



Deriving value from inter-organizational learning collaborations

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to develop the understanding of how organizations can derive more value from participating in inter-organizational learning collaborations.

Design/methodology/approach – The collaboration is viewed as one “level” within an extended organizational learning system and both feedback processes between levels and the dynamics within the collaboration itself are explored. Seven learning-based inter-organizational learning collaborations are studied using a qualitative exploratory research design. An extensive literature review is used to design the semi-structured interviews undertaken with participants in the collaborations, as well as the convenor of each.

Findings – Multiple forms of value are evident (individual capacity building, operational value, affirmation, reputation and relationship building and learning about how to collaborate more effectively), though subject specific organizational capability building is rarely achieved. Two main factors seemed to influence this: individuals not translating the implications of the learning, and the organizations not transferring and amplify that learning. Building capability required a visible long-term commitment by leaders to the collaboration.

Research limitations/implications – Confirmatory research is needed to refine the proposed framework of actions to develop the organizational capability to derive value from participating in this kind of collaboration.

Practical implications – A coherent set of actions is proposed for organizations wishing to build the capability to derive more value from participating in inter-organizational learning collaborations. Recommendations are also generated for those wishing to convene a collaboration.

Originality/value – The contribution is the development of the concept of the organizational capability to participate effectively in inter-organizational learning collaborations, and the identification of a coherent set of actions required to develop this capability.

Keywords Learning organizations, Leadership, Knowledge sharing

Paper type Research paper



1. Introduction

Success in a complex and changing world requires innovation, which in turn needs the stimulus of new knowledge. A wide variety of diverse external links is known to provide organizations with such stimuli. External perspectives also help overcome the organizational dominant logic, supporting adaptation and evolution. This is not just a

This research project was carried out by a working group of knowledge managers from member organizations of the Henley KM Forum. Public, private and third sector organizations were included. Particular thanks are due to Graham O'Connell from the National School of Government who was the practitioner champion of the research, and to Keith Heron who was a researcher on the project.

competitive drive. Within the public sector, challenging social issues (these have been called wicked problems) can no longer be solved from within a particular service area and require a new kind of cross-department and cross-sector thinking (Kettl, 2006). Learning mechanisms provide the basis for capability development, and in rapidly changing industries offer a “path-breaking strategic logic of change” (Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000, p. 1118).

Over the past decade, the study of organizational learning has increasingly encompassed research into learning through participation in inter-organizational networks. There is a growing strategic emphasis on alliances, partnerships and collaboration between organizations (Engestrom and Kerosuo, 2007). Collaboration in this sense is “a cooperative, inter-organizational relationship that relies on neither market nor hierarchical mechanisms of control but is instead negotiated in an ongoing communicative process” (Lawrence *et al.*, 1999, p. 481), while an alliance is the creation of a governance mechanism to pursue collaborative interests between two or more independent firms (Park and Ungson, 2001). These governance mechanisms range from loose cooperative arrangements to formal contractual relationships.

The objectives for entering into an alliance tend to be either to exploit current resources and areas of strength more efficiently or effectively, or to explore new possibilities by learning from partners to develop expertise that may be more widely exploited within the individual organizations (Johnson and Scholes, 2002; Child, 2003). The ability to meet these objectives through alliances depends on the appropriateness and effectiveness of the structure and collaborative processes adopted. Loose (informal cooperation) types of alliance are most appropriate when there is a learning motive for collaboration (McKenzie and van Winkelen, 2004; Miles *et al.*, 2000) and these are the focus of this study. Seven inter-organizational collaborations having an explicit collaborative learning objective were studied with the intention of generating both conceptual and practical insights into what enables them to succeed and what would allow the participating organizations to derive more value.

2. Literature review

Understanding the value generated from participating in learning-based collaborative partnerships requires a comprehensive interpretation of the term “value” (Andriessen, 2003). It involves integrating valued outcomes in the form of knowledge and learning that can be used to solve immediate operational problems, as well as to build capability for the future (potentially the basis for sustainable strategic advantage), with intangible benefits such as enhancing reputation and building relationships that may provide opportunities elsewhere (Allee, 2000a, b). Participation also allows idea and approaches to be tested and refined with respected external colleagues. In entering into an inter-organizational learning collaboration, any or all of these forms of value may be available to an organization.

