

Opening windows to inter-firm change processes

- Tracing the beginning of a process

Work-in-progress

Special track: Time and process in business network research

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ABSTRACT

Purpose and literature addressed: The focus of this paper is on change processes in interfirm relationships, and specifically on the beginning of the process. *The purpose is to present methodological tools to trace the beginning of a process.* The paper relies on the interaction approach by the IMP Group, which sees markets as continuous and changing interaction and exchange processes between firms (Håkansson, 1982; Ford, 1980).

Method: Impulses that set off change processes are discovered with the help of retrospective processual case studies and critical interview technique with visual aids (Chell, 2004). Case studies in business travel management exemplify the use of these techniques. In *critical interview technique*, the informants describe specific *impulses* that lead to major changes in the core relationships. *Visual aids*, i.e. drawings with a time axe, where the informants marked the impulse, and a vertical axe, where they marked its consequences to the core relationships, were used to focus the interview, and to get a sense of the nature and chronology of the change processes. The intertwined impulses were organized into four groups that exemplify extensive change processes in the core relationships.

Major findings: The methods used in this study provide a useful setting to trace the beginning of a process. Visual aids help to capture the chronology of the impulses and to ensure that there is a change process following the impulse. However, no individual impulses as such, but a number of intertwined impulses can be used to explain the beginning of a change process. Multiple perspectives to specific impulses were obtained by investigating specific relationships from the both ends. However, this led to differing views, and provides a challenge to the analysis.

Contribution: The paper contributes business network research with methodological tools to study how a change process begins. Change impulses provide a window through which the change process can be investigated. Time aspect and distinction between the firm and its individual actors is discussed.

Keywords: Processual case study, change process, changes impulse, critical interview technique, visual aid.

INTRODUCTION

In the IMP approach, the process view of interaction and exchange is important (Halinen and Törnroos, 1995). Business relationships in networks are seen as dynamic and changing, where the process of business consists of interactions “*within business relationships between individually recognized interdependent actors, and which have particular outcomes for each of those involved*” (Ford and Håkansson, 2006). The process nature of business relationships is emphasized specifically in the service context, where buying and consuming services are integrated processes that cannot be separated. (Grönroos, 2006)

Processes can be understood as a series of actions that are carried out with a specific result in mind. However, in organizational studies, the term process is usually connected to change, and it may also be investigated as unintentional developments that result in change. A process exists between two points in time, even though it may not always be observable (Tuttle, 1997). This study focuses on the first point of the process, on its beginning.

Tools to gain understanding on the process characteristics of interaction and networks are still missing (Halinen and Törnroos, 2005). “*Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end*”, was stated by Seneca, a Roman philosopher, in the mid-1st century AD. However, the processes of change are permanent and natural to organizing, and it is not easy to define when a process starts. In business relationships, there are change processes with ongoing beginnings and endings, and one change process does not wait for the other to end.

In organizational studies, brainstorming may be used to create a list of important events (cf. Isabella, 1988) as an impulse for a change. Schein (1985) notes that events are critical when perceived as such by the informants themselves. They can be seen as temporally specific events that have an impact on relationship development (cf. Halinen et al., 1999; Halinen, 1997). The events may represent crossroads or turning points in the relationships (cf. directive incidents proposed by Edvardsson and Strandvik, 2000; see also Edvardsson, 1988; Gremler, 2004; Roos, 2002). The informants and their interpretations determine which events are responded and acted upon in other connected relationships (cf. Havila and Salmi, 2000; Halinen et al., 1999). In the current study, the informants describe, and arrange in a timeline the impulses that they regard as turning points in the core relationships.

With the help of these impulses, a window to look at a change process opens, and it is possible to investigate the different phases of the process. *The purpose of this paper is to present new methodological tools to trace the beginning of a change process in interfirm relationships.* The use of these tools is exemplified by case studies in business travel management.

The rest of the paper is arranged in the following way. First, the retrospective case study method, and the data gathering techniques are presented. Second, the analyses procedures are explained. Third, the time aspect is addressed. Finally, conclusions, limitations and avenues for further research will be presented. Throughout the paper, case studies in business travel management are used to exemplify the data collection and analysis procedures.

