BUYER–SELLER RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN THE SERVICE-INTENSIVE PROJECTS: INTRODUCING FOUR ARCHETYPICAL POST-PROJECT RELATIONSHIPS

I. Ojansivu, Oulu Business School, ilkka.ojansivu@oulu.fi

K. Alajoutsijärvi, Jyväskylä University School of Business and Economics, kimmo.alajoutsijarvi@jyu.fi

J. Salo, Oulu Business School, jari.salo@oulu.fi

ABSTRACT

In service-intensive projects, services enable suppliers to overcome issues of discontinuity and "sleeping relationships". Both are topics that have long influenced project-marketing research. In this study, we develop a research framework that illustrates the path from the instigation of relationships through to the project's afterlife. Our contribution is to that part of project marketing research focusing on post-project interaction. By employing a theory-driven case study approach, we are able to showcase four archetypical post-project relationships in practice.

Track: General track

Keywords: buyer-seller relationships, project marketing, service-intensive projects, interaction

Work in progress

INTRODUCTION

Over the last twenty years, services have become a central part of project business (Artto, Wikström, Hellström & Kujala, 2008; Davies, Brady & Hobday, 2007; Skaates & Cova, 2005; Stremersch, Wuyts & Frambach, 2001) and many project-based companies earn even greater revenues from project-related services than from delivery of the project itself (Davies, 2004; Gebauer, Edvardsson, Gustafsson & Witell, 2010; Penttinen & Palmer, 2007). We call these projects 'service-intensive' as they include a wide variety of services from basic maintenance to more sophisticated development and consulting.

One of the most successful examples of the recent development is Kone Corporation, which has transformed the highly volatile elevator and escalator project business into very profitable maintenance service business (see Gebauer, Edvardsson, Gustafsson & Witell, 2010). The main products of Kone, escalators and elevators, are nevertheless not among the core activities of its customers; but merely part of the visible infrastructure and supporting activities. In the case of other investment commodities such as a paper machine, which is highly customized and critical to the paper manufacturer, building a long-term post-project service exchange relationship is more challenging. In this case, as the service relationship goes to the core of the business activity, it requires strategic thinking and a long-term service contract enduring perhaps decades after initial delivery, taking it beyond the scope of a simple outsourcing decision for the buyer.

The question of the project afterlife, and especially the influence of services on it, has been largely ignored in the project marketing research (Cova & Salle; 2011, 404-405; Mandjak & Veres, 1998; Söderlund, 2011, 52). The reason for this has to do with the challenges associated with post-project interaction beyond its mere social dimension (Cova & Hoskins, 1997; Skaates, Tikkanen & Alajoutsijärvi, 2003). Hence, research focus has been directed to the concepts such as sleeping relationships (Hadjikhani, 1996); milieus (Cova, Mazet & Salle, 1996); the ritual approach (Cova & Salle, 2000); and project networks (Mele, 2011; Owusu & Welch, 2007) as means available to continue the relationship in the absence of economic exchange and structural ties (Cova & Hoskins, 1997; Skaates, Tikkanen & Alajoutsijärvi, 2003).

As in contemporary projects economic exchange rarely ends upon the delivery, we argue that the focus of project marketing needs to be extended. So far, the main theorization of post-project interaction is the so-called sleeping relationship (Hadjikhani, 1996), which calls for more variety when categorizing different types of post-project relationships. Consequently, we address the research gap by asking: 1) What are the archetypical post-project relationships in service-intensive projects? and 2) What are the relationship antecedents and processes leading to their development?

This research is structured as follows. The research framework of the study is introduced next. That is followed by an empirical investigation of post-project relationships using a multiple case study method. We conclude by analyzing our case findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Relationship antecedents

In service-intensive projects the time period before any formal agreement is made between the project buyer and seller is interesting. Acquiring a project most likely entails service elements,

which require a service contract. Therefore, buyers are sensitive and looking for clues to signal the level of the supplier's commitment. Without a certain level of mutual understanding and trust, the buyer is not willing to commit, since the latter is aware of the fact that the services create an inevitable dependence on the supplier's willingness and capability to enhance the life span of the product.

