

# MNC SENSEMAKING OF GLOBAL KEY CUSTOMERS

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Abstract:

The present day MNCs are network organizations that consist of multiple internal relationships and networks involving different units, actors and organizational levels. Identifying the key customers in the MNCs is an important strategic decision. Still, defining the global key customers at the corporate level is problematic, since different organizational and geographical units may perceive different customers more important than others; thus, the emerging question in this multinational context is who the customer actually is? The present study contributes to the understanding of industrial customer-supplier relationships through the analysis of individual level sensemaking processes within the internal MNC network in relation to the organizational level key customers. MNC sensemaking of its global customer relationships consists of sensemaking by multiple individuals interacting with customer during the history of the relationship. This research conceptualizes sensemaking by describing the different types of it. The contribution to key account management literature in this research is created by showing the role of key account manager as a primary sensemaker and combiner of the different sensemade views of the customer relationship.

Keywords: Customer relationships, sensemaking, MNC, internal network

## INTRODUCTION

The present day MNCs are network organizations that consist of multiple internal relationships and networks involving different units, actors and organizational levels. In this setting identifying the key customers of the MNCs is an important, but challenging strategic decision (Wilson, Weilbaker 2004). Defining the global key customers at the corporate level is problematic, since different organizational and geographical units may perceive different customers more important than others. MNC's relationships are strongly embedded into both global and local environments, where different units are located in geographically distant places and multitude of technologically diversified products is developed within a single multinational. The emerging question in this multinational context is, thus, who the customer actually is. The question becomes even more complex in dynamic environments in which the manager's need to plan for the future (see Möller 2010).

This study focuses on the MNC's internal network in relation to its key customer relationships. In this setting the processes of sensemaking by single individuals are the key to understand the organizational customer relationships. Different organizational levels affect and restrict the ways how customer is seen and how individuals at those levels can make sense of the customer (see e.g. Henneberg, Naudé & Mouzas 2010). The managers get into complex processes of sensemaking in a business network context to understand their own position, as well as their available options for change (Henneberg, Naudé & Mouzas 2010). Managing in this context is a question of making sense of the network environment, understanding ways to influence others sensemaking and through that shaping the network and the behaviors in it (Möller 2010).

Sensemaking has been defined previously (Weick 1995, 4-5) as structuring the unknown, which enables individuals to comprehend, understand, explain, attribute and predict events and actions. In the present study, sensemaking is seen both as an individual and organizational level activity (Weick 1995, 5-6), where circumstances are turned into a situation that is comprehended in words and stimulates action (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld 2005). It is about continuous refining of an emerging story (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld 2005, Näslund, Perner 2012). In MNCs, individuals create "stories" to better understand the global customers. These stories do not represent the whole truth, but over time, they might describe the relationship with customers quite accurately. Still, one particular story might fit better the view of one group than of another.

Global customer relationships cross national borders and the interactions within them involve actors from different national networks. Furthermore, the customer relationships under examination in this research involve the episodic and discontinuous project level which is intertwined with the more continuous organizational level relationship. As multiple business units are involved with one customer, the functioning of the whole organization becomes important for consistent communications and relationship development. In order to realize this, MNC needs to make sense of its global customer relationships at the corporate level. The main research question in this study is: *How a MNC makes sense of its global customer relationships?*

The present study contributes to the understanding of industrial customer-supplier relationships through the analysis of individual level sensemaking processes within the internal MNC network in relation to the organizational level key customers. The study starts with depicting the MNC as an internal network, It then brings in core concepts from the primarily IMP based research emphasizing customer relationships as the most important resources that a company has (e.g.

Dwyer, Schurr & Oh 1987, Ritter, Wilkinson & Johnston 2004) and seeing the relationship development and management as the key competence of the firms (Ritter, Wilkinson & Johnston 2004, Möller, Halinen 1999, Wilson 1995), Young and Javalgi (2007). Customer relationships and their development have been researched in significant amounts in the IMP tradition, but sensemaking has only recently received attention in IMP literature. Overall, the study of the individual's acting in the MNC internal networks in relation to their global customers is limited. Therefore, the initial theoretical framework is elaborated and the sensemaking processes uncovered through an in-depth empirical study of three key customer relationships in a project business MNC. The study reveals the complex interplay of the individual, unit and corporate level acting in relation to both project and relationship development, where the individuals in different units of the supplier MNC make sense of the same global customers.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### MNC as internal network

The network perspective was first applied to the MNC context by Swedish scholars in the mid-1980s and their view was inspired with IMP theories (Piekkari, Welch 2010). Forsgren (2008) has labeled this tradition as business network perspective. Business network theory focuses on the network of business relationships in which the business actor is embedded (Forsgren 2008, 108). When contemplating MNC from business network theory, a fundamental characteristic according to Forsgren (2008, 121-122) is that headquarters is outsider in subsidiary's network and considered to be one player among several in the organization.

Business network is a complex web of interdependent relationships, within which individuals are embedded and operating (Henneberg, Naudé & Mouzas 2010, Forsgren 2008, 108). The previous literature (e.g. Andersson *et al.* 2002) has studied subsidiaries in relation to business network theories and focused on the external networks of subsidiaries, their embeddedness into local environment and effect on the overall functioning of the MNC or on internal competition or charters in MNC (Dörrenbächer, Gammelgaard 2010). In the network perspective, the subsidiary is seen as a quasi-autonomous entity within a differentiated system (Manev 2003). Each subsidiary is embedded in its own network of relationships, which may differ from the networks of other subsidiaries (Forsgren 2008, 123). Thus, there might be a struggle between headquarters and subsidiaries as well as between different subsidiaries. Still, different internal units are dependent on each other and there is a need for coordination and integration of activities. Therefore, the network-based MNC relies heavily on both vertical (i.e., headquarters–subsidiary) and lateral (i.e., subsidiary–subsidiary) connections (Manev 2003). The subsidiaries external networks are important for overall view of the MNC networks but the focus of the present study is on the internal network and processes of MNC.

Ritter, Wilkinson and Johnston (2004) note that it's important to consider also intra-firm relations and thus extend the current network view to include also internal network. And thus, bearing in mind the multinational and dispersed nature of MNCs, it is natural to discuss also about MNC's internal network. For example Ritter and Gemünden (2003) discuss multinationals as networks of quite independent players as they resemble more hierarchical networks than organizations. According to Ritter, Wilkinson and Johnston (2004) organization is “embedded in

a network of ongoing business and nonbusiness relationships, which both enable and constrain its performance” and can thus be defined as a “corporate network” (see Holm, Sharma 2006). Large multinational corporations have been perceived as networks of quite independent players (see Ritter, Gemünden 2003) or been depicted by having “markets” inside them (Forsgren 2008, 121). In addition, MNC has been conceptualized as differentiated networks that in turn are embedded in external networks (Nell, Ambos & Schlegelmilch 2011, Andersson, Forsgren & Holm 2002). Manev (2003) states, that MNC must be internally organized as a differentiated network, in which resources are distributed through internal relationships.

