

CRITICAL FEATURES OF RELATIONSHIP VALUE AND THEIR EFFECTS ON RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

Daniela Corsaro

Department of Management and Economic Studies

Università Cattolica di Milano

Via Necchi 7

20123 Milano

daniela.corsaro@unicatt.it

Abstract

Literature on value has increasingly stressed the influence of psychological and social aspects on the conceptualization of relationship value, showing the complexity of the concept in comparison to the traditional more simplified economic view. Such complexity has been translated into five critical features relevant for relationship management. They are value as actor specific, context dependent, relative, collective and interactive (Corsaro et al, 2013).

This paper discusses the consequences that the key characteristics of relationship value have on business to business relationships. 72 Interviews have been carried out internally and externally to the Mikron Tool's business network.

The study finds out that each feature of relationship value has specific effects on btob relationships, and these effects emerge as mainly related to communication issues. We will also discuss how companies can manage such consequences, where symbolic aspects and coordination of meanings seem to play a particularly important role.

Keywords: value, solution, communication, actors, symbols.

1. Introduction

Over time, the debate on value has remained particularly active, leading to a significant evolution of the concept and attracting a great research interest.

Starting point of this study is that existing research on the value of relationships offers an oversimplified view of the concept. If value is associated to business relationships and networks, then there is the need to treat deeper the implications of adopting a relational perspective.

For a long time business to business marketing research on value has analyzed the activities that allow exchanges, emphasizing the physical-economic content of the transaction and the active role of the supplier over the customer. The most diffused view of value in business to business was based on the concept of utility maximization, strongly influenced by classical and neo classical economic studies, which neglected the other social, psychological and emotional dimensions of value. Classical and neoclassical economics focused on value as embedded in products. In the economic view, which presents the absence of uncertainty, the decision becomes impersonal, an automatism that can be done without convictions and evaluation capacity of the subjects (Rullani et al., 2013).

In this good dominant logic, value is seen as created by the firm and distributed to the market, where the customer destroys it. The value co-creation view, instead, implies a shift from considering the firm as the creator and distributor of value to a value-proposing entity within networks of interaction and exchange (Lusch, Vargo, Tanniru, 2010). Value is not considered anymore as embedded in the supplier offering, rather it emerges through the use of such offering (Vargo & Lusch, 2008; Gronroos, 2008). Interaction becomes key for value creation (Gronroos, 2011).

Moving from a product-centric to a relational logic, studies on value have been enriched with new ideas and thoughts: “Once it is accepted that perceptions of value are specific compared to subjects, delimited, interdependent, and therefore constantly changing, it becomes obvious that the evaluation of relational outcomes cannot be based on a given set of economic criteria (benefits and sacrifices) that reflect the content and the form of relationships” (Corsaro & Snehota, 2010: 996).

We think that past conceptualizations of relationship value have not been able to completely catch the complexity and richness of the interactive process that involve actors participating btob relationships. In particular, there are 5 key features of relationship value that recent research has identified as critical for relationship management. They are value as actor specific, context dependent, relative, collective and interactive (see Corsaro et al. 2013).

Aim of this study is to explore how the 5 critical features of relationship value affect business relationships in terms solutions developed to solve customers’ problems. Value in btob relationships, in fact, is strictly dependent from the alignment between problem and solution, where negotiating diverging views of value in use can be a difficult task (Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola, 2012). We therefore assume that relationship value management is strictly connected to communication management. Actually, there are still few studies on how communicative interaction supports value creation, which would implies observing everyday interaction between providers and customers (Salomonson et al. 2012).

Given that, this research aims at understanding how relationship value features affect btob relationships and how such consequences can be managed.

Empirically, we present a longitudinal study of the Mikron Tool’s business network, where we carried out 72 interviews with different players, both inside and outside the company (customers and potential customers, resellers, agents, competitors).

This study will show that the relationship value’s features have important consequences for btob relationships development and these effects, whatever connected, can be isolated with respect to each characteristic. We will also illustrate that many misalignments in business relationships are due to problems in communication and describe the ways companies can use to manage them.

The paper is composed as follows. First we will review literature on the value concept and its strict interrelation with the solution concept. Then, we will discuss the role of communicating value in business to business relationships. In the following sections we will present the methodology and the case analysis. Discussion of findings and conclusions end the paper.

2. An evolving view of the value concept

The concept of value plays an important role in management studies. Scholars and managers agree that the creation of value to customers and other stakeholders is the key to long-term success of the company and the major source of competitive advantage.

The initial conceptualization of value has been mainly inspired by studies from classical and neoclassical economic. In a utilitarian perspective, value is thus reduced to the concept of exchange, the utility that parties are able to draw from the object of the transaction. In this view, the exchange is a discrete event, without references to time and disconnected from the subjects involved in the transfer of ownership (Castaldo, 2002). The competitive market is 'given' and individuals perfectly rational in determining the value of "things". Decisions, in turn, are based on the objective convenience that descends from the costs and revenues, from foresight and calculation associated with each action.

Over time, however, socio-organizational studies have begun to affect those of marketing, which in turn started to go beyond the traditional centrality of the concept of exchange given by economists in favor of the role of relationships, primarily in their dyadic form and then as complex networks. From that moment the economic dimension of exchange started to be accompanied by the social dimension of relationships. In marketing this change strongly manifested thanks to the studies on inter-organizational relationships by IMP researchers, as well as thanks to the diffusion of relationship marketing, with an important impact on value conceptualization: "From a marketing concept related to the transaction, the value for customers is embedded in the exchange of a product for the price. However, if we assume that marketing is based on relationships, the role of the product begins to blur" (Grönroos, 1997: p. 411). Scholars started to recognize that the attributes relevant to the creation of value were no longer those related to products and services but also, and especially, those pertaining to the relational processes.

Research on the value of relationships has produced within a decade or so numerous and elaborated models aimed at defining the concept of relationship value and grasp the factors that contribute to generating value, going beyond the product and the service. Relationship value has been usually conceptualized as the customer's subjective perception of the benefits and costs involved in the exchange (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006; Blocker et al., 2011), which can be understood both in monetary and non-monetary terms (Biggeman & Buttle, 2012). This conceptualization, on the other hand, has taken place mostly through the search for the best combination of benefits and sacrifices that compose the value of relationships.

Nevertheless, it entails assuming that relationships are of a circumscribed content, observable and measurable, expression that the notion of relationship value was still strongly influenced by neoclassical economic studies. Implicitly, relationships were still treated as objects of exchange, like products and services.

Starting point of this study is that existing research on the value of relationships offers a oversimplified view of the concept. If value is associated with business relationships and networks, then we need to treat deeper the implications of adopting a relational perspective. Marketing scholars have recently started enforcing the criticism of the prevailing notion of value, especially emphasizing the influences of the psychological and social aspects, that turn away from a model of objective convenience.

Benefits and costs are always individual perceptions, determined in the social and cognitive processes in the customer's mind (Payne et al., 2008). Thus the value created in a business relationship depends more on how

each actor perceives and interprets value, rather than on the objective assessment of the cost/benefit consequences of interaction.

Ritter and Walter (2012) also criticize the traditional assumption that a linear relationship exists between relationship value and its antecedents, in favour of a u-shaped relationship.

According to Payne et al. (2008) value creation is composed by emotional, cognitive and behavioral elements, all interrelated each other, and with respect to which the customer can play the role of ‘feeler’, ‘thinker’ or ‘doer’. Hilton et al. (2012) argue that if value is “phenomenologically” determined by the client, i.e. a personal evaluative judgment, value cannot be created, but it becomes “a process of resource integration undertaken by two or actors with the intention of each realizing a value proposition” (2012: 1504).

In this process both the customer and the supplier have an active role. The supplier can contribute collaboratively in value creation as value advisor, value organizer, value amplifier, value experience supporter, while the customer can be co-diagnoser, co-designer, co-producer, and co-implementator (Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola, 2012).

