Strategic Partnerships in the IT Sector: Trust, Power and Inter-Organizational Collaboration

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Abstract

With an ever-increasing number of companies outsourcing their information systems' operations, issues associated with the establishment and management of collaborative relationships have attracted considerable recent interest. In particular, a good deal of attention has been directed towards the role that power plays in collaborative relationships and, specifically, to methods of distinguishing between true cooperation and collaboration and the exercise of power dressed up as collaboration. Many aspects of power do lend themselves to quantification and this enables the development of models of collaborative relationships that can be employed for both descriptive and predictive purposes. In our paper, we present a model of this type: a model derived (in part) from a current study of collaborative relationships within the Australian communications industry. Our work to date suggests that a much more fine-grained analysis than is usual must be undertaken if the type of inter-organizational interface that is conducive to engendering trust is to be established.

Keywords

Strategic Alliances; Communications Industry; Outsourcing; Organizational Behavior; Decision Models.

INTRODUCTION

This paper builds on earlier investigations into the use of system dynamics as a conceptual modelling tool and, specifically, its potential in the crucial area of capturing the crucial "softer" aspects of organizational phenomena (McGrath, 1998; McGrath and More, 1999a). We draw on experiences with cooperative relationships and the practice of such relationships from the perspective of the Australian communications industry - including computing, telecommunications and the media. Specifically: 1) we present some results of an earlier, longitudinal, 3-year case study which traced the development, progress and management of a number of the major relationships within the Australian telecommunications industry; 2) we then present details of a follow-up study, where we have extended the scope of our original investigations to encompass the wider communications industry; and, finally, 3) we outline details of a model of trust, customised for the general area of cooperative relationships, designed to guide prospective inter-organizational collaborators in the establishment and management of a proposed partnership and to identify likely outcomes (both positive and negative).

Inter-organizational collaboration and cooperation, whilst not new to this decade, has been revisited by scholars and practitioners, fascinated by its energetic adoption as a means of gaining competitive advantage. Cooperative relationships may be defined as those special affiliations between at least two organizations, aimed at pooling resources, having joint

activities, and grounded in a strategic base designed to enhance competitive advantage. Such relationships should, ideally, be guided by a sound respect for organizational autonomy and individuality, and emphasise some type of long term or permanent commitment. They range from very tight approaches, such as joint ventures, to broader strategic alliances and more arm's length, extremely loose, forms of collaboration. What appears necessary and sufficient for strategic alliances per se is retention of independence, sharing of benefits and performance control, and maintaining ongoing contributions to one or more strategic areas (Yoshino and Rangan, 1995).

Cooperative strategies are changing the very face of organizational life, especially in high-technology organizations. Furthermore, what is evident in the burgeoning growth of inter-organizational collaboration, is its increasing complexity and the way it alters the very nature of business, competition, organizing and management, both nationally and internationally. Collaborative ventures move beyond mere economic rationalism and formal transaction processes. As complex, multi-tiered social systems, they involve social and political dimensions – both intra and inter-organizational, and the vital nexus between organization and external environment (including government). Not surprisingly then, some of the central planks of effective organizational collaboration reside in issues of appropriate coordination approaches, trust, communication, and the vitality of interpersonal relationships. The role of cultural compatibility is also important (More and McGrath, 1996).

From a theoretical perspective there is much to be done, although the pace of research in this area has certainly accelerated over the last few years. As Ebers (1997: 15) suggests: *"… we still have some way to go before we can claim that we sufficiently understand when, where, why, and how organizations form which kinds of inter-organizational relationships and to what effect."* Moreover he emphasises the importance of two under-researched yet important areas – possible costs and dynamics of such relationships, areas touched on in this paper.

In the following section, we outline our broad research design and we then introduce our model of trust within strategic alliances. We follow this with a discussion concerning the difficulties often inherent in distinguishing true collaboration from the exercise of power and concluding comments are presented in the final section.

