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Will collaborative partners' selection enhance sustainability performance of firms? An empirical study

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Abstract

Main purpose of this paper is to study the role of collaboration for sustainability, in success of business performance. Businesses can have collaborations with many players such as suppliers, logistics operators, clients, intra- and inter-departmental collaborations, for various purposes including the sustainability. We use qualitative approach, mainly semi-structured interviews to understand various dimensions of collaboration namely sharing of valuable information, physical resources both tangible and intangible. We try to understand the collaborative relationships of focal companies under study with its suppliers, buyers and logistics partners. Further, we will study the impact of collaborating partners' selection in business performance.

Keywords: collaboration, partners' selection, sustainability.

Introduction

Main purpose of this paper is to study the role of supply chain collaborations for sustainability, in success of business performance. Here, 'sustainability' refers to green operations to maintain environmental sustainability in the businesses. While in the past two decades, collaboration has become a buzzword for all businesses (Vachon and Klassen, 2008), in recent days, green objective and environmental sustainability have become general norm of businesses. Organizations can have collaborations with many players such as suppliers, logistics operators, clients, intra- and inter-departmental collaborations, for various purposes including the sustainability. In simple terms, the collaboration can be any joint effort(s) of two or more business partners to enhance business performance that can be beneficial to the partners involved.

Collaboration is practiced in supply chains for many years in different forms such as vendor managed inventory, quick response, continuous replenishment,

collaborative planning, forecasting and replenishment (Aviv, 2007; Sari, 2008; Ramanathan and Muyldermans, 2010). However, success of such collaborations, say in terms of forecasting accuracy, will be dependent on three main factors namely explanatory power of the supply chain partners, speed of supply side operations and internal services (Aviv, 2007). Here it is important to note that collaborative information sharing is the key for its success.

In supply chain collaborative relationships, participating members will share valuable information, physical resources both tangible such as transport, warehouse, manufacturing facilities and also intangible such as goodwill, patents, knowledge and experience. It is well accepted that strength of collaboration lies in involvement of collaborative partners in planning, execution and decision making (Ramanathan and Gunasekaran 2014). In this line, we first try to understand the sustainability-oriented collaborative relationship of focal companies under study with their suppliers, buyers and logistics partners. Also, we will study the impact of collaborating partners' selection in the success of collaboration.

Nyaga et al. (2010) tested two different perspectives of suppliers and buyers in collaborative relationship. Authors asserted that the collaboration helps to improve performance. They also found that relationship outcome is heavily valued by buyers while suppliers are maintaining relationship using information sharing. As an extension to previous researches, in this research we try to see the impact of such collaborations, specific to sustainability, on business performance, information sharing and partnership performance.

Due to governmental, stakeholders and organisational pressure, the number of business collaborations aiming to achieve sustainability objectives is on raise in the recent past (Ramanathan et al., 2014). While many previous researchers (Aviv, 2007; Nyaga et al., 2010; Ramanathan and Guansekar, 2014) identified the role of collaboration in performance of the businesses, they have not related how the selection of collaborating partners will really affect the sustainability performance and overall performance of businesses. In this research we try to fill this gap using case study approach.

Rest of the paper is organised as follows. First of all, in the following section, we introduce the research topic using relevant literature and theory. Then, we explain the research approach we use in this paper and relate the theory with the proposed conceptual model. Further interview protocol and case analysis are discussed briefly. We discuss the findings from the analysis and discuss the same in line with the available literature. Finally, we conclude the paper with managerial implications and future research.

Literature review and relevant theory

To achieve green objectives, businesses seek support from their stakeholders that strengthens different sustainable operations and also enhances the overall performance (Ramanathan et al., 2014). In 21st century businesses, collaborative relationship can be established with both upstream and downstream players, and also with logistics operators. Such collaborations will support green supply chain objectives of the organisations and evolve some new theories around this area (Sarkis et al., 2011). As we are studying the collaborative relationship, based on selection of suppliers, logistics operators and buyers/clients, we review some relevant literature specific to these three areas.

