# Network strategizing: a resource analysis

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## Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to investigate how the Norwegian Airport Express train company Flytoget is attempting a deliberate shift to a network strategy. The company wishes to shift their strategic understanding in a number of dimensions including how the firm itself creates value, how it relates to the surrounding network of actors and how it can influence others to strategize in networks. In other words, there is recognition of the need to work within current relationships in a different way and to build new relationships for the strategy to become networked reality.

'Collective strategy', 'relational strategy', 'strategic networks', 'strategic nets' and more recently 'network strategy' are commonly used terms in discussing strategic action at the inter- organisational level (e.g. Blumberg 2001; Dyer & Singh 1998; Gulati, Nohria, & Zaheer, 2000; Möller & Svahn 2003; Baum & Rowley 2008). IMP provides an understanding of strategising with key counterparts at *both* the relationship and network levels based on resource and activity, as well as actor, connections (Gadde et al., 2003). As Gadde et al (2003) argued, a company's strategic orientation can only be considered via the three layers of substance - actors, resources and activities – and therefore strategising involves ongoing actor bonds, resource ties and activity links.

We will analyse Flytoget's strategizing efforts using the resource layer tool kit (Håkansson and Waluszewski, 2002a; Baraldi et al, 2012a, b) as attempts are made to imagine, identify and build resource connections which were previously not in place. We employ a longitudinal case based approach based on in-depth interviews and participant observations. Flytoget's network awareness is present in its strategic plan of 2014 where the company

articulates its ambition to be a central actor in the creation of seamless travel networks. The paper is a work in progress effort to follow the firm's strategic development in real time.

**Keywords:** network strategizing, resources, transitions.

## 1.0     Introduction

Seamless travel is a subject that concerns a variety of service providers, authorities and research communities, besides the traveler. 'Seamlessness' is being described as effortless travel solutions or hassle-free travel experiences. It indicates a so-called 'free-from-disturbance' journey, offering an easy, carefree experience. A win-win scenario thereby appears in the seamless offering: comfortable and efficient journeys for the travelers may imply better value creation and competitiveness for capable service providers and more environmentally sustainable transportation flows.

That travelers depend on multiple service providers at numerous junctions throughout an entire journey is not problematic in itself. However, typically companies do not address their customers' needs in a systematic way. The industry is riddled with firm level strategies focusing on independence rather than a system level understanding of strategies and value creation based on interdependencies. To illustrate; even successful organizations think too much in the components of journey and how to make their part 'the best one'. Schiphol's ongoing development work maintains that their departure hall is *where many passengers start their journey*.[1] But, not a single passenger has ever started his or her journey in a departure hall!

Similarly, one of the firms in our study claims in its vision statement the desire to '*deliver the supreme part of the journey*' to their customers. As expressed by one of the managers: "*So you can have had a really lousy morning and a two-day flight delay… but our 19 minutes were great!*" The company shares this vision with many other transportation providers. Obviously, it does not help the traveler if other providers fail in their deliveries. It will neither assist in creating less stress for the traveler nor provide environmentally sustainable offerings. Seamless travel requires that the providers focus less on 'their' section of the journey

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[1] http://www.innovatievemainport.nl/en/projects-themes/seamless-travel/item16)

and more on how they in cooperation can offer integrated products. There is therefore a need to address strategic action at the inter-organisational level.

The point of departure for the study reported here is that there are relatively few studies focused on the issue of deliberate – rather than incremental - networking action (Baraldi et al, 2007; Harrison & Prenkert, 2009; Harrison et al, 2010). The purpose of the paper therefore is to investigate how Flytoget is attempting a deliberate shift to network strategy, or perhaps more accurately, network strategizing. In other words, the company wishes to shift their strategic understanding in a number of dimensions including how the firm itself creates value, how it relates to the surrounding network of actors and how it can influence others to strategize in networks.

The paper proceeds as follows. In section two below we discuss the concept of network strategizing. As Gadde et al (2003) argued, a company's strategic orientation can only be considered via the three layers of substance - actors, resources and activities – and therefore strategising involves ongoing actor bonds, resource ties and activity links. We make use of the resource layer as a way to materialize Flytoget's strategizing efforts. Following this, our methodology is briefly outlined, before we present the first working through of our case study.

