COMMUNICATION AND TRUST IN THE CONTEXT OF NPD COLLABORATION

MARÍA PEMARTÍN*
JOSÉ LUIS MUNUERA-ALEMÁN
ANA ISABEL RODRÍGUEZ-ESCUDERO
pemartin@um.es, munuera@um.es,ana@eco.uva.es
Universidad de Murcia, Universidad de Murcia, Universidad de Valladolid

ABSTRACT:

Recently, there has been much emphasis on the benefits of New Product Development (NPD) collaboration with external parties. However, as yet, the number of empirical studies on the subject is small. Besides, previous works have produced contradictory results with regard to the existence and nature of the relationship between external partner involvement and project performance. To contribute to the existing knowledge in this research area, we examine the direct, indirect and overall impact of two dimensions of NPD collaboration, collaborative communication (frequency, formality, reciprocity and rationality) and relationship trust, on three types of outcomes: operational (product newness, competitive superiority and adherence to budget and schedule), market and relational outcomes. To test the research model, we collected data from 207 new product development projects realized in a collaborative effort. Preliminary analysis using structural equation analysis point out that collaborative communication influences market outcomes and relationship satisfaction mainly through the adherence to budget and schedule, the product newness and the trust between partners.

Keywords:

Innovation, NPD collaboration dimensions, collaborative communication, relationship trust, new product outcomes, relationship satisfaction.

* The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support from Spanish Ministry of Education and Science (ECO2010-21546) and from Regional Agency of Science and Technology of Murcia Region-Fundation Seneca (08663/PHCS/08).

1. Introduction

Innovation is a key strategic activity for many firms because it contributes significantly to sales and firms growth (Koufteros et al., 2005). However, the average success rate of NPD projects has remained around 59% since 1990 (Barzack et al., 2009), which has made it a highly risky and complex process (Kaiser, 2002), forcing firms to increase their research efforts significantly in order to realize and retain market shares. In this context, much attention has recently focused on the subject of NPD collaboration (López, 2008). NPD collaboration with external parties tends to be beneficial to the firm, not only in terms of technological innovation, but in many other areas as well (Un et al., 2010). Both the firm and the external party benefit from access to external resources without having to develop the desired input internally or acquire the partner, and they can share the risks and costs inherent in the innovation process (Calia et al., 2006).

However, as Pittaway et al. (2004) indicate, so far, few empirical studies have examined this area. In addition, previous works have produced contradictory results with regard to the existence and nature of the relationship between external partner involvement and project performance (Hoegl and Wagner, 2005). Also, some authors indicate that there are shortcomings to their studies due to the available data (Becker and Dietz, 2004; Belbederbos et al., 2004). As a result, they are only able to measure the existence of collaboration rather than the resources involved or many other important dimensions. In line with this, Barge-Gil (2010) shows that most of the published empirical studies focus on analyzing the determinants of the decision whether or not to collaborate in NPD with external partners, and pay less attention to which dimensions influence each type of outcome. So, in contrast with the traditional focus on the decision whether or not to collaborate, in this research we see NPD collaboration as a multidimensional construct. Particularly, the goal of this study is to examine the impact of two collaboration dimensions in particular, communication and trust, on operational, market-related and relational outcomes. We focus on distinguishing the overall, direct and indirect effects of these dimensions on firm performance. Figure 1 provides a representation of the theoretical framework we propose.

This research contributes to existing literature in various ways. 1) To our knowledge, no existing work uses the concept and components of collaborative communication to study NPD collaboration relationships. This variable is particularly used in the context of channel relationships (Mohr and Nevin, 1990; Mohr et al., 1996; Joshi, 2009). Besides, by dividing this construct into the components of frequency, formality, reciprocity and rationality of the relationship, it is possible to examine more closely how and to what extent the dimensions of collaborative communication influence each type of outcome. 2) In our research, relationship trust is modeled as an outcome of communicative behavior. As Bstieler (2006) argues, trust is an outcome of gradual effort over time, and we posit that collaborative communication is a fundamental part of this effort. 3) We extend research on the NPD collaboration by the joint consideration of operational, market and relational outcomes. Most existing only look at NPD collaboration outcomes in part. 4) The model proposed is empirically tested against a large sample of collaborative projects.

