



# Innovation promoters – A multiple case study

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 27 June 2012

Received in revised form 10 December 2012

Accepted 8 May 2013

Available online 17 January 2014

### Keywords:

Innovation promoters

Innovation networks

Open innovation

## ABSTRACT

This paper empirically examines the role of innovation promoters in loosely-coupled inter-organisational innovation projects. With a starting point from existing literature on innovation promoters, it seeks to develop a theoretical framework for analysing the particular challenges of inter-organisational innovation projects. Data from seven inter-organisational innovation projects provides the empirical setting of the paper, and these data are analysed on the basis of an inductive, interpretive approach. The paper results in the development of four types of innovation promoters (power, expert, process and relationship). In addition, the results indicate the substantial challenges of dividing the labour between several promoters in inter-organisational innovation projects. The paper concludes with some managerial and research implications.

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## 1. Introduction

Prior research has emphasised the role of inter-organisational networks in innovation (Powell, Koput, & Smith-Doerr, 1996). However, a substantial portion of the literature on innovation in network settings also stresses that the collective sum of resources and competencies within the network is not sufficient when the chances of innovation success are considered. Inter-organisational network innovation depends on orchestration and facilitation (Dhanaraj & Parkhe, 2006). Hence, the success of the network depends on the ability of one or more actors within the network to lead the other actors in a given direction (Provan & Kenis, 2008). The literature on innovation promoters represents a theoretical framework to understand the essence of orchestrating, facilitating and leading innovation projects (Hauschildt & Kirchmann, 2001). The concept of promoters has been used in a number of studies of innovation projects carried out within the boundaries of the firm (Ernst & Vitt, 2000; Kim, Min, & Cha, 1999; Walter & Gemünden, 2000). While these studies have addressed the role of the relationship promoter, the unit of analysis has been innovation projects carried out within one particular organisation. Hitherto, the role of innovation promoters in inter-organisational innovation projects has not been scrutinised. This type of inter-organisational project is marked by a high degree of interdependency between the involved organisations: By entering into the inter-organisational project, they acknowledge that they are confronted with innovation challenges, which are more efficiently met by joining forces with other organisations than by operating alone. However, at the same time, this particular type of inter-organisational project is marked by low barriers for exiting from the project: If the innovation project does not meet the expectations of

the participating organisations, they are not contractually committed to stay within the project (Hirschman, 1970). In other words, these inter-organisational innovation projects can be seen as loosely-coupled systems (Orton & Weick, 1990), where interdependency is combined with low exit barriers.

This paper will seek to answer the following research question: *What is the role of innovation promoters in loosely-coupled inter-organisational innovation projects?*

In order to answer this research question, the paper will first present a literature review. Secondly, the theoretical framework will be outlined. This section will be followed by a description of the methodology used and a section on the results of the analysis. Finally, the paper will conclude with some practical and research implications.

## 2. Literature review

The entire body of literature on innovation promoters is founded on the premise that innovation does not just happen automatically. Due to innate barriers and resistance within organisations in terms of willingness and ability (Hauschildt & Kirchmann, 2001), the innovation process has to be promoted. Various innovator roles have been described in prior research on innovation projects and these roles will be described in the following section.

### 2.1. Champions, gatekeepers and innovation promoters

The literature on the role of individuals, who act as leaders, managers, facilitators, promoters etc. within innovation projects, has been developing during the last half century. In his seminal article on the difficulties of organisations to innovate and sell new products and services, Schon (1963) states that the management of radical innovation requires that the initial product or process idea finds a *champion* that is willing to

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put himself on the line for the idea. Schon emphasises that this champion is a person that ‘displays persistence and courage of heroic quality’ (pp. 84–85). A related perspective on the roles of individuals within innovation projects focuses on the *technological gatekeeper*. The gatekeeper is a project member, who is not only strongly connected to outside information domains, but also capable of translating technical developments and ideas across contrasting coding schemes (Katz & Tushman, 1981). Both the champion and the technological gatekeeper emerge within the organisation and cannot necessarily be hired and developed in the way that other employees can be hired and developed (Katz & Tushman, 1981; Schon, 1963). The additional insight from the technological gatekeeper concept is the focus on knowledge brokering. The gatekeeper is marked by the fact that he or she has the ability to broker solutions and be socially competent in relation to the external environment of the organisation – abilities that are seen as important for open innovation professionals (Chatenier, Verstegen, Biemans, Mulder, & Omta, 2010; Gassmann, Enkel, & Chesbrough, 2010).

The literature on *innovation promoters* draws on the champion and gatekeeper concepts. It stresses the essence of individuals in the success of innovation projects. However, as opposed to the prior literature, it does not exclusively focus on the individual as the one all-around “star”, but seeks to understand the cooperation between several different kinds of specialized promoters (Rost, Hölzle, & Gemünden, 2007). In contrast to the promoter, the gatekeeper is normally regarded as being independent of a specific innovation project. The promoter’s role can be performed for a special innovation process only (Hauschildt & Schewe, 2000).