## 2.0    Strategizing at the network level

IMP is unique in that it provides an understanding of both relationship and network level strategising in terms of all three layers of substance – actors, resources, activities (Gadde et al., 2003). Networking actions in exploring the 'scope for action'– network strategising - are typically considered to be incremental and emergent over time (Håkansson & Ford 2002:137). Strategic action involves connections with other actors, and thus interactions within these relationships: "… *it is not limited to the focal firm but involves the network of relationships in which it is involved and the resources to which it has access*" (Axelsson and Easton, 1992:181). The implication is that any strategic actions of a firm are embedded and interdependent rather than isolated (Mattsson 1987). It is the logic of the rainforest (Håkansson et al 2009, based on co-existence/co-evolution, interdependence, collaboration and 'plus' sum games, and a move from competitive advantage to cooperative advantage at the network level. In other words, ''*the scope of strategy shifts from that of pursuing a victory over others to somehow making it together with customers and suppliers, distributors and development partners*'' (Ford et al. 1998, p. 107). In other words, attempts to build interdependencies in systematic ways for strategic purposes.

Using the verb 'strategizing' (Håkansson & Ford 2002; Gadde et al., 2003; Tikkanen & Halinen 2003; Baraldi et al 2007; Harrison & Prenkert 2009) places emphasis on doing rather than having (cf Whittingon 1996, 2002). Network strategizing can be considered as being of three types; cognitive, positioning, and adapting (Tikkanen & Halinen 2003; Harrison & Prenkert 2009). Briefly, cognitive strategizing incorporates concepts such as network theory, network pictures and network horizon (e.g. Henneberg, Mouzas & Naude, 2006; Holmen & Pedersen 2003). Positioning strategizing encompasses efforts to develop or maintain network roles and positions (Axelsson & Easton 1992; Mattson 1987; Awaleh 2008). Day-to-day adaptations to a particular counterpart in a network might also have major consequences for strategy (e.g. Brennan & Turnbull 1989; Canning & Brennan 2004). In other words, 'adaptations as strategizing' places emphasis on continuing relational interactions.

The point of departure for the study reported here is that there are relatively few studies focused on the issue of deliberate – rather than incremental - networking action in networks (Baraldi et al, 2007; Harrison & Prenkert, 2009; Harrison et al, 2010). Baraldi et al (2007) pointed out that studies have not directly considered how managers devise, select and implement new strategies when embedded in a network context. Harrison & Prenkert (2009) attempted to address this challenge in analysing, prospectively, how network connections were discussed and analysed within a strategy development process. They used the term 'network strategizing trajectories' to give a process dimension to the ARA functional layers of actor, resource and activity. Deliberate strategizing efforts can also be analysed using the idea of intra- and inter-organisational strategic initiatives (Harrison et al, 2010).

Discussing network strategizing efforts within planned strategy making raises one key and somewhat obvious issue: does the selection of a strategic option result in this planned, deliberate strategy being implemented, or realised at least somewhat as intended (Snehota, 1990) Øberg & Brege's (2009) is a rare exception here. This empirical work illustrated how a deliberate strategy was not implemented as intended at all.

In the paper reported here, we will use a resource lens to widen the scope of deliberate strategizing to incorporate both deliberate planning efforts and how these are implemented.

### 2.1. Materializing network strategizing efforts: analyzing resource interfaces

A key strength of the IMP approach is the simultaneous focus on three layers of substance, and not only that of actors. Strategizing is not only at the actor level, concerned with connecting or disconnecting actor bonds (Gadde et al, 2003). Instead, it can be materialised.

The so-called '4R model' is one way to analyse resource interaction by modelling resource connections or interfaces (Håkansson and Waluszewski, 2002a). Baraldi et al (2012a) suggested that strategy was one area in which there is scope for such analysis, following the work of Awaleh (2008): "*it would be a tool for individual strategists to learn about the resources of others, to systematically compare images of resources, and to make decisions together regarding how resource utilization could be more effective…*" The output is a resource-centred representation of a relationship or network. "*Such analysis may provide a fine-grained picture of the existing resource structure…at the network level…in turn strengthening the possibilities for conducting change and development*" (Baraldi et al, 2012a).

