

**The Janus Phenomenon:  
"Building and Managing Relationships in a Global Network:  
Challenges and Necessary Capabilities"**

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**Janus, the Roman god of gates and doors, beginnings and endings, facing both ways.**

**The evolving roles of the account manager and the supply chain manager**

Traditionally, whilst looking outwards to identify threats and opportunities, managers have been intrinsically concerned with the deployment of internal resources (human and otherwise), over which they have direct vested authority. For two groups of managers, however, those concerned with managing relationships with key or strategic customers (*K/Sams*), and those involved in managing strategic supply chain resources (*SCMs*) their role is concerned with the acquisition and deployment of resources beyond their direct authority, both from within their own organisations and within customer or supplier organisations. In occupying important boundary spanning roles that go beyond dyadic, to encompass complex network relationships, these managers reflect what we have dubbed “the Janus Phenomenon<sup>1</sup>”.

In the light of changes in economic organization to accommodate ways in which companies need to do business, we posit that these evolving roles represent a significant change in managerial practice that has implications for the way companies manage the process of problem resolution, value creation and the balance of power. The implication is also that managers occupying these strategically important boundary spanning inter-organisational roles may need skills other than those traditionally nurtured in intra-organisational managers.

**Changes in Economic Organisation**

Economic organization, the way in which companies create economic value, has changed radically in recent years. Badoracco (1991) identified a shift from the firm as a “citadel”, to firms operating as the “city state”. He argued that whilst many of the economic leviathans of the early C20th encompassed all of the means of production and value creation within their organisational walls, the “citadel”, whereas the growing complexity of modern business required collaboration between players who contributed their individual competencies to the creation of value, which was considered impossible for one company to create alone, hence the “city state”, a group of autonomous but interdependent organisations collaborating for mutual advantage.

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<sup>1</sup> A term first employed in relation to the key account manager role by Klieintenkamp M, and Ricker SA, (1997) “Kundenorientierte Organisation” in Kleintenkamp M and Plinke W (Eds) “Strategisches Business to Business Marketing” 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Berlin pp285-320

More recently the concept of competing supply chain networks and value nets attests to the accuracy of Badoracco's observations and requires the development of relationship management competencies within the context of networks of collaborating organisations. Of interest to us is the way in which these networks of relationships are managed informally. At one level they are managed through formal contract where agreements prescribe working practices but our experience suggests that informal mechanisms for problem resolution are of equal importance and that much of the "management" is performed by boundary spanners, the most important of whom we perceive to be *Ksams* and *Scms*. Our attention is drawn to three issues: the changing roles of account managers and supply chain managers; the changes in the mechanisms employed to realize value, implement contractual agreements and reconcile/balance power within the network; and, the nature of the skills and competencies employed by the central players in collaborative network.

### **The Role of Key/Strategic Account Managers (*KSams*)**

Key, or Strategic Account Management evolved from the "sales" function and as a result has suffered from an association with "sales" rather than "management". This was first noted by Millman and Wilson (1996) but more recent studies suggest that this may still, to some extent at least, be the case (Wilson and Woodburn 2012) and that the role of the *ksam* continues to be poorly understood and perceived to be primarily about sales rather than the management of inter-organisational relationships. This is perpetuated by most account managers being drawn from the sales force rather than other organizational functions (Woodburn 2006 & 2008), resulting in there being little true understanding of the managerial nature of their role and making them ill equipped to really understand the 'beyond product' expectations of customers (Senn & Arnold, 1999; Zupancic, 2008); the nature and importance of the supply chain; problem solving (McDowell & Ford, 2001); and the potential for value creation held in their own company (Rackham & de Vincentis, 1999).

Despite exhortations to lay emphasis on the management role that could be performed by *Ksams* (Millman and Wilson 1996<sup>1</sup>, 1996<sup>2</sup>), little is found in the literature about the boundary spanning managerial role of account managers. Specific reference to value creation by account managers looking "beyond product" was made by Wilson and Croom (1993) and Wilson (1997) who posited that the nature of relationships could be directly effected by the focus of problem resolution.

Ironically the move to recognize the growing importance of problem resolution within the context of buyer seller relationships has received more attention from the sales literature. Rackham (1984) has long been an advocate of the importance of the salesperson as "problem solver" and recently Loy et al (2012) and Lemmens (2012) identified the need for sales people to act as business consultants "provoking" customers to consider innovative solutions to problems that directly impacted upon a firm's strategic objectives.