To sum up the discussion above, Corsaro et al. (2013) have identified the five key relationship value characteristics which need to be better investigated as they have important consequences for relationship management. They are relationship value as actor specific, context dependent, collective, relative and interactional, as in Figure 1:

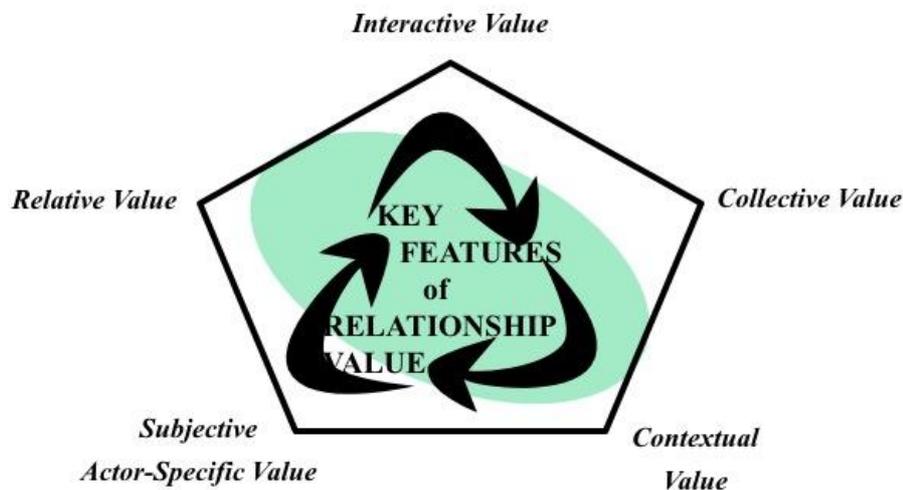


Fig. 1: Key features of Relationship Value in btob relationships, adapted from Corsaro et al. (2013).

These elements have been only slightly adjusted to fit the context of the present research.

Relationship value as actor specific

The first element of relationship value refers to the phenomenological nature of value with respect to the different business actors involved in the relationship, whose perceptions of value are necessarily always incomplete. Perceptions are specific to each person involved in the business relationship; therefore, the value perceived by the supplier may refer to different benefits and costs than those that the customer perceives.

Medlin (2008) underscored the importance of joint evaluations in business relationships and introduced the construct of a double perspective as a dyadic view of value in a business relationship. Corsaro and Snehota (2011) discussed the role of alignment and misalignment in customers' and suppliers' interpretations of problems/solutions as well as the extent to which these impact relationship development. Similarly, Cox (2004) studied alignment and misalignment in operational and commercial value capture drivers for buyers' and suppliers' transactions, highlighting that positive outcomes can be achieved even if dysfunctional operational and commercial aims exist between the customer and the supplier.

Relationship value as contextual

We already said that within a dyadic customer–supplier interaction, both parties are also involved and embedded in a wider business network (Edvardsson et al., 2011). Interdependencies among network entities (both direct and indirect) are a critical aspect of the conceptualizations associated with the Industrial Network Approach; this is also true for assessing relationship performance and value (Van Den Bulte and Wuyts, 2007).

Value creation is shaped by social forces, is reproduced in social structure and can be asymmetric for the actors involved" (Edvardsson et al. 2011: p. 327). The varying views of value affect the way resources integrate.

Relationship value as relative

Relationship value is always relative to other relationships. As an effect of interdependency, one relationship may have different values with respect to the other relationships with which it is compared. Thinking in terms of relationship value goes beyond merely classifying relationships according to their different values. Relationships should not be evaluated in isolation; rather, each relationship should be considered as a part of a bigger set of relationships interconnected with one another. Such interconnections can limit or enhance value creation. In our study we slightly modify this element compared to Corsaro et al. (2013) and think in terms of relationship value as relative not only with respect to the other relationships, but also with respect to further elements that actors use to anchor their value judgments.

Relationship value as collectively determined

Relationships based on interactions are driven by and produce a world full of different and often conflicting interpretations of business behaviors. Individuals construct collective frames as they interact (Porac et al., 2001); the emerging collective frames, in turn, influence those applied by the individual actors (Kaplan and Tripas, 2008). Value assessments often do not overlap, even for individuals involved in the same interactions and relationships. Consequently, understanding how the diverse frames of reference are reconciled within and between organizations in order to formulate and implement strategies becomes crucial (Hodgkinson, 2005).

In networks, in particular, actors confront so that at least partially shared ideas of value can emerge to coordinate their behaviors. More in general value co-creation is necessarily a kind of joint activity, which depends on the establishment of mutual understanding to achieve mutual goals among distinct entities (Clark 1996). According to Håkansson and Snehota (1995, p. 40): “*The actors (companies) have no common goals, but there exist some shared beliefs about the activity pattern as well as the resource constellation*”.

Relationship value as interactional

This last element of relationship value simultaneously represents the determinant and outcome of value as actor specific, collectively determined, relative, and contextual. Relationship value as interactional reflects the dynamic nature of value perceptions and thus the need to adopt a process-based and long-term approach. Value is intrinsically linked to the concept of interaction. Value arises in business relationships as two parties desire, enact, and perceive managerial benefits during their reciprocal acts (i.e., their business interactions) (Ford et al., 2003). In these interactions, each actor emphasizes certain dimensions of value, changes others, and simply becomes aware of dimensions not previously considered. Moreover, a company’s ability to realize adequate value often depends on its counterpart (Henneberg et al., 2009; Pinnington and Scanlon, 2009). These considerations impact any kind of relationship portfolio decision that cannot be built from a static and mechanistic perspective.

Concluding, over time a more complex processual view of relationship value emerged, which we think need to be better investigated in terms of consequences it produces on btob relationships. We suppose that once we apply the 5 critical features of relationship value to business relationships, we realize that they influence the effectiveness of business relationships in terms of development of solutions able to satisfy the customer’s problems.

3. Creating value through Solutions

Solutions represent one of the most important vehicles for better/accurate value creation in business- to - business markets. As Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola (2012) observe, value creation is strictly dependent from problem solving, such as in terms of innovative product development, customized solutions and knowledge intensive business services (KIBS). This even more considered the increasing relevance of intangible resources and services as differentiator elements, the importance of a relational view of markets, and also the conceptualization of value as co-created in complex patterns of interactions in networks (Håkansson et al. 2009; Gronroos, 2012; Norman & Ramirez, 1993; Vargo & Lusch, 2008).

Many companies in business to business are facing the transition from a product based logic to a service one, often becoming service providers of more and more complex solutions, characterized by a large degree of consultancy, and whose aim is to solve the problems of the customer in an integrated way.

In line with the evolution of studies on value, for many years debate on solutions has been mainly devoted to defining the characteristics of the solution’s content, that is, which products and services to develop and which combination can be more effective than the others. Clearly, this view was mainly supplier oriented: It was the supplier assessing the customer needs and discovering the best course of action to address them.

In the course of time, however, scholars have started to note that solutions deliver a value that is mostly intangible and thus not embedded anymore only in the supplier offering. The interest of scholars has thus

progressively moved from the content of the solution (object of exchange) to how the relational processes of the customers combine with those of the suppliers when developing business solutions (Kapletia & Probert, 2010; Tuli, Kohli, & Bharadwaj, 2007). But this view implies going further than just the customer and the supplier, indeed also including the other actors in the customer and supplier's spheres who are participating to the process (Cova & Salle, 2008). These inter- and intra-firm relationships, however, will both facilitate and limit the development of new solutions (Windhal & Lakemond, 2006).

IMP scholars have been particularly active in discussing the solution concept, stressing how combining resources to develop solutions involves different organizations and entails integrating resources across the different boundaries of business organizations. Integrating resources amounts to incorporating one actor's resources into another actor's resources (Baraldi & Bocconcelli, 2001; Gressetvold, 2001, 2004; Håkansson, 1987; Håkansson & Waluszewski, 2002; Wedin, 2001). In this process, each actor can act simultaneously as a provider, who delivers its resources to the combination, and as a user, who utilizes the existing combination to solve its very specific problems. From the interaction between these two roles the interfaces between resources confront each other, and the solution evolves (Cantù, Corsaro & Snehota, 2012).