This is a way to address the role of resources in inter-organisational strategizing. Although the resource-based view (RBV) has considered the formation, operation, management and performance of strategic alliances (e.g. Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven, 1996; Das and Teng, 2000; Ireland et al, 2002; Park et al, 2004), a recent theoretical extension by Lavie (2006) builds on Dyer and Singh (1998) and Gulati (1999) in emphasizing the importance of relationships rather than resources. He argues "*…studies [that] retain the fundamental assumptions of the traditional RBV… [conform] to principles that may be inconsistent with the nature of interconnected firms*" (Lavie, 2006: 640).

Lavie's pertinent concerns can be addressed by how the 4R model deals with resource interactions. Moreover, few RBV studies focus on resource combinations/bundles and resource combining rather than the characteristics of single resources (Kraaijenbrink et al, 2010, Foss and Stieglitz, 2010, following Grant, 1996; Teece, 2007; Stieglitz and Heine, 2007), or how the mental models of managers and entrepreneurs allow firms to "navigate the vast space of possible resource combinations..." (Foss and Stieglitz, 2010: 20). There are parallels here Håkansson and Waluszewski's (2002a) idea and activated structures. A visualised idea structure might be a tool for managers to discuss new ideas– future resource bundles – in existing resource interfaces within and across boundaries.

What is the 4R model and how are resources conceptualised to interact within this? First, resources are classified into two groups, technical (products and facilities) and social (organizational units and inter-organizational relationships) (Håkansson & Waluszewski, 2002a: 34-38). "*The main advantage of this four-part classification is that it allows for a precise analysis of how two or more resources interact*" (Baraldi et al 2012a), and for envisioning and making decisions based on this.

The four types of resources are complemented by the concept of 'resource interface'. Resource interfaces are the "interconnections between two or more entities at a shared

boundary" (Dubois & Araujo, 2006: 22; see also Jahre et al 2006; Baraldi & Strömsten, 2006, 2008; Baraldi, 2003). The interfaces that connect the resources (either of the same resource 'type' or different) are a way to capture interaction. They are thus a 'building block' for the analysis of resource combinations (cf Baraldi et al 2012a). In the words of Baraldi et al (2012a), "*The longer two resources have been combined in interaction, the higher the chance that they have been more closely adapted by means of modifications made to one or both*" (cf. Baraldi & Waluszewski, 2007; Håkansson & Waluszewski, 2002a).

Interfaces can be technical (between products and facilities) and organizational (organizational units and inter-organizational relationships) (Dubois & Araujo, 2006; Jahre et al, 2006). Mixed interfaces (between resources in different groups) is the most important source of value in resource combining (Jahre et al, 2006). Development requires changes in resource combinations with the relevant resource interfaces.

## 3.0    Research Design

Considering the exploratory nature of this research, we will primarily employ a longitudinal case study methodology. Various authors provide suggestions for carrying out case research (e.g. Halinen & Törnroos 2005; Dubois & Araujo 2007; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Case studies embed an object in context, allow depth, detail, and richness of data, are longitudinal by default (Easton 1998) and are process-oriented. The two main sources of primary data are in-depth interviews and participant observations. To date, nine interviews and two participant observation meetings have been conducted.

The research has an interesting set of industry partners in Flytoget (the Airport Express Train), the Norwegian National Rail Administration, Oslo Airport and Heathrow Express. Flytoget carries more than six million passengers every year, which amounts to approximately 10 % of all train passengers in Norway, and approximately 20 % of all train passengers in the greater Oslo region.

Its strategic plan of 2014 emphasizes the ambition of Flytoget to be a central actor in the creation of seamless travel networks, and thereby to become a recognized contributor to sustainable development. We have a unique opportunity to follow the firm's strategic development in real time as it embarks on this endeavor. The strategic plan is valid until the end of 2018. We also have access to other organizations in the network, such as the Norwegian National Rail Administration. This organization plays a fundamental role as a provider of a basic infrastructure layer that other providers utilize for their services. Heathrow Express,

which operates between London Heathrow and Paddington Train Station in central London, is another important actor. We expect the number of network actors involved to develop as Flytoget's strategizing activities unfold over time.

