

SOURCING TEAMS AND INTERDEPARTMENTAL INTEGRATION

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ABSTRACT

Internal integration is often mentioned as a prerequisite for conducting strategic sourcing, as multiple functional departments must collaborate on creating value-creating activities amongst them. Though it is one of many possibilities, the use of cross-functional teams is often the most commonly proposed solution to ensure internal integration. This paper presents an exploratory case study evaluating the use of internal integration mechanisms in a cross-functional sourcing process. Two commodity categories are examined. One is organised in a cross-functional team, while the other is not. Findings indicate that informal integration mechanisms not promoted by management or the organizational structure may contribute to the overall level of integration.

KEYWORDS

Cross-functionality, sourcing teams, interdepartmental integration

INTRODUCTION

With a general consensus that sourcing occupies an increasingly essential position because much value creation, today, happens outside the scope of the focal company; purchasing and sourcing, consequently plays an important role in value-adding activities (Carr and Pearson, 1999; Chen et al. 2004). This tendency to view sourcing as a value-adding function has triggered a shift from clerical and strictly operational orientated purchasing department towards a strategic function (Driedonks and Van Weele, 2009; Driedonks et al. 2010). The strategic aspects of sourcing require a larger pool of competences. In practice, this is often resolved by having multiple functions collaborate and integrate with each other to achieve the common goal of the sourcing process. Horn et al. (2014) find that previous studies suggest a positive link between internal and external integration. More explicit, internal integration is argued to be the foundation upon which external integration can be built (Das et al. 2006).

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Therefore, companies should start by focusing on internal integration before focusing on integration with external suppliers and/or customers (Flynn, Huo, Zhao, 2010), as it is ineffective to focus on external initiatives if the internal organisation is design is not designed accordingly (Ellegaard and Koch, 2012; Narasimhan and Das, 2001).

An observation is that as the strategic role of sourcing advances so does the use of internal teams accordingly (Johnson et al., 2002). The (cross-functional) sourcing teams are often introduced to achieve internal integration (Chen et al., 2009; Das and Narasimhan, 2000; Narasimhan et al., 2001). Integration is, in this perspective, an approach to ensure the alignment of the purchasing departments' goals with the remaining organization as well as to position the purchasing function strategically within the firm (Narasimhan and Das, 2001; Driedonks et al., 2014). In the efforts to achieve internal integration the organisation and management of cross-functional sourcing teams become important tasks, as they affect the influence that the purchasing and strategic sourcing functions have on overall company performance (Driedonks et al., 2014). Flynn et al. (2010) conducted an overview of links drawn between different aspects of integration and performance. Here it was found that achieving internal integration within an organization has positive effects on performance related to, respectively, logistics, finance, quality, product innovation, total cost reduction and process efficiency (Flynn et al., 2010).

Even though cross-functional teams being a favoured approach to achieve internal integration within the purchasing function, it is not the only one. An array of different integration mechanisms exists. The complexity is substantial as multiple integration mechanisms may interplay with each other within a single company or even within a given process. In implementing cross-functional teams and other integration mechanisms lessons regarding purchasing structures and organisation need to be learned and unlearned (Nellore and Motwani, 1999); some lessons still needs empirical investigation. The aim of this paper is to present and discuss the initial findings of such empirical enquiry. Examining both a team and a non-team setting organised to perform similar sourcing teaks within comparable market settings; this paper addresses the following research question: *How is internal integration achieved in a cross-functional sourcing setting?*

This paper presents the preliminary results of a study of integration in sourcing teams. It is structured as follows; the following section presents theoretical dimensions of internal integration and it's relation to team usage. Hereafter, the next sections outlines the methods applied to data collection as well as present the setting of the case company. The remaining part of the paper relates to a discussion of the implications of the preliminary findings along with a conclusion and further research section.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

As displayed by the work of Chen et al. (2009) multiple dimensions of integration exists. Integration can be internally or externally aimed as well as have specific characteristics based on the scope and stakeholders involved. Focus of this paper is internal integration; in short, the integration mechanisms deployed to strengthen the relationship between – in order words integrate – functional departments and their respective employees. Lawrence and Lorsch (1967, pp. 3-4) operate with the terms differentiation and integration, where integration is “*the process of achieving unity of effort amount the various subsystems in the accomplishment of the organization's task*”, which is useful in overcoming differentiation

which they define as “*the state of segmentation of the organizational systems into subsystems, each of which tends to develop particular attributes in relation to the requirements posed by its relevant external environment*”. In this perspective integration is a way for companies to overcome the threat of different divisions and departments having conflicting objectives. This perception is continued by Baiden et al. (2006), who argue that integration may be regarded as different disciplines merging their needs and cultures to become mutually supportive.

