Benefits of holding on to partners for innovation

Sara THORGREN*, Joakim WINCENT & Håkan YLINENPÄÄ
Entrepreneurship, Luleå University of Technology, IES, SE-971 87 Luleå, Sweden
E-mail*: sara.thorgren@ltu.se

Abstract

Research has for a long time suggested a facilitating role of interorganizational relations for innovation performance. Although implicitly advocating for switching partners based on the evidence of having variety, diversity, and nonredundancy of information accessed in relations, practise suggests otherwise. Firms have found to be interlinked over time and some do not even search for alternative partners. This study adds to prior research by examining how and why some organizations stick to the same partners in innovation processes. We report a qualitative study of organizations that have an agenda of sticking to partners in the development of innovations. We find using existing relationships had several important benefits for innovative performance possible to categorize as 1) effective use of indirect linkages, 2) better prerequisites for unspecified exchanges, 3) providing a fast lane to essentialities by known values and firm characteristics, 4) improved dialogue and surprises, and 5) enhanced enthusiasm guided by altruism. Our contributions are related to prior work on management of interorganizational relationships for innovation.

Keywords: Innovation, interorganizational relations, long-term relationships

* Corresponding author

1 Introduction

Being innovative is seen as significantly contributing to firms' competitiveness and performance, and thereby also fertilizing a more dynamic economy as a whole. There is an implicit consensus among scholars that interorganizational relations are important for facilitating innovation activity in firms. In fact, already decades ago, it could be stated that interorganizational linkages have an effect on innovation (Baum *et al*. 2000, Goes & Park 1997, Pennings & Harianto 1992, Shan *et al.* 1994). In addition to the agreement that relations are important, there is a corresponding consensus on some commonly mentioned relational characteristics that seem most advantageous for facilitating innovation performance. Overall, beneficial opportunities for innovation are opened in relations supplying variety, diversity, and nonredundancy of information (e.g. Burt 1997, Granovetter 1973). The assumption that access to novelty is crucial for innovation may nourish a conception that forming new relations are preferable to secure the provision of a constant flow of new information and hence to be successful in the development and launch of innovations. Yet, by observing organizations in practise we know this is not the case. Some firms are repeatedly working with the same partners and do not show much interest in switching.

The aim of this paper is to approach this interesting observation by illuminating benefits of using the same partners in different innovative processes. Guided by the fact that prior work has increasingly been directed to acknowledging the relevance and suitability of including external partners in innovative development efforts, we realize that there must be a reason for working with the same partners. With partners, we do not simply mean associated firms that have a stake or a share of equity in the innovation to be developed. We refer to those external ties that can be characterised as being a source of advice and support in problem solving (Ylinenpää 1997).

Prior literature has found such supportive ties could have different characteristics, e.g., they could be formal or informal, short-term or long-term, social or purely economic. Unfortunately, this literature does not provide a clear-cut picture of why certain firms chose to repeatedly turn to the same partners in the development of innovations. There are only indications, where for example scholars have indicated that long-term relationships based on trust promote innovation and technological development (e.g. Håkansson 1990). Although we do not disagree with voices claiming that the gain from external linkages for innovation is new knowledge and diverse information (Ahuja 2000, Dhanaraj & Parkhe 2006, Powell *et al.* 1996) and that there is a dark side of sticking to long-term relationships compared with those of shorter duration (Grayson & Ambler 1999, Pressey & Tzokas 2004), we want to explore the use of interorganizational relations for innovation from another perspective by acknowledging the fact that some firms bring the same partners into different innovative processes. When keeping to the same partners, logic suggests those partners must be attractive for at least some reason. Despite the negative side of long-term relationships, firms still seem to value previously used partners in new innovative processes. Therefore, we hope to provide a better understanding of how and why it could be beneficial to bring in the same partners in different innovative processes.

Previous research has often investigated the impact of interorganizational relations on innovation in general (e.g. Ahuja 2000) or it has been focused on a specific project or product development process (e.g. Ng *et al.* 2002). Studies neither on partners in strategic alliances (e.g. Wong *et al.* 2005) nor on project partnering (e.g. Kadefors 2004) could be used to cover the relevance of using the same partners in innovative processes. We follow the definition of innovation proposed by Amabile *et al.* (1996): "*the successful implementation of creative ideas within an organization*" (1996:1155). Each innovation is thus preceded by creativity defined as "*the production of novel and useful ideas*" (op. cit). In this paper the innovative process is thus seen as the implementation process of creativity. Our focus is therefore not on the innovation *per se*, but on the process sprung from creativity. Further, we are interested in all kinds of partners, not restricted to a certain strategic alliance or to a specific actor type (customer, supplier, competitor, etc.). Hence, our interest lies in understanding how and why it could be beneficial to take advice and support from the same partners in different processes of implementing creativity to organizational innovative outputs.