BACKGROUND

Much of the literature, academic and popular, theoretical and pragmatic, has focussed in the main on relationships within specific industries, whereas current developments suggest that, at least in some arenas, what is emerging is cross industry collaboration of diverse types. Nowhere is this more apparent that in the convergence of telecommunications, entertainment, computing and media industries - for us, evident in the conglomerate known as the Australian communications and entertainment industry. What we find here is the convergence of telecommunications, media and communications technologies and services between traditional broadcasting and other types of media and communications services. This has involved increasing interdependencies in areas that must cooperate with each other in forging the pivotal nexus between content, form, and transmission in order to be competitive in the global marketplace.

A major part of the research in the field has concentrated on the rationale for collaboration forming rather than the more diffuse and intangible area of development of such relationships over time. Experience with research into the Australian telecommunications sector, the results of a longitudinal case study (More and McGrath, 1996) exploring the development, progress and management of broadly based strategic alliances between suppliers and customers, demonstrates some pivotal lessons that go beyond the mere economics of collaboration.

Our study focused on Telstra, the previous monopoly telecommunications carrier, and its four strategic alliances (Alcatel, Ericsson, Nortel, Siemens); the second general telecommunications carrier, Optus, and its five strategic partnerships (DEC, Fujitsu, Leighton Contractors, Nokia Telecommunications, and Nortel Australia); and the third cellular mobile company, Vodafone, and its two alliances (Ericsson Australia and Keycorp). Extracting rich data from intensive interviews with key managers and senior executives involved in telecommunications alliances and with those in Government bodies and industry associations, the following key findings emerged:

- While many relationships were initially based in expedience, centred on operational, pragmatic and short-term needs, this did not necessarily diminish an alliance's strategic element, nor exclude the possibilities of future longer term relationships.
- Major overt motivations for relationships included increased innovation; access to labour, technology and expertise; market access and global market capability; and risk sharing. An underlying covert motive was the pressure by Government for such relationships, in order to promote local industry hand in hand with technology transfer from multinationals to Australian companies.
- Some of the key areas of concern were: pressure for rapid return on investment; employing and keeping suitably qualified staff; the time involved in maintaining relationships; and difficulties with professional cultures undermining broader organization strategy and culture.
- Vital benefits encompassed product development, growing business opportunities, profit, credibility, technology access, speed, quality output, access to markets, competitive advantage, reduced costs, and organizational learning.
- Critical success factors (CSFs) in management of the alliances included assigning alliance management responsibility to a specific individual or group; little reliance on formal legal arrangements; clear coordination and control mechanisms; a heavy emphasis on commitment, trust, and effective communication; and the necessary senior management involvement in the creation and nurturing of relationships.

Turning now to the wider Australian communications sector, there are a myriad of contemporary problems. These follow the 1997 Telstra float to sell one third of the Government owned telecommunications carrier and the July 1, 1997 start of industry-wide deregulation with full competition in services and facilities. They include:

- cross media ownership laws;
- the perceived versus the real nature of competition in a deregulated environment;
- the desire for cable to deliver more than pay – i.e. competitive telephony;
- pay television operators struggling to balance television and telephony, with losses in the billions of dollars over the last few years;
- the proposed sale of the other two-thirds of Telstra;
- the regulatory nightmares posed by different technologies in terms of universal service funding arrangements;
- global pressures, possibly affecting Government's abilities to set local content requirements and regulations on ownership;
- controversy over digital broadcasting for radio and television; and

- ongoing debates about the national broadcaster (the Australian Broadcasting Corporation), tax concessions for the film industry, and outsourcing in both.

Ongoing convergence and the introduction of digital television gives rise to ongoing challenges to traditional ways of regulating broadcast media. In 1998 the current free-to-air television companies were given exclusive rights to digital terrestrial transmission until 2008. An infinite variety of services and opportunities will severely test legislators, financiers, technologists and the public. HDTV broadcasting is set to commence in metropolitan areas at the beginning of 2001, bringing with it a whole new set of concerns.

