

Work-in-progress paper (Condensed; 5-8 pages)
**How do managers mobilize others towards a circular economy:
From activities to sustainability practices and tools**

Keywords: network mobilization activities, practices, tools, internal network, sustainability

Special Track: Sustainability in the networked economy

ABSTRACT

This paper adopts an IMP perspective to develop a framework of relevant management activities involved in mobilizing, involving and relating to significant others. Our research context has been inspired by two provisional comparative case studies (which are ongoing). One firm is involved in the development a digital energy system in the construction of a “smart chicken factory” which requires coordination with multi technology partners, from sensors and solar equipment to digital platforms. The digital energy system has the capability to measure and balance energy consumption patterns in this factory concept that is expected to serve as a model for the future to create positive environmental impacts. The other firm is involved in the development and installation of an “intelligent battery storage” connected to an offshore wind farm. The innovative aspects of this intelligent battery storage lie in its software solution with the possibility to teach the battery when to hold back and store electricity, and when to send power to the grid. Based on a literature review, we suggest that that relevant management activities for mobilizing others in extensive networks could be differentiated into externally oriented and internally oriented or hybrid ones. This paper is work-in-progress and in this version, we try to develop a preliminary framework to guide our ongoing empirical investigations to identify sustainability practices and tools for mobilizing others towards a circular economy. Results of this research are expected to provide a deeper picture of the “how” of business collaboration, often deemed as the Achilles’ heel in the building blocks towards the circular economy, and to increase the awareness of the importance of developing the internal network to match the scale and variety of the external network, especially in light of digital technologies and platforms in extensive networks. Results of this research can also be expected to inspire the development and dissemination of managerial tools relevant for mobilizing others, including peripheral actors in the surrounding network.

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Circular economy thinking is not new and has been acknowledged to be one of the few viable and scalable growth models that is ripe for widespread adoption (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2015; Accenture, 2014). In this paper, we used circular economy thinking and approaches to focus on the power of businesses to expand their ability to collaborate with partners to create positive environmental impacts. Circular economy approaches tend to involve extensive networks, yet the “how” of business collaboration, one of the important building blocks to make the transition towards a circular economy, is also its Achilles’ heel (Kraaijenhagen et al., 2016). In particular, practical support is lacking for this building block of collaboration (Kraaijenhagen et al., 2016). This should provide a lot of drive for IMP researchers to contribute with ideas and knowledge to companies facing the sustainable business challenge. With the interest to develop the managerial side of IMP studies, this paper aims to develop a framework of relevant management activities involved in mobilizing, involving and relating to significant others.

Business collaboration has long been investigated by IMP studies, where one effort is directed to the daily work in mobilizing direct and indirect actors, as part of achieving change in the surrounding network (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995, 2017; Johansson and Mattson, 1992). Furthermore, the debate on manageability continues at the surrounding network or “ecosystem” level in light of digital technologies and

platforms, where ecosystem is not a term to be used loosely because important peripheral actors can exert considerable influence (Möller and Halinen, 2017; Aarikka-Stenroos and Ritala, 2017). Concomitantly, researchers are also increasingly pointing out that actors in the company's internal network should not be conveniently assumed away, building on IMP studies that have emphasized that the internal network should not be relegated to lesser importance than the external network (Ritter et al., 2004; Zolkiewski et al. 2007; Öberg, 2010).

Since scholars increasingly highlight the importance of *approaching strategy as something people do* (Whittington, 1996; Golsorghi et al. 2010), we approach mobilization activities with a practice lens, building on existing studies that have combined ideas from the IMP approach and the Strategy-as-Practice (SaP) perspective (Laari-Salmela et al., 2018; Cheng and Havenvid, 2017; Cheng and Harrison, 2014; Harrison et al., 2010). We do so by drawing on the understanding of a variety of *network management activities* in the IMP literature (Tikkanen and Halinen, 2003; Harrison and Prenekert. 2009; Aaboen et al. 2013; Aarikka-Stenroos et al. 2017) and several *network mobilizer* models (Mouzas and Naudé, 2007; Lundgren, 1992, Ritala and Salmi, 2010). We argue that not enough attention has been paid to the activities through which focal firms operate at the intersection of the internal and external networks (Hillebrand and Biemans, 2003; Cheng and Harrison, 2014; Håkansson and Ford, 2016; Laari-Salmela et al. 2018). This is important, if we are interested to develop the managerial side of IMP studies.

