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Relational capabilities as effectiveness fundamentals in inter-firm cooperation

Abstract: The aim of this article is to broaden exploratory perspective of the problem of interorganizational cooperation. Economists often pay greater attention to economic (e.g. transaction costs, access to new capabilities) and market (e.g. increasing market power) factors underlying the decision to cooperate with other organizations and seem to neglect the so-called soft factors determining eventual success or failure of cooperation.

The article presents a theoretical study in which on the basis of a broad literature study, the author examines selected factors highly influencing the shape and efficiency of interfirm alliances, that are mentioned not only by economists but are subjects of sociological and psychological analyses as well.

Among all, the so-called relational capabilities may be of greatest importance. Partnering experience, social embeddedness, interorganizational trust, learning ability, as well as relational mechanisms may be considered as critical success factors in cooperative relationships. The author gives weight to non-economic aspects of management in cooperative relations, as this direction is often neglected in research on the subject of interorganizational collaboration.

Key words: business cooperation, relational capabilities

JEL codes: M10, M12, M14

1. Business cooperation – some definitions

Business cooperation, broadly defined as an alliance between two or more independent organizations, is a deliberate activity aimed at acting as partners in chosen business area and time, assuming achieving mutual benefits of different kinds. The alliance does not exclude participation in other partnerships and competitive relations. Cooperation may take different organizational and legal forms (Glaister and Buckely 1996). The partnership gives the parties a possibility to satisfy their needs, while still remaining independent, by resource connection, exchanging and distribution, and broad co-creation of products, services, procedures and organizational processes (Serrat 2009). Some definitions underline longevity as a characteristic of partnerships: "Business relationship is more than just a deal. It is a connection between otherwise independent organizations that can take many forms and contains the potential for additional collaboration. It is a mutual agreement to continue to get together, thus its value include the potential for a stream of opportunities" (Moss Kanter 1994: 98).

Engagement in strategic alliances is also considered to be a "hard times strategy," the answer for increasing market uncertainty by reliance on trustworthy external partners (Lorenzoni and Lipparini 1999). Economic cooperation means that partners have common goals, and they strive to share actions, resources and capabilities while functioning in the same business network, but accordingly to their competitive position they may also try to act in competitive way (Jankowska 2009). This situation is called coopetition, that means that firms are partners and competitors at the same time, but in different areas of their activities and/or organizational functions. Coopetition and co-operation, as well as competition and coexistence are specific types of interactions among business organizations (Bengtsson and Kock 2000).

Partnerships aimed at connecting dispersed resources vary in their forms from formally arranged (based on strict contract norms and equity exchange) to loose (based on mutual trust), weak and distant (based on occasional collaboration) to strong and close (based on strict organizational integration and interdependence), organized along the value-chain and horizontally connecting partners around selected links. Among many classifications Moss Kanter (1994) divides partnerships into: mutual service consortia, joint ventures and value-chain partnerships.

2. Motives to cooperate

In order to properly understand the essence of cooperative relationship it is necessary to determine the motives it was created for. Main motive for cooperation as business relation is striving for leveraging effectiveness and efficiency of firm's activities, both according to competitive potential building and strengthening competitive position. In that context cooperative strategies (including co-opetition) act as alternative to internal development and capital investments (equity exchange, mergers and acquisitions).

The most common strategic motives of strategic alliance are (Buckley 1992):
- risk distribution among partners;
- production rationalization, economies of scale;
- complementary technology transfer, patents exchange;
- competitive structure shaping;
- adjustment to host country policy;
- international expansion facilitation;
- vertical quasi-integration;
- market position consolidation;
- other, like: diversification through alliance, smoothing the way to unknown sectors and markets thanks to partner's experience, entry barriers elimination.

3. Cooperation success measures

Economic cooperation effectiveness is a notion referring to the degree of goals achievement. It is important to remember that partners define both common and individual goals, not all of them are the same (e.g. the aim of the alliance is to get better access to remote market and create new product together, while the aim of each partner may be leveraging some specific capacity by learning from the partner).

