



# How knowledge brokers emerge and evolve: The role of actors' behaviour



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## ABSTRACT

This article investigates how actors positioned in a network can evolve as knowledge brokers, as well as how they act to develop new brokerage roles. Our focus is on actor's behaviour while previous studies concentrate more on the structural and positional determinants of brokerage roles. This research combines brokerage roles with a broker's functions in an exploratory study of a small Italian comics publishing house. Over 20 years, the firm played different brokerage roles involving different actors at national and international levels. We find that if all brokerage roles involve transcoding functions, the ability to overcome transcoding obstacles, through the use of shared imprinting with receiving partners, could be useful for developing any brokerage role. Moreover, heterogeneity in the competences and industry experience of hired members of the management team could support the development of new brokerage roles, with differentiated effects on various brokers' functions. If a brokerage role involves new actors with no previous allegiance, the status of the broker, signalled through network relations, can have significant impacts by indirectly communicating its superior knowledge. The proposed, emerging theoretical framework has direct implications for studies of knowledge brokers and innovation in social networks, as well as for entrepreneurship research.

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## 1. Introduction

Studies of social networks and entrepreneurship share the notion that innovation can be created by transferring and combining extant ideas, knowledge and artefacts held by various individuals, firms or institutions. Most studies recognize the key role of knowledge brokers, such as bridging organizations or gatekeepers that mediate the flow of knowledge and information between two unconnected actors (Burt, 1992), whether they belong to the same or different subgroups or networks (Marsden, 1982). Knowledge brokers also might be individuals (Malecki, 2010; Shi et al., 2009; Uzzi and Spiro, 2005; Watts, 1999; Wink, 2008) or organizations (Graf, 2011; Hargadon, 1998; Lazaric et al., 2008; Wink, 2008).

Various studies seek the structural antecedents of brokerage roles (Uzzi and Spiro, 2005; Zaheer and Soda, 2009) by attempting to identify them in a network structure of ties, such as a geographical cluster, industry system of innovation or other social structures. These studies also tend to focus on a particular kind of broker: the gatekeeper, defined as the actor that mediates

knowledge between its own group and another group of actors, from which it acquires new knowledge. Other kinds of brokers rarely are addressed. Although such investigations might identify possible knowledge brokers, they ignore the behaviours and processes that sustain the creation and further developments of the brokers. Nor does extant research address how actors that are well positioned in their network as knowledge brokers might deliberately exploit old or explore new brokerage roles. But these questions are key for researchers interested in how innovation emerges in social networks. They also likely have implications for studies on entrepreneurship, in that entrepreneurs often are interested in benefiting from brokerage positions or seek to access such positions (Aldrich, 1999; Burt, 1992).

With this exploratory research, we investigate actors' behaviours that can support the emergence of brokerage roles. We thus contribute an initial answer to an important theoretical question raised by Dhanaraj and Parkhe (2006): How do actors act to understand, preserve and enhance their network and try to extract value from it? Research specifically focused on structural holes and knowledge brokers (Zaheer and Soda, 2009) calls for new perspectives on this agency issue. Accordingly, we adopt a twofold research question: How can actors positioned in a network evolve as knowledge brokers, and how can they act to develop new brokerage roles? Our intent is not to minimize the role of structures and positions; rather, we shift the focus to processes

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and behaviours, to complement and extend results derived from structure-centred research.

We therefore embrace a perspective that suggests brokerage roles differ for various actors (Gould and Fernandez, 1989) and for the same actor at different times (Graf, 2011). In particular, we recognize different brokerage roles, depending on the flow of knowledge within and between different groups of actors (Gould and Fernandez, 1989). Moreover, we adopt Burt's (2004) typology, which recognizes four functions through which a broker can create value, at different levels of complexity. With these two constructs, we also address outstanding demands for models that combine the brokerage role construct with other ones, to better investigate its developments and implications (Shi et al., 2009).

To build and advance theory on the agency issue in relation to the emergence and evolution of brokerage roles, we combine and apply these two constructs in an exploratory research study of an Italian comics publishing house, a small firm located in the Bologna comics cluster. For 20 years, the firm has played a significant role in brokering knowledge within its group and across other groups of actors, such that it has performed several different brokerage roles. We take the firm as the unit of analysis and observe it and its management team over a 20-year period.

In the next section, we introduce our theoretical background and the key components of our conceptual framework. After we describe our research methods and offer a brief history of the firm, we analyse the evolution of the firm's brokerage roles and functions. Furthermore, we elaborate on the relations between the firm's behaviour and its brokerage functions, which lead to several propositions. Finally, we summarize our results and highlight some implications for theory and management, along with some limitations and ideas for further research.

