Coopetitive Learning and and Knowledge Exchange Networks ('CoLKENs'):
Insights on Strategic Management, Governance Structures, ICT-Usage and Measurable Impacts

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Research Background and Relevance

Behind the emerging digital facade, organizations are changing their operations. Companies start to operate in a distributed fashion. Multiple companies cooperate in such a way that quasi-organizational entities emerge. The intricate connectivity among contributing firms implies exchange of valuable resources like knowledge and information in the structure of intra-organizational so-called 'Learning Networks'. The implied collaboration is what enables organizations and members to make decisions together, learn from one another, and communicate effectively. However, inter-organizational collaboration may confront companies with a paradox. While reciprocal knowledge sharing may enhance the summed and individual added value, inter-firm knowledge sharing may also affect the uniqueness and thus competitive contribution of a firm's knowledge repository. Opportunistic behaviors of counterparts may erode anticipated benefits of cooperation and result in unevenly distributed value. In this context we speak about 'Coopetitive Learning Networks' (CLNs).

Research Questions

- How do organizations collaborate and actively manage knowledge exchange in CLNs to create value?
- What governance structures are applied in CLNs?
- What role do ICTs play in operating CLNs?

Research Methodology and Case Examples

Lack of prior theorizing suggested an inductive case-study based approach with cross-case analysis of various CLNs applying inter-organizational knowledge flows. A qualitative method was chosen as the best way to arrive at an in-depth understanding of how to initiate, manage, and sustain knowledge exchange in CLNs. The research to be reported is based on a multi-stage, nested design. We plan to report on two cases: The first organization is CarCo[1], a German-based automotive cluster. The second one is CheRoTa, a round table of IT managers working for international chemical companies.

Lessons Learnt So Far

While the recent literature suggest that innovation opportunities offered by accessing and mobilizing knowledge from diverse and distributed sources demand a new kind of ICT and knowledge management strategy, the two reported cases demonstrate that traditional CLNs have not started yet actively leveraging ICT to improve or redesign their core governance and value-creation (learning and knowledge management) processes.

Members of both, CarCo and CheRoTa, are under tight price pressures; hence *reasons to participate* tended to be financially motivated. Participants come in order to get 'information' at a good price or in order to sell their products or services.

Both CLNs and thus both organizations - although adopting different governance and knowledge exchange models - succeed in enabling *mutual learning and networking among professionals from similar functional areas*, but different companies or industries. They focus on the inter-organizational relationship, especially within a domain of activity.

In both CLNs, members are sufficiently *motivated* to share and exchange information with the objective of learning. The respective *governance structure*, e.g. determining the exchange objectives for the group, is a function of the leader, his understanding of leadership and the CLN's decision-making style. *Collaboration* is, interestingly, quite low, while learning takes place in effect through a loose 'enlightened' transmission. It seems that both CLNs create *value* for their members which however has not been strictly quantified, there is *no measurement or evaluation of the benefits* of the knowledge exchange., Finally, both networks express a direct need to take care of competitive implications without creating unwanted noise in the tedious learning procedures. Active knowledge exchange procedures are demanded, scratched on paper, but not effectively implemented. It is still under investigation to what degree this is a question of time, market pressure, or just a theoretical line of thought.

Further Research

To better assess the impact of ICT adoption and integration in CLNs and to base our insights on a wider variety of contextual setting, we are currently studying several CLNs from different industries including those within OpenSource type communities.

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[1] Company names have been changed.

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Presentation Outline (DRAFT)

Research Background

- Learning Networks
- Knowledge Management during Coopetition
- Increasing number of Learning Networks composed of members stemming from competing organizations

Research Questions (s. Proposal)

Research Methodology and Case Examples

- Methodology and Study Design (very brief, s. also Proposal)
- Case Acquisitions
- Description of Cases (illustration of learning needs and potentials as well as of knowledge exchange impact on competitive setting)

Lessons Learnt So Far

- Urgent wish and need to participate, but lack of measurable and measured results/impacts, hence ongoing pressure for intra-organizational justification
- Illustration and analysis of the issues raised in the proposal
    - Reasons for and experienced benefits from participation
    - Mutual learning, networking and knowledge exchange experiences
    - Applied governance structures - collaboration mechanisms found
    - ICT usage

Practical Relevance

- Frequent appearance of CLNs in public and semi-hidden in intra-organizational structures
- DOs and DON'Ts for CLNs
- Being actively approached by other CLNs to be included in the study

Further Research - Further Generalizability

- Overcome main limitation, i.e. broaden validity base for generating insights