

The Potence of Resource Potential when Envisioning Business

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Abstract

In this paper, we elaborate on the issue of identifying and acknowledging potential resources when resuming business, following a previous business closure. The purpose of the paper is to further our understanding of business resumption by highlighting the role of resource configuring in a changing network context. We see resource configuring competence to include: acknowledging potential resources, using previous experience of combing resources, and envisioning future resource combinations. Equally we argue that configuring resources is essential to resource becoming. We base our discussion on a case study of a closed Australian car manufacturing plant where resources are applied to a different purpose.

Keywords: business, closure, resuming, resource, configuring, competence

Introduction

When, on the 31st March 2008, the Japanese Mitsubishi Motors Corporation (MMC) closed its wholly owned subsidiary in Australia, the Tonsley motor vehicle assembly plant of Mitsubishi Motors Australia Limited (MMAL). The plant closure meant that the company ended a well over two-decade era of manufacturing of cars in Australia. This, in turn, influenced all of the 137 suppliers that had supplied parts to the Mitsubishi 380 vehicle that was produced at the plant, and resulted in around 900 employees being laid-off. MMAL did maintain its Australian headquarters and a spare parts facility on the site, but the vehicle assembly plant was fully de-commissioned by the end of 2009. The now empty manufacturing site consisted of 61 hectares of land, alongside a main arterial road in the southern suburbs of Adelaide, the capital of the state of South Australia. The site was also serviced by a rail line, a high speed optical internet cable, high capacity electrical lines and an on-site electrical sub-station. Also located nearby are the state's third university, a medical centre and a small entrepreneurial cluster.

From the time of closure the Director of the State's Economic Development Department (SEDD) began to see a new potential for the site, as he was specifically looking for a new driver of the economy in the region. Building on previous experience, the Director had the insight to prepare a broad based economic plan for the Tonsley project. After considerable lobbying the State government ratified the project in 2012. Included in the plan was also the sale of 11 hectares of residential land. This land sale served two purposes: fast recouping of capital and a population to provide activity and vibrancy. The project also received support for the re-development from the State Department responsible for Technology and Further Education (TAFE). After some time, the Tonsley site was once again a vibrant place, although at this time with business and activities very different from car-manufacturing – to a large extent a result of one individual with experience and visions seeing potential in unused resources and mobilizing through other actors a range of resources.

During a complete business closure, relationships and activities linked to the business are terminated. At the same time resources tied to the business are either left unused or transformed to a new type of business. However, residues of the past may remain in the form of personal relationships and knowledge, physical artefacts and other remainders that may again become useful. In this paper, we discuss a field that until now has received little research attention, namely business change in terms of re-applying resources and relationships after a closure. The purpose is to elaborate on the *resource configuring competence* that may be needed when a closed business at a particular site is resumed.

Little research has acknowledged potential in resources that are left unused in a former place of business. Within industrial marketing, one reason for this is that most research has focused on continuing and long-lasting business relationships, where different companies' resources are tied together and combined (e.g., Håkansson & Snehota, 1995). Research and practical interest has focused on how to use "active" resources. Further, research on business relationship ending has concentrated on the termination process (e.g., Alajoutsijärvi, Möller & Tähtinen, 2000), most often leaving out the time after trading has ceased, and thus not focusing on resources that are left unused.

There has been some research interest in what happens after business closure to unused resources, such as, for example, the buildings and roads remaining at an old industrial site (Collaton & Bartsch, 1996). Also, reactivation of ended business relationships that are seen as important potential resources has been acknowledged (Gidhagen & Havila, 2016). However, what remains to be explored is the issue of how previously used resources in a former place of business are available to be vitalized for the same or a new type of use. This longitudinal view brings a dynamic perspective to resources.

