

# Extra-role behavior in buyer–supplier relationships

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## Abstract

This study develops theory and provides empirical evidence regarding the antecedents and consequences of extra-role behavior in supply relationships (i.e., supplier behaviors that go beyond formal role definitions and responsibilities and are oriented toward helping the buyer firm, referred to as partner ERB). Communal motivations, instrumental motivations, and role formalization explain the variation in partner ERB. Further, the effect of partner ERB on relationship profitability is contingent on the buyer partner's qualifications and the degree of technological unpredictability. An empirical test is presented based on 223 buyer–supplier relationships. Partner ERB has several drivers including role formalization. While partner ERB generally increases buyer profitability, in certain cases (e.g., for poorly chosen suppliers in a predictable environment) it may actually decrease it.

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## 1. Introduction

Effectively managing supply relationships for firm profitability and competitive advantage represents a key concern in channel relationship management (e.g., Cannon & Perreault, 1999). A major complicating factor is the impossibility in any kind of inter-firm cooperative setting to specify all possible contingencies contractually (Macaulay, 1963). Even if possible, complete contractual specification entails substantial costs associated with discovering and negotiating pre-specified contractual responses to all potential contingencies (Klein, 1996). These contractual restrictions in combination with buyer firms' increasing expectations of supplier firms have challenged effective buyer–supplier relationships (Kauffman, 2001). On the one hand, buyers address this challenge by identifying good suppliers using increasingly demanding selection criteria. On the other hand, suppliers often go to great lengths to signal that they

are 'dedicated' suppliers. An important behavioral expression of such dedication is a supplier doing more than what is formally required in order to help out the buyer firm, referred to as 'extra-role behavior' or—in an inter-firm setting—partner ERB. In view of the increasing demands on suppliers and the limitations of contracts for effectively coping with an unpredictable environment, channel theory and practice can benefit from a better understanding of the phenomenon of partner ERB and its drivers and consequences. Somewhat surprisingly, very few empirical channel studies devote explicit attention to such pro-social behaviors (exceptions include Cannon & Homburg, 2001; Lusch & Brown, 1996). The intention of the present study is to examine the drivers and the consequences of partner ERB displayed by supplier firms in buyer–supplier relationships.

ERB, doing more than what is formally required, has received attention in marketing (e.g., MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Ahearne, 1998; Maxham & Netemeyer, 2003; Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1994) as well as related fields, including social psychology (e.g., Katz & Kahn, 1966; Pearce & Gregersen, 1991; Wright, George, Farnsworth, & Mahan, 1993) and management (e.g., Kim & Mauborgne, 1996; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). However, this literature has exclusively studied relationships between individual employees and firms, with a focus in the marketing literature on the relationship between

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salespersons and the sales organization. Partner ERB in inter-organizational settings remains unexplored. This manuscript aims to fill this void by providing a theoretical discourse on partner ERB, deriving a set of hypotheses, and testing the conceptual framework through an empirical study of over 200 buyer–supplier relationships.

More precisely, this study aims to contribute to the literature in three ways. First, from a theoretical point of view, the introduction of ERB in marketing channel research extends the literature on ERB from the classic employee–firm context to the firm–firm context. Also, it extends channel theory by drawing attention to positive behaviors that go beyond formally agreed upon role definitions, displayed by a supplier firm for the benefit of the buyer firm. Essentially, partner ERB differs from relational norms such as solidarity in that norms are bilateral expectations that behaviors are directed toward the relationship which result from a cooperative atmosphere and feelings of mutuality (Jap & Ganesan, 2000; Macneil, 1980). Partner ERB, however, refers to behavior displayed by an individual exchange partner. While pro-social behavior may result from a cooperative atmosphere within the dyadic relationship, it may also be driven by instrumental factors such as impression management. What sets a study of partner ERB apart is hence its focus on partner-specific pro-social behavior.