Because of the project related services, both parties have expectations of the other party. In an extreme situation, the buyer might refuse to sign any service contract and will settle for a warranty period. In other occasion, the buyer may assume maintenance, development or even consulting services relating to its core capabilities (Helander & Möller, 2008; Matthyssen & Vandenbempt, 2010). At the same time the supplier might have its own expectations. It might assume a greater or smaller role in the customer's business processes and value chain, perhaps a safeguard function or other indirect-functions (see e.g., Walter, Ritter & Gemünden, 2001). It is arguable that the more the supplier's role shifts towards the customer's core business processes, the more sensitive the customer becomes. If the service targets life-cycle partnerships that encompass the whole life span of the product, the customer is not likely to enter into cooperation in the absence of a previous history with the supplier.

The buyer or seller experience of the other party can be divided into performance and psychosocial components (Möller & Wilson, 1988, p. 400) and onto the individual, intergroup and interorganizational level (Andersen & Kumar, 2006; Ritter & Gemünden, 2003). In this research we will focus on the two levels of individual and 'collective', from which the lastly mentioned combines the intergroup and interorganizational levels. Satisfaction on the performance level refers to efficiency, effectiveness and adaptability gains or losses of each participant and it can be associated with the functionality of the exchanged product or service. Psychosocial satisfaction is broader as it relates to the overall satisfaction with the business relationship and its reciprocal nature. We argue that the broader the expected role of the service supplier, the more critical the psychosocial component and the collective level are for the buyer. This is due to the overlapping activities of the customer and the supplier; the more business processes and parts of the customer's value chain affected by the supplier services, the more customers' employees are involved and influenced in the process.

Relationship experiences relate not only to relationship-specific learning but also to knowledge accumulated from various buyer-seller relationships (Möller & Wilson, 1988, p. 417). Over time, firms can begin to follow a certain "interaction orientation" that indicates their behavioral tendency to favor certain interaction characteristics (Möller & Wilson, 1988, pp. 417–418) that can be either competitive, cooperative, coopetitive and dominance or something between these extreme types (Alajoutsijärvi, Klint & Tikkanen, 2001; Bengtsson & Kock, 2000; Campbell, 1985; Easton & Araujo, 1992; Möller & Wilson, 1988, 1995). These four relational types are interesting in this type of business, since more or less abstract service features complicate the development of linear relationships and the predictability of joint activities. It is necessary, that the buyer and seller share a roughly similar interaction orientation in order for the parties to reach an agreement.

Relationship processes

If the role expectations, relationship experience, and the interaction orientations of the buyer and seller overlap sufficiently, the interaction processes begin. Generally speaking, interaction in a

buyer-seller relationship can be described with reference to three basic processes: exchange process, coordination process and adaptation process (e.g., Håkansson, 1982; Möller & Wilson; 1988). Exchange is usually described with four types of elements: product or service exchange, information exchange, financial exchange, and social exchange (Håkansson, 1982, p. 16). In our framework, developed exchange is described as discontinuous, occasional, continuous, or institutionalized (see Håkansson, 1982, 17; Ford, 1980; Möller & Wilson, 1988; Ring & Van de Ven, 1994).

Adaptation processes refer to actions that interacting parties perform in order to derive benefit from the exchange relationship. These actions can include modification of resources, skills, operations and even goals, attitudes, and managerial values (Möller & Wilson, 1995, p. 27). If adaptations require relationship-specific investments (RSI), this may lead to increased relative dependence and high switching costs between the interacting parties. Non-retrievable investments are the relationship-specific commitment of resources that cannot be recovered if the relationship ends (Wilson, 1995). In the framework, four types of adaptations are taken into account; low, one-sided, and mutual RSI in addition to complete lock-in, which refers to thorough interdependence between the parties.

Coordination processes have to do with mechanisms that facilitate the control of exchange processes. These mechanisms include decisions, rules, and procedures as well as the "terms of trade" that each contributes to the efficiency of the relationship (Möller & Wilson, 1995, p. 27). We divide coordination into four types: simple, moderate, complex and extremely complex.