The discussion is based on an empirical case study of starting a business after a closure of the Mitsubishi Motors Australia Ltd. manufacturing plant in Australia, where new activities begin using the former facilities, and where some of the stakeholders, such as authorities, local politicians and even employees are the same as before. Although new technology is needed there are still examples of old resources and connections from the past, which are important in carrying forward the new business – through resource configuring competence.

Theoretical framework

In business network literature, evolution is seen to follow from either adaptations within business relationships (Håkansson & Snehota 1995; Hallén, Johanson & Seyed-Mohamed 1991), or from intentional relationship changes made by firms according to strategy (Harrison, Holmen & Pedersen 2010). In both cases resources are recombined to find new ways to create opportunity and value within the relationships. Thus, how actors combine and recombine resources is a key aspect of business network evolution.

Resources in perspective

Initial thoughts on resources had an intra-firm perspective. Penrose (1959) asserts that the key economic challenge confronting firms is securing the best use of resources, thus referring to the collection of productive resources controlled by the firm; all existing assets – tangible as well as intangible – whose services can be used productively. Penrose argue that "it is the heterogeneity... of the productive services available or potentially available from its resources that gives each firm its unique character" (1959, p. 75).

The resource-based view (RBV), building on this perspective (e.g. Rumelt 1984; Wernerfelt 1984), states that the competitive position of a firm is defined by the bundle, or portfolios, of resources it controls. This RBV view presupposes that there is a given, and certain, set of existing and defined resources – contained within the borders of the firm. This is in line with the Schumpeterian perspective of resources that exist (and of which the firm is aware) ripe for recombination processes; i.e., innovation (Schumpeter 1934). Thus, RBV is only focusing on the actual resources under the control of a particular firm and how they are configured, or combined, in creating a competitive advantage (Moran & Ghoshal 1999; Prahalad & Hamel 1990). In this view resources are explicitly defined as "all assets, capabilities, organizational processes, firm attributes, information, knowledge, etc., controlled by a firm that enable the firm to conceive of and implement strategies that improve its efficiency and effectiveness" (Barney 1991, p.101). The resource-advantage theory of competition (e.g. Hunt & Morgan 1995) is also in line with the RBV perspective, defining resources as the "tangible and intangible entities available to the firm that enable it to produce efficiently and/or effectively a market offering that has value for some market segment(s)" (Madhavaram & Hunt 2008, p.67). Also, in discussing the closely related concept of firms' dynamic capabilities (e.g. Teece,

Pisano & Shuen 1997), resources are conceptualized as “firm-specific assets that are difficult if not impossible to imitate” (ibid, p. 516).

In an extra-firm resources perspective of business network research, also following the Schumpeterian tradition, resources are treated as “given” in any particular setting (e.g. Håkansson and Snehota 1995; Håkansson and Waluszewski 2002), although acknowledging that the combinations thereof – that are crucial to innovation (Schumpeter 1934) and potential value (Moran and Ghoshal 1999) – might not necessarily appear as obvious to the actors involved. One way of seeing the potential of resources is through interaction (Håkansson and Waluszewski 2002), where combination of resources not only considers those controlled by one specific actor, but also combining – through interaction – with resources controlled by other actors in a business network. According to this perspective, the features of a (combined) resource are not only a result of interaction, but also contingent on how individuals perceive the resource(s) being used in combination with other resources (Harrison and Håkansson 2006). This “interactive effect” gives room for what is referred to as resource heterogeneity, which in turn forms the foundation stone of business interaction; only by combining through interaction may the full potential of resources be seen (cf. Håkansson and Waluszewski 2002).

This way of emphasizing the possibilities of combining resources supplied by all actors within a network – a viewpoint also shared by the service-dominant logic (e.g. Vargo and Lusch 2011) – provides an interesting contrast with the single firm centrality of the resource-based view (cf. Prahalad and Hamel 1990). Nevertheless, resources are most often discussed as being actualized; resources “are”, and they are defined and acknowledged as such – by an actor/the focal actor.

