

## **KAM and the internal alignment challenge**

### ***How aligned are we? How more aligned can we be?***

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### **Abstract**

As Key account management (KAM) programs do not appear in a vacuum but are developed in “pre-existing” organizations, the question of how to align such “systems” with the host organizations is a central one. Different types of alignment exist – functional, operational, internal, external, vertical horizontal... In this work we are specifically dealing with the organizational internal alignment of a key account management entity (whether it is a department, a direction, or even a function) within a supplier company. We propose to use Lawrence and Lorsch’s (1964) integration concept to assess how much a KAM entity is aligned (or not). We then present the concept of “frame alignment” inspired by the work of Goffman (1974) and propose to use it to analyse possible aligning processes that could help improving the internal alignment of a KAM entity within a company. A case study will provide an illustration of how these theoretical frameworks can help to conceptualize the “internal challenge” of key account management.

### **Keywords**

KAM – Alignment – Integration – Frame analysis

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## INTRODUCTION

Michael Stevens was the Global Account Director of 3M electronics. He is now a consultant. Commenting on the launching of the KAM (key account management) program at 3M he declared: “*Establishing a global strategic accounts program within a traditionally structured company is an unnatural act. [...] SAM program cut everything familiar: global regions, product-based divisions and sales territories. Programs require a global team and functional alignment*” (Stevens, 2009, p. 26).

Alignment is far from being a new topic in management, whether it concerns strategy (Porter, 1996; Zajac, Kraatz & Bresser, 2000), organization (Day, 1997; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967), supply chain (Gattorna, 1998), IT (Luftman & Brier, 1999). In KAM, the concept has been considered as an important one by several authors. Shapiro and Moriarty (1980) in one of the seminal KAM articles discussed different types of integration KAM must attain. The same with Kempeners and van der Hart (1999) working on the notion of “integration” between the account manager and his team members. “Internal coordination” (across functional units, product units, and geographic regions...) is also seen by Workman, Homburg and Jensen (2003) as an important task facing key account managers. A similar position was adopted by Jones, Dixon, Chonko and Cannon (2005). Gosselin and Bauwen (2006) were interested in alignment between a company and its key account customers. Guesalaga and Johnston (2010) stressed the importance of the “internal alignment” issue, and invited scholars to develop research on it. Very recently Storbacka (2012) chose alignment as the key dimension of its SAMP (Strategic Account Management Program Framework).

As KAM never appears in a vacuum but is created in a pre-existing company, and because most of the time the KA department is going to use existing resources to make them fit with the strategy determined for a key account customer, the integration of the KAM within its company can therefore be considered as a central task. This paper deals with how a KAM program - with what it supposes in terms of creation of new processes, new job positions, new information systems, etc. - will “integrate / fit / align / match” in/with the organization in which it is implemented.

Our paper will be organized as follows. First we will provide an overview of the concept of “alignment” (considered in this work as equivalent to the ones of “integration” or “fit”). Then we will present Lawrence and Lorsch’s (1964) work on the “integration” concept and propose it as a possible framework to assess how a key account management entity (whether it is a department, a direction, or even a function) is internally aligned within a company. Then we’ll present the concept of “frame alignment” inspired by the work of Goffman (1974) and propose to use it as a framework for understanding the development of aligning processes that could help to improve the internal alignment of KAM within a company. The Ondeo IS case study will provide an illustration of how these two frameworks can help to conceptualize the “internal challenge” of key account management.

## THE ALIGNMENT CONCEPT

### A STILL RATHER AMBIGUOUS CONCEPT

Corsaro and Snehota (2011) recognize that the concept of alignment is “*ambiguous*” and that there is “*little agreement on how alignment [...] should be conceptualized*” (Corsaro &

Snehota, p. 1043). With respect to the “integration concept”, Barki and Pinsonnault (2005) stress that it “*has been diversely understood and conceptualized across disciplines and has evolved in a fairly independent and non-integrated way*” (Barki & Pinsonnault, 2005, p. 166). Directly linked to our specific purpose, not so different is Guesalaga and Johnston’s (2010) position when they admit that “*there is a need to propose a conceptual model for alignment in KAM*” (Guesalaga & Johnston, 2010, p. 1067). These authors recommend to “*build on the literature on organizational alignment and adapt a model for internal alignment to key account management*” (Guesalaga & Johnston, 2010, p. 1067).

A rapid review of the literature dealing with how different organizational entities – whether they are companies or subsystems (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967) like departments or functions – can work “harmoniously” together, leads us to consider the notions of “fit” (Miles & Snow, 1994; Zajac, Kraatz & Bresser, 2000), “alignment” (Corsaro & Snehota, 2011; Snow et al., 1986), and “integration” (Barki & Pinsonnault, 2005; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1969) as equivalent.

#### THE ORIGIN OF THE CONCEPT

Several authors (Barki & Pinsonnault, 2005; Zajac, Kraatz & Bresser, 2000) have reviewed the origins of alignment, matching, integration or fit concepts. All scholars stress that the concept occupies a central place in the strategy literature. For instance, according to Venkatraman and Camillus (1984) the strategic field “*is rooted in the concept of “matching” or “aligning” organizational resources with environmental opportunities or threats*” (Venkatraman & Camillus, 1984, p. 513, quoted by Zajac, et al., 2000, p. 431). But, as Barki and Pinsonnault (2005) stress, “*In strategy, the conceptual roots of integration can be traced to [...] Lawrence and Lorsch (1969)*” (Barki & Pinsonnault, 2005, p. 166).