Most often mentioned cooperative goals are connected to the relation itself, its longevity and stability, innovativeness and interorganizational learning and to economic success of relationship expressed in financial measures. Hamel divides success metrics into two groups: traditional are partners' satisfaction and partnership longevity, and alternative are related to partners market position: bargaining power and competitiveness (Hamel 1991). Anderson's cooperation performance evaluation model (Anderson 1990, Holtbrügge 2004) combines traditional quantitative financial performance measures and market position indicators with those reflecting cooperative processes connected with learning and general state of cooperation characterized by harmony among partners, morale, productivity, adaptability, innovativeness and changes in financial resources.

4. Alliance management problems – critical success factors

Doz and Hamel (2006) proposed broad set of subjects that may be seen as challenges towards alliance managers (traditional and contemporary), creating both aims and success merits. It is presented in Table 1. Giving good answer to the questions stated here is a subject of cooperative management.

Table 1. Traditional and contemporary challenges toward alliance management

Traditional point of view	Contemporary approach
Will the alliance create value, and if so, who would benefit?	
– costs and profits analysis – profit creation priority – simple complementarities – structure set at the beginning	– comprehensive strategic analysis – pressure at advantage gaining – comprehensive competence combination – structure elaboration process
Will the alliance pass the test of time?	
– goals management – securing particular interests – commitment – longevity reaching	– moving aims monitoring – securing a set of interests – options creation and support – competitive advantage building
Will the partners reconcile conflicting priorities and interests?	
– cooperation – interdependence – trust	– co-opetition – risk of unstable interdependence level – well understood common interest
How would each of partners manage its growing alliance network?	
– married couple – relationship	– care for own interests, diplomacy – alliance networks

Source: Doz and Hamel (2006: 32).

If the managers are to guarantee the alliance success they must be aware of critical success factors and be able to create specific corporate asset – capability to be a good partner. Propositions of cooperation critical success factors given by different authors are listed hereunder.

Holtbrugge (2004) divides factors influencing cooperative success into two groups: (1) situational conditions, which are external constraints that cannot be influenced by partners (or their influence is relatively weak), among them the strongest impact have: competitive rivalry and industry concentration; (2) management instruments: partner selection routines, cooperation agreement, alliance management structure, partners' acculturation and knowledge management.

Doz (1996: 69–70) sees some aspects critical to the success of the alliance outside partners, inside the partnership management process and in partners themselves:

1. The environment of the partnership creates both external and internal strategic contexts for partnership and partners themselves, it is crucial that partners share the perception of external conditions and are compatible in individual strategic context which is important for the future convergence between partners (their common learning and common sense making).
2. Goals and motives – partners behaviour in the process shows real motives, but what is also important, the collaboration process may lead to new set of goals – thanks to learning process partners may see new circumstances which lead them to their goals revision.
3. The task of the partnership – basic assumptions and the way the coalition is to be performed, sometimes the reason for failure is in bad task definition just at the beginning.
4. The process of cooperation – recognizing differences and similarities in resources, processes and routines and finding the way to constructively use them: eliminate, combine or improve in a way to cooperate efficiently.
5. The skills of partners – the main problem is skills learning: the ability and willingness to learn, what is important here is the scale and pace of individual and relational learning, which may show both the level of commitment in partnership and real intentions of partners (slow learning which may show small relevance of the alliance or weak belief in its success, and learning race – learning faster than partner even at partner's expense are often considered as opportunism and alliance pathology).

