact with the customers' individuals, and it is their personality and professionalism that is evaluated and that influences on the customer's perception of the supplier. As all economical activities are carried out by individuals, the actors on the buyer's side can have a central role in the process. It is difficult to know what kinds of personal motives exist, and which can control how the individual actors act during the process, and why they act the way they do. What was notable during the stage was that the position of the supplier, and consequently some significant decisions were based on perceptions by a single actor on the buyer's side. There were also collective perceptions involved, but especially at the very beginning the control was in the hands of a single actor, and the position of the supplier depended mainly on that single individual actor. If he was convinced by the solution to the problem, the process could continue, or if there was a motive to promote for it.

As soon as there are some potential solutions to the problem available, the process takes a turn towards some new perspectives. During the stage 2, **Feasibility study & research and selection of suppliers for advice**, the functional dimension is still central, but in addition to the actual

solution alone, the feasibility of the solution becomes important. In the assessment of feasibility proposed solutions are compared with each other and against eventual financial objectives related to solving the problem. The buyer also tries to figure out, if the solutions can be trusted and that there are no major difficulties to be expected while implementing the solutions. A more comparative assessment of solutions is conducted, and weighted against any possible sacrifices due selecting a solution instead of another one. Identity of the suppliers remains one of the key issues via its components cooperation and trustworthiness, and the buyer weights the expected identity against the detected identity of the supplier. The parties build a relationship, and the supplier's will and capability to convince the buyer about the importance of the relationship, by working to develop of the relationship, are vital. The parties engage themselves to a long process and they should jointly construct an eventual project. Joint construction is an important component of the relationship, because both parties are needed for a successful project. Even though the organization related dimensions are important, the influence of persons cannot be underestimated. All actions are carried out by the supplier's individual actors, and therefore the professional and social skills of the supplier's individual actors are focused upon by the buyer's actors. Honesty and the correct attitude towards taking part in the buyer's learning process can greatly enhance the perception of the supplier by the buyer. The buyers' personal dimension did not appear in the data of the stage. Evaluation of the feasibility of the project and proposals to solve the problem were based on a collective perception instead of a more single actor centric situation valid during the previous stage.

When the buyer is moving forward with the project and preparing formal documents during the stage 3, i.e. *Definition of specifications and compilations of terms and conditions* focus is shifted to two areas. Firstly, as from the beginning of the process, the functional dimension comprising the solution to the problem, buyer's trust in solutions, and the economical consequence of solutions are vital, as the purpose of the stage is to create pre-requisites for a comparative situation with multiple suppliers involved. Secondly, the supplier involved up until this point, has to continue showing motivation to assist the buyer during the stage, even if the stage includes the possibility that the buyer will start to involve more suppliers in the process. The functional dimension is, however, governing the stage, and the solution to the problem and its feasibility are the keys. The buyer presents the project to the management of the company, and any flaws in convincing them about the feasibility of the solution or competing solutions may have an influence on how the actual solution is positioned. The difference in the stage is that the supplier is not actually the principal actor, and instead the solution is in the limelight. The supplier's part is to stay in the background and maintain its position by working together with the buyer, and prepare the ground for the next stages in the process. On the buyer's side besides the functional dimension personal motives to act in a certain way may become decisive for a project. There may be some very personal reasons to try to promote for certain paths, such attempts to enhance own career or position in the buyer organization. The activities carried out on the buyer's side were spread within the organization, and respectively perceptions were based merely on collective cognition.

