

Dynamics of inter-firm commitment in turbulent environments

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ABSTRACT

Business environments are becoming more complex, uncertain and dynamic. Hence, businesses need to increase their resilience capacity to deal with the challenges of the environment. Relationships are strategic resources for businesses, but their role in building the resilience capacity of organisations is under-studied. In this empirical study, we explored the role, structure and dynamics of inter-firm relational commitment in the turbulent environment of the Middle East. Our sample included 33 companies from the manufacturing sector with local and international business relationships. Findings highlight how unique structure and dynamics of commitment present in the relationships helped the resilient capacity of businesses.

Keywords: commitment, resilience, turbulent environments, relationship dynamics

INTRODUCTION

The business environment is becoming more turbulent due to various social, economic, political, environmental and technological factors. Disruptions such as Recessions, inflations, political unrest, terrorist attacks, wars, natural disasters, human mistakes and technological innovations increasingly threaten the survival and growth of today's businesses. This situation suggests businesses to continue improving their resources and capabilities among which are management of business relationships. Managing business relationships is considered as a capability that improves the resilience capacity of businesses particularly in uncertain and turbulent times (McCann & Selsky, 2012; Williams, Gruber, Sutcliffe, Shepherd, & Zhao, 2017). Despite the importance of relationships, managing them could be complicated in uncertain environments as firms require both commitment to foster close-collaboration and flexibilities to switch (Sheffi & Rice Jr, 2005). Recent studies on organisational resilience asks for more research to understand the forms of interactions between firms that improve resilience (Linnenluecke, 2017). This empirical research aimed to study the important relational feature of inter-firm commitment in turbulent environments of less developed countries. We were particularly interested in studying the construct of commitment in dyadic relationships, as it appears challenging in uncertain environments. We, therefore, seek to answer if and how the nature and dynamics of commitment contribute to business resilience in the turbulent environment of the Middle East region. We draw on two separate bodies of knowledge to answer the research question: (1) Business relationship literature including IMP, sales and purchase and channel relationships, (2) literature on organisational resilience.

The literature in business relationships acknowledges that the environmental characteristics that surround the interaction influence its form and dynamics (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987; Håkansson & Waluszewski, 2013). However, the majority of empirical research in business relationships including the work of IMP, study interaction and networks in developed economies. This is while in less developed economies, businesses face a high level of turbulence and uncertainty arising from socio-political and regulatory forces. The lack of research in less developed economies, make us question the applicability of traditionally accepted relationship structure and development models in such contexts (e.g. Ford, 1980; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Even in the limited studies that explore relationship features in less developed or developing countries researchers have taken a cultural perspective on relationships to explain differences (e.g. Abosag, 2015; Sharma, Young, & Wilkinson, 2006). In contrary to cultural perspective Chen, Ellinger, and Tian (2011) take a contingent view and argue that differences in relationship management can be explained by the characteristic of the country's business environment such as the level of uncertainty about resources and regulations.

Turbulent and uncertainty have the potential to turn into crises when resources are not enough, and there is a pressure of time to act (Hermann, 1963). As business partners are interdependent, crisis situations can influences relationships. The phenomenon of relationship and its management under pressure of time has been studied in teams who come together to manage projects. However this area of research lacks enough empirical evidence in non-project situations (e.g. Lambe, Spekman, & Hunt, 2000). Relationships as providers of resources are strategically beneficial in crisis; however, structure and development of relationships may change in crisis-prone situations. A crisis may particularly influence specific relationship features such as commitment, which is both beneficial and challenging in temporal exchange situations that involve change, uncertainty and crisis. Desirable

relational features such as trust and commitment take time to develop through continuous interaction that is not disrupted (Ford, 1980). When there are turbulence and crisis, this gradual process may be disrupted or take a different development path.