Resources and change

Firms operate in business relationships, which when considered together form a network of firms activating resources (Håkansson & Snehota 2006). However, resources are continuously changing in use and in value according to change flowing through the network. Managers need to be responsive to change from within the firm (Schumpeter, 1942), as well as to change within business relationships (Håkansson & Ford, 2002), but at times firms do fail to change and some are even forced to close – for that or other reasons. Following the end of a business closure process, the once used and combined resources are now left unused, available for revitalization and configuring.

How a manager considers the revitalization of resources is an important issue. We see two aspects to this issue: (1) the future, and (2) the dynamic becoming nature of a resource. First, if resource configuring decisions are based only on present costs, then strategic opportunities are not valued (Atkinson & Stiglitz 1969). This suggests that a dynamic perspective is needed, one which accounts for a future, unknown however envisioned.

Second, resources are not things, rather they have a dynamic becoming aspect. This dynamic resource perspective was first addressed by Zimmermann (1951), who coined the expression “resources are not; they become”. This idea encapsulates the way the material or physical aspects of [natural] resources exists before they become resources. Resources are brought into being by functional relationships between a set of capabilities – that is, human knowledge (de Gregori 1987). For Zimmermann (1951, p.129) a “fundamental concept of resources” is the functional relationship between things. If there is no such relationship, any use of the term “resource” is meaningless. For de Gregori (1987, p. 1243) a resource is “a property of things – a property that is a result of human capability”. Thus, in this paper we maintain that in any particular context, at any particular time, any entity (tangible or intangible) with which a functional relationship – and thus a specific intended deployment – is absent, cannot be considered a resource in its own right. However, when the entity is acknowledged – by a human actor or actors – as bearing potential of becoming a resource for a specific intended purpose the entity transforms into a potential resource, ripe for configuring and combining with other resources. Following that reasoning, human knowledge – and skills to apply it – is the mother of all resources (de Gregori 1987), and indeed a resource in its own right (see e.g. Vargo and Lusch 2004).

The notion of “potential resources” is used by Vargo and Lusch (2011) to describe the process of resource becoming, in that the usefulness of any particular potential resource from one place is facilitated and/or triggered by the availability of other potential resources from other places – making the whole idea of potential resources becoming realized a contextual matter, where every context is unique. Consider the example of a production machine; when first acquired and installed for a specific purpose, at a specific place, the entity is a potential resource until it is deployed in the production process – at which time it becomes an acknowledged resource in use. Next if business activities end and the machine ceases to be operational, what is left is a remaining entity, void of any meaning or purpose. Only at the time a functional relationship is again established is the entity restored as a potential resource, and presumably also vitalized to become an actual resource. Subsequently, identifiable entities may recurrently gain or lose their resource status, depending on context, place, time – and potential.

To conclude, from an economic/business perspective, a resource can be said to be characterized by five conditions:

- its potential must be identified and acknowledged
- its potential is contextually bound
- its deployment must be enabled through combining with other resources
- its deployment must be motivated by someone benefiting from it
- its deployment must be economically viable, either on its own or through combination

Resource configuring competence

Vitalizing, configuring and integrating resources after a business closure is not the same as managing as usual, instead there are specific understandings and skills with other actors brought to bear to arrange a change. Thus, we see a special managerial competence, configuring resources after a closure, which requires foresight (McMaster, 1996) and network maneuvering. As contended in our reasoning, one major issue is identifying and acknowledging potential – and not necessarily obviously discernable – resources in or connected to the remains of past business operations, and hence this is perhaps the most prominent difference to the resource perspective in discussions on e.g. dynamic capabilities (e.g. Teece & Pisano 1994; Teece et al., 1997) and effectuation theory (e.g. Sarasvathy, 2001; Read & Sarasvathy, 2012).