MNC in business network theory is less hierarchical than in other research streams (Forsgren 2008, 122) and is viewed as a heterogeneous and loosely coupled organization with focus on external networks such as customer relationships (Piekkari, Welch 2010). Therefore, it has been seen that the major change catalyst in the organization’s internal network is the process of evaluating and managing important customer relationships (Campbell 2003). This can be taken further by asking how we understand the role and position of customer relationship in relation to organization’s internal network.

### Sensemaking in MNC

In the changing world MNCs, as well as all the other organizations, need to understand – or make sense of – the market and the changes happening in there, in order to be successful. Sensemaking activities are especially critical in dynamic environments, “where the need to create and maintain coherent understandings that sustain relationships and enable collective action is especially important” (Maitlis 2005).

Sensemaking literature has been heavily affected by the work of Weick (1995), who has divided sensemaking in organizations into seven properties. This division is useful when describing the sensemaking process in MNC, where individuals frequently find themselves facing novel circumstances with dynamic complexity (Colville, Brown & Pye 2012) and are struggling to make sense of their surroundings. According to Weick’s (1995) classification sensemaking is a process that is 1. grounded in identity construction, which means that sensemaking begins with the sensemaker – an individual, 2. retrospective, meaning people make sense of past events, 3. enactive of sensible environments – so in organizations, people produce a part of the environment they face, 4. social, implying that sensemaking is not only individual level activity, it also involves organizational level, 5. ongoing, it never stops, since people constantly face new situations, 6. focused on and by the extracted cues, which means that sensemaking is dependent on the past meanings and 7. driven by plausibility rather than accuracy, which means that people are looking for interesting, attractive, appealing, plausible definition and the criterion of accuracy is only secondary. Resting on previous Weick’s division, sensemaking can be approached both as organizational and individual level activity. Organizational sensemaking has been defined among others as ongoing process of creating intersubjective sense of shared meanings (Gephart, Topal & Zhang 2010, 284-285) or as collaborative activity used to create and sustain organizational practices (Cunliffe, Coupland 2012).

Organizational sensemaking has been interest of researchers (e.g. Maitlis 2005) because it has been seen as a critical organizational activity. Neill et al. (2007) approaches organizations as sensemaking units and connect the concept to previous research on organizational learning, thus

seeing sensemaking as organizational level activity. Weick et al. (2005) discusses sensemaking by searching an answer to the question “what is the story?”. The answer is searched from the ongoing, unknowable, unpredictable stream of experience. However, sensemaking is seen as a wider term than stories as it refers to the process through which people interpret the world and construct meaning (Weick 2012). Sensemaking is the means by which we enact – make real – our surrounding environment (Cunliffe, Coupland 2012). In connection to customer relationship, this can mean that the history and development of history is created through the actions of participants. Different involved actors interpret the past events in relationships and thus affect the future events. Among others, Maitlis (2005) has approached organizational sensemaking as fundamentally social process where organization members interpret their environment and by interacting with others, constructs meanings of the world they act in. Organizational sensemaking is about meaning and action as well as the interplay between them (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld 2005, Neill, McKee & Rose 2007).

Customer relationships are most often depicted as continuous, but still certain critical events guide the relationship and affect its development. Sensemaking can thus be seen both as episodic as well as continuous, which create interesting tension (Weick 2012) and creates the need to portray sensemaking through both of these visions. This also goes in line with Maitlis (2005) notion that sensemaking can be seen as preceding decision making as well as following it. Also networks are formed by the views of actors involved in them (Ellis, Hopkinson 2010).

In recent IMP literature, sensemaking and network pictures (i.e. views of network held by participants of that network) and relationships have been linked – they have been seen as similar, but not as identical concepts (Colville, Pye 2010 see also *Industrial Marketing Management, Special Issue: Sense-Making and Management in Business Networks*, 2010). Literature in network pictures in IMP tradition has recently received increasing attention (see e.g. Colville, Pye 2010, Leek, Mason 2010, Leek, Mason 2009). Ford and Redwood (2005) use network pictures to make sense of network dynamics thus linking sensemaking and network pictures together. Network picture provides a picture of a company’s position within a network (Leek, Mason 2010). Colville and Pye (2010) propose that network pictures can be seen as “exercises in sensemaking”. Research on network pictures has focused more on drawing actual pictures (even organizational charts) on network in question. Leek and Mason (2010) approached network pictures by focusing on employee perspective on a specific supplier relationship inside a single company. The authors (Leek, Mason 2010) see network pictures may act as a useful sense-making tool for developing and sharing internally relationship information. They see that individual’s network pictures of the relationship could be used in academia to build-up a more comprehensive understanding of various aspects of relationships, such as how the network pictures between individuals involved in the same relationship differ. Organizations attempts to affect the network it is operating in, depends on the organization’s view of the complex interdependencies existing in network, which Ford and Redwood (2005) refer as a “network picture”. Leek and Mason (2010) utilised the concept of network pictures in their research to focus on a relationship between two companies and examine how individuals within one company perceive the relationship. Authors merit here is that they utilized a network level concept to approach a relationship level phenomenon. They also noted the levels of analysis in their research.

Sensemaking is also an individual process (Weick 1995, 5-6, see Näslund, Perner 2012). It happens in organizations when members confront somehow surprising or confusing events,

issues and actions (Maitlis 2005). In sensemaking literature, the basis of managerial action is not the objective view of the world, but rather a world as people understand it to be (Ellis, Hopkinson 2010). Organization has been seen both as socially constructed and as a social construction, where the sensemaking of the members of organizations is in central role (Maitlis 2005, Taylor, Lerner 1996). “For top managers, sensemaking activities such as environmental scanning and issue interpretation are key tasks that significantly influence organizational decisions and strategic change” (Maitlis 2005). Manager’s sensemaking is needed in a world where organizations are facing a bundle of possibilities, but where those possibilities are not in exact and transparent form, instead, they are dispersed and perceived by the managers embedded in their surrounding network (see Mouzas, Henneberg & Naudé 2008). Actors create their own understanding through sensemaking (Möller 2010). Managers that make sense in “business network are able to mobilize other actors and create competitive advantage for their organization that is crucial” (Mouzas, Henneberg & Naudé 2008) for functioning customer relationships.