Because firms need to consider the surrounding network when mobilizing others in circular economy approaches, the internal network becomes even more significant as another "layer" of the ecosystem. That is to say, in addition to the direct actors in a company's most important relationships and the indirect actors connected to such relationships, important peripheral actors can bring very different orientations and goals to the network, ranging from societal, regional and local development aims, than the more specific aims sought by the focal, direct and indirect business actors (Aarikka-Stenroos and Ritala, 2017). It then follows that preparing the internal network and developing internal routines and processes become even more important to handle the variety and scale of external variation (Håkansson and Ford, 2016). This makes mobilization activities more complex and may call for new practices and tools to support the managerial sense making and visioning in networks (Van Bockhaven and Matthyssens, 2017). The purpose of this paper is to develop a framework of relevant management activities involved in mobilizing, involving and relating to significant others by not bracketing away the importance of the actors in the internal network, given that peripheral actors in the ecosystem layer becomes an increasing consideration.

In this paper, we ask the following research question: *Which types of management activities have been conceptualized for mobilizing direct, indirect and peripheral actors in extensive networks?* Addressing this research question would pave the way for further empirical studies interested to identify and uncover more management activities relevant for network mobilization, both externally oriented and internally oriented ones.

Network mobilizing has been defined as committing partners by sharing visions or goals and allocating resources to the relationships, and refers to those interactions that influence the development of relationships and networks (Tikkanen and Halinen, 2003). Based on a literature study focused on extensive networks, Aarikka-Stenroos et al. (2017) offers a comprehensive outline of six management activities comprising resourcing, goal setting, coordinating, motivating, controlling and consolidating. These management activities are also interlinked, and are portrayed to show how actor diversity in an extensive network can both support and complicate management.

Other studies also shed more light of the kind of network mobilization activities managers engage in in their day-to-day activity. Mouzas and Naudé (2007) presents a model of a stratified reality of network mobilization comprising a dynamic interplay of five challenges. These challenges involve developing network insight, introducing new business propositions, concluding the deal, developing the social contract of how to work together in practice, and achieving sustained mobilization. Not meant to convey a linear process of network mobilizing, the model also hints that there is a continuous struggle by organizations to increase their

internal efficiency and exploit new opportunities in their surrounding network (Mouzas and Naudé, 2007). What Mouzas and Naudé (2007) are also emphasizing is that internal efficiency is a key aspect of network mobilization.

Inspired by the approach to strategy as something people do but in a network context, additional studies also shed light on a more balanced approach towards managing in the external network and managing internal efficiency. Embedded in a network of ongoing relationships that both enable and constrain its performance, the firm itself can be conceptualized as a complex network of internal relationships among people, departments and functional units that form the basis of its ability to develop and implement its strategies (Ritter et al. 2004). In fact, in an overview of network management tasks, Ritter et al. (2004) suggest that network management involves marrying the external network of relationships to and via the internal network of relationships, thus stressing the interplay between inter-organizational relationships and intra-organizational cross-departmental relationships. An integrated internal communication structure is an important part for the development of a firm's networking ability (Ritter and Gemünden, 2003) and this is especially so with increasing complexity of interaction in extensive networks. In addition, Håkansson and Ford (2016) propose that as interaction thickens, managers not only have to develop internal routines to gather information on changes in continuing counterparts, but also require a whole set of internal managers be involved in the development of relationship practices in order to find possible coordination possibilities with other important relationships.

In other words, not only is the level of relationship complexity directly proportional to internal coordination, the level of internal efficiency must also be commensurate with the extensiveness of networks to be managed. Operating in extensive networks with increasing actor diversity therefore requires more sophisticated internal network management. Baraldi (2008) cautions that the strategic centre cannot be "hollow" because the external network cannot compensate for the gaping weakness of unprepared firms. Studies concerned with the internal and external cooperation have suggested different tools and mechanisms. Håkansson and Lind (2004) discusses an appropriate accounting system as part of the design of the internal network to coordinate priorities in relating to external counterparts. In addition, CRM systems have also been investigated as an intra-organizational resource in aligning the knowledge of the internal network while managing in relationships and networks (Perna and Baraldi, 2014).