Method

To explore the concept of resource configuring competence in the case of resuming operations after a business closure, a case study was undertaken. For the purpose of the maintained discussion, it was argued that the case had to include examples of resources being configured to achieve a different outcome than before closure, to further depict the issue of seeing potential when others are not. Applying case comparison is a useful exploratory approach for theory building (Yin, 2009). The case of the Tonsley factory site deals with a car-manufacturing plant that was closed in 2008 by Japanese Mitsubishi Motors Corporation (MMC) in Adelaide, South Australia. Even though Mitsubishi Motors Australia Ltd. (MMAL) continues to base their Australian import business on the site and has a warehouse of spare parts to meet obligations to owners who purchased Australian made Mitsubishi cars, most of the plant and land at the manufacturing site have been configured into new types of use. The Tonsley case was considered a typical example of a business where resources were once deployed for a specific purpose at a specific site, and where – after business closure – resources were left unused. Of particular interest to this discussion, when resuming business, these unused resources were configured for a wide array of diverse purposes, all different from the original MMAL operations.

The chosen research design is combining primary and secondary data, considering both the focal companies and the other relevant actors with which the companies had established business

relationships. Apart from studying official company information, oral presentations, press-releases, and newspaper articles, primary data was gathered through interviews with individuals considered to be key informants (Marshall 1996). Six interviews were conducted with key individuals involved in the re-development of the Tonsley site between August 2013 and August 2014 (see Table 1).

Table 1: Interviewees by role and date

Director, State Economic Development Department (SEDD)	12 August 2013
Project Officer (A), SEDD	2 April 2014
Development Office, Municipal Council	17 April 2014
Project Officer (B), SEDD	25 May 2014
CEO, Computing firm newly locating at Tonsley	11 August 2014
Director, Tonsley Re-development, SEDD	18 August 2014

The Tonsley case of resuming business

The Tonsley motor vehicle assembly plant of Mitsubishi Motors Australia Limited (MMAL), a wholly owned subsidiary of Mitsubishi Motors Corporation (MMC) of Japan, ceased production on the 31st March 2008. The plant closure meant that the company ended manufacturing of cars in Australia, which in turn, influenced all the 137 suppliers that had supplied parts to the Mitsubishi 380 vehicle that was produced at the plant. The plant closure also resulted in around 900 employees being laid-off. Between February 1984 and August 2005 MMAL had produced 793,521 of their Magna model and between August 2005 and March 2008 only 32,044 of the 380 model. The 380 car was a large family sedan, which was introduced to the market at a time of rising fuel prices and when people were shifting their preference to smaller vehicles suited to city transportation. MMAL maintain their Australian headquarters and a spare parts facility on the site, while the vehicle assembly plant was fully de-commissioned by the end of 2009. The empty manufacturing site consisted of 61 hectares of land, alongside a main arterial road in the southern suburbs of Adelaide, the capital of the state of South Australia. The site was also serviced by a rail line, a high speed optical cable internet provided by the South Australian Broadband Research and Education Network, high capacity 66 kilovolt electrical lines and an on-site electrical sub-station. Nearby were located the state's third university, a Medical Centre and a small entrepreneurial cluster.

From the time of closure the Director of the State's Economic Development Department (SEDD) began to see a new potential for the site. The Director of SEDD was *"looking for something that could drive the economy in the south ..."*. He was a public servant who had a great deal of experience. For instance, he had been closely involved with the previous closure of the Mitsubishi engine plant at Lonsdale in 2004. With these experiences the Director had the insight to prepare a broad based economic plan for the Tonsley project. After considerable lobbying the State government ratified the project in March 2012. Included in the plan was sale of 11 hectares of residential land to house up to 1200 residents. This land sale served two purposes: fast recouping of capital and a population to provide activity and vibrancy. Support for the re-development was found from the State Department responsible for Technology and Further Education (TAFE). A new campus was built inside one end of the old manufacturing assembly building, which will bring 1200 students per week to the site. Also support came from Flinder's University, who constructed a new six story building to house their School of Computer Science and Mathematics, the Centre for Nano-Scale Science and Technology, the Medical Devices Research Institute, and the University's two commercialization arms: Flinders Partners and the New Venture Institute. The SEDD is still the main project leader, and continues to seek firms to populate the Tonsley site.

