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## Introduction

## Managing business and innovation networks—From strategic nets to business fields and ecosystems

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## ABSTRACT

This article introduces the *Special Issue of Managing Business and Innovation Networks* and makes an independent contribution to the advancement of network management research. The study has three ambitious goals. First, it evaluates the main developments in network management research from 2000 to 2016, focusing on disciplinary openings. Second, it specifies the contributions of recent domain extensions (business fields, ecosystems, platform networks) to network management, and clarifies the role of networks and network management in these domains. Third, it proposes a general theory of network management based on the past 20 years of research in the field and the contributions of SI articles. The theory explains how the factors at three contextual levels – environment, network and actor – influence network management activities, forming patterns of management based on activity configurations. The framework consolidates our fragmented knowledge on network management and paves the way for more advanced research and management. We conclude with suggestions for future research.

## 1. Introduction

This article introduces the *Special Issue of Managing Business and Innovation Networks*. The theme in the call for papers was the creation and management of intentionally designed business and innovation networks that we specified as strategic networks or value nets constructed for attaining specific business purposes and goals.

As guest editors, we looked for empirical and theoretical contributions relevant to this broad theme and were open to the application of different theoretical perspectives, as long as they advanced the development of business network management theory and praxis. The CFP resulted in 37 submissions, of which eight outstanding papers are published in this issue. Our selection process emphasized ambitious, and even provocative contributions pertaining to neglected but central issues in network management, and the elaboration of new domain extensions to network management: business fields, ecosystems and value platforms. We are most thankful to the authors of these papers and to the more than 50 reviewers for their invaluable support. Their efforts were instrumental in bringing this special issue to fruition.

Besides serving as an editorial, this article makes an independent contribution to the advancement of network management research. Research in this field began only in 1999, when we had the privilege of editing the first *IMP Conference Special Issue in Industrial Marketing*

*Management* on this topic (Möller & Halinen, 1999). Since then, research has extended vastly in terms of perspectives applied (e.g., “Cognition and Management in Networks,” Henneberg, Naudé, & Mouzas, 2010; “Managing creativity in business market relationships,” Andersen & Kragh, 2013; “Innovations and Networks,” Freytag & Young, 2014) as well as in the sheer number of published studies. A dozen of special issues on network management have been published in the *IMM* alone (see Möller & Halinen, in press) and the individual contributions across business marketing, strategy and management studies, innovation and technology research, and supply chain management exceed a thousand. At this point, it is thus valuable to evaluate the evolution and the current state of knowledge in network management research. Before presenting more detailed goals we offer a brief background discussion.

## 1.1. New research streams and domain extensions

Two major development trends – as seen in the contents of this special issue – can be discerned. The first is a steady emergence of new research streams which include the strategic networks or value-nets perspective, addressing managerial solutions and capabilities customized to various kinds of nets (Möller & Rajala, 2007; Möller & Svahn, 2003; Nordin et al., in press), the cognitive view of network

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management, examining how managers construct and use “network pictures” (Henneberg, Mouzas, & Naudé, 2006; Ramos & Ford, 2011), and the institutional perspective employing both network and institutional theory in studying network mobilization (Ritvala & Salmi, 2010, 2011) or change of industrial logic (Matthyssens, Vandenbempt, & Van Bockhaven, 2013). These openings hold a strong promise concerning the possibilities of network management, enriching the basic network theory notions of actors, resources, and activities, their relationships and configurations (Snehota & Håkansson, 1995). The second trend is the extension of network management research to new application domains. The network approach has been extended to study the construction and commercialization of innovations (Aarikka-Stenroos, Sandberg, & Lehtimäki, 2014; Dawson, Young, Tu, & Chongyi, 2014; Rampersad, Quester, & Troshani, 2010), business ecosystems and new business fields (Adner & Kapoor, 2010; Möller & Svahn, 2009; Wilkinson & Young, 2013), and service systems and various multi-actor platforms (Edvardsson, Kleinaltenkamp, Tronvoll, McHugh, & Windahl, 2014; Gawer & Cusumano, 2014).

There is also new interest in exploring the theoretical basis of the network approach and especially the gap between theory and praxis. Addressed themes include the debate over network management between core IMP researchers and more strategy-oriented scholars (Håkansson & Waluszewski, 2016; Möller, 2013), and whether business networks can be addressed as partially closed sub-systems. This stance has been posited by Möller, Rajala, and Svahn (2005) and more recently explored by Prekert (2017) from a system ontology perspective. Raab, Mannak, and Cambré (2015) suggest that network management should be examined from a configurational perspective – combining structure, governance and context with network effectiveness. These treatises offer new ways of viewing network management, thereby advancing the development of the field.

