
Editorial

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1 Introduction

Despite a growing research impetus to focus on the effective management processes related to building, sourcing, developing, and sharing knowledge assets both within and between firms (Grandori, 2001; Grant and Baden-Fuller, 2004), only recently has

research emerged that seeks to further our understanding of the underpinning coordinating mechanisms that enable organisations to access, deploy, manipulate, and employ knowledge effectively (Foss, 2007; Inkpen, 2008; Nielsen, 2010a; Nielsen and Nielsen, 2009). The literature is rich on studies on antecedents that support (or inhibit) inter-organisational knowledge transfer, yet, the specific mechanisms that govern knowledge sharing and enable value creation are far less understood (Nielsen, 2010b; van Wijk et al., 2008). To this end, the alliance governance literature (Lee and Cavusgil, 2006; Poppo and Zenger, 2002) distinguishes explicitly between contractual-based and relational-based governance and investigate the impact of both types on performance. While some scholars suggest the use of contractual agreements to resolve the opportunistic problem and stabilise the relationship (Hennart, 1988; Osborn and Baughn, 1990), others advocate mutual trust and commitment (Kale et al., 2000; Krishnan et al., 2006). This literature is typically concerned with the structural dimensions of alliances in order to determine to what extent contractual and relational governance substitute or complement each other in influencing performance.

What remains largely unresolved is whether specific governance structures (or combinations thereof) are more efficient in terms of facilitating knowledge sharing between the firm and its partners. Hence, while extant research recognises that contractual governance is an important vehicle for structuring inter-organisational relationships, the treatment of its role is often in an atomistic fashion, separated from its indirect mediating influence on knowledge outcomes and its interaction with relational governance mechanisms during alliance evolution. Interfirm exchange involves simultaneously aspects of both relational and transactional governance (plural governance) as legal ties are interwoven with various social norms that may affect a firm's ability to extract value from inter-organisational knowledge sharing activities. Moreover, the temporal dynamics associated with alliance formation and development points to the importance of investigating the extent to which contractual and relational governance mechanisms change over time as a function of the evolution of the partnership. This puts a premium on issues pertaining to complexity, temporal dynamics, and alignment between various governance mechanisms in the pursuit of more effective knowledge sharing in inter-organisational partnerships; the topics covered in this special issue.

2 This special issue and future research directions

The articles presented in this special issue were selected from the papers presented at the 3rd Annual Copenhagen Conference on Partnerships, which was held in Copenhagen in October 2009 and gathered a number of international scholars and practitioners from the strategic alliance field. Participants were asked to submit papers that addressed the interaction between various types of governance mechanisms and knowledge sharing processes in inter-organisational partnerships. We called for papers that:

- 1 theoretically discuss the link between various governance mechanisms (e.g., contractual, relational, procedural) and knowledge management processes (e.g., knowledge acquisition, transfer, sharing, application) in partnerships
- 2 empirically verify the importance of governance mechanisms for value creation in partnerships

- 3 bridge the gap between theory and practice by offering constructive insights for practitioners involved in strategic partnership management.

The first article by Duisters, Duysters and de Man, 'The partner selection process: steps, effectiveness, governance', highlights the importance of a more structured partner selection process where firms pay due attention to the legal dimension. They illustrate empirically how the establishment of formal governance structures during the early phase of alliance formation may diminish potential conflict and increase the likelihood of alliance success. The strong attention to legal contracts and relatively low attention to social issues provide strong support for the importance of contractual-based governance in relation to partner selection. Interestingly, they find negotiation rather than legal contract writing per se to be conducive to alliance success.

Schweitzer and Gudergan, 'Contractual complexity, governance and organisational form in alliances', provide a theoretical framework for examining the role of the contractual complexity of alliance agreements for the governance and organisational form of alliances. The authors draw on organisational control theory to explain how the goal incongruence and performance ambiguity among collaborating partners, in conjunction with the complexity of their contractual agreements, affect the organisational form of alliances that can be characterised as bureaucracy, market, clan, or adhocracy. The paper develops a set of propositions to guide firms in identifying and employing alliance structures that better support their strategic intentions.

Svård and Lunnan, 'Trust and control in fixed duration alliances', on the other hand, argue for the importance of trust as governance mechanisms in alliances. She outlines different forms and functions that trust may take and discuss the implications for fixed duration alliances. One is the traditional personal trust resulting in learning and high performance. This trust replaces other forms of governance and therefore entails risks of opportunism. The other form of trust is inter-organisational (contractual trust), founded on the contract and favourable initial encounters, and allows for smoother and faster processes throughout the cooperation thereby exposing the firms to relatively low risks. As the contract proceeds towards termination, the benefits of opportunism may be too tempting, resulting in mistrust.

