Investigating soft skills in network management

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Abstract—The abstract goes here. TODO

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1 Introduction

This is a research proposal. A proposed research project that will contain the main ideas, main methods, recipe for execution, detailed research questions, and expected results.

The area of research is of a business related theme. As the title says we propose to look into the role of soft skills in network management.

First off we have to define soft skills. Soft skills are skills that affects people. In general these skills are people skills. The ability to communicate, interpret, and understand other peoples actions and emotions.

Second we have to know what network management is. Network management is the result of all actions that are executed to cooperate, coexist, and have co-evolution with other business entities in the ecosystem surrounding a given firm.

In essence we want to investigate how social skills affects the management of networks, that is how human input, and interaction, makes network management.

This topic is interesting on many levels, mostly business related. To link it up to a challenge that are on the rise today we can see this topic in association with computer science, or rather the IT consulting business. One shortcoming of IT-personnel is that they are very technically competent while at the same time have no idea of how what they are doing fits into a bigger picture. To expand on this issue, soft skills in network management can be one part of the diverse problem of integrating IT into the core of business strategies.

Another reason for looking into this topic further may be the lack of existing empirical data. As of now there are few studies into this angle of network management, and it would be natural to expand this area as well as others.

Also, the multi-disciplinary aspect that combines social and behavioural psychology, organizational psychology, business strategy, management, and a potential field of application such as computer science(IT).

The research would have to be executed in multiple steps. First would be to execute interviews of current management in bigger IT firms to map the boundaries of the research task. Second interviews of multiple levels of management would be executed. Third two or three case studies would give insight into the companies that interact in networks. Fourth, the collected data would have to be interpreted, and then aggregated. Fifth, statistics can be created from the collected data. Sixth, conclusions can be drawn based on the statistical findings.

1.1 Outline

Continuing this proposal are the research questions, research strategy, detailed description of research execution, expected results, a literature review into the field of network management, and a conclusion at the end.

2 Research Questions

The importance of research questions is big. Research questions define the wanted outcome of the research, and in many ways define the expectations for the work to be executed.

To be specific, we want this research to find out: 1: What soft skills are used in relation to network management, 2: Whether or not soft skills affect network management, and 3: How

the soft skills affects the interactions between firms in a network.

These three questions are natural to ask in an emerging are of research. They enlighten core aspects and uses for the field, and would provide useful information fro practical application later on.

3 Research Strategy

The strategy of research will have three data gathering parts, a data aggregation part, and a conclusive part. In the core of the strategy we have qualitative methods. Methods that dive deeper into the little data we have gathered, in contrast to qualitative methods that require lots of data, and provides shallow aggregations of the data.

For the data acquisition, the three parts, both qualitative and quantitative methods will be used, although the quantitative depends on findings of the qualitative. The suggested approach is that the findings from preliminary interviews decide which firms to be considered in a series of case studies, and that the results from the case studies and interviews dictate the content of a survey.

For data aggregation a programmatic approach would be beneficial. This will be faster for the amount of data from the survey, but also give interesting results from the case studies as well. For the interviews there is little reason to use programs to extract data, although it might result in interesting new aspects.

Conclusions will be based on the aggregated data, and related to the research questions.

4 Research execution

The majority of the work will be done with the three data gathering parts. These three parts are interviews, case studies, and surveys.

Interviews serves the purpose of limiting the field of research, and finding its boundaries. As well as creating the first data points, and pointers for the next two data gathering parts. The interviews will be with management officials, such as middle and high level managers in respectable firms. The number of interviewees has to be limited to those who have a high degree of perceived influence in the terms of the research.

The interviews will ideally be held at the interviewees location, as that would be more practical, and it would give the interviewer insight into the work environment of the interviewee. Questions should be prepared, be related to the topic at hand, and be posed the same way to all interviewees. This will hopefully decrease digressions in answers, and result in more uniformly shaped answers. The key here is to keep on topic, not to force the interviewees to answer the same ting as everyone else.