When individuals are confronted by ambiguous events, they try to make sense of them. As sense develops about the situation, it allows individual to act in some rational fashion – meaning that sensemaking is primary generator of individual action (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld 2005, Drazin, Glynn & Kazanjian 1999). Abrahmsen et al. (2012) focus on actor sensemaking in business network in exploring network dynamics. They see that “actors’ attempts to change their position or role in the network are directed by their subjective sensemaking or perceptions of their surrounding network. Individual’s sensemaking is shaped by interactions with others engaged in similar situations and in multidimensional situations individual seeks out the interpretations of others and through these interactions, group level categorizations emerge (Drazin, Glynn & Kazanjian 1999). Even though shared group-level frames may develop, they can also differ across organization –two actors may share similar experiences, their sensemaking may differ and through that the resulting action (Drazin, Glynn & Kazanjian 1999). Drazin, Glynn and Kazanjian (1999) state that even though sensemaking might not be completely shared in organization, political compromise between opposing groups will nonetheless guide the behavior in organization. Individual sensemaking in MNC is important and this importance can well be seen in relation to customer relationships, since in fractured organization, knowledge about customers is difficult to combine into organization-wide understanding. In network MNC, relevant pieces of customer knowledge are decentralized into multiple local settings and to various individual actors (see Lindkvist 2004). When making sense in this context, one must recognize organization’s dependence on knowledge of individuals and the challenges in integrating and generating knowledge. As Henneberg, Naudé and Mouzas (2010) state “from the IMP perspective, a core requirement to understand any network is to understand the interaction of the parties within the network”.

### Global customer relationships

Taking care of customer relationships is a critical task in organizations and the complexity of this task reflects the complexity of the relationships themselves and the resulting network structures (Ford et al. 2003). Therefore, in MNC context where the identification of customer is not self-evident, it starts from making sense of how MNC and individuals acting in it make sense of these customer relationships. The customer relationships in this context are global and therefore a supplier company needs to address both the local and global needs of the customer. In addition, the supplier company itself has both global, headquarter level needs as well as local, production

unit level needs. In order to respond to increasing customer needs, the supplier company needs to adjust its own organization structure, involve people to the process and strengthen the company's organizational culture (Yip, Madsen 1996).

Relationships are important empirical phenomena that have a considerable impact on business enterprises, but as Håkansson and Snehota (1995, 6, 26) note, the concept of relationship is difficult to define as it cannot be seen merely as a relationship. Instead, the relationship is a result of an interaction process, where multiple connections exist between the parties creating mutual commitment. Therefore the authors see that when researching relationships, one needs to focus on the elements of the relationships and the effects that those connections have. To achieve this, descriptive and explanatory models as well as maps of connections are needed. The concept customer relationship is used to describe the pattern of interactions and behaviors over time between a company and a relationship (Ford et al. 2003, 38). These relationships often are close and long term and may involve a complex pattern of interaction between the two organizations (Håkansson 1982). Relationships are based on repeated interactions, which may cover a wide range of functions, activities and actors in the organization (Holmlund 2004). This means that customer relationships consist of diversified interorganizational contacts, which can involve multiple organizational levels (Holm, Johanson & Thilenius 1995). In supplier organization, usually more than one person is involved in the management of specific customer relationship (Helfert, Vith 1999). Over time, interactions between organizations build up to an interorganizational relationship (Ritter, Gemünden 2003).

In this research (and in relation to the empirical data), customer relationships are found between Supplier Company and Customer A, Supplier Company and Customer B, Supplier Company and Customer C as well as between different organizational levels and units of these organizations. It is seen here that customer relationships consist of different organizational levels and units and the global customer relationship is the relationship between two organizations, consisting on multiple relationships between different subsidiaries, units, organizational levels and individuals. As Håkansson (1982) notes, the international nature of industrial markets indicates that the international dimension of customer relationships needs to be included in research. Another central feature in industrial markets is that they are strongly influenced by the technological features in market. Therefore, the relationships discussed in this research are seen as global relationships centered on technological solutions. These global customer relationships turn to relationship networks due to the complex and intertwined nature of the relationships. These relationship networks can exist already inside one organization, since MNC itself is described as a network as discussed previously.

Relationships have life courses; they emerge and develop or fade away (Hedaa, Törnroos 2008). So to understand these relationships researchers need to consider how and why they develop (Tidström, Hagberg-Andersson 2012). As sensemaking is a retrospective process (see Weick 1995), the history and development of customer relationship affect the way MNC makes sense of each customer relationship in question. Therefore, there is a need to discuss the development process of customer relationships. Development of good working relationships with customers is needed so organization can understand and serve customers' needs as well as co-develop new products and services (Ritter, Wilkinson & Johnston 2004).

Relationships between actors are seen as a basic concept for understanding networks (Hedaa, Törnroos 2008). Some of the recent research (e.g. Hedaa, Törnroos 2008, Tidström, Hagberg-

Andersson 2012, Kamp 2005, Schurr, Hedaa & Geersbro 2008) describes relationships developing through certain events, which take place in relationship network. According to Håkansson (1982) the relationships between supplier and customer organization are dynamic and are affected by the individual episodes which take place within them. Håkansson and Snehota (1995) states that these relationships are a complex knitting of episodes and interactions and relationships are formed from these various episodes and processes, which may be beyond the control of individuals acting in organizations. It is also seen that different episodes in the relationships will affect the technical, knowledge, social, administrative and legal aspects of the relationship and organizations.

It is suggested (Tidström, Hagberg-Andersson 2012, Ford, Håkansson 2006) that researchers should not focus only on current interaction, Instead they should note what precedes the current situation and frames the evolution. Relationships can thus be analyzed through events, which can be connected with each other in the past, present and the future and together influence the development of a relationship (Hedaa, Törnroos 2008, Tidström, Hagberg-Andersson 2012). These events act as engines for relationship change and development as well as change in relationship networks (Hedaa, Törnroos 2008, Kamp 2005, Schurr 2007). Hedaa and Törnroos (2008) in addition state that in practical research detecting and following event-based change processes enables researcher to follow the relationship and network development. Business relationships evolve through different events and actors are key mediators in them; they are creating the events and reacting on them (Hedaa, Törnroos 2008, Tidström, Hagberg-Andersson 2012, Schurr 2007). Events are perceived by actors based on their previous experiences (Arthur 2001), therefore events are socially constructed (Tidström, Hagberg-Andersson 2012, Halinen, Medlin & Törnroos 2012). Outcome of the events, that is the actions in them, depend on how actors have interpreted these events, given meanings to them and how willing the actor is to respond to the stimuli (Hedaa, Törnroos 2008, Halinen, Medlin & Törnroos 2012). These responds to stimuli can be proactive (creating actions and new events), reactive or neglecting with no intention to act (Hedaa, Törnroos 2008)

Companies have always been engaged in exchange relations and some of those relationships can be developed into more close and long-lasting relationships. Both managers and academics have faced the growing need to develop long-term, close relationships with key customers (Guenzi, Georges & Pardo 2009). These relationships have complex inter-firm contact patterns and the contact structures inside organization involve several organizational levels (Holm, Johanson & Thilenius 1995). The mutual interests between parties involved enables over time creating favorable atmosphere to maintain the relationship (Cova, Salle 2000). It is important to recognize that relationships differ and some may require more intensive interaction (Madill, Haines & Riding 2007). The most important customer relationships from supplier perspective are often named as key accounts or in multinational context as global accounts. Global account management looks the customer relationship as one unified entity and thus can be seen more as an organizational level issue.

