

CSR IMPLEMENTATION IN SMEs THROUGH THE MANAGEMENT OF DIFFERENTIATED NETWORKS

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Abstract

The objective of the communication is to analyze the implementation of Corporate Social Responsibility within SMEs through the management of differentiated networks. For SMEs, the CSR issue appears to be a key strategic challenge but due to resource, competence constraints and limitations, managers face a complex task of concrete implementation. From a network perspective SMEs have a complex role of identifying and activating a wide and relevant range of partners. Our communication combines two relevant strands of research that have been devoted to the subject of CSR implementation, in considering CSR as a type of organizational innovation. The first one is mainly represented by the work of Conway and Steward (2009) and Håkansson et al. (2004). These authors show the importance of network configurations and multiplexity (i.e. intertwined networks of relationships) for the understanding of innovation implementation. The second strand of research is represented by the works of Maon, Lindgreen and Swaen (2009) about the topic of CSR innovation phases, identifying qualitative steps which differentiate levels of interactions, network configurations and types. In combining these two strands of research, we propose an integrative approach of CSR implementation within SMEs based upon the management of different types of networks in their structural as well as dynamic aspects.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, implementation, network, relationships, SME

INTRODUCTION

Social Corporate Responsibility (hereafter CSR) is as an active approach by which an organization intends to raise awareness of belonging to an environment, the consequences of its intervention in this environment and to correct or anticipate the consequences that are negative (Windsor, 2001). The issue of CSR implementation, that is to say the actual implementation, with the necessary activation of a set of partners and mobilization of human, financial, organizational competences, is rarely addressed in an analytical perspective (Jenkins, 2009; Warhurst, 2005). Partners can mobilize these assets in networks in order to create value. The value creation process in the network necessitates considering each partner and their particularities. In the network, there is a combination of resources of each partner, for example symbolic or intangible assets, with investments in research and development or in marketing. But at the same time, the managers have to mobilized other types of partners, for instance to get resources, knowledge or legitimation, especially in SME context.

Thus we aim at understanding the CSR implementation in SMEs and the characteristics of the management devoted to differentiated networks. In the first part, we present the main interests and implications of a network approach to implement CSR in SMEs. CSR implementation in SMEs necessitates understanding relationships with stakeholders and other types of partners, identifying knowledge networks and methods to reach and maintain legitimacy in SMEs. Consequently in a second part, we analyze the process of CSR implementation through differentiated networks. In a third part we propose an integrative perspective of CSR implementation combining structural and dynamic aspects. Concluding comments follow.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CSR IN SMEs: INTERESTS AND IMPLICATIONS OF A NETWORK APPROACH

The analytical approach of the CSR innovation process involves addressing at first how this process is part of its organizational environment. Research work on innovation networks and open innovation (Powell and Grodal, 2005), as well as their applications for organizational innovations, is discussed in the first place. Secondly, a complete understanding of the complexity of these processes, particularly in their learning dimensions when a collective action is initiated, needs for the approach to be expanded.

NETWORK AND CSR AS AN ORGANIZATIONAL INNOVATION

Organizational innovations result in "the development of new methods in organizational business practices, work organization and external relations" (OECD, 2005:51). Thus, among the organizational innovations, it may be "the establishment of codified knowledge, to establish good practices (...) to make them more accessible to external partners" (OECD, 2005: 51). Organizational innovation is rarely the result of a single firm and the innovation system participates to the idea that "the innovation process has a multifunctional character which presupposes from the combined action of these organizations, a nonlinear and complex articulation of specific skills and knowledge acquisition process throughout a chain of production" (Maillat, Quévit and Senn, 1993: 10).

The components of an innovation system are manifold. The organizational dimension is crucial: the innovation system is marked by the passing of a formal duality firm/market. The innovation system has also a dynamic dimension: it is the center of a web of formal and informal relationships highly evolutionary. Finally, the cognitive dimension, that is to say the entire process for creating and transferring knowledge is also part of the innovation network. As highlighted by Maillat et al. (1993) "the network organization is a repository of collective know-how superior than the sum of the individual skills of the actors; the advantage of this mode of organizing innovation (i.e. network forms) is to enable the development of collective learning processes" (Maillat, Quévit and Senn, 1993:10). In an analytical approach of the in-

novation process, cognitive and organizational dimensions are preferred. These dimensions have indeed a special resonance for organizational innovations such as CSR, given the importance of learning phenomena for SMEs in that context (Abdirahman and Sauvée, 2012; Gellynck et al., 2007).