In addition to six mentioned management activities, Aarikka-Stenroos et al. (2017) also propose leveraging as an emergent management activity to refer to intentionally preparing actors in every layer of the network. Arguably, leveraging would also apply to actors in the internal network, if they are considered an important "layer" of the network. It seems possible to scrutinize management activities for mobilization by their orientation towards the external network or the internal network or both. [Figure 1](#) shows that network management activities for mobilizing others in extensive networks could be differentiated into externally oriented and internally oriented or hybrid ones.

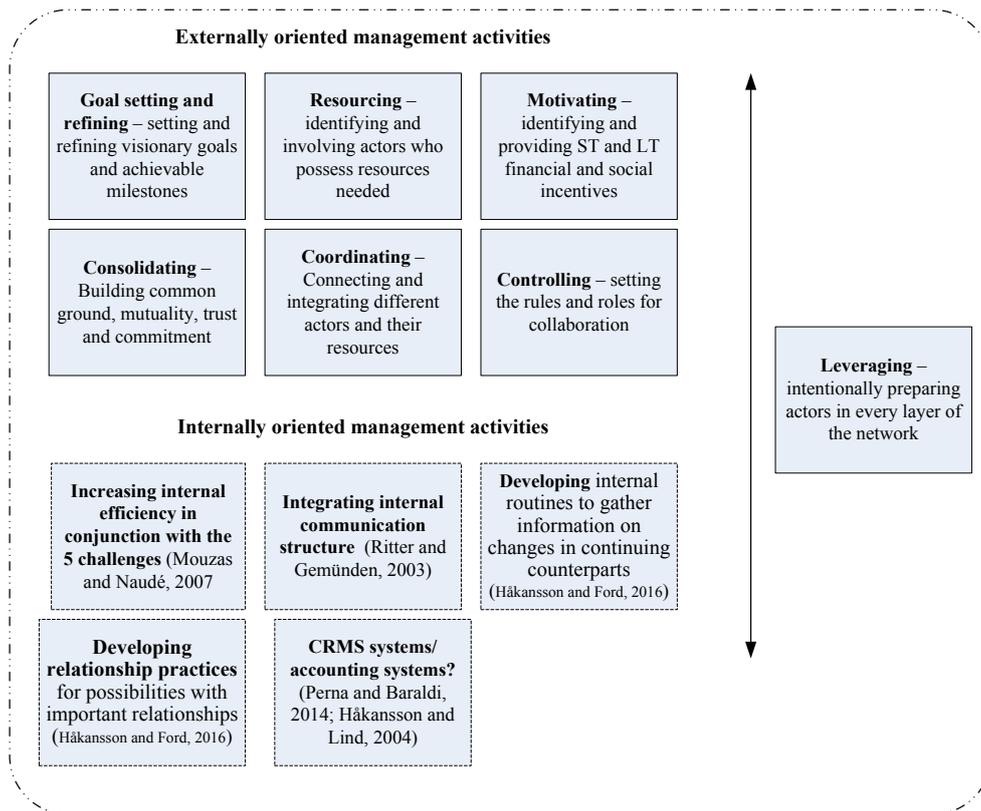


Figure 1 Externally and internally oriented management activities relevant for network mobilization (building on Aarikka-Stenroos et al. 2017)

That network mobilization management activities have tended to be oriented externally is understandable. It is often difficult to make useful abstractions of reality that capture both the complexity within organizations as well as the complexity of the environment, as suggested by Axelsson (1982). However, given the managerial reality of managing in extensive networks in circular economy approaches, and to develop the managerial side of IMP studies, research needs to foreground the significance of the internal network.

METHODS AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

The case studies are ongoing, and are based on qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews and archival data in terms of conferences, reports and newspaper articles to map out the relevant network management activities and to identify the relevant practices and tools. The SaP methodological arsenal (such as Balogun et al. 2003) is very helpful to offer compatible approaches when trying to capture activities and traces of interaction. Furthermore, storytelling techniques (Bates, 2004) can be particularly valuable to gain access to the everyday language of participants and where participants may have difficulty responding to lines of questioning concerning relationships and network mobilization.