Moss Kanter's analysis concentrates at partnership process and proposes that the best organizational partnerships are those that meet eight criteria, the so-called 8 Is (Moss Kanter 1994: 100):

1. Individual excellence – both partners should contribute something valuable to the relationship, it is better of both sides to represent positive motives e.g. of connecting resources for common chance.
2. Importance – the relationship should be seen as important in partners' strategic contexts, so they want to make it work.
3. Interdependence – it is important that both sides need each other because of their complementary assets and skills.
4. Investment – the relationship may need some visible signs of commitment, like e.g. cross-ownership, common authorities/management, joint investments.
5. Information – effective communication, open information sharing is of essential meaning starting from dissemination of partners objectives and goals, through necessary communication in learning processes, to problem solving mechanisms.
6. Integration – it is necessary for partners to create a structure of linkages and methods of common operations leading, that would enable partnering relations of both learners and teachers at different organizational levels.

7. Institutionalization – it is a precondition of relation's stability, appropriate formal status, partnership contract contains agreed regulations of power sharing, sides' responsibility and benefits distribution; institutional frames are especially important when the complexity of relationship increases.
8. Integrity (moral soundness; honesty) – this factor depends on trustworthiness of partners who should not abuse each other, integrity means respecting partners and contracts and not acting opportunistically.

Even more detailed approach is visible in works of Ohmae (1989) and Hughes and Weiss (2007), who concentrated on managerial advice:

1. Collaboration must be seen as personal commitment.
2. Be aware of additional management time needs.
3. Mutual respect and trust are essential.
4. Mutual benefit is vital, collaboration must be a win-win situation – meet mutual expectations.
5. Tie up a tight legal contract but go beyond formal governance structures and focus on the relationship.
6. Circumstances change – be prepared for that.
7. Develop metrics pegged not only to alliance goals but also to alliance progress.
8. Share vital activities with your partner and socialize, make your people do so, too.
9. Cultures are different (both geographic and organizational) – instead of trying to eliminate differences, leverage them to create value.
10. Recognize your partner's interests and independence.
11. Make sure that your vision is approved – collaboration needs corporate approval.
12. Celebrate achievement together.

To sum up, partnership's effectiveness and efficiency is influenced by a broad set of factors: those coming from the environment – partners' home markets and the arena of partnership; related to transaction attributes – information asymmetry, asset specificity and differences in bargaining power as well as connected with firm characteristics – cooperative capabilities and trustworthiness. By managing these factors (some of them remain beyond firm's control) alliance members try to reach their business goals, which means they try to maximize the gain from the relationship and minimize its cost. The latter means, among others, efforts made in order to balance formal and informal governance methods preventing opportunistic behaviour (Hansen, Hosskinson and Barney 2008).

5. Collaborative advantage – concept characteristics

As it was said in above sections, it is clear that managing successful alliance demands from partners the ability to be a real partner not just a contractor. In a present business environment of numerous sectors, such ability is seen as a key success factor, in literature it is called relational capability ("the capability to interact with other companies" according to Lorenzoni and Lipparini (1999: 317)) or collaborative advantage ("being a good partner" (Moss Kanter 1994: 96)). The ability to be a partner to other company in business relations may decide of firm's ability to renew its competencies and reduce inertia and susceptibility to change.

Managers design and shape relational context of their companies in order to create a sustained cooperative advantage, so interfirm network creation is a deliberate process. Managing strategic alliances is an idiosyncratic strategy of building competitive advantage through the combination of alliance's resources: "Relational capability can shape interfirm networks representing a structure-reinforcing competence" (Lorenzoni and Lipparini 1999: 335). If alliance management is a deliberate process – a strategy, the relational capability/collaborative advantage is a core competence underlying this strategy success.

Relational capability/collaborative advantage is a dynamic competence (Teece, Pisano and Shuen 1997), it changes over time and the process of its development decides of its final quality as a competitive advantage driver. Looking at the above set of cooperation's critical success factors, it is obvious that relational capability is a complex one and its value as competitive advantage factor depends both on a set of firm's characteristics and processes that lead to their modifications. Being a dynamic competence, relational capability is time embedded, which means that it may be analysed at different points of time showing different sets and levels of components. Some scholars indicate *ex ante*, as well as *ex post* cooperative competence characteristics (Czakon 2008). *Ex ante* cooperative competence components are those influencing organization's ability, proneness and willingness to cooperate as well as its learning capacity. An example of *ex post* cooperative competence indicators may be found in Anderson's cooperation performance evaluation model (Anderson 1990, Holtbrügge 2004).

