

Emerging relationships: Where are they coming from?

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Abstract

Although during the last thirty years the IMP researchers have created important knowledge of the business relationships, interestingly the question of how a business relationship does emerge has only a small interest. Ford (1980) analyses the pre-relationship stage from the point of view of the buyer focusing on the main causes, motivations and why the buyer becomes ready to look for or to accept a new potential supplier.

However what can one say about the causes and motivations of the supplier? Of course he is looking for a new customer and wants to do a business with him. How can they meet each other? How can the supplier find a potential buyer? How does a business relationship emerge?

The paper deals with these types of questions from the point of view of the supplier. Based on the results of a large case study of a very successful Hungarian electronic supplier company the eminent role of personal relationships on the emerging phase of customer relationships is presented. Some conditions and mechanisms which are necessary or helpful to make the relationship possible or to facilitate the emergence of a new customer relationship have been discovered.

Introduction

Although during the last thirty years the IMP researchers have created important knowledge of the business relationships, such as the Interaction Model (Håkansson 1982), the evaluation of relationships model (Ford 1980) and also on the field of the management of business relationships (Ford et al 1998), interestingly the question of how a business relationship does emerge has only a small interest. In his seminal article Ford (1980) analyses the pre-relationship stage from the point of view of the buyer focusing on the main causes, motivations and why the buyer becomes ready to look for or to accept a new potential supplier.

However what can one say about the causes and motivations of the supplier? Of course he is looking for a new customer and wants to do a business with him. How can they meet each other? How can the supplier find a potential buyer? How does a business relationship emerge?

This paper attempts to present some elements of the answers of these questions. It is evident that even a new business relationship can't work without trust. However the research questions in this article are focused not only on this trust building process but also on what is behind it. The paper deals with these types of questions from the point of view of the supplier. Applying some results of a large case study of a successful Hungarian electronic supplier company the eminent role of personal relations in emerging customer relationships is presented.

The paper is organised as a following: firstly a short comprehensive theoretical part deals with some relevant issues. The company's case is presenting secondly. After the case analysis and discussion the paper ends with some conclusions.

Theoretical foundation of the paper: communication (be)for(e) trust

Business relationship is an interactive exchange relationship between two organisations, embedded in a business network. The exchange relationship which has always economic and social elements in fact connects activities, resources and actors (Håkansson and Snehota 1995). Typically there are only relatively small numbers of individuals who are involved in a business relationship. It is not the whole organisation but two smaller groups of people; the buying centre (Webster and Wind 1972) and the selling centre (Bonoma and Johnston 1978) which are in interactions with each other. It means that within the buyer-seller relationship we can differentiate between four participants: 1) the buyer organisation 2) the individuals representing the buyer organisation 3) the selling organisation 4) the individuals representing the selling organisation - the sales people and others. Accordingly actor bonds (Håkansson and Snehota 1995) have generally two dimensions: the connections at organisational level and the connections at individual level as it is presented by the Interaction Model (Håkansson 1982).

According to Doney and Cannon the basis of *trust* is that the partners evaluate each other's credibility and benevolence, that is, one of them must possess information about the other

party's behaviour and promises (Doney and Cannon 1997). In business relationships trust has two dimensions, based on two perceptions: one of the partner's benevolence (motivation) and the other of its credibility (ability) (Andaleeb 1992). The first dimension, benevolence, which is based on quality, wills, and traits attributed to the partner, which are signs that the partner does care about the other party, and is willing to make sacrifices which go beyond the limits of purely egocentric and profit-oriented way of thinking (Rempel et al., 1985). The second dimension, credibility is based on the partner's will that he/she will keep his/her promise. It means that he/she will take into account the factors which are important for the partner, such as the task specific competencies, that he/she produces or provides services trustworthily, and his/her behaviour in connection with work is predictable (Rempel et al., 1985).

Andaleeb (1992) differentiates four types of trust based on the perception. *Connecting trust* is when both dimensions benevolence (motivation) and credibility (ability) exist. In the case of hopeful trust benevolence is there but credibility is not. Insecure trust if we just presume credibility but not benevolence. At least we cannot speak of trust in case neither dimension is present (Andaleeb 1992).