These examples relate to the context of the sale, however, rather than to the context of the relationship (although ongoing relationships are tacitly acknowledged) and do little to explore the way in which, as our experience suggests, some account managers reach deep within their own and their customer organization to access resources, influence decisions and realize entrepreneurial value.

Work that is directly relevant to our proposed research is that of Wilson and Millman (2000, 2004), Wilson (2003) and Croom et al (1999) who made observations on the role of the

global account manager that stressed the managerial role they performed and led to the development of the concept of the *political-entrepreneur*. Whilst they perceived traditional selling skills to be part of the armoury of the account manager, of greater importance were two competencies not normally associated with salespeople: Firstly, political skills that reflected a deep understanding of how organisations *work*, how decisions could be influenced, countervailing power developed and resources acquired at both the customer interface and from within both the buyer and seller organisations. Secondly, account managers were observed to apply entrepreneurial skills to the deployment of resources that went way beyond product to create value and resolve issues related to both business processes and strategic concerns, not only related to the dyad but to the entire supply chain network. We contend that this concept of the *political-entrepreneur* can be extended to describe the managerial role performed by strategic supplier relationship managers as well as strategic account managers.

Whilst some practitioners may still view the account management role as being primarily concerned with sales, this view is increasingly challenged as inadequate in the light of increasing levels of competition and the demands placed upon suppliers by customers (Wengler 2007). Wengler also argues that research into the account management role must evolve beyond the confines of “the traditions of personal selling research” and encompass the context of relationship management. The early distinctions between national, key and global account management are also challenged on the basis that they are different only in the degree of complexity imposed by internationality (Napolitano 1997), a view supported by Wilson et al (2001) and one that we endorse now. However, there are differences in the role demanded of account managers that are reflected in the different relational “states” and these are discussed later.

### **What are the factors that influence the nature of the role of the account manager?**

We propose that a number of interwoven factors influence the competency needs of key account managers. The relational context, the degree of relational intensity, organizational complexity and cultural diversity and the demands customers place on their strategic suppliers shape the nature of the multiple roles played by account managers and determine the competency requirements of both organisations and individual account managers.

Millman and Wilson (1996a) referring to their six stage relational development model (Millman and Wilson 1995<sup>2</sup>), identified that both organizational and management competency requirements may depend upon the nature of the relationship that exists or is intended between buyer and seller. In the early “states” of key account development they suggested that companies can migrate some way along the relational development continuum by making only minor adaptations to their organisational infrastructure, but eventually a point is reached when major changes are required that *transform* rather than merely *extend* traditional organizational structures and processes.

Similarly, the competencies required of account managers may relate strongly to the traditional sales role in the early stages of development but as the role becomes increasingly embedded in complex networks of interaction, so the need to understand the organizational context as well as the characteristics of each participant becomes increasingly important and

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<sup>2</sup> The model, based on exploratory research, identified six relational stages of development : pre-kam ; early-kam ; mid-kam ; partnership-kam ; synergistic-kam, and ; uncoupling-kam. This model was adopted by McDonald et al (1997).

has implications for the selection and development of account managers. They argued “that KAM should be regarded as an activity carrying responsibilities and requiring competencies closer to the general management function or senior marketing function, in preference to its current location in sales” (Millman and Wilson 1996a)

Later Millman and Wilson (1996b) specifically address the changing role of *kams* together with an analysis of the inherent conflicts/ambiguities associated with their boundary-spanning role. They suggest that this, together with the growth in buyer-supplier *partnerships*, has led to a need for industry and customer knowledge that they perceived as being much deeper than in the traditional sales role. They observe (referring to their 1995 article) that there was a general belief that KAM had its natural home in “sales” but warned that if that belief were perpetuated there was a danger that *kams* would be perceived as merely “sales managers dealing with large customers”.

They also refer to the danger of promoting the best sales people to account management roles and expecting them to “grow into the role” of “farmer” rather than “hunter” sales people. They challenged this view saying, “in our view, these changes are necessary for the sales role, but insufficient for the broader and more demanding role of key account manager”.

In discussing the changing role of the *kam* they noted that the *kam* operates within a network of other managerial activities and these existing structures make it difficult to initiate development of the *kam* role where that threatens the status quo and challenges traditional power bases.