In business life, the notion of organizations investing more efforts on their most important customer is not new, regardless whether named as key accounts, strategic accounts, national accounts or global accounts. This research chooses to use the concept of global account since it reflects the global nature often encountered in MNCs. Global accounts are multinational customers, who operate internationally, have strategic importance to the supplier, are expected to



be serviced and supplied consistently worldwide (see also Yip, Madsen 1996) and are beginning to buy on coordinated basis or at least select vendors centrally. Global account management is critical task for industrial sales organizations (Madill, Haines & Riding 2007) and some researchers (Cova, Salle 2000) see the company's very existence depends on that. Global account management has multidimensional effects on firm's performance and should be viewed beyond profitability to include such performance dimensions as customer retention, share and revenues (Harvey, Myers & Novicevic 2003). The key individuals involved in managing global customer relationships are global account managers (Madill, Haines & Riding 2007) and the role of these individuals is notable when creating trust in business relationship (Guenzi, Georges & Pardo 2009). Global account manager may have multiple roles both inside own organization and outside of it. Wilson and Weilbaker (2004) identify the roles of political entrepreneur, communicator, team leadership, relationship management, strategic planning, problem solving and internal selling. Global account managers are often boundary-spanners positioned between headquarters customer relationship management personnel and local offices customer relationship management personnel and between the selling company's different activities (Madill, Haines & Riding 2007).

#### MNC sensemaking of global customer relationships

MNC is defined in this research as an internal network, since the nature of multinational organization is more accurately depicted through network of relationships than for example defining it as a hierarchy. Therefore, the customer relationships of MNC are seen to be built through internal network of relationships. These relationships contain multiple levels, organizational units and individuals. In previous literature it is also stated that organizations interact with other organizations through their own internal network of interpersonal and cross-functional relationships (see Ritter, Wilkinson & Johnston 2004).

The customer relationships discussed in this research are long-term and multinational by nature. During the history, companies have been engaged in exchange relations and some of those relationships can be developed into more close and long-lasting relationships. The focus on customer relationships has been seen important both by managers and academics, who have faced the growing need to develop these relationships with key customers (Guenzi, Georges & Pardo 2009). Customer relationships discussed here develop through relationship specific events. Relationships involve repeated interactions, which may cover a wide range of functions, activities and actors in the organization (Holmlund 2004, Helfert, Vith 1999). When focusing on the relationship between supplier and buyer MNC, the relationship is bound to have complex inter-firm contact patterns and these contact structures inside both organizations involve several organizational levels (Holm, Johanson & Thilenius 1995). Events in each relationship as well as actions that individuals take and the meanings they give to the events and actions affect the relationship portfolio as a whole and the competitive success supplier may or may not have in the relationship (see e.g. Ford & McDowell (1999). This is especially true in a more complex context of MNC, where the individual dyadic relationships between supplier and customer representative are more intertwined to each other and together create a dynamic relationship portfolio, which can be seen constituting the interorganizational relationship between organizations. Network perspective is taken as a starting point, since as previous literature (see e.g. Ritter 1999) states, customer relationships are not managed in isolation.

Sensemaking has been defined in previous literature (Weick 1995, 4-5) as structuring the unknown, which enables individuals to comprehend, understand, explain, attribute and predict events and actions. Making sense of the customer relationship enables individuals to better understand the customer and the relationship. In fractured MNC context, individual understandings of the customer relationships are difficult to combine into organization-wide understanding. In organizational level, sensemaking of customer relationships may include procurement, production, synthesis, manipulation and diffusion of information in way, which gives meaning, purpose and direction to the relationship development. In text above, MNC has been described as a context, where the relationship development takes place. The figure below describes the sensemaking in MNC and how it is created.

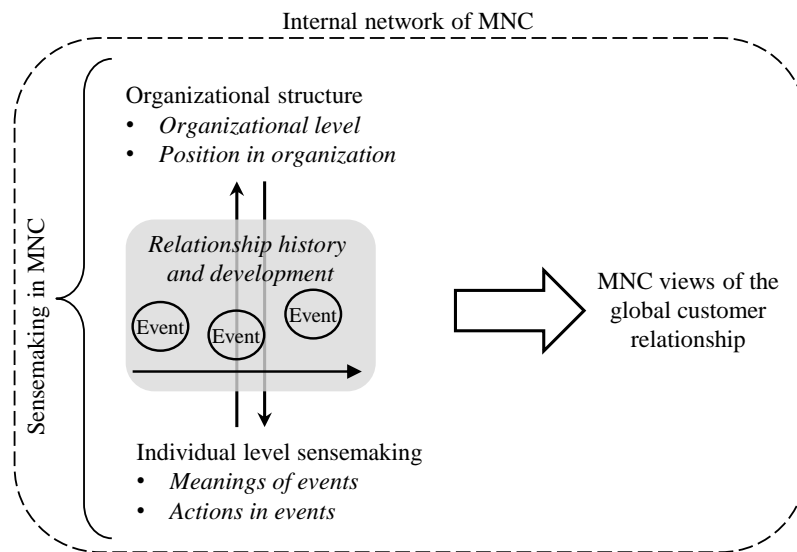


Figure 1. MNC sensemaking of global customer relationships

Sensemaking is based on past experiences (see Weick 1995) and therefore, relationship history and development have a strong effect on how individuals in MNC see the customer relationship. Central belief in sensemaking is seeing what one believes is true and not seeing that what one does not believe in (see Weick 1995, 87). Acting of individuals is triggered by the events happening in the relationship. Enactment, in which part of the environment is created by individuals acting in it, is a central part of sensemaking. Creation of meaning is an intentional process (Weick 1995, 25) and the past experiences of individuals affect their sensemaking. Individuals give meanings to events happening in the relationship. Actions in events focused in this research can be either directly or indirectly connected to relationship development.

The organizational structure of MNC affects the sensemaking process, since the organizational structure (referring to subsidiaries and technological and geographical units), where individual acts restricts individuals understanding of the overall relationship. Individual sees only parts of the relationship and may act only with one part of the customer organization. The position in the organization (referring for example whether individual belongs to top management versus project management) influences the level of customer contact and whether individual is mainly involved in strategic level negotiations or practical project operations.

Individual's sensemaking is shaped by interactions with others engaged in similar situations and in multidimensional situations individual seeks out the interpretations of others and through these interactions, group level categorizations emerge (Drazin, Glynn & Kazanjian 1999). Individual sensemaking pictures and the individual views and experiences of the customer form the overall organizational level views of the global customer relationships. Because of the continuous nature of the sensemaking, the MNC view of the global customer relationship is merely a cross-section of the state of customer relationship in one point of time. It is also necessarily to note that even though shared group-level views do develop, they can also differ across organization – even though two actors may share similar experiences with the customer, their sensemaking may differ and through that the resulting action asking for political compromise in the organization (Drazin, Glynn & Kazanjian 1999).

