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Informal cooperation in the US and Germany: cooperative managerial capitalism vs. competitive managerial capitalism in interfirm information trading

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Abstract

Several empirical studies have shown that apparently competing companies cooperate extensively through an informal exchange of valuable information. Since international interfirm relations have become elementary in many markets, the informal information exchange across national borders gains significance. Cross-cultural discrepancies in information-trading patterns may impede the emergence of stable and intensive informal relations between companies of different countries. So far, however, the question of whether information trading patterns are similar across nations has remained widely unexplored.

Therefore this research compares the informal exchange of technical information among 438 managers in US and German steel companies. We assumed that a greater inclination to cooperate predominates in German firms (cooperative managerial capitalism) in comparison to their American counterparts (competitive managerial capitalism). Nevertheless, the findings indicate a more complex situation. Managers of German companies are found to interact more frequently than US managers with colleagues in other companies. However, in contradiction to the generally accepted assertion, the information exchanged among German firms proves to be of less importance to the recipient company than in the US.

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1. Introduction

Cooperation between firms can take on many forms from highly formalized joint ventures to rather informal agreements (Fontanari, 1996). The exchange of information is normally at the center of these cooperative activities (Porter, 1990). Regardless of whether the cooperation is formal or not, the information exchange itself frequently occurs without prior explicit contractual agreement. To reach a contract regulating the information trading can face numerous nearly insurmountable difficulties. This is especially the case if the information to be exchanged can only be vaguely described *ex ante*, a situation especially relevant in innovation collaborations (Arrow, 1971; Carter, 1989; Chiesa & Manzini, 1998). Even if explicit contracts are used to govern interfirm information transfer, the partners frequently still have a considerable degree of freedom (Hamel, Doz, & Prahalad, 1989).

Informal information exchange between companies within an industry segment (horizontal cooperation) is in the focus of this paper. This mode of cooperation is characterized by an inherent tension between cooperation and competition. On the one hand, firms within an industry face similar problems and therefore can benefit from each other's knowledge and experience. On the other hand, companies in direct competition have to prevent the leaking of information that jeopardizes their competitive advantage. Thus, the question of whether cooperation will yield advantages or disadvantages becomes particularly salient.

While there has been significant research on the mechanism of informal information trading (Rogers, 1982; von Hippel, 1987; Schrader, 1991; von Hippel & Schrader, 1996), cross-cultural aspects received only little empirical examination. It is widely unknown if international differences play an important role in this context. In times of increasing concern about industrial globalization, more attention has to be paid on comparisons of information trading styles in countries around the world. New findings with regard to this topic could help top management to implement suitable organizational settings that guide international information-trading in the desired direction.

In the present paper a survey of employees in companies of the US and the German steel industries is conducted to explore cross-cultural differences in informal information trading styles. Chandler (1990) sees a major difference between industrial companies in Germany and the United States in their general attitude to maintain interfirm relationships with the home competitors. He and several other authors assert that German business life is characterized as substantially richer in various kinds of interfirm cooperation than that in the US (cooperative managerial capitalism vs. competitive managerial capitalism). However, these investigations generally observe only general tendencies in horizontal cooperation of companies from different

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