Competence dynamics reflects the process of organizational adaptation, both proactive and reactive to environment changes and interorganizational conditions. Having this assumption in mind we may divide cooperative competence components into two groups (Czakon 2008): *ex ante* components are those that are of critical importance before partnership and in the early stages of relation and *ex post* components – elaborated during partnerships, results of joint actions and learning. Because of cumulative learning effect that builds firm's competences, partnering experience elements may be in the next point of time regarded as *ex ante* competences – the potential to start new cooperation. The sources of these capabilities lay in firm's specific features and their quality determines its bargaining position/power in the relationship (see Barney's VRIO model, Barney 2002).

To sum up numerous propositions present in literature, firm's collaborative advantage is based on three groups of cooperative capabilities (Hansen et al. 2008): (1) ability to identify economically valuable set of complementary assets in the environment; (2) ability to assess real value of combined external and internal assets from the individual and mutual strategic perspective; (3) ability to manage the alliance appropriately in order to achieve a win-win result.

Cooperative relationship may be also analysed with reference to five dimensions that describe its dynamics (Birnbirg 1998):

1. The degree of partners' commitment (both absolute and relative).
2. The symmetry of expected and achieved profits from cooperation.
3. The uncertainty level coming from both partners' behaviour and external conditions.
4. Mutual trust degree.
5. Length and stability of the relationship.

The importance of each of these dimensions to particular relation may differ among relationships thus influencing their efficiency. Creating the optimum combination of these characteristics is the subject of cooperative relationship management.

Next section of this paper is dedicated to a more detailed analysis of those specific components of cooperative advantage.

6. Collaborative advantage – what are its components?

6.1. Propensity to cooperate

Positive attitude towards cooperation as an alternative strategy, is based on two competencies: ability to identify market chance of valuable combination of complementary resources possible through partnership with other market subjects and willingness to search for possibilities to cooperate in order to exploit identified resources. Apart from market research capabilities that are not investigated here, there exist a wide range of features building the so-called partnering experience, that is seen as an important precondition of cooperative relations.

6.2. Partnering experience

Partnering experience is an accumulated experience gained from any prior inter-firm alliance, that may enhance firm's relational capability. Firm may gain experience both from repeatedly cooperating with the same partner (partner specific experience – PSE) and from cumulative learning from all the alliances it has been involved in (general partnering experience – GPE). Partnering experience may have positive impact on relational capability by guiding appropriate selection decisions and fostering relational mechanisms of mutual trust, reciprocity and loyalty that weaken negative effects of partner's opportunistic behaviour (Gulati 1995, Gulati, Lavie and Singh 2009). Other positive effects may be: openness to commit critical resources to the alliance (Dyer and Singh 1998), savings on governance costs thanks to greater level of trust and better efficiency of established problem solving mechanisms (e.g. conflict prevention) (Gulati and Singh 1998, Kale et al. 2000). General partnering experience gains may differ from partner specific ones in favour to the latter. PSE gains are based on specific, more stable learning processes, and richer learning opportunities in recurrent alliances, but only under condition that partners actively influence learning process and look after longevity of partnership. It is also helpful if a firm simultaneously seeks for occasions for new alliances to put some novelty into gained experience and achieve synergy effect also by GPE. The partnering experience may be translated into economic gains when a firm takes care about application of knowledge learned during alliance (Gulati, Lavie and Singh 2009).