## RESEARCH METHOD

Qualitative case study, as applied in this study, offers the opportunity to address the complexity of studied phenomenon in its own context (Eriksson, Kovalainen 2008, 3). It has been seen as a potentially valuable way of gaining knowledge in a cross-cultural setting, in particular (Marschan-Piekkari, Welch 2004, 7-8). The case company in question is a global, consolidated company, which provides process technologies for the mining and metals industry. The company is a multinational corporation with three separate subsidiaries and each of these subsidiaries has multiple geographical units located usually near main customers.

MNC's sensemaking of its global customer relationships is analyzed through three, selected, global customer relationships. All customers are big, metal producing concerns with strategic importance to the supplier. All of the customers are defined to be important to the Supplier Company by the top management. Customers differ by their nature and therefore offer quite different challenges for the supplier. All the customers have multiple productions units and can have projects with all the subsidiaries. All of the customers are senior houses and steady customers to the case company. Customer A is mainly working in India, Zambia and Australia. The relationship with the customer A has started actively in 2003 and the customer has been experiencing high growth and expanding especially rapidly in 2003-2006. Customer B is focused in North and South America, Australia Pacific and Africa. It has had a long, steady relationship with Subsidiary I (from 1990s) of the case company and it is offering great potential for Subsidiary II (relationship started in 2006). Customer C is concentrated on South and Central America. The projects with this customer are not massive but they are constant and steady. The Subsidiary I has had a relationship with the customer C from 1980s and Subsidiary II from 2003.

Both customer and supplier companies are global and consist of multiple independent units and geographical locations. Not all supplier subsidiaries have equal relationship to customers. Instead, some subsidiaries are more important to certain customers than to others and vice versa: some customers are more important to certain subsidiaries than to others. In either case, multiple units or subsidiaries from both on customer's and supplier's side are involved in the relationship and the relationships are embedded in their own cultural surroundings. Hence there is a need to notice the special characters of the customers.

The present study uses interviews, documentation and sketches and presentations provided by the interviewees as a primary empirical data. MNC sensemaking of global customer relationships

is analyzed through three, selected, global customer relationships (namely customers A, B and C). The data collected include 20 interviews done with the managers of a mining technology company in multiple organizational units and levels. These interviews lasted from one hour to two and a half hours and were all tape-recorded. Together these interviews produce 24 hours and 34 minutes of recording. The interviewed persons have been working closely with some or all of the customers inside the different subsidiaries of the case company. The interviews have been concentrated on specific customers or the internal events and actions of the case company. The themes for these interviews were centered on the history and development of customer relationship, features of the relationship and projects done, cooperation between the companies and different internal units. This research utilized multitude of data sources, which included 32 interviews, which focused on different themes, but were still able to provide important viewpoints and created an understanding of the activities of the Supplier Company. In addition, the secondary data included the web-pages of the firm and its customers, brochures, project memos, as well as workshop materials and case-specific seminars. The secondary data was an important supplement and it was extensively used during the research process and especially before the interviews to create understanding of the context and the phenomenon.

## ANALYSIS

### The development of customer relationships

The empirical analysis focuses on three global customer relationships of the Supplier Company. Customers have contacts to all the subsidiaries at multiple levels. These customers are typical examples each in their own way. Classifying and defining “what is a good customer” is seen difficult in headquarters. The relative importance of customer varies based on the existing or potential projects and therefore, classifying the importance of the customer relationship merely based on historical data is not sufficient. Common feature in the three relationships is the variation of project phases from more active negotiation and execution to quiet maintenance and sleeping periods.

Customer A operates with all the subsidiaries, but is most active with Subsidiary III. The activities of Customer B are nowadays divided between Subsidiary I and Subsidiary II. Customer C has the most active cooperation with Subsidiary II, it is not exclusive, but the largest projects are executed with Subsidiary II. The relationship with Customer B is mainly dealt from the local office in North America, whereas the local unit in Central America has the closest relationship with Customer B. The coordination of contacts is a challenge for MNC and the headquarters, sine contacts are often taken care from subsidiaries and thus local units are not always informed. From customer perspective this seems to be illogical.

Since sensemaking differs depending on who the customer is and which organizational units are involved, it is natural to start the discussion of sensemaking on the development of each customer relationship. Understanding of the dynamic phenomenon is therefore searched for through examination of the evolution of the relationships over time. Sensemaking is a retrospective process and includes historical understanding of the development of customer relationship. The table 1 below lists the basic differences of each subsidiary’s relationship with customers, which in turn affect the sensemaking in MNC in relation to each of its customer relationship.

*Table 1. Relationships between customers and different supplier subsidiaries*

Customer A			
	Relationship started	Importance	Relationship management
Sub I	2003	Low	Through key account manager
Sub II	2005	High, more important to SubII unit 1 than SubII unit 2	Local office in Finland, also through India office and key account manager
Sub III	Relationship between previous supplier and previous customer units from 1970s	High	Local office in Germany, role of India office growing, also through key account manager
Customer B			
	Relationship started	Importance	Relationship management
Sub I	1990s, first contact through the companies that customer bought	High	Decentralized in local offices: North America, South America (unit1 and unit2), Australia
Sub II	2006	Medium	Centralized in local office in Finland
Sub III	Sales with former supplier unit	Low	Not active, through Sub I if needed
Customer C			
	Relationship started	Importance	Relationship management
Sub I	1980s	High	Local office in North America, through local office in Central America
Sub II	2003	High	Through local office in Central America and Finland
Sub III	Relationship with former supplier unit from 1980s	Low	Through local office in Central America

The relationship to customers differs between subsidiaries, because they are working with different technologies, with different size of projects and with different project time frames. Some of the subsidiaries have long relationship with the customers and see them as more important partners than others. Not only there are differences between subsidiaries, but also the analyzed customers differ from each other. The customers have different backgrounds and therefore the actions in the relationship and thus the understanding of the customer – or sensemaking – varies between different customers. The sensemaking tied to each customer is dependent of the past events in relationship history.

### Sensemakers in relationships

In Supplier Company, individuals make sense of the customer relationship in multiple organizational levels and therefore, the sensemaking is tied to the particular organizational level and geographical unit to which individual in question belongs. Different subsidiaries, internal units, geographical locations and individuals have different views and experiences of customer relationships, which create the basis for individual sensemaking.

*“Isn’t it the point that you will get different answers [from the interviews done] -- there is no single truth” (Senior Vice President of Marketing Development)*

Even though in HQ-level, it is understood that views and experiences of customers differ, it might not be clear in lower organizational levels, where individuals' network positions restrict their view of the customer. Customer perceptions can also differ, since the customer in question might not always be the same. In case of global customers, which consist of multiple units, the subsidiaries and their units might be dealing with separate customer units.

Table 2 describes the development of each customer relationship through the critical events in the relationship as well as the different individual sensemaking related to these different events and thus describes the different types of sensemaking in relationship development. In different relationship events, four types of individual sensemaking were identified, namely defining, linking, triggering and creating.