Harmsen and Jensen (2004) define a firm's value creation competence as the firm's ability to understand and translate customer business needs into superior solutions for customers, which translates into improved sales performance, mediated by strategic account management and relationship perceptions (Sullivan et al., 2012).

According to Prior (2013) there are four elements that define a solution: provision of both product and service elements, customization to address specific needs, a delivery process and the need to build and maintain relationships with stakeholders.

Storbacka et al. (2013) state that the critical for the transformation of business to business companies toward solution business models are customer embeddedness, offering integratedness, operational adaptiveness and organizational networkedness. These elements represent four continua along which firms engaged in solution business over time should change their business models.

Moving from product to solution it changes also the service network which can be intentionally developed by companies and covers different degrees of complexity of customer solutions change (Gebauber et al., 2013).

More in general, recent research on the solution process reflects a new representation of the concept that is more and more seen for its interactive, networked and emergent nature: "The recognition that solutions are service-dominant has led to a greater acknowledgement of individuals as the primary vehicles through which implementation process contributes to value creation" (Prior, 2013: p. 3).

According to Powell and Stuart (2013: p. 3) the different stakeholders' viewpoints should be taken into account in the development of a solution, as different solution requirements emerge from them. Emotions, also, have a very important role in solutions delivery and can make this process particularly complicated.

More in general, given that the majority of value a solution delivers is intangible, communication is an important source of intangible value (Prior, 2013). This implies the need to look at communication practices in business to business relationships which we assume can have an impact on actors' representations of value and thus on the effectiveness of solutions provided.

4. Communicating value in business to business relationships

The importance of communication in business to business relationships has been widely established (Haytko, 2004; Mason and Leek, 2012; Holden & O'Toole, 2004). Communication is critical in making value proposition and co-creating value with customers (Lusch and Vargo, 2006). Also, through communication perceptions of value emerges (2012: 6).

According to Ballantyne and Varey (2006), 'communicating' is one of the most important value creating activity to enable the service experience as communicative interactions to develop relationships. Value creation implies a dialogic communication, where both customer and supplier need "to put forward their perspectives on value, and be explicit about the benefit expected through reciprocal premises (Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola, 2012: 16). Ballantyne et al. (2011) also develop a platform for communicative interaction in terms of value proposition, resource integration and value-in use.

Effective communication impacts the perceived relationship quality (Sharma and Patterson, 1999) and reduces interpersonal value incongruence (De clerq, Thongpapanl and Dimov, 2009). Barriers to communication can create confusion and misunderstanding. "Effective communication reduce misunderstanding due to difference between exchange parties' world views by providing an opportunity for both parties to increase the clarity of communication exchanges" (Hung and Lin, 2013: 3). Communication is necessary to reduce conflicts in relationships. On that Hung and Lin (2013) find out that a high level of effective communication diminishes the negative impact of conflicts on satisfaction.

Truong et al. (2012) find out that thinking in terms of reciprocal value propositions can be intuitively appealing, but it is constrained in practice at network level, due to issues related to dialogue and knowledge brokerage.

Through dialog actors can reach a mutual understanding, defined as the coping knowledge about how to deal with one another (Ballantyne, 2004). Customer requirements emerge through mutually creative, co-constructed dialog (Jaworski & Kohli, 2006), which thus is an interactive process of reasoning together so that a common knowledge platform is created and thus value (Gronroos, 2000).

Contextual factors need also to be taken into consideration in studying communication practices in btob relationships. On that, by adopting an interactive approach, Mason and Leek (2012) discover that the interplay between different types of time -vertical, horizontal, standardized, and planned- determine the communication practices in a specific context. By doing this, they establish a connection between the inside communication practices and how they link to the external macro-environment. In this light, communication can be also seen as mediating employees' knowledge and customer's needs by supporting the customer opportunity to create value (Solomonson et al., 2012).

Clearly, communication in btob relationships is strictly related to the role of salespeople. Interpersonal communication is in fact at the base of sales and key account management, not only for information exchange, but also in terms of potentialities of innovation (McGrath and Hollingshead, 2012).

Haas et al. (2012) assert that by acknowledging a customer as an active part of the process of value creation, the sales function is changing its role: not anymore a persuader, as often seen in the literature, but rather a speaking partner, capable of soliciting and interpreting the voice of the customer and bringing it to the own company. The sales force role thus becomes related to four main tasks (1) identify and activate (potentially) relevant actors, (2) foster two-way communication, (3) enable and facilitate mutual learning, and (4) establish co-leadership in value-creating processes. Fostering two-way communication reflects the fact that, as part of value-creating processes, confrontation among actors on the supplier and the customer sides is important. This confrontation is

not simply functional for aligning parties' ideas, but rather for generating novel ideas and for understanding the reasons for the actors' behaviours.

But negotiating diverging views of value in use can be difficult in business to business relationships (Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2012), for instance for the supplier to communicate the value proposition in advance and for the customer to evaluate the value potential (Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2012).

According to Terho et al. (2012) there are three main dimensions of value based selling 1. Understanding the customer's business model 2. Crafting the value proposition 3. Communicating customer value and stress the most relevant aspects of sales communication. Also the authors define communicating value proposition as 'the degree to which a sales person focuses on convincing customers that the proposed offering would impact the profit statement (Terho et al., 2012: 182).

Solomonson et al. (2012) discover three communicative skills which are particularly important for customer service representatives in supporting customers' value creation. They are attentiveness, which is the focus on the customer demonstrated through verbal and non-verbal clues (see Ford, 1999); perceptiveness, as the listener's attempt to understand the message by assigning meanings to the verbal and non verbal messages that are transmitted by the speaker (de Ruyter and Wetzels, 2000); responsiveness, that is the level of agreement between the provider and the customer (de Ruyter and Wetzels, 2000), and which occurs in an adaptation process made of restatements, clarifications and interpretations.

5. Methodology

To answer our research question, a longitudinal single case study of a company's business network has been carried out (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Dubois & Araujo, 2004; Harrison & Waluszewski, 2008). The company studied is Mikron Tool, formerly known as the tool department of the Mikron Machining division (Mikron SA, Agno, Switzerland), currently a global leader in machining solutions and cutting tools.

We apply a longitudinal case study in order "to search for patterns in the process, to find the underlying mechanisms that shape the patterns in the observed processes and to use both inductive and deductive reasoning in the analysis" (Pettigrew, 1997: 1290). Our objective was at the same time to draw up an ex-post, in-depth observation of the phenomenon under investigation and to directly observe in real time interactions between actors belonging to the business network.

For the first point, to gain a many-sided view of changes, in-depth interviews have been carried out inside the firm and with the most important actors that have relationships with Mikron (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003). Over a period of two years (2011-2012), we collected 73 interviews, of which 62 in the company business networks (41 face to face semi-structured, 10 by skype or phone and 11 by email) with existing customers, resellers, agents, competitors and potential customers. In parallel, 11 interviews have been carried out in the company: General Manager (2), Business Developer (2), Sales People (3), Technician, Marketing Manager (2), Finance, Controlling & Logistics Manager and the CAD manager. All interviews have been registered and transcribed.

As for the second point, direct observations of interactions between actors have been done during a technology fair in Parma, that served as a hub of information for the cutting tool industry. Key actors to be interviewed have been both indicated by the company and identified during the fair.

Primary data have been then complemented and combined with secondary data gathered from the firm's website, Annual Reports (2004-2010), and other internal documents. In particular, secondary data have been collected from 10 main competitors' websites which included the following criteria: origin, standard tools, special tools, fair attendance, training, quality, catalogues, etc.