Internal integration is not a question of either-or. Rather, it is a continuum ranging from none or low integration to high integration. The higher the integration the less functional departments act as silos (Zhao et al., 2011), but instead contribute to a common process and consider each other’s perspective. Often the continuum is separated into levels (e.g. Trent and Monczka, 2003) to simplify complexity and possibly track development in the degree of integration. Determining the grade of (internal) integration relates to the presence and active use of different integration mechanisms. Referring to Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) then not only the presence – but also the quality of the implementation of a given integration mechanism should be addressed. For instance, it should not only be established if information is shared, but it must also be addressed if it is shared in a timely manner (Chen et al., 2009) and whether in fact the right information is shared. Furthermore, integration mechanisms may both be tangible (e.g. co-location and measurements) and intangible (e.g. information and relations) in nature (Chen et al., 2009). When addressing internal integration it is, additionally, important to separate the actual integration mechanisms from their effect(s), thus, the behaviour and conditions that the integration fosters (Baiden et al., 2006). Integration mechanisms can be characterised as practical organizational structures, for example data and information integration through an enterprise resources planning (ERP) system. Integration mechanisms create common goals and alignment as well as process standardization and formalization (Chen et al., 2009; Flynn et al., 2010; Zhao et al., 2011). While the behaviour fostered by integration is reflected in e.g. communication and coordination.

Purchasing integration

Internal integration can have different focuses – one of these more specific and specialized views is related to purchasing integration. Purchasing integration can be addressed on two aggregation levels. First, on a general level purchasing integration is “...*the integration and alignment of strategic purchasing practices and goals with that of the firm...*” (Narasimhan and Das, 2001, p. 593). Thus, insufficient internal integration may result in weak integration of purchasing perspective into the overall strategy of the company (Pardo et al., 2011). Looking more into the linkages between the functions involved in the sourcing process, then the internal integration amongst the departments partaking in the sourcing process may be viewed as “...*a process of interaction and collaboration in which manufacturing, purchasing, and logistics work together in a cooperative manner to arrive at mutually acceptable outcomes for their organization...*” Pagell (2004, p. 460).

Originating in the definitions of internal integration discussed above; it follows that a lack of internal integration between purchasing and other functions prevents boundary spanning activities. This can, in turn, result in the status of the purchasing function dimising in the eyes of other internal stakeholders, which could eventually isolate the purchasing department (Pardo et al., 2011). Often focus in on how other departments must condiner the persepctives of sourcing in their work. However, such one-sided purchasing perspective is not ideel either, and purchasers need to accept that they too need to take into account the priorities of other

departments. An approach to evaluating the level of integration is to evaluate the amount of integration mechanisms adopted as well as the quality of these implemented mechanisms. Thus, purchasing integration is evaluated as high, if the departments participating in the purchasing and strategic sourcing process all express that they reach consensus, and have well-implemented integration mechanisms. Table 1 presents a list of different mechanisms that companies may adopt to increase purchasing integration.

Elements of purchasing integration
Interdepartmental committees that allow for joint decision making
Cross-functional teams
Temporary task forces focusing on collaboration within a specific project
Liaison personnel
Co-location
Purchasing regularly attends strategy meetings
Purchasing is rewarded on strategic contributions
Jointly establishing goals
Recommends and impacts changes in end-products based on supplier analysis
Purchasing participation in product and process design as well as in developing sales bids
“No blame” culture (in cross-functional teams)
Equal opportunity for contributing ideas
Time devoted to supplier development

Table 1 – Elements of purchasing integration. Based on Baiden, Price and Dainty (2006), Das and Narasimhan (2000), Das, Narasimhan and Talluri (2006), and Germain and Dröge (1997).