Relevant learning happens at multiple interacting levels – across individuals, groups, organizations and inter-organizationally. Managing and influencing the feedback and feed-forward processes across the levels are the basis for shaping the stocks and flows of the organizational learning system (Crossan and Holland, 2002; Crossan *et al.*, 1999). Beesley (2004) suggests that learning at one level cannot take place until it has occurred at the previous level, so the levels should be viewed as nested within each other as shown in Figure 1. A wide range of factors influences

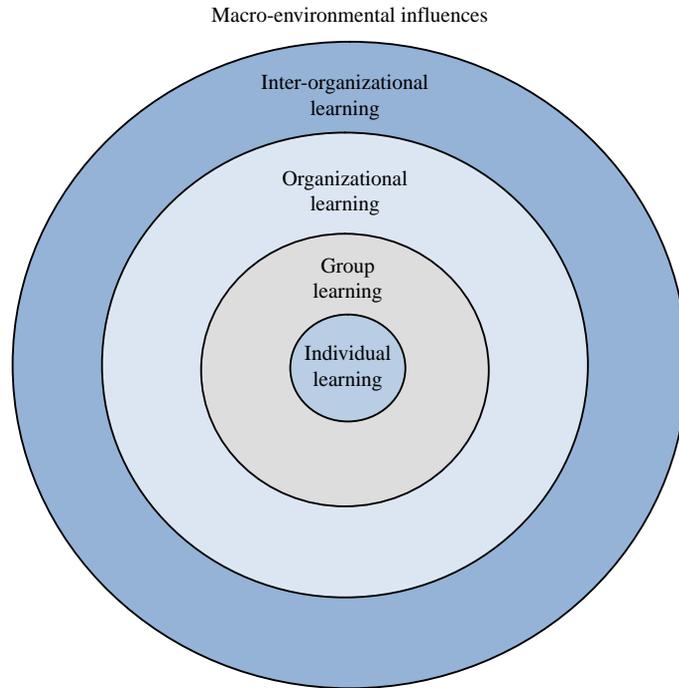


Figure 1.
Nested learning levels

Source: Based on Beesley (2004)

the process of the creation, diffusion and utilization of knowledge intended for organizational application within and across these levels.

Studies of inter-organizational network characteristics that support knowledge transfer emphasise the importance of social relations and, in particular, investments in developing relational capital (van Wijk *et al.*, 2008). The quality of the relationship between organizations is a necessary aspect of value creation and realisation from the inter-organizational learning-based collaborations (Madhok and Tallman, 1998). Establishing trust is at the heart of building effective relationships. Trust between partners changes through the evolution of a collaboration: it has been shown to move from behavioural trust in the early relationship-forming stages to structural trust at the committed stage.

Network learning is learning by a group of organizations as a group (Knight and Pye, 2005). The processes involved may be formal or informal, proactive or emergent. It is useful to distinguish network learning from learning networks. "Learning networks are networks whose purpose is to learn" (Knight and Pye, 2005, p. 372). The learning-based inter-organizational collaborations studied here are learning networks in these terms. However, although network learning may also happen in that the group itself demonstrates observable changes to routines and strategies and widely shared values and procedures, this study views them as learning networks interacting with organizational learning processes. The intention is the generation of learning at the level of the participating organizations via the learning of the individuals representing them.

From the outside, the individual equals the firm (Maznevski and Athanassiou, 2007). This places a considerable emphasis on the individuals who span the boundary of the organization to participate on its behalf in inter-organizational collaborations. Kasouf *et al.* (2006, p. 36) notes: “The quality of an inter-organizational relationship depends on the many dyads and interactions among groups of employees who interact, negotiate, and deliver value to the partner organization”. Research into knowledge sharing behaviours by individuals and the influence of personality has identified seven specific knowledge sharing behaviours that individuals demonstrate to a greater or lesser extent: networking, consideration and recognition, trust and empowerment, gathering and developing knowledge, managing and sharing information, communicating knowledge and applying expertise (Truch, 2004).

Learning in organizations as a consequence of learning by individual representatives of the organization in the learning network is known to be a significant challenge (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2008). Absorptive capacity describes the ability of an organization to understand the value of knowledge and then translate it into use (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990; Zahra and George, 2002). Knowledge put into productive use by an organization as a result of participating in a learning network depends on its absorptive capacity and the volume of network generated knowledge it is exposed to (Kumar and Nti, 1998). Links between external learning processes and internal learning processes are increasingly evident (Holmqvist, 2004) but problematic to fully understand.