The research has been carried out in the context of a broader research project commissioned by Mikron Group to Università della Svizzera Italiana.

During interviews it has been asked participants to tell the story of their relationship with Mikron (or with the counterpart in the case of Mikron), which was their idea of value, the main problems occurring in the business relationship, the extent customers and suppliers were aligned in their idea of problems and solutions, and the role of communication in relationships. We also asked to tell about critical episodes occurred in the relationship. Then, to interpret the effects that the different value features have on business relationships, we refer to the interpretative scheme used by Corsaro et al. (2013) and which identify five key relationship value characteristics which have important consequences for portfolio management: value as actor specific, context dependent, collective, relative and interactional.

6. The case: Mikron Tool's network

From the 1960s onwards, Mikron Group has developed its activities in machining systems. In 1986 Mikron Group acquired Albe SA2, a reputable company that had expertise in the creation of the famous ballpoint pen product that spread around the world. That division now has around 7000 systems installed and provides solutions for several segments such as Automotive, Watching, Writing instruments, Hydraulic & Pneumatic, Infocom/Electro, Fittings and special industries. The automotive, the medical technology/pharmaceutical, electronic and the writing instruments industries are now its key markets.

Mikron Group has a large and diversified corporate client base including industry leaders such as Bosch, ABB, BIC, Pfizer, Siemens, GlaxoSmithKline and many others. It has six production sites, of which two in Switzerland: in Agno there is the headquarters of Mikron Machining division and in Boundry the headquarters of the Mikron Automation division. The other productions sites are situated in Rottwell (Germany), Denver (USA), Singapore (Singapore) and Shanghai (P.R. China).

Mikron Tool, formerly known as the tool department of the Mikron Machining division (Mikron SA, Agno), was restructured into an independent company in 1998. Today, in less than one decade, it has grown from 20 to 120 employees.

The company is currently a global leader in machining solutions and cutting tools. Its reputation is based on its ability to supply high precision cutting tools from small to mid-sized to a high-end customer base. Its high-end quality, high precision, continuous performance and know-how, allow its production of special tools and accessories stands as a key competitive advantage. The manufacturing process of tools includes different phases of professional tool management, from engineering to the testing of new tools at machine manufacturing companies, to measurement protocols, on-site support and regrinding services. The company is engaged in providing not only excellent products or services to its corporate customers but also in developing many hands-on projects from the basic to the most complex, to guarantee success for clients. This cooperation enables Mikron to increase productivity and efficiency and reinforce its status as a premier company.

In the field of manufacturing technology Mikron Tool is known among the pacemakers as providing the highest standard of precision, cost-efficiency and flexibility for both special and standard products. At the moment the company sell 70% special tools and 30% standard tools.

In the company business network particularly critical are the relationships with customers and resellers all over the world for value creation, also due to the complexity and innovativeness of the solutions delivered. These relationships are mainly managed through the support of business developers, sales people and technicians. In the following paragraphs we will present the view of the different actors involved in the company business networks, and which we have classified with respect to the different value features.

Value as subjective (actor-specific) at Mikron Tool

One issue that emerged quite often during interviews is that the customer may not realize what the benefit from the product is and what makes the product a solution to its problem:

“Customers do not always know what they want. Usually they know the products if they are standard. If they are special then it’s more difficult.” (General Management at Mikron Tool).

“Sometimes the problem is that on one hand they request the specific tools and they don’t care about the documentation, like I mean if he wants the drill with the diameter 4 instead or when our standard is 3 or the total length is 2, 3 millimeters bigger, they don’t check this one. They say “I need this one”. After, it’s your responsibility to see, watch out maybe this one is a standard tool, just maybe 3mm shorter. They don’t check this.” (Marketing manager at Mikron Tool).

“To buy the things for the cheapest price, actually most of them don’t know in details that you can have two types of drill with the same quality but one will make 1000 holes and other one will make 10 000 holes. So this is just a little bit about understanding the difference because it depends even if you need 10 000 holes or only 1000 holes.” (Salesman 1 at Mikron Tool).

“Even when you have the best tools and innovation, you bring it to the customer, and you should be able to tell the advantage: what is a benefit. But we have to be realistic; maybe the customer does not need this drill.” (Business developer at Mikron Tool).

“It’s clear if you look for a tool, one costs 5 euro and the other costs 40, and you think that one is expensive. But if this tool can do many thousands holes more, or... Yes because from the feedbacks from companies, almost all of them say they focus on price, they think price is very important, but only 1 of them said they focus on cost per unit. Maybe he doesn’t even search for it. But if you made an article and everybody see they can save money from the solution.... Maybe the customer doesn’t focus on single price, he sees the example of reducing costs and then he goes in more detail.” (Sales Technician at Mikron Tool).

“We set a tool and more or less have to be the value, but no one could say we’re 10 times faster and 3 times cheaper, because only if you are sure about it you can say and push it on the market. But it fit’s not clear, you

can only we're a little bit faster and a little bit cheaper, no basics." (Sales Manager 2 at Mikron Tool).

The issue of how communicating the benefits of a solution becomes even more relevant in the case of new innovative ones, like CrazyDrillFlex:

"We have a tool, CrazyDrillFlex, which is able to make a hole of 0.1 mm diameter. In the past it was only possible with a laser. The mechanical way for doing something was 0.5. So we have technology which does not exist before. And it has another advantage like the flexibility and it would not broke really easily. But communicating this to customers and resellers is not an easy task" (Business developer at Mikron Tool).

"In general we can say we are much faster, you need less tools and you do not need special machines, you can continue with your machines, you do not need to use laser or another machine, so these are already benefits. The customers think we're generally expensive, but actually we're cost efficient. We wrote even article for newspaper, but I did not put inside any number." (Salesman 3 at Mikron Tool).

Communicating value to customers is complicated even because customers, themselves, have different ideas of value:

"But at the end, we know that all manufacturers are doing quite good quality, so the price will be the most dominant factor." (Customer 1)

"The price of the tool is not important at all. What is important for us is the ratio called: Price/Piece made. We start a production with a new tool, and we look how much pieces it will produce until the end of its life, which is determined by less precision, less power, broken, etc., then we look how many pieces it has produced and we obtained this ratio. With this ratio we can equally compare all the tools from the different manufacturers. We do this test on about 10 tools and then we have an average." (Customer 2)

"I just have to make a hole; I don't care about me burning it" (Customer 5)

"It's about mutual communication. From our side, we need trust, availability and technical knowledge from our suppliers." (Customer 3).

"So the elements customers care are quality, price, and processing efficiency." (Sale manager 2 at Mikron Tool)

"In general, besides quality, price and deliver time, the relationship is very crucial. When you and your competitor have very similar products, the customer will choose the supplier who has a better reputation, or with whom they're more familiar." (Salesman 3 at Mikron Tool).

Even resellers can be heterogeneous in that sense:

"We choose the tools best suitable for our machines, with high quality and low price. Besides the processing efficiency it is also important for us how fast the tool can be when manufacturing, and how much time the tool can save for us." (Business Developer at Mikron Tool).

“Some time reseller sees us like the mother company and they respect us like a little bit director. In some other ways it sees us only like supplier. I realized that they don’t like if I say you have to do training or something like that.” (Reseller 1).

“Mikron Tool cuts well and they are well made. They look good too but I don’t care about it, it has to work.” (Reseller 2).

Value as collective at Mikron Tool

This second set of quotes illustrate how value becomes an issue that connects at network level and which the difficulties related to that can be:

“Sometimes with the reseller the problem is that the customer explains to him and the reseller explains to us and after you can lose some points ...” (Business Developer at Mikron Tool).

“If you are not there maybe it’s really difficult to understand problems, especially when we have a problem. If we have a problem with one machine with different tools inside, they tell you that these tools are broken. But you don’t know if the reason is before these tools in the process or it’s really these tools. This is the problem that we have after.” (Sales Technician at Mikron Tool).