The alignment concept is therefore also considered a central concept in the field of “organization theory” with the notion of “*structural contingency theory*” focusing there on the fit between environment and structure, rather than on the fit between environment and strategy as in the strategy field. Lawrence and Lorsch (1969) define integration as “*the process of achieving unity of effort among the various subsystems in the accomplishment of the organization's tasks*” (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1969, p. 34). Or, as Barki and Pinsonneault (2005) put it, integration deals with defining how “*harmoniously the different departments of an organization work together and how tightly coordinated their activities are*” (Barki & Pinsonneault, 2005, p. 166). In this case, integration has a much more intra-organizational orientation.

Barki and Pinsonnault (2005) also mention the importance of the concept for several other fields such as, production/operations management, logistics and information systems, though indicating that in such fields, the concept “*parallels the perspective in strategy*” (Barki & Pinsonnault, 2005, p. 166).

#### DIFFERENT TYPES OF ALIGNMENTS

Barki and Pinsonnault (2005) building on the work of Thompson (1967), Mintzberg (1979 & 1983) and Porter (1985) (for reference to the primary or support activities in the value chain) distinguish between different types of “integration”. As far as “internal integration” is concerned, Barki and Pinsonnault (2005) distinguish between internal-functional and internal-operational integration. They both concern the alignment of activities and/or processes (p. 169). Operational integration concerns “*the integration of successive stages within the primary process chain of a firm*”, while functional integration concerns “*the integration of administrative or support activities of the process chain of the company*” (Barki and Pinsonnault, 2005, p. 168).

Kathuria, Joshi and Porth (2007) distinguish between two types of “*organizational alignment*”: vertical and horizontal or lateral. Vertical alignment refers to the coordination of activities and priorities across the three levels of a company: corporate, business and functional and also within each function. This vertical organizational alignment is deeply anchored in a bottom-up conception of strategy “*where strategic management is an iterative process that starts with the development of an overall strategy at the corporate level to guide the entire organization*” (Kathuria, Joshi & Porth, 2007, p. 505). Vertical organizational alignment therefore refers to the consistency between lower level decisions and the decisions at the upper levels. As the authors underline: “*When this consistency is achieved vertical alignment has been realized*” (Kathuria, Joshi & Porth, 2007, p. 505). Horizontal alignment concerns primarily the functional level of an organization. It is concerned with consistency of decisions and activities between functions and also consistency within a function between the “*function-specific task and that function’s policies and practices*” (Kathuria, Joshi & Porth, 2007, p. 505). This is the reason why horizontal alignment is both defined in terms of “*cross-functional and intra-functional integration*” (Kathuria, Joshi & Porth, 2007, p. 505).

More recently Corsaro and Snehota (2011) have discussed the concept with respect to different types of “alignments” considered by a number of studies. Globally speaking, the concept is described as referring to aspects of “fit”, “match” and “congruency”. The authors distinguish between “*cognitive alignment*”, “*alignment of practices*”, and “*alignment in goals*”. Cognitive alignment refers to alignment between cognitive representations, perceptions, representations. Alignment of practices refers to processes and competencies. Four “Alignment of practices” are identified by Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford (1986) – namely “bridging”, “amplifying”, “extending”, and “transforming” – inspired by Goffman’s (1974) frame analysis. Finally, alignment in goals refers to “consistency” and “compatibility” between customers’ and suppliers goals. As in previous studies, Corsaro and Snehota’s (2011) perspective is an inter-organizational one as they focus in alignments/misalignments in interpretations of a problem and its solution between a supplier and its customers.

#### THE ALIGNMENT CONCEPT IN THE KAM LITERATURE

Guesalaga and Johnston (2010) show in their study that “internal” alignment is “*the topic that has received most of the attention in the SAMA articles*” (Guesalaga & Johnson, 2010, p. 1067). They bring the concept of alignment closer to the one of “team spirit” as developed by Workman, Homburg and Jensen (2003) who define it as “*the extent to which people involved in the management of key accounts feel obligated to common goals and to each other; it is manifested as an interest for other team members’ needs and a sense of “belonging” to the group that permeates multiple levels in the organization*” (Guesalaga & Johnston, 2010, p. 1067). Authors evoke several devices that are considered as means to achieve internal alignment. Such devices run from meetings (to shape cross-functional agendas for key account success, and to promote dialogue and joint decision-making); to the development of specific skills and capabilities, specific management systems and processes and matrix organization (Guesalaga & Johnston, 2010, p. 1067).

The idea of congruency and alignment when linked with key account management has also already been addressed by Gosselin (2002) and Gosselin and Bauwen (2006). Gosselin and Bauwen (2006) building on the work of Gosselin (2002) define congruency as a “*dynamic consistent relationship between two concepts or constructs*” (Gosselin, 2002, p. 122; Gosselin & Bowen, 2006, p. 382). As an output of their work, the authors formulate the proposition that: “*alignment towards important customers creates a competitive advantage*” (Gosselin & Bauwen, 2006, p. 382). More precisely, the authors promote *alignment with customers* rather than *internal alignment* as a source of performance: “*internal alignment within the supplier*

*company seems not to contribute much in explaining account management performance”* (Gosselin & Bauwen, 2006, p. 384).

Here again, Gosselin and Bauwen (2006) seem clearly to be referring to two types of integrations: an inter-organizational one linking “environment” to organization, and an internal (or intra-organizational) one. Nevertheless, through explicit reference to the work of Workman, Homburg and Jensen (2003), Gosselin and Bauwen (2006) seem rather to be assimilating “*internal alignment*” or congruency with the sole idea of formalization. One of Workman et al.’s empirical questions being, indeed “*whether firms that formalize KAM are more effective than others that do not explicitly label and organize a KAM program*” (Workman et al., 2003, p. 7). Workman, Homburg and Jensen (2003) define formalization of the KAM approach as “*the extent to which an organization has established policies and procedures for handling its most important set of customers*” (Workman et al., 2003, p. 11), and the authors indeed show that formalization is not an antecedent of KAM performance and that “*less formalized KAM approaches lead to higher levels of KAM effectiveness*” (Workman et al., 2003, p. 13). But formalization on the one hand and integration/alignment/congruency/fit on the other, are far from being totally equivalent concepts.