To examine our questions on how and why firms keep to the same partners in different innovative processes we examined firms having such an agenda by a case study approach. Such an approach enables a deeper and richer understanding of the multifaceted and often fuzzy relationships characterizing innovative processes. We next turn to our research methods, followed by the empirical findings. Finally, we present reflective notes and concluding remarks.

2 Research methods

The use of external relations in innovation development was studied in eight firms. All data were collected during the autumn of 2006. The firms were selected on the basis of two criteria. First, we wanted to choose firms that were innovative and used relations with others in their work on innovations. Second, we wanted the eight firms to be a heterogeneous group, i.e. we wanted a mix of firms offering services and products, having own production and outsourcing, and differences in firm age and background. This would give rich data on different kinds and usage of external relations in innovation development and ensure a sample of firms that did not work purely in-house with developing innovations, i.e. that they were teaming up with partners. The eight selected firms were all located on science parks in the northern part of Sweden and Finland. Firms located on a science park were chosen since we had established relations with people involved in these science parks that could name firms that met the selection criteria and to some extent also provide access to these firms. Therefore a combination of "criterion" and "convenience" sampling (Miles & Huberman 1994) was utilized in this study. The selected firms were all small (less than 50 employees) and operating in industries of electronics, IT, and mobile technology. They were founded between 1986 and 2004, had a turnover between 50 000 and 6 000 000 EUR. The majority of the firms developed products based on communication and measurement techniques, where other firms developed web-based programmes, integrated circuits, and mobile services and programmes. Examples of specific products are RFID products, care phones, a web-based project management tool, speed measurement equipment, and mobile games.

In each of the eight firms, data was collected by using the same procedure. When potential firms were selected we contacted them and asked if they were interested in participating in our study. If the firm was positive to our request, we arranged a meeting for an interview with the current or previous CEO, owner, or manager, depending on which individual that was considered to have the greatest insight into their development of new and improved products during the last couple of years, and would be sufficiently communicative for a valuable conversation.

We conducted two-hour interviews with each of the eight selected informants. The interviews consisted of three parts: 1) questions on the firm background, 2) questions on the development of a product that turned out to be successful, and when possible 3) one that turned out to be less successful or was simply different from the one discussed previously. For both the discussed products, we draw a time-line together with the informant on which we marked out where and from which actor there had been an input that had contributed to the development, and which and when actors had been a hindrance instead. When possible, we used a check-list for each actor in question, helping as well as hindering, to obtain more detailed information about each relationship. The check-list for the actors helping and hindering the development of the product or service were used to secure that the interview captured answers to questions such as:

- In which phase of the development has this actor been important?
- What has this actor provided?
- Why has this actor been important in this specific period?
- What has been given in exchange?
- Has there been a change in the relationship during the development of the product or service?

Most of the questions were asked in an open-ended manner, whereas some of the informants' answers were classified by us to fit one or more of the prepared categories in the check-list form. Before we left the firms after the interview we made sure that we could contact them for clarification and additional questions if needed.

3 Benefits of using the same partners in innovative processes

Guided by Glaser & Strauss (1967) and Miles & Huberman (1994), we used iterative processes inspired by data or literature to develop themes about benefits from having long-term relationships in innovative processes. To see if a theme was grounded, we compiled the data and looked for evidence leading us to sometimes modifying or abandoning a theme. Representative evidence is summarized in Table 1. After consulting the data, we found five themes on benefits of enduring relationships in innovation processes. The themes and representative comments supporting them are summarized in Table 1, and below there will be a detailed discussion of each of these themes. In this discussion we present empirical findings, conceptual arguments and pertinent literature.

Table 1. Categorized benefits of long-term relationships in innovative processes.