“What happens presently on the market is that if you sell a high demand in the country with a reseller, in such a level, it would make sense to take away the reseller and to make the leases by yourself because you spend less per cost then with the reseller and their discount. But of course, the investment to enter a foreign market is huge and so that’s why they don’t like to give us information about the clients and it’s not that common that we know which client buys the tools.” (Business Developer at Mikron Tool).

“Sometimes we do tests together with resellers and so I told you that the sales technicians have to support resellers. Sometimes they go together to the final client and test the tool.” (General Manager at Mikron Tool).

Sometimes resellers have nothing to do with drilling tools and thus the company has to invest a lot of time in training different things. Their technicians have to frequently go to the country and support resellers to go to the clients. Actually they have to invest much more resources but in the end they have maybe the advantage that when the company is successful they will be really a good partner.

But sometimes it is also difficult to relate to other actors in the network so as to create shared ideas of value:

“I think because I had the same issue with other kinds of clients that sometimes it’s hard to tell the client -look if you don’t give me the clear information I cannot serve you because you will not be satisfied either-. And sometimes it’s complicated because on one hand you want to be friendly and on the other hand you have to tell him that if he continues like that you will not offer something that the customer really needs, that he/she can use”. (Technician at Mikron Tool).

It can also happen a gap between information available and the once delivered in the network:

“...I realized that we have little problems in communication. Because if I know from 6 month ago that they are 10 times faster and 3 times cheaper and we would not only have come here two weeks ago”. (Mikron Tool’ s customer).

According to resellers:

“We need to know: more information about tools, how to use them. You could have a good tool but if you do not know how to use them, then it would be not effective.” (Reseller 1)

“If somebody goes into their internet site he might find out them we make a lot of special tools. He says, hey Mikron Tool might have a solution for me, but in many cases they stop just at the drills or at the standard or catalogue tools (Reseller 2).

In order to communicate value in the networks, the role of sales people and agents are essential:

“It’s better if resellers have background. When problems happen, communicate with them, find out the problem and solve it.” (Customer 5).

“Sales assistants don’t need to have maybe all the technical information this is clear but I think some background would be good or would be helpful I don’t know for the daily work for something like that I don’t know.” (Business developer at Mikron Tool).

“When people need a not very good drill they might not even thinks about Mikron. So this could be a problem for standard Mikron drills.” (General Manager at Mikron).

In the company portfolio there is one product that is less expensive than the others, it’s a MiquDrill but they are doing quite difficult to sell it because it’s a kind of drill that other competitors provide. Thus they did a training with a technician and a HE tried to do a presentation, he explained reseller the solution and if he is not sure about himself even reseller afterwards would not sell it because he will say: *“No Mikron, they are the company for a high quality production things, for the difficulties”.*

“The agent is the person that has information on the market. He doesn’t buy tools and sell tools, he just gives you or gives us the information that maybe there would be potential clients for us or he gives already the information to the clients and the client contacts us and he will take, depending on the contract, a percentage of the transaction. Actually this is quite difficult because if he doesn’t do the business by himself... you really need a person you can trust because sometimes it’s not really clear why the client buys from you and afterward you have to pay the agent some commission maybe for work that he didn’t do.” (Marketing Manager at Mikron Tool).

Value as context-dependent at Mikron Tool

The variety of the value ideas is much related to the context where actors operate, which in turn is determined by many different elements:

“The customers have different needs. They are all different with specialty, stability and cost efficiency...it is very

hard to give a general answer for the problem, because for different people they always have different reasons in communication problem: benefits, beliefs, the relationship between human, cultural background, mutual understanding, and so on...the solution varies based on every specific case.” (Sales Manager 2 at Mikron Tool).

Cultures and languages seem issues that can generate difficulties in the interactions between customer and supplier:

“What is quite difficult is that every country has different kinds of relationships, and even different kind of companies and persons. So I have to search the right method to talk to different people in different ways...” (Sales manager at Mikron Tool).

“You have different kind of languages and sometimes it’s not so easy if you have someone on the phone and not at the table, you cannot quickly do a drawing together. Yeah it’s getting a little bit more difficult.” (Technician at Mikron Tool).

“I would say France is a country where it is very difficult to sell tools from Switzerland. Well “French are special” I think they have a certain pride of being French, they say well we can make these tools. It is people and company related and country related too. Some companies are very proud of what they have and whatever you bring them, they know it already, whether they do it or not they say “well what do you know about making parts so we know this better” so you just let the people talk and then you try to take advantage of what people tell you.” (Business Developer at Mikron Tool)

“For me I think it’s important to have a method or a system to transport my opinion my idea about my product to one other person in China, for example, but it’s not easy. I’m not in contact with the person. So if I have something easy to explain...because sometimes you send an e-mail and I understand one thing and you read the e-mail and you understand another thing so it’s... if we can find something to have facility to give the information, because sometimes with an e-mail it takes a long time because we need to explain exactly what we mean.” (Sales manager 4 at Mikron Tool).

“In China it’s difficult because we have some decisions like the discount that could not be at the end of the total amount but it needs to be inside of every product that you sell; if they don’t tell us to us you can maybe forget and that could be a problem for the customer. Now we know that for the discount it’s better to write on the tools not the discount but the price directly with the discount.” (Marketing manager at Mikron Tool).

The cultural issue is relevant for customers too:

“I think it depends. For example, sometimes we have problems because of the language, and we may have some deviation in understanding the same content. I think it is normal. Except for the language issue, we don’t have problems in communication.” (Customer 2 at Mikron Tool).

From the illustrations that follow it can be easily seen the variety of situations that the company has to manage due to the different actors’ contexts:

“One customer uses it because he always breaks the tools, another one uses it because it’s faster than erosion or the gun drill and the other one uses it in another way.” (Sales manager 2 at Mikron Tool).

“You need correct geometry of a drill, you need sometimes a coating, surface on the drill that is not used too fast, so there are different kind of things that they work together to be successful or not successful. So for this drill I saw like trial, like a test, trial with different testing versions, I don’t know how many there was.” (Sales manager 4 at Mikron Tool).

“You have to find out if maybe they already have a process that they use and they want to improve it or they don’t have anything at the moment so they ask you for the complete solution.” (Sales assistant at Mikron Tool).

“Well I think if they have a process in place and they might want to improve it they might give us a rough outline of what they have or what they use so that at least we follow, because if they use a drill or a tool with a certain diameter, they want from me a tool with the same diameter so that they can change it with the other, because if it’s an improvement they want to make a test with our tools making the least of changes.” (Technician at Mikron Tool).

This variety impacts also the activities of product testing, which cannot be standardized.

At product level there are also many kinds of material, which make the effectiveness of the solution depending on what kind of cool you use, air or oil, and even the quality of oils.

However not only the actual context seems to matter, but also in terms how the customer envisions it, how he/she imagines the value of the solution ‘in use’:

“Sometimes I don’t see the need or I don’t see the application for that tool”. (Customer 3)

“From the company’s brochure it is only possible to know that products are really well made, but I don’t know how the economic benefits could be. I can only know it after using their drills.” (Customer 1).

Value as relative at Mikron Tool

Another key element that emerged during interviews is about the way customers calculate the performance of the solution and in particular the parameters they use for comparison to understand the value (or potential value) of Mikron’s solutions. This aspect is also related to the previous ones and thus to the variety of contexts in which customers and resellers work.

“Actually it’s hard to compare. Because Mikron’s product is more expensive than the others, but at the same time the quality is also much better than competitors.” (Customer 3).

“We make comparison on price, quality, texture.” (Customer 2).

“If the clients can’t compare these values, it will be quite difficult, they don’t care only about how many holes you do, they want to compare with others.” (Sales manager 5 at Mikron Tool).

“This process is not easy because the client will compare in the beginning your drill with another drill. Okay our is not cheap but you have to show him that he will reduce his costs a lot so. Even in Germany, most of the time they don’t calculate this in deep. If we drill 10 times faster than with another drill you have to see that you need 10 times less the machine, you need 10 times less a person who is working for these components, so cost per component is much less.” (Country manager at Mikron Tool).