Relationship outcomes

We propose four types of buyer-seller relationships as outcomes of the interaction processes. The first is the *sleeping relationship*. The term sleeping relationship dates back to the beginning of the 1980s, and to the studies of Palmer (1986) on the relationship between actor and movie producer. In project marketing research, the term sleeping relationships was first used in the mid-1990s by Hadjikhani (1996) in order to depict buyer-seller relationship discontinuity after project completion. We use the term in a similar manner to describe a buyer-seller relationship that has ceased in financial terms after project delivery, but which maintains owing to social bonds, prospective project sales, and reference value. The second buyer-seller relationship type is referred to as a passive *relationship.* This is founded on the exchange of basic maintenance services linked to a buyer's supporting business processes and partial value chain. We call the third buyer-seller relationship an *active relationship.* When the buyer and seller are engaged in an active relationship they have agreed on the terms of a full service contract. Service exchange encompasses buyer's core business processes, but only parts of its value chain. The last relationship type is referred to here as an *interactive relationship.* It is the most challenging relationship to establish and maintain in the service-intensive project business. It is formed around the core business processes, the complete value chain of the customer and is sealed with a full service contract. Figure 1 presents the research framework for the study.

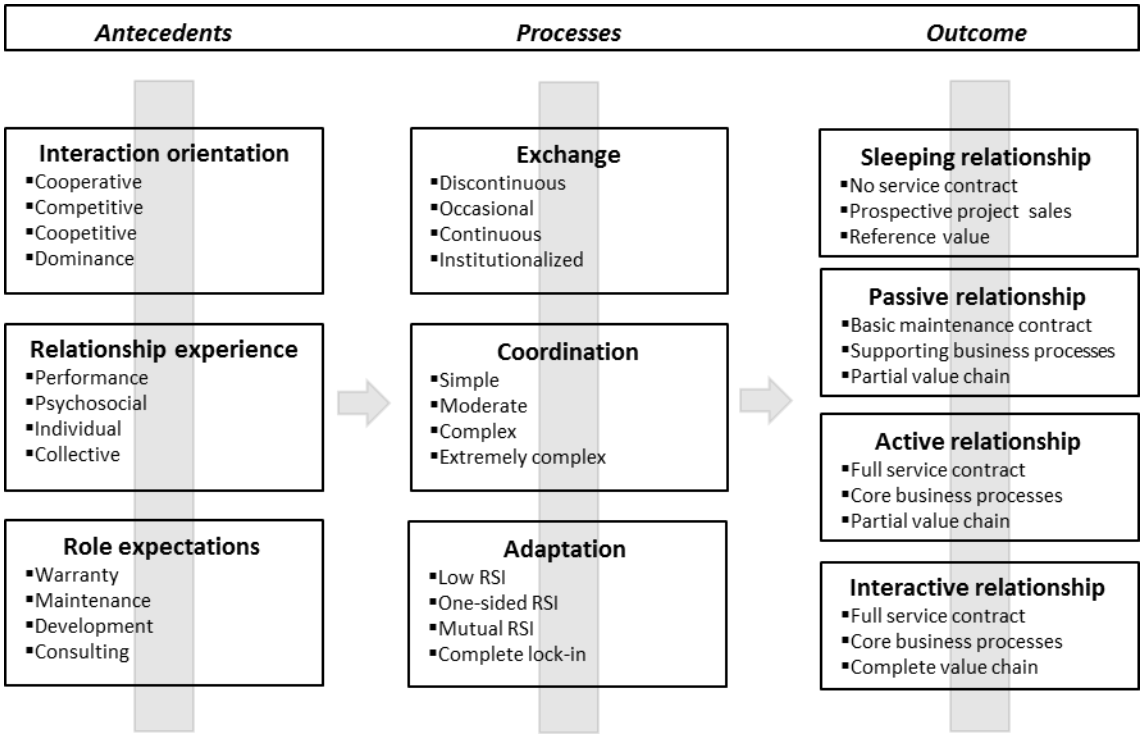

Figure 1. The antecedents, processes, and outcomes of buyer-seller relationships in the service-intensive project business.

METHODOLOGY

This section examines the relevance of the theoretical framework outlined in the previous section in a business context using a multiple case study. We will then contrast the outcomes of the framework (four post-project relationships) with our empirical findings.