Clearly this early work recognised that the role of the *kam* was not the extension of a sales role, but a role requiring much higher levels of authority, status and reward. This view is supported by their identification of the growing importance of managing the support of strategic customer and supplier relationships often involving large numbers of people, if not directly managed by the KAM/GAM, then certainly orchestrated by them.

Gosselin and Heene (2003) distinguish between key account selling and strategic account management. They suggest that strategic accounts are those where there is mutual recognition of the strategic importance of the relationship by both buyer and seller and further suggest that whilst both key account selling and key account management may be involved in the creation and delivery of value, strategic account management is also concerned with building the competencies upon which that value is based.

“It is clear that the competencies and skills needed to perform the task of account manager are far beyond those of a sales person. Millman and Wilson (1999) refer to this function as a *political-entrepreneur* emphasizing by this the strategic, business developing and relational side of the function. We believe that in order to be successful in his function the strategic account manager must have a background in sales, marketing, business development, strategy and operational business management. He must be positioned and viewed in the company as a senior executive, responsible for participating in shaping the business strategy through his competence and knowledge of key customers.” (Gosselin and Heene 2003)

The term *political-entrepreneur* first appeared in an IMP paper presented by Wilson and Millman (2000). It emerged from discussion following the SAMA-SRT Global Account

Management Research Study published later in the same year (Wilson et al 2000) and owed much to the discussion of the role global account manager presented by Croom et al (1999). The account managers observed were entrepreneurial in the sense that they had the ability to recognise and realise the potential for innovation and value creation through the combination of existing inputs in the sense suggested by Schumpeter (2012). They realised value by combining the operational and core competencies of both buyer and seller (See Fig 1). Their political capabilities were observed in their understanding of how organisations worked and their ability to influence decisions through networking in both buyer and seller organisations.

This paper identified three managerial roles performed by global account managers, those of strategic analyst, politician, and entrepreneur, a theme later elaborated upon in the Wilson-Millman papers (2000 & 2003) where they explore the nature of boundary spanning roles and identify the *gam* as performing a boundary spanning role across two important interfaces: the first being the *internal* interface between global and national account management, which is often embedded in the headquarters/subsidiary relationship; the second *external* interface between the selling company and the dispersed activities of the global account. Thus recognising what Kleinaltenkamp and Rieker (1997) had identified as the “Janus” nature of the key account manager role.

“In recognition of the need to navigate sensitive commercial/political aspects of these interface relationships, we have dubbed the global account manager as performing the role of *political entrepreneur*.”(Millman and Wilson 2000, 2003)

To the three roles identified by Croom et al (1999) a further role, that of co-ordinator was added. These roles are set out below:

**Analysts** tend to be team-orientated trouble-shooters possessing outstanding knowledge of products/services, technologies and customer industries. Analysts perceive themselves primarily as international sales managers focusing on global sales targets, sales from regional/national territories and share of customer spend, rather than upon opportunities for enhancing levels of value creation and customer profitability.

**Politicians** combine diplomatic and linguistic skills with cultural empathy and knowledge of global business trends/opportunities. They engage their senior managers in the GAM process and are adept at achieving objectives via influence/persuasion, both in their own and the customer organization. 1. Political Entrepreneur

**Entrepreneurial Strategist** – *Gams* were seen as looking beyond the immediate transactional exchange relationship to seek opportunities through the application of strategic and entrepreneurial skills that facilitate the synergistic realization of value by combining the core competencies of their own and the customer organization.

**Coordinator** – In order to achieve sales and relationship development targets the *gam* performs the role of coordinator, orchestrating the activities, not only of the account support team but also coordinating the operational capabilities of the supplier organization in order to align with customer systems and processes. Clearly this may be perceived as closer to a general management role, rather than a sales role, albeit often with limited line authority.

The role of the political entrepreneur is clearly a boundary-spanning role, performed at both the internal interface between corporate and local account management (embedded in the headquarters/subsidiary relationship) and at the external interface between the selling

company and the dispersed activities of its strategic account.

Political and entrepreneurial skills are applied at both these interfaces by this new breed of manager. The internal interface is where much of the global account manager's ability to manage potential conflict/ambiguity depends on positive or negative perceptions of his/her mediating role and thus, where political skills may be of primary importance. Those political skills include the ability to walk the corridors of power, to know the people to speak to, the buttons to press and the strings to pull, both in their own organization and that of the customer. The external interface provides the forum within which both political and entrepreneurial skills may be applied. (Croom et al 1999, Wilson and Millman 2000, 2003)

The role of the political entrepreneur is represented in figure1 adapted from Wilson and Millman (2003). It represents the main elements of the role and its contextual complexity.

