



## The global account manager as political entrepreneur

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### Abstract

Early work in key account management (KAM) led to the development of a Relationship Development Model that provided the basis for much of the work of other researchers in the field of KAM. More recently, attention has turned to the emerging management task of global account management (GAM). A major concern of GAM studies has been the nature of the role of the global account manager and a number of models that explore the notion of the global account manager as *political entrepreneur* have been developed. The aim of this paper is to introduce a contextual model of political–entrepreneurial behaviour and to integrate this with previously published work on the political entrepreneur, the model of global account manager boundary-spanning behaviour and the Relationship Development Model.

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### 1. Introduction

A recurring question emerging from our research, consultancy, and management training workshops on global account management (GAM) is: What is the nature of the role performed by global account managers?

Global account managers are normally recruited/promoted from *within* multinational selling companies, typically from the pool of national account/sales managers, on the assumption that thorough knowledge and experience of the company's organisation and products/services are essential prerequisites. They perform a boundary-spanning role across two important organisational interfaces: first, the *internal* interface between global and national account management, which is often embedded in a headquarters/subsidiary relationship; and second, the *external* interface between the selling company and the dispersed activities of its global accounts. Were the role only concerned with boundary spanning, then it would be a little different, although with added degrees of complexity, from the role performed by general line sales people. Its obvious complexity and developing strategic importance suggest that we may be witnessing the emergence of a fundamentally new

managerial position. In recognition of the need to navigate sensitive commercial/political aspects of these interface relationships, we have dubbed the global account manager as performing the role of *political entrepreneur*.

In an earlier paper [15], we have explored the boundary-spanning roles that may be played by the global account manager in terms of the degree of identification they might display towards their own organisation and that of the global account. In this paper, we will build upon that discussion and introduce a model that explores the degree to which the application of political and entrepreneurial skills may be impacted upon by contextual factors, and how the application of these skills may be related to stages of relational development.

The nature of the global account manager role and how it is performed have significant implications for companies seeking to recruit, develop and retain global account managers. Further, an understanding of the contextual factors that impact upon the role will influence the way they are deployed and how effectively they perform the role to enhance the quality and profitability of relational interaction.

Our paper commences with a critical review of the literature on boundary-spanning roles and goes on to explore recent thinking around the relationship skills that are required for strategic account management in a global context [19]. Our recent exploratory research on GAM interface relationships is then interpreted using two conceptual models. The first revisits our previous work [15] and

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emphasises global account manager dilemmas and transitions at the external interface, and the second examines the application of political and entrepreneurial skills within the context of developing relationships. These capture the essence of the global account manager as political entrepreneur, giving due consideration to contextual factors such as organisational complexity, cultural diversity and industrial setting.

## 2. An overview of the literature

### 2.1. Boundary-spanning roles

The notion of “boundary spanning” has its origins in *open systems* approaches to strategic management and marketing, typically centering on the process of internal organisational adaptation to external environmental change. People occupying the role of boundary spanner have been variously described as “linking pins,” “information brokers,” “gatekeepers” providing “human bridges,” and the organisation’s “antenna in the external business environment.”

Our current focus is the boundary-spanning role performed by global account managers, though we recognise that there are many other people whose primary role involves face-to-face interaction with customers (e.g., senior marketing/sales executives, project managers, sales staff, customer service/support staff, applications development engineers, public relations officers). There are also internally based staff who, perhaps, have less face-to-face contact, but occupy an important relationship-building role, nevertheless (e.g., in sales administration, distribution, credit control). Most of the early literature, however, resides within sales management and explores the well-worn track of role conflict and ambiguity (see Refs. [1–3,16,17,18]). These writers raise a number of pertinent issues that may be translated to the role of global account managers:

... one reason why the sales person is susceptible to high levels of role conflict and ambiguity is that he occupies a boundary position in his firm and, therefore, has a large and diverse role set, i.e. people in related positions, both within and outside his company, who depend on his performance in some fashion... and are rewarded by it or require it to perform their own tasks. (Ref. [18], p. 33)

Boundary roles involved with maintaining or improving the political legitimacy or hegemony of the organization not only represent the organization but also mediate between it and important outside organizations. (Ref. [1], p. 220)

... in comparison with role conflict, role ambiguity is more amenable to managerial intervention (Ref. [17], p. 329)

... whether boundary spanners can discriminate *empirically* among what researchers see as *conceptually* distinct facets of role ambiguity is unknown. (Ref. [17], p. 329)

Because of the nature and complexity of boundary-spanning roles it is probably futile and perhaps counterproductive to expend resources on programs that eliminate role ambiguity... managers may find it rewarding to put their efforts behind programs that reduce and/or help boundary spanners to cope with ambiguity in *specific facets of their role*, e.g. targeting boss and company-related ambiguities or designing jobs with greater autonomy. (Ref. [16], p. 27)

The potential for role ambiguity and conflict is increased in the boundary-spanning role performed by global account managers because of the complexity of the coordinating function they perform. Not only are they expected to coordinate the activities of their own organisation in delivering the *global promise*, but very often those of their customer and with little direct authority over those charged with the local implementation of global strategy.

### 2.2. Role of the global account manager

A Global Account is one that is of strategic importance to the achievement of the supplier’s corporate objectives, pursues integrated and co-ordinated strategies on a world wide basis and demands a globally integrated product/service offering. [19]

The role and competencies required of the global account manager have received our increasing attention in recent years (see Refs. [8,9,12–14,19]). While we can claim to have achieved modest success in teasing out and prioritising lists of desirable personal attributes/traits and skills/competencies, we have also been drawn irresistibly towards some of the softer, higher-order *meta-skills/competencies* that separate out the few highly effective global account managers from the mediocre. As the title of our paper suggests, this has led us to those particular meta-skills/competencies that underpin the role of the global account manager as *political entrepreneur*.

The following extracts capture our earlier thoughts on what this role entails.

Millman and Wilson [14] suggest that global account managers require “... finely tuned political instincts that enable them to navigate the corridors of power, to reconcile conflicting interests, and to enlist the support of people at all levels.”

Millman [10] alludes to the “... political/cultural milieu at the buyer/seller interface and coping with the unrelenting pressures of different time zones.”

Wilson et al. [19] envisage the global account manager as “... knowing the people to speak to, the buttons to press

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