According to Sahay from the aspect of the survival of business relationships it is decisive that we get to know the factors which lead to the formation of trust. The basis of the trust forming factors is how much the partner is able to predict the behaviour of the other party in advance. In this process, the sharing of information, the advance information about the partner has an elementary role (Sahay 2003). Doney et al. have concluded that in the formation of trust social interaction and open communication both play a role (Doney et al. 2007).

Trust could be considered as an evolution process starting with a no-trust situation and arriving at the connecting trust. This connecting trust could be the basis and the glue of a lasting business relationship. During the time the perceived connecting trust must be supported by experienced trust related to the interaction process and conveyed by the different exchange episodes (Håkansson 1982). This transition from the perceived trust to the experienced trust (Mayer et al. 1995) could happen in the business relationship evolution process, described by Ford (1980). However in the case of an emerging (new) relationship the interesting question is that whether the process from the no-trust to the connecting trust occurs or not. What are behind this trust growing process? What are the pre-conditions, the *trigger* issues of this trust building process?

Based on an extensive literature review Smirnova et al. (2012) argue that *expectations* and *relational norms* are important pre-conditions of trust building. The authors propose that "there is certain initial component of trust-based expectations, moderated by specific relational norms, internalised by partners and their relative importance ... They would have direct impact on formation of trust" (Smirnova et al. 2012:5). Expectations, relational norms and trust are all the results of the interaction dynamics (Smirnova et al. 2012) they are exist in time and created by processes.

The relationship between *communication* and trust was empirically examined among others by Bialaszewski and Giallourakis (1985), Anderson et al (1994), Dwyer et al (1987). The empirical research has not provided an unambiguous answer to the direction of the

relationship of the two variables. While Anderson et al. have come to the conclusion that communication leads to trust, Dwyer et al. came to the conclusion that communication is the result of trust. Anderson and Narus present the varying relationship of trust and communication as an iterative process. The communication between the companies is the prerequisite of trust, and increasing trust leads to better communication (Anderson and Narus, 1990).

Social type of interaction takes place between three participants (the recommender, the recipient of the recommendation and the recommended) therefore we can talk about an *extended social exchange*. The first relevant interaction is communication, during the course of which the recommendation takes place. This exchange is not directly connected to an economic event it is in conformity with the characteristics of social exchange. In the case of extended social exchange, when more than two participants participate in the exchange, trust usually occurs during a mutual indirect process, in which one party receives an advantage from the other party and returns it to the other participant within a certain time. It is the taking of the risk that goes with assumed reciprocity that leads to the formation of trust (Das and Teng, 1998).

According to Levinger during the unfolding of the relationships the exchanges became more frequent and bigger both regarding their size and the risk (Levinger, 1980). With the acceptance of recommendation an extended social exchange takes place between the recommender and the recipient of the recommendation, and in addition, also an economic exchange relationship is established between the recipient of the recommendation and the recommended company (that some kind of exchange relationship already existed between the recommender and the recommended company is highly likely).

The interesting question is how the connecting trust could be grown up or achieved? The grow up of the connecting trust could be the result of a *matching process* (Mandják et al. 2007) between the two organisations and between the two groups of people involved in the future relationship. This matching process contains of interactions and it is typically based on and begins with the communication (later on the meeting) of two persons. The connecting trust (the perception together the benevolence and the credibility) relates here at the same time to the both object of the trust (a person or an organisation). We call as *whole connecting trust* when the perception of the partner's benevolence and credibility is simultaneously refers altogether a person and an organisation. Of course this person is a representative of the particular organisation. This whole connecting trust seems to be a condition fundamental of the establishing an emerging (new) business relationship.

There are several ways (or several scenarios) of the matching process to gain the whole connecting trust. One scenario could be from the perception of the benevolence first and credibility after and an other could be the opposite direction. About the object of the trust also two scenarios could be; from the organisation to the person or just vice versa. However the interesting issue is that how this whole connecting trust does come into being about the object of the trust. More precisely does it form first at the personal level and after it passes to the organisational level or it begins at the organisational level and goes after to personal.