“You know that you save money by drilling faster, you are saving money by drilling more precisely, but you are also saving money by buying cheaper; so at the end of the day, how much money have you made with our tools? What’s the difference and which tool has been worth more for you? But I tell you, every company works differently and I’m amazed sometimes how companies calculate their costs, but I cannot influence that.” (Sales manager at Mikron Tool).

This issue is also key for resellers:

“I only sees the price of the tool. There is the price of the machine, the price of the operator or the additional costs which he has, which I don’t know about. I only know my price. I can only judge what his costs, his internal costs might be.” (Reseller 2).

Value as interactional at Mikron Tool

Related to what discussed above, problems with customers and resellers are also related to the time issue, and to the fact that ideas about value can change very rapidly.

“Look, are you sure that you want this because it’s quite impossible? ... Look already in your question I realize that you are not sure about what you want or what you need. And sometimes maybe this is the problem. Customers ask for a fast solution and in the end we have nothing because maybe it was not described really well what he needed.: ‘Ah no, it was a mistake I need something else’”. So this takes first of all a lot of time and you can do it only with a technical person because even for me it’s too difficult. I’m not specialized enough in tools that I can tell him.” (Business Developer at Mikron Tool).

“We organize our sales technicians to go there because sometimes you don’t have two or three times chance to go in the company. If it’s a big company Porsche or Volkswagen I don’t know, you have to go inside and you have to show him quite quickly that you have any benefit; if you don’t have this background he will not spend hours and hours to explain you what he does, what he doesn’t do, without no result.” (Business Developer at Mikron Tool).

“With one person you can get all if you talk directly. If you talk by e-mail sometimes you forget to tell and you tell him later and it’s difficult to change after”. (Sales Manager 3 at Mikron Tool).

“I know that if you change only one tool you have to do all the process again, you have to define the quality again and it’s not that easy in automotive industries to change anything in a process.” (Technician at Mikron Tool).

Time related issue can be expressed also in more practical terms:

“The problems what I feel up to now that for the reseller, it’s quite important to know as fast as possible if we have this tool on stock because maybe he is visiting the client and the client says okay I need a solution but I need it next week because I have to produce.” (Business Developer at Mikron Tool).

“On average if you are not able to answer the resellers in 24 hrs you will lose about 50% of the customer but if you could have the tool on stock then about 75% they will buy the tool”. (Technician at Mikron Tool).

“If you buy Mikron Tool today and you buy the same tool in two years time, you get the same tool. So the quality is consistent. (Customer 1 at Mikron Tool).

Given that ideas of value change due to the interactions going on in networks, it is very important for the company to monitor them:

“We have regular return visits to the customers, asking for the feedbacks for the product, and their opinion on the other suppliers. Sometimes we also invite engineers from customers into the designing process for new products. Because we think it will help us to know their needs better, and to be more customer-oriented.” (Marketing manager at Mikron Tool).

“Because we are still creating this kind of network so we now have to begin to structure these things more and more even to check. Do they sell well? Are the clients satisfied? Are the technicians satisfied because in the end it’s important that some of these steps are... how I can say...? To be successful in the long run there have to be many different kinds of things that they worry about.” (Sales manager 1 at Mikron Tool).

“To get this information you need to do research on the SAP to see which reseller is buying which kind of tools every month, to see if they focus only on one tool or another tool or what is the range.”

7. Discussion of findings

The empirical illustrations have shown that the different value features have specific consequences in business to business relationships. These consequences need to be managed to grant the effectiveness of interactions between parties so as to generate effective solutions to the customer’s problems.

The first critical issue (*value as actor-specific*) leads to the fact that it is not always easy to understand the need of the customer or reseller and to show that Mikron Tool have, or can have, the right solution to this problem.

Since value is co-created by several actors in the network (Norman & Ramirez, 1993; Fjeldstad & Ketels, 2006), the different views of value that actors have should be taken indeed into consideration. This generates in the network value heterogeneity, in terms of both the variety of values associated with a market and the distribution of how values are being realized (Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2006).

To manage value heterogeneity it seems important to make understandable to the other parties each own idea about value. One way to do that is by generating symbols of such value, something that is observable.

So in the Mikron case parties tries to represent their ideas of value through drawings of tools or in general of technologies. Drawings are symbols that customer and sales people use to make tangible what they have in

mind. For instance, they make a drawing and define what kind of material and what kind of geometry the tool should have. Unfortunately, however, sometimes customers send to the company drawings which are very ambiguous and thus bring to ambiguous interpretations.

Another way the company uses to represent value is by story telling, even if many time due to confidentiality related issue they cannot and thus just make examples.

As for value being *context dependent*, we know that value connotations and meanings are provided depending on the context (Priem, 2007). In this case, we have observed that different elements can affect the parties ideas about value, like the worker, the machine, the oil, the pressure, the conditions, cultural issues, and many others which make not straightforward to caught such value.

However, the most effective way to maintain parties representations of value flexible enough to be translated in different context, many times manifested through symbols, is thanks to the flexibility embedded in people, and especially sales people. Given that customers have a subjective view of the benefits and costs that embody value (Helkkula et al., 2012), it is usually the supplier's responsibility to ensure that a mutual understanding of value is jointly constructed (Aarikka-Stenroos, & Jaakkola, 2012). For that reason the company is investing in trying to increase the technical competences of salesmen trough production training so that to increase their ability to interact and propose personalized solutions to customers presenting specific problems. Even showcases should be build in a way to show maintain this flexibility.

For Mikron at the moment it is also quite difficult to define the content of articles as they don't know if people who are reading them are focused on time, long life, and precision. They thus try to create something, like publicity in general, where customers can catch two things or three better than for competitors and keep them in mind.

Value as *relative* is another critical aspect: with respect to the different parameters that actors use in their comparisons, different ideas about value emerge. This is even more complex considered the variety in the context of customers' uses which, related to previous point, implies that the elements actors use to anchor their value representations are context specific too. It thus emerges the need to keep these elements homogeneous on the one side, but on the other side flexible enough.

So, to reduce the ambiguity this can generate, Mikron uses examples in the catalogue to show how much faster drilling can be with Mikron technology compared to other technologies. Or, even more important, they support customers in making calculations about the performance of their solutions and they also support resellers in doing that.

Moreover, in order to make more clear the performance related to their solution, sales people invite customers to visit their location and factory: "*It would be very persuading if they can see the performance directly. Seeing is believing.*" In this way they try to anchor ideas about value more on emotions, like trust, than on elements which would make comparisons difficult to be realized in a proper way.

The fourth point, is value as *collective*. Actors need at least shared representations of value to coordinate their action: a certain level of commonality or overlapping between individual actors' views can be expected in networks (Morgan, 1986; Ford and Thomas, 1995) This feature, value as collective, is strictly related to the consequences generated by value heterogeneity. On that we can for instance refer again to the role of symbols like drawings. Symbols are embedded in dynamic systems of multiple actors which are active participants in the creation of such symbols. If on the one side each actor through the drawing reflects its value representation,

on the other side the meanings associated to these representations can differ and need to be coordinated. Symbols, in fact, may have not the exact same meaning for different actors (e.g., Blomberg, 2008). One way to do that is through dialog. Penalzoa and Venkatesh (2006: 303) assert that “Value is constituted by marketers and consumers in their activities and discourses via an enacted process, a social construction that take place prior to, during and after the actual exchange and use(s) take place”. As mentioned by the Business Developer at Mikron Tool: *“The customer sends a drawing and then we work by email to make it working. Then, if clients come to the company place and work together it is much better as they can explain the meanings associated to the drawings.”*

The possibilities for dialogues are really crucial in this sense: *“Look, of course today you can have a video conference and you can make a drawing. Both people see the same thing and talk about the same thing. That’s easier too, but not everybody is equipped with a video system so it’s very easy to get confused... then if both people have the same mother tongue or both speak English then it’s ok, otherwise it’s difficult to understand for both sides the same thing.”* (Business developer at Mikron Tool)."