Resource configuring competence in the Tonsley case

Founded on the above discussion on resource becoming and resource configuration, the case can be analyzed based on three elements of resource configuring competence: the way business initiators see

the possible future value of combining resources, envisioning future resource combinations; the way the initiators make use of previous experience of combining resources; and – most crucial – the ability to identify and acknowledge potential resources.

Envisioning future resource combinations

The Director of the SEDD was looking at the closure of the Tonsley manufacturing plant and thinking about the state's future manufacturing ability. Adelaide is not central to the large concentration of people on the Australian eastern seaboard. The possibilities to re-place the Mitsubishi facility needed to produce globally competitive products and services, with cost and price structures suited to global logistics systems. At the same time the firms should re-employ or at least offer future employment to skilled workers. Faced with these thoughts the Director saw that a mixed use Technology Park with education, training and the states strategic industries was the way forward.

Using previous experience of combining resources

The Director of the SEDD had a number of past experiences which directly informed his approach. For example, he had direct experience with the prior development of a technology park. He could also see the value of the land for housing development, and that state finances would benefit from land sales. But he knew that such developments could not add significant value to the state's manufacturing capability. The Director had access to more than thirty years of relationships with different international, national and local firms; he also had access via relationships with the state's education industry; and access via relationships into all parts of the state and Federal Government bureaucracies.

Acknowledging potential resources

Vehicle manufacturing had been successfully undertaken at the Tonsley site for 45 years before the plant closure. Thousands of families and hundreds of local firms had been associated with a manufacturing industry. The site was an identifiable feature in the landscape, with the manufacturing assembly building standing out as one approached along arterial roads. The local municipal council, RenewalSA, and the Environmental Protection Authority had archival materials regarding the site which provided information about the infrastructure, and how it might be re-developed. The Director of the SEDD saw the Tonsley manufacturing plant in a context of other potential resources, indicating that future was important when configuring resources.

Elaborating on a framework for resource configuring competence

The resource configuring process is relying on a new and emerging set of business relationships. In the case relationships are the means for business resuming: the actors work with others to bring the resources into new configurations to achieve some collectively understood ends. This analysis supports past industrial network research (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995). There were, however, also potential resources in terms of remnants of past relationships available. The connections to infrastructure resources and the associated business relationships were available to aid the managers in their resource configuring. Thus, re-connections with other firms in the past network do aid in resource configuring – and that is the case whether the prior network is in the distant past or more recent.

However, important to note is that the remnant relationships were not necessarily resources configured in the same way as in the past. New technologies and site uses lead to changing relationships, as new actors were brought in. For example, electricity supplies were up-graded, and this was supported by developing business relationships. But noteworthy is that the older actors connected to the site brought valuable information and knowledge from a past time, which aided the resource configuring process; an example being the environmental information at the manufacturing

site led to the housing location decision. The past – and its resource potential – matters in a resource configuring process, be that relationship remains, artifacts or archival records.

The role of previous experience is equally commanding. The vision of the business initiator, in this case it more or less primarily came down to one individual, was possible because of his unique experiences. In the case, foresight (McMaster, 1996) was available based on bringing together past experience and resources, and future resource use and configuration. The other entrepreneurs and managers also bridged the past and future networks and saw how to transform the old to a new resource by connecting in new technologies. Furthermore, place-particular resources as well as context-specific resources were central questions for managers to acknowledge.