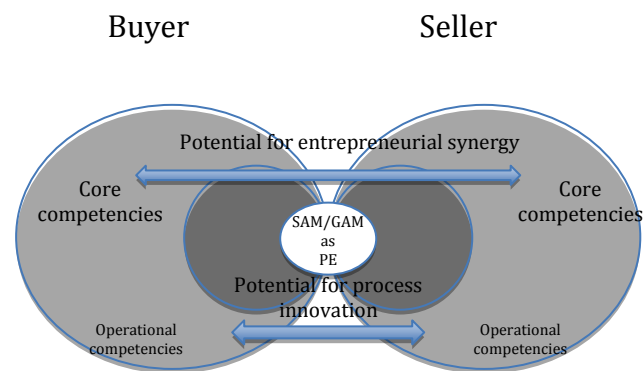


Fig 1

The importance of this model is that it presented the role of the SAM/GAM as being concerned primarily with value creation, rather than with the creation of sales.

Firstly, as *analyst* the SAM/GAM identifies, through their intimate knowledge of customer, industry and process, not only opportunities for increased share of wallet, but also the potential for creating process related innovation in manufacturing, logistics and organizational interaction. As coordinator they manage the integration and realisation of synergistic value arising from the operational capabilities of both buyer and seller.

As *entrepreneurial-strategist* the SAM/GAM role is focused upon realizing entrepreneurial opportunity offered by accessing and using the combined core competencies of both organisations. The entrepreneur sees things that other people do not and acts upon those insights in order to create new value. Within the context of GAM, the knowledge and resources from which entrepreneurial opportunity is created are the core competencies embedded in the relationship. At an operational level, the political entrepreneur recognizes

the potentials inherent in marrying the operational competencies of both the buyer and seller teams to create process innovations that enhance the product/service offering by creating greater efficiencies within the supply chain. At a strategic level, the political entrepreneur sees opportunities to create entrepreneurial synergy from the core competencies of both organizations.

In both value creation roles the SAM/GAM must manage people over whom they may have no direct authority, certainly within the client organization, and more often than not, within their own, they must also gain access to resources, which unlike the *general manager*, they do not “own”, and be adept at influencing the decision making process at senior managerial level in order to realise opportunity.

Whilst no comparable work appears to have been carried out in relation to supply chain management and more specifically related to the management of strategic supplier relationships, we contend that a similar model is applicable to the emerging role of strategic supplier relationship managers.

### **Supply Chain Managers (SCMs)**

The role of supply chain managers (SCMs) is transitioning from an operational to strategic role. Traditionally supply chain managers, whatever their specific role (which typically encompasses functions including purchasing, planning, production/operations, distribution and logistics) are concerned with the ‘middle phases’ of product and service life cycles, where operational roles such as the generation of formal contracts, negotiation, contract compliance, expediting, planning and scheduling have been their focus. In the last decade or so, not only have these activities changed significantly, frequently through various forms of standardization and automation, but also supply chain professionals have become more actively involved in strategic decision making. Of significance for us, this has included a greater involvement in total life cycle management, most significantly expanding actively into the design phase and thus embracing processes of collaborative innovation. Furthermore, SCMs are increasingly assuming a far greater responsibility for problem resolution and risk mitigation within the supply chain. Lambert and Schwieterman (2012) point to changes in the SCM role, it being increasingly viewed as “strategic, process oriented and cross-functional and value creating for buyer and seller”.

Moeller et al (2006) identify purchasing as the “gateway” between the external supplier and the internal functions of the firm, reflecting the “Janus” role we posit for the account manager and suggesting more than a boundary connecting role for the SCM encompassing collaboration with suppliers in joint value creation. Collaborative innovation with suppliers and third parties has been discussed as strategically advantageous (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Bititici et al, 2004; Cross et al, 2008; Baldwin & von Hippel, 2009), authors citing the improvements in quality, cost and time from such developments for organizations in the auto industry (Clark & Fujimoto, 1991; Lamming, 1993; Dyer, 2000), and beyond.