## 4.0    Strategising at Flytoget: some background notes

Flytoget has been a success so far. It is a three-time winner of the Norwegian Customer Satisfaction Index and the current holder of the highest score ever achieved. Changing strategy under such conditions may be challenging, but some issues have also been in favour of a transition.

One change trigger is the growing recognition that Flytoget is responsible for a very small part of a passenger's entire journey. Its management believes the company has been very focused on its own route, neglecting to look beyond that small part. Attention has been given to operations, focusing on client satisfaction and profitability measures. But an overall strategy has been largely absent. The business model and revenue logic have not been systematically addressed; partners/relationships have not been placed in a strategic perspective. To some extent, the organization has been in a 'success trap', doing slightly better what it always has done for many successive years. Flytoget's competitive advantages have been speed, frequency and accuracy. However, today its main competitor drives just as fast, have equally good trains and charges half the price. The operational differences tend to disappear, and this is what the company currently is experiencing.

Recently the organization also faced a declining market share, for the first time in its history. This fact became public in January 2016 when one of Norway's leading newspapers illustrated how similar the main competitor's offerings actually were. Flytoget's communication manager addressed concerns within the organizations by expressing a relief in that these facts were, finally, public. There was an internal desire to, once again, respond by stressing high customer satisfaction. But those responsible for the strategizing efforts which form our case study did not want to live on old memories; they preferred to publicize a new network strategy and various innovations towards seamlessness.

A number of interesting industry developments has also influenced Flytoget's network strategising. For instance, Finnair and Finnish railway operator VR are cooperating to offer combined air-and-rail tickets between St. Petersburg and international destinations connecting via Helsinki. This alliance will enable passengers flying throughout Finnair's network to connect to and from St. Petersburg on a high-speed Allegro train. Heathrow Express has

developed alliances with both Air Lingus and Iberia, facilitating the booking process. The Amtrak - United Airlines partnership allows travelers to make one reservation for both air and rail tickets by simply calling United Airlines, logging onto United.com, or calling their local travel agent. TripIt has established partnerships with Best Western hotels and Avis; by integrating TripIt into Best Western's mobile application and by making it possible to access trip itineraries and reserve vehicles with Avis. KLM and Uber work together.

The management team at Flytoget is therefore in a hurry. They want to implement their network strategy 'before the train leaves the station'! Simply put, more and more journeys are connected, everything can be connected and if they want to be well positioned, they need to act swiftly.

### 4.1. Building seamless travel through deliberate strategising

Some managers within Flytoget have viewed the declining market share as unproblematic and possible to deal with though cost cutting. But the management team behind the transition believes that to be a short term alternative only. The firm is already lean, focusing on one type of business only (one train route, one type of train).

During an EMBA program at one of the leading business schools in Norway, one of the managers learnt about network models. To this manager, the new frameworks explained the culture of the main competitor, where he had worked for a number of years: *These are our tracks, these are our trains. There was no customer focus, only an operational focus. That was because they only saw their own value chain…and always maintained an internal focus.*"

During the EMBA program, the manager had a consulting project at Flytoget with a team of fellow students. Employees and other managers were involved and given concrete assignments, including descriptions of the firm's strategic position in 2018 and how to reach that position. All employees were part of a virtual train trip taking place between the firm's departure and arrival stations. The start of the journey included a presentation where the participants were told that their company had become identical to other train companies. The decision '*not be the railway's answer to Ryanair*' was articulated.

The perception was that there was no benefit from a low cost strategy since their competitors are stronger here (tickets are half price). Work started towards forming a differentiation strategy. One pillar in the strategy is to be '*the builder of the seamless travel network*'; an interesting ambition considering the firm's small size and brief part of its clients' total journey. The intention is to connect with partners, build a unique cooperative culture,

utilize synergies, and establish a position as the 'digital glue' in the traveler's network. The ambition is not to become a hub, but to be a 'network influencer'; building and driving the establishment of a network-oriented mentality among different stakeholders.