This brings us to the second intended contribution. Drawing from the ERB literature in social psychology and organizational behavior, a set of drivers of partner ERB is derived that is relevant to a channels context. While the classic motive for engaging in ERB discussed in the prior literature relates to feelings of positive affect resulting from a cooperative atmosphere (e.g., Van Dyne & Ang, 1998), instrumental motives related to impression management are likely to be influential as well (e.g., Bolino, 1999). Particularly in an inter-firm setting, such instrumental motivations require more attention. Further, role formalization is expected to influence the occurrence of ERB, but interestingly, the literature provides contradictory rationales. On the one hand, the governance literature has drawn attention to the restrictions of detailed formalization of roles and responsibilities in contracts (Jap & Ganesan, 2000; Macaulay, 1963). On the other hand, the organizational literature stresses the restrictions of role ambiguity, which occurs when roles and responsibilities are not sufficiently formalized (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Shenkar & Zeira, 1992). The empirical test will contrast both lines of thought and examine whether role formalization strengthens or weakens partner ERB.

A third contribution relates to the value of partner ERB to the firm. Virtually the entire prior ERB literature has assumed that such pro-social behavior benefits the actor to which the behavior is directed. However, this assumption can be questioned in business markets where the effect of partner ERB on relationship profitability is likely a function of partner characteristics and environmental conditions. Theoretical arguments for such contingency effects will be presented, and it will be empirically shown that partner ERB is only profitable to the buyer firm in specific situations. This has implications not only for channels research, but also for the ERB literature broadly.

In sum, contributions to the channels literature include the study of pro-social behaviors and an alternative perspective on role formalization. Contributions to the ERB literature include an elaboration of instrumental motivations in an inter-firm context and attention to contingency conditions. The empirical test is based on a survey among 223 buyer firms active in industry sectors related to industrial machinery, equipment, and components. The cross-sectional character of the data does not allow for unambiguous causal inference, but the pattern of findings is in line with the developed theory. The findings provide a more comprehensive picture of the motivational sources than what has been portrayed in the prior ERB literature, leading to managerial recommendations as to how to stimulate partner ERB. Further, the results show that partner ERB is only associated with greater relationship profitability under specific contingency conditions.

## 2. Theory and hypotheses

### 2.1. Defining partner extra-role behavior

ERBs are efforts voluntarily exerted beyond the call of duty (Kim & Mauborgne, 1996). Within the confines of an organization, it refers to creative behaviors that go beyond role descriptions for the benefit of the firm. The origins of the ERB concept can be traced back to the role conception of the individual employee, as proposed in the social psychology of organizations (Katz & Kahn, 1966).<sup>2</sup> ERB is mostly associated with positive consequences such as decreased voluntary turnover among salespeople (MacKenzie et al., 1998) or individual employee performance (van Dyne & LePine, 1998). Nevertheless, some scholars have argued that ERB may at times be less helpful than hoped for, for example if the extra help is ineffective or inaccurate (e.g., Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1994).

Beyond the traditional intra-firm context, doing more than what is formally required has particular value in marketing channel contexts, where contracts are necessarily incomplete and costly to draft (Klein, 1996; Macaulay, 1963). Partner ERB is defined as a partner firm's behaviors that go beyond formal role definitions and responsibilities, oriented toward helping a channel partner. It is important to distinguish partner ERB from dyadic relational norms of flexibility and solidarity that emerge over the course of a channel relationship as a result of feelings of mutuality and affective commitment (Heide & John, 1992; Noordewier, John, & Nevin, 1990). Partner ERB reflects an individual actor's actions oriented toward a channel partner as opposed to relational norms that pertain to the dyad rather than an actor in the dyad. Partner ERB can even occur in the absence of dyadic relational norms, for example when it is instrumentally motivated, as explained below.

<sup>2</sup> Examples of extra-role behavior, such as assisting colleagues, are sometimes also referred to as Organizational Citizenship Behavior (Bateman & Organ, 1983), which further underscores the one-sided focus of the literature on the individual employee.

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