

# Inter-organizational communication as a relational competency: Antecedents and performance outcomes in collaborative buyer–supplier relationships

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## Abstract

Inter-organizational communication has been documented as a critical factor in promoting strategic collaboration among firms. In this paper, we seek to extend the stream of research in supply chain management by systematically investigating the antecedents and performance outcomes of inter-organizational communication. Specifically, inter-organizational communication is proposed as a *relational competency* that may yield strategic advantages for supply chain partners. Using structural equation modeling, we empirically test a number of hypothesized relationships based on a sample of over 200 United States firms. Our results provide strong support for the notion of inter-organizational communication as a relational competency that enhances buyers' and suppliers' performance. Implications for future research and practice are offered.

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## 1. Introduction

That communication is the essence of organizational life has been well documented by communication and management scholars and practitioners (e.g., Fulk and Boyd, 1991; Reinsch, 2001; Yates and Orlikowski, 1992). Similarly, literature in relationship marketing has recognized how collaborative communication is

critical to fostering and maintaining value-enhancing inter-organizational relationships (e.g., Anderson et al., 1994; Mohr and Nevin, 1990; Mohr et al., 1996; Schultz and Evans, 2002). Reflecting its centrality to business performance, one business executive asserted, “communication is as fundamental to business as carbon is to physical life” (Reinsch, 2001, p. 20).

Operations management researchers have also documented how inter-organizational communication enhances buyer–supplier performance (e.g., Carr and Pearson, 1999; Carter and Miller, 1989; Claycomb and Frankwick, 2004; Newman and Rhee, 1990; Prahinski and Benton, 2004; Cousins and Menguc, 2006). However, such work has remained disjointed, largely anecdotal, and without a strong theoretical underpinning.

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In empirical studies, researchers have typically considered communication as a facet of a broader construct, such as supply management (e.g., Chen et al., 2004), or examined the extent to which the use of select communication strategies by buyer firms enhances supplier firm operational performance (e.g., Prahinski and Benton, 2004). What has not been systematically investigated is the extent to which communication between buyer and supplier firms mediates the links among key antecedents and outcome variables within a coherent theoretical framework. Such an investigation is needed in order to advance theory building and empirical testing in supply chain management.

With this goal in mind, we develop a conceptual model linking key antecedents and outcomes of inter-organizational communication within the context of collaborative buyer–supplier relationships. Drawing on the *relational view* of strategic management (Dyer and Singh, 1998), we conceptualize inter-organizational communication as a *relational competency*, which mediates the links between several antecedent and outcome variables for buyer and supplier firms. Using structural equation modeling, we provide a holistic test of the hypothesized relationships (Bagozzi et al., 1991), and document the extent to which the empirical evidence concerning the strategic role of inter-organizational communication is cumulative.

We believe the relational view of strategic management provides the relevant theoretical framework for the present investigation for at least three reasons. First, the relational view takes the *inter-organizational* level of analysis and addresses the extent to which *relational capabilities* form the basis of durable strategic advantages (Dyer and Singh, 1998; Kanter, 1994; Lado et al., 1997; Madhok and Tallman, 1998). This theoretical perspective extends the “resource-based view” (RBV), a firm-level theory of sustained competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984). Taken together these perspectives provide a robust theoretical framework for explaining how strategic advantage is gained or lost based largely on endogenous strategic factors. Second, users of the relational view examine how relational competencies, enable firms to gain and sustain *collaborative advantage* (Kanter, 1994). In contrast, users of the RBV focus on explaining how firm-specific resources and capabilities characterized by value, rareness, imperfect imitability, and non-substitutability form the basis of sustained *competitive advantage* (e.g., Barney, 1991). Finally, the relational view places a premium on behavioral phenomena, such as inter-organizational communication as the drivers of firm performance.

Thus, by viewing inter-organizational communication as a relational competency and empirically investigating its mediating role in the links between key antecedents and outcomes, we seek to gain a better understanding of the strategic importance of this construct within the context of buyer–supplier relationships.

In the following section, we briefly review literature in the relational view to provide a theoretical backdrop to our proposed model of the antecedents and outcomes of inter-organizational communication. Then, we develop the theoretical rationale of our proposed model, drawing on related research in strategic management, operations management, and marketing, among others. In Section 3, we explain our research methodology, including data collection procedure, construct operationalization and measurement, hypothesis testing and results. Section 4 presents discussion and implications of the study findings. In Section 5, we highlight some limitations of the study and offer suggestions for future research.

## 2. Theory and hypotheses

### 2.1. Relational competencies and supply chain management

Given the increasing importance of strategic collaboration among supply chain partners (Contractor and Lorange, 1988; Kanter, 1994), the issue of how relational competencies generate sustainable strategic advantage has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention (Dyer and Singh, 1998; Kale et al., 2000; Lorenzoni and Lipparini, 1999). The development of relational competencies requires that firms adopt a collaborative managerial mindset for building strategic advantage (Ohmae, 1989). Leaders in such firms articulate a “strategic intent” by creating an imbalance between the firm’s strategic goals and their current stocks of resources and capabilities (Hamel and Prahalad, 1994). Such a strategic intent then drives firms to acquire, access, or develop additional resources through cooperation. Additionally, firms may form strategic partnerships to access or acquire unique and valuable resources that they lack, or leverage “social” resources, such as reputation, status, and legitimacy (Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven, 1996). Thus, firms that emphasize cooperation among supply chain partners may achieve greater economic benefits compared to those that espouse traditional, zero-sum-based notion of competition. For example, Toyota’s cooperation with its suppliers enhances its competitive position as well as

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