Furthermore, if we consider that most of the relationships with customers are mediated by resellers, it becomes fundamental for the company that these resellers share common ideas and ‘are fan’ of Mikron’s solutions, otherwise they will have problems to propose them effectively.

One more thing that Mikron Tool tries to manage value as collective is to talk with the people ‘in front of the machine’, which seems to be particularly effective. Recently they are also thinking about introducing technologies based on holograms during trade fairs. The reason is that transporting real machines is very costly and risky, as well as showing videos is not very helpful to understand the machine functioning. Not last, holograms can create an emotional involvement in the visitors.

Finally, to discuss value as *interactive*, we have seen that actors’ cognitive interpretations result from social interaction processes with other actors (Weick, 2001; Henneberg et al., 2006) and that actors’ perceptions and interpretations are constantly being shaped and re-shaped by what is taking place in the network (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995; Henneberg et al., 2010). Actors change their value representations; more in general time is a critical variable once we deal with value. Connected to the important role of drawings we analyzed before, once something changes in the tool it is really important to send immediately a revised drawing and, if possible, to talk with the right person so as to avoid misunderstandings and check together the ongoing process.

Moreover, it is important not only to try to overlap certain ideas about value but also to overlap future images about value, that is what actors envision as being of value in the future. This in line with Helkkula, Kelleher and Pihlström (2012) who characterize value as value-in-experience, which can be both lived and constructed based on previous, current and imaginary future experiences, so temporal in nature. We also agree that negotiating diverging views of value in use can be difficult in business to business relationships, for instance for the supplier to communicate the value proposition in advance and for the customer to evaluate the value potential (Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2012).

The discussion presented above, can be summed up in the following table:

Table 1: Effects of the critical features of relationship value in btob relationships and their management

<i>Critical Features of Relationship Value</i>	<i>Effects in BtoB Relationships</i>	<i>Relationship Management</i>
Subjective (actor-specific)	Different representations of value, value heterogeneity	Making value representations tangible through symbols
Context dependent	Different elements affect the actors' representations of value	Making value representations flexible enough to be adapted to different contexts
Relative	The elements used to anchor ideas about value differ	Making the elements of comparison more homogeneous as possible. Create emotions that reduce the importance of comparisons.
Collective	Need to create shared view of value	Coordinating different value representations and generating shared meanings to symbols. This is due mainly through dialog.
Interactive	Actors' representations of value continuously change	Incessantly check for the other actors' value representations. Making shared imagines of future value through present symbols

8. Conclusions and implications for future research

In this study we have shown that recent insights on the relationship value have led to take distance from the classical and neo-classical economic view of the concept, in favor of psychological and social influences. On that Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola (2012) refer to the concept of 'optimal' value in use, which is needed in the interaction between customer and supplier and which in turn leads value proposition to involve a *best* possible balance between the value in use to be achieved and the required sacrifices. We agree with the authors that the value experience is related not to the solution outcome but also to the process of exchange; at the same time, however, we think that the idea of optimal value can be problematic, by recalling an economic, neo-classical view of value which has shown its limitation. Our perspective is that value cannot be 'optimal' given that it is actor specific, contextual, relative, collective and interactive.

We have here empirically shown that the 5 elements that recent research has identified as critical features of relationship value have each very important and specific consequences for btob relationships, specifically on the possibility for the customer and supplier to align their ideas of problems and solutions.

The analysis of the Mikron Tool's network has also clearly confirmed that the majority of effects that the features of relationship value generate are communication related issues. In the process of dematerialization of the business offering, in fact, there is a transformation of value which is more and more related to meanings and bonds, and to a lesser extent to the physical performance of the material object purchased.

These consequences need to be carefully managed to avoid reducing the effectiveness of business to business relationships. In this study we have identified possible ways to manage the consequences generated by each specific feature of business relationship, an area which can attract the interest of future researchers.

Future works should also be addressed to find out models that try to represent and simplify the value conceptualization, but without reducing it to the economic view of the concept. This also implies developing value frameworks which can be useful to practitioners too (Rensburg, 2012).

References

Aarikka-Stenroos L., Jaakkola E. (2012). Value co-creation in knowledge intensive business services: A dyadic perspective on the joint problem solving process. *Industrial Marketing Management*: 15-26.

Ballantyne, D. (2004). Dialogue and its Role in the Development of Relationship Specific Knowledge. *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, 19(2), 114–23.

Ballantyne, D., & Varey, R. J. (2006). Creating value-in-use through marketing interaction: the exchange logic of relating, communicating and knowing. *Marketing Theory*, 6 (3): 335–348.

Ballantyne, D., Frow, P., Varey, R. J., & Payne, A. (2011). Value propositions as communication practice: Taking a wider view. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 40 (2): 202-210.

Baraldi E, Bocconcelli R. (2011). The quantitative journey in a qualitative landscape: developing a data collection model and a quantitative methodology in business network studies. *Management Decision*, 39(7):564–577.

Biggeman, S. & Buttle, F. (2012). Intrinsic value of business-to-business relationships: An empirical taxonomy. *Journal of Business Research*, 65: 1132-1138.

Blocker, C., Flint, D., Myers, M. & Slater, S. (2011). Proactive customer orientation and its role for creating customer value in global markets. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 39: 216-233.

Blomberg, J. (2008). Negotiating meaning of shared information in service system encounters. *European Management Journal*, 26: 213 – 222.

Castaldo S. (2002). *Fiducia e relazioni di mercato*. Il Mulino.

Clark, H. (1996). *Using language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Corsaro, D., & Snehota, I. (2010). Searching for relationship value in business markets: are we missing something? *Industrial Marketing Management*, 39(6): 986-995.

Corsaro D., Fiocca R., Tunisini A., & Henneberg S. (2013). A Value perspective on Relationship Portfolios. *Marketing Theory*, 1-28

Corsaro, D., & Snehota, I. (2011). Alignment and misalignment in business relationships. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 40(6), 1042–1054.

Cox, A. (2004). Business relationship alignment: on the commensurability of value capture and mutuality in buyer and supplier exchange. *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal*, 9 (5): 410-420.

Cova, B., & Salle, R. (2008). Marketing solutions in accordance with the S–D logic: Co-creating value with customer network actors. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 37(3), 270–277.

De Clercq, D.; N. Thongpapanl and D. Dimov. 2009. 'When good conflict gets better and bad conflict becomes worse: the role of social capital in the conflict–innovation relationship'. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing*

Science, 37, 283-297.

De Ruyter K. & Wetzels M. (2000). "Customer equity considerations in service recovery: a cross-study perspective". *Journal of Service Management*, 11(1), 91-108.

Dubois A. & Gadde L. E. (2002). Systematic combining. An abductive approach to case research. *Journal of Business Research*, 55(7), 553-560.

Dubois, A. Araujo, L. (2004). Research methods in industrial marketing studies, in Håkansson, H., Harrison, D. and Waluszewski, A. (eds.), *Rethinking marketing: developing a new understanding of markets*, Chichester: John Wiley and Sons.

Edvardsson, B., Tronvoll, B. & Gruber, T. (2011). Expanding understanding of service exchange and value co-creation: a social construction approach. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 39(2): 327-339.

Eisenhardt, K.M. (1989). Building theory from case study research. *Academy of Management Review*, 14 (4), 532-550

Fjeldstad, Ø., & Ketels, C. (2006). Competitive advantage and the value network configurations- making decisions at a Swedish life insurance company. *Long Range Planning*, 39(2), 109-131.

Ford, D. & Thomas, R. (1995), Omega: Network Perceptions and Network Learning, In Håkansson, H., and Snehota, I (eds.): 221-231, *Developing relationship in business networks*, Academic Press Limited.