Very recently Storbacka (2012) defined the alignment aims as the “*improved performance of the account, both in terms of value creation for the strategic account and value capture for the firm*” (Storbacka, 2012, p. 260) and hypothesised that KAM programs “*influence intra- and inter-organizational fit by changing elements of the firm’s business model and/or improving the interconnectedness of firm and customer business models*” (Storbacka, 2012, p. 260). Storbacka then identified four inter-organizational alignment design elements (account portfolio definition, account business planning, account-specific value proposition, account management process); and four intraorganizational design elements: organizational integration, support capabilities, account performance management, account team profile and skills.

#### MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CONCEPT

Drawing on the literature cited above, several comments can be formulated. First, several concepts seem to be used to describe quite similar phenomenon reflecting the harmonious working together of different organizational entities. Second, it is possible to distinguish between an inter-organizational perspective of alignment and an intra-organizational one. The first perspective deals with “the working together” of an entity and a surrounding environment considered as “external” (this is for instance the perspective of alignment as seen by the strategy literature). The second perspective is an internal one and considers how two subsystems of an entity can work together. Both perspectives can coexist. This is particularly the case in Lawrence and Lorsch’s works. Thirdly, the “alignment issue” is connected to the issue of “differentiation” (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). “Differentiation” or “specialization” allows an organizational entity to display required skills and expertise, while “alignment” allows those “differentiated” or “specialized” entities to work together “as a whole”; The problem being that “*other things being equal, differentiation and integration are essentially antagonistic, and that one can be obtained only at the expense of the other*” (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967, p. 48). Finally, there is the necessity of “working as a whole”. The common position is that the “good” combination of “integration” and “differentiation” is linked to a “good” level of organizational performance (Homburg, Krohmer & Workman, 1999; Kathuria, Joshi & Porth, 2007)

## ASSESSING KAM INTERNAL ALIGNMENT

How can one determine how much a KAM entity (whether it is a department, a direction, or even only a function) is internally aligned within its company? Lawrence and Lorsch's (1967) concepts of differentiation and integration appear to provide guidance in answering this question. Differentiation is defined as "*the state of segmentation of the organizational system into subsystems, each of which tends to develop particular attributes in relation to the requirements posed by its relevant external environment. Differentiation, as used here, includes the behavioral attributes of members of organizational subsystems*" (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967, p. 4). Integration is defined as "*the process of achieving unity of effort among the various subsystems in the accomplishment of the organization's task*" (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967, p. 4). The value of the work of Lawrence and Lorsch to KAM research was provided by Shapiro and Moriarty (1980) in one of the very first academic work on KAM. Shapiro and Moriarty (1980), referring to Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) considered three types of KAM integration: 1/ the integration of KAM with the customer; 2/ the integration of KAM with "*various operating units and functions*" within the supplier company as for instance "*the product development laboratories concerning new ideas, the logistics department concerning inventory support and shipment, [...] the finance function concerning credit*" (Shapiro & Moriarty, 1980, p. 15); 3/ the integration with other "*various units*" of the "*sales organization*" (Shapiro & Moriarty, 1980, p. 15).

Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) propose different dimensions that can be used for our purpose. The four first dimensions are those "attributes" that are used by the authors to predict "*the degree of differentiation between any pair of subsystems*" which is "*inversely related to the effectiveness of integration between them*" (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967, p. 10). Two other dimensions were quoted by the authors but could not be investigated in their survey. The last dimension is called "requisite integration" and is adapted from the works of March and Simon (1958). Let us now consider these dimensions in detail and assess how they can be used for our purpose of KAM internal alignment.

In the following paragraphs, we will use the term "support system" to designate any entity (department, direction, function...) within the supplier company that can play a part in the management of a key account customer. It is Shapiro and Moriarty (1984) who suggested the term "support-systems". In the present situation it can be considered as equivalent to the term "sub-system" as it is used by Lawrence and Lorsch (1967). Also we use the generic term "Key Account Management Entity" (KAM entity) to designate the organisational form of key account management within the supplier company, whether it is a department, a direction, or even only a function.

### 1/ Difference of "structural formalization" between the KAM entity and the support systems

Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) pay attention to the "degree of formalized structure" of sub-systems. Structure is defined as "*those aspects of behavior in organizations subject to pre-existing programs and controls*" (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967, p. 5). In an organization, depending on their environment, sub-systems can have a high degree of structure ("mechanistic" subsystems) or a low degree of formalized structure ("organic" subsystems). We then propose that the degree of likeness between the formalization of the KAM entity and the degree of formalization of the support systems be considered when investigating the issue of KAM internal alignment.

## 2/ Difference in “orientation toward others” between KAM entity members and the supports systems members

Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) also consider the notion of “*orientation of members toward others*” which is described as “*a cognitive and affective orientation toward the objects of work [either people or inanimate tools and instruments], which is manifested in a person's inter- personal style*” (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967, p. 7). In an organization, depending on their environment, subsystem members can have either more social interpersonal orientations, or more task-oriented interpersonal orientations. We propose that the degree of similarity between the orientation of the KAM entity’s members and the orientation of the support system’s members is important when considering the issue of KAM internal alignment.

## 3/ Difference in time orientation between the KAM entity and the supports systems

“*Time orientation*” is described by Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) as the timespan of feedback. In an organization, subsystem members can be either short-term oriented (for instance if a feedback about their efforts is received on a daily basis) or long-term oriented (for instance if a feedback about their efforts is received after one year’s efforts). We propose that the degree of similarity in time orientation between the KAM entity and the other support systems is an important consideration when investigating the conditions of KAM internal alignment.