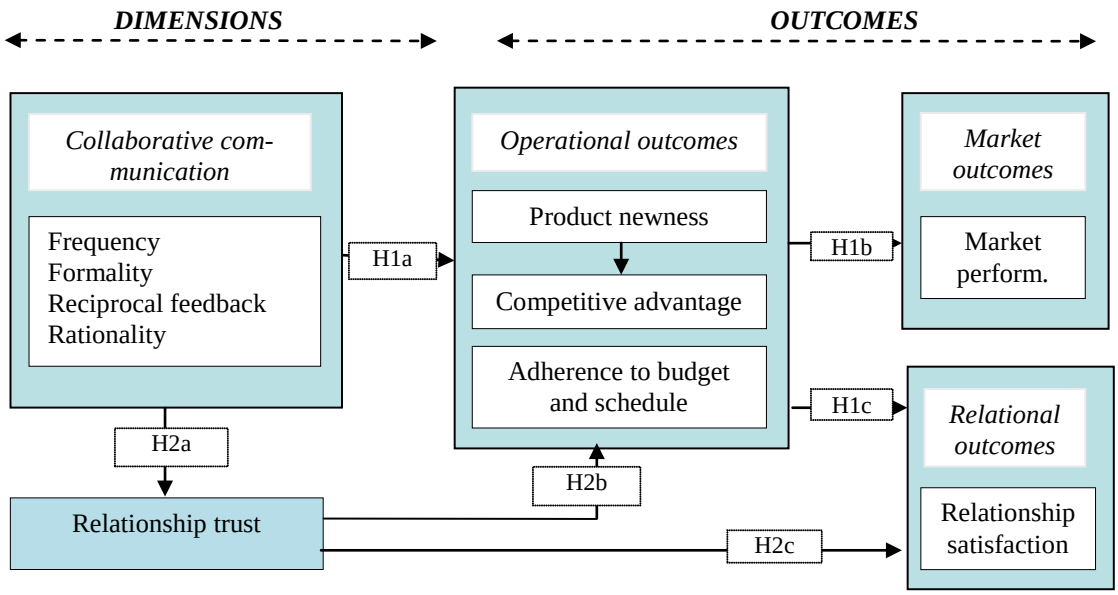
2. Conceptual framework

Communication, one of the most important elements in the successful exchange between firms (Mohr et al., 1996), has been linked conceptually both to structural issues (e.g., the pattern of exchange relationships) and to behavioral issues (e.g., power, climate, etc.) (Mohr and Nevin, 1990). It is seen as a transmission process that can be characterized by different facets. The facets we explore - frequency, formality, reciprocal feedback and rationality - were first conceptualized as part of a theoretical variable (collaborative communication) by Mohr and Nevin (1990). Frequency refers to the amount of contact between collaboration partners (Mohr et al., 1996). Formality of communication suggests the extent to which contact between collaborators is routinized, planned and structured, as opposed to unplanned, fleeting and ad hoc (Mohr et al., 1996). Reciprocal feedback captures the intent of collaborative communication; it focuses on

communication in which each party builds on what its partner has said (Joshi, 2009). Rationality is defined in terms of providing rationale and evidence as to why a partner should adopt a particular recommendation (Payan and McFarland, 2005). So, within the specific context of NPD collaboration, collaborative communication is defined as the extent to which partners communicate with their partners on a frequent, formal and reciprocal basis while using rationality as a way to influence each other (Joshi, 2009). All these facets characterize the quality, intensity and richness of the collaborative relationship.

Relationship trust is usually defined as the willingness to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations regarding the intentions or behavior of another party within a particular context, i.e., in interdependent and risky situations (Rousseau et al., 1998). It is an obvious and central element of any type of relationship (Delgado et al., 2003). Trust is something that cannot be forced. It is the outcome of a gradual and consistent effort over time. In fact, following Bstieler (2006), we modeled relationship trust as an outcome of communication behavior.

Figure 1
Theoretical framework



Generally speaking, there appear to be at least two useful categories of criteria when evaluating collaborative NPD efforts: new product outcomes and relational outcomes (satisfaction) (Bstieler, 2006). At the same time, new product outcomes are a multidimensional construct reflecting both operational effectiveness and market competitiveness (Menor et al., 2002; Tatikonda and Montoya-Weiss, 2001; Carbonell et al., 2009).

Operational outcome measures assess the development effort from an internal perspective (Hauptman and Hirji, 1996; Adler, 1995). Internal performance measures capture the extent to which practical objectives have been realized, and thus reflect the operational success of the development effort (Tatikonda and Montoya-Weiss, 2001). We include product newness, competitive advantage and adherence to budget and schedule as operational performance measures.Market outcomes usually approach the development effort from an external perspective. External performance measures capture market-related outcomes like product sales, customer satisfaction, profitability and market share (Tatikonda and Montoya-Weiss, 2001). These measures reflect the market success of the given new product development effort, which in turn is the ultimate goal of NPD collaboration. Relationship satisfaction in NPD collaboration context can be defined as the appraisal of all the outcomes of its collaborative NPD relationship with another innovative organization.