Cross-functional teams as an integration mechanism

As briefly addressed above, one particular integration mechanism emerges as particularly favoured by practitioners: Cross-functional sourcing teams. The trend is related to the introduction of category/commodity management, where the sourcing of goods is pooled into categories with similar characteristics. Such category often has a team of representatives from a wide variety of departments all specializing in the given category. Johnson et al. (2002, p. 77) defines such sourcing teams as combining “... *skills and re-sources of several stakeholders, which can span across multiple functions or subunits, to facilitate the timely completion of a purchasing-related project*”. Other characteristics are often that participants in these sourcing teams are only part-time dedicated to team (Trent, 1998), and still have hierarchical referral to their respective functional departments. Thus, the participating employees must balance the needs of the team and their respective departments, which can make the achievement of consensus, and hereby integration, difficult.

Again, it is worth noting that the implementation and facilitation of a cross-functional team is no guarantee for achieving integration. Often such efforts fail to deliver on their promises (e.g. Murphy and Heberling, 1996; Rozemeijer and Van Weele, 2007; Trent, 1998). The quality of the implementation and set-up needs to be taken into account. In literature there are multiple factors listed as influencing the success of these cross-functional sourcing teams, e.g. availability of key resources, management support and training in teamwork (e.g. Englyst et al., 2008; Giunipero and Percy, 2000; Hult and Nichols, 1999; Moses and Åhlström,

2008; Pearson et al., 1996). Thus, to evaluate cross-functional sourcing team's effect as an integration mechanism such elements need to be taken into account. Elaborating further on this perspective, a team with full integration "...has a single project focus and objectives; boundaries between individuals are diminished and team members work towards mutually beneficial outcomes through the free sharing of information" (Baiden and Price, 2011). These elements of team integration are intangible in nature and cannot easily be measured. To overcome this fact, sourcing team members may be asked about their perception of what they gain from being in the team when addressing the quality of the team.

METHODOLOGY

Case studies were deemed appropriate because they provide the possibility to study the dynamics between employees. As respondents are boundary spanners partaking in the sourcing process, they are balancing (at least) two points of view related to the team and a functional department.

Furthermore, case studies are useful for addressing *why* and *how* questions (Voss, 2009; Yin, 2009), as expressed by Eisenhardt (1989, p. 542): "... the qualitative data are particularly useful for understanding why or why not emergent relationships hold. When a relationship is supported, the qualitative data often provide a good understanding of the dynamics underlying the relationship, that is, the "why" of what is happening." The richness of qualitative data will allow for an in-depth understanding of the relations between the process characteristics and contextual factors and the performance of the investigated strategic sourcing process, as respondents are able to express *why* they act in certain ways. Respondents are, thus, allowed to disclose experiences in a narrative as well as nuance their perceptions. This is valuable input since the concept of integration, both overall and within a team, cannot easily be measured. Adopting a qualitative approach allows respondents to elaborate on their perception of the work environment and setting they partake in.

A qualitative single case research methodology is applied to uncover the relationship and integration mechanisms present both within and surrounding a sourcing team. Data was collected through seven² semi-structured interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009) lasting on average 64 minutes. Three of the respondents are members of a commodity team, whereas the remaining four are not part of official teams. One employee regarded as team member recently switched to a different commodity; however, the newly appointed replacement had yet to be incorporated into the team work; hence, the former member was interviewed. The manager responsible for the commodity team assisted in identifying other boundary spanning respondents, who he knew to be working together on a commodity. The interviews were recorded and supplemented with field notes.

The preliminary data analysis is based on partially transcribed interviews along with field notes and the audio recordings of the interviews. Based hereon commonalities as well as opposite perceptions were uncovered. The initial coding concerned identifying integration mechanisms or other practices impacting the interaction between functional departments.

² The dataset has later been enriched with interviews of two managerial positions. These interviews are still being processed and therefore not included in these preliminary findings.

CASE COMPANY

The characteristics of the case company are non-perishable assembly products in a discrete manufacturing setting. The medium to high complexity products entails that sourcing becomes important, as components are sourced externally only to be assembled by the case company. In this case, the investigated company (hereafter Case Company) is the maintenance division within a global group. A commodity team sourcing one type of electronic component along with employees from different functional departments working together, but not in a team setting, to source a different electronic component were inquired. Case Company is not set-up as a team-based organization, but rather a matrix-like organisation. Each division operates in four different geographical areas, and the organization has regional as well as global managers overseeing the sourcing process.