	Benefit	Representative comment
Theme 1:	Effective use of indirect linkages	*"We are so close today that if we were any closer, we would be married, one could say."*
Theme 2:	Better prerequisites for doing unspecified exchanges	*"When I need favors they give them, and when they need favors I give them."*
Theme 3:	Fastest lane to essentialities by known values and firm characteristics	*"It cannot be too rapid and too radical change, so it is good if you do it with the same company that had the idea in the first place."*
Theme 4:	Improved dialogue and surprises	*"If you already know what you should know, you don't need any contacts."*
Theme 5:	Enhanced enthusiasm guided by altruism	*"They want to be proud of what they have done and we do it kind of together."*

Effective use of indirect linkages. We found one benefit of sticking to the same partners in innovation processes is their usage of providing low relational costs to a wide range of other firms (their partners' network). When firms are developing new products, there are numerous requirements that must be met for the product to become successful. It must not only meet the needs of the customers and consumers, it must also be produced in the best way possible. Relations with other organizations can be facilitative since they provide help in the form of providing information, advice, partnership, and other resources. In our data, we noticed that firms having the same partners accessed filtered information through their partners' network of partners (indirect ties). Even if it could intuitively be assumed that the more interorganizational relations a firm has, the better it is for its innovative processes, we notice the actors being aware of the danger of doing such a drastic conclusion without regarding the costs of the relationships. Even if each interorganizational relation could be assumed to add some value to the innovative process, the interviews indicate that actors recognized the fact that the value of some relations does not always outweigh the costs. Possible relational costs were both direct costs such as spent time on exchanges and redundant information, as well as opportunity costs regarding the opportunities abandoned in favor of the relation (Blau 1964, Burt 1997).

Instead, firms having the same partners used them to ensure having low relational costs. An advantage that we found in the interviews was that studied firms actually used the indirect ties of the existing partners to ensure access to a wide range of others at a minimum of costs (cf. Salman & Saives 2005). The procedure was obtaining access to the valuable resources of indirect ties through their existing direct ties. By this approach, the organization with which a specific firm had a direct relation functioned as an information filter. The mechanism was straightforward: when a relationship develops, the actors learn to know the need, plans, and behaviour of each other and the longer the time the relationship endures the more fine the filter can become (cf. Salman & Saives 2005). This filtering of the information flow at the direct tie could be highly effective for the firm. However, the interviews also indicated that the direct ties could function as filters on the reverse flow. Most product development processes include a certain amount of secrecy, and some information might be of a rather sensitive nature. Some of this information is not meant to be spread at all, whereas some must reach certain actors, and therefore requires a restricted circulation. In such a situation, the long-term relationship with another organization can be a valuable filter since the repeated interactions develop a trust in each others responses (Doney & Cannon 1997), a trust that cannot be enough accumulated in relationships of shorter duration. Which information and to whom it is distributed could therefore be filtered by the organization with which the firm has a long-term relationship.

Notable is that not any direct tie could provide effective use of indirect relations. The relationships in the empirical examples are close, long-term relationships where both parts know that the cooperation constitutes a win-win situation. In one firm the respondent explained “We are so close today that if we were any closer, we would be married, one could say”. This lays the foundation for an effective filter; they trust each other, they are interdependent, and they know what kind of information that is suitable to transfer.

Better prerequisites for doing unspecified exchanges. In the firms studied, we found working with the same partners is also important for innovation processes because these relations help set and reinforce unspecified exchanges. Under novel or innovative circumstances exchanges are often hard to specify in advance, either implicitly or explicitly (Wincent & Westerberg 2006). In the innovative work in the firms studied, there were often situations where it was difficult for the firm to make a judgement on what is exactly needed and which contributions that will be of value in the process. In such situations it is difficult to specify the exchanges in advance, i.e., “if you give me this, I will give you that”, and the part giving something have to trust the other part that the favor will be returned (Blau 1964).

Interviews pointed out unspecified exchanges to require both a certain amount of trust and a period of time for an appropriate favor to be returned, whereby a long-term relationship would facilitate this type of input in the innovative process by inherently bringing a certain degree of trust (Humphries & Wilding 2004). The parts know that their favor will be returned sooner or later, and hence there is a reduced need to secure the obligation. In the data this is illustrated by statements like “of course we have like cooperative partners, smaller companies…that I know and sometimes visit…and we trade ideas of course, and when I need favors they give them, and when they need favors I give them.” This exemplifies how the firms develop congruent expectations with its partner, and where this process results in a psychological contract between them (Rousseau, 1989), mainly guided by the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner 1960). Such social expectations are partly based on social experiences in the past (Blau 1964). Among the firms using the same partners in different innovative processes, the psychological contract does simply not end with the finalization of one innovation but is running from process to process, and can in turn further reinforce the trust in the relationship (Kingshott 2006).