Supplier selection is a well-established concept in the domain of supply chains. Traditionally in normal supply chains, the cost, quality, service performance, supplier

profile and risk factors have been considered important criteria in supplier selection (Xinyang et al., 2014). Recent research from Igarashi et al (2013) examined the extant literature to suggest a conceptual framework for selecting green suppliers. The authors suggested alignment of supplier selection with three main aspects, namely supply chain context, process and tools. Power balance in supply chain, decision and information sharing, and green agenda have been considered as important elements in supplier selection.

Customers are heart of any business. Especially in competitive business era, it is not quite common for all businesses to select their customers; rather customers or clients will have freedom choosing their right choice of business partners. Client or customer selection is widely researched in the domain of service sector (Yu et al., 2015; Cho et al., 2008). Some businesses aspiring to have sustainable long-term partnership with clients may tend to choose their clients based on their business objectives or green objectives (Ramanathan et al., 2014). This concept of client selection is not a common area of research and hence in this research, we try to find out underlying factors of clients' selection in collaborative relationships using case study approach.

Logistics partners' selection is another important criterion to ensure reliable on-time delivery in collaborative relationship. This enhances the long-term partnership. Many researchers discussed the quality of delivery (without damaging the product) as it influences the customer satisfaction (Yu et al., 2015; Ramanathan, 2010). However, it is not well considered in the literature how this logistics selection plays a main role in collaborative partnership. In this research, we see the role of logistics and skills selection in collaborative strength. We also see the outcome this collaborative partnership in performance of businesses. Due to tremendous increase in the technology products and software, the 'skills selection' is currently considered a mandatory procedure in technology projects. For example, if an IT project needs experts in 'Java', they need to look for these specific skills to be involved in the project. This term 'skills selection' is used by the IT Company as every project needs different skills and hence partnership selection includes this criterion. We have included this term in our research based on the interviews and this is also validated by other IT personnel.

In the literature, there are many theories used in the context of supply chain collaboration. Especially, Resource Base View (Wernerfelt, 1984) and Resource Dependency Theory (Harland, 1996) have been considered widely to explain the collaborative arrangement among the partners in case of sharing their tangible and intangible resources (Sarkis et al., 2011). In this research we are using the Agency Theory (Eisenhardt, 1989) to support our research objective. Bottom line of this theory is considering the risks involved in collaborative relationships and involvement of agents to resolve the issues (Jensen and Meckling, 1976; Fama and Jensen, 1983). We assume that the strength of collaborative relationship is based on the selection of agents namely suppliers, clients and logistics partners. It is believed that these agents can help to improve the overall performance of the company.

Research approach and conceptual model

In this research, to better understand sustainability-oriented collaboration, we use qualitative research method. First, we use semi-structured interviews with established businesses to understand the current status of collaboration. This information is instrumental in developing initial conceptual model. And we use case company background and excerpts of interview to test our conceptual framework on sustainable supply chain collaboration in the next stage of our research.

For the purpose of interview, we have contacted businesses from different industries from the UK and Canada. This approach has helped us to understand the role of collaboration in businesses of developed countries. Some companies collaborate mainly to improve overall performance with main focus of profit earning; while other companies show interests in sustainable operations. We have chosen four companies from the list of six companies who seek collaborating partners with focus on sustainable operations to maintain sustainable supply chains within their businesses (see Table 1). These four companies are representing two main industries namely Fashion (includes Fast fashion) and Electronics (includes IT). Fast fashion in Table 1 represents the company with very short lead-time and short product life cycle. As Fisher (1997) correctly identified, the fashion industry is highly innovative and hence their product life cycles are very short compared to many basic products. Table 1 reports the main focus of collaboration of the selected case companies. It is interesting to note that sustainable operations are one of the key focuses when selecting collaborating partners; but all operations are not included in this process. Timely delivery needs collaborative partners support in Fashion industries but not in Electronics and IT industry. Though forecast accuracy has been claimed as an important reason for collaboration in food supply chains (Ramanathan and Muyldermans, 2010), it is not found as the main focus of collaboration for most the companies we interviewed, except Fashion Company.