Defining refers to seeing the customer, the relationship or own organization in a different way. For example in case of Customer B, as the customer took contact to Subsidiary I, as they were about transfer from one metal mines to mines involving more ores, With Customer A defining refers for example finding out what has happened with the customer and who the customer actually is. In the case of first multiunit project with Customer B, the relationship was defined as a triad and as a network, which naturally affected the future and present cooperation with the customer. Sometimes the definitions of the customer may differ, since individuals have had different experiences of the same event. This has happened in all of the relationships, for example with Customer A in Project I and II, the experiences of the event differed depending on the individual involved.

Linking simply indicates connecting different events, meanings or actions. In the relationship with Customer B, the importance of personal relationships and relationship development were linked. Different individuals can also create different links; problems in Project II with Customer A were explained differently based on individual's own experience and sensemade view of the customer. Also Projects A and B with Customer C represented different viewpoints depending on the teller. This resulted in different stories where own acting and project development were linked in different ways.

Sensemaking can also trigger the change; one example of this is the creation of KAM system as happened with Customer B. The involvement of Subsidiary II as well as each Subsidiary defining the Customer B as their own created the need for KAM system in order to coordinate contacts with the customer. Another example of triggering is establishment of a new policy to always inform the local office as happened with Customer C. Certain events may also create possibilities for new business opportunities, new shared future or create an unexpected result. For example, existing projects can arouse new possibilities and intensify the relationship as it has happened with Customer B. From these four different types it can also be seen that defining and linking are past-oriented and focus on giving meanings to past events, whereas triggering and creating are more future-oriented and guide the future actions of individuals.

From the table below it can be seen that primary sensemaker quite often is the global account manager. Global account manager represents a key individual in building the sensemade view of the customer relationship. Overall, individuals represent their own unit and the sensemaking is tied to their level of analysis and environment. Individual's actions are based on the meanings they give to different events and these together create the understanding - or sensemade view - of the customer.

Table 2. Types of individual sensemaking identified in different events

Timing	Events in relationship with Customer A	Sensemaking	Primary sensemakers
Starting from 1970s	Start of the relationship through few equipment sales	<i>Defining</i> the relationship through agents	Senior Vice President (VP) of Marketing Development (Mkt.dev.)
Early 2003	Activating the relationship, defining the current stage, creating contacts	<i>Defining</i> the current state of the relationship <i>Creating</i> opportunities for future cooperation in multiple levels	Customer A key account manager (CustA KAM)
2003	Establishing Project I with SubI and Customer	<i>Linking</i> project negotiations and relationship creation <i>Defining</i> the customer based on different experiences	CustA KAM President, Sub I; CustA KAM
2004 onwards	Internal marketing, creating unified ways of action and one contact point (i.e. KAM) to the customer	<i>Linking</i> own organization's actions and challenges with the customer <i>Triggering</i> the need for internal marketing in order to work in multiple levels with the customer	CustA KAM CustA KAM
2006	Establishing Project II with SubII, creating wider, multiunit relationship	<i>Defining</i> the customer based on different experiences <i>Triggering</i> relationship change from one project/unit relationship to multiunit relationship	Sales Manager, SubII; CustA KAM CustA KAM
2007	Establishing new unit to India near customer HQ	<i>Linking</i> the establishment of new unit and future possibilities	HQ (Senior VP of Mkt.dev.); CustA KAM
Fall 2008	Customer approaches SubIII and hopes to create a strategic partnership	<i>Creating</i> chances for strategic partnership	CustA KAM; President, SUBIII
December 2008	Problems in Project II: customer plant suffers downtime and production numbers decreases	<i>Linking</i> : explaining the problems based on own sensemade view of the customer	CustA KAM; Technology sales manager, SubII
Spring 2009	Loss of sale with SubIII because of the problems in Project II with SubII	<i>Linking</i> problems in Project II and loss of sale <i>Defining</i> the customer and relationship management in a new way as a highly centralized and networked	Vice President, SubIII Head of proposal management, SubIII
Summer 2009	A turn for better: working together and building trust	<i>Defining</i> : seeing that customer needs to be educated	Technology sales manager, SubII
Timing	Events in relationship with Customer B	Sensemaking	Primary sensemakers
In the beginning of 1990s	Start of the relationship through small sales projects	<i>Defining</i> the relationship <i>Triggering</i> the future operation practices	SubI KAM; VP, Business Development (Bus.dev.), SubI; SubI KAM
1994-1995	Creation of technological breakthrough, joint technological development with early units of Customer B	<i>Linking</i> personal relationships and relationship development	SubI KAM
2005	Contact from Customer B to create relationship also with SubII	<i>Defining</i> customer as multiple metals house	SubI KAM

2005-2006	Subsidiary II involved: wider base for customer contacts, developing technology together	<i>Defining</i> the relationship as one's own, comparing the relationship to others <i>Triggering</i> change, involvement of KAM system, changing towards strategic relationship	SubI KAM; VP, Bus.dev., SubII Senior VP of Mkt.dev.
Starting in 2006	First multiunit project, actual start of the relationship for SubII	<i>Defining</i> the relationship as a triad and a network <i>Creating</i> new opportunities for cooperation	VP, Bus.dev., SubII SubI KAM
Starting in 2007	Second multiunit project, which is seen as a best success story between these two companies	<i>Defining</i> relationship through projects <i>Defining</i> customer similar than own organization <i>Creating</i> connections between different subsidiaries	VP, Bus.dev., SubI CustA KAM Managing Director, SubII, North America
Timing	Events in relationship with Customer C	Sensemaking	Primary sensemakers
In 1980s	Start of the relationship through first projects to customer mines	<i>Defining</i> the relationship as project-based & family-owned company	President, Sub I
Starting in 1980s and 1990s	Top management involved in relationship, having closer, corporate level connections	<i>Linking</i> organizational culture of the customer and relationship development	Senior VP of Mkt.dev.
1996	Establishing a local office in Mexico as the customer prefers to work through the local office	<i>Defining</i> central individuals in the relationship in different ways in different units  <i>Linking</i> own organizational structure +problems with customer <i>Triggering</i> : establishing policy that local office always need to be involved	SubI (President, SubI, North America); Sub II (VP, Bus.dev., Sub II); Local office in Mexico (General Director in Mexico); HQ (Senior VP of Mkt.dev.) Senior VP of Mkt.dev. HQ (Senior VP of Mkt.dev.)
1997-2000	After sales challenges, small problem which eventually threatened the overall relationship	<i>Defining</i> : the relationship as trustworthy, seeing that customer sees that problems will be solved	General Director in Mexico
2003	Relationship with SubII starts as a result of active marketing, discussions of possible cooperation, creating personal relationships	<i>Linking</i> : existing relationship enabled the creation of new <i>Defining</i> own organization's strengths & weaknesses <i>Creating</i> new opportunities for future cooperation	President, SubI VP, Bus.dev., SubII VP, Bus.dev., SubII
2003	First customer project with Sub II	<i>Defining</i> customer as patriarchal <i>Linking</i> own acting and project development	Senior VP of Mkt.dev. General Director in Mexico; VP, Bus.dev., SubII
2007	Second customer project with Sub II	<i>Linking</i> own acting and project development	General Director in Mexico; VP Bus.dev., SubII

Each relationship has central individuals or primary sensemakers as table 2 suggests. These individuals (such as global account managers) can act at multiple levels. They may have more central role in relation to customers as well as inside own organization. Their acting can develop



the long-term inter-organizational relationships, where the acting is not bounded in divisional borders. The introduction of global account management and manager with the Customer B has changed the overall relationship and created more consistent way to handle the relationship.