Gulati and Sytch (2008) use the term "shadow of the past" to show both positive and negative aspects of partnering experience. One of important dimensions of partnering experience is relational trust that is built in three steps process (Lewicki and Bunker 1996). First step is rational, based on calculations and economic analysis. It is a presumption to look for deeper foundations of lasting relationship in partner's behaviour. Observed behaviour and knowledge about the partner build non-calculative elements of trust. The last step in this process is trust based on shared values, incorporated by both partners, that assures similar actions in specific situations. Interorganizational trust is endogenous and to some extent depends on former interactions among partners, which creates and strengthens conviction of mutual trustworthiness (Gulati 1995, Dyer and Chu 2000). Non-calculative trust is also basic to create good relations among organizational boundary spanners, representing firms in relations with external partners.

Common history takes effect in tendency to favour familiar firms in partner selecting process and to build less restrictive, more general contractual frames. It is also in people's nature that they try to repeat positive past experience by reconstructing context of former alliances into present ones. This inclination may also have negative impact on relational capability – relying too much on familiar partners may weaken firm's alertness to new opportunities as well as opportunistic behaviour and undermine learning capability due to inertia (Hoffman et al. 2010). Repeating context of once successful cooperation does not guarantee another success, mostly because of different historical context between and inside organizations, which means that even in the same or similar alliance context different firms may behave in a complete different way (Boddy, Mackbeth and Wagner 2000).

Partnering experience, both positive and negative, may result with establishing mechanisms of proper partner selection, based on economic analysis as well as organizational similarity and cultural coherence.

6.3. Social embeddedness

Relational capability and partnering experience may be leveraged by the social context of cooperation – firm's embeddedness (Rooks, Raub and Selten 2000). Structural embeddedness may influence the firm thanks to the access it has to other partners in environment and their resources (e.g. information), institutional embeddedness means functioning in a certain combination of formal and informal rules that may allow for credible agreements and commitments based on trust. Social embeddedness is a feature of environment that may offer the firm a handicap. In this context, relational capability may also mean that the firm is able to act, even if the social context is not favourable. Temporal embeddedness is what was called above "the shadow of the past," common history with partners means having access to first-hand information, that is cheap, reliable, detailed and accurate (Grannoveter 1985) as well as having done some relation-specific investments. Ability to create bonds between partners and with organizations in the environment, makes business context for the relationship more stable and creates reciprocity effects and loyalty in partners, not only regarding present operations but also as it comes to the anticipated future cooperation ("the shadow of the future effect"). That makes partnership management less costly due to trust-based, non-contractual safeguards against opportunism as alternative to contractual or even hierarchical ones (Rooks et al. 2000).

When cooperating partners used to be, or still are, competitors (the co-opetition situation), they tend to be competitive embedded and this fact can also positively influence their mutual cooperative plans. Trapido (2007) notes that the mechanism of trust-based cooperation emergency among former competitors (conflicted ones) is quite similar to the one happening among firms with positive history. Competitive interactions among mutually aware competitors result in their great knowledge about each other on organizational and individual levels, established channels of interaction, that may be now used for positive purpose and personal relationships among potential boundary spanners: owners, managers, experts – all that may be helpful in future cooperation. Relational capability may be boost even by having "proper competitors," although it is worth mentioning here that positive effects of competitive embeddedness may appear fully only if partners do not have strong negative reminiscences that may make them unable to shift to collaborators. Co-opetition is also more possible in environment of strong cooperative business culture.

Good partnering experience and favourable social embeddedness effects can mitigate trust building in cooperative relationships as well as trust enhancing ability of firms. Those features may also be important for development of the ability to create learning networks, crucial to gain alliance's competitive advantage.

6.4. Managerial abilities

For a successful cooperation, partners have to create favourable context that consists of several areas in which partners must possess resources and managerial capabilities. They are: alliance objectives and expected results, financial and other resources available to alliance, technology and information systems used by partners, people with their knowledge, skills, goals and attitudes that may affect alliance result, business processes and organizational structures both individual and elaborated to satisfy the demands of common activities, cultural background and power relations – its sources and distribution between partners (Boddy, Macbeth and Wagner 2000, Wziątek-Staśko 2010). Relational capability covers all the subjects mentioned.