A review of the literature and research on inter-organizational knowledge transfer was presented in a special issue of the *Journal of Management Studies* (June 2008). This emphasised the importance of intra-organizational knowledge transfer mechanisms to exploit the learning from the collaboration, as well as the role individuals play in transferring tacit knowledge. An integrated model of factors influencing inter-organizational knowledge transfer was proposed by the editors which reflects many of the issues already mentioned (Figure 2).

This model has been integrated with other insights from the literature to generate a research model (Figure 3). As the focus is the inter-organizational collaboration, the organization, the individuals involved and the macro-environmental issues are contextual levels that interact with it and are the basis of feedback and feed-forward

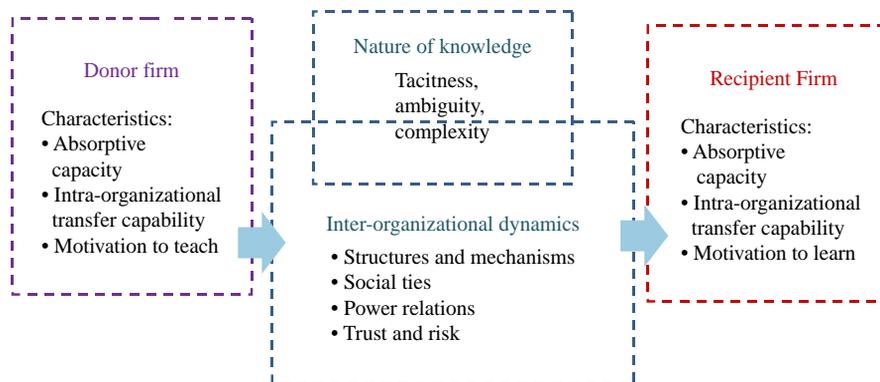


Figure 2. Factors influencing inter-organizational knowledge transfer

Source: Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2008)



Figure 3.
Research model of the
collaboration system

learning loops within an overall learning system (consistent with Figure 1). The components of the model are as follows:

- *Contextual factors.* Macro-environmental factors include the external drivers for participating in such collaborations. At the organization level, access to and effectiveness of intra-organizational collaboration mechanisms are of particular relevance. At the individual level, it is the knowledge sharing behaviours exhibited by a person that mediate the learning process, though there are undoubtedly personality, emotional and cognitive capacity factors that could be considered too (Amy, 2008; Barsade *et al.*, 2000; Beesley, 2004).
- *Inside the collaboration.* This starts with the intent or motivation for the collaboration and the associated outcomes that are actually delivered and valued. The delivery of these outcomes is assumed to be mediated through collaboration mechanisms largely in line with the inter-organizational dynamics elements described by Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2008) and shown in Figure 2.

3. Research design

The interactive research method (van Winkelen and Truch, 2002; van Winkelen *et al.*, 2008) was used, which was undertaken collaboratively within the Henley Knowledge Management Forum based in the UK. This is research with and by groups of active practitioners, and keeps attention close to the reality of organizational issues and priorities. Findings are tested against experience, as well as interpreted within the appropriate body of academic literature, typical of Mode 2 applied research (Bryman and Bell, 2003, p. 5). The term Mode 2 has been given to interdisciplinary knowledge that is generated in a context of application (Gibbons *et al.*, 1994, p. 3). In these

research-oriented partnerships, the “cooperation with companies should not be perceived as a useful consequence of research but as a prerequisite for the production of actionable knowledge” (Hatchuel, 2001, p. S39).

The research was undertaken by a working group of 13 knowledge management (KM) experts, academics and knowledge managers. The knowledge managers represented nine large organizations (UK public sector, not for profit, and large private sector with significant operations in the UK). They shaped the focus of the research, identified collaborations to study and provided access to them.

Initially, the research model was developed through a comprehensive literature review. The research was then undertaken in two phases. Initially, a qualitative exploratory survey was used to identify specific instances of learning-based inter-organizational collaborations within the experience of the working group. Ten examples were outlined. From these, seven cases were chosen for in depth study, with the selection criterion being the variety of the forms of value they appeared to be generating.

The case based methodology (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Yin, 1994) was adopted which focuses on developing an understanding of the dynamics present within settings. The primary unit of analysis was the collaboration, focusing on the individual’s perceptions of the value derived, their own role and activities and the dynamics within the collaboration. The seven cases selected are summarised in Table I, organised approximately in order of the extent to which a specific short-term tangible outcome was one of the expected forms of value from the collaboration, as compared to a long-term and open-ended learning intent.