## 4/ Difference in goal orientation between the KAM entity and the supports systems

For Lawrence and Lorsch (1967), “*goal orientation*” describes what members of subsystems are primarily concerned with. For instance, salesmen are primarily concerned with customers; while manufacturing managers are primarily concerned with operations. More precisely, the authors distinguish between three main orientations when carrying out their empirical survey. Main concern of subsystems may be: 1/ “*competitive action*” (it defines “*market orientation*”), 2/ *processing costs* (technical-economic orientation), or 3/ *developing new knowledge* (scientific orientation). We propose that the degree of likeness between the “*goal orientations*” of the KAM entity’s members on the one hand, and the support systems’ members, on the other, is an important consideration when investigating the conditions of KAM internal alignment

## 5/ Difference in linguistic or semantic orientation between the KAM entity and the supports systems

Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) also consider the “*linguistic or semantic orientation of the subsystems*” (p. 10) or in other words the fact that “*the specialized languages that develop around certain tasks and environments are reputed to complicate the relations between subsystems*” (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967, p. 10).

## 6/ Difference in motivational orientations between the KAM entity and the supports systems

Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) also consider the value orientation of the subsystems in the sense that members can have various “*motivational orientations toward achievement, power, or social rewards*” (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967, p. 9).

Because of methodological problems these two last dimensions were not included in Lawrence and Lorsch’s (1967) empirical study, but were considered as “*operational feasible*”. We propose to integrate these dimensions when investigating the conditions of KAM internal alignment.

## 7/ Difference in requisite integration between the KAM entity and the supports systems

Another dimension was added by Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) to their analysis of differentiation of subsystems. The authors use the notion of “*requisite integration*” to describe

*"whether task characteristics make it possible for subsystems in an organization to operate independently of each other, or require continual collaboration in making decisions before a given subsystem may act"* (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967, p. 10). *"The greater the degree of requisite integration between two subsystems the more difficult it will be to achieve integration"* (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967, p. 10). We propose to consider the degree of independence or "required collaboration" between the KAM entity and support systems when investigating the conditions of KAM internal alignment.

## FACILITATING KAM INTERNAL ALIGNMENT

Not only did Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) describe the nature of the differentiation of subsystems, they also propose various "integrative devices". These devices are: management hierarchy; direct interunit contact; management control systems (rewards/punishments); interunit committees and task forces; integrative organizational units... Similar devices will be described later by Mintzberg (1974; 1985). More recently, Barki and Pinsonnault (2005) - building directly on the work of Glouberman and Mintzberg (2001) - describe different types of mechanisms that could help facilitate integration. Those mechanisms can be "work standardization" (i.e., common and clearly specified procedures and tasks), "output standardization" (i.e., clearly specified results or output of work), skills and knowledge "standardization" (i.e., standardized training and expertise), norms standardization (i.e., establishment of common values, beliefs, and expectations), direct supervision (i.e., someone not directly doing the work, but being responsible for coordinating the activities), planning (i.e., establishment of schedules governing activities of different units), and mutual adjustment (i.e., people or units adapting to each other during their work processes). The authors explain that depending on the "complexity" or the "interdependence" of what has to be integrated, certain integration mechanisms are more adapted than others. In the specific case of KAM, Homburg, Workman and Jensen (2003) consider three coordination modes: 1/ top-management involvement; 2/ use of teams (both considered as personal coordination modes in KAM) and, 3/ formalization (considered as an impersonal coordination mode).

Homburg et al. (2002) note that *"a key account manager may face difficulty in receiving support for his or her tasks"* due to his *"lack of authority"* over the different support systems that must collaborate to a key account relationship (Homburg, Workman & Jensen, 2002, p. 45). The authors then insist on the importance of the *"esprit de corps"*, defined as *"the extent to which selling center participants feel obliged to common goals and to each other"* (Homburg, Workman and Jensen, 2003, p. 45) and directly connected to *"interdepartmental connectedness and collaboration"* (Workman et al., 2003, p. 10). The authors clearly show the importance of such *"esprit de corps"*. The only problem is that the authors do not say a lot about how to develop (if it is possible...) such an "esprit de corps". We therefore looked for another theoretical framework able to bring us deeper in the analysis of such alignments based on common goals, common collaborative culture. Snow, Rochford, Worden and Benford (1986) building on the works of Goffman (1974), propose an interesting perspective on alignment and alignment processes. The authors are specialists in SMOs (social movement organizations), and more specifically they are interested in the issue of *"support for and participation in"* such movements. The "alignment" that Snow et al. (1986) are considering concerns *"interpretive orientations"* such that *"some sets of individual interests, values and beliefs and SMO activities, goals, and ideology are congruent and complementary"* (Snow et al., 1986, p. 465). The authors describe four alignment processes by which mentioned "congruency" or "complementarity" can be achieved. We briefly describe these "alignment processes".

- 1/ *Frame bridging* refers to the fact that the “alignment process” aligns people and organizational entities (in this case SMO) through “information diffusion”. It is considered as the primary form of alignment.
- 2/ *Frame amplification* underlines the role of “clarification” and “invigoration” that the alignment process attempts to manage. Two types of “frame amplification” are described by the authors. Value amplification aims at “*identifying, idealizing and elevating*” “*one or more values presumed basic to prospective constituents but which have not inspired collective actions for numbers of reasons*”. Whereas “belief amplification” aims at focusing and amplifying selected beliefs (Snow et al., 1986, p. 470)
- 3/ *Frame extension* consists of “*extending the boundaries of [...] framework so as to encompass interests or points of view that are incidental to its primary objectives but of considerable salience to potential adherents*” (Snow et al., 1986, p. 472).
- 4/ *Frame transformation* appears when the framework is redefined and “*radically redefines what it is for participants that is going on*” (Goffman, 1974, p. 45, quoted by Snow et al., 1986, p. 474).