Organizational innovations induced by the adoption of the CSR principles in SMEs mobilized networks of different nature (Delattre and Moulette, 2009). Their characterization has focused the attention of many researchers (Jamali et al., 2009). The work of Bonneveux (2008), and Bonneveux and Saulquin (2009), highlight the role of the network, seen as a framework "which fit together resources and capabilities between the internal and external stakeholders", to allow integrated approaches of social responsibility. Thus the group of companies studied by Bonneveux plays a role of coordinator of several families of players, where the territorial dimension (geographical proximity) will have an important task. According to Bonneveux, the existence of the group reduces the information asymmetry on CSR, including providing a more concrete representation of actions to integrate when a company wants to implement CSR. The group, as a collective actor, is also "an interlocutor of the various stakeholders which allows a greater exchange of experiences, knowledge and resources, both tangible and intangible" (Bonneveux, 2008: 11).

THE INNOVATION NETWORK AS STRUCTURE AND AS INTERACTION PROCESSES

The CSR implementation is a highly complex phenomenon (Cramer, 2005; Cramer et al., 2005; Fenwick, 2010), where multi level of interactions and networks are mobilized (Crossan et al., 1999). The ambivalent dimension of the network in the phenomena of innovation is demonstrated by Conway and Steward (2009). By distinguishing the network itself from the networking event, they show that the study of the innovation process involves taking into account both the structural dimension and interactivity (Pittaway et al., 2004; Powell and Grodal, 2005). For Conway and Steward (2009), there is an interaction between the network as a structure and the networking event taking place in this network, with "on the one hand, the network may constrain or liberate the patterns of interaction and exchanges between network members; on the other, networking behavior may serve either to ossify (i.e. fix) the existing network membership and relationships, or create a dynamic in the membership and relationships within the network" (Conway and Steward, 2009: 73).

This vision is also developed by Berthon et al. (2007) in their study of implementation of IT standard projects. These authors point out that in the context of innovations mobilizing large transfers of knowledge, social networks and learning processes are involved. Thus, "the formal structure of network, but also the quality and relational characteristics that are played out, have a role on the nature of the learning that occurs there" (Berthon et al., 2007:24). One of the reasons that require the taking simultaneous consideration of structural and relational dimensions according to these authors rely on the fact that the individual, place of learning, is demanding of both resources and information but also demands a sense of belonging and social ties. In the context of the implementation of CSR principles, knowledge transfer to the organization necessitates the mobilization of new cognitive resources and the activation of formal structures. For an analytical approach applied to the implementation of CSR, it is consequently assumed that a better understanding of the learning processes is necessary. For Berthon et al. (2007), the mechanistic perspective is an essential step in that "the transfer of knowledge, considered as the dependent variable, proceeds from an optimal layout between the nature of network and the types of knowledge. The question is often that of a systematic identification of structural and relational properties of the network, as brakes or levers of the knowledge transfer." But this structural determinism cannot explain alone the CSR implementation process. A subject as complex as CSR implies the vision of a set of interdependencies and a permanent adjustment between the actors, their objectives and the context in question

(Cramer, 2005). Thus emerges a perspective of co-constructed knowledge. In the end, a more complete representation of the relationship between network and organizational learning should show that the network is a "channel for learning but, recursively, that the network is transformed by the learning taking place. In other words, the network is at least partly constructed by the learning processes, dynamically, deliberately and in an emergent manner" (Berthon et al., 2007:23). It is thus necessary to delineate clearly the purposes, objectives and content of these networking activities (Gilsing and Duysters, 2008).