The Videoton Case: Presentation of two emerging relationships

The Videoton Holding has an exciting history which was started in 1938 when it was established in Székesfehérvár in Hungary as a private company in the military mechanics industry. After the Second World War it has been nationalised. Over a forty years period Videoton has been operated as one of the most important and largest Hungarian state-run company. It has changed its profile and became a huge electronic consumer goods company covering the big part of the Hungarian market and making an important export activity to the neighbouring socialist countries and to the USSR. Their products were very popular in Hungary and in the other countries and his name became well-known in the socialist countries. The company became one of the strongest Hungarian brands at those times. The Videoton existed in the mind of people as a large electronic consumer product manufacturer meanwhile it had a very important military activity as well. It was not more on the mechanics field but on the high level of military communication. Videoton had a heavy military export activity but only to the Warsaw Pact countries. At the end of the eighties Videoton had a considerable turnover and employed more than sixteen thousand people. Just after the end of communism in 1989 the always state-run Videoton had a double crisis. Caused by the free import of Western and Japanese consumer electronics its products become obsolete and unpopular and they lost their market and the company lost its competitiveness. With the disappearance of the Warsaw Pact its military export market is collapsed and Hungary's new NATO membership killed its local military sales as well. After fired several thousand of people and before the bankruptcy the Videoton has been privatised in 1995. It has been bought by the today's owners of the company. The new owners had immediately stopped all the money loosing activities it means most of the manufacturing activities and carefully analysed and used Videoton's old capabilities and began to rebuild a completely new industrial complex.

Today the vertically integrated Videoton is the largest Hungarian industrial group in local private ownership offering manufacturing and related services for industrial firms. The company has nine locations in Hungary, one in Bulgaria (Stara Zagora) and one in Ukraine (Mukachevo). Employing 7600 people, Videoton's turnover was 326 million EUR in 2011. Videoton is a professional, regional, integrated supplier and contract manufacturing company being the 4th most significant European EMS provider and the 26th largest globally at the same time. The company is also a competent multi-commodity supplier of parts, assemblies and modules, a professional regional EMS provider with extended engineering services, a turn-key contract manufacturing partner for outsourcing and transfer projects and also a complex service provider for the establishment and operation of industrial parks (Figure 1 illustrates Videoton Holding's group structure).

1. Figure: Group structure of Videoton Holding in 2014



According to the purpose of our paper, in the following we introduce two different relationships of Videoton. In the description we focus on the emergence of these relationships. There were no direct antecedents of these customer relationships. We name the two customers Company A and Company B, since the names of the companies are not relevant in our case.

VT Automotive Electronics and Company A

Videoton’s 25 specialized medium sized subsidiaries provide a complete solution to its business partners from Automotive Industry (39%), Household Appliances (22%) and Industrial Applications (29%). One of the major activities of Videoton is supplying for automotive companies which is provided by VT Automotive Electronics. The subsidiary’s main cooperation began in 1998 with the French company, Company A which is a Tier 1 supplier in the automotive industry and still the most important partner for VT Automotive Electronics and Videoton Holding as well. At that time Videoton already had several years of experience in supplying to the automotive industry. It means they were aware of the strict quality requirements of the industry and they had the expertise, the manufacturing facilities and the human resource as well. The whole business of VT Automotive Electronics was based only on one customer. But in 1998, this relationship stalled, they could not develop further, so VT had to look for new customers. The truth is that the relationship with Company A wasn’t created from a natural step in the company's life. In 1998, the company still did not have adequate capital, liquidity; the financial risk was on the highest level. The managing director was careful and restrained with the establishment of the French relationship; however, the two

CEOs of Videoton have supported it. In fact, the Company A found VT and not inversely. VT sent approximately 180 proposals to Company A to different locations. The Company A roughly defined the size of potential partner and thus actually reached VT. But after proposals there was no answer. A twist in the relationship has occurred when the CEO's at Videoton persuaded a manager at upper level at Company A to visit Videoton. The risk bearing and "go ahead" was paid off. They have been taken steps without specific customer needs because they seriously believed in the potential for development and finally, therefore could the French relationship developed. As the director of the automotive electronics company nicely formulated that situation: *"This French manager has been arrived, he went to the machine-shop ... we said him look there was the machine-shop and there were thousand workers, we had been very nicely able to supply for automotive electronic industry since six-seven years and believe we would be able also to delivery to him. He gave credence to us. I always say that marketing and sales are about that I have to sell my capability which doesn't yet exist but I'm surely able to develop it when there will be demand for it."* First of all they negotiated about the switches and contacts, than electronic components. Since 2002 the VT Automotive Electronics has already delivered to 22 different locations of Company A (e.g. Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, China, Turkey, Portugal, Spain, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Czech Republic, and Romania). However for a successful relationship building there is a very important condition. *"It is not just the partner's interests we need; on the other side we need a person who is the engine, the "motor" of everything. So, people who try...of course, problems always occur, but the problems have to be solved in the shortest time. The whole thing has to go this way. On the other side we need somebody who is the engine; the "motor" of all this and who believes in it. It is important that we should perform well. After this, it works"* explained by a senior manager of the company.