RESILIENCE OF THE ORGANISATION

The resilience of a system is the ability and capacity in reducing its vulnerabilities and increasing its adaptive capacity to quickly go back to its initial equilibrium condition or a better condition when disrupted (Dalziell & McManus, 2004). A resilient organisation has the capabilities to sense, prepare and quickly adapt to change or seize opportunities created by change (Felin & Powell, 2016; Teece, 2007). The resilience of an organisation is therefore defined by how much it is prepared for the disruption, and can recover from it by responding appropriately and quickly (Tukamuhabwa, Stevenson, Busby, & Zorzini, 2015). One of the comprehensive definitions of resilience is offered by Williams et al. (2017) wherein resilience is looked upon as a process: “Resilience is the process by which an actor (i.e., individual, organisation, or community) builds and uses its capability endowments to interact with the environment in a way that positively adjusts and maintains functioning prior to, during, and following adversity.” (Page 742).

Resilience has been conceptualised differently by researchers, however, current studies on resilience agree on the importance of features such as flexibility, agility, strength, coping and learning capacities and the level of vulnerabilities in defining resilience (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003; Van Der Vegt, Essens, Wahlström, & George, 2015). With respect to relational systems, Kahn, Barton, and Fellows (2013) argue that such systems can become more resilience with more cohesion or attachment, flexibility and improved communication among members. Similarly, the supply chain literature emphasises on flexibility, velocity, visibility and collaboration to help resilience in movements of goods between businesses (Jüttner & Maklan, 2011).

Overall the capabilities that lead to improvement in resilience are a combination of cognitive, behavioural, emotional and relational capabilities (Williams et al., 2017). While inter-firm relationships have been emphasised as an important capability in building resilience (Van Der Vegt et al., 2015), there is limited empirical work on how business relationships and their management contribute to the resilience capacity of each partner. Stevenson et al. (2014) find the importance of inter-firm coordination and network activities in the quick recovery of businesses after the Christchurch earthquake. Wieland and Marcus Wallenburg (2013) studies resilience in dyads and confirms the positive influence of relational communication and cooperation on resilience capacity concerning agility and robustness.

Research in resilience is based on different conceptualisation and use of various theories (Tukamuhabwa et al., 2015). This has resulted in different definitions, conceptualisation and outcomes in the limited empirical research that exists. Moreover, when it comes to the role of relationships in increasing resilience, there is an apparent lack of empirical research particularly in less developed countries (Tukamuhabwa et al., 2015). Linnenluecke (2017) and Van Der Vegt et al. (2015) suggest that future research should be more focused on understanding resilience and its management in inter-organisational context. Moreover, they suggest the need to explore further, transferability of resilience across various environments that require different capabilities. In this study, we explore the role of inter-firm commitment in improving resilience capacities of firms. As suggested by Tukamuhabwa et al. (2015), we used a qualitative case study method for studying resilience in organisations as complex and adaptive systems.

RELATIONSHIP COMMITMENT

Businesses search for exchange partners and develop relationships because of the combination of economic, technical, service and social benefits business relationships offer. Business relationships are therefore driven by direct and indirect functions (Anderson, Håkansson, & Johanson, 1994), and these functions drive the quality aspects of relationships such as commitment, trust and satisfaction (Walter, Müller, Helfert, & Ritter, 2003). The direct functions of relationship include productivity (Håkansson & Waluszewski, 2013), cost reduction, quality improvement, time-saving, selling more volume, and safeguarding against contingencies (Walter et al., 2003). Beside such direct functions, relationships' secondary functions include helping each other in the market, scout function or passing useful market-information, innovation development function and social support (Walter et al., 2003). Fulfilment of both functions improves desirable features of relationship and increase the motivation to enter and stay in a particular relationship.