DELINEATING CSR NETWORKING ACTIVITIES IN SME CONTEXT

CSR networking in SMEs context is complex because relationships in SMEs are based on different objectives and rationale. Firstly stakeholders' actions are a way to create CSR value and at the basis of the social responsibility approach. Secondly knowledge networks are necessary to acquire new skills and to create a real sustainable (i. e. CSR) value in a competitive environment. Thirdly this value must be credible and maintained in the long run. Thus this is the combination of different types of networks (and networking activities) that are implied by CSR implementation. For heuristic reasons, we propose to delineate three types of network categories relevant for CSR implementation, each of them devoted to a particular objective and/or function: stakeholder networks, knowledge networks, and certification/post certification networks. Of course each of these categories is itself organized around complex set of players and relationships.

CREATING CSR VALUE THROUGH LEGITIMACY: STAKEHOLDER NETWORKS

In a competitive and international context, SMEs aims to adopt social, ethical, economical and environmental actions (Persais, 2010; Wolff, 2011; Logsdon et al. 2006). So they orientate their strategy through CSR principles. For instance, in an international context, SMEs adopt some strategies such as resistance strategy, to consider pressures to improve environmental performances; reactive strategy, to adapt to the environmental performances when pressures appear; proactive strategy, to make effort to reduce environmental impact of its activities; sustainable or ecological strategy, to review the management of the firms by respecting environmental standards (Tilley, 1999).

In other words, to fulfill CSR principles, SMEs must create their own strategy and follow some formal and informal objectives (Russo and Tencati 2009). Stakeholders such as employees, trade unions, suppliers, clients or consumers, civil society, and NGOs (non-governmental organizations) help them in implementing these complex societal roles. Indeed suppliers and consumers will oblige firms to adapt their strategies to their global societal context (Persais 2010). For instance NGOs and consumer organizations promote the human rights, the respect and the protection of the environment or the improvement of labor conditions (Hatanaka et al. 2005). When actors interact efficiently in the network, they combine resources to create value (Håkansson, 2004; Henneberg and Mouzas, 2004). These resources (skills, workers, etc.) encompass all partners' resources in the network (Henneberg and Mouzas, 2004). These stakeholder networks are at the core of the CSR strategy and will define the new governance mechanisms needed for CSR principles to be effective (Basu and Palazzo, 2008; Cramer, 2005; Fenwick, 2010).

ACQUIRING CSR SKILLS AND COMPETENCES: KNOWLEDGE NETWORKS

One of the reasons to acquire specific skills from network partners is the objective of developing a specific CSR approach. By engaging in some exchanges, directly and indirectly profitable, partners create value for them, for end consumers and for customers (Blois, 2004). Also, through the CSR strategy, partners can invest in research and development to acquire expertise. So they follow the value creation process in the network, which depends on some key elements such as other companies, their members and their consumers. To maximize the value

creation, the process must consider the capability of any holistic value network (Matten and Moon, 2004). Several authors (Jamali et al, 2009; Jenkins, 2009) have shown that specific skills and competences are necessary to develop CSR within companies. Thus it is necessary to link these specific competences and skills, seen as global knowledge, to the activation of a web of partners such as consultancy firms, network coordinators or even public bodies (Abd-rahman and Sauvée, 2012).

MAINTAINING CSR CREDIBILITY: CERTIFICATION (AND POST CERTIFICATION) NETWORKS

Credibility is important to reach a real CSR approach. To do so, actors craft some governance mechanisms (Provan and Kenis, 2007). Some of these mechanisms are: agreements, norms and rules (Hannan et al, 1995); formal and informal mechanisms (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983); standardization and specification of roles (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Hatanaka et al. 2005; Henson and Humphrey, 2009). According to the market, formal mechanisms can be focused on the control of actors in the network. It is the case of formal certification, when an authorized institutional actor controls partners in the network (Sine et al., 2007; Henson and Humphrey, 2009). In a certification context, some stakeholder groups such as producers, consumers, NGOs (non-governmental organizations) supermarket chains influence the process and build an informal credibility (Hatanaka et al., 2005). Also, credibility depends on decisions of the founders and of the resources mobilized by organizations. According to their size organizations will mobilize the resources they need (Carroll, 1991; Hannan and Freeman, 1977). To reach and maintain their CSR actions, SMEs must organize their activities in the network by using the appropriate governance mechanisms and resources. For SMEs, credibility is a way to develop and sustain their actions in the long term in face of strong competition. They must create relationships with partners and build progressively their reputation to maintain their position on the market (Murillo and Lozano, 2006). This is especially true in the case of CSR implementation (Huysman, 2000).