Fastest lane to essentialities by known values and firm characteristics. We also found that working with the same partners help the studied firms to swiftly acquire, access and retrieve essentialities for supporting their innovative processes. Efficient use of time in innovative processes is important and often critical when the wheels of competition are spinning faster and faster. The interviews revealed several accounts that in an interorganizational relation it takes some time to get to know the firm characteristic and business of each other and for each new relation this start-up time prolongs the innovative process. By using input from existing relationships in innovative processes, more time could be spent on the innovation development and less time on the relation. The need of knowing that things really are as they appear (Turner 1987) would thus require less time to confirm in a long-term relationship.

The data indicate several efficiency gains of using existing relationships. To be able to decrease the development costs, one of the studied firms cooperated with another company that got one product market in exchange for money contributed to the product development. The cooperation was very successful, and the success factor was considered to be the long-term relation between the two companies. The interview suggests there was no bureaucracy between them and by taking fast decisions not preceded by large evaluations they could save a lot of time and money. This could be considered a result of the trust created in the repeated exchanges with the partner, which makes the firm more secure about their relationship and consequently enables more rapid interaction (Ring & Van de Ven 1994).

Except for the reduced time spent on the relation, the existing relation can have prior knowledge of the innovation in question. In the data we found several examples of this. One of the firms has a long-term relationship with a designer organization, and when they were thinking of slightly changing the design of one of their products they thought it was good to use the existing relationship with the designers: “it cannot be too rapid and too radical change, so it is good if you do it with the same company that had the idea in the first place”. Previous discussions held in other situations can in this way be continued in discussions in new innovative processes. The use of existing relationships can thus both increase the time spent on the innovation and place the discussion in a context, aspects that make the use of interorganizational relations more efficient.

Improved dialogue and surprises. Innovative processes include uncertainties of different kinds. The interviews indicated several examples where firms developing something new may have a basic idea of what it is they want to do and how to do it, but they do not know the details. In these accounts we found using the same partners is also important for facilitating dialogue and surprises. In the concept of innovation it is inherent that something is new, which implies that nobody else has done exactly what is being developed in the firm under identical conditions. Interviews indicated that this brings two constraints on the collection of input from other organizations in the innovative process: 1) it is not clear which questions should be asked, and 2) there may not be any available answers. Working with the same partners may support these inputs since the long-term relationship and its developed trust might be the factor qualifying the firm to overcome those constraints (cf. Doney & Cannon 1997).

In the data a representative comment exemplifies the importance of relations by saying “*if you already know what you should know, you don’t need any contacts*”. His argument is that most information is available and if you know what you are searching for it is easy to find. However, if you do not know what information you would benefit from, most sources (like the Internet) are not as helpful. By using the same contacts it is possible that the other part can give you the suitable information even if you do not have a defined search problem. Whereas short-term relationships could be adequate for information provision, long-term relationships would have a greater potential of generating information. In a long-term relationship, the parts have a more comprehensive understanding of the strategies, resources available, etc of each other. It would therefore be easier for the organization in the innovative process to have a dialogue with the other organization in which new questions will emerge and where the answers will be adjusted to the specific context that the organization is situated in. Furthermore, if their prior interactions have been satisfactory then the parts are more inclined to invest in future interactions (Doney & Cannon 1997). By joint history between the firm and its partners, a more generous attitude towards having an extended dialogue can emerge.