The cases were constructed through three in-depth semi-structured telephone interviews, two with participants from separate organizational members of the collaboration and one with its convenor. The two organizational interviewees were selected to be as representative as possible through consultation between the working group member that provided access to the collaboration and the convenor of the collaboration.

A total of 21 semi-structured interviews based on the research model were carried out by telephone. Interviewees were briefed ahead of time in terms of the broad topic areas of the research model. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was recorded, as well as notes being taken. Two researchers undertook the interviews, having previously carried out two pilot interviews together to refine and align the interview process.

Content analysis (Bryman and Bell, 2003) was used to classify interview text, using the research model factors as the starting basis for the categories and generating themes at the level of the cases. The researchers independently reviewed the interview notes and transcripts to prepare the case level analyses and then compared interpretations, with areas of disagreement being resolved through review and discussion. The findings at the level of each case were reviewed in an extended focus group session with the working group to identify cross-case insights.

4. Results

The first set of results relates to the contextual factors, while the second set moves into the “collaboration space” to explore the value being generated.

4.1 *The context of the inter-organizational learning collaborations*

Contextual factors in the research model are the macro-environment, the influence of the internal collaboration and knowledge sharing systems and process in the

Table I.
The seven case studies

Case name	Strength of drive for specific outcomes	Collaborators	History and operation
Cross-Govt agencies	Strong	Four major UK government agencies. Convened by one of the collaborators	Established about four years ago. Dedicated manager of the collaboration funded by one party. Regular board meetings of senior people from the collaborating organizations
Govt policy	Strong	Two main parties with five others involved. Convened by one of the collaborators	Collaborative learning phase lasted 12 months before evolving to conventional project format
UK learning	Moderate	Knowledge managers from 45 large multi-nationals and the UK public sector bodies. Convened by a UK business school	Established eight years ago. Regular pattern of events with speakers and workshops. Collaborative research projects. Online collaboration through web site and wiki. Dedicated organisers of the collaboration. Fee paid by collaborators to cover costs
Local Govt CoP	Moderate	Community of practice for local government knowledge and information managers. About 350 online members. Convened by a government agency	Established about two years ago as part of an extensive programme to develop online communities of practice. Specialised and trained team of facilitators. Some face-to-face events. Funded by the convenor agency
Int. Govt agencies	Moderate	Two major government agencies from the UK and Canada. Mutual decision to collaborate	Initiated three years ago. Formal inaugural event demonstrating senior leadership commitment then ongoing programme of informal exchanges and secondments. Lead contact in each organization
Private learning	Weak	Learning and development managers from the UK operations of private sector organizations. Convened by a private consultancy	Evolved from a previous forum about two years ago. Lunch meetings facilitated by knowledgeable consultant. No fixed agenda: informal process to allow people to discuss current issues. No fee – own costs covered by each participant
US learning	Weak	Chief learning officers (or equivalent) from 20 large US organizations (public and private sector). Convened by a US University department	Established eight years ago. Programme of carefully designed and facilitated events. Participants screened for appropriateness, including desire to have no direct competitors. Dedicated organisers of the collaboration. Fee paid by organizations to cover costs

participant organizations, and the characteristics and behaviours of the individuals representing their organizations.

Macro-environmental factors. These were the drivers for organizations seeking out, or even convening, inter-organizational learning collaborations. The founding motivation of the US learning was that in a more complex world there are ambiguous challenges that are difficult to even articulate. Long-term relationships are needed to allow specialists to think through these issues together. In the public sector, partnership working across government is expected to be the norm in the UK. Cross-Govt agencies and Govt policy had an explicit aspect of their remit to both model this to other public sector bodies and to learn how to get better at it themselves. Also, increasingly organizations need partners to deliver complex tasks and relationships established within learning networks seem to be helpful in building trust for this. Evidence of additional working alliances developing beyond the learning collaboration was particularly evident in Cross-Govt agencies, UK and US learning. It is interesting to note that these were the most established collaborations and large enough to support a variety of bi-lateral connections.

For three of the collaborations, a driver for participation is increasingly isolated specialists in organizations. The individuals participating in UK learning, US learning and private learning were all subject matter specialists in relatively unique positions in their organizations. They identified their own need for a place to share ideas and practices about rapidly changing and complex organizational themes with like-minded professionals.