Videoton Holding and Company B

The story of this relationship started in 1995. The antecedents of the relationship go back to 1988, to the Videoton before the transition in Hungary. At that time one of the subsidiaries of Videoton, dealing with audiotechnics, was in for a fruitful relationship with Sony Vega. The responsible person at Videoton was the same manager who is the business development director of Videoton today. They were already near to sign the contract about manufacturing sound box for radio cassette players, but in 1990 when the political situation in Hungary became troublous, Sony finally stepped out of the business. After the transition the director started to reveal the old relationship. Sony showed interest and the sales leader of the component manufacturing division in Japan visited Videoton. He wanted to sell components for manufacturing CD players. Videoton had business in this field but they had commitments to other suppliers. The Japanese sales leader was so enthusiastic that he had frequent visits – twice in a year – to Videoton to check the opportunities. The last visit occurred in the beginning of 1995. The CEO's of Videoton did not support these visits, but the business development director kept open house. He remembers: *„A manager from Sony used to visit us regularly he wanted to sell us CD pick-ups. We have said him that we were producing CD players but that was the client who determined what kind of pick-ups must be used, thus we*

couldn't buy from him. Never mind he came every year and checked how we had developed. A day he played golf together with the European boss of Company B, an other Japanese who asked him whether he knew an Eastern-European company to manufacture car radios. This manager gave him my visit card." In September 1995, the business development director at Videoton got a phone call from the European boss of Company B. He explained that he was looking for a partner in Eastern Europe for manufacturing car radio. He also promised to send products by mail and they arrived within 2 weeks. The relationship with Company B emerged, the first personal meeting occurred in October 1995, and manufacturing started in March 1996. In that year out of the 12.000 employees of Videoton 300 worked in this project and this number increased up to 550 employees (out of the total 19.000). This relationship was significant in added value for Videoton and lasted until 2002 (Company B had to finish the project because of quitting the audio division in Europe).

Case analysis

Where are emerging (new) relationships coming from? The analysis of the case of Videoton's two emerging relationships gives an opportunity to get some elements of the answer. The analysis has two steps; firstly the trust building scenarios and secondly the trigger issues have been studied.

Whole connecting trust building scenarios

In the case of Company A the whole connecting trust building process began by different demands for bidding. At this phase Company A had a perception about the credibility of Videoton but not yet about the company's benevolence. After receiving several answers (more than 180 proposals) Company A made sure of the benevolence of Videoton. From our point of view it means that Company A had a connecting trust but only at organisational level. And it was not enough to establish a business relationship with Videoton. The turning point was the visit of an upper level company manager at Székesfehérvár. It was the occasion for the manager of the Company A and for the director of VT Automotive Electronics to make sure of each other's credibility and mainly benevolence. The connecting trust now established at personal level too. As a result of this whole connecting trust the emerging business relationship has been transformed to an established relationship and Company A became the most important customer of Videoton. This relationship always stays while that manager has quitted several years ago the Company A.

In the case of Company A the connecting trust firstly has grown up at organisational level and only after at personal level.

The case of the Company B is an example of another type of scenario how the connecting trust is growing up. Here the general manager of Company B firstly had a perception of credibility and benevolence of Videoton. It is very important to say that this first personal level connecting trust has been based on a recommendation. Based on his connecting trust the general manager of Company B had connected the director of Videoton by phone and after he

sent the samples to the company. The two persons met each other only some months later. Generated by this personal level connecting trust and the organisational level connecting trust have been rapidly grown up. This whole connecting trust made possible the established business relationship which has worked well during six years from 1996 till 2002.