LOOKING BACKWARD TO SEE THE BEGINNING

Case-based research is recommended when the aim is to understand the process by which specific relationships develop over time (Håkansson, 1982; Dubois and Gadde, 2002; Halinen and Törnroos, 2005). The case approach allows detailed study of particular events over time, which can reveal the dynamics of business network processes (Easton, 2010). The processual perspective (cf. Dawson, 1997) to change addresses the question of how change occurs, i.e. the nature, sequence, and order of events and activities that unfold over time (Halinen, 1996). The basic idea of processual research is that organizations may be researched as a continuing system with a past, a present and a future. In accordance with the interactive view, “the actions of a single company are based on *“its interpretation of the previous actions of specific others and on its anticipation of the possible re-actions and re-re-actions of those specific others in the future”* (Ford and Håkansson, 2006: 4).

Longitudinal case research is recommended when studying processes (Pettigrew, 1997; Stevens and Dimitriadis, 2004). *The retrospective processual approach* helps in revealing the complexity and the process nature of business relationships. Weick (1979; 2001) states that many processes include elements, that may best be captured first after the process has been brought to a close, or it has reached a given point. Furthermore, he argues that *“all understanding originates in reflection and looking backward.”* (1979: 194) The perceived world is actually the past world, because things are seen and visualized before they are conceptualized and *“people know what they have done only after they do it.”* (Weick, 2001: 462)

The empirical setting

The empirical context of this study is business travel management. Travel industry and its relationships have undergone dramatic changes during the last few decades, providing thus a suitable industry to study change processes. Case studies within its core relationships are used to exemplify these processes and their beginnings. Industry specific information, i.e. trade magazines, and scientific research on business travel, is used for triangulation.

Purposive sampling was applied to select the cases. This strategy comes close to intensity sampling, which involves collecting information-rich cases that are excellent or rich examples of the phenomenon of interest, but not unusual or extreme cases (cf. extreme or deviant case sampling; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). The buyer organization, an industrial enterprise, was taken as a starting point when selecting the focal firms. The travel manager was the key informant (cf. Patton, 1990: 263) who acted as a “gate opener” that paved the way to the other informants. Her most important partner organizations, and her contact persons in those organizations, were interviewed. These were two travel agencies (1 and 2), two airline companies (A and B), and a hotel chain. In total, eleven dyadic relationships were investigated:

- Industrial enterprise – travel agency 1 relationship
- Industrial enterprise – airline A relationship
- Industrial enterprise – airline B relationship
- Industrial enterprise – hotel chain relationship
- Industrial enterprise – travel agency 2 relationship
- Travel agency 1 – airline A relationship

- Travel agency 1 – airline B relationship
- Travel agency 1 – hotel chain relationship
- Travel agency 2 – airline A relationship
- Travel agency 2 – airline B relationship
- Travel agency 2 – hotel chain relationship

These relationships were established to arrange and develop the industrial enterprise’s travel management process. All the actors were during the investigated period actively relate to each other through business, social and technological exchange (cf. Halinen and Törnroos, 2005: 1288).

The informants were chosen from different organizational levels in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of their co-operation (see table 1). A business traveler was chosen to give “a second opinion” on behalf of the industrial enterprise. The general manager and the district manager represent the travel agency 1, and the Nordic manager and the operation manager the travel agency 2. The clerk worked first for the travel agency 1 and changed later to the travel manager 2 along with a new contract. Thus, she represents both the agencies, and comments for them both. The airline (airline A and B) informants, the account manager and the sales director, and the hotel chain informant, the sales manager, are the travel manager’s contact persons with whom the co-operation is arranged.

Table 1 The informants.

Industrial enterprise	Travel agency 1	Travel agency 2	Airline A	Airline B	Hotel chain
Travel manager	General manager	Nordic manager	Account manager	Sales director	Sales manager
Business traveler	District manager	Operation manager			
	Clerk				

Many empirical studies on interfirm relationships rely on data collected from one informant at each of the participating organizations, even though interfirm relationships involve active participation of several individuals within each partner organization. However, the organizations may have contradictory objectives and individuals may have varying perceptions of the role and performance of the relationship. (Palakshappa and Gordon, 2006) It is important to include several individuals from an organization in the study, because the informants view the focal phenomenon from different perspectives (cf. Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Traditionally, in business relationship studies, CEOs and top management informants are used. However, including informants that are involved in daily contact with the other companies provides insights into the short-time interactive processes and their outcomes (Holmlund, 2004).