The literature on innovation promoters highlights the division of labour in innovation management (Chakrabarti & Hauschildt, 1989). Hauschildt and Kirchmann (2001) present a theory of a troika of promoters – a power promoter, an expert promoter and a process promoter.

Firstly, the *power promoter* has the necessary hierarchical power to drive the project, to provide needed resources, and to help to overcome any obstacles that might arise during the course of the project (Witte, 1973). According to Gemünden, Salomo, and Hölzle (2007) this promoter is characterised by his or her hierarchical level and the impetus that this positional power gives him or her. The empirical evidence of the impact of the power promoter seems scarce. In their analysis of various innovation promoters Gemünden et al. (2007) do not find any significant effect of the power promoter.<sup>1</sup> And in their analysis of role of promoters, Gemünden and Lechler (1996) describe how power promoters have a tendency to prevent the termination of projects that should have been terminated.

Secondly, the *expert promoter* has specific technical knowledge for the innovation process. This person is characterised by his or her technological know-how (Gemünden et al., 2007) and often has a line function in a department that is closely connected with the envisaged innovation (Rost et al., 2007). Gemünden et al. (2007) identify a tendency for expert promoters to have the ability to exploit the market potential significantly better within time and budget than projects without expert promoters. However, when the projects are aimed at radical innovation the expert promoters do not perform very well, since the expert promoter has a tendency to remain within the boundaries of the firm and does not have the ability to cross these boundaries. This boundary crossing ability is essential when it comes to radical innovation.

Thirdly, the *process promoter* derives his or her influence from organisational know-how and intra-organisational networks. He or she makes the connection between the power and the expert promoter and has the necessary diplomatic skills to bring together the people necessary for the innovation process (Hauschildt & Schewe, 2000). In

other words, the process promoter overcomes administrative barriers by recognizing and addressing organisational hurdles (Rost et al., 2007).

In a small digression, Hauschildt and Kirchmann (2001) discuss whether the troika should be expanded. They suggest the role of a *relationship promoter*, who is able to overcome barriers between various organisations within the project. This idea is further developed by Gemünden et al. (2007), who define the relationship promoter as an individual, who has strong personal ties not only inside but especially also outside the organisation, i.e., to customers, suppliers and research partners. The relationship promoter can further be divided into the technology-related relationship promoter, who parallels the technological gatekeeper (Katz & Tushman, 1981), and a market-related relationship promoter who promotes the project through his or her market-related know-how (Gemünden et al., 2007). Rost et al. (2007) define the relationship promoter in a more general way as a person with an extensive network competence inside the organisation and across the boundaries to other organisations. Walter (1999) focuses on the actual activities of the promoter by stating that “*Relationship promoters are persons who intensively shape and advance inter-organisational exchange processes*” (p. 538).

The impact of promoters, team leaders, champions, gatekeepers etc. have been analysed intensively. Kim et al. (1999) explore the effect of five different roles of R&D project leaders and find positive relationship between the strategic planning role, the team builder role, the gatekeeper and the technical expert on the one hand and project team performance on the other. Similarly, Gemünden et al. (2007) find that in an era of open innovation, the relationship promoters are essential as knowledge brokers.

## 2.2. Promoters in inter-organisational innovation projects

As indicated in the previous section, the literature on both technology gatekeepers and innovation promoters focuses on particular benefits and challenges of cross-fertilization between internal and external knowledge domains. Successful innovation projects rely on the ability to exploit external knowledge. This external knowledge exploitation refers to the commercialization of knowledge assets exclusively or in addition to their application in an organisation’s own products and services (Lichtenthaler & Ernst, 2009). However, the monetary and strategic benefits claimed in the literature on open innovation, also involve some significant challenges and risks. Above all, the openness may strengthen competitors as a result of diffusing competitively relevant knowledge (Lichtenthaler & Ernst, 2006). This risk of giving away competitive advantages is supplemented by a tendency to have a negative attitude to knowledge that originates from a source outside the boundaries of the organisation – a tendency which is termed the *Not-Invented Here Syndrome* (Katz & Allen, 1982).

While understanding the role of the relationship promoter focuses on the ability to identify and involve external resources from other organisations, the unit of analysis remains innovation or R&D project of the individual company. The difficulty and essentiality of the promoter is likely to be even more important when he or she has to operate in a setting of loosely-coupled organisations (Orton & Weick, 1990). These organisations are marked by a sense of dependency of interests in innovating new products or services (the coupling element) but at the same time they are affected by the possibility of exiting the project if the outcome is not as it was envisaged at the time of involvement (the loose element). Hence, these loosely-coupled settings often call for *subtle leadership* (Orton & Weick, 1990), which builds on the simultaneous provision of direction and coordination on the one hand and acknowledging the value of increased discretion on the other (Boynton & Zmud, 1987). The particular challenges of the relationship promoter often necessitate formal training in leadership (Walter, 1999).

Forrest and Martin (1992) have addressed the impact of relationship promoters in an inter-organisational setting. They developed the term *alliance champion* to describe the ability of a promoter to facilitate

<sup>1</sup> However, this lack of empirical evidence from the study might be due to a bias in the sample. The sample consisted of projects of high strategic importance, and the obstacles within the organisations could be assumed to be limited.

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