6.5. Alliance governance routines

At the beggining of any relationship there is a need to establish alliance governance mechanism, a set of general governing rules defining: power and duty sharing, resources exchange, profit distribution, control variables and problem solving. Appropriate governance mechanism may influence the effectiveness of the alliance as a tool to minimize opportunism risk. As a managerial capability component, alliance governance routines may be seen as a competence to foresee which governance approach would be the most efficient in a certain situation. Ring and Van de Ven (1992) describe two types of contractual management: discrete contracting means that alliance partners prefer to act in strictly to the partnership contract, which is rather complicated and detailed, and plays central role even in day-to-day management; other approach is relational contracting, when partners agree upon primary contract, that gives frame to the relationship, but in daily operations they rely mostly on social relationships elaborated during previous partnerships (partnering experience) or established in present one, as well as on the basis of mutual trustworthiness. Contractual management capability is a function of partner's trustworthiness and alliance risk evaluation, contract building competence, social embeddedness, bargaining power and ability to assess which governance mode is the best in particular situation's gain maximizing – opportunity minimizing paradox (contractual-management type capabilities versus relationship-management type capabilities) (Hansen et al. 2008).

6.6. Structuring the relationship

Apart from the partnership agreement, the alliance also needs appropriate organizational structure that may shape partners' interdependence. Alliance's structure building ability is a competence of gaining the balance between governance mechanisms and operations management as well as of proper economic integration level. One of the main motives for partnership is getting access to partner's resources and one of the most often mentioned alliance success measures is stability, because resource exchange and inter-partner learning are durable processes. Both of them are affected by economic integration of partners, their interdependence – "the extent to which resources contributed by different alliance members and subsequent operations using these resources are effectively blended into an alliance's value chain to the point where if one member withdraws, the remaining member(s) suffer great loss" (Luo 2008: 617). As Luo accentuates, increased economic integration may improve alliance performance by stronger structural and resource coupling, activated interparty sharing that improve persistence and effectiveness and increase interparty trust, joint governance, and procedural justice.

As a building factor of firm's cooperative advantage should be considered an ability to make strategic decisions about the most proper economic (structural) integration level with concurrent social and cultural integration. Economic integration level definition influences levels of other factors critical to alliance's success as sustained relationship: commitment, forbearance, reciprocity, knowledge integration, inter-partner learning as well as opportunism and competition for individual profits. Ability to structure optimal resource interdependence in an alliance: pooled, sequential or reciprocal (Gulati and Singh 1998), optimizes coordination costs, curtails internal uncertainty and intensifies inter-firm ties where neccessary, thus enabling the alliance to reach common goals (Gulati 1999, Lorenzoni and Lipparini 1999). This network structuring capability value is strongly dependent on other "capabilities required to manage a progressive intensification of interfirm ties" (Lorenzoni and Lipparini 1999: 318): contractual and trust-based governance, shared management structures, symmetric power relations, conflict management. Some authors point out that sometimes the cause of problems in relationship is not the conflict itself but efforts to avoid it, e.g. hiding important information, communication failures and acting on one's own instead of cooperation jeopardize the partnership stability (Holtbrugge 2004).

6.7. Boundary shifting mechanisms

Social embeddedness mentioned above that increases propensity to cooperate (and so is crucial before and at the beginning of cooperation) and socio-psychological congruency along the process of cooperation often need a boundary-shifting mechanism. That is another content of organizational relational capability based on interpersonal interactions.