Commitment is a critical construct in relationships that have been studied intensively as an essential variable. Commitment is defined as the "exchange partner's believing that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it; that is, the committed party believes that relationship is worth working on to ensure that it endures indefinitely" (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, page 23). Commitment, therefore, reflects one's desire to maintain a valuable relationship and dedicate efforts and invests in keeping it. As a variable in the relationship, commitment improves trust (Sako & Helper, 1998) and increases cooperation (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Sharma, Young, & Wilkinson, 2015). Also, parties in exchange value commitment when deciding to stay or leave a relationship (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006).

Different forms of commitment have been studied that are either psychological or behavioural. A dominant form of commitment is emotional, affective or attitudinal all of which reflect thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes about the other party and emotional intention for staying in a relationship. These forms of affective commitment indicate the emotional elements and social bonding with a partner. Affective commitment is built over time as a result of interaction between various actors and therefore appears later in relationships. (Ford, 1980). Research shows that affective commitment is more influential in sustaining relationships even when alternative partners offer better choices (Schurr & Ozanne, 1985). Contrary to this finding, Young and Denize (1995) find that low performance may lead to switching.

Another form of commitment that influences attitudes is the moral commitment that arises from norms, values and sense of responsibility that is not mentioned in contracts. Moral commitment is a positive cognitive commitment which is also referred to as 'value-based commitment' as it involves considering values and social norms and responsibilities in the calculation of commitment (Sharma et al., 2006).

Behavioural, economic or resource commitment involves actual investments into relationships based on calculating the rewards and costs in continuing a relationship. Behavioural commitment reflects how much resource and energy is dedicated to a relationship to develop ties and maintain the relationships with the particular exchange partner (Sharma et al., 2006). As much as behavioural commitment reflects the desire of keeping a relationship, high level of commitment can also exist due to dependence (Andaleeb, 1996). Sometimes the dependence-form of commitment takes a negative form

called 'locked-in commitment'. Parties are locked-in due to the high cost of switching or high level of relationship-specific investments or obligations (Ford, 1980).

Commitment in a relationship is a combination of attitudinal, behaviour and moral forms. Söllner (1999) operationalised commitment concerning specific inputs and evaluation of outputs from both parties. According to this view, inputs into relationships can be instrumental, which reflects the calculative nature of commitment, or attitudinal reflecting the emotional nature of commitment. Instrumental inputs include physical assets such as inventory, dedicated infrastructure, production capacity or dedicated human resource and time. Attitudinal inputs on the other hand include intangible inputs such as psychological attachment or positive attitudes that are forms of affective commitment. Commitment outputs include but may not be limited to the performance of relationship and justice regarding the share of business or profit one achieves from a relationship (Söllner, 1999). While firms evaluate their relationships based on economic benefits, performance from relationships need to be defined by the parties and may involve learnings, or for example increase of business with other clients.

Ross Brennan, Turnbull, and Wilson (2003) suggest adaptation as a critical form of commitment. The authors characterised two forms of adaptation, formal and informal, depending on whether they are specified within contractual terms (formal) or not (informal). Formal or informal adaptation may include a change in production planning, stockholding and delivery, tailoring products, the extent of information exchange, production processes, financial or contractual terms or organisational structure. Adaptation can happen at any stage in relationships and does not only happen at later stages. Besides, adaptation may happen because of power imbalance (Ross Brennan et al., 2003)

Commitment appears in the later stages of relationship development according to most of relationship development models (eg. Dwyer et al., 1987; Ford, 1980). Even the definition of commitment reflects the belief that commitment (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) has a long-term orientation relational benefits appear over continuous interactions. Most of the conceptualisations of commitment are based on the long-term orientation assumption of commitment and the belief that the relationship value can be achieved through a long-term oriented relationship. Walter et al. (2003) and Gundlach, Achrol, and Mentzer (1995) in return argue that commitment can be temporal. The therefore, suggest the temporal dimension of commitment which indicates the time aspect of commitment and reflects the party's intention in having short or long-term relationships. As the benefits of long-term relationships are non-arguably apparent, no firm would want short-term relationships unless the situation requires it. The question, however, remains as to the nature of commitment when there is a temporal intention in relationship management.