When the project moves to the next stage, in which the actual variety of potential suppliers is evaluated, and the official negotiations start, the number of influencing dimensions of position increases. The stage 4, *Setting up the bidding list & invitation to tender & information exchange* provided many possibilities for changes in the positions of the involved suppliers. The functional dimension is still important, but its nature changed towards details and highly technical matters, and merely conceptual discussions conducted earlier were replaced with quickly changing technical requirements by the buyer. Changing requirements put the competence of the suppliers on trial, and provided the buyer with possibilities to change its perception. The supplier was either able to create confidence in the supply and implementation of the solution, or generate distrust while failing to perform during the interactions. Concrete project implementation elements were also involved and

especially timing and financial matters are relevant. The identity dimension started gaining a foothold, as the principal matters relating to values on the buyer's and supplier's side were discussed and compared. Identity was built up from the values and trustworthiness of the supplier. There were no single events that influenced on the identity, and instead the dimension was more incremental by nature. If the identity dimension was incremental by nature, the relationship dimension provided more radical developments. During interactions, both the organizational and personal level events shaped the perceptions of the buyer. The buyer was expecting the supplier to show commitment, customer orientation and willingness to invest in the relationship, and failures to perform and reluctance to adjust influenced on these components and finally on the relationship dimension. It was also obvious that in the case of a supplier network unclear network actor roles and performance shaped the relationship dimension. To the buyer's direction a supplier network has to act as a single coherent unit that has a clear leading actor taking the responsibility of the project. The leading actor is also responsible for the performance of the supplier network and the performance of its individual actors. The relationship dimension showed a whole new component during the stage, relationship history taking into account how the buyer had perceived a supplier based on events in the past. The buyer's relationship with another supplier started influencing on the relationship dimension, and there was a continuous comparison going on between the suppliers. Personal level dimensions had importance both on the supplier's and buyer's side. Individual actors of the supplier had an influence on the perception of the supplier by the buyer via their personality and professionalism, and the buyer's individual actors evaluated how they felt working with the other party. The skills and ways of working of the supplier's actors reflected on how professional the actor was perceived by the buyer's project team. The feelings shaped the buyer's evaluation process of the suppliers. On the buyer's side the positions of the individual actors were significant, especially now that the project was concrete, and it would be implemented. Decisions made by individual actors would influence on the success of the project implementation, and consequently on the positions of the actors after the project. Individuals on the buyer's side had their preferred ways of implementing the project. The perceptions on the buyer's side were formed by a group, the project team working as a cohesive unit, but still each individual actor followed his/her own procedures of perception.

The stage 5, *Reception and analysis of suppliers' proposals and negotiation on all points* followed the previous stage from the position perception perspective, but there was a kind of finality to it. The functional dimension was still receiving much focus, and the events during the stage could either confirm or reshape the perceptions formed up until now. Confidence in the solution was based on the quality of the engineering work conducted and impressions gathered during visits to reference projects. Relationship and its components are vital during the stage, as this is the last chance for the supplier to convince the buyer on its commitment, customer orientation and trustworthiness. Incidents during interactions and reference visits can turn perceptions in either direction. Relationship history is important from two perspectives: firstly, until now even a new relationship has some historical value, and this kind of fresh relationship with suppliers can be compared, and secondly, in case there would be a longer relationship with a supplier, it provides another kind of basis for making comparisons. The significance of experience increased again closer to the level it was at in the beginning of the process. There is, however, a difference on the buyer's side in the capability to evaluate the reference projects compared to the beginning of the process. After intensive and detailed engineering activities learning has taken place, and the buyer has more skills by which to assess the references. From the buyer's perspective visiting reference projects later in the process is much more valuable than at the beginning, when pure enthusiasm can replace objectivism in evaluation of projects. Much like during the previous stage, the supplier's individual actors can influence the perception of the supplier by the buyer via their ways of working

and interacting. Professionalism and trustworthiness are the influencing components in the personal supplier dimension. The personal motives of the buyer's individual actors are more central, when the project marketing process is moving towards the end. Scoring of suppliers is based on how the actors see the suppliers from their own perspective and preferences. Especially uncertainties related to suppliers or their solutions create concerns. This stage still includes group perceptions, but the individual elements influence the coherence of the project team.