As the aim of the research is to develop a conceptual framework, we employ a comparative case study (Eisenhardt, 1989; Cunningham, 1997). We recognize the importance of case selection and take into account the advice offered on the topic in the literature (Eisenhardt, 1989; Pettigrew, 1989) while following Romano (1989) in thinking that the decision of which particular cases to select is one for the researcher alone. We have chosen the cases on theoretical grounds (Stake, 1995, p. 4; Glaser and Strauss; 1968, p. 49) in order to highlight the research framework in practice, and thus the purpose is mainly descriptive. Furthermore, each case reflects a different industry, as we suggest this will make the analysis more compelling.

The methodology used follows abductive reasoning (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Peirce, 1958), where both theoretically deduced dimensions and empirical material are used. The data were collected during several research projects funded by the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation (TEKES). The main data source used to describe the interaction was semi-structured interviews (Kumar, Stern & Anderson 1993; Arksey & Knight, 1999) summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Interview data

Firm	Case A	Case B	Case C	Case D
Selection criteria.	Illustrates the first relationship roadmap: a sleeping relationship.	Illustrates the second relationship roadmap: a passive post-project relationship.	Illustrates the third relationship roadmap: an active post-project relationship.	Illustrates the fourth relationship roadmap: a partnership relationship.
Sources of data.	Personal interviews, internal company documents.	Personal interviews, internal company documents.	Personal interviews, internal company documents.	Personal interviews, internal company documents.
Number of personal interviews.	Seller: 2 key informants.	Customer: 4 key informants. Seller: 4 key Informants.	Customer: 3 key informants. Seller: 7 key Informants.	Customer: 10 key informants. Seller: 10 key Informants.
Positions of the key informants.	Seller: CEO and sales manager.	Customer: environmental manager, purchasing manager, technology manager, production manager. Seller: 2 sales managers, 2 sales & application managers.	Customer: purchasing manager, board member responsible for purchasing, design engineer. Seller: 4 technical account managers (TAM), 3 key account managers (KAM).	Executives and middle managers from both companies.
Duration of interviews.	1–2 hours each	1–2 hours each	1–2 hours each	1–2 hours each

The choice of informants was premised on the principle that information is best elicited from people who have knowledge of the phenomenon. All interviews were taped with the interviewee's permission and then transcribed and analyzed accordingly. Qualitative data analysis was employed to thematize the material (see Miles & Huberman, 1984). Researchers scrutinized documents, minutes of meetings, industry reports and firm visits to triangulate the respondents' answers, as suggested in the literature (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1987). Recursive stages were used to analyze the interviews; first the material relating to post-project stage was extracted, following thematization according the preliminary theoretical conception, which allowed the researchers to iteratively link data to theory, and finally build the research framework. The results are presented in the next section. To maintain confidentiality, the true identities of the firms and the respondents have been withheld.

FOUR PROJECT BUYER–SELLER RELATIONSHIP CASES

Case A: An engineered wood solutions supplier and customers

Our engineered wood solutions supplier provides a variety of traditional wood products to customers in the UK and other areas of Europe. Since early 2000, the firm has shifted from traditional wood products to engineering various environmentally-friendly wood solutions (from different types and grades of wood) for their customers in the construction industry. Typical relationships between the buyer and the seller last from project initiation to the ending of the project. The wood industry has gradually moved to adopt different types of services in its ecosystem, but these

do not yet form part of the firm's offering. Relationships with its customers (typically construction firms) are "sleeping" while the firm awaits new customer projects to arise from sleeping relationships or from a new customer. The firm relies on current and sleeping customers to act as a reference to help it acquire new customers.

Case analysis: Construction firms select suppliers based on tendering processes. In addition to references, price is one of the dominant factors in the decision-making process. The construction firm buyers state when, where and at what price wood solutions will be purchased and they expect timely delivery and high quality solutions. Exchanges between buyer and the seller end after project delivery and can be described as discontinuous. During the project delivery phase, both interacting parties coordinate the project delivery, but the seller is the most active in the process. Usually the seller adopts the buyer's modus operandi, for example, utilizing a specified IT-system for reporting. Thus, adaptation occurs one-sidedly with low relationship-specific investments on either side of the relationship.