Table 1: Case companies' focus of collaboration

Focus of collaboration	Case-1 Fashion	Case-2 IT	Case-3 Fast Fashion	Case-4 Electronics
Sustainable operations	✓	✓	✓	✓
General operations	✓	x	✓	✓
Technology	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cost	✓	✓	✓	✓
Timely delivery	✓	x	✓	x
Quality	✓	✓	✓	
Performance	✓	✓	✓	✓
New opportunities	✓	✓	✓	✓
Forecast accuracy	✓	x	x	x
Market positioning	✓	✓	✓	✓

Also, we have searched through academic literature and published business articles to get better understanding of the current forms of collaborative partnerships in various industries. From extant literature review and current practices of the collaboration prevailing in the industry, we first plan to develop a conceptual framework of 21st century collaboration model for enhancing sustainability in business organizations. Further, we will validate our conceptual model through the data collected from the case companies (both interviews and public data) and content analysis of interviews. A brief case description of two of the case companies is given below.

Case 1: Fashion Company

Fashion Company is operating from the United Kingdom is an established Jeweller with 38 years' experience in the industry. The company has just ten full time employees with an annual turnover of about 2 million pounds. This company is classified mainly as a retail manufacturer for special customised jewellery. The term retail manufacturing represents production for retail market. Fashion Company also sells through their franchise companies.

Case 2: Information Technology Company

Information Technology company is operating from various European countries and the UK. IT Company provides products and services for its clients for the past 12 years. It operates with 75 employees for annual turnover of 35 million pounds. Like Fashion Company, this company is also producing bespoke products and services for their clients. Sometimes, IT Company is also working with their Franchise companies for new business projects. Unlike Fashion Company, IT Company does not need much support from logistics operators but it needs high level of involvement of IT skill workers from other companies. This company feels that collaboration will help them to achieve sustainable IT performance in a competitive market.

Conceptual framework

In order to achieve our research objective-impact of collaboration in businesses, we use a theoretical lens called Agency Theory. We use this theory to test our proposed conceptual model depicted in Figure 1. This is mainly due to the fact that all collaborating partners (agents) are instrumental in improving and achieving sustainable supply chain with the given financial constraints. In recent days with green awareness, all stakeholders (principles) of the company give pressure to exercise sustainability. These sustainability objectives are directing the focal company in selecting the partners namely from suppliers, buyers and logistical operators. This concept of partners' selection has become a main notion of our conceptual framework. Further background of the case companies helped us to relate Agency Theory with the conceptual model.