What is so important in this situation is that the perception of the organisational motivation and capability are based on the recommendation of a third actor, namely the recommendation of Sony's manager who had visited Videoton so many times and who had excellent personal relationship with Videoton's business development director. But they have never working business relationship together.

In the case of Videoton we have examples for two trust building scenarios with the same result, but the matching process is quite different behind.

What are behind this connecting trust emerging process? What are the trigger issues to begin a matching process? How does a new relationship born?

Trigger issues

Anyhow „the industrial network is a product of its history. The actors – organizational or individual – have memories of their interaction. They have made investments in the relations with other actors; they have developed and invested in their industrial activities on the basis of that interaction.” (Håkansson and Johanson 1988:461). As the director of VT Automotive Electronics remarked „*Last year the same French manager with whom together we begun the business with Company A in 1999 came back. During the time he left Company A and joined to a telecommunication firm. He came back to us and now we are delivering different rooters to his company. Telecommunication rooters... The former buyer had his come-back. If someone asks me about customer satisfaction I think it is. When the buyer comes back while he works for another company.*” Here we can see the positive result of a former direct personal and business relationship. It is positive from the point of view of the birth of an emerging (new) relationship.

A manager of the automotive electronics company has mentioned also an interesting example of the birth of a new relationship: „*The purchasing director of this company worked so many years ago for the Company A. We did not know each other and he had only some information about Videoton but he knew that we are short listed supplier of the Company A. He only remembered us, they came to audit us. They said OK we are good for them. The purchasing manager said that if we are good for the Company A since many years and we have always big business with the Company A certainly we will be good for them. Just because of that. Now we have yet two or three businesses with this company.*” In this situation the positive result is based only a former business relationship but without real personal contacts.

Industry norms are important trigger issues. As a director of automotive electronics pointed out: [automotive electronics] „*Industry culture is different. There are references. Personal acquaintances, relationships, as mentioned before a colleague from the Company A had changed his company and now we are also producing rooters what we have never done*

before. Thus it works like that, what is more important for a customer it is the recommendation of an old colleague, etc. Therefore this basis of reference, it is much stronger than anything else.”

How these personal relationships work or begin to work? Videoton managers gave some interesting insights of this matching process. One important issue could be the feeling inside a communication interaction. „...*as you begin a negotiation with someone you can feel whether the direction of the negotiation is that he/she asks something just to avoid problems or he/she asks something because he/she wants to prove that something couldn't work*” said a senior manager of Videoton.

Another central issue could be the sympathy. One of the top managers remembered about a new partner like this “„... *he said to me, look my friend, there were many other Hungarian companies but I've chosen you because you were the most sympathetic guys.*”

However sympathy is important mainly at the very beginning of the matching process but of course it is not enough. The same top manager highlighted: “*On the other side we need somebody who is the engine, the “motor” of all this and who believe in it. It is important that we have to perform well. After this it is working.*” It means that the key is to find this person who is the “motor” of the business relationship building and after of its maintaining as well. To find him it is the question of personal relationships or the management of personal relationships. Interestingly these “motor” persons could be in the new, just nascent relationship but sometimes they could come from other side. For instance a person at a customer who leaves the company or perhaps the industry and later he comes back just because of the good experiences in the past relationship.

Discussion

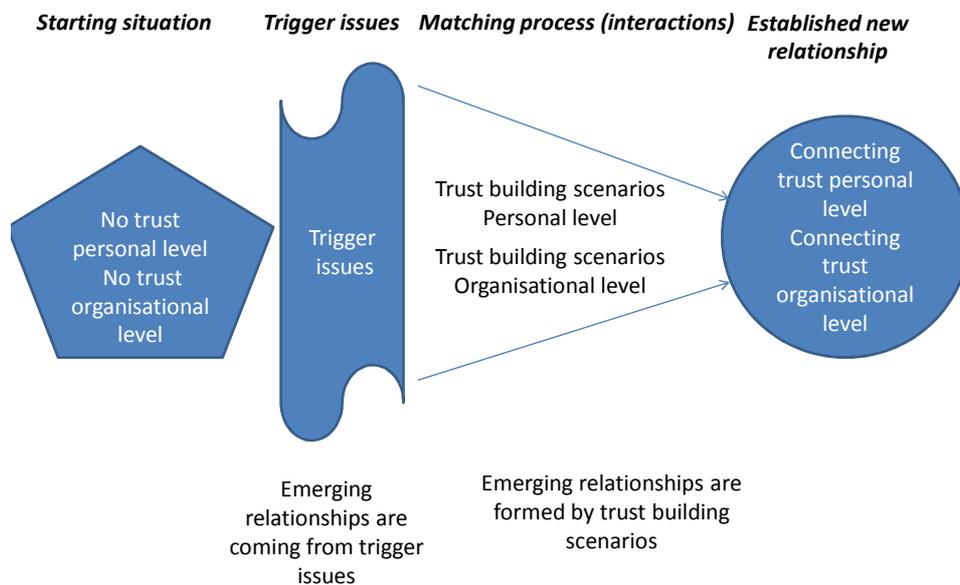
How does business relationship emerge? Where are the emerging (new) relationships coming from?