Commitment may still exist when there is short-term orientation or expectation of relationships, however, in this situation, specific features and forms of the commitment may become more or less relevant. For example, when a specific job needs to be completed under uncertain and changing situations, high level of adaptation as a form of commitment may become more critical. Lambe et al. (2000) introduce a form of exchange called interimistic relationships that represent a high level of interaction between parties but have temporal characteristics as they form to make use of opportunities or rectify threats. The authors suggest more investigation into such relationships, their forms and their dynamics.

METHOD

We have studied 33 businesses in the turbulent business environment of the Middle East to identify the dominant forms of commitment and their dynamics. The region was chosen as a less developed region with countries that have both economic, political and regulatory turbulence. Risk of doing business according to World Bank 2017 ranking is high in countries in the region due to infrastructure insufficiencies, wars, political instability and economic and regulatory uncertainty and lack of transparency (Sheth, 2011).

Cases were chosen from the manufacturing sector in the United Arab Emirates and Iran. The two countries reflected various dynamics and different levels of turbulence and uncertainty in their business environment. The sample included businesses from chemical, food, construction, polymer, minerals, oil and gas industries and had both supply and sales relationships in local and overseas markets. The high exposure to local and overseas markets would increase the chance of logistic disruption. Cases in this study exclude public sector or technology sector.

For each case, semi-structured interviews were conducted with sales, purchase and/or general managers who dealt with business relationships. The interviews lasted 60-120 minutes and were tape-recorded and transcribed. The semi-structured questions were focused on (1) understanding sources of threat and uncertainty in the environment, (2) role of relationships in dealing with such threats, (3) characteristics of beneficial relationships and relational features including commitment, (4) critical incidents where relationships were beneficial for firm's survival after disruption.

Documents and field note observation complimented the data collected. Data were organised and thematically analysed with the help of the Atlas-ti software. While using thematic analysis, attention was paid to note activities, actors and resources (Hakansson & Johanson, 1992) and use this analysis to identify dimensions of commitment at various stages of the relationship. Moreover, the coding involved outcomes of interactions in terms of various features of resilience. The analysis aimed to identify sources of turbulent, their influence on the structure and development of commitment as well as dominant forms of commitment and their role in the resilience capacity of firms. For the coding and analysis, constructs were used from both the literature of resilience and business relationship. Within case and cross-case analysis concluded similarities and differences between firms operating in the two researched country.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings suggest that commitment is the central pillar of relationships in turbulent environments. Commitment dominantly started at the very beginning of the relationship with the high level of inputs and stays intense throughout the lifecycle of relationships. The findings also highlighted reasons behind commitment behaviours and showed how various forms of commitment help to improve resilience.

Firms reported a high level of complexity, uncertainty and sudden change in their business environment for which economic, regulatory, political and social features of the environment were blamed. Recessions, inflations and sometimes both were reported to influence businesses. The dependency of economies on oil, high level of governments' control and intervention, and regulatory inefficiencies were other significant reasons for turbulence.

Moreover, judicial inefficiencies and unethical behaviours such as fraud, favouritism and corruption added to the challenges.

The above factors of the environment had led to unexpected disruption in regulations, supply and demand and issues with liquidity deliveries and profitability. Firms, therefore, reported that they were forced to shift from one relationship to the other while keeping a diverse portfolio of relationships. Over time, the continuous unexpected change had resulted in two significant perceptions that drive relationship behaviours. Firstly, high level of uncertainty about the future had resulted in firms' perception of dependence to all the potential exchange partners, which had led to the diversification of relationship portfolio to ensure it includes more exchange partners to reduce the risk. Consequently, all potential exchange partners are considered valuable as their future roles and importance are unknown. Moreover, continuous turbulence and the crisis that firms' had faced, led to prioritising speed and agility in access to resources. This is because firms working under turbulence, were unsure how much time is available to them to rectify threats or how long the limited resources may be available.