PROVISIONAL COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES

Background

The energy sector is facing tremendous restructuring changes representing great possibilities for value creation. In mid Norway, as part of this energy transition, there has been a surge of interest to develop renewable energy sources. The renewable industry is part of an international area of growth and a foundation for the green shift to mitigate the climate challenges the world is facing. However, the volatile renewable energies pose significant challenges for pricing and require the development of modern storage systems.

Furthermore, from a consumption point of view, more intelligent designs are needed to measure and balance energy consumption patterns especially in office buildings and factories in order to balance the grid more efficiently. Energy flexibility is the “new currency” of the future energy world. Getting energy consumption, production and procurement organized will be highly important in the years to come.

Two comparative cases on Digital Energy Solutions

In Trondheim, Norway, an industrial cluster focusing on renewable energy was established in 2018 as part of the Norwegian Innovation Clusters. The two case studies that we are focusing on for this paper are based on companies that are a part of this cluster.

Case 1: Smart chicken factory (Intelligent energy management in buildings and industry)

In response to the rising demand for high-quality poultry products, Norsk Kylling, owned by Rema 1000, is planning to build a whole new poultry processing plant in Orkanger, Norway. The plant will be innovative in energy use and will be the start of an industrial cluster in the area with a total investment of €185 million. Norsk Kylling has undergone a major transformation and their business has become far more sustainable in recent years to deliver top quality products to customers across Norway. Animal welfare has been given the highest priority, focusing on expertise and investments in operation and technology for high animal welfare.

In this new factory, Norsk Kylling is aiming for a world-class energy and sustainability concept, including having the ability to trace the carbon footprint per chicken. To achieve this, they are in the process of developing an intelligent system for the surveillance and control of energy together with the energy company Trønderenergi and a start-up company called Green Business Solutions (GBS). The platform and measuring equipment (e.g. sensors to get an overview of the temperatures in large parts of the plant) is delivered by GBS. Trønderenergi’s contribution in this project lies within their vast knowledge about the power market and renewable energy and they have also strong competences in machine learning and artificial intelligence (AI). The idea is that the digital energy system can also be applied for other buildings and industries (such as aquaculture) in the future. The digital energy solution had a finished demo version in December 2018 and the first product should be ready in April 2019. For the poultry processing plant, the plan is to get the machinery and equipment delivered through 2020 toward planned start-up of the factory in 2021. The direct, indirect and peripheral actors relevant for Trønderenergi are depicted in [Figure 2](#).

Case 2: Intelligent battery storage (Floating offshore floating wind farm)

The large Norwegian energy company Equinor has recently installed is the world’s first floating offshore wind farm (Hywind) just outside of Scotland, powering about 20,000 households with renewable energy. This pilot wind farm is an integrated wind power and energy storage power plant where wind turbines in combination with battery energy storage have the potential to mitigate the intermittency of wind and optimize the plant output. This storage solution project, named Batwind, is the result of a cooperative project between Equinor and renewable firm Masdar in Abu Dhabi (global leader in renewable energy). The wind farm is located 25 kilometers off the coast of the city Peterhead, and the electricity produced will be transported via cables to an onshore substation where 1 MW batteries are placed and connected to the grid. This makes it possible to store the power in so-called “energy warehouses” when it is windy and release it when most needed and valuable in the market and thereby delivering a reliable stream of energy.

While there are many energy storage products and solutions in the market, the battery software solutions are less developed. The innovative aspects of the Batwind solution lies within digitalization and the possibility to teach the battery when to hold back and store electricity, and when to send power to the grid, this increasing the value of power. The algorithms related to this are developed by Equinor and Masdar and are built on multiple data sources including weather forecasts, market prices, maintenance schedules, consumption patterns and grid services. The German-American company, Younicos, designed and supplied the intelligent YQ software, which ensures that the battery ‘learns’ the optimal storage conditions. The

software tells the battery when to store electricity and for how long, and when and how much to inject back into the grid. The direct, indirect and peripheral actors relevant for Equinor and Masdar are depicted in Figure 2.