The basic idea is that even a new business relationship can not work without trust. Trust is the basis and the glue of a lasting business relationship. The “development of trust is not primarily to exclude the uncertainties created by motion, but rather to ensure that it is handled fruitfully” (Håkansson et al. 2009:23). The emerging (new) business relationship is at the same time both an interactive and a trust building process.

In the case of an emerging (new) relationship the starting point is that there is not yet any trust between the potential partners. It is a no trust situation (Andaleeb 1992) at both personal and organisational level. Caused and influenced by different trigger issues a matching process begins between the actors. This matching process contains different types of interactions which create different types of trust building scenarios. As result of these scenarios the whole connecting trust grows up between the partners. This whole connecting trust is the basis of the establishment of a new business relationship. And in this new business relationship the whole

connecting trust transforms to experienced trust (Mayer et al. 1995). Figure 2 presents this process.

Figure 2 Process of emerging relationships



Source: Constructed by the authors

In the context of an emerging (new) relationship the *perception of the benevolence of a person* is related to the supposed and later proved motivation and readiness to build together this new contact. What kind and how many efforts or specific actions could be hoped from him or her to develop this new relationship? The *perceived benevolence of an organisation* is closely related to its actual network position. More exactly it is the question of the organisation's network identity. This network identity has two dimensions anticipated constructive and anticipated deleterious effects (Anderson et al. 1994).

In the context of an emerging (new) relationship the *perception of the credibility of a person* consider his or her ability of communication (negation skills, empathy, and open mindedness) and of professional problem solving capacity and eventually of decision making possibility. An *organisation perceived credibility* depends on its different capabilities. More precisely its demand and transfer abilities (Ford et al. 2006) are perceived. Demand ability means that the organisation is able "to advise the supplier of the type of offering it should produce and to offer the supplier the volume and type of demand that it requires" (Ford et al. 2006:65). Furthermore the transfer ability is about the organisation's "reliability in providing the promised type and volume of orders and information to the supplier, or more generally in managing a relationship (Ford et al. 2006:65).

Conclusions

What is behind the trust? The important learning from our case study is that there is a matching process. This preliminary matching process is helped by different elements. Industry norms as they were explained by the director of the automotive electronics company about the role of references are one of them. Personal and organisational expectations about the potential new partner are the other groups of pre-conditions. Recommendations seem to have extremely high importance. All of these elements are altogether to pave the way of the perception of connecting trust. This perception can be achieved by different ways. Either benevolence (motivation) or credibility (ability) is perceived first at least both must be present for the connecting trust. As our case show this growing up of connecting trust can begin at personal level and after arrives at organisational level, that is the case of the relationship with Company A; or it can be realised in an opposite way, as it is happened in the case of Company B. However the connecting trust makes an important, perhaps fundamental contribution to the birth of an emerging (new) customer relationship.

To resume expectations, norms, personal sympathy, mutually supported preliminary actions more precisely preliminary interactions (here the fundamental role of “motors” or “engines”) are behind the trust. They are the elements of the matching process between the two future or potential partners. How these people meet each other (at the first time)? What could be horizontal (from the same industry) or vertical (from a different industry) by direct or indirect recommendation? Further possible contribution of the paper is a better understanding of the process of the generation and the growth over time (Raimondo 2000) of the trust.

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