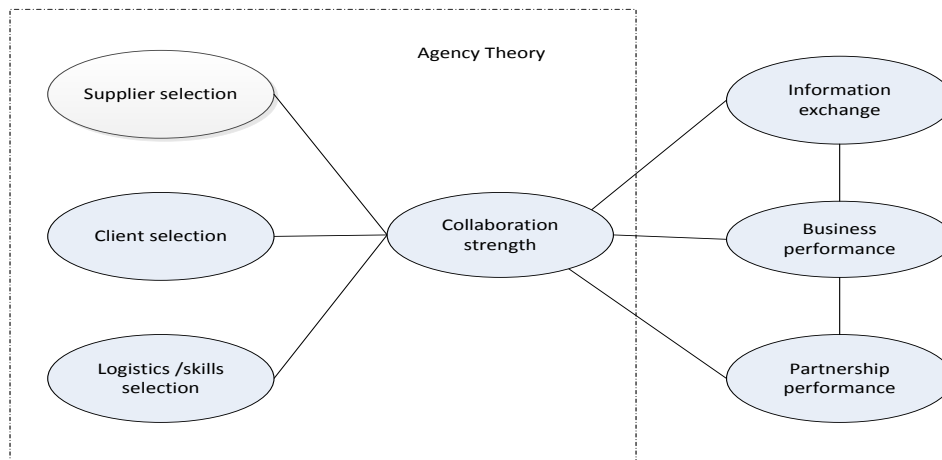


Figure 2: Collaboration for Sustainability- conceptual model

Interview protocol and case analysis

In this research we use qualitative semi structured interview approach to understand various green operations in practice. This approach is mainly used to enhance understanding of sustainability in different industrial set up under the lens of collaboration. We have conducted in-depth interview with four global companies operating in fashion and technology areas. Three of the four companies are based in the United Kingdom and one company is based in Canada. A brief description of two of the four companies has been provided in the previous section.

Our interview questions were focussing on nine main criteria namely supplier relationship, client/buyer relationship, logistics/skills partnerships, internal support within the organisation, external pressure, information-sharing, impact of collaboration in -business performance, partnership performance and overall performance. These nine criteria are further analysed to understand the common practices of selecting

collaborating partners (supply-side, buyers-side and logistics) to achieve sustainable performance. Some of these criteria have been dropped from the further analysis due to its non-significant role within the current research objectives.

From the analysis of interview data, we understand the basic differences of green operations specific to fashion industry and information technology (IT) industry. While both fashion and technology companies are highly dynamic in nature, they have separate set of green operations based on clients' expectations. For example, fashion jewellers use latest manufacturing technology in production process, IT manufacturing company uses tight control in supply side of operations to reduce waste and increase sustainability. We discuss this further in the following sections.

Input- Supplier, buyers, logistics and skills selection in collaboration

Product quality, service quality, sustainable operations and reliability of suppliers are main criteria used by both IT and Fashion Companies while selecting suppliers for collaborative partnership. Interestingly, in global operations the location of suppliers has not been considered seriously by both the companies. Although cost is one of the minor criteria of supplier selection in IT Company, this is not considered seriously by both IT and Fashion Companies. It is argued that reliability of supplier will guarantee the cost of supply and hence there is no need for further cost negotiations in collaborative partnership.

In any business buyers or clients are considered soul of success. In dynamic business environment, it is also possible to target some special buyers who can take the business further to different heights. This is evident from both IT and Fashion companies that buyers are normally chosen based on the location of operations, price they are ready to pay, demand and number of orders. Another important criterion of buyer/client selection in collaborative relationship, with special focus for sustainability, is loyalty of the buyers and their retention rate. It is important to note that buyers' interest in sustainability has a great impact on core operations of the focal companies (both IT and Fashion Companies).

Logistical partner selection and skill partner selection is another important feature in dynamic business environment. Service quality and on-time delivery are guaranteed by logistical collaborating partners with added cost effectiveness. Use of latest technology to maintain sustainable operations are taken care by skilled partners. This is also helping the companies to develop trust and hence increase mutual dependability for developing new products.

Output – Business and partnership performance

Collaboration benefits the parties involved in many ways. Transparent information sharing, quality and speed of information are found to be imminent use of many collaborative relationships (Ramanathan and Muyldermans, 2010; Forslund and Jonsson, 2007). Fashion company claims that open information exchange under collaborative relationship helps them to be dynamic in view of changing customers' expectations. For IT company, on-going trend of customer demand and technology advancement are vital to be viable in the market. This is achieved through information from partners that help the company to be sustainable and trendy. In case of Fashion Company, partnership performance and business performance are almost the same concept as most of their business is happening in franchise and retail stores. For IT Company, clients' growth brings in many new projects and hence partnership strength is increased.

