



Capabilities that enhance outcomes of an episodic supply chain collaboration

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ABSTRACT

Firms are increasingly dependent on the knowledge and expertise in external organizations to innovate, problem-solve, and improve supply chain performance. This research examines two capabilities that enable firms to collaborate successfully as a means to combine knowledge and expertise in an episodic collaboration initiative. Building from two theoretical foundations, the knowledge-based and relational views of the firm, we examine the effects of absorptive capacity and collaborative process competence on the outcomes of an episodic collaboration initiative. Using structural equation modeling, we empirically validate the positive effect of absorptive capacity, collaborative process competence and level of engagement on the operational and relational success of a collaboration effort. Results show that collaborative process competence mediates the relationship between absorptive capacity and collaborative engagement, and positively influences both operational and relational outcomes. Finally, we offer suggestions for managers to improve the effectiveness of inter-firm collaboration initiatives and discuss future research opportunities.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, collaboration has risen in importance with the push to develop core competencies and strategic capabilities within the firm, while outsourcing everything else (Gottfredson et al., 2005). Collaboration with suppliers, customers and even competitors to co-create solutions to problems is increasingly important to a firm's business strategy and a source of competitive advantage (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). We view collaboration as a mechanism to combine and deploy external and internal knowledge and skills, and examine two capabilities (absorptive capacity and collaboration process competence) that influence the operational and relational outcomes of such collaborations.

Historically, collaboration research has focused on long-term collaborative relationships that are strategic in nature such as alliances and partnerships. Dyer and Singh (1998) suggested firms who invest in long-term relationships to combine resources in unique ways could realize a competitive advantage and accrue "relational rents." Paulraj et al. (2008) suggested a long-term relationship orientation is an antecedent to building relational

competencies that improve collaborating firms' performance. Yet many collaboration efforts are episodic in nature, focused on an episodic initiative, with a defined beginning and end, occurring in a limited timeframe, and taking place between specific organizations or teams within firms.

In today's dynamic environment, firms embedded in a "virtual" network or a supply chain must collaborate with other firms to pursue episodic initiatives, whether or not a formal alliance or long-term relationship exists. Resolution of a significant quality problem, supply chain network redesign, contingency planning, or a new product launch are examples of episodic initiatives that may require collaboration outside a formal alliance or long-term collaborative relationship. In some cases, for example customizing and implementing an information system, designing and building a facility, or developing an environmentally friendly recycling process, collaboration with firms not integral to ongoing supply chain processes may be required.

Based on our review of the literature and preliminary interviews with a number of firms, we concluded that when companies face unique or complicated challenges within the supply chain, they are often dependent on an episodic collaboration as a means to combine internal and external skills and knowledge for successful resolution (Fig. 1). In such situations, they are likely to engage intensely with another firm. We also identified absorptive capacity and collaborative process competence as internal capabilities that influence collaboration success. Firms with high levels of

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A Conceptual Framework For Capabilities that Enhance Outcomes of an Episodic Supply Chain Collaboration

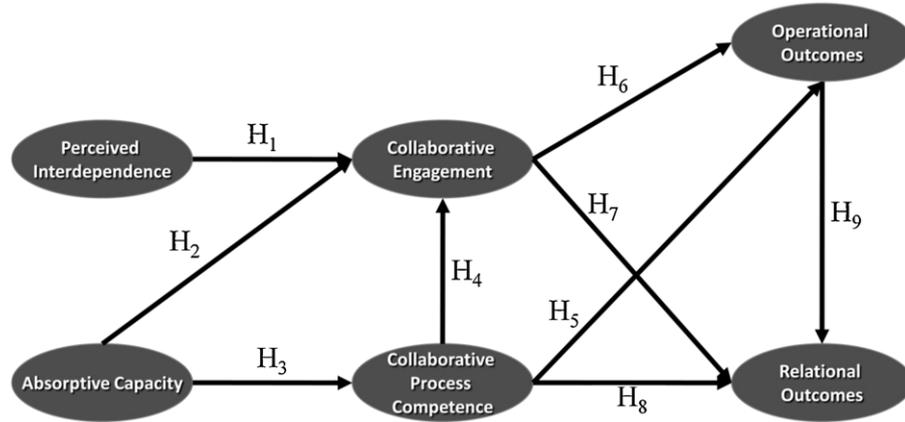


Fig. 1. A conceptual framework for capabilities that enhance outcomes of an episodic supply chain collaboration.

absorptive capacity are more likely to recognize the opportunity to benefit from external knowledge and engage intensely in collaboration efforts to capitalize on that knowledge. They are also likely to learn from previous collaborations and develop basic competencies (collaborative process competence) required to manage the process well. As a result, they achieve better outcomes, both operationally and in terms of the relationship with their collaboration partner.