The number of novel themes the articles in this special issue raise is indicative of the vitality of the research field and accentuates the need for new openings and extensions to sustain the validity of network management research for the changing business landscape. In the last decade, the use of network-oriented collaborative forms for various kinds of value creation increased significantly. These include regional innovation agencies and networks, public-private entrepreneurial incubators, complex service systems involving various authorities and NGOs, and internet-enabled logistical systems and technology platforms. Such collaborations call for new kinds of management roles, the creation of shared actor-based goals, and extended social and institutional understanding. Although these new forms are not necessarily called networks, they require management of collaborative efforts among firms and organizations, in other words, networks of relationships. The changing business landscape poses both new opportunities and new challenges for network management, and new issues for researchers to investigate.

All this suggests that we live in a promising era for the continued development of business network management research. Several new research streams are enriching the original network management notions and the network management perspective is being applied to widening new research domains. On the flipside of these developments is the theoretical fragmentation that leads to conceptual confusion and overlapping partial theories and research streams. These challenges inhibit efficient disciplinary development and the formation of managerially relevant guidelines.

## 1.2. Goals and outline

We pose three ambitious goals in this paper to advance the research in network management. First, we describe the major developments in network research from 2000 to the present, emphasizing the most recent developments. The purpose of this chronological mapping is to illustrate how the disciplinary openings add to network management.

Second, based on the eight published articles in this special issue,

we examine the nature and contributions of newly offered domain extensions to network management and clarify the distinctions between the growing number of labels that originate from nearby research domains (e.g., “business field,” “ecosystem,” “platform network”). At the same time, we specify the significance of networks and network management for these domain extensions.

Third, drawing on the analysis of the research and the contributions of the articles in this issue we propose a general theory of network management. The theory describes the contextual levels of environment, network, and actors that influence network management activities, and the adopted configurational view on management activities. The constructed framework will consolidate our fragmented knowledge and pave the way for more advanced and theoretically rigorous research.

We base our analysis on the major developments in the research field over the last 20 years and the novel contributions provided in the articles published in this special issue. The article will proceed from the description of the major developments of the field, to the network extensions and contributions on their management offered by the SI articles. Based on these analyses, we present the general theory of network management, and in conclusion, some suggestions for future research.

## 2. Evolution of business network management research: 2000–2016

Since the late 1990s, research on network management has evolved, both in terms of publication volume and in the new perspectives. To cover the developments of almost 20 years as concisely as possible, we adopt a few guidelines. We focus our analysis on the research streams that we view as the most influential, and describe their main goals and conceptualizations with a few exemplary articles. Fig. 1 depicts the evolution of the research domain in terms of these openings.

### 2.1. Research streams in network management research

#### 2.1.1. Strategic nets perspective – enabling network management

The strategic nets perspective was introduced by Möller and colleagues between 2003 and 2007 (Möller et al., 2005; Möller & Rajala, 2007 and Möller & Svahn, 2003). The use of the term “net” instead of “network” refers to an effort to distinguish these purposefully designed network organizations ontologically from the emergent (and borderless) view of business networks dominating the IMP research (Ritter, Wilkinson, & Johnston, 2004). Strategic nets are formed by a few actors pursuing specified mutual goal(s) and having jointly agreed and contractually defined roles and responsibilities. Actors relinquish part of their autonomy to the net to achieve goals beyond their individual resources.

By drawing on the resource-based view and the dynamic capabilities perspective, and on network research in strategy and organization theory the strategic nets approach proposes that business nets can be analyzed and classified based on their goals and the determination of their underlying value-creating systems (Parolini, 1999). Using these propositions, Möller and colleagues (Möller et al., 2005; Möller & Rajala, 2007) constructed a value-system continuum and posited three types of strategic nets: current business nets, business renewal nets, and emerging business networks.

*Current business nets* are clearly specified and stable value systems. The actors producing and delivering specific offerings, and their activities, resources and capabilities, as well as business processes are known, indicating a high level of determination. Typical examples are multi-tiered demand-supply networks that are customary in the electronics and automobile industry.

*Business renewal nets*, in the middle of the value continuum, describe value systems which

are based on current value-creation systems and as such are well

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