Findings and Discussion

The success of business collaboration is dependent on the parties involved (for example, supply chain partners and investors) (Ramanathan and Gunasekaran 2014). We test this concept using different data obtained from various industries from the developed countries. We have interviewed company's high-level officers responsible for sustainable operations. This approach has helped to generalise the results specific to industries and to strengthen our research framework. Further, this research will indicate the level of collaboration required from each supply chain player namely supplier, buyer, logistics operator and also within an organisation to achieve the best performance. This result indeed is a new concept that will be helping the companies for making decisions on collaborative investments, specific to sustainability. Also, this approach will help to choose the right supply chain partner having similar initiative and interests in sustainability practices (Ramanathan et al., 2014).

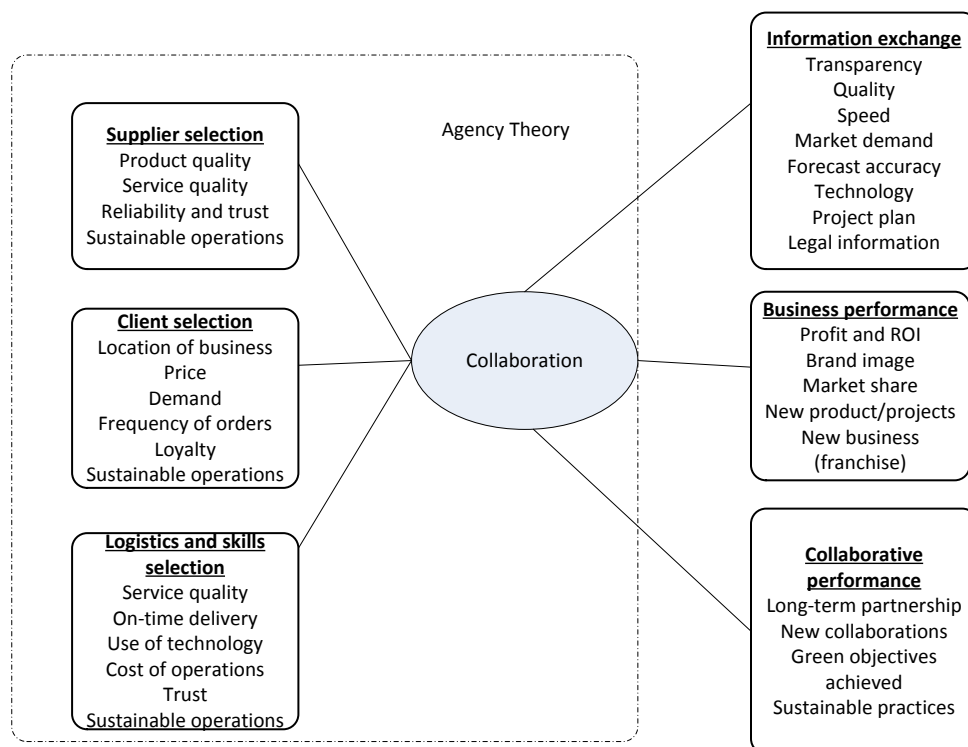


Figure 3: Conceptual framework - Collaboration for sustainability

Using content analysis of the interview discussions, we have developed a specific framework to conceptualise our idea of collaborations for sustainability. As given in Figure 2, if a company is interested in achieving sustainability through collaboration, it needs to select suppliers for collaboration based on the previous experience of trust and reliability. It is also important to make sure that the suppliers' product quality and service quality are matching with the expectation of the company. This finding is very much in line with the previous findings that all collaborative relationships will have trust and reliability as underlying principles (Cao and Zhang, 2010; Nyaga et al., 2010). It shows that some factors namely quality, cost, trust and reliability are common in all collaborations with various focuses. Also, for collaborations with focus of sustainability, it is imperative for the companies to focus on sustainable operations. Collaborating companies' sustainable business objectives and current operations will help to choose the right partners (Figure 2).

Buyers' selection for sustainable operations can be done through a careful selection based on their location of operations. Frequently placing of orders, demand for the product/service and price paid by the buyers are three main criteria to be considered by collaborating partners. Also, the focal company will need to consider sustainable operations of the buyers. In case of logistics or any other special skills selection, the importance of selection criteria depends on service quality, on-time delivery, use of technology and cost of operations. In all cases, trust and sustainable operations have been acting as backbone of selection of suppliers, buyers and logistics/skills operators.