UNDERSTANDING THE CSR IMPLEMENTATION THROUGH DIFFERENTIATED NETWORKS: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

We have seen that the process of adopting an organizational innovation such as CSR encompasses both a structural and a dynamic dimension, and mobilized different types of networks, summarized in three categories, stakeholder, knowledge, and certification networks. We therefore propose to draw the analytic consequences of this approach, firstly by addressing the structural dimension of these differentiated networks and then replacing their structural dimensions in a dynamic context. Finally an integrated perspective is proposed.

IDENTIFYING THE STRUCTURAL ASPECTS OF CSR IMPLEMENTATION

The starting point of the process of structural analysis of networks is to consider any network as a combination of actors and relationships (Borgatti et al., 2009). In the structural analysis of networks, the actors are not independent but rather interdependent and influence each other. To take into account the unique situation of each member and the network structure as such, the structural approach combines two complementary perspectives: the global network, that is to say its density, the average distance between each of its members, the existence of subsets more or less structured; and the ego network, that is to say the situation of an actor (an individual, a SME) in its environment and its degree of inclusion, its mode of insertion into the global network.

Operationally, two families of components must first be identified, actors and relations (Jonker and De Witte, 2006). An important contribution of this approach is the simultaneous consideration of all types of actors involved, in the first place individuals (which will constitute a social network) and organizations (the basis of an interorganizational network). The identifi-

cation of relationships that these actors have with one another is the second component. These relationships can be of several types: continuous (similarities, relationships, interactions) or discrete (financial flows, knowledge flows), directed or not, measured by value or not, formal or informal (Borgatti et al., 2009).

PUTTING INTO PERSPECTIVE THE DYNAMIC OF CSR IMPLEMENTATION

The implementation of a standard as CSR goes through qualitatively distinct stages (Henson and Humphrey, 2009) with an evolutionary perimeter of actors involved. These steps are mostly a reflection of the types of actors mobilized and of their changing status or role from one phase to another. It is therefore necessary to consider explicitly the time dimension and its corollary, namely its influence over the types of actors involved, and over the process of adopting the CSR standard. This reflects the fact that the implementation of CSR is done in the long run and differentially mobilizes actors and resources (Brodhag, 2011). Maon et al. (2009) rightly point out that CSR must be “considered an organizational change process whose aim is to align the organization with the dynamic demand of the business and social environment by identifying and managing stakeholder expectations” (Maon et al., 2009: 72). These phenomena of learning will change the company, but will also change the environment in turn, engaging CSR as an activity “evolutionary and recursive that acts on and reacts to and with the business environment” (Maon et al., 2009:72). These authors used the changing nature of these learning phenomena as the key to qualify the distinct phases of the process.

They propose four phases based on a critical review articulated with case studies: awareness, challenge, set in motion, re-appropriation, each of these phases differing itself in successive steps. Phase 1 includes a single stage at which the organization seeks to increase its awareness in the value of CSR to define its business strategy. The key role of the leader is often mentioned, that it responds to external partners (stakeholders such as NGOs, market pressure ...) or internal partners (increased weight of the values held by certain employees or groups of pressure within the company). Phase 2 differs in four steps. First the company must question the meaning of its commitment to society and to its relationship with key stakeholders. In particular it is necessary to identify what are the social issues specific to these stakeholders and what are the critical resources involved. In a second step the company must develop its own vision and a concrete implementation of this vision. A third step is the audit as such, where the company, for each of the three CSR pillars, compared with those of competitors and the expected standards. Finally a fourth step is the establishment of integrated strategic plan for the implementation of CSR principles. Phase 3 of set in motion is divided into three steps. The first step is the actual implementation of actions to be taken, a step that involves active networking in order to acquire the necessary material and immaterial resources. The second step covers all activities of internal and external communication for the implementation of CSR. The third step is the one to evaluate the results obtained from the dashboard of indicators. Phase 4 consists of a single step, so-called institutionalization. For Maon et al. (2009) this crucial phase should provide answers to the question of the sustainability of the action. Given the constraints, including competitive pressures, market risks or demotivation of employees that could result in medium term to a questioning of the strategy, the organization must have a clear commitment of resources, incentive mechanisms and official permanent control.