Organizational factors. In all seven of the inter-organizational collaborations, it was clear that the participants had limited systematic mechanisms to transfer learning back into the organization. Pockets of good practice in internal collaboration were mentioned, but the informal use of face-to-face and personal networks still predominated, with inconsistent use of technology, systems and processes. Several interviewees commented that the starting point for organizational learning from the inter-organizational collaboration is personal effort by the individuals involved to think about the implications for their organizations of what they have learnt and then identify appropriate internal mechanisms to transfer that knowledge into the organization.

Individual factors. All interviewees were asked “how would you describe your own personal style in participating in a collaborative activity like the one we are looking at?” This resulted in a long list of descriptive terms which it turned out could all be categorised in using the knowledge sharing behaviour competency framework developed by Truch (2004). No significant differences in the kinds of responses were evident in particular collaborations – but clearly there is insufficient data to reach definite conclusions about this. Knowledgeable, committed and open-minded individuals able to establish and sustain relationships seemed to best describe effective participants.

4.2 Inside the inter-organizational collaborations

There were two main areas of study within the collaborations themselves:

- (1) a more detailed investigation of the value being generated for the organizations involved; and
- (2) an investigation of the dynamics between the participating organizations and how this relates to the value delivered.

Valued outcomes. In looking at the value generated from participating in these collaborations, the identified outcomes are summarised in Table II.

In all the cases, the outcomes identified through the interview process were more extensive than those identified in the preliminary scanning survey. Even with Cross-Govt agencies and Govt policy, which had the most specific and tangible outcomes associated with them (a joint web site and policy implementation guidance, respectively), there was clearly a range of other valued outcomes for the participants.

Interviewees also identified the importance of being open minded to unanticipated benefits. Several forms of value were evident: operational value, affirmation, intangible benefits in terms of reputation, relationship building for productive collaboration

Case	Outcomes (value description)
Cross-Govt agencies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Shared independently branded web site offering consistent guidance to the public sector (tangible) 2. Demonstration of partnership working in action (reputation building) 3. Trusting organizational relationships for other activities outside the collaboration (relationship building)
Govt policy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Decision reached about how to implement a government policy decision (tangible) 2. Better relationships established between the key players (relationship building). 3. Learning about how to collaborate with partners in general capability building)
UK learning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Co-creation of practitioner guidance on specific KM issues through collaborative research (tangible) 2. Exposure to practical approaches from workshops and other events (operational value) 3. Challenges to thinking through exposure to new ideas (individual capacity building) 4. Way for isolated professionals to compare practices with those of other organizations (affirmation) 5. Professional networking for benefits outside the collaboration (relationship building)
Local Govt CoP	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Learning from others facing similar challenges (operational value) 2. Comparison of practices with those of other organizations (affirmation) 3. Development of subject specific knowledge (individual capacity building)
Int. Govt agencies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Learning from a peer organization facing similar challenges (operational value and capability building) 2. Established relationships at all levels in the organization for ongoing benefit (relationship building) 3. Comparison of practices with a similar organization (affirmation)
Private learning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Opportunity for isolated professionals to compare practices with a similar organization (affirmation) 2. Professional networking for benefits outside the collaboration (relationship building)
US learning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Trusting relationships to solve long-term difficult problems together (capability building and relationship building) 2. Generation of practical insights from workshops and other events (operational value) 3. Challenges to thinking through exposure to new ideas (individual capacity building)

Table II.
Value derived from each collaboration

elsewhere and deeper thinking about issues together. Organizational capability building was mainly evident in terms of learning how to collaborate externally more effectively. However, the tight two-way peer-to-peer collaboration of Int. Govt agencies seemed to result in other forms of organizational capability building – in particular, broader influences on policy and specific strategies were reported. Similarly, the long-term investments in relationship building in US learning seemed to be starting to bear fruit with some evidence of capability building, though tensions were also expressed in terms of needing to balance this with operationally valued outcomes. Even here though, the additional valued outcome of individual capacity building was more evident. Interviewees in Local Govt communities of practice (CoP) and UK learning also commented that these collaborations provided a vehicle for building the knowledge base and capacity of individuals.

The dynamics of the inter-organizational collaboration. Practices that sustained the relationships between participants in the collaboration and managed the dynamics of their interactions are summarised in Table III.