This research makes several empirical contributions to existing literature. First, we developed and empirically validated a comprehensive model of an episodic collaborative initiative. Prior research has focused primarily on long-term collaborative relationships. However, knowledge and expertise required for many improvement initiatives reside in organizations outside a firm's existing relationships. We provide empirical support for the importance of episodic collaborations, and examine critical capabilities required to ensure success. In addition, while researchers have recognized perceived interdependence as an antecedent to long-term collaborations, we empirically validated the role of perceived interdependence as an antecedent to an episodic collaborative engagement.

We also identified and validated the importance of two capabilities to collaboration success (absorptive capacity and collaborative process competence) and their effects on the relational and operational outcomes of an episodic collaborative initiative. We identified, operationalized, and validated *collaborative process competence* as a critical capability with a direct positive effect on the degree to which firms engage in a collaboration effort and the outcomes of the collaborative initiative. We found the effect of *absorptive capacity* in a collaborative initiative is mediated by collaborative process competence, providing empirical support for the premise that absorptive capacity enables the development of other context specific capabilities that can yield a competitive advantage (Kale et al., 2002).

Finally, our results provide strong empirical evidence of the contribution of episodic collaborative efforts to performance in a wide range of types of collaboration and in multiple industries. The empirical validation of these relationships demonstrates the importance of collaboration as a means of accessing, synthesizing, and deploying knowledge to improve performance.

The theoretical background and hypotheses for this research are discussed in Section 2. Section 3 describes the research method and data collection, Section 4 presents the analysis and Section 5, the results. Section 6 discusses managerial and theoretical implica-

tions, and Section 7 points out the limitations of this research and opportunities for future research.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Knowledge based view and relational view

The increasing importance of inter-organizational relationships has led to the development of a wide range of theories in a number of disciplines to explain the formation of collaborations. The two theories that provide the theoretical foundations for this research are the knowledge-based view (KBV) and the relational view (RV).

The knowledge-based view of the firm, an outgrowth of the resource-based view, suggests knowledge is the most strategically important of a firm's resources (Conner, 1991; Grant, 1996; Spender, 1996). KBV suggests the role of the firm is to create, acquire and deploy organizational knowledge that leads to superior performance (Spender, 1996; Nonaka, 1994). Dyer and Singh (1998) noted the importance of customers and suppliers as sources of external knowledge that complement an organization's own internal knowledge.

Knowledge itself can be delineated in many ways, but the most common distinction is between explicit knowledge (know what—facts and theories that can be codified) and tacit knowledge (know how—knowledge that can only be observed through application and acquired through practice) (Grant, 1996). Explicit knowledge can be articulated and easy to transfer while tacit knowledge is difficult to articulate and very slow, costly or uncertain to transfer (Kogut and Zander, 1992). Tacit knowledge produces more sustainable advantages, since it is difficult to imitate, and the process of accumulating and leveraging knowledge is more likely to create new sources of advantage (Choo et al., 2007).

Grant and Baden-Fuller (1995) noted collaborations may exist to exchange and integrate knowledge between buyers and suppliers when products are highly complex and knowledge is "imperfectly embedded" in the product exchange. In many interactions between firms, the exchange of explicit knowledge is required, and accomplished with very little collaboration. For example, a buying firm may request a change in package size, ship date, order quantity, or transportation mode in order to meet changing demands from their customer. While the buyer is dependent on the supplier to solve the problem, the solution is relatively straightforward, requiring only a simple exchange of information with a sequential or reciprocal response by the supplier firm (Thompson, 1967).

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