## 2. Theoretical background and conceptual framework

We investigate how actors positioned in a network evolve as knowledge brokers and how they actively work to develop new brokerage roles. Most studies of knowledge brokers instead focus on the structural determinants of brokerage roles, often related to performance implications (Graf and Kruger, 2011; Lazaric et al., 2008; McEvily and Zaheer, 1999; Zaheer and Bell, 2005). In this context, actors generally are defined as knowledge brokers or particular kinds of brokers (i.e., gatekeepers, who mediate knowledge between their own group and another group of actors, from which they acquire new knowledge). In industrial systems of innovation, such "bridging organizations" establish and maintain ties with many different actors and help overcome weaknesses of the system (Sapsed et al., 2007). Studies of innovation in geographical clusters also highlight the linkages that firms and individuals can create within and outside their cluster. Gatekeepers tend to be well connected with knowledge sources (Munari et al., 2011), though their relationships with local firms may be limited in both their number and the quality of the transferred knowledge (Morrison, 2008). When innovation research adopts a social network perspective, knowledge brokers appear well connected to different industries, rather than taking a central position in any one of them (Hargadon, 1998). Other perspectives instead grant them a central position in social networks (Hulskin et al., 2008). This attention to the structural determinants of a brokerage role is shared by Uzzi and Spiro (2005), who investigate small worlds and gatekeepers in the Broadway musical industry, and by Zaheer and Soda (2009), who study the origins of structural holes through network evolution at an individual level and highlight the roles of prior status and centrality, as well as of structural holes spanned in the past.

In brief, a structuralist perspective is diffuse and prevalent in knowledge broker studies, as it is in studies on social networks (Burt, 1992; Kilduff and Brass, 2010; Steglich et al., 2010). Challenges to this perspective appear in studies of social capital (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998), though they are rather more limited in knowledge broker research. They reflect two fronts. The first considers the role of attributes; for example, a few studies combine structural determinants of brokerage roles with other factors that might affect the ability of an actor to serve in this role, including size, absorptive capacity (Giuliani and Bell, 2005; Graf, 2011; Spencer, 2003), internal skills, involvement in experimentation (Giuliani, 2011) and broader career experience (Stam, 2010). The second criticism of the structuralist approach refers to its limits in accounting for the role of an actor's behaviour, i.e. the role of agency. If actors have competences and motivation to identify and take advantage of a network position, any research interested in addressing the antecedents of a brokerage role must analyse behaviours that sustain their exploitation of this position and exploration of new ones. We therefore shift the focus from structure and position to behaviours and processes that contribute to the emergence and development of brokerage roles, with the intent of complementing previous approaches (Nohria, 1992; White, 1992).

To the best of our knowledge, no studies address the evolution of brokers and their behaviour, with the exception of one investigation of gatekeepers (Giuliani, 2011). This single study shows that the persistence of a gatekeeper role is accompanied by an increasing number of mediated partners, with whom trust and stable relationships are created progressively.

To address our research questions, we build a conceptual framework on the basis of two constructs: knowledge brokers' roles and key functions. We start recognizing different brokerage roles, other than gatekeeper, and adopt Gould and Fernandez's (1989) typology, which inextricably ties structural positions to the roles played by actors. These roles connect different actors with unique positions in the social network. We accordingly recognize five structurally distinct types of brokers (equivalently, five types of brokerage relations) that follow from a partitioning of actors into non-overlapping subgroups:

- (a) *Coordinator*: All actors belong to the same group, so the brokerage relation is completely internal.
- (b) *Representative*: One or more members of a subgroup delegate one of their own members to communicate information to or negotiate exchanges with outsiders.
- (c) *Gatekeeper*: An actor selectively grants outsiders access to members of his or her own group.
- (d) *Liaison*: The broker is an outsider with respect to both the initiator of the brokerage relation and the receiver of the relation. This actor's role is to link distinct groups, without any prior allegiance to either.
- (e) *Cosmopolitan or itinerant broker*: The intermediated actors belong to the same subgroup, but the intermediary belongs to a different group.

Kirkels and Duysters (2010) use this framework to identify different kinds of individual knowledge brokers, and Shi et al. (2009) adopt it to propose links of different brokerage roles played by middle managers with varying strategic orientations and contributions to the strategic process. We know of no studies that have used this framework to address the behavioural antecedents of different brokerage roles.

Brokers can play these roles in different ways too, with different functions. Literature about the functions of brokers is heterogeneous in its focus and typologies. Hargadon and Sutton (1997) consider internal processes that enable a broker to innovate by benefitting from its network position and thereby suggest two

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