*" It [key account management] has brought new things, people think more over divisional borders, understands that this customer plays potentially with all of us -- we coordinate now more -- this didn't happen before, but now during two last years it has happen -- mainly because of the [President of Subsidiary I, North America] who has good relationship with few persons in [customer organization] -- and worked as a contact person between two subsidiaries". (Vice President - Business Development, Subsidiary I)*

Global account manager can help sales by having a higher level contact to management and mediate information about the genuine status of the project. Without key account manager system with Customer A, most of the past problems would be still dominating and there would be less sales and connections. CRM and KAM are been seen as tools for coordinating the internal network. Customer A needs more active management, whereas Customer B can easily be contacted. Customer C is most dependent on close local level connections. These differences naturally affect the MNC's sensemade view of the specific customer relationship. With more challenging customers, HQ level support to key account manager is crucial.

As the relationships are created through different projects, it is good to note that global account manager and project manager usually is not the same person. Project managers are responsible of the functioning of the single project, not the whole customer relationship. Global account managers instead might not be directly involved with project, but they may act as negotiators and mediators – both inside the own organization and between customer and supplier organization as it has strongly been with the Customer A.

The central individual can also be some other person in the relationship, who has achieved the position either through organization's decision or through his own background. One example of this is with the Customer C, where Senior Vice President of Marketing Development has had a close personal relationship with the CEO of the Customer C and therefore substantial effect on the relationship development as well as organizational level understanding of the customer. These individuals act during the whole development of the relationship and strive to enhance the development of the relationship in different stages and levels. There can be one or more of these individuals and in certain organizational levels and development stages the individual's acting can be emphasized more than in others.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

In this paper it is shown how MNC makes sense of its global customer relationships. MNC is defined here as an internal network, since the nature of multinational organization is more accurately depicted through network of relationships than for example defining it as a hierarchy. Therefore, the customer relationships of MNC are seen to be built through internal network of relationships.

The focus on customer relationships has been seen important both by managers and academics, who have faced the growing need to develop these relationships with key customers (Guenzi, Georges & Pardo 2009). Customer relationships discussed here develop through relationship specific events. Relationships involve repeated interactions, which may cover a wide range of

functions, activities and actors in the organization (Holmlund 2004, Helfert, Vith 1999). When focusing on the relationship between supplier and buyer MNC, the relationship is bound to have complex inter-firm contact patterns and these contact structures inside both organizations involve several organizational levels (Holm, Johanson & Thilenius 1995). Events in each relationship as well as actions the individuals take and the meanings they give to the events are discussed in this paper.

This research acknowledges the inherent complexity when dealing with the customer who is not always the and in which participating individuals, geographical and technological units differ. The customer relationships between multinational supplier and buyer cross national borders and relationships are embedded into different national contexts. MNCs have been a focus of many researches, but in this research the definition of a MNC is widened and MNC is being defined as an internal network, formed around its customer relationships. The customer is a key driving force in internal cooperation and creates the environment in which individuals strive to make sense of their own network and the customers who they are operating. These internal networks affect the customer relationships as well as each customer relationship shapes the internal network.

Previous research (see Doz, Prahalad 2005, 21) has stated that in MNC there are multiple internal as well as external stakeholders and therefore multiple points of views and choices made. In this research, customer has been seen as key element in defining and building the internal network. Subsidiaries are not only embedded in their own local networks, which may differ between subsidiaries (Forsgren 2008, see Andersson, Forsgren & Holm 2002, Vahlne, Schweizer & Johanson 2012), they are also forming internal MNC networks between different subsidiaries, geographical and technological units and individuals based on the customer with they are operating. Vahlne et al. (2012) note that HQ can be unaware of the networks and actions of its subsidiaries. In this research it was also seen that the HQ struggles to be aware of the project operations and negotiations of the subsidiaries. To HQ and through that to the whole MNC classifying and defining “what is a good customer” is a challenge. Especially in fractured project organization, the importance of customer relationships for different subsidiaries and units differ as well as how and where the relationship management is organized. The importance of a customer relationship fluctuates on the basis of current or future projects, and therefore, for HQ as well as for subsidiaries, the understanding of customer relationship greatly depends on the history of the relationships, common projects, individual’s or unit’s own experience and the created common understanding or sensemade view of the customer. The organizational structure of a MNC was seen to restrict the understanding of customer relationships and therefore, sometimes creating obstacles for cooperation. As different customers may act with numerous of subsidiaries and units, internal competition is bound to exist. The notion of organizational structure is also discussed in previous literature (see e.g. Gebauer, Kowalkowski 2012), where it has been seen that customer focused organizational structures naturally require increasing collaboration between different organizational units. It has also been emphasized that for becoming a customer-centric organization, multiple changes in organizational structures is need (Homburg et al. (2000) as seen also here in the case of Supplier MNC.

Thus, organizational levels as well as the projects in which individual has been involved with, restrict and shape the understanding of an individual. As the experiences vary and not all the customers are equally important to all the units, there might exist multiple understanding of the

customer. Also certain individuals such as key account managers may have a central role in creating organizational level view of the customer, since they are acting in multiple organizational levels and with different units and /or subsidiaries.

Sensemaking is seen as individual's subjective understanding of the world, which leads to action. Individuals strive for structuring their experiences, which enables them to comprehend and explain events and predict future actions (see Weick 1995, 4-5). By making sense of the customer relationship individuals are better able to understand the customer and the existing relationship. Sensemaking of different individuals is tied to the specific organizational level and unit where they operate as suggested in answering to the first sub question. Thus, sensemaking is tied to the particular organizational level and geographical unit to which individual in question belongs. Sensemaking of an individual is affected not only through the organizational level and unit in which individual belong to, but also through the existing shared views on the organization and the experiences of the customer. When dealing with multinational customer, also the customer perceptions may differ, as the customer units and individuals may not always be the same. Sensemaking is an ongoing process, where understanding of the customer is being created constantly and this view thus effects on how individuals in MNC make sense of the events in the relationship and customer relationship as a whole as the figure below shows.