Some claim that the Government's decision to give the digital broadcast spectrum away free to existing networks, who will be protected from competitors until 2008, is a serious mistake. As the Sydney Morning Herald (13 July, 1998: 14) puts it:

> *"This is an issue that goes far beyond an interest in the range and quality of television reception. In fact it goes to the heart of the information age and the type of economy that will be built on it. Digital broadcasting constitutes the next breakthrough in data delivery. When linked to television it will provide the pipeline for a range of information services, including the Internet. The advantage the Government has just handed the existing networks is that they will be able to provide a range of data services to their established audiences while other data service providers … will be restricted in taking full advantage of the integration and cross-marketing benefits arising from the new technology. Ultimately the loser is the customer because the Government is precluding the possibility of better and more innovative services in a more efficient and competitive industry."*

Given such complexity it is hardly surprising then that industry members find the need for increasing collaboration. We find partnerships and joint ventures across the industry. These include:

- the recent 50/50 partnerships between Australian Consolidated Press and Time Warner Inc. – a magazine publishing house in Australia called Premier Magazines;
- the joint venture in pay TV, between News Ltd and Telstra, a collaboration between the giants in Australia's newspaper and telecommunications industry for the major cable player Foxtel;
- the joint venture between the commercial television player, Seven Network with Optus Communications, again uniting telephony and pay television;
- Publishing and Broadcasting Ltd's Channel Nine joint venture with Microsoft Corp. to provide online consumer products for Australia, New Zealand and New Guinea; and
- the joint venture of IBM with Telstra and Lend Lease for information technology outsourcing.

In addition we have a burgeoning multimedia industry, alongside the more focussed information industry interest with growing e-commerce, and other dimensions to the Internet. Electronic commerce is a real focus for both industry and the Government, given that it is not just concerned with delivering the traditional in a new way but also with new products and service, changing markets and demographics, efficiency and effectiveness, a real client focus, competition and the like.

Consequently, the environment is changing and developing even more complexities as we move beyond the within-industry relationships that our earlier study investigated in telecommunications. Moreover, a number of studies have indicated that a significant number

of inter-organizational collaborative arrangements fail: studies by McKinsey and Co., Coopers and Lybrand, among others, have reported that 7 out of 10 joint ventures do not meet expectations or disband; international alliances are even more prone to failure (Stafford, 1994); Bain and Co. found that only 2% of all alliance negotiations actually produced lasting performance improvements for those involved; and, finally, even when they succeed, strategic alliances are expensive exercises (Rigby and Buchanan, 1994). What we are attempting now is to map and model these more intricate collaborative organizational relationships in order to better understand the realities of strategic practice and performance in these high technology arenas. A secondary aim is to produce some sort of aid, based on the best research and experience reports available, that might be used by prospective collaborators to: guide the establishment and operations of the arrangement; and, quite possibly, to predict negative consequences before the event.

Our research design is illustrated in Figure 1. Our earlier detailed study of the Australian telecommunications industry produced a wealth of information that has both informed and motivated our follow-up study of the wider communications and entertainment industry. A further outcome of our earlier study was a preliminary list of strategic alliances critical success factors (CSFs). We have since used these to develop a preliminary version of a *CSF Model.* Findings from our current study will be used to refine this model which, in turn, is the basis for our *Compatibility Framework* - the automated implementation of which is, in effect, an advisory expert system. A prototype system, based on our earlier study and preliminary findings from the current study, has already been implemented. A key CSF is *trust* and we now turn our attention to this portion of our framework.