2.1. The effect of collaborative communication on market outcomes and relationship satisfaction: the mediating role of operational outcomes

In this study, we argue that collaborative communication within NPD collaboration enhances operational outcomes, which in turn are positively related to market-related outcomes. In short, operational outcomes mediate the relationship between collaborative communication and market-related outcomes.

Innovation is the result of an interactive learning process that often involves several actors from inside and outside companies. This interactive process is based on communication patterns. Frequent, formal, rational and reciprocal communications between partners are fundamental to adaptive learning (Tyre and von Hippel, 1997) and form the basis of knowledge transfer and innovation generation. By establishing an ongoing and reciprocal pattern of communication with their partners, companies can convey their evolving expectations and provide their partners with timely performance feedback to align both their expectations at any given point in time (Krause et al., 2000). These communication patterns enable close coordination between partners (Bidault et al., 1998). So that adaptation and technological development occur in NPD collaborations through interactions (Hakkansson, 1987). Over time, communication makes it possible to fine-tune the collaboration, which in turn will increase operational efficiency and effectiveness (Roy et al., 2004).

Operational success is an essential precondition to market success. In fact, operational success cannot be viewed as an end goal in itself, because the bottom line is ultimately driven by market success. The two sets of performance outcomes are inextricably intertwined. Tatikonda and Montoya-Weiss (2001) have shown that greater achievement of project operational objectives contributes to greater success of the product in the marketplace, because operational outcomes are not only project execution outcomes, but also key product-intrinsic characteristics – product quality, cost, and timely availability to the marketplace – which individually or collectively could influence market outcomes (Tatikonda and Montoya-Weiss, 2001; Rodriguez et al., 2011).

Besides, it has also been argued that operational outcomes enhance relationship satisfaction. A satisfactory collaboration exists when the expectations of a working relationship have been realized (Anderson and Narus, 1990). According to Geyskens et al. (1999), an "economically satisfied partner considers the relationship to be a success with respect to goal attainment. It is satisfied with the general effectiveness and productivity of the relationship with the partner, as well as with the resulting financial outcomes". So, firms obtaining better operational results are more likely to exhibit higher satisfaction with the collaboration relationship. Consequently, the following hypothesis is offered for empirical testing:

> *H_1: Operational outcomes mediate the relationship between collaborative communication and market outcomes, and between collaborative communication and relationship satisfaction such that: (a) collaborative communication is positively related to operational outcomes; (b) operational outcomes are positively related to market outcomes; and (c) operational outcomes are positively related to relationship satisfaction.*

2.2. The effect of collaborative communication on operational outcomes and relationship satisfaction: the mediating role of relationship trust

In this study, we argue that the efforts in collaborative communication during the NPD collaboration enhance trust, which in turn is positively related to operational outcomes. In short, trust mediates the relationship between collaborative communication and operational outcomes.

Trust evolves when the knowledge and understanding of the people with whom one must interact grows (Bstieler, 2006). This process is only possible through frequent interactions. Research on new product development has emphasized the importance of a meaningful and timely exchange of information to resolve disputes or align perceptions and expectations, thus fostering the formation of trust (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Besides, the perception of reciprocity and rationality is expected to enhance the quality of the partnership in general and of trust in particu-

lar. Rationality is an especially effective non-coercive means of gaining compliance (Joshi, 2009) that also contributes to the perceived fairness of the relationship, which is positively related to the formation of trust (Bstieler, 2006). Reciprocity relates to the reciprocal feedback between partners. This feedback influences the content and quality of communication, which in turn are key ingredients of the success of any partnership (Mohr and Spekman, 1994) and a strong determinant of trust development (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Consistent with these arguments, Mandhavan and Grover (1998) have suggested that trust grows with past experiences and feedback about progressive project successes.