Ford, D., Gadde, L.E., Håkansson, H., & Snehota, I. (2003). *Managing Business Relationships*. 2nd Edition. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons,

Gressetvold E. (2001). Technical development within the industrial network approach as interaction between four resource entities. 17th IMP Conference in Oslo, Norway.

Grönroos, C. (1997). Value-driven Relational Marketing: from Products to Resources and Competencies. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 13: 407-419.

Grönroos, C. (2008). Service logic revisited: who creates value? And who co-creates? *European Business Review*, 20 (4), 298-314.

Grönroos, C. (2011). A service perspective on business relationships: The value creation, interaction and marketing interface. *Industrial Marketing Management*, doi:10.1016/j.indmarman.2010.06.036

Haas A., Snehota I., & Corsaro D. (2012). Creating value in business relationships: The role of sales. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 41: 94-105.

Håkansson, H., & Snehota, I. (1995). *Developing relationships in business networks*. London: Thompson.

Håkansson H, Waluszewski A. *Managing technological development: IKEA, the environment and technology*. London: Routledge; 2002.

Håkansson, H., Ford, D., Gadde, L. E., Snehota, I. & Waluszewski, A. (2009). *Business in networks*. London: Wiley and Sons.

Håkansson H, Ford D, Gadde L-E, Snehota I and Waluszewski A (2009) *Business in Networks*. Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons.

Harrison, D. Waluszewski, A. (2008). The development of a user network as a way to re-launch an unwanted product. *Research Policy*, 37, 115-130.

Henneberg, S.C., Naudé, P., & Mouzas, S. (2009). Sense-making and management in business networks — some observations, considerations and a research agenda, *Industrial Marketing Management* doi:10.1016/j.indmarman.2009.03.011

Henneberg, Stephan C., Peter Naudé, and Stefanos Mouzas (2010), "Sense-making and management in business networks -- some observations, considerations, and a research agenda," *Industrial Marketing Management*,

Hodgkinson GP (2005) *Images of competitive space-A study of strategic cognition*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Harmsen, H. & Jensen, B. (2004). Identifying the determinants of value creation in the market: A competence-based approach. *Journal of Business Research*, 57, 533-547.

Haytko, D. L. (2004). Firm-to-firm and interpersonal relationships: Perspectives from advertising agency account managers. *Academy of Marketing Science Journal*, 32(3), 312–328.

Helkkula A., Kelleher C., Pihlström M. (2012). Practices and experiences: challenges and opportunities for value research. *Journal of Service Management: 23* (4): 554–570.

Hilton T., Hughes, T. & Chalcraft D. (2012). Service Co-Creation and Value Realization. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 28: 13-14.

Holden M. T., O'Toole T. (2004). A quantitative exploration of communication's role in determining the governance of manufacturer–retailer relationships. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 33 (6): 539-548.

Hung K.-P., Lin C.-K. (2013). More communication is not always better? The interplay between effective communication and interpersonal conflict in influencing satisfaction. *Industrial Marketing Management*, In Press.

Jakki M., Fisher R. J., & John R. N. (1996). Collaborative Communication in Inter-firm Relationships: Moderating Effects of Integration and Control. *Journal of Marketing*, 60: 103-115.

Kaplan S and Tripsas M. (2008) Thinking about technology: Applying a cognitive lens to technical change *Research Policy*, 37: 790–805

Kapletia, D., & Probert, D. (2010). Migrating from products to solutions: An exploration of system support in the UK defense industry. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 39(4), 582–592.

Kjellberg, H., & Helgesson, C.F. (2006). Multiple versions of markets: Multiplicity and performativity in market practice. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 35(7): 839–855.

Lusch, R., Vargo, S. L., & Tanniru, M. (2010). Service, value networks and learning. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 38(1), 19–31.

Lusch, R. F., & Vargo, S. L. (2006). Service-dominant logic: Reactions, reflections and refinements. *Marketing Theory*, 6(3), 281–288.

Medlin C. J. (2008). Business Interaction: The Double Perspective, Benevolence and Joined Firm Activity. Imp Conference Uppsala, Sweden.

Mason, K. & Leek S. (2012). Communication practices in a business relationship: Creating, relating and adapting communication artifacts through time. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 41(2): 319-332

McGrath, J. E., & Hollingshead, A. B. (Eds.). (1993). Putting the group back in group support systems: Some theoretical issues about dynamic processes in groups with technological enhancements. New York: Macmillan.

Morgan, G. (1986). *Images of organization*. London: Sage.

Normann, R. & Ramírez, R. (1993). From value chain to value constellation: Designing interactive strategy. *Harvard Business Review*, 71, 65-77.

Pettigrew, A. 1990. "Longitudinal field research on change: theory and practice."

Organization Science 3: 267-92.

Porac JF, Ventresca M and Mishina Y (2001). *Interorganizational cognition and interpretation*. In Joel A.C. Baum (Ed.). Blackwell's Companion to Organizations. Oxford: Blackwell.

Payne, A., Storbacka, K., & Frow, P. (2008). Managing the co-creation of value. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 36: 83–96.

Peñaloza, L. and Venkatesh, A. (2006). Further evolving the new dominant logic of marketing: from services to the social construction of markets. *Marketing Theory*, 6: 299-316.

Powell, J.H, and Swart J. (2010), Mapping the values in B2B relationships: A systematic, knowledge based perspective. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 39(3), 437-449.

Priem, R. L. (2007). A Consumer Perspective on Value Creation. *Academy of Management Review*, 32: 219-235.

Prior, D.D. (2013). Supplier representative activities and customer perceived value in 1165 complex industrial solutions. Original Research Article. *Industrial Marketing Management* (In Press).

Rullani E., Corsaro D., Roberta, S., & Mele, C. (2013). *Sense, Bonds, Value*, paper presented at the Naples Forum on Service, Ischia.

Salomonson N., Åberg A., Allwood J. (2012). Communicative skills that support value creation: A study of B2B interactions between customers and customer service representatives *Industrial Marketing Management*, 41, 145–155.

Storbacka K. & Nenonen, S. (2011). Scripting markets: From value propositions to market propositions. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 40 (2): 255-266.

Sharma, N., & Patterson, P. G. (2000). Switching costs, alternative attractiveness and experience as moderators of relationship commitment in professional, consumer services. *International Journal of Service Industry Management*, 11, 470–490.

Tehro H and Halinen A (2007) Customer portfolio analysis practices in different exchange contexts. *Journal of Business Research* 60, 720–730.

Truong, Y., Simmons, G., & Palmer, M. (2012) Reciprocal value propositions in practice: Constraints in digital markets. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 41, 197–206

Tuli K.R. , Kohli A.K. , Bharadwaj S.G. (2007). Rethinking customer solutions: from product bundles to relational processes. *Journal of Marketing*, 71(3):1–17.

Waluszewski A., Baraldi E., Shih T., & Linne Å. (2009). Resource Interfaces telling other stories about the commercial use of new technology: the embedding of biotech solutions in US, China and Taiwan. *IMP Journal*, 3(2):86–123.

Wedin T. (2001). Networks and demand. The use of electricity in an industrial process. Uppsala University: Department of Business Studies.

Weick, K. E. (2001). 'The attitude of wisdom: Ambivalence as the optimal compromise'. In: K. E. Weick, *Making sense of the organization*, pp. 361–379. Blackwell, Oxford.

Windhal, C., & Lakemond, N. (2006). Developing integrated solutions: The importance of relationships within the network. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 35(7), 806–818.

Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. London: Sage Publications.

Ulaga, W., & Eggert, A. (2006). Value-based differentiation in business relationships: Gaining and sustaining

key supplier status. *Journal of Marketing*, 70(1): 119–136.

Van Rensburg D. (2012), Value – A practitioner’s lens. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 41(1), 13-14.

Vargo, S.L. and Lusch, R.F. (2008). Service-dominant Logic: Continuing the Evolution. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 36(1): 1-10.