5. Discussion

Multiple forms of value were clearly being derived from these inter-organizational learning-based collaborations. Learning relevant to operational activities, tangible deliverables generated together, and individual and organizational relationship building for other purposes were all evident. However, there was limited evidence of subject-specific organizational capability building. The subject-specific knowledge of individuals representing their organizations was enhanced, but not of their organizations to any significant extent, other than for organizations participating in

Inter-organizational dynamics element	Identified practices
Systems and processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Full/part time collaboration manager Subject knowledgeable, skilled facilitators A knowledgeable person capturing and distributing collaboration generated content as artefacts Regular “rhythm” of activities and events Loose agenda at events creating space for people to raise issues and discuss emergent topics
Social ties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Technology used to support collaboration Social time allowed and valued for building personal relationships Appropriate qualifying criteria for participants Continuity of individuals representing their organizations
Trust and risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Neutral venue Skilled facilitation to generate a “safe” environment Working together on something specific Exploring real issues
Power relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limiting of commercial/remit conflicts in selection of collaborators Individuals representing their organizations of a similar seniority Participative design of collaboration activities Efforts to reduce the visibility of differences in power between organizations or individuals

Table III.
Practices that sustain the relationships between organizations in the collaborations

Int. Govt agencies and US learning. The capability building that was evident was in relation to learning about collaborative and partnership working itself.

The knowledge and alliance literature argues that at an organizational level, loose inter-organizational alliances mainly support information and explicit knowledge exchange (Mariotti and Delbridge, 2001; Reid *et al.*, 2001; McKenzie and van Winkelen, 2004). Yet, in contrast to this, within an organization, communities offer a vehicle for the exchange of meaningful and more complex knowledge, including tacit knowledge (Wenger, 1998). To understand how a multi-organization collaborative network may generate meaningful learning as the basis for long-term capability building, it is necessary to look at the individuals involved separately to the organizations they represent and view them as participating in something closer conceptually to an organizational community of practice. Several of the learning collaborations studied here deliberately set out to invest in building the social capital (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Adler and Kwon, 2002) that allows the individuals involved to establish trusting relationships, and therefore to potentially exchange and develop tacit knowledge (Baumard, 1999; Nonaka and Konno, 1998), thus learning and building their capacity to act in the future. However, as these relationships are between the individuals involved, they do not necessarily lead to sustained capability building at an organization level without further transfer and amplifying mechanisms being in place.

This research provides some insights into the factors that both support and limit organizational capability building. This can be viewed in terms of the effectiveness of the feedback and feed-forward processes between the inter-organizational collaboration and the individual and organizational levels of the overall learning system. At the organizational level, the main limitation can be described in terms of realised absorption capacity (Zahra and George, 2002). This is the organization's capacity to leverage the knowledge that has been recognised as important and brought to the organization – in this case by the individuals representing the organizations in these learning collaborations. Reflection is necessary for conversion of information to knowledge through learning. The informal mechanisms mainly evident in the organizations studied may mean that it is indeed more valuable knowledge, rather than just information, that is transferred because of the conscious effort of individuals needed to identify potentially useful material and follow through on its transfer (Powell, 1998). However, with only opportunistic, unstructured and *ad hoc* approaches and no further amplification mechanisms available, there is an inherent limit on the learning efficiency and, thus, on long-term subject-related capability building. To capture and internalise knowledge obtained through an alliance – effectively to build capability – a firm needs an alliance learning capability (Parise and Henderson, 2001). The fact that a number of the participants explicitly valued the learning collaborations as mechanisms to learn about collaboration and partnership working suggests that over time a more strategic perspective on integrating external learning with internal collaborative mechanisms could evolve.

The cases suggest that the individuals representing their organizations have a pivotal role to play. Their subject specific knowledge is the basis of the organization's potential absorption capacity (Zahra and George, 2002) – they are responsible for recognising the value of knowledge from the inter-organizational collaboration and acquiring it on behalf of the organization. However, it was clear that not all individuals

saw their participation in these terms. One interviewee summarised the position saying it relies on “personal effort to think about the implications”. Although the importance of sophisticated knowledge sharing behavioural competencies was recognised, the self-report data collection method means that this research cannot tell the extent to which these are actually demonstrated in practice. It was evident that not all participant interviewees viewed their role as that of an envoy for learning and knowledge transfer back to their organizations. Activity theory explicitly emphasises the role played by individuals in initiating and nurturing change (Engestrom and Kerosuo, 2007) and this suggests that giving permission, emphasising the remit, or giving responsibility to individuals (whichever has the closest match with the organizational paradigm) needs to be part of increasing the value generated for the organization from the individual’s participation in the inter-organizational collaborations.