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This work is based on an in-depth analysis of the changes brought by the implementation of a KAM program at Ondeo IS. Data sources are twofold: (1) in-depth collaboration with an MSc student doing a 7-month internship in the company in 2011; (2) analysis of secondary data from newspapers, websites, market surveys... linked to the different issues associated with the organization and changes in the organization of Ondeo IS. During the internship, day to day contacts took place between the Msc Student and the Key Accounts Director, the regular salesforce and the top management. A report was written by the Msc Student “telling the story” of the creation of the Key Account Department at Ondeo IS. The report was discussed during a meeting between the Key Accounts Director and researchers. Two other meetings were organized around two complementary topics: 1/ organizational aspects of the Key Account Department at Ondeo IS and 2/ dedicated information system. During this meeting notes were collected. Finally, researchers submitted their result (the Ondeo Case Study as they saw it) to the Ondeo team that gave feedback. By doing that, it appears that our research design allows what Dubois and Gadde (2002) define as “systematic combining” that characterizes an adductive research process.

## **CASE STUDY**

### **ONDEO IS**

Ondeo IS is a subsidiary of Suez Environment. It is a leader in industrial water treatment. Ondeo IS employs 650 people in Europe and 2010 sales were 66 million Euros. The company headquartered in Paris has several European subsidiaries in France, UK, Benelux, Spain and Italy. Ondeo IS can be involved at different stages of the industrial water cycle, from raw water to discharging into the natural environment, thus helping industrial companies optimising and diversifying their water source (which appears sometimes to be a critical issue for certain plants and industrial processes). Ondeo IS also provides means for controlling water quality, pre-treating wastewater for subsequent re-use, etc. Ondeo IS also provides different services for water when it is used in industrial processes and utilities. Ondeo IS proposes different water treatment methods (Flow separation; Physico-chemical, aerobic and anaerobic biological treatment; Special treatment using hydrocarbons, nitrogen, or phosphorus). Finally, Ondeo IS also proposes processes for treating and reducing the amount of sludge left behind after wastewater treatment

Because water is a critical part of the manufacturing processes in many industries, Ondeo IS customers belong to different activity sectors such as aeronautics (Dassault, EADS, Air France...), Automotive (Renault, Ford are among Ondeo IS's customers), Pharmaceuticals, cosmetics and fine chemicals (with customers like l'Oréal, Novartis, Procter & Gamble, Sanofi, etc) ; the food and beverage industry (Bonduelle, Danone, Mars-Masterfoods, Unilever are Ondeo IS's customers); Microelectronics (with companies like Alcatel, Philips, Siemens, STMicroelectronics). Ondeo also provides solutions to the Chemicals industry (Arkema, Rhodia, Ajinomoto...), Oil and Petrochemical (Total, BP, Shell, Exxon Mobil...), Power (Alstom, EDF, E.On, Scottish Power...), Pulp and Paper (Arjo Wiggins, Smurfit Kappa...), Metallurgy, Iron and Steel (ArcelorMittal, Vallourec...), and Glass (Essilor, Owens-Illinois, Saint-Gobain Group).

#### KAM AT ONDEO IS

The Key Account Department at Ondeo IS was created in 2010. At that time, there was a real willingness of the management to be proactive with respect to environmental changes and to place customers at the core of the business so as to better understand and serve them.

KAM is considered at Ondeo IS to be part of the sales multichain process. This sales process is internally described at Ondeo IS along three main stages<sup>1</sup> namely: 1/ "Listen, understand, identify stakeholders"; 2/ "from customer needs to opening the door"; 3/ "grow the business". At each of these stages, KAM is playing a role. At the first stage, KAM approach is complementary to the site approach. At the second stage, KAM supports the development of services; at the third stage, KAM provides a continuous KA customer management.

#### SELECTING KEY ACCOUNTS AT ONDEO IS

Ondeo IS has defined several criteria to be used so as to identify those customers that should be managed as key accounts.

- The first selection criterion is that key accounts are customers that Ondeo IS is already in relation with, or at least for whom Ondeo IS has already developed a project. Key accounts are never "totally new" customers for Ondeo IS.
- The second selection criterion is the potential development for Ondeo IS with the KA. Thus, KAs at Ondeo IS are customers where Ondeo IS is not yet very present but that offer an important growth potential for the company.
- The third selection criterion is concerned with what Ondeo IS considers its target segments. Four activity sectors are considered to be targets for Ondeo IS: Chemicals, Oil and petrochemical, Energy, and Food and Beverage. The customers that have been selected as key accounts by Ondeo IS all belong to one of these four segments.

#### THE KEY ACCOUNT DEPARTMENT AT ONDEO IS

When the KA department was created in June 2010, only one person (the Key Accounts Director) was appointed. The idea at that time was not to make her manage directly the 23 identified key customers, but rather to build the KAM program in general. The Key Account Director then identified the different supports needed for a successful KAM program. Two levels of supports were identified. At the first levels are all the sales directors, business developers or subsidiaries directors. The second level is made of the Ondeo IS salesforce, the Innovation & Technical Division the Technical and Expertise Department and the Purchasing Department.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Ondeo IS internal source

In that way, the core idea is to develop what Ondeo calls “double selling”. This means that every key account customer is both managed in a transactional manner by the traditional sales force, and in a relational (more mid-term) manner by the key account approach.