Scholars frequently mention the role of the so-called boundary spanners, organization members who are closely involved in interorganizational relationships. Boundary spanners' role is: to create communication channels and develop open communication routines, to hand on and form information that has to be received and understood properly, to shape mutual perceptions and expectations of partners, to help in maintenance of interorganizational ties at individual and group level and to enhance communication effectiveness and inter-partner learning (Gulati and Sytch 2008). Boundary spanners' role is based on personal ties with their counterparts, which they are able to create and intensify. Personal relations and friendships supplement or even substitute people's organizational roles and thus help to build interorganizational trust and may provide both formal and informal base for procedures used at different stages of relationship (negotiations, commitment and execution of an alliance) and for conflicts resolution (Ring and Van de Ven 1994). This institutionalization of initially informal interpersonal commitments is possible because boundary spanners are seen as representing the organization they come from, and so speaking its voice (Gulati and Sytch 2008).

6.8. Trust management

Economic and social congruence essential for successful alliance management may only be possible if partners put their trust in each other (Wziątek-Staśko 2009). Individual trust arises through personal interactions and organizational/social trust in complex relations comes from two types of sources: reciprocity norms and social networks (Putnam 1993, 2000). Reciprocity norms may upgrade cooperation, because they: raise infidelity costs (infidelity meaning violation of partnership agreement), facilitate communication and information flow. Using reciprocity norms strengthen their influence on partners and, to some extent, their environment and helps to embody firm's individual partnering experience advantages to a new partnership. Interorganizational trust, both calculative – based on partner's assessment and market reputation and non-calculative – based on an opinion made during repeated interactions showing partner's motives, attitude, morality and behaviour has a significant meaning to the relationship organization, course and rents gained.

Trust has a positive impact on factors determining relational rents (Dyer and Singh 1998): trust supports organizational problem-solving routines, positively influences efficiency and effectiveness of governance mechanisms and partnership longevity, increases the degree of mutual congruence at organizational and cultural levels, enhances partnership stability and longevity and thus helps to develop co-specialized assets – source of alliance's competitive advantage (Hoffmann et al. 2010).

One of factors building relational advantage is also ability to create trust-based environment for partnership, that in turn relies on firm's own trustworthiness. Barney and Hansen (1994) propose that in certain conditions partners' trustworthiness may be considered as a source of alliance's competitive advantage as it may enable partners to put less attention to, sometimes costly, formal governance mechanisms and concentrate more on the core of cooperation.

Collaborators' trust in each other should come together with greater readiness to share information about themselves and their markets (Child and Faulkner 1998). Interfirm trust may be analysed as a process of calculating each other's intentions, mutual understanding and then developing chances to progress the relationship. All that depends on the time – longitude of acquaintance and collaboration, its context – both business and cultural, and managerial practices used in creating partners' connections and dependencies.

6.9. Acculturation

At the stage of partner selection and while developing partners congruence another critical success factor is acculturation – the convergence of corporate cultures. The process of integration of partners' values, attitudes and symbols encourages mutual understanding and learning processes, reduces conflict ability and thus reduces the need for technocratic coordination mechanisms (Holtbrugge 2004). Empirical evidence shows that organizational cultures convergence manifesting in similarity of goals, values, decisive structures and management styles, is one of the most important factors influencing effectiveness and stability of cooperation (Sulimowska-Formowicz and Stępień 2011).

The source of acculturation capability is the ability to create climate for cultural convergence – to learn about each other, although the process itself may be hardly manageable, especially in international alliances, because of embeddedness in organizational culture and national cultures as well and because of unconscious nature of some parts of the culture (Hofstede 2000). Some elements of that climate creation may be: using "cultural cross-border commuters" or boundary spanners' tie-building capabilities, building reward system on the success of cooperation not on individual achievements, initiation of intercultural training procedures (Holtbrugge 2004).

6.10. Organizational learning – knowledge management

One of the significant goals of cooperation is competence leveraging and mutual access to valuable know-how. In this context, relational capability means: individual and organizational learning ability, and knowledge management processes (mostly knowledge exchange and absorptive capacity (Cohen and Levinthal 1990)). At interorganizational level, basic factors enhancing cooperative learning and limiting opportunism are: trust and mutual commitment of similar degree. Knowledge exchange mechanisms build common competence of the partners, but absorptive capacity must be created individually, as its quality affects ability to gain from cooperation. Important organizational characteristic in this context is ability to share knowledge and protect it simultaneously. "The dissemination of knowledge among partners improves the absorptive capabilities of the whole network as well as mutual adaptation of network participants" (Lorenzoni and Lipparini 1999: 334).