It is only recently that the sourcing task has been appointed strategic significance, which is illustrated by the growth from two to 12 employees in the strategic procurement department in just over two years. Approximately 16,000 different materials are handled in the maintenance division, and complexity is further increased by the fact that demand for most components in maintenance emerges years after the conclusion of serial production of new units.

At Case Company there are three value streams or essential overall categories, which each contain one or multiple commodity categories. It should be noted that a value stream may contain categories managed in a team setting while others categories are not. Still, a commodity team managed by the category manager from strategic procurement is regarded as an officially implemented integration mechanism because it is supported by the overall company management. The goal is eventually to implement cross-functional teams in all commodities; however, as this is not presently the case, it allows for both a team and non-team setting to be studied at this time.

Our point of origin was a commodity team A its three members as well as four employees not participating in a commodity team (see Table 2). These non-team members still collaborate on purchasing a given component and therefore handle a similar set of tasks as those performed within the team.

	Affiliation
<i>Commodity team</i>	Strategic procurement
	Operational procurement
	Technology and engineering
<i>Non-team members</i>	Strategic procurement
	Operational procurement
	Technology and engineering
	Dept. for returned goods

Table 2 – Organizational affiliation of the respondents

The respondents are all, but the engineers, located in departments which are part of the same section of Case Company and are, thus, located within the same offices. The technology and engineering department constitute their own section and is located in a different building in walking distance of the other departments.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Based on the initial coding of the data it appears that Case Company has a medium integration level. The degree of integration is evaluated on an overall basis and takes into account the answers provided both by team and non-team members. This collective approach is chosen because it at this initial stage the result is deemed too ambiguous to compare the integration levels indicated by, respectively, the members of the cross-functional team and those outside the team. Therefore, the overall integration level amongst the departments contributing to the sourcing process and task is addressed in the following. Furthermore, the goal of this study is not specifically on evaluating the degree of integration, but rather to explore the adopted integration mechanisms. The result of the initial findings related to Case Company is presented in Table 3.

Case Company	Elements of purchasing integration
✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interdepartmental committees that allow for joint decision making Cross-functional teams Temporary task forces focusing on collaboration within a specific project Liaison personnel
✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Co-location Purchasing regularly attends strategy meetings Purchasing is rewarded on strategic contributions Jointly establishing goals Recommends and impacts changes in end-products based on supplier analysis Purchasing participation in product and process design as well as in developing sales bids “No blame” culture (in cross-functional teams) Equal opportunity for contributing ideas
(✓)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time devoted to supplier development

Table 3 – Purchasing integration detected at Case Company.

Looking further into the reasoning underlying the results in Table 3, one integration mechanism is quite self-explanatory: Cross-functional teams. As already established one commodity category is organized in a team with representative from three different departments. Commodity team A has existed in approximately one year. Other teams were also formed; however, they were later dissolved owing to lack of resources. All participants in Commodity team A expressed content with its implementation. Especially the communication facilitated in the team setting was praised. One team member, who also work in other commodities not organized in teams, states that when teams are not used then tasks more frequently fall between two departments. This results in no one taking responsibility, which delays the process unnecessary. Non-team members also indicated that they expect communications and clear division of responsibility to increase in a team.

As mentioned above, three out of four enquired departments are currently located in very close physical proximity to one another. Two of these are actually co-located and situated in offices depending on which of the three overall categories they belong to. One respondent expresses a positive effect from the co-location and states that the departments now help each other whereas they before had little interactions with one another due to physical distance. Another respondent, however, mentions co-location as a barrier as it disperses employees with similar skill-sets and makes exchange of experiences difficult. Still, the co-location is argued to promote cross-functional integration as multiple respondents state that it facilitates

‘over-the-desk coordination’ allowing them to quickly access their counterpart from the other functional department. The easy access allow for the development of a working relationship between the respondents.

As depicted in Table 3, one integration mechanism is indicated as partially present at Case Company. This partially indication reflects that the integration mechanism is not explicitly mentioned, but hinted through the respondents’ statements. Most respondents mention quite well-defined and planned interactions with suppliers in the form of fixed contact persons in both companies and weekly or biweekly meetings. This is in contrast to the internal processes, where especially non-team members find that responsibility sometimes is difficult to place. External relations and the development and maintenance hereof appear to be prioritized; however, it is beyond the scope of this study and dataset to explore further.