Medlin and Törnroos (2007) notice the lack of distinction between the firm and individuals as actors, and claim that the role of individuals has been underestimated in the interaction and network approach. The current study, the question of which change impulses may be considered as important is finally dependent on the individual’s perspective. It is the individuals who act on behalf of their employers. They describe use terms “organization”, “company”, and “employer”,

indicating that they represent their employer. They also use personal pronouns, I, she/he, we, as for more personal meanings. (cf. Isabella, 1988)

Critical interview technique

Critical interview technique was utilized to trace the beginning of change processes in the core relationships (Chell, 2004). The technique bases on Flanagan (1954), but assumes a phenomenological approach in contrast to the more positivistic approach that was dominant in Flanagan's time. The aim of the technique is to capture the thought process, the frame of reference, and the feelings about a happening that has meaning to the respondent. Chell (2004) defines the critical interview technique in the following way:

The critical interview technique is a qualitative interview procedure, which facilitates the investigation of significant occurrences (events, incidents, processes or issues), identified by the respondent, the way they are managed, and the outcomes in terms of perceived effects. The objective is to gain an understanding of the incident from the perspective of the individual, taking into account cognitive, affective and behavioural elements. (Chell, 2004: 48)

An advantage of the technique is that the linkage between *context, strategy and outcomes* is more readily teased out because the technique is focused on an event, which is explained in relation to what happened, why it happened, how it was handled, and what the consequences were. (Chell, 2004) The interviews lasted from 1 hour to 2,5 hour. The informants were encouraged to describe the development of the core relationships and the specific impulses that have changed them.

IMPULSES THAT OPEN WINDOWS TO CHANGE PROCESSES

The impulses were used as “windows” through which to look at the change processes, their content, specific features, and their impact on the core relationships. They were reasons for turning points in these relationships.

Change impulses discovered in the current case studies were endogenous, arising from the individual firms and from the dyadic relationships between them, or exogenous, having their origins in the primary business network, i.e. the industry specific network. The change also emerged from the macro environment, i.e. the other industries, and society as a whole (cf. Anderson et al., 1994; Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). They imply, for example, internationalization, technology development, competition, information exchange, deregularization, industry chocks, and changing consumer habits, to mention a few. Finally, a change process is a combination of endogenous and exogenous impulses. Figure 1 visualizes the focal relationships, and the wider network in which they are embedded. The primary network is placed inside the dotted elliptical line, and the macro network outside this line. The double-headed arrows visualize the dyadic relationships between the firms.

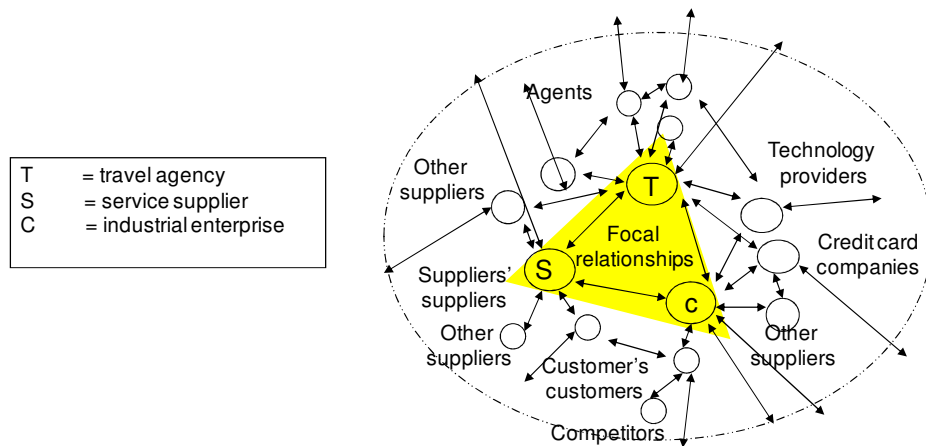


Figure 1 The focal relationships embedded in the wider network.