#### THE ALIGNMENT CHALLENGE

Once the KA Department created and its director appointed; once the key accounts selected and the supports that must be mobilized identified, the question Ondeo IS has had to tackle was the integration of the whole system to the pre-existing entities. As the Development Manager explained: *“This new structure must now be anchored within the company. Structural integration and the integration of information processes are critical for the success of the KAM program”*. The choice was made to keep a very light KA Department with only a Director and a Development Manager. The Director of the KA Department was the first key account manager at Ondeo IS. Then, a process of identification of key account managers was put in place.

Information was soon considered to be a central topic in the management of key customers at Ondeo IS. A three-step approach was implemented. First, a list of all necessary information about a key customer was produced. 14 information blocks are identified. They cover such topics as: key figures; shareholding; organisation; description of incurring business; etc. Second, the formalization of the account plan was discussed. Two options were then proposed. In the first option, the account plan is a word-document, structured around the identified information building-blocks. The document is then to be managed by the key account manager, with other users able to add pieces of information to the plan, but with the key account manager having final responsibility of the content of the document (information accuracy, information updating...). The document is to be stocked in the Ondeo IS informatics network. The second option is built around the idea of a “sharing support”. Here, a cloud computing informatics platform is available on Ondeo IS Intranet. The platform would be developed internally with a user-friendly design so as to develop the attractiveness of the platform for every user. This second option was approved due to the fact it allows important and easy interaction between the members of the Key account team. It was decided that an extended set of internal actors may have access to the KA platform: general managers, regional managers, markets managers, sales managers, sales force, purchasing managers, technical engineers, operational managers, project managers and of course the KA department. However, each population will have a specific access right. It was also planned to give access to key stakeholders within Suez and GDF.

### DISCUSSION OF THE ONDEO IS CASE

#### ASSESSING ONDEO IS KA DEPARTMENT INTERNAL ALIGNMENT

We propose to use Lawrence and Lorsch’s (1964) differentiation dimension to assess the degree of alignment of Ondeo IS KA Department with the rest of the organisation. Considering each of the 7 dimensions that we described in a previous part, we try to analyse the situation of the KA Department.

##### 1/ The structural formalization of the Ondeo IS KA Department compared to the potential support systems within Ondeo

This is an interesting point to discuss. As the KA Department is an emerging entity, the level of formalization appears rather low. For instance, information tools do not exist at the very first stage of the KA Department operation. This can be partly explained by the “embryonic” state of the KA Department. This may be perceived as a willingness (on the part of the KA

Director) to maintain enough “agility” in order to be able to evolve according what is discovered during the process. On the other side, other support systems are considered as more formalized. This is particularly the case for all “technical or scientific” support systems. In conclusion we can say that the KA department displays a lower structural formalization than that of other support systems. One may also note that part of the Development Manager’s task through the key account plan and the “Customer Intelligence Platform” can also be interpreted as a move toward more formalization.

The question of formalization is an important one in the KAM literature. It was largely considered by Homburg, Workman and Jensen (2002) and Workman et al. (2003) who define formalization of a KAM approach as *"the extent to which the treatment of the most important customers is governed by formal rules and standard procedures"* (Homburg, Workman & Jensen, 2002, p. 45). Workman et al’s (2003) results show that *"formalization of the KAM approach [...] is negatively related to performance"* (Workman et al., 2003, p. 14). This result is all the more important that formalization also plays a coordinating role. It has an impersonal coordinating mode (*"as opposed to top-management involvement and use of teams, which represent personal coordination modes in KAM"*. Homburg et al., 2002, p.45).

## 2/ The “orientation toward others” of the Ondeo IS KA Department members compared to that of the other support systems members ?

Have the Ondeo KA Department members more social interpersonal orientations, or more task-oriented interpersonal orientations than members of the other support systems? This point is rather difficult to assess in the sense that the KA Department is still in its infancy. If considering the KA department as the duo of the KA Director and the Development Manager, it can be noted that they are much more interpersonally oriented. For instance, when the Development Manager was appointed, the KA Director explained that one of his first tasks would be *“to meet people”*. She also often refers to the idea that they (KA Director and Development Manager) are there to *“feel things”*.

## 3/ The time orientation of the Ondeo IS KA Department compared to that of the support systems

The time perspectives are not the same between the KA Department and other support systems. This is the case for instance, if we compare the KA Department and the sales department. Transactional, short-term actions characterize the sales approach, while “medium term” is the time horizon of the key account approach. This difference is clearly visible when considering the concept of “double selling” where the terms “short term” approach and “medium term” approach are clearly used. This difference in time orientation may appear in a different way when considering other support systems. For instance, technical engineers are working on water treatment processes whose development can take several years...

## 4/ The goal orientation of the Ondeo IS KA Department compared to that of the support systems

Members of the KA Department at Ondeo are primarily coping with the management of relationships with a specific set of customers. This is different from the goal of other support systems from two perspectives. First, other support systems do not have goals limited to a certain set of customers or at least this set is not defined according the KA selection criteria. The selection of customers may be done on a geographical basis (for the sales department) or on an activity sector basis (for the marketing department). Second, the goals of other support systems are not “to manage the relationship” but “to sell products and services” (where the sales force is concerned), to develop new processes (for instance for technical engineers), etc.

5/ The linguistic or semantic orientation of the Ondeo IS KA Department compared to that of the support systems

The KA Director clearly indicates that Ondeo IS as a whole is a company of “engineers”. Dialogue with other support systems (for instance technical engineers) is not natural, in the sense that vocabulary used by both parties (KA Department and Technical engineers) is not exactly the same. One part may talk about Electro-Deionization or Reverse Osmosis and the other about the customer decision making unit!