In Chapman & Corso’s editorial (2005) they highlight the critical role that is played by collaborative networks, explicitly contending that it is network relationships and interaction, rather than network ICT that is a core capability for the success of emergent collaboration. Integral to the discussion of collaborative relationship, the critical role of trust has been examined as a core catalyst for collaborative innovation (Gambetta, 1988; Sako, 1992; Lawrence and Porter-Lynch, 2011; Fawcett et al, 2012).

Taking advantage of collaborative innovation does, however, require new management skills (Biemans, 1995, citing most notably the ‘boundary spanner’), whilst Johnsen and Ford (2000) undertook a study of collaborative innovation and found that the critical collaborative skills needed by the parties to the relationship included: *mobilising, informing, synchronising, and co-ordinating* – reflecting Dyer & Singh’s contentions about the increased significance of relational skills. The literature on dyadic and network relationships is expansive and significantly influenced by the work of the IMP Group, so in this paper we are focusing on the nature of influencing skills in buyers and sellers alike.

Moeller et al (2012) propose three broad managerial tasks for SCMs: the management of “out” suppliers, “in” suppliers and “in” supplier (relationship) dissolution. The management of “out” suppliers is largely concerned with identifying those suppliers who have the potential to become “in” suppliers; the management of “in” suppliers with setting up and developing the relationship, with establishing contract, with managing disruption, and finally with dissolution once the relationship no longer delivers the required level of value, through choice, natural or forced ending. We suggest that the processes identified in order to realize the potential of the relationship by SCMs equate roughly with those attributed earlier to the role of the account manager: The ability to identify value creation opportunities and to manage their realization through the application of innovative (entrepreneurial) and political skills.

Knight and Harland (2000) identified a number of supply network management roles: information broker, advisor, network structuring agent, supply policy maker and implementer, coordinator and innovation sponsor. They further identified a number of competencies required to support those roles: network understanding, developing a network position, relationship management, strategy formulation, strategy implementation and learning, knowledge and knowledge management. (Knight et al 2005)

### **The Boundary Spanning Perspective**

In our view there is a distinction between boundary spanning roles and boundary connecting roles that highlights a fundamental difference between the role performed by sales people and purchasing officers on the one hand and the account manager and supply chain manager on the other. We contest the idea that sales people or purchasers are boundary “spanners”, they are more likened to boundary “connectors” in that they tend to have limited contact networks within the customer/supplier organization and rarely penetrate deeply. Direct contact within their own organization may also be shallow, limited to colleagues in similar roles and line management relationships. Contrast this with the true boundary-spanning role of the strategic key account manager or supplier relationship manager, who are expected to have multiple contacts within the client organization spanning function (broad) and hierarchy (deep). Account managers and supplier relationship managers must also reach back into their own organisations, not just to manage multi-functional “virtual” teams but also to access resources and influence decisions impacting on client/supplier relationships. We contend that it is this boundary “spanning” role, as opposed to the boundary “connecting” role that categorizes what we see as the emergence of new managerial roles concerned with the creation of inter-organisational value .

Boundary spanning between buyer and supplier has been shown to be both critical to the effectiveness of trust-based collaboration and directly impact the degree of trust between the parties (MacDuffie & Helper, 2006; Lado et al, 2011; Zhang et al, 2012), where communication and commitment are two critical dimensions identified as the ‘building



blocks' of collaborative trust. Croom (2001) explored this further in an examination of the dynamics of customer-supplier interaction, recognizing the impact of not only commitment and communication, but the ability to navigate the relationships within and between the dyadic organization.

SCMs and KAMs both perform at the internal interface between corporate and local management (embedded in the headquarters/subsidiary relationship) and at the external interface between the selling/purchasing company and the dispersed activities of its strategic customer/supplier. Political and entrepreneurial skills are applied at both these interfaces by this new breed of manager. The internal interface is where much of the sam/scms' ability to manage potential conflict/ambiguity depends on positive or negative perceptions of his/her mediating role and thus, where political skills may be of primary importance. Those political skills include the ability to walk the corridors of power, to know the people to speak to, the buttons to press and the strings to pull, both in their own organization and that of the customer. The external interface provides the forum within which both political and entrepreneurial skills may be applied. (Croom et al 1999, Wilson and Millman 2000, 2003)

It is evident that both *Ksams* and *Scms* manage beyond the relational interface reaching into their own and buyer-supplier organisations to access resources and effect change. The mechanism they use to do this are the formal team (selling or purchasing) and the informal network. As Cross et al (2008) note,

“Whether selling products or services, making strategic decisions, delivering solutions, or driving innovation, most work of any substance today is accomplished by teams.