Inkpen (1998) identified three dimensions of maximizing interorganizational learning: the intensity of knowledge transfer through established knowledge connections network, based on partnership social capital; affinities of alliance knowledge with partners' knowledge and knowledge about alliance management, cultural congruence between partners at individual and group level.

Hamel (1991) mentions three determinants of learning in alliances:
1. intent – desire to learn originating in firm's competitive strategy (collaborative orientation to an access to partner's assets or competitive orientation aimed at internalization of partner's skills);
2. transparency – opportunity to learn determined by partner's attitude towards outsiders and openness to share information and knowledge, character of learned skills – extent to which they are easy to decode and learn (e.g. path dependent know-how or context-bound know-why); and
3. receptivity – ability to absorb knowledge.

According to the individual motive of getting into the alliance, learning capability may mean: being able to access and exploit partner's knowledge or being able to internalize partner's assets or even outlearn him. Although learning race is often seen as partnership aberration (Barney 2002), in competitive alliances it is often a common practice based on individual economic goals of firms aiming at raising their bargaining power and competitiveness more than at getting satisfaction from stable and prolonged cooperation (Hamel 1991).

As partnership may become arena of inter-partner competition for competence (Hamel 1991), one of the most important dimensions of relational capability is also ability to protect oneself from knowledge capture: opportunism avoidance and knowledge leakage prevention. As far as it comes to opportunistic behaviour, proper solution may be contractual governance, legal tools (e.g. patent rights) and trust building by social and institutional embeddedness. But even in fair, durable relationship partners should be alert to actions aimed at interception of assets that were not intended to share.

6.11. Ability to communicate

Another factor important at all stages of cooperation is ability to communicate effectively. Communication is seen as crucial to guarantee partners' commitment to the relationship, through its four functions: instruction and feedback dispersion, reduction of uncertainty, socialization, coordination (Wahyuni et al. 2007).

Partnership develops and brings desired gains on condition that (Sulimowska-Formowicz, Stępień 2011):

- communication among partners is seen as effective in uncertainty reduction, as it raises trust and switches partners' efforts towards potential development;
- information exchange increases and communications routines get standardized;
- information exchange and cooperation help coordinate partners activities and that enables partners to enhance partnership scope due to growing compatibility and trust;
- partners share decision making procedures.

7. Conclusions

The capability to cooperate successfully is one of the most important competitive advantages in nowadays business environment. Business cooperation may be an efficient competitive strategy, not only a second-best one, but there are some conditions to be met. Partnering organizations should concentrate on common goals and common activities to the same extent to which they pay attention to building individual collaborative advantage, even if it needs to allow the partner for competitive behaviour apart from collaborative one.

Married couple analogy is often used to describe the process of successful alliance development – alliances work only when both partners do (Ohmae 1989). Moss Kanter's (1994) analysis shows that the meaning of partners' own features and relational ones to the success of partnership change over time, and the most successful alliances are those in which partner tend to compromise and pay attention to close social, organizational and cultural interdependence, thus remaining independent subjects (just like in happy marriages). Hamel (1991) stresses partners' independence as especially important in achieving individual learning objectives (along with mutual ones), main motive of many alliances. It may be said that being a good partner means commitment to the relationship and not forgetting about oneself – striving for a real win-win situation.

To sum up what was said above, this study stresses up the multidimensional character of collaborative relationships and thus the necessity for researcher to pay attention to the complex nature of cooperation's critical success factors. To understand this phenomenon properly research methodology should be based on a broad set of variables and assume necessity of interdisciplinary approach.

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