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Leveraging boundary spanning capabilities to encourage supplier investment: A comparative study

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Article history: Received 29 January 2014 Received in revised form 2 January 2015 Accepted 5 January 2015 Available online 18 April 2015</p> <p>Keywords: Boundary spanner Communication Trust Supplier investment Cross-cultural studies</p>	<p>Despite growing recognition of the importance of boundary spanners at managing inter-organizational relationships, the process by which capabilities residing in boundary spanning individuals are leveraged to encourage partner firm investment remains unclear. In addressing this gap, we find that a boundary spanner's capabilities in strategic communication and job expertise enhance a customer firm's communication with a supplier firm, which increases a supplier's willingness to make future-oriented investment both directly as well as indirectly through increasing customer firm trustworthiness. Data collected from two samples of suppliers in the U.S. and other Western industrialized countries provide empirical support for our propositions. Furthermore, we found that the process of how boundary spanning capabilities influence supplier willingness to invest differs significantly between the two regions in ways that affect managerial decisions on resource allocation.</p> <p>© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.</p>

1. Introduction

Intense competition in global supply chains motivates industrial customers to collaborate with suppliers to realize innovations customers cannot achieve by themselves (e.g., Dyer & Chu, 2003; Takeishi, 2001). To this end, industrial customers encourage suppliers to invest in new technologies that can generate innovations beyond those specified in their contracts (Cox, 2004; MacDuffie & Helper, 2006). Such future-oriented supplier investments are difficult for competitors to imitate and represent a source of competitive advantage for the industrial customer (e.g., Morgan & Daniel, 2001; Singh & Power, 2009). In particular, when competing industrial customers share the same supplier base, a customer firm can lose its competitive advantage if its suppliers are more willing to direct technology investments to support innovations of its competitors (MacDuffie & Helper, 2006; Takeishi, 2001). This has happened to a number of well-established industrial customers in the computer, copier, automobile, and construction industries (Hayes & Abernathy, 1980; Morgan & Daniel, 2001).

Suppliers decide, with at least some deliberations, for whom they will undertake future-oriented investments. For a supplier to be willing to make future-oriented investments, the supplier needs to be able to assess a customer's intentions and strategic plans to determine whether it will be able to recover the value of its customer-firm-related investments (MacDuffie & Helper, 2006). This assessment is particularly challenging in a global market where customers and suppliers are separated by geographic and cultural differences (Kiesling, Harvey, & Garrison, 2004).

To foster supplier future-oriented investment, boundary spanning individuals play an increasingly important role in communicating knowledge of a customer firm's intentions and strategic plans across organizational boundaries (Ireland & Webb, 2007; Kiesling et al., 2004). Knowledge, however, means little to firm success if it remains within a boundary spanning individual (Arnett & Witzmann, 2013). Boundary spanning individuals' knowledge and competencies will need to be leveraged into firm-level assets before they can influence a supplier's investment decisions (MacDuffie & Helper, 2006). Nonetheless, little empirical research has been done to examine how individual boundary spanners disseminate critical knowledge across organizational boundaries to facilitate supplier future-oriented investment (Gupta & Polonsky, 2013; MacDuffie & Helper, 2006). Some case-based research provides insight on the role that boundary spanners play in facilitating organizational sharing and investment in critical technology (MacDuffie & Helper, 2006) and in cross-organizational learning (Gupta & Polonsky, 2013), but few studies have empirically tested these processes in customer-supplier relationships. Instead, studies of boundary spanners in inter-organizational relationships have primarily focused on the influence of boundary spanners on trust development between organizations (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Ireland & Webb,

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