



Integration techniques in customer–supplier relationships: An empirical research in the Italian industry of household appliances[☆]

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Abstract

The paper explores the management of customer–supplier relationships through the adoption of a set of practices supporting integration in interface processes.

A classification of relevant integration techniques (i.e. decisions on how to manage interface processes) and tools (i.e. assets or resources that support the adoption of techniques) is provided: techniques are grouped into the operations, technological and strategic domains, while tools are divided into the information technology, management and organization classes.

An in-field research in the Italian industry of components for household appliances provided the ground to measure the diffusion of techniques and tools in the relationships between component manufacturers and appliance OEMs. The study found that the most adopted are the techniques related to operations management, coherently with the industry priorities, while the diffusion of technological and strategic techniques is low. Tools, on the other hand, have generally a low diffusion rate, except for vendor rating systems and e-procurement. Analyzing firms' efficiency and effectiveness performances, it is possible to notice how the best performing firms are the ones adopting the higher number of techniques and tools in all domains, while efficiency-oriented companies focus their integration practices (that are actually light) in the logistic domain, and growth-oriented companies give great importance to coordination in new product development and strategic planning.

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1. Introduction

Managerial practices in buyer–supplier relationships are continuously evolving, due to endogenous and exogenous changes occurring at an increasing speed to market needs, competition and environment. Globalization, increased product variety, speeding up of technological innovation and shortening of product life cycles

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Table 1
Potential advantages of long-term relationships for customers and suppliers

Interface process	Advantages for customers	Advantages for suppliers
New product development	Increased innovation Reduced time-to-market Reduced cost of projects Improved quality of projects Reduced risk of projects Joint investments in R&D	Joint investments in R&D
Operations	Increased level of customer service Reduced financial cost of stocks Increased overall quality Increased flexibility	Reduced risk through long-term planning of production capacity, more reliable orders and forecasting Reduced costs through better inventory control, scale and learning economies
Management and strategic planning	Reduced costs through reduced complexity Increased supplier loyalty through mutual dependence Reduced time spent looking for new suppliers of stipulating contracts Focus on core competencies	Reduced administrative costs through the focus on few key customers Reduced risks thanks to the certainty of consolidated customers Help in developing capabilities and support to growth

contributed to increase the complexity in configuring and managing intra-firm and inter-firm processes. Processes such as procurement, inbound logistics, internal operations and logistics, distribution and new product development involve now many different actors, inside and outside the company, and require several different skills: this scenario pushes companies to modify their supply chain strategy. In particular, long-term customer–supplier agreements are substituting in some cases the short-term adversarial approach, usual in the past. This might follow the trend in manufacturing companies of outsourcing an ever increasing part of the business, in order to focus on core competencies (Ellram, 1995): coordination and partnering with suppliers become, then, a strategic issue.

Different authors in literature have described and analyzed the potential benefits of buyer–supplier strategic partnerships: among others Carr and Pearson (1999), Cooper et al. (1997), Ellram (1997), Kalwani and Narayandas (1995), McLeave (1999) and Watts and Hahn (1993). A synthetic view of their findings is provided in Table 1.

Moreover, the centrality of customer arises the need to deliver a superior and customized service as a major competitive lever: the focus in supply chains thus shifts from the efficient use of resources to the effective response to serviced market segments (De Maio and Maggiore, 1992). Supply networks arise, in which firms cooperate in innovating, producing and distributing products, competing with other networks on service, quality and cost together: the joint performances of a network will determine its possibility to succeed in the market. Integration among supply chain actors in shaping and managing interface processes can act as a lever for success, by developing skills, technology and market opportunities. An interesting framework for the strategic design and improvement of supply networks is proposed by MIP (2001).

This paper will focus on the tactical and operational practices (hereafter called *techniques* and *tools*) supporting integration in buyer–supplier relationships. Its objectives are: (a) to provide an original classification of actions supporting buyer–supplier integration, (b) to assess empirically the diffusion of these actions in a particular

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