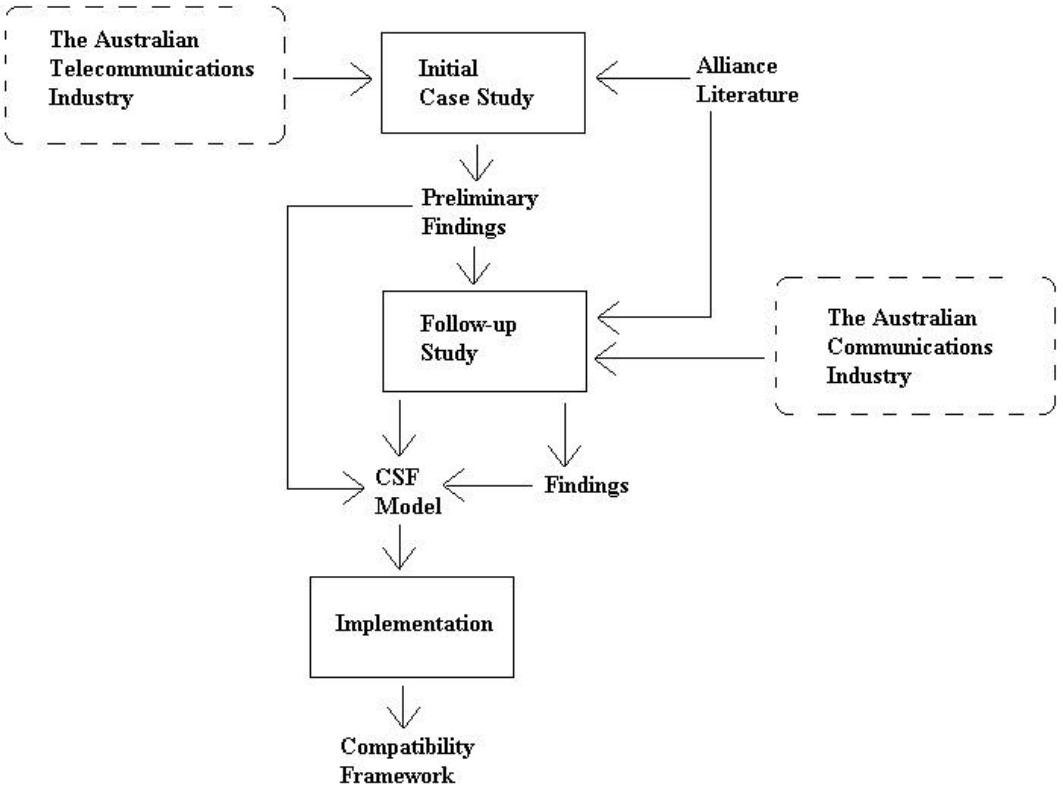

Figure 1: Research design.

A MODEL OF TRUST IN STRATEGIC ALLIANCES

A vital ingredient for success reported in many studies of inter-organization cooperation is that of trust among partners. Indeed, some argue that it is the ability to be a trusted cooperator that allows an organization to be a really effective global competitor (Holmes and Smith, 1997).

The majority of those interviewed for our studies agreed, stressing the centrality of trust and commitment, including trust existing long before the signing of any formal agreements:

> *... I mean an awful lot of it was based on trust. ... we went out there and started ... doing things with really no written commitment on anything. It was, we just got out there and we started doing things and had a gut feeling, the rest of it would follow and we'd be paid for what we did and all the rest of it. I mean ... the whole thing, was based on trust (Interviewee).*

Trust, however, is difficult to delineate - especially in relation to the contextualisation of power. Recently there has been a great deal of interest in the role that power plays in collaborative relationships and, specifically, in methods of distinguishing between true cooperation and collaboration and the exercise of power disguised as collaboration (Hardy, Phillips and Lawrence, 1998). For example:

> *[The partner] did keep putting pressure on [us] to drive the price down, because that was a key motivation that end. So that was, it's a one-sided party relationship, in fact, they do keep driving the price down, they reckon, making unreasonable demands. … And when we were … slow to drop the price, for a number of reasons it's difficult in reducing costs, they then used the threat of putting in another supplier. … they're fairly ready to bring that threat in so that if you don't meet our price requirements, we'll go to another supplier. And we got to an awkward stage about two years ago where they - they went out, they threatened to go to tender for a number of different products which we felt were, as part of our relationship, we … [were] logical suppliers of that (Interviewee).*

Other study participants emphasised the impact that imbalances in organization size (by whatever significant measure) can have on inter-organizational relationships. For example:

> *Well, the big problem was a one-sided relationship really, it still is. And they've certainly got all the pluses … [the organization] is the biggest customer … so you tend to do things you wouldn't normally do, just to keep that business (Interviewee).*

> *Well obviously you're talking about multinational companies who have got world's business at stake and all the rest of it and they're not fools, they're sitting there trying to make sure that it's a … Well it's really meant to be a cooperative arrangement but they're going to lead, by hell you know … they want to make sure they win (Interviewee).*

In earlier work (McGrath and More, 1998) we have advocated the use of formal conceptual modelling techniques - commonly employed in information systems and artificial intelligence work - for representing organization and management theory. In particular, we have suggested that system dynamics (Vennix, 1996) has much to offer and, in a recent study of an IT outsourcing venture (McGrath and More, 1999b), we present a system dynamics view of our case study domain. A generalised (and partial) view of this model is presented in Figure 2.