Enhanced enthusiasm guided by altruism. When it is discussed how interorganizational relations can be used in innovative processes, it is easy to take an egocentric perspective where the other actors are assumed to abide to any strategies or requests from the organization in question. The data indicated actors thinking of this real life discrepancy – even if an organization has the possibility of helping another organization in their innovative activities, there is no guarantee that it in fact also will help – suggesting there must be something motivating them to contribute to the other organization. One difference between short-term and long-term relationships is that in a long-term relationship the contributing organization can both follow the innovative process and see the end result of their help. The interviews revealed a number of such accounts. A representative statement was one respondent saying why he thinks the designer with whom his firm had a long-term relationship is successful: "they want to be proud of what they have done and we do it kind of together ", and that it is as if the designers think "ok, now we see it and we know exactly where it is going". This may be motivated by a type of uncertainty reduction, where the partners can assimilate to the situation of the firm and thereby be given guidelines on how to behave to feel secure (Hogg & Terry, 2000). In another case the respondent explains how the contribution from one long-term partner was founded on the enthusiasm and joy that the other partner felt for being involved in the firm's innovative processes. As Turner (1987) claims the importance of sustaining a self-conception by adjustment in order to avoid anxiety, the enthusiasm of helping others could be regarded an adjustment to obtain what Turner calls a feeling of "inclusion". The need of inclusion is a motivational force (Turner 1987), and a long-term relationship could to some extent meet it since it gives the partners a feeling that they share something with the innovating firm, which reinforces their feeling of being included and hence confirms the partner's self-conception.

4 Concluding remarks

In this paper our aim has been to illuminate the benefits of using the same partners in different innovative processes by posing both the 'how' and the 'why' question. It demonstrates how existing partners can be used to enhance innovation and it also provides possible explanations about why these partners are beneficial to bring into subsequent innovative processes. Illustrated with findings from our qualitative study of eight firms, we have given five themes covering some of the possible advantages of using the same partners in different innovative processes. On the basis of evidence from the studied cases this paper suggests that in innovative processes existing relationships could be beneficial in terms of effective use of indirect linkages, better prerequisites for unspecified exchanges, providing a fast lane to essentialities by known values and firm characteristics, improved dialogue and surprises, and enhanced enthusiasm guided by altruism.

On a reflection of the above categorized themes, it is apparent that the benefits could be understood by an exchange theory and transaction cost framework (Gouldner 1960, Williamson 1979). The use of the same partners affects the norm of reciprocity governing the relationship into imposing better opportunities for valuable exchanges in the innovative processes. A long-term interaction where partners learn to know each other also implicates lower transaction costs since the learning curve of understanding a partner's specific strengths and weaknesses makes the operative interaction more effective. Hence, we propose exchange and transaction cost frameworks could be used to, at least partly, understanding and explaining why some firms stick to their partners in their development of innovations. This does by no means argue against the contributions of network scholars on social capital upholding benefits and value of variety, diversity, and nonredundancy of information (e.g. Burt 1997, Granovetter 1973) in understanding innovative performance.

Our study indicates a number of possible benefits of using the same partners in different innovative processes. However, since the study is a qualitative case study, we must be careful in providing managerial advice based solely on the ideas suggested in this paper. Nevertheless, managers could subtract some useful notions. For managers involved in innovative processes the findings implicate that they could be benefited from considering whether their interaction with partners could be used more efficiently in multiple processes.

Three limitations of our study should be addressed. First, this study builds on a quite general definition of innovation and its surrounding processes. This means that we have not highlighted the potential differences between different types of innovative processes. This in turn raises new questions for further research. One such obvious question is whether interaction processes and patterns differ referring to the origin of the creativity? Second, the data were based on retrospective accounts of the respondents which brings the difficulty for the respondents to remember the use and dynamics of the relationships in detail. However, since the focus of our study was to explore the use of interorganizational relations in innovative processes and obtain a general idea, the details were of less importance and the retrospective accounts were therefore considered sufficient for our purposes. Third, by putting forward ideas from a limited sample, one must be careful not to make generalizations of the findings to other organizations. However, our aim has been to introduce new ideas and to be a source of inspiration for future research. This study therefore invites future work to confirm the suggested benefits of using the same partners in different innovative processes. If there would be sufficient resources available to make a longitudinal observation of the partners used in different innovative processes, this would of course be a source for additional insight into possible benefits. However, this study is adequate enough to use as the starting point for future confirmatory steps. There is however a call for further elaboration on the categorized themes. For example, exactly which information could be filtered within a direct linkage? Which types of unspecified exchanges are important in innovative processes? What exactly is it that enhances enthusiasm over providing help in different innovative processes? After a thorough elaboration on the suggested benefits, these benefits could be confirmed and generalized by hypotheses-testing. In addition, since this study only focuses on the beneficial side of keeping to the same partners, a careful examination of the disadvantages would also be necessary to be able to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

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