Case B: A chemical solutions supplier and a mining company

The seller is a global supplier of chemical solutions to customers from various industries such as paper, oil, and mining. The customer is an internationally recognized mining company focusing mainly on nickel and zinc. For the mining company, the chemical supplier offers water treatment solutions that are used in the ore process, production, refining and also in wastewater treatment.

The mining segment presents a fairly new business area for the seller, but as environmental legislation become stricter and the public more aware of environmental issues, water-related solutions are becoming more important for the mining companies. In this case, the customer is using a specific treatment to leach nickel requiring substantial amounts of tailings water, and thus a project with the seller was initiated in order to develop tailored water treatment solutions.

The customer was not, however, used to working so closely with its chemical suppliers, as the basic chemicals it required were typically acquired through an intensely competitive procurement process. The situation was awkward in as much as the parties could intensively develop new solutions for a project, but at the same time, the seller would be competing with other suppliers for the basic chemical supplies contract. However, the project proceeded well and the results were encouraging. This led to the establishment of a maintenance contract that included regular weekly visits to the customer site, overseeing of the equipment and testing of the tailings water. The buyer, however, did not view these services as adding direct monetary value, but as a necessary precaution to avoid environmental problems. Therefore, the customer focused on developing its core processes, and the post-project exchange with the seller remained modest.

Case analysis: This case showcased roadmap two, where post-project interaction continued in the form of passive maintenance exchange. Interaction was of a form in between the cooperative and competitive, as the seller was involved both with development activities and in the supply of basic chemicals. The interaction could perhaps best be described as coopetitive (Bengtsson & Kock, 2000).

Case C: A wind turbine part supplier and a wind turbine manufacturer

The customer is an international wind turbine company that manufacturers, supplies, installs and offers maintenance services for wind turbines. The seller is an international manufacturer of fre-

quency converters and generators for wind turbines. It offers design, development, education, and maintenance services for its customers, who are predominantly large wind turbine manufacturers.

Wind turbine manufacturers use several subcontractors, but there are around five or six components in a wind turbine that are critical and require partnership-type cooperation. Wind turbine manufacturers promise their customers a certain utilization rate, and typically, 90% of failures originate with five or six components. Frequency converters and generators belong to this category, and therefore their development projects are under intense scrutiny by the customer.

Every wind farm differs depending on the temperature, wind direction, humidity and other related variables. Therefore, a prototype wind turbine needs to be designed and tested before serial production can be started. The prototype project tends to last up to three years and the following serial production from six to twelve months. However, the life span of a wind turbine is around 20 years, which requires a long-term commitment to after-sales and maintenance. In fact, the post-project stage does not end before the wind turbine is replaced or decommissioned. After the prototype project is delivered and approved by the customer, the seller takes care of installation, training, provision of spare parts and on-site metrics. Furthermore, the development activities between the customer and the seller continue as well, because the technologies develop rapidly, and competition for more powerful wind turbines is intense.

Case analysis. The case illustrated the third relationship roadmap, where the post-project stage continued as an active relationship. Both parties were dependent on each other and committed to the relationship. Gaining trust in the relationship was viewed as central as the frequency converters and generators were critical for the customer, and thus the psychosocial aspect of the interaction features strongly.

Case D: A Finnish paper producer and a Finnish paper machine producer

The seller's paper mill was one of Finland's leading paper manufacturers in the 1950s. It belonged to the Finnish Corporation, which in turn was one of the largest forestry industry firms in Europe. The mill commissioned a major rebuild of two papermaking machines in 1957 from the industry's global leader, a firm from the USA. The large project did not go well and the relationship between Finnish Corporation and the machinery manufacturer ended acrimoniously amidst product volume production and quality issues (see, Alajoutsijärvi *et al.*, 2000).

Following the disastrous collapse of this relationship, the Finnish paper producer initiated a strategic partnership with a small Finnish paper machine manufacturer, which gradually took over responsibility for supplying all new machines, major rebuilds and maintenance services. Since the manufacturer's track record as a paper machine producer was very short, the buyer invested considerable effort into developing the seller's capabilities, and by the 1970s, the once-small Finnish paper machine manufacturer had become world-renowned for delivering new best practices for paper mills. Today, it is the leading producer of papermaking machinery in the world.

