ABSTRACT

Virtual networks are often characterized as having less formal and hierarchical structures compared to traditional intra-organizational contexts. Instead, informal actions and so-called political behaviour of individual members play an important role regarding power and decision-making. In the present paper the authors investigate the relation between structural characteristics of virtual networks and informal influence tactics of network members. Results show that there are indeed numerous relations between the ‘playing field’ provided by the network structure and the behaviour of individual network players. Surprisingly, an increase of formalization, e.g. through the use of agreements, fixed principles and rules or even contracts, did not constrain informal political behavior. On the contrary, higher formalization was comprehensively associated with higher use of micro-political tactics. In addition, the use of all tested influence tactics showed to be positively related to network outcomes in terms of product, process and service innovation on a moderate level. Overall, these first insights into the interplay between network structures and informal influence behavior suggest that the approach to restrict micro-politics through stronger structuring might not only be ineffective but possibly misconceives the potential of micro-politics for collective goals in virtual collaborations. Despite the fact that this was an exploratory study, the results strongly argue for a deeper investigation on how virtual networks could benefit from micro-political actions.

Keywords: Influence Tactics, Micro-Politics, Network Structures, Political Behaviour, Virtual Networks

Does the Playing Field Determine the Game?  
An Impact Analysis of Structural Virtual Network Characteristics on Political Actions

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, globalization and technological developments have led to new forms of organizational structures that go beyond classic individual enterprises and gain increasing importance on the market. Among those, so-called virtual networks have been studied intensively for quite some time (e.g., Davidow & Malone, 1992; Goldman, Nagel & Preiss, 1995; Kock, 2000; Travica, 2005). Nevertheless, there is still need for research regarding their formal and informal mechanisms of governance and leadership: The vast majority of existing research in this area has focused predominantly on the level of either structural or behavioral characteristics (Provan, Fish & Sydow, 2007). As such, some authors solely rely on the network’s formal structures and design (e.g., official guidelines, contracts, formal roles like network managers) to explain network success (Provan & Kenis, 2007), while others emphasize the informal dynamics and individual interest-driven behavioral actions between agents as the relevant key factors for decision-making (Elron & Vigoda-Gadot, 2006). With these two approaches, different perspectives on governance and leadership are given: While the focus on formal mechanisms might result in recommendations on network design and could be illustrated in an organization chart with a network’s “official” roles of their members, their relations and work flows, the approach on informal behavior tries to see behind the curtain of official, formalized network structures and considers the inner dynamics between individual agents with their personal needs and interests. Despite the fact that theories like structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) emphasize the analysis of both the structures and the individual actions as well as their interdependencies, the interaction of virtual network structures and informal, political behavior of individual agents, however, has seldom been studied so far.

Trying to bridge this gap, the aim of our paper is to investigate potential drivers of micro-political actions in virtual networks. It examines whether structural characteristics of virtual networks – formalization, centralization and interaction as well as the composition of the network members – are crucial to explain several forms of political behavior in the joint collaboration. In addition, different characteristics of the external business environments of virtual networks as well as inner dynamics such as the members’ (dis)satisfaction with network services are taken into consideration. Finally, political influence tactics as a form of governance have to be analyzed with regard to their outcomes: There is an ongoing discussion of whether individual political influence behavior is necessarily self-oriented or can be aimed likewise at collective goals to serve the network as a whole (cf. Janneck & Staar, 2011; Elron & Vigoda, 2003). Since innovation that creates valuable business breakthroughs has been identified as one important collective outcome of inter-organizational virtual networks (Chesbrough & Teece, 2002), influence tactics are evaluated in their impact on collective success factors in terms of innovative network outcomes.

In our paper, ‘politics’ refers to informal actions of individual stakeholders to gain power and exert influence (Ansari, 1990; Kipnis, Schmidt & Wilkinson, 1980; Pfeffer, 1992). Originating in organizational science and psychology, political behavior within organizations has been extensively researched in the last decades (e.g., Ferris et al., 2000, 2002; Vigoda-Gadot, 2003) but is continuously gaining attention in the field of network research (Huxham & Vangen, 2004). Focusing on both, formal network structures and informal political processes is particularly interesting due to the fact that on one hand formal instruments are seen as a vital tool to coordinate processes in the common collaboration. On the other hand, inter-organizational networks are typically characterized by a lack of structures, hierarchies and limited formal authority to give directives therewith giving way to informal political behavior as a mode of decision making (cf. Rittenbruch, Kahler & Cremers, 1998; Travica, 2005). Thus, it is sensible to assume that formal
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