Where organizational capability building was evident, the involvement of senior leaders seemed to bring a long-term perspective, sustain the allocation of resources and clarify the expectations from participating. In Int. Govt agencies, Directors of the two organizations initiated the collaboration and then formally endorsed it at a visible inaugural event. This effectively gave permission for the sustained commitment of resources to the learning process, for example through secondments and staff exchanges. In US learning, senior individuals with roles equivalent to Chief Learning Officer committed their own time to engaging in ongoing conversations about complex and challenging issues, despite uncertain outcomes.

In terms of the inter-organizational collaborations themselves, it is clear that they should not be treated as static entities (Estivaleta *et al.*, 2008). As the relationships mature, individual capacity develops and organizational interests evolve. The skill of those convening the inter-organizational learning collaborations rests in their ability to identify and assess discrepancies between the outcomes desired by the participants and the mechanisms and processes being used to support the collaboration (Kumar and Nti, 1998). Skilled subject-knowledgeable facilitation of all the learning collaborations studied was evident. This clearly provided the opportunities for relationship building between the participants. Avoiding complacency and continuing to emphasise the partnership role of all involved in ensuring the success of the collaboration was also important. The convenor of Local Govt CoP described himself as “an inquisitive member of the community” and “a member with a few more responsibilities” trying not to have “an overwhelming presence”. This is perhaps a useful perspective to adopt in convening a learning-based collaboration.

6. Conclusions

This research has studied inter-organizational collaborations in which learning is an explicit objective. Multiple forms of value were evidently being generated from the collaborations (individual capacity building, operational value, affirmation, reputation and relationship building and learning about how to collaborate more effectively), though subject specific organizational capability building was rarely achieved. This was because of two main factors: individuals not translating the implications of the learning back to their organization, and the organizations not having systems and processes to transfer and amplify the learning that was brought back. Zahra and George’s (2002) potential and realised absorption capacity describe these two factors conceptually and this conclusion is in line with Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2008).

Where capability building was achieved, there was visible long-term commitment to the collaboration by senior leaders in the collaborating organizations. The research model which acted as a framework for this study (Figure 3) identified intra-organizational collaboration capability as an important organizational factor shaping the context for value delivery from participating in the collaboration. However, it did not specifically identify the importance of committed leadership alongside this. The research model factors need to be amended to make this an explicit consideration in future research.

This research suggests that deriving value may be more likely by adopting an holistic approach encompassing the following as a coherent set of actions:

- (1) Selecting individuals to represent the organization who demonstrate effective knowledge sharing behaviours and making clear that their remit in participating includes transferring learning back into the organization.
- (2) When committed, skilled and open-minded individuals have been identified to represent the organization, ensuring that senior management commitment to the collaboration is in place to allow them to stay involved as long as possible to build social capital and effective trusting relationships within the collaboration so more meaningful knowledge can be shared.
- (3) Improving internal collaboration mechanisms and identifying ways of joining these up with the learning from the external collaborations.
- (4) The leadership of the organization positively acknowledging that collaboration is used to achieve something difficult that an organization cannot do on its own. It takes time, effort and commitment to build capability. Success on the journey is likely to happen through other forms of value generation such as operational and affirmation value, reputation and relationship building.

Learning how to derive value from participating in an inter-organizational learning collaboration is an organizational capability in itself (included in Eisenhardt and Martin's (2000) dynamic capability of alliancing) and this set of actions could be viewed as the basis for developing this capability. Further research is needed to confirm the relative importance of each element.

There seems to be a sophisticated understanding of how to convene and run learning-based inter-organizational collaborations that have the potential of delivering multiple forms of value through enabling effective relationships to be established between the participants. Creating a collaborative "ambiance" to build trusting relationships and create a shared identity within the collaboration is needed if more complex issues are to be addressed. This requires skilled, subject knowledgeable facilitators capable of selecting and using appropriate tools and techniques to support the collaboration. Both convenors and participants do need to see the collaborations as dynamically evolving entities and adjust the kinds of activities they undertake together appropriately. Applying the principles learnt from studies of the evolution of intra-organizational communities of practice (Wenger *et al.*, 2002) may be a good starting point for this and further research in this area is recommended. However, the main recommendation for future research is to explore how to develop practical strategies and tactics to "join up" participation in external learning-based collaborations with internal collaboration initiatives.

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