High level of both attitudinal and instrumental inputs into relationships was present in all the cases. Instrumental inputs included human resources in the form of recruiting experienced staff, financial resources, slack resources in the form of extra stock and time resources to frequent and intensively interact. Attitudinal inputs reported by cases were mainly patience, efforts to solve problems, find innovative solutions, reduce tensions from the other organisation and efforts to plan. Besides behavioural and attitudinal commitments, the moral commitment was also observed mainly in the more challenging environments. The environment makes it challenging to keep acting ethically and staying with specific values, and ethics was challenging as the environment changes but was taken as a sign of long-term commitment and caring. This is while parties in exchange could get away with their unethical and illegal acts in the market.

Commitment in the above forms has been reported in all stages of the relationship. Unlike what is traditionally known about relationship process, commitment starts right from the start of relationships and stays consistently at a high level throughout the relationship. During the exchange, commitment is mainly focused on the exchange but may expand to non-exchange interactions that serve indirect functions of relationships. Interestingly, commitment stays very high even when actual exchange stops due to change in the environment. In this circumstances, commitment is focused on non-exchange topics but still involves considerable inputs involving time, resources, attitudes and information exchange.

In most of the cases that operate in a highly turbulent environment, relationships are formed or transformed after a significant disruption. As firms have experienced a high level of turbulence in the past, they expected relationships to be temporal. The fact that relationships are considered to be temporal reflect the expectation from relationships to be formed to solve problems during a crisis. This implies that there is a high chance that parties in exchange may split shortly after and miss the chance to form a long-lasting relationship. Besides, there was a high chance of any good relationship ending or moving to sleeping mode with minimum level of resource exchange because of various reasons including irrelevance of exchange, less resourcefulness of the exchange partner or unethical behaviours.

Commitment proved to contribute to the resilience capacity by increasing the adaptive capacity, reducing the time of reaction and reducing vulnerabilities. Attitudinal and instrumental inputs in relationships helped to increase the flexibility and agility in the market by adaptation to new situation required by a change. Moreover, high frequency of interaction

helped to develop social ties, communicate hazards and change and negotiate for the new situation and control the exchange together before any change turns into a crisis. Continuous communication and information exchange, as well as negotiation with the help of social bonds between actors, helped the adaptation to the new situation. Moreover, such high level of interaction that commitment supports increased the speed of action and therefore led to capitalising short-lived opportunities.

Another role of commitment was to support development and maintenance of trust. Parties in turbulent environments are highly vulnerable to each other's vulnerabilities. This high risk of the relationship becomes even worse when parties are forced to start working during the crisis before checking the trustworthiness of the exchange partner. High level of commitment at early stages of relationships helps trust to develop early on. Moreover, parties are committed to keeping in touch during the sleeping mode when no exchange of goods is happening. This interaction helps to continue checking the trustworthiness of the other party and makes it easier to re-enter the next active phase of interaction with the same relationship when the environment changes again.

As the environment gets more uncertain and turbulent, the non-exchange role of the organisations in helping each other increases. Commitment supports this role by facilitating intensive communication between actors with strong bonds. Parties in exchange help each other make sense of the complex environment they work in. Actors spend considerable time to share their experience and interpretation about what is happening in the market, how it applies to them and what possible options exist. This form of commitment that leads to collective sense-making leads to indirect benefits from relationships by reducing vulnerabilities of exchange partners in the market, increasing knowledge repertoire of choices and actions.

This empirical research uses relationship studies in IMP and other relationship marketing streams to study commitment in turbulent and uncertain environments. Results of this study confirm and extend the literature in relationship commitment to conditions in which the environment is uncertainty and turbulence, relationships are risky and resilience under pressure of time is vital in the survival of businesses. It furthermore reveals how commitment is critical and necessary and not just a desirable feature in relationships in turbulent environments and how and why it is present throughout the relationship development.

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