Case studies provide the business and network context for the interviews. The case studies are mostly to elaborate on the business aspects of networking, and network communications. Hopefully such case studies will give insight on how soft skills affect network aspects of business.

Three to five case studies proposed, to provide a variety in data, and also to provide ample opportunity to find areas to execute surveys. The case studies have to be qualitative, and focus on the company as a whole while at the same time emphasise the focus of soft skills. Areas such as human resources, work environment, competitors, collaborators, partners, strategy, vision, and values have to be considered in these case studies.

The data from a case study have to be interpreted critically in association to network management, and a verdict of the firm's network management capabilities have to be decided. Here strategies of the different firms have to be compared to give a bigger picture of which aspects of the case studies that affect soft skills in network management.

The last data acquisition tool is surveys. Surveys are targeted to the masses of the firms. This is to map management influence, the use of soft skills, and the importance of soft skills. The surveys have to be adapted to the context, and built from data gathered in the previous two methods for data gathering, interviews and case study.

The results of these surveys will be the easiest part to interpret. Surveys more or less give the number of this and that answer out of the box, while interviews and case studies are more

difficult. Although after getting the survey data there is the aspect of interpreting what the data means. Or rather which conclusions we can draw from the collected data. This is the difficult part.

After the acquisition of data there is the aspect of data aggregation, and finding conclusive parts of it. This is the difficult part of the research execution. The data aggregation will be manual for the interviews, semi manual for the case studies, and automated with the surveys. The case studies can be aggregated with the use of some programs that compare the cases, and find similarities. Common traits and passages will be useful for the enlightenment of the research questions. For the surveys a series of simple programs can be created to generate graphs, and other aggregated statistics.

When the data has been aggregated to useful statistics, the statistics can be used to directly answer parts of the research questions. A typical approach would be to adapt the data aggregation programs to give direct answers to the research questions. If there are no direct answers, techniques for a broader and more fussy answer can be used to condense the data related each research question into something digestible. The most probable case would be to manually read the data and draw conclusions.

5 Expected Results

Through the research so far described, there are some expectations of results. The expectations regard the three research questions.

Firstly we expect to gain good knowledge about the selected firms, and their area of operations. In this regard we hope to find the most common uses of soft skills related to network management, and their application.

Secondly we hope to find evidence of the effect soft skills has on network management. More specifically we hope to determine confidently whether or not soft skills has an impact on network management.

Third, there are interactions between firms in networks, and how these interactions are affected by soft skills. Here we hope to find clear indications of ways soft skills affect management in networks. These indications will be the foundation for future work in this field of research in the future.

On the whole it is expected that the main area of research is enlightened a bit, while at the same time new areas of unexplored management aspects are uncovered. It is also hoped that the multi-disciplinary part of the research can be brought together into a new and more interesting direction that will make headway in the future of business management.

6 Literature Review

The following literature review is based on the three articles stated in the references. The review is about network management, an important first step before bringing the soft skills into the picture.

Håkansson and Snehota, [1], states that the basic assumption about the environment is that it is faceless, atomistic, and beyond the control of the individual firm. Opportunities in the environment cannot be created or enacted, rather they can be exploited so that a firm adapts to its environment. In many cases of industrial networks many actors are unknown to others; each company has a limited number of identifiable actors. While the environment is hard to influence, each firm can to some degree choose its environment.

To survive in the environment a firm have to adapt to the ecosystem of actors, and to the market. Moore ([2],1996) states that single actions without an ecosystem are ineffective. A firm has to do competitive cooperation and systems thinking. Co-evolution in coexistence is the result of ongoing interactions in the network environment, and lack of sufficient coproduction and innovation results in demise of companies in the environment.

Moore's (1996) ecosystem, and Håkansson and Snehota's ([1],1989) concept of environment can be compared. The development we can see is that Moore talks about an ecosystem as a place where companies strive to survive, where Håkansson and Snehota uses the concept of environment as the set of interactions and entities that always influence the other actors.