It is interesting to note that the companies are not specifically looking at level of greenness or sustainability in each of their operation. Partner of Fashion Company correctly mentions:

"We do not look for sustainability in each of our production operations. We know that the right operation will help us to be sustainable".

Both IT and Fashion Companies consider sustainability as integral part of all operations wherever it is possible. To our surprise, both these companies claim that the cost of operations is not a very important criterion in selecting collaborating suppliers. It is insisted that:

"Cost is guaranteed as a basic norm of collaborative relationship. And hence we do not need to negotiate with our suppliers".

It is clear from the cases analysed that the collaborating partners working as agents for the focal company can help achieving sustainable collaborative relationship to see benefits in terms of transparent information sharing, higher level of business performance and successful collaborative performance. It is also good to know that the level of outcome of collaboration strength is based on the right choice of collaborating partners. Careful selection of collaborating partners is the key for successful collaboration as the strength of the collaboration is reflected through these three selections - suppliers, buyers and logistics/skills operators.

Another important finding from the data analysis is that companies are collaborating with their upstream and downstream partners mainly to improve performance of various functional areas in order to maximise the profit. However, sustainable operations are basic minimum expectation in any new collaborative relationships to achieve sustainable supply chain or to reduce carbon emission. Especially in this 21st century, more and more companies are environmental conscious. Hence, the sustainable operations are rather routine and integral part of operations than being an optional criterion. In turn, many collaborative relationships include sustainability with high priority in the list of criteria for partners' selection. Also, the sustainable operations are increasingly becoming a phenomenal attitude of corporate social responsibility (Ramanathan et al., 2014).

Managerial implications and future research

Recently many researchers have discussed collaborative relationships (mainly trust and long-term partnership) and their impact on businesses (Ramanathan and Gunasekaran, 2014; Cao and Zhang, 2011; Nyaga et al., 2010). Some researchers have focussed on the factors of collaboration and also their impacts on success of businesses (Ramanathan and Muyldermans, 2010; Ramanathan and Gunasekaran, 2014). This research is an extension of previous researches in terms of looking at the other side of collaboration namely partners' selection and their involvement in collaborative partnerships for the purpose of sustainability. Further we see how this collaboration is impacting three main areas, namely future partnerships, business performance and transparent information exchange, both directly and indirectly.

Any company planning to achieve sustainability will need careful consideration of partners' selection. Our research framework will guide them through this process and will also insist the important areas to be considered seriously before making any future collaborative plans. Based on the collaborative partners' suitability and their criticality in collaboration formation, organizations can invest resources wisely for ameliorating the sustainability performance of all involved bodies. The strategies for duration of collaboration can also be accordingly decided.

According to our findings it is clear that collaboration will support performance. Here performance represents both business performance (in terms of projects and profits) and environmental performance (in terms of environmental sustainability). This result is in line with many other previous researches (Ramanathan and Gunasekarn, 2014; Cao and Zhang, 2010). But, additional insights from our research insist that appropriate partners selection will increase the strength of the collaboration to achieve sustainable operations. A successful collaboration can help enhancing three positive outcomes namely transparency in relationship, business performance and collaborative performance. As Agency Theory suggests that all collaborating partners will support each other in handling issues, provided the partners' selection is carefully done to support the core objective of partnerships. In summary, it is possible to say that the success of any collaborative partnerships (with sustainable focus) will be expressed through improved performances in both business and environmental area.

Our research is based on case study interviews with a few companies operating in two main industries. Generalising the current research findings will be possible if this research can be extended for many companies operating in a variety of industrial setup. Our research is being continued with a quantitative survey. We are positive that our quantitative data analysis will support our findings of this research to validate the conceptual model.

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