AN INTEGRATED PERSPECTIVE OF CSR IMPLEMENTATION IN SMES

A company wishing to implement the CSR principles must reconfigure its place in its environment by mobilizing simultaneously its individual and organizational partners over a relatively long period of time. An analytical approach can be characterized these events in a heuristic manner (Crossan et al., 1999; Kleysen and Dyck, 2001) and should allow in particular

identifying what are the critical stages in the implementation of CSR principles, both in terms of mobilized resources (new knowledge mobilized, financial needs, flow of new knowledge required) or relationships with the outside (with consultants, contractors, other SMEs).

The use of the structural approach for the study of innovation processes, due to the network dimension of the phenomenon, has naturally encouraged the development of research in this direction (Conway and Steward, 2009). Given the difficulty of measuring the phenomena of innovation and its complexity (including their multi dimensional features) there has been a strong development of qualitative research, such as in the agrifood sector with the works of Chiffolleau (2004, 2005), Compagnone (2004), Compagnone and Hellec (2009).

Adapting this approach to the issue of organizational innovations such as CSR requires some contextualization (Hatanaka et al., 2005) and a number of adjustments. The process of implementing quality standards systematically involves usually two groups of actors (Temri, 2011; Temri and Fort, 2010), individuals (managers, consultants etc.) and organizations (SMEs, ISO, consular agencies, auditors, banks etc.). This adaptation of the approach also assumes that is taken into account the heterogeneity and complexity of the flows and interactions generated in the process. Finally the network reveals itself, by its structural properties, as facilitating (or hindering) the implementation.

The principle of construction of the proposed approach consists in connecting the structural characteristics of differentiated networks with the practical phases of the process. Initially we must consider the nature of actors mobilized in this process. A major difficulty in studying the adoption of CSR principles is its complexity and duration (Helfrich, 2008). In addition the implementation of the CSR standard itself induces a networking and activation of CSR stakeholders, which should not be confused with the creation of (often new) relationships with other types of actors, such as actors facilitating the setting up (consultants for instance) or institutional actors whose role would be to bring the innovation through a collective approach (such as a network coordinator). This fact shows the relevance of distinguishing broad categories of relationships and networks from the point of view of their specific roles in CSR implementation.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUDING COMMENTS

We propose in this communication an original perspective on the implementation of CSR in SMEs. From a literature review, we highlight the key components of the process, which is the starting point for the construction of this perspective. The proposed approach has two major advantages. Analytically, our work allows better understand how organizational and individual variables will actually fit together and affect the implementation of CSR principles in a particular context. The approach is also a potential analytical tool to identify and characterize the functions of different groups of actors involved, which could create synergies and complementarities at the individual and at organizational levels. On the managerial level, this framework is the embryo of a diagnosis tool, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of SMEs in implementing CSR (McWilliams et al., 2006). Indeed SMEs are often identified, because of their size, isolation or lack of resources, as experiencing difficulties to implement CSR. The approach can help to better characterize objectively the role and place of their set of partners and identify resources and critical phases having a greater impact on the process. Considering the perspective of research, this exploratory approach must be complemented by an application to concrete situations of SMEs in collective initiatives like ISO standards, organic farming label, private standards (Raynard and Forstater, 2002; Abdirahman and Sauvée, 2012), in order to reinforce the value of these preliminary results. For instance the implementation of CSR can be analyzed in food SMEs, with an identification of specific characteristics in these differentiated networks. The agribusiness sector, composed largely of SMEs, carries strong specificities regarding CSR (Poetz et al., 2012). The food SME registering a sustainable de-

velopment is often hampered by the complexity of the problems and is not aware of its strengths and weaknesses, both in terms of positioning in its environment, of access to resources, of relationships with strategic partners. Consequently the proposed approach could help providing diagnosis tools to improve the implementation of CSR principles in specific sectors.

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