The stage 6, *Final evaluation and selection of supplier and contract* was based on perceptions that had been formed during the earlier stages of the process. What was relevant at this point was the risk avoidance perspective. The functional dimension, with its components solution and confidence in implementation was important. In a way, the other dimensions were related to the functional dimension, due to the relationship history in which one of the suppliers possessed a known performance, and therefore the buyer could rely on them. The supplier had performed and implemented a project before in a satisfactory manner, and the historical knowledge was governing the cognition of the buyer. Identity of the supplier with the historical merits supported the perception, as the resources of the supplier were perceived positively. There was a single actor in the buyer's project organization that high influence on the perception. The project manager's objective was to avoid any unnecessary risks in the supplier selection process, and relying on a known relationship served this objective well.

Even though the approach in the present study has been to split the project marketing process into stages and analyze them, the process still produces one entity in which the separate stages are embedded. The supplier's position during a stage may be change significantly, but it is, however, always inherited to a certain extent from the previous stages. The final position of suppliers from the perspective of the present study, namely ending with the granting of the implementation of the project to a supplier, is accumulated during the project marketing process and shaped by events during the final stages.

## Conclusions

The study contributed on multiple arenas, both on the theoretical but on the managerial as well. The *first* theoretical contribution of the study concerns the proposed new structure of the project supplier's network position concept. This study proposes that a supplier's position in a project marketing network is composed from the functional dimension (representing the solution), the experience dimension (representing the solution), the relationship dimension (representing the relationship with the buyer), the identity dimension (representing the supplier's identity in the business), the personal supplier dimension (representing the supplier's individual actors), and the personal buyer dimension (representing the buyer's individual actors). Compared to existing views on the concept of network position (Table 1 and 2) the proposed PSDC framework gives a much more detailed view of the relevant factors affecting a project suppliers position. Additionally, the proposed framework is tightly based on a rigorous analysis of an empirical project marketing process.

The *second* theoretical contribution of the study concerns the dynamic nature of the position concept. The processual approach to analyzing the data results in findings that propose the concept of the position is not stable during the project marketing process, which is not reported in the earlier studies concerning s network position (see e.g. Johansson and Mattsson 1985 & 1992; Jansson 1989; Henders 1992; Turnbull, Ford and Cunningham 1996; Cova, Ghauri and Salle 2002).

The first managerial implication is derived from the conclusion drawn about the composition of the supplier's position in the project marketing network. There is no single dimension or

component that explicitly defines the supplier's position in such a network. Instead, the complicity of the position governs, and the number of dimensions and underlying components is high (see Figure 2). The position is a result of the cooperative influence of the dimensions and the underlying components, and it should be taken into account while planning the marketing strategy for a project.

The second managerial implication is related to the structure of the position concept presented in Figure 2. A project marketer can assess a prospective project and its suitability based on the proposed position concept. By evaluating the components and consequently the resulting dimensions and finally the outcome, it is possible to evaluate the supplier's position, to see if a project is a potential one for the supplier.

The third managerial implication regards the dynamism of the position concept in the PSDC model in Figure 2. A supplier of a project can evaluate based on the model, what kinds of dimensions control the formation of the supplier's position during each stage of the project marketing process. It is vital to understand that we are dealing with a process, and an essential element of a process is continuous dynamism, or simply change. What is valid to one period, or stage in the process, may not apply during other stages, or may require changes in the marketing strategy. The marketing strategy should be prepared to adapt to the changes in the project marketing network, but the challenge is to identify changes and to be not only reactive, but also proactive.

The fourth managerial implication concerns the experience dimension and especially one of its components, references. The references are the most important way of convincing the buyer that the supplier has experience in the industry and solution finding. The visits to reference projects have different natures depending on which stage during the process the visit takes place. Visits during the initial stages are more general and the buyer is not necessarily able to evaluate the reference projects in detail. If the visits take place near the supplier selection, it is probable that due to the learning process, the buyer network is capable of identifying details requiring expertise as well. The planning of the use of the references must take learning into account.

It is, however, clear that further studies on the dynamism of the position concept are needed in the future in order to deepen the understanding on the phenomenon.

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