Chell (2004) suggests using a visual aid to get informants to think about the sequence of events that have emerged over time. The visual aid helps to focus the interview, exercise the memory, and enables to get a sense of the nature and chronology of the events. When beginning the interview, each of the informants was given empty diagrams with two axes. They were advised to visualize the changes in the relationships in which they were involved, and the impulses from which the changes originated. On the time axis, they illustrated specific events, which were named *change impulses*. On the vertical axis, by drawing a line, they described how these impulses have changed the core relationships. This forced them to consider if the impulse actually was a reason for a change process.

Figure 2 provides an example of a visual aid created in an interview. (The impulses will be exemplified more in detail later in the paper) The purpose of the visual aids was to capture the chronology of the impulses (the time axe), and to ensure that there was a change process due to the specific impulse (the vertical axe).

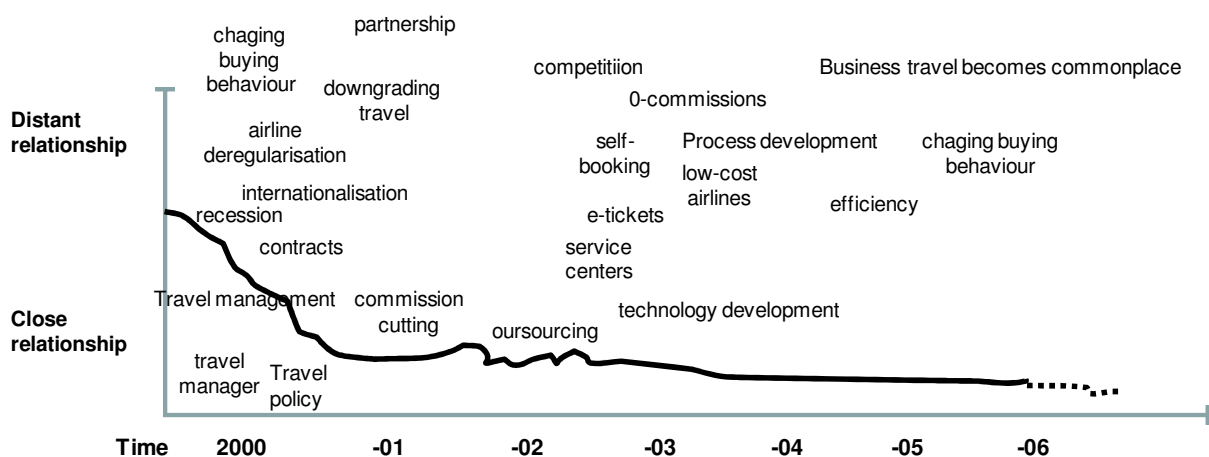


Figure 2 An example of the visual aid.

The informants memorized the impulses in their own terms allowing them to determine which of them are the most relevant. They were mainly describing the same impulses, colored with their own perspectives and experiences. Some of the informants chose to tell a chronological story, starting from the early 1980s, and ending up forecasting the future trends (as I had expected them to do). However, some of the informants worked backwards, marking impulses along the length of the axis, and some of them remembered the impulses out of order. The illustrations helped to structure the interviews, and to get a time frame to the change processes.

Other potential methods would have been, for example, event-structure analysis and mental mapping. *Event structure analysis* views social processes as a successive series of events, where events are occurrences that are important in understanding the history of the process. (Stevenson, Zinzow and Sridharan, 2003; Corsaro and Heise, 1990). It is associated with a computer program, and it has been used primarily as a tool for modeling historical processes (Griffin 1993; Brown and Brueggeman 1997) and individual motivational processes (Eder and Enke 1991; MacKinnon and Heise 1993), but has also been used in organizational change research (Stevenson and Greenberg 1998; Hager, 1998). *Mental mapping*, or cognitive mapping, which has been extensively used in management studies from 1970s (e.g. Axelrod, 1976; Eden, 1992; Fiol & Huff, 1992), could be used to visualize the elements of thoughts of the informants (see e.g. Eden, 1992).