On a different level, trust is a social process related to the perception one party has about another party´s abilities, expertise, knowledge, motives or intentions (Wilson and Möller, 1995). The greater the amount of competence trust in a relationship, the less need there is for repeated explanations (Roy et al., 2004), which also saves time and money, which in turn ensures that deadlines and budgets are respected. This level of trust would mean less frequent but more high-quality, valuable interactions, resulting in the increased generation of innovations (Nooteboom et al., 1997). Besides, the greater the level of competence trust, the greater the effect of interaction on innovation generation will be (Roy et al., 2004), which in turn is translated into a higher product quality. The greater the degree to which one partner trusts the other to look after its interests without explicitly asking for such help, the more likely it is that the interactions will be valued by the participants, hence leading to more frequent interactions. The parties will do each other favors with the understanding that neither party will take undue advantage and that both will assume new initiatives with respect to existing innovations. Goodwill trust facilitates the sharing of information that is proprietary yet critical to the generation of innovation (Roy et al., 2004), and that would improve the operational results. Without trust, interactions will often serve only a limited purpose that will not result in radical innovations.

In addition, we argue that relationship trust in the NPD collaboration is positively related to relationship satisfaction. Higher levels of trust prepare the way for stronger bonds between individuals and organizations and lead to a preference to remain in a relationship rather than look for alternatives (Bstieler, 2006). According to Geyskens et al. (1999; p.224), partners who are satisfied with the social outcomes of the relationship "appreciates the contact with its partner, and, on a personal level, likes working with it, because it believes the partner is concerned, respectful, and willing to exchange ideas". This means that higher levels of trust imply greater satisfaction with the collaboration itself. Consequently, we propose the following hypothesis for empirical testing:

> *H_2: Trust mediates the relationship between collaborative communication and operational outcomes, and between collaborative communication and relationship satisfaction such that: (a) collaborative communication is positively related to trust; (b) trust is positively related to operational outcomes; and (c) trust is positively related to relationship satisfaction.*

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample and data collection

To test the hypotheses of the research model, data were gathered using a cross-sectional survey methodology. The initial sampling frame included Spanish innovative firms operating in a wide and varied number of sectors. Data were collected through a web-based questionnaire sent to senior executives in charge of new product development. A total of 207 complete questionnaires were returned. The median respondent firm had 381.1employees, 163.6 million € annual revenue and 8.87 in progress projects. The unit of analysis was the collaborative new product development project. Respondents were asked to select a new product that had been developed in collaboration with another innovative organization and fully completed within the past three years. 20.8% of the projects were developed in collaboration with suppliers, 21.3% with customers, 2.4% with competitors, 18.4% with universities, 24.6% with technological centers and

12.6% with other partners. Using seven-point Likert scale, we found that the implication level of the partner in the development was 5.61.

3.2. Measures

A pool of items was generated to measure each of the constructs using existing literature. Collaborative communication and its four facets were operationalized through seventeen items borrowed and adapted from Joshi (2009): frequency (three items), reciprocal feedback (six items), formality (five items) and rationality (three items). Trust and satisfaction were both measured by five items each from Bstieler (2006). Operational outcomes – product newness, competitive advantage and adherence to budget and schedule – and market outcomes scales (fourteen items) were adapted from Tatikonda and Montoya-Weiss (2001), Blindenbach-Driessen et al. (2010) and Ledwith and O´Dwyer (2009). Overall, the items were measured using a seven-point Likert-type scale (1= strongly disagree to 7= strongly agree). Construct definitions, measures, means and standard deviations are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Construct definition and measures