6/ The motivational orientations of the Ondeo IS KA Department compared to the one of the support systems

This point is rather interesting to discuss. It was clear during the interviews that there was a real desire on the part of the KA Director to “make it work” and a deep conviction that this is how things can be done. The personality of the Director is an important consideration. She is particularly sensitive to what the KA Department can bring to the company. She pays great attention to the fact that anyone at Ondeo IS can understand and benefit from the implementation of the KAM program. For instance, she’s intensely working on business cases telling the “stories” of the very first “successes” of the department to show that it is possible to co-create more value with customers when using KAM to coordinate activities.

7/ Difference in requisite integration between the Ondeo IS KA Department and the support systems

This is an important point because the KA Department can be considered as highly dependent on what other support systems are doing. So as to implement the strategy that has been defined for one key account, the KA Department must collaborate with different support systems. Its level of “requisite integration” is very high.

<b>Dimensions of differentiation</b>	<b>Assessment of the Ondeo IS situation</b>
Formalization	The KA department displays a lower structural formalization than that of other support systems.
Orientation toward others	The KA department is interpersonally oriented
Time orientation	The time perspectives are not the same between the KA Department and other support systems
Goal orientation	Different from the goals of other support systems
Linguistic or semantic orientation	Dialogue with other support systems is not natural, in the sense that vocabulary used by both parties is not exactly the same.
Motivational orientations	A real desire from the part of the KA Director to “make it work” and a deep conviction that this is how things can be done
Requisite integration	Very high by nature of what is the KA department

Table 2: Synthesis of the differentiation dimensions of the Ondeo IS KA Department with the rest of the company

DISCUSSING THE ALIGNMENT PROCESSES OF THE ONDEO IS CASE

We consider that all four of the “alignment processes” as we adapted them from the work of Snow et al. (1986) are mobilized in the Ondeo IS case. We illustrate each of these alignment processes.

1/ “Bridging” to align the KA Department within Ondeo IS:

Bridging, as an “alignment process” consists in diffusing information so as facilitate the aggregation of individual activities. This point is important for KAM at Ondeo in the sense that important work has been undertaken around the notion of information. The “Key accounts Customer Intelligence Platform” project was presented and validated by top management in July 2011 with a clear stated objective of “*sharing key account information and knowledge*”. This information tool allows data on key accounts to be collected, stored, and exploited. In the light of the “frame analysis”, it furthermore appears as an “alignment process”: it allows people using it to feel “mobilized” in the process of key account management. This second point is particularly important and must be taken into account when designing such an information tools. For instance, often the access of such tool is restricted to a very limited set of persons – most of the time for reasons of confidentiality. Considering such a tool as an “alignment process” may lead managers to make the tool available to people who need to feel involved in the KAM process but who, at first sights, do not appear to warrant being given access. The choice has been made by Ondeo IS to provide wide access to information about KA. For instance people belonging to GDF Suez (the parent company) can have access to the KA Customer Intelligence Platform”.

### 2/ “Amplifying” to align KA Department within Ondeo IS

KAM at Ondeo IS is presented as a means to “*position the customer at the core of the relationships, so as to better understand it and better serve it*”<sup>2</sup>. By presenting the objective of KAM this way, Ondeo IS alludes to a general objective of the company. The objective of KAM is not formulated in a sense that is not understandable to other support systems; on the contrary, it refers to a “general” goal of the whole company. Snow et al. (1986) would talk about “value amplification” in such a situation, in the sense that the KA Department appeals to a value “*presumed basic to prospective constituents*”. It is all the more interesting to consider that, according to Snow et al. (1986) this “basic value” is considered to have not been able to inspire collective action so far. This point is worth making, because it gives to KAM at Ondeo IS the role of implementing something new within the company: a real customer orientation. A second aspect of amplification is described by Snow et al. (1986): belief amplification. Here beliefs are those “*elements that cognitively support or impede action in pursuit of desired value*” (p. 470). For instance such an “amplification processes” may involve references to the efficacy of actions that have been carried out. We can find an illustration in the Ondeo IS case with a first formalization of 4 “business cases” providing “*sound evidence of KAM results at Ondeo IS*”<sup>3</sup>. Those cases describe the relationships between Ondeo IS and 4 customers - Dow, Areva, Goodyear and EDF – and each illustrates what has been achieved by the KAM approach: increase business, new partnership, short listing for an ultimate round of a CFT, umbrella contract being signed, access to a “privileged supplier” status, etc.

### 3/ “Extending” to align the KA Department within Ondeo IS

In this perspective, what is at stake is how the KA Department at Ondeo IS is able to “*extend the boundaries of its primary framework to encompass [other] interests or points of view*” (Snow et al., 1986, p. 472). This appears again as a very important point for KAM at Ondeo IS. We cannot forget that a KAM system works as a coordination device. KA managers spend their time combining diverse internal resources to make them fit within the key account relationship strategy they have defined. As we have mentioned before, a KA manager rarely has hierarchical power over these different resources. So he/she spends his/her time convincing people who hold these resources to act according to the strategy defined for a key

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<sup>2</sup> Source : OndeoIS internal document – December 2011

<sup>3</sup> Source : OndeoIS internal document – December 2011

account. We can suppose that those people will be more easily convinced if they see their own interest are served by behaving in accord with this key account strategy. Therefore, there is an important amount of work for a key account manager that is dedicated to explaining what a KAM program may bring to any support system within the company. This is really important because it is the other side of the coordination between KAM and support systems. KAM not only receives support from other subsystems within the company, but in turn supplies them with support. In the case of Ondeo IS it seems that the help the KA Department can bring to the “traditional” sales force is rather well formulated, for example through the “double selling concept” (see case study description). This concept clarifies how the sales force and the KA department are “*working in a coordinated manner*”<sup>4</sup> and how the sales force may benefit from the KA Department actions. Sentences like “*key account managers are there to open doors for the sales force*” or “*key account managers must feed the commercial pipeline*” pronounced by the KA Director, illustrate this position.