A bundle of intertwined impulses

The informants and their understanding determined which impulses were responded and acted upon in the interfirm relationships. (cf. Havila and Salmi, 2000; Halinen et al., 1999) When describing the impulses, the informants compared the state of the core relationships before and after the impulse occurred. This was regarded as a sign that a change process has been activated. The informants used expressions like: “*we had to do something, because of [the impulse]*”, “*new possibilities [because of the impulse] were utilized*”, “*something was needed more/less than earlier [due to the impulse]*”, and “*things are not as they used to be [before the impulse]*”.

The separate impulses did not as such lead to change processes. They were intertwined (cf. Hedaa & Törnroos, 1997), and a number of simultaneous, or successive impulses, were a reason for a more wide-ranging change process.

The frequently mentioned impulses, those that were discussed in every interview, were arranged into four categories that relate to: (1) saving campaign, (2) change in earning logic, (3) new sales channel, and (4) convergence of business and leisure travel. These are the major change processes that can be regarded as turning points in the core relationships. They caused changes in the activities performed, and in the shared resources. In table 2, the saving campaign is used to exemplify how the interviews were interpreted.

Table 2: Case study example: The saving campaign

Excerpt	Impulse
<p>”We had to somehow <u>concentrate</u> [travel] on <u>all the countries</u> to which we were travelling. To get it managed in a reasonable way, to get a common <u>[travel] policy</u>, common partners, and common <u>[management] reporting</u>.” (Traveler)</p>	<p>Centralizing travel management (concentrate) Internationalization (all the countries) Establishing a travel policy</p>
<p>“It was good when the client [industrial enterprise] got a <u>travel manager</u> who said how they would like to have it, what was good and what was not good.” (Airline A, account manager)</p> <p>“It all started [relationship development] with the contact person <u>[travel manager]</u>, it is difficult to start negotiating contracts without a contact person.” (Airline B, director)</p>	<p>Appointing a travel manager</p>
<p>“They [corporate buyers] were the ones to make the decision that they wouldn’t travel <u>business class</u> any more. (Travel agency 2, Nordic manager)</p> <p>“When business travel was downgraded from <u>business class to economy class</u>, our yield went down, of course. It led to a saving campaign for us as well.” (Airline A, account manager).</p> <p>“It was then that when we got these <u>rules of travelling only in economy class</u>. (Traveller)</p>	<p>Downgrading business travel to economy class</p>
<p>“... because of the <u>jungle of rates</u>, we are needed even more than earlier. (Travel agency 1, district manager)</p>	<p>Complicated price structures</p>
<p>“<u>Partnership</u> brings the firms closer to each other. You bind yourself to one firm, to one service supplier, you chose the airline. (Travel agency 1, district manager)</p> <p>“Service suppliers’ goal was to bind corporate buyers with long-term <u>contracts</u>. The travel agency’s goal was to realize the contracts.” (Travel agency 1, general manager)</p> <p>“When service suppliers started to <u>negotiate deals</u> directly with the client [industrial enterprise], we in the travel agency felt a little like outsiders. (Travel agency, district manager)</p> <p>“When the situation is challenging, there is a lot of discussion... It is not only about putting your name on the paper, but there are a lot of discussions, which strengthen the relationships, also personal relationships.” (Hotel chain, sales manager)</p>	<p>Contract negotiations and partnership relationships</p>

THE WINDOW MAY NOT ALWAYS OPEN

All the impulses the informants described did not open a window. They were those that (1) were important for one firm, but there was no turning point in the core relationships, (2) those with differing views between the firms', or (3) those with differing views between the informants of the same firm.

An example of an impulse that was important to the industrial enterprise was its new business site. Because the core firms operate internationally, the disappearance of an individual business site, or the birth of a new one, does not cause major changes. Small, local service suppliers, on their part, would be more likely to suffer:

As a whole, our travel is so spread out around the world that small changes have an impact on the local hotels, for example, if the flow of travelers stop coming...if we have filled the hotel, let's say 70 %, it is a big issue for the hotel...But to the airline carriers, because we have divided our flights between several carriers, because our destinations cover the whole world, it is not a big issue. (Travel manager)

Due to multiple perspectives, differing views of the importance of the impulses occur. It takes two to develop a relationship, and one-sided arguments did not open the window. For example, airline informants emphasize the importance of the airline alliances; meanwhile the travel manager has a differing opinion:

Airline alliances are useful when it comes to the bonus-systems and lounges and marketing. But all the basic things never came true. (Travel manager)

The service level in business travel purchase is defined in the managerial level. However, the practical travel is arranged by the travel agency clerks. For example, the travel agency clerk is often worried for the travelers' safety and security:

The most devastating impulse was probably the twin towers [11 September, 2001], that was a shock to the whole world...Then there are, for example, civil wars taking place when you have to get travelers home from the country as soon as possible. It is nearly as if you were there yourself...Then you will co-operate [with the airlines and the client] to get the traveler back home. We only talk about money later on when everybody is safe. (Clerk)

However, the travel manager looks at the safety problem from a different perspective:

Employees who deliver newsletters and security plans of risk areas and areas where traveling should be restricted, are the right source... a travel agency is not the right place to take on the responsibility for the lives of the travelers. (Travel manager)

The clerks have closer relationships with the regular travelers, and they may feel that giving them superior service leads to closer relationships. However, this is not necessarily visible in the firm level.

CAPTURING THE TIME

The contextual setting and the timing of a process are important, because of the continuous changes as well in the organizational and relational conditions (Jahre and Fabbe-Costes, 2005; Halinen and Törnroos, 2005; Halinen, 1994). Time sets a reference frame for “*what changes are seen and how those changes are explained*” (Pettigrew, 1990: 271). However, a lack of knowledge in terms of how time affects businesses is acknowledged by several researchers (Quintens and Matthyssens, 2010; Plakoyiannaki and Saren, 2006; Halinen and Törnroos, 2005; Medlin, 2004). Quintens and Matthyssens (2010) propose three main reasons for the lack of temporal research. First, time is always a part of the reality which is observed (see also Zaheer et al, 1999), thus, time is a social construction (Pettigrew, 1990). Second, time is perceived differently by the researchers (cf. Hedaa and Törnroos, 2002; Halinen and Törnroos, 1995). Third, time is incorporated in theories and empirical models of firm dynamics with practically no attention about time, as time is a multifaceted phenomenon that is difficult to measure and model.

The timing of the change processes in the current study is defined by the individual informants. They memorized the impulses, put them in the time line, and considered if the impulse leads to a change process. Figure 3 is an attempt to illustrate the beginning and approximate timing of the change processes in the current case studies. Two change processes, (1) the saving campaign and (3) the change in earning logics are illustrated by a rectangle, because they were *time-framed and planned processes*. The (2) new sales channel and the (4) business and leisure travel convergence led to *evolving processes*, and they are illustrated by using elliptical shapes.

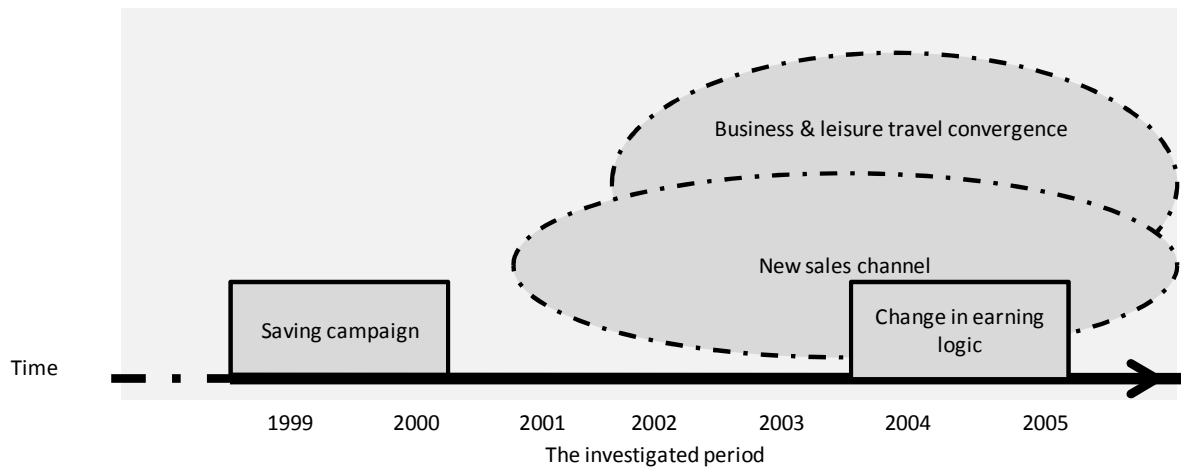


Figure 3 A visualization of the time frames of the change processes.