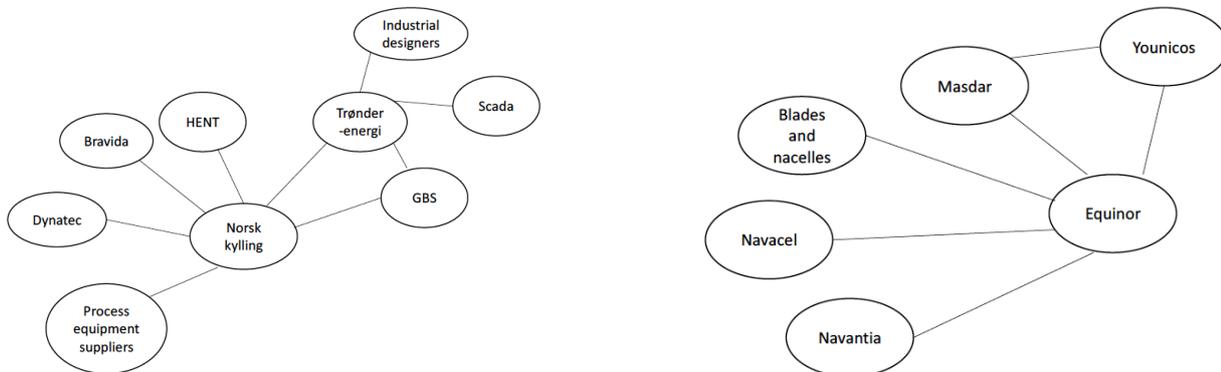


Figure 2 Overview of direct, indirect and peripheral actors in the smart chicken factory case and the intelligent battery storage case

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Mobilizing others requires continuous attempts to engage in multiple management activities simultaneously in the external network and the internal network. In these activities, there is a propensity for managers to use tools and practices to develop relationships, to facilitate interaction, not only for the external network, but in the internal network as well. Further empirical work can extend the preliminary framework presented in Figure 1. Most of the managers involved in developing the relationships between customers and suppliers are in middle-management positions. In line with the recent research interest on strategy which has taken a practical stance (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007), focusing on who to involve in strategy, what to do in strategizing activity, and which strategizing methodologies to use in order to guide the strategizing activities, further empirical work can identify the practices and tools embedded in these activities. Practices mean shared understandings, cultural rules, languages and procedures, and can refer to shared routines of behaviour, including traditions, norms and procedures for thinking, acting and using ‘things’ in the work of strategy (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). Focusing on their practices in involving direct and indirect actors as well as the peripheral actors in the surrounding network in the two cases would provide a deeper picture of the “how” of business collaboration. This would also be building on IMP strategizing studies that have started to draw ideas from SaP (Harrison, 2007; Harrison and Prektert, 2009; Harrison et al., 2010; La Rocca and Perna, 2014; Cheng and Havensvid, 2017; Nyström et al., 2017).

Researching interaction processes in business relationships is challenging as they leave little traces and are never-ending, making them difficult to access and to record. Focusing on activities which in turn can lead us to the uses of practices and tools can help to overcome some of these challenges. In this paper, a preliminary framework has been developed which enables researchers to approach practices and tools relevant for network mobilization activities to produce a clearer picture of the interactive phenomena underlying the business world. A relevant question further down the road would be: How do managers use practices and tools to involve important actors in the internal network and peripheral actors in the surrounding network?

Results of the research are expected to be significant in at least two ways. First, analyzing network mobilization activities from a practice perspective can shed light on the nuances in terms of the *patterns and combination of strategizing practices* than previously conceived in the literature. Second, analyzing network mobilization activities with a practice lens can provide insights for the closely adjacent topic on the *development and dissemination of IMP tools* (Cheng and Holmen, 2015; Brennan and Turnbull, 2002). The topic of tools is an important but neglected pillar in IMP research with the exception of a handful of studies (Möller and Halinen, 1999; Ford and Håkansson, 2006; Abrahamsen et al., 2016; Cheng and Havensvid, 2017;

Hannu and Tidström, 2018). Beyond IMP, there has been calls to develop *strategy tools* to support shared strategy work in ecosystems, networks or dyadic strategic relationships (Vuorinen et al. 2018; “Retooling business relationships”, 2017). Results of this research can also be seen as an effort by IMP research to reach out to complementary research in B2B. It is not unimaginable that “relationship and networking strategy tools” (Cheng, 2018) can be considered particularly poised to address practitioners’ call for the need for state-of-the-art strategy tools to be better prepared as they increasingly recognize and operate in extensive networks.

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