The basic building blocks of system dynamics models are *stocks* (represented as rectangles), *flows* (represented as arrows with circular flow regulators attached) and *converters* (represented as circles). In Figure 2, examples of stocks are *Trust, Positive Exchanges* and

Participants Capability. There is a level associated with each stock, which can be an actual value or a value bounded by some artificial scale (which is the case with each of the three stocks used in our model). *Trust*, for example, is measured on a 0-100 scale and the system has been set up so that, when the (collective) CSR knowledge level is at 70, the system is in equilibrium. Stock levels vary with flows, which may be *inflows*, *outflows* or *bidirectional*. For example, *trust varn* is a bidirectional flow such that:

$$Trust_t = f(Trust_{t-1}, trust\_varn_t).$$

i.e. the trust level at time, *t*, is a function of the trust level at time, *t-1*, and the trust variation at time, *t*. These equations are the foundation of the systems dynamics approach's formidable simulation capabilities. The third of the basic constructs, *converters*, serve a utilitarian role: they hold values for constants, calculate mathematical relationships and serve as repositories for graphical functions. In general, they convert inputs into outputs (hence, the name, "converter").

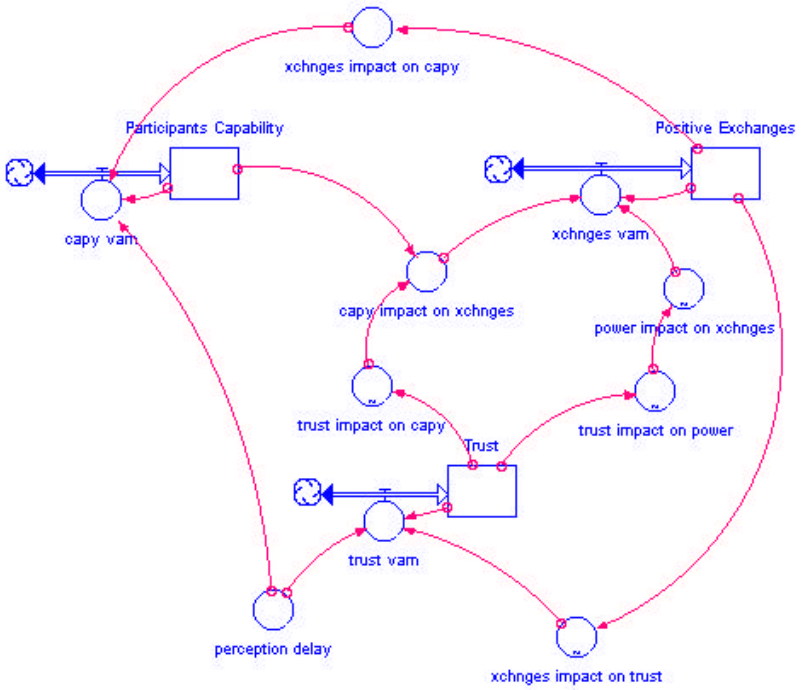

Figure 2: A high-level view of a collaborative relationship.

McAllister (1995) defines trust *as the degree to which parties are willing to act on the words, actions and decisions of others.* Creed and Miles (1996) take this further and argue that the most critical factor in increasing (or decreasing) trust is the number of positive exchanges. This is reflected in our model, where the dominating factor is the reinforcing loop from *Positive Exchanges* to *Trust*, and back to the starting point via *Participants Capability*. Note also that there is another route from *Trust* to *Positive Exchanges* via *trust impact on power* and *power impact on xchnges*. That is, as partners discover that their opposites are as good as their word, the level of trust between them increases and this, in turn, reinforces their capacity to do business together (the converse also applies). The final loop in the model, from *Positive Exchanges* to *Participants Capability* and back, acts as a stabilising influence. That is, as performance drops (as reflected in *Positive Exchanges),* some corrective action will generally be taken in an attempt to remedy the situation.