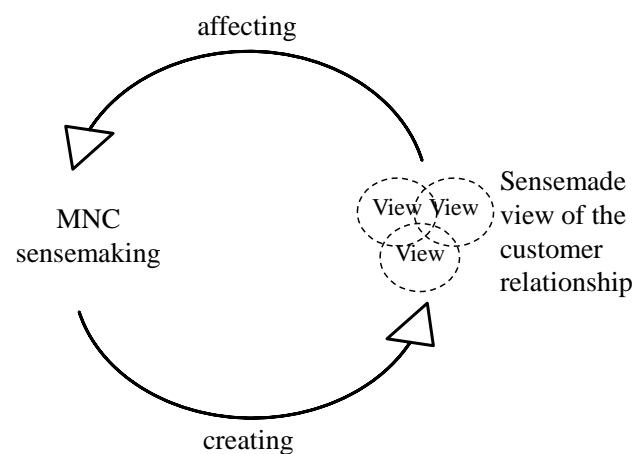


Figure 2. MNC sensemaking process

As individuals' network positions restrict their view of the customer, different individual sensemade views do not inevitably lead to shared, sensemade view of the global customer relationship, but over time and with increasing internal cooperation, these views can become more unified. By combining different views, more comprehensive understanding of the customer is created which helps on managing the entire relationship inside the MNC

As sensemaking as a concept often remains in abstract and broad level, in this research sensemaking was characterized through identifying four different types of acting, which describe the sensemaking tied into different events in relationship development. Individual sensemaking was seen consisting of defining, linking, triggering and creating. From these four different types it can also be seen that defining and linking are past-oriented and focus on giving meanings to past events, whereas triggering and creating are more future-oriented and guide the future actions of individuals. Based on the previous experience and events in relationship, individual can define the customer in numerous of ways, which may lead to differing views of the customer and thus

different actions and eventually affect the relationship development and future events with the customer. Individuals can link different events, actions or meanings and saw connections between them. These explanations can differ based on individual's own experience and sensemade view of the customer, which then can result in different stories, where own acting and events are linked in different ways. Sensemaking can also trigger the change or create possibilities for new business opportunities, new understanding, new shared future or create an unexpected result. All of these types of sensemaking were found in the development history of each customer relationship researched, and as each event consists of several actions, each event can naturally include multiple types of sensemaking. Sensemaking of MNCs stems from individual's interactions with customer representatives and is closely related to the development of the relationship over time.

Global customer relationships were defined as continuous, developing through different events, which may include different organizational levels and individuals. These events create the overall relationship with the customer organization. The inter-organizational relationship between supplier and buyer consist of several intertwined relationships and legal contracts between individuals, different projects, units, subsidiaries or MNC as a whole. Sensemaking is not only tied with current interaction, but it is also retrospective in nature and future-oriented in its actions, and therefore by merely concentrating on current interaction, the overall relationship cannot be understood. The episodic as well as continuous nature of sensemaking (see Weick 2012) meant that it was discussed in both ways in this research.

Relationship history and development have a strong effect on how individuals in MNC see the customer relationship. Individuals own experiences guide the attitude towards the customer and affect their view of the customer relationship. The challenge for individuals is to make sense of the customer in their own organizational level, as the sensemade view of the customer is primarily formed through individual's own experiences of the relationship and its development and secondarily through shared sensemade view existing in unit or project level. As relationships focused in this research consist of projects, the development of relationships happen through projects in different organizational levels. And thus affect the experiences of individual and create different views in organization as projects do differ and not all individuals, units or subsidiaries are involved in them. The success or failure of individual projects guides the sensemaking of involved individuals as shown in analysis. Individuals strive to perceive the limitedness of their own understanding, since sensemaking is subjective, even though it is created in interaction. Thus, customer relationship exists in multiple levels and guides also the customer expectations. Also future events are affected by the sensemaking of individuals, since sensemaking is a primary generator of individual action (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld 2005, see Drazin, Glynn & Kazanjian 1999). Individuals make sense to events, give meanings to them and act on that basis. Sensemaking is a continuous process and closely connected to the change and development in organization. Individuals in organization create a part of the environment in which they are acting.

This research also identified primary sensemakers and typical example is global account manager. These responsibilities can be either built by conscious decision of top management or they can stem from the history and experience of individuals and organization. There can be one or more of these individuals and in certain organizational levels and development stages the individual's acting can be emphasized more than in others. In each customer relationship

researched, there were primary sensemaker(s) whose acting and sensemaking built the MNC view of the global customer relationship and connect the multiple different views stemming from the different units and experiences tied to their own level of analysis. Primary sensemakers thus act in multiple organizational levels and are often involved in multiple events and through that create the MNC view of the customer relationship and develop the long-term inter-organizational relationship which crosses the divisional borders.

## CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

This research contributes to literature on industrial customer relationship by analyzing the complexities of the relationships in geographically and technologically dispersed MNCs with globally operating customers. Furthermore, the study takes into account that MNC's sensemaking of its global customer relationships is inseparable from the sensemaking of individuals interacting with the customer's representatives and development of the relationship over time. IMP and e.g. key account management literature has focused on how to manage customer relationships (e.g. Madill *et al.* 2007) and account manager (e.g. Wilson & Weilbaker 2004) has been one suggested solution. Despite its credits, this viewpoint is too simplistic to describe the situation where customer is not always the same, relationship consists of overlapping projects, in which participating individuals, geographical and technological units differ.

In this research it is described how the sensemaking process inside a network functions and how the MNC sensemade view of the customer relationship is formed from multiple individual views. Previous literature in the field of IMP has done extensive studies on the relationship development and management, however, when acting in geographically and technologically dispersed MNCs with globally operating customers, the management of MNC first needs to understand who their customer is and how the customer is seen inside their organization, before they can manage, take care or develop the relationship further.

MNC sensemaking of its global customer relationships consists of sensemaking of multiple individuals interacting with customer during the history of the relationship. Even though relationships of individuals may provide useful information of the relationship, only by combining these views the comprehensive understanding can be created as done in this research (see also Leek, Mason 2010). Individual sensemaking is therefore combined into organizational level understanding and thus this research offers a multilevel approach to both relationships and networks as suggested by previous literature (see e.g. Möller, Halinen 1999, Ritter, Gemünden 2003, Järvensivu, Möller 2009, Provan, Fish & Sydow 2007). This research creates additional understanding of the sensemaking and operationalizes the concept by showing the different types of sensemaking and how individuals make sense, thus continuing and developing further the previous research done by for example Mason (2012) and Ramos *et al.* (2012).

The contribution to key account management literature in this research is created by showing the role of key account manager as a primary sensemaker and combiner of the different sensemade views of the customer relationship. Managerially there is a need to recognize that in each organization there are primary sensemakers building the shared view of customer relationship. These individuals may be appointed by the organization or rise based on their own characteristics. Related to specific customer relationship, there can be a shared primary sensemaker or each subsidiary or unit may have their own. This study implies that the global

account manager can act as one organizational power connecting different views and levels together and often customer sees these individuals as a crucial for the relationship. With certain customers, establishing a global account management is needed for successful relationship development. Global account manager should be experienced individual having credibility both in the eyes of customer and own organization. Clear responsibilities and HQ level support are needed for successful operations.

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