The strategy has been presented to groups of eight employees at a time, with the help of an enlarged map from Google. On the map were both trains and clients, along with all of the ongoing initiatives that were to form part of the new strategy. Along the Google journey map, the timeline between 2014 and 2018 was highlighted. This was further visualized when, upon arrival at Oslo airport, a number of cards which had been placed upside down were shown, with text describing how the ongoing initiatives were to be implemented. The manager spent one hour on each group, and the entire process lasted for three months. An inclusive and participatory approach seems to have addressed many of the internal concerns regarding the deliberate transition towards a network strategy.

To date it is the management team's perception that other actors initially struggle to understand the extent of the network strategy. The industry talks about seamless travel, but lacks the 'network thinking' to achieve that goal. Having an explicit network strategy in order to stay competitive is therefore novel to most actors in the emerging network. So far, we have not conducted any interviews with external partners, although some external actors have been present during participatory observation meetings. Flytoget seems to face partners, both actual and potential organizations, which become surprised by this relatively small actor's network ambitions. To influence others in seeing 'a networked view of reality' is stressed as central by the management team; "*You are in a network, but you don't see it. How can we change that, how can we make that visible and communicate that to others as well? And that is the journey we are doing now.*"

Some 30 initiatives related to the network strategy are currently in progress. It is described as "*the greatest change ever… a version 2.0 of the company*". The possibilities for connecting with other actors are described as "*unlimited*". What is emphasized here is that partners must receive value from the relationships that are developed. Flytoget has already established a number of new relationships, such as www.visitoslo.no to deal with its own limited distribution.

The company also arranged recently a competition that SAS won. Working with SAS has been an ambition for a long time. Based on trust and an open book policy, a common project group finally managed to establish a joint offering. Today passengers receive Eurobonus points when traveling with Flytoget. SAS works with a number of partners who purchase points from them, but Flytoget stresses that to 'purchase' oneself into other's channels

is easy but not a network strategy with win-win ambitions. The desire is to combine resources in such a way that synergies create benefits for both parties, benefits that they could not have achieved on their own. Flytoget can now use the SAS customer database to analyse new possibilities. Compatible applications and the recruitment of clients to one another's networks are potential benefits.

This is a good example of the size differentials involved in the strategy. SAS has 3.2 million members in their network, and Flytoget has about 50 000. Despite this significant difference in size, the power balance appears to be somewhat equaled by Flytoget's strong brand recognition. As stated by one of the managers: "*We do not have a big network, but most actors benefit from being associated with us*." But while the brand may be a 'door opener', Flytoget still needs to articulate its network ambitions.

Flytoget has already experienced what it means to be a 'network builder'. Their partners usually need to develop their mindset towards a more radical view of network possibilities. Offering discounts and similar operational ideas may be interesting, but the firm wants to provide a broader picture of what seamless travel could be, from a customer viewpoint. The company regards its Eurobonus program and its initial voucher offering with Heathrow Express and Arlanda Express Train as the first steps of their network strategising. The main task is to reduce both physical and cognitive barriers hindering seamless developments.
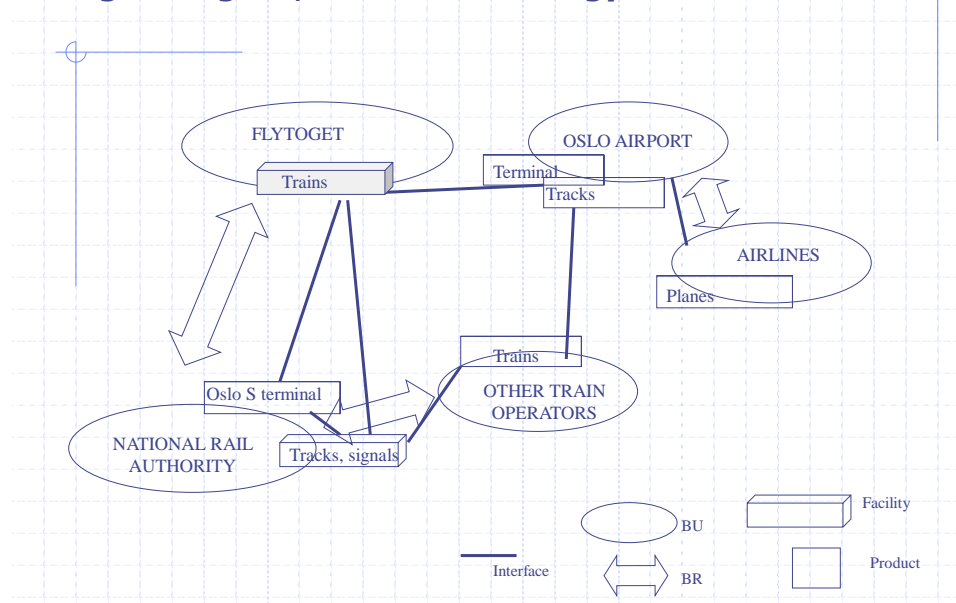