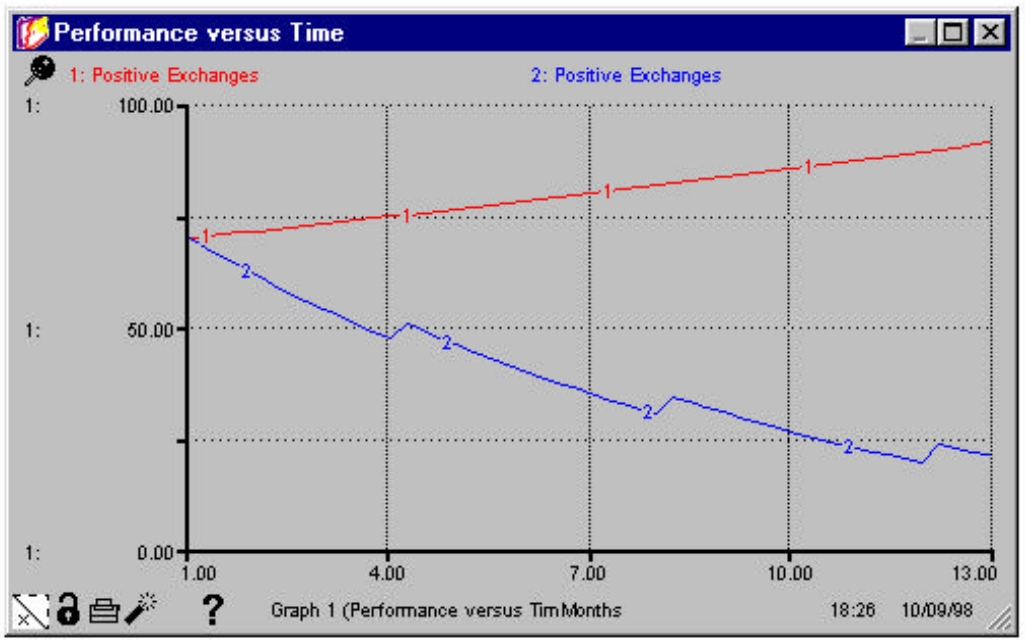

Figure 3: Performance variation with time (from model simulation).

The effectiveness of corrective action, however, is highly dependent on both ensuring the right alliance fundamentals are initially in place and on an ongoing commitment to the relationship. Assuming both these conditions apply, our model yields the type of performance variation exhibited in graph 1 of Figure 3. This is consistent with the observations of a study participant, involved in one of the more successful alliances we investigated, who observed that trust and commitment were essential during the inevitable difficult periods. Specifically:

> *However, the fact that we had the underlying alliance took us through the hard times. The fact that it wasn't a threat environment, nobody at no stage, and we went through some very difficult times, where things were late and they had requirements that we couldn't meet and we had expectations from them which they couldn't meet (Interviewee).*

If, however, trust is lacking, performance will gradually deteriorate over time (as illustrated in graph 2 of Figure 3) and this is precisely the behaviour observed in our more recent outsourcing case study (McGrath and More, 1999b).

COLLABORATION AND POWER

In general the issue of power in interorganizational relationships, covering both broad and narrower specific forms of collaboration, has been left largely out in the cold. While trust is consistently applauded in the literature and research concerned with interorganizational levels of analysis, unpeeling the deeper layers of interorganizational relationships has not teased out trust and collaboration in terms of power constraints, divergent motives, and conflict adequately up to this point. Cooperation, instead of competitive and opportunistic behaviour, is imagined somehow to erase power concerns even between organizations of varying size and might. Certainly the economic literature on the matter of trust vis-à-vis power is not forthcoming on the power dimension aside from dealing with opportunistic behaviour in a narrow sense.