Construct name	Construct measurement	Mean (S.D.)
Frequency[1] (n.a.)	Approximately how often does your company interact face-to-face, by phone, via electronic mail, or via fax with collaborator´s …	
	- Marketing personnel?	3.15 (0.98)
	- Operations personnel?	2.79 (1.09)
	- R&D personnel?	1.94 (0.90)
Formality[2] (α=.90, CR=.90, AVE=.65)	In our relationship with this collaborator, …	
	we both have adopted formal communication channels (i.e., channels are regularized and structured as opposed to being casual and informal).	4.75 (1.77)
	we both have written down the terms of our relationship in detail.	5.05 (1.81)
	we both have developed a set schedule of times at which they communicate with our firm over the course of a particular transaction.	5.42 (1.54)
	we both have explicitly verbalized and discussed the terms of our relationship.	5.43 (1.45)
	we both have conveyed the expectations from the relationship to our firm in detail.	5.30 (1.54)
Reciprocal feedback[2] (α=.92, CR=.93, AVE=.68)	In our relationship with this collaborator…	
	we both solicit our views on new product ideas on an ongoing basis.	5.40 (1.36)
	we both respond promptly to communications from each other.	5.16 (1.33)
	we both have great dialogues between us.	5.35 (1.38)
	we both provide each other with a lot of feedback on each other performance.	5.19 (1.47)
	we both solicit each other views on improvements to operational processes on an ongoing basis.	5.08 (1.67)
	we both work hard to ensure that there is a lot of two-way communication between our firms.	5.36 (1.45)
Rationality[2] (α=.89, CR=.89, AVE=.72)	In our relationship with this collaborator…	
	we both provide specific information or data in order to make a case for a particular course of action that they would like to implement.	4.89 (1.50)
	we both provide justification for a particular course of action through research findings that they make available.	5.00 (1.49)
	we both share the results of their past experience in making a case for a particular course of action that they would like to implement.	5.25 (1.49)
Product newness[2] (α=.87, CR=.88, AVE=.70)	The new product is based on a revolutionary change of technology.	4.60 (1.71)
	It represents a radical improvement of existing products.	5.14 (1.45)
	The new product is very innovative compared with the industry average.	5.26 (1.49)
Competitive advantage[2] (α=.90, CR=.90, AVE=.69)	The new product provides our firm a competitive advantage.	5.43 (1.41)
	The new product meets all the expected functionalities.	5.49 (1.40)
	The new product satisfies the clients' needs.	5.33 (1.42)
	The new product is of excellent (technical) quality.	5.35 (1.35)
Adherence to budget and schedule[2] (α=.86, CR=.86, AVE=.56)	The new product development was less expensive than expected.	3.76 (1.56)
	The new product development tightened up cost estimates.	4.32 (1.65)
	The new product was developed in a shorter time than expected.	3.24 (1.48)
	The new product was developed in a quick manner.	3.40 (1.56)
	The new product was launch on time.	3.89 (1.66)
Market performance[2] (α=.93, CR=.93 AVE=.87)	All the sales objectives were met.	4.01 (1.55)
	The new product achieved the expected gained profit.	3.95 (1.62)

Relationship trust[2] (α=.94, CR=.94, AVE=.77)	The collaborator's representatives were frank in dealing with us	5.48 (1.44)
	In this partnership, promises made by the collaborator were reliable	5.31 (1.41)
	The collaborator's representatives did not make unwarranted claims	5.57 (1.40)
	If problems (such as delays) arose, the collaborator's representatives were honest about the problems	5.54 (1.34)
	We felt the collaborator's representatives were on our side	5.59 (1.39)
Relationship satisfaction[2] (α=.96, CR=.96, AVE=.79)	Results and benefits of this collaboration met expectations.	5.10 (1.49)
	NPD collaboration realized the goals we set out to achieve.	5.09 (1.48)
	Time and effort spent in developing and maintaining this relationship was worthwhile.	5.31 (1.49)
	Our relationship with the collaborator company was productive.	5.34 (1.49)
	We were satisfied with this working relationship.	5.37 (1.50)

[1]Four point scale (1= several times per week, 2= several times per month, 3= several time per year, 4= never) (reversed scored).
[2]Seven point Likert-type scales (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree).
α= Cronbach's alpha, CR = composite reliability, AVE = average variance extracted.
n.a.: not applicable.

We examined the psychometrics properties of the reflective scales using widely accepted procedures. Tests' results suggest that the scales possess sufficient unidimensionality, reliability and validity (Table 1). We assessed discriminant validity examining whether the average variance extracted for each construct is greater than the square of the correlation between the construct (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). We employed two procedures to empirically examine the possibility of common method bias: the confirmatory factor-analytic approach to Harman one-factor test and the Lindell and Whitney's (2001) technique. Results from these tests suggest that common method bias was not a serious threat.

3.3. Preliminary results

Preliminary analysis using structural equation analysis point out that collaborative communication influences market outcomes and relationship satisfaction mainly through 1) the impact of contact frequency on the adherence to budget and schedule; 2) the contribution of formality, reciprocity and rationality to product newness, which in turn is positively related to competitive superiority; and 3) the importance of reciprocity and rationality in generating trust between partners, which in turn is positively related to competitive superiority, adherence to budget and schedule and relationship satisfaction.

Therefore, partners are able to improve their results in terms of adherence to budget and schedule if they establish frequent contacts, and if they develop trust between them. During this last task, reciprocity and rationality play a fundamental role. On another front, relationship satisfaction seems to be explained in the same proportion by product competitive advantage and partners trust. This result expands the traditional focus on relationship marketing, which highlights, over other variables, the importance of trust as antecedent of partner´s satisfaction. Concretely, our preliminary result shows that the objective of collaboration (the development of a good product) is itself key for both partners approval.

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