The elements of resource configuring competence

Besides any aspects of how, why and when the previous business closed, we subsequently argue that three elements are important for resource configuring competence: *envisioning future resource combinations*, *use of previous resource-combining experience*, and *acknowledging potential resources* (see Figure 1). Without envisioning, configuring of resources is not possible. How to envision new business relationships is a complex matter, necessarily also involving aspects of and influence from the strategy and activity of other actors. Thus, an individual envisioning future value of for example a new business relationship sees not only the way resources and activities are configured, but also how and why other parties might join that process – and how resources, activities and parties are connected in time. Thus, envisioning new business relationships is a key to revitalizing a resource; a key to resource becoming. Use of previous resource-combining experience also provides the ground from which a change is made possible. The sensemaking that managers undertake inside and between businesses when projecting forward into new situations is necessarily based on past experience (Medlin & Törnroos, 2014). Acknowledging any potential resources connected to a particular place, such as remains from previous business is, as we argue, the third and most essential base for the resource configuring. Integrating and combining resources into new situations require knowledge of past business relationships and resource use. Earlier research shows that business relationship ending is not a clear-cut issue (Gadde & Mattsson, 1988; Hadjikhani, 1996). Even though the parties stop trading with each other, there may exist some social bonds that can be activated at a later stage (Havila & Wilkinson, 2002). Furthermore, archival material and physical artifacts may be seen as potential resources providing managers with insights and reported experience.

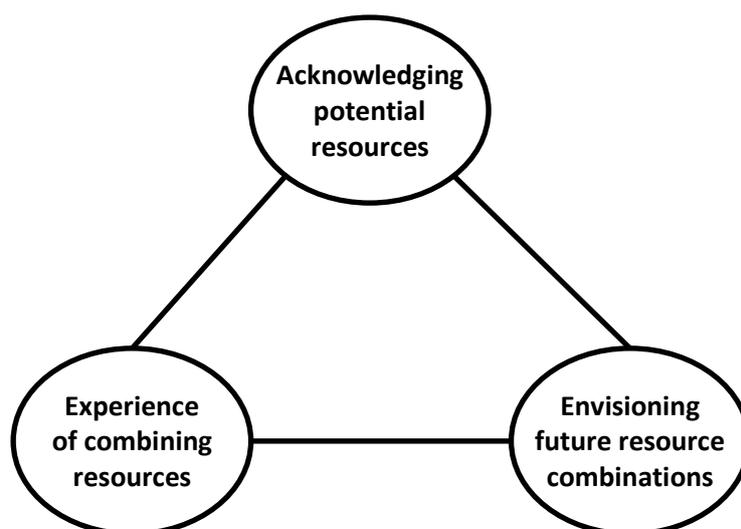


Figure 1: The three elements of resource configuring competence.

Concluding remarks

In this paper the focus has been on how remains after a business closure matter – in their being *potential resources* – when resuming business, and how the acknowledging of these resources is a vital element of resource configuring competence. In the studied case, the closure meant that many directly and indirectly connected actors were influenced by the “hub actor” disappearing from the business network. Relationships with customers, suppliers, and local municipalities were terminated. Thus, the old business network disappeared, although with many of the actors continuing their businesses and some changing their business. What we have shown in this paper, is that to a certain degree the old and once active business network can be reactivated, but the process cannot be initiated without someone having the ability to envision relationships and future value creation. Furthermore, this actor needs to have a ground to build on: previous business experience and knowledge, presumably having an effect on the understanding and ability to analyze the remains of previous business, as well as an ability to acknowledge and make use of any potential resources; relational or physical, individual or organizational.

Recognizing and understanding the vital elements and importance of resource configuring competence is not only of use to managers when facing the challenges of resuming a closed business. Resource configuring competence is also applicable for starting a new business, as even new resources and new technologies are connected to near or distant previous operations, related to present business operations. These connections are displayed in the case discussed. Thus, the three elements of resource configuring competence – *envisioning future resource combinations*, *use of previous resource combining experience*, and *acknowledging potential resources* – are available to any resourceful manager who seeks to be well-prepared for change or who seeks to be a strategic visionary, apt to make changes in the present industrial system. The framework of resource configuring thus provides conceptual tools at any stage of being in business, for seeing possibilities few others do and before any others implement their own possible changes.

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