In some ways the environment and the ecosystem are the same thing, Ritter et al. (2004) sees this as a self-organizing systems, which, in the context of management of industrial networks, will be discussed here.

In a network all participants are continuously affected by the influence of the other contributors. Ritter et al. ([3],2004) suggests the ongoing management of the network is a simultaneous process where all firms partake, and that the performance and structure is the coproduce of managerial actions of the network. Further we see that business networks generally don't have a controlling firm, but are widely regarded as self-organizing systems. In these systems order emerges through local interactions among the participating firms, resulting in a bottom-up emergence of structure.

While the understanding of management in networks is currently limited, we can pose some implications that affect management in networks. The ability to manage and develop relationships with other firms in a network can be seen as a core competence of a firm. This core competence influences the firm's position in, and profit from a network. "On short, relationship and network management is about managing interactions with others, not about managing others," (Ritter et al., [3],2004).

The level of management in a network is disputed. Ritter et al. ([3],2004) suggests that management of networks to a small extent can be possible. A frequent question is whether a firm should try to manage its network, or try managing in its network. The difference is the amount of influence the firm should exercise in the network, or if a firm should take the reactive or proactive role in the network. Ritter et al. ([3],2004) shows the concept of power for one actor over another and how this power influences the relationship. The essence is that the more perceived power the firms have the better the relationship between these two actors. If both companies have strong perceived power over the other it is a mutual relationship.

Möller and Rajala ([4],2007) says that one of the fundamental shifts in the 21st century is from a dyadic perspective of interorganizational exchange relationships, towards a network perspective of value creation involving different types of network organizations. This, in the light of Ritter et al. ([3],2004), arguments for a model where networks of organizations and network organization are the two opposites in regards to influence and control in industrial networks. Here networks of organisations are weakly manageable, while network organization are argued to have to be managed to be effective.

The aspect of control varies from network to network. In some networks a firm wants a high level of control. High levels of control in a network gives the firm a central role, it becomes a 'hub firm'. In networks where hub firms are present these firms can to some extent choose its partners and direct the way relationships operate. When a firm can control all other actors in the network it is a monopolist.

When comparing the two ways of influencing a network, except control or not, Ritter et al. ([3],2004) argues that firms are not in total control over their resources as other actors influence or restrict actions taken by a given firm. In this context a key resource is the ability to manage relationships in a network. To develop a networking ability that enables firms to connect their resources to those of other actors is seen as a challenge for managers. As part of a continuous process within network relations are dyadic and cross-relational management tasks (Ritter et al., [3],2004).

After discussing issues of management in networks Ritter et al. ([3],2004) pose some propositions. The propositions describe aspects of management in networks. These propositions are important when strategizing in industrial networks, as all the managerial decisions affect the position of a firm in relation to the other actors in a network. In short, decisions of management decide the success of a firm, and to some extent the successfulness of networks in which the firm participates.

7 Conclusion

Through this research proposal we have covered the topic of research, the more detailed research questions, the strategy for research, methods of data gathering, a literature review, and now a concluding part.

The proposal suggests investigation into soft skills in association with network management. This is a little research field today, and would give valuable insight for managers today.

The research questions specify the details of the what is hoped to be found, while the research strategy explains the approach to gain results. Expanded on the strategy the method part explains in more detail how it is hoped to gain data and knowledge in the specific parts of the proposal.

Data in three parts will be the building blocks of the conclusive findings of the proposed research, while the data aggregation described has to be elaborated and improvised to give adequate results when executing the actual research. The challenge will be to gather good data from representable firms that are in networks.

The literature review gives insight into the field of network management, but it is limited and have to be expanded significantly in the actual research. Literature review into soft skills, and the previously mentioned other scientific disciplines have to be conducted also.

Throughout a thorough research process it will be possible to shed light on aspects discussed in this research proposal. Especially the multi-disciplinary part of the research has an interesting appeal to it. Combining different research disciplines will be more important in the future.

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