Clegg and Hardy (1996) have sounded a note of warning, however, on this area of omission, pointing out that *"Writers have tended to assume that partners collaborate voluntarily, and share common goals and equal power.";* and that *"All too often, collaboration is assumed to*

be beneficial for participants as well as other stakeholders (1996: 679)." Their answer, which Hardy, Phillips, and Lawrence (1998) take up in more detail, is to pursue a sociological perspective focussing on communication and shared meaning, and using different methdologies for understanding the process of establishing trust. In essence, they argue against simplistic perspectives (structural-functionalist, strategic management and institutional theory) that ignore the reality of power, domination – overt and covert - and diverse stakeholder interests in collaborative relationships. Power can thus be the flip side of trust, especially in relationships between strong and relatively weaker organizations, the concept of strength itself here open to different perceptions, often related to levels of dependency and interdependency.

In our earlier study, whatever was said about trust in the most genuine sense it was clear that Telstra was a dominant organization in the telecommunications arena, with enormous power remaining even with the introduction of competition and this being maintained through deregulation in mid 1997 and beyond. Strategic suppliers of Optus also hinted at times at the power in relationships - over pricing at least. This was not, of course, necessarily the case in terms of some of the very strong and genuinely trusting interpersonal relationships that were revealed to us, but was a sort of omnipresent macro backdrop to the developing interorganizational relationships. As Clegg and Hardy (1996: 680) put it: *"There is, then, a substantive difference between cooperation achieved through power differentials that render some partners unable to engage in opportunistic behaviour, and a willingness to voluntarily sacrifice the benefits of opportunistic behaviour in order to cooperate with a trusted partner."*

This type of focus and analysis will be a much greater feature of our present work on the broader communications industry, with its clear outline of dominant players across telecommunications, computing, and entertainment. It will prove a particularly challenging aspect of modelling interorganizational relationships, although it will build on some earlier work already done by the authors on organizational power (e.g. McGrath, Dampney and More, 1998).

CONCLUSION

Strategic organizational alliances, given the complexities involved, provide the perfect scenario for opportunistic behaviour. It is little surprise, therefore, that trust is such a focal point in such relationships. Nor is it surprising that the issue of trust in inter-organizational relationships per se is critical and a fertile ground for research, both from a theoretical and pragmatic perspective.

In this paper we have focussed on the need to assess strategic alliances in the wider Australian communications industry sector and across industry sectors for a richer comprehension of inter-organizational relationships. We have argued, building on our earlier research in telecommunications, the central role of trust in such relationships. Given the variety of views on trust and the real complexity of inter-organizational relationships per se, modelling trust in collaborative relationships in extremely difficult, though very useful for practitioners and important for theory building in the field. We have proposed one rather simple model as a basis from which to begin work in the area.

The authors understand that once having mapped the communications industry (itself a difficult task), development of a more sophisticated model of trust in inter-organizational collaboration is required, grounded in a more thorough and rigorous analysis of trust as a concept itself. This is evident if one takes the range of issues raised in the recent special issue of *The Academy of Management Review* (Sitkin et al., 1998) on trust in and between organizations. There we find:

- Different comprehensions of trust determined by disciplinary perspectives – particularly those of economics, psychology, and sociology;
- The trust process as static or dynamic;
- Types of trust from individual to inter-organizational;
- Different levels for analysing trust;
- Trust as cause, effect, or interaction;
- Forms of trust;
- Context and trust;
- Forms of dependence, risks;
- Qualities of trustworthiness;
- Mechanisms of trust;
- Trust-distrust dynamics;
- Development of trust;
- Relationship of trust, control, and confidence;
- Dimensions of trustworthy behaviour;
- Trust and betrayal; and
- The effect of organizational and national cultures on trust.

Given such a rich menu of issues associated with understanding trust in inter-organizational relationships, researchers should have few problems in finding one or more areas to claim as their own in order to increase knowledge and improve practice in this vital arena for contemporary and future organization studies. Choosing the communications industry was not intended as paradoxical initially but it has turned out to be so given the nexus between trust and communication and the vitality of this sector as core to so many other industries and social activities in the 1990s and beyond. It is also fitting given the call by Hardy, Phillips, and Lawrence (1998) for a communication perspective on trust and power and the growing recognition of the need to incorporate considerations of power in analysing interorganizational collaboration per se. Collaboration, after all, need not always involve deep levels of trust, nor be without dimensions of politics, power and conflict. That it sometimes does exist in interorganizational relationships and provides a firm foundation for creative partnering is a challenge for researchers and practitioners alike to explore and comprehend.

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