Future research should seek to tease out how firms can increase the potential for success by being more effective in the partner selection and contract negotiation processes. Specifically, longitudinal studies that aim at investigating how various partner selection criteria, negotiation processes, and ensuring governance mechanisms influence subsequent alliance knowledge sharing processes are advocated. Particular attention should be paid to various conceptualisations of trust, spanning multiple functions and levels of analysis, and how these may influence both initial and ongoing partnering processes. Moreover, the example of fixed duration alliances in Svård's and Lunnan article shows how relational governance mechanism in alliances may vary with specific contractual provisions. Future studies should build on these insights and consider interactions between specific contractual elements (such as fixed duration or non-competing clauses) and relational governance in explaining alliance outcomes.

The article by Vos de Wael and Faems, 'The impact of trust and formal control on interfirm knowledge transfer: an exploration of the micro-level foundations', elaborates on these findings by showing that initial conditions and organisational outcomes are not directly linked to each other, but rather are indirectly connected via a complex set of micro-level interactions. Based on a case study, the article argues that combinations of

high initial trust and low initial formal control may trigger unintentional micro-level interactions, such as unstructured technological knowledge exchange, negative managerial gate keeping and limited joint sense-making, which can result in negative knowledge transfer outcomes. While these findings are seemingly at odds with the relational governance view (e.g., Dyer and Singh, 1998), it shows how micro-level interactions can lead to a variation of outcomes at the macro-level. The multilevel perspective of alliances advanced in this paper constitutes a particularly ripe area for future research and scholars are encouraged to further theorise and empirically verify the cross-level interactions that are likely to influence alliance management processes and performance (Nielsen, 2010c).

In the article by Woods and Hecker, 'Helping to learn: governance of knowledge-sharing in the Aurora preferred suppliers alliance network', it is examined how a firm's governance of its alliance network facilitates knowledge sharing about effective collaboration between the partners of the alliance. The study, based on data gathered from a larger preferred supplier network between 1992 and 2005, explores how governance of task definition, partner routines, interface structures, expectations about partner behaviour, expectations about alliance performance and expectations about partner motives facilitated knowledge-sharing between the broker and network members. A well governed alliance will not only provide the partners with beneficial outcome in the short run; it will also generate value in the long run as the partners learn how to utilise alliance relationships in general and develop new functional skills in relation to partnering.

Clifton, Pickernell and Senior, 'Small and medium sized enterprises and knowledge networks: an initial analysis of the roles of external supporting organisation', analyse the contribution of a range of external supporting institutions in an innovation creation and dissemination framework. The article explores the contribution of networks and identifies the mechanisms required to source external knowledge. Analyses, based on survey responses of over 450 UK SMEs, show the value of cross-locality networks, network governance structures, and spillover effects from universities for alliance performance.

Together, these two network studies point to potentially different governance mechanisms operating in knowledge networks. Future research should build on these studies and seek to identify:

- 1 how network governance differs from dyadic or triadic governance
- 2 how interactions between contractual and relational governance mechanisms in networks influence knowledge sharing
- 3 what the implications of such network governance are for firm and network-level outcomes.

Combined with insights from the other studies in this special issue, such inquiries may lead to novel findings regarding the optimal way to select partners, negotiate contracts, and structure and govern the network.

The special issue concludes with a commentary by one of the keynotes at the conference; Professor Alice Lam. Lam ('University industry collaboration: careers and knowledge governance in hybrids organisational space') shifts the focus to a particularly important type of collaborations; the specific knowledge sharing alliances that take place between universities and industry. The article describes how a growing category of research scientists can be referred to as 'linked scientists'. These people engage in the

practices of both science and business, and develop knowledge networks and career patterns that straddle the two sectors. The notion of an ‘overlapping internal labour market’ gives insight into our understanding of the interdependent relationship between flexible projects and more enduring career arrangements that support knowledge governance across organisational boundaries. The attention to the role of particular individuals embedded in inter-organisational knowledge networks is consistent with a growing impetus towards researching the interplay between individual and organisational antecedents of alliance capability and outcomes (e.g., Knudsen and Nielsen, 2009).

The contributions in this special issue indicate that research on governance issues in partnership is thriving and many important questions still endure. Collectively, these articles illustrate how attention to detail – be it contractual duration, complexity or types and functions of trust, or linked scientists – may enhance our understanding of how various configurations of governance mechanisms can lead to value creation via more effective knowledge sharing in partnerships.

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