Naturally, the beginning of a time-framed change process is easier to define. The impulse for saving campaign was primarily endogenous, originating from the industrial enterprise. Change in the earning logic included both endogenous and exogenous impulses. The two evolving processes have to do with changes in the society as a whole.

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND AVENUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study provides three major contributions to the limited understanding of process characteristics of interaction and network research. First, it addresses *the techniques of how to trace the beginning of a process*. Retrospective processual case studies are applied to the dynamic business travel industry relationships. Critical interview technique (Chell, 2004) and visual aids, where the informants describe impulses that they see as turning points in the core relationships, are used as tools to trace the initiation of a change process.

Second, the current study takes into consideration the *time perspective* in the change processes. The informants outlined the time line of the impulses with the help of the visual aids by drawings with a time axe, and an axe describing the change that occurred in the relationships due to a specific impulse. The impulses were categorized into four groups of a combination of impulses that led to major change processes. The visual aids constructed by the informants help in setting the change processes and their beginnings into an approximate time line. Two of these processes were time-framed from the very beginning, i.e. they have a beginning and an end. The remaining two change processes are evolving, and their beginnings are difficult to define precisely. Furthermore, they do not have an end, but they are processes that change the core relationships continuously.

Third, the study aims to make a *distinction between the firm and the individuals as actors* (cf. Medlin and Törnroos, 2007). Several knowledgeable individuals from different organizational levels in the co-operating firms were interviewed. Furthermore, because the firms, and the individual informants are co-operating partners at the time of the research is conducted, multiple perspectives are applied by looking at the specific change processes from the “both ends” of the relationship. This is a challenging issue because of the differing views. One-sided perceptions of turning points in a relationship may not be regarded as true turning points in the relationships.

This study presents one way to study processes, and to trace their beginnings. Processual case studies were applied. *Longitudinal research* and the analysis of data collected at different points of time, or an ethnographic, or an action research approach would have been alternatives. However, a process may engage different actors at different points of time, and the right moment to collect data would have been difficult to specify beforehand in a longitudinal, or in an action research study.

Brennan et al. (2003) suggest *co-interview techniques* where the informants are interviewed simultaneously. This would create the opportunity to address directly the possible conflicting views that the exchange partners may hold about the nature and the importance of adaptations in specific relationships. This approach, however, causes difficulties in practical details, because it is impossible to find a time that would suit the informants. Furthermore, the informants express themselves more freely when the counterparts are not present, and the conflicting views would probably not have been solved by discussing them openly.

If compared to industry specific research, the change impulses, and the change processes, are rather *generic and universal*. They are not sudden, and they do not arise from individual specific, or firm specific occasions. *The impulses describe rather the general developments of the relationships than partner-specific developments*. The industrial enterprise, which is a powerful

actor, was taken as a starting point when selecting the firms and the informants. The travel manager chooses the partner firms, and requires similar kinds of services and adaptations from its partners. Thus, the relations with the suppliers and the travel agencies face similar challenges, i.e. the relationships with the two travel agencies, and with the three suppliers, follow the same principles, and it is the same impulses that change the relationships.

Another reason for the generic change processes may derive from the informants themselves. First, they concentrated on the common impulses because of their vast experience in different positions in the business travel industry, and because their interest in the development of the industry. Second, the informants were co-operating partners at the time of the interviews. Generally, it is not easy to collect data from the actual buyer, seller, and intermediary counterparts to specific relationships because of the opaque nature of the business relationships (see e.g. Trimarchi and Tamaschke, 2004: 341). Håkansson (1982) also noticed that trying to do it might lead to resistance from firms, because it could interfere with their business with each other. It may have been easier for them to discuss these generic issues than individual specific, or firm specific issues.

This study includes many analytical levels, and a number of interesting questions would deserve further investigation. For example, how and when do individual processes in one firm cumulate to inter-firm change processes? And how do inter-firm change processes cumulate to individual processes?

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