”These teams have evolved from stable co-located groups. However, since the early 1990s, teams have evolved from more stable groups-where members were co-located, dedicated to a common mission, and directed by a single leader-to more matrixed entities with colleagues located around the world, juggling time between several projects, and accountable to multiple leaders. As teams have become more fluid, substantial challenges have been posed to traditional advice on team formation, leadership, roles, and process.”

### **Formality and informality**

Traditionally contracts have been seen as the formal framework for transactionally based relationships. Formal mechanisms, structures, systems and processes are put in place to negotiate and allocate contractual responsibility, to establish arbitration processes and to manage problem resolution, value is seen as being embedded in the exchange defined by and limited to the contract.

We have observed in both the sam and scrm roles that whilst formal mechanisms exist, these are augmented by informal mechanisms that facilitate more effective interaction between buyer and seller.

The role of supply chain/purchasing has expanded from ensuring adherence to contract to having an increased responsibility for the drafting, negotiation and definition of contracts. However, one consequence we have observed has been the impact this has had on reducing the dependency on contractual terms and increasing the emphasis in buyer-seller dyads, triads

and networks upon informal problem definition and resolution, which has increased supply chain managers' contribution to the process of collaborative innovation within the supply chain.

On the supply side this can also be seen to be the case where account managers are essentially concerned with creating and delivering value “beyond product”, and with working with customers to identify and realise process innovation and entrepreneurial value. We suggest that formal mechanisms may act as a restraint on innovation and that both supplier *Ksams* and client *Scrms* strive to use informal networks in order to influence decisions, resolve problems and realize value potential in addition to the formal mechanisms available to them.

### **The Research**

Our interest is to deepen our understanding of how informal networks are managed by both *Ksams* and *Scrms* in order to transcend the restrictions of formal contracts, processes, structures and relationships in the resolution of contractual problems, operational issues and the identification and realization of potential synergistic value. We posit that these actors play a key role in the ability of organizations to adapt to the changing economic environment and, more specifically, the expectations and constraints of their partners upstream and downstream - customers and suppliers. A further common facet of their respective function at the management interface between two organisations is the role of acquisition and deployment of resources beyond the borders of their own company to extend into their clients' businesses or that of their suppliers. In other words, their role is crucial and is located at the boundary between several organizations.

To explore these issues a number of case studies are carried out. In choosing our cases, we followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) guidelines for multi-sites sampling. A series of contrasting cases is presented. We choose companies that operate in distinct industry segments (defence, food, etc.). The conditions found in different industries has an effect on the relationships firms have with their upstream and downstream partners. For example, in the defence industry, the end customer is the state, where in most other sectors, there are private companies and due to the highly strategic nature of defense programs, the choice of suppliers is much more constrained in this sector than in others (Barbat, 2011). The specificities of each sector influence the managerial practices of *Ksams* *Scrms*. By exploring a variety of cases drawn from different sectors we believe we can develop a greater generic understanding of the complexity of the processes under study.

Data were collected from secondary sources on the industrial sectors as (newspaper and professional magazine articles, internal documents, websites and balance sheets) as well as through interviews and observations that provided primary data. For each case, semi-structured interviews were carried out with two groups of actors, which we believe can be described as occupying “Janus” positions: *Ksams* and *Scrms*. We used open-ended questions focusing on their relationships with other actors inside and outside of their company, on the formal mechanisms, structures, systems and processes they put in place in their function and on the informal managerial practices they employ to contribute to the solution of inter-organizational problems, create value and manage to the power balance between them and their upstream and downstream partners.

For each case we provide an analysis from the internal/external interface (Janus) perspective of both the *Ksam* and *Scrm*. Following the suggestions of Petigrew (1992) and Miles and

Huberman (1994), we chose to combination of narrative and graphic/matrix analytical strategies. These permit the contextualization of each case, and allow us to describe its differences/similarities with the other cases through comparative analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). All interviews were transcribed and analyzed. We submitted research findings to the Ksmas and Scrms to identify convergence/divergence between our findings and their own perceptions. This last strategy recognizes the highly politicized nature of some of the situations we explored (e.g. the defence industry) and may expose areas of sensitivity that require further investigation.

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