#### 4/ “*Transforming*” to align the KA Department within Ondeo IS

In this alignment process, what is to be analysed is how Ondeo IS KA Department could have had redefined its goals and activities to something totally new with the objective of mobilizing internal support systems in an easier manner. According to Snow et al. (1986) this transformation may be “domain specific” (in this case, Ondeo IS KA Department is adding totally new domains of action to its initial mission) or “global interpretative” (in this case, Ondeo IS KA Department is defining itself in a totally new manner, for instance, through totally new missions). No such “transformation” has been noticed so far in the Ondeo IS case. But, this does not mean “transforming” is not possible...

Alignment process	Definition	Illustration with the Ondeo IS case
Bridging	Aligning people and organizational entities (in this case SMO) through “information diffusion”. It is considered as the primary form of alignment.	The “Key accounts Customer Intelligence Platform” with its clear stated objective of “sharing key account information and knowledge”.
Value Amplification	Identifying, idealizing and elevating” “one or more values presumed basic to prospective constituents but which have not inspired collective actions for numbers of reasons”.	IS positions the customer at the core of the relationships thus refers to a general objective of the company that is understandable by other support systems
Extending	Extending the boundaries of its primary framework to encompass [other] interests or points of view”	Managers explaining that a KAM program brings value to any support system within the company
Transforming	Radically redefining what it is for participants that is going on”	No such “transformation” has been noticed

Table 2: Synthesis of alignment processes at work in the Ondeo IS case

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR A NEW CONCEPTUALIZATION OF KAM

Both ideas of “differentiation” and “alignment” may shed a new light on how to raise the issue of KAM within a company. If we follow Lawrence and Lorsch’s (1964) work, KAM has both the status of a “differentiated sub-system” and at the same time that of an “integrative device”.

*KAM is a differentiated subsystem* in the sense that it aims at the optimal adaptation to a key customer. No other subsystem has the same objective within a company. Not even sales,

<sup>4</sup> Source : OndeoIS internal document – December 2011

because the sales objective differs from the KAM objective from at least two perspectives. Firstly, as Gosselin and Bauwen (2006) mention - KAM is about “relationship *building and coordination*” while sales is about “*transactional sales generation*” (Gosselin & Bauwen, 2006, p. 377). Secondly, because the sales function - due to geographical or product specialization - is rarely responsible for a customer in its totality (ie, in any place of the world where the customer is located, or for any product or service the customer may buy from the supplier). Coordination of customer in its “totality” (at least at a certain geographical or business unit level) is the objective of KAM. Then, as Shapiro and Moriarty (1980) state, the difficulty for KAM will be the “*trade-off between greater differentiation and more difficult integration, on the one hand, and less differentiation but easier integration on the other*” (Shapiro & Moriarty, 1980, p. 16). What we must understand with KAM is that “greater differentiation” is essential because KAM really must bring “extra activities” - as Workman et al. (2003) mention - which means that KAM really brings something new to a supplier company through the process of value co-creation with key customers. This greater differentiation is particularly important to traditional sales: a key account manager should not be a “super-seller” at the risk of being in internal competition with the traditional sales force, thus creating redundancy in action, or even conflicts, and so resulting in being totally unproductive. At the same time, greater integration must be sought by KAM, because KAM’s fundamental purpose is to coordinate existing resources within the supplier company to support the value co-creation process with the key customer. But KAM rarely has “dedicated resources” or even “hierarchical power” over support systems to enable them to work for the “key account relationship”. Thus, KAM must find ways for this coordination: it must look for greater integration.

Among solutions proposed by Lawrence and Lorsch (1967 & 1969) for better integration is the activation of “management hierarchy”, or the use of “integrative units”. We’ve just said that the use of “hierarchy” is rarely possible for KAM. As far as “integrative units” may be considered, the problem is that KAM already is an “integrative unit”! It already coordinates different resources for the purpose of managing a key account relationship. It would sound strange to create a new “coordination unit” to coordinate a... coordination unit! That is why “direct contact” - as it is described by Lawrence and Lorsch (1967 & 1969) or Mintzberg (1985) - appears to be a more suitable solution for KAM alignment. However, these authors say little about how these direct contacts actually work. We think then that further work on frame alignment such as the one proposed by Snow et al. (1986) could be of help in going further in this direction.

## **IMPLICATIONS, LIMITS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

This study still has the status of work in progress, but, nevertheless, we believe it contributes to enriching the knowledge corpus on key account management in several ways.

First, we think that this work may play a role in the promotion of “internal alignment” as an important topic for key account management. As we have mentioned it, if the idea of alignment of a KAM entity with the key account customers has been clearly raised, the one of *internal alignment* (the KAM entity being aligned internally with other parts of the supplier company) is far from being raised with the same intensity.

Second, it appears that such an issue is compatible with the invitation made by several authors (Ivens & Pardo, 2009; Piercy, 2009; Sheth, Sharma and Iyer, 2009) to pay attention to how ideas translate into “organizational devices”, or, in other words, to pay attention to the “organizational how to do” of several managerial orientations (relationship orientation, customer orientation, and of course key account orientation).

Third, we think that – though they deserve refinements – the framework we propose to conceptually grasp the notions of “KAM internal alignment degree” and “KAM internal alignment improvement” may be helpful for both scholars and practitioners. For scholars it provides a first conceptualization that can pave the way for further research. As such it can be considered as complementary to the recent work from Storbacka (2012) in the sense that it goes deeper into one intra-organizational design element as identified in his SAMP model. For practitioners, these frameworks – with some necessary adaptations - could serve as diagnostic tools during the implementation process of a KAM program.

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