## 5.0. Analysis

The preliminary case analysis starts in the illustration below (Figure 1) of the original, successful strategy. This is essentially 'before seamless'. The resource interfaces between the business unit and facility resources are deep and well established. For example, the facility-facility interfaces between the tracks at Oslo S and those at Oslo Airport, and the business unit-business unit interfaces between Flytoget and Oslo Airport. The resource connections are both well established and well understood, especially in an environment of population growth and increased passenger numbers.

This resource network was very successful from Flytoget's perspective when the facility resource 'trains' owned by other train operators offered much slower journey times and old trains in their departures from Oslo central railway station, Oslo S. Flytoget had a clear perspective on their source of competitive advantage and a well defined role to play in the network. But when new trains – new facility resources – are introduced by other train operators, which shorten journey times to match those of Flytoget and offer an equally comfortable ride,

there is a direct threat to the latter's competitive advantage. This is shown in the declining market share position described in the background notes above. In other words, the resource interfaces can be, and have been, directly copied.

**Fig 1: Original, successful strategy**

FLYTOGET

Trains

OSLO AIRPORT

Terminal

Tracks

AIRLINES

Planes

Trains

OTHER TRAIN OPERATORS

Oslo S terminal

NATIONAL RAIL AUTHORITY

Tracks, signals

BU

Facility

Interface

BR

Product

The new strategy – of providing seamless travel to the passenger customer - is requiring Flytoget's managers to imagine a networked resource future. The imaging of a different resource layer is partly based on the existing resource interfaces, and partly on conceptualizing new interfaces, identifying potential relationships, and attempting to influence others in order to establish or deepen/change an existing resource interface. Some of the resources and the related resource interfaces are highly likely to stay the same. The facility resources (e.g. trains) owned and operated within Flytoget's resource collection remain. The trains cannot go faster, will not be replaced (at least in the short to medium term) and the company has no intention to reduce ticket prices. The strategic issue is therefore what other resources can be interfaced into this rather fixed resource bundle in order to make it unique from a passenger perspective?

The efforts to build a network strategy, with new and existing relationships, are not based on Flytoget as a hub actor. Instead, it is centred on the travel experience (before, during and after taking the train, on outward and inward journeys). The idea of seamless travel requires putting the customer and not the train at the centre. This would require a small but

significant change to Fig 1, as we would add a picture of the customer as the 'product' within the Flytoget train facility resource (observant readers will have already noticed we do not have any 'product' resources in Fig 1).

Flytoget's managers are imagining new resource interfaces, identifying possible relationships (they are likely of course to know the actors involved here), and trying to find or co-create solutions. These efforts are underpinned by digital technologies (essentially a new and very central facility resource). Overall, we will expect a clear expansion of the resource boundaries compared to Fig 1.

## 6.0. Final remarks

The purpose of the paper was to investigate how Flytoget is attempting a deliberate shift towards a network strategy. The current challenge is the ongoing identification, design and implementation of this strategy with new and existing relationships.

The focal firm's network strategizing involves cognitive developments that may be analysed from network theory and network picture perspectives. The firm has explicitly acknowledged that its role and position in the network must change in parallel with seamless developments. Seamlessness appears to include novel idea structures based on a variety of resource interfaces. Moreover, the activated structures include a clearer focus on connecting 'departure with arrival', rather than focusing on trains and rail.

Flytoget's managers cannot network strategize by themselves. They imagine a networked resource future, but they must also influence others in seeing such a future. In our continued research, we therefore intend to study how network strategizing efforts materialize through resource interfaces. A visualised idea structure might be a tool for managers to discuss new ideas– future resource bundles – in existing resource interfaces within and across boundaries.

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