Case analysis: The relationship between the Finnish paper producer and the small papermaking machine manufacturer is a great success story in Finnish industrial history and incisively illustrates an interactive relationship. Following its collaboration with Finnish Corporation, the papermaking machine manufacturer went on to establish a worldwide reputation for designing and implementing projects and maintenance services for paper production. The firm credits its success to its flexible service provision, strong customer orientation, and openness to learning from

more experienced customers in its early years. The buyer, in turn, is one the largest paper producers in the world. The outcomes of the relationship include high performance in paper production, a close and open atmosphere in the business relationship, career success for those individuals who participated in joint projects. Another condition shared by the two firms is that several executives and middle managers have worked in both. The managers and experts of both companies even daily use the internal phonebooks of the other, something that illustrates how the firms' boundaries have become blurred.

CONCLUSIONS

The current study explores different types of post-project relationship configurations in service-intensive projects, which to date have been few and far between. Our aim in this research was to address the questions: 1) What are the archetypical post-project relationships in service-intensive projects? and 2) What are the antecedents and processes leading to their development?

To answer the first question, we used four case studies to confirm the relationship outcome types of the research framework (Figure 1). These cases were chosen on theoretical grounds (Stake, 1995, p. 4; Glaser and Strauss; 1968, p. 49) in order to highlight the research framework in practice, and thus the purpose was descriptive. These cases support the view of four main post-project relationship types that we refer as the 'archetypes'. These archetypes (sleeping, passive, active and interactive) seem quite generic and include a majority of the different post-project relationships configurations in service-intensive projects.

In order to answer the second research question we need to backtrack to the research framework once again. In the Table 1, the findings of the four cases are combined with the antecedents and processes of the research framework. As a result, four buyer-seller relationship development roadmaps emerge.

Table 2. Four different relationship development roadmaps in the service-intensive project business.

Relationship roadmap	**Roadmap 1. Sleeping**	**Roadmap 2. Passive**	**Roadmap 3. Active**	**Roadmap 4. Interactive**
Interaction orientation	Buyer dominance	Coopetitive	Cooperative	Partnership
Relationship experience	Performance/ individual/	Performance/ individual	Performance/ psychosocial/ individual	Performance/ psychosocial/ individual/ collective
Role expectations	Warranty	Maintenance	Development	Consulting
Exchange	Discontinuous	Continuous	Stable	Institutionalized
Coordination	Moderate	Simple	Complex	Extremely complex
Adaptation	One-sided RSI	Low RSI	Mutual RSI	Complete lock-in

Roadmap 1 encompasses the *sleeping relationship*. In this relationship the buyer dominates. It expects the supplier to deliver the project with minor service elements. In this case, the buyer is mostly concerned with the performance the supplier has recorded in its previous projects. The key decision will be made by few individuals in the buying center without the broader approval of other company staff. Coordination tasks are moderate as the supplier takes on most of the responsibility during project implementation. Adaptations are made mostly by the supplier, which needs to adjust its own technology to suite its demanding customer. After the project is completed, business exchange ceases and the relationship becomes a *sleeping* one.

Roadmap 2 features the *passive relationship.* In that relationship, the interaction orientation is competitive; the buyer is searching for a project supplier that also offers simple services and there are plenty of similar buyers and services on the market. Adaptations are low and relationship coordination simple. In the third roadmap describing an *active relationship,* the interaction is cooperative. The parties are bound by a full service contract and they are equally dependent on each other. Before signing the full service contract, the buyer may well have established that the supplier is trustworthy by monitoring its performance in minor projects. The service concerns customer core business processes, but only parts of the value chain. The last roadmap reflects the *interactive relationship*. This relationship is hardest to instigate as it requires the customer to be convinced of supplier's capabilities relating to all the components: performance, psychosocial, collective, and individual. If the supplier is able to convince the customer after several years of cooperation to take charge of the services encompassing the customer's core business processes and value chain, the relationship becomes institutionalized and the company boundaries blurred. In this case, it is most likely that the companies are completely locked-in to each other and there is no longer any way out of the relationship.

Business relationships are strongly embedded in their specific environment and therefore generalizations are challenging. The current research provides insights into buyer-seller relationships occurring in the service-intensive projects and thus, findings should be generalized only with caution, while more research is needed in this emerging project context.

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