Propositions

The integration mechanisms evaluated in Table 3 and addressed above are all formal mechanisms facilitated by management and, thus, part of the official organizational structure. However, a second type of integration mechanisms is identified. These are informal integration mechanisms. In short, this refers to behaviour and practices displayed by the respondents to further integration with other departments. These actions are not formalized, but emerge because the employees find them useful and value-adding. These actions are in addition to the organizational structure and integration mechanisms promoted by management. We therefore denote it as an informal integration mechanism.

One informal integration mechanism stands out. This is an informal liaison person or integrator who takes in upon himself to create relationships with the other departments in order to foster collaboration and better communication. These efforts include personal interactions even though company policy is written communication via email. Another aspect is acting as single point of contact for he contact persons in the other departments; thus, even if they ask favours that are outside the scope of his work, he makes an effort to solve the issue anyway or at least guide them to someone to can. The motivation behind this is the notion of a bank account – you may deposit a favour to cash in a helping hand at a later date. The result is that the integrator fosters information sharing and better communication bypassing the official channels. The effect of this personal integrator is supported by the observation that the official organizational structure does not provide a clear division of responsibility. Respondents from all four departments address that the unclear division of responsibilities causes problems from time to time. This manifests itself in multiple comments concerning the commodity categories not run by a team. Here the respondents describe the work as sequential where tasks are passed on to each other. As a consequence they all accept that when the task is not on your desk it is not your responsibility. Bringing matters to a head one may state that the concept adopted is: out of sight – out of mind. Worth noticing is that while this practice fosters frustrations no one faults the other departments for this practice. It is commonly accepted that you cannot blame your colleague for something that is not strictly part of their job description.

Overall, respondents gave answers indicating similar integration both with and without a cross-functional team. This indicates that despite of little or no formal and official integration mechanisms, there is still something rendering integration in the non-team setting. Following this notion, we propose that:

P1. There exists two layers of integration, respectively, formal and informal integration mechanisms

Further addressing the level of integration present at Case Company, it appears that the efforts put forth by the unofficial integrator influences the overall level of integration. When non-team members were asked whether or not they would like an official commodity team all respondents, expect the integrator, answered that they felt that the current set-up worked adequate. They all expressed that time is a scare resource and since the current set-up always seemed to work out somehow they would prefer not dedicating time to frequent team meetings. We propose that the reason why a team structure was not wanted more is the same reason explaining why the current set-up somehow seems to work-out in the end. We find that the reason is that the integrator undertakes the role of the team and singlehandedly acts as an integration mechanism that overcomes departmental gaps. Based on the observations presented above, it is proposed that:

P2. The use of informal integration mechanisms positively influences the overall integration level

It is possible that informal integration mechanisms could also hinder integration if it counterbalances or simply overrule e.g. formally organized integration mechanisms. However, the current data shows no evidence of informal integration mechanisms negatively influencing the overall integration level, and therefore we can only note that this could be subject for future investigations.

Even though, the initial findings only identify one informal integration mechanism it is worth noticing how compressive it is. The integration has ties into all of the included departments. Despite of the non-team members recognizing that a team could, most likely, aid the process of creating unity between departments; they still thought the integrator to be a suitable solution. One might deduce from this that the internal integration mechanism to an extent render the official integration mechanism obsolete. At least the integrator decreases the need for a team. Just like the team, the integrator focus on breaching the boundaries of the functional departments through coordination and communication. These observations are in line with those of Pagell (2004), who propose that real-time informal communication as well as cross-functional teams increase the integration. Further, Pagell put forth the proposition that “[r]eal-time informal communication has a greater influence on the level of integration ... than formal ... communication” (Pagell, 2004, p. 480). Our finding combines herewith leads to the proposition that:

P3. Informal integration mechanisms may have a larger positive influence on the level of integration than formal integration mechanisms

When establishing the overall integration level at Case Company, it was observed that the departments all have separate performance measures. Further addressing these performance indicators revealed that they, in fact, even contradicts one another by promoting unaligned behaviour amongst the departments. For example, one department is measured on the direct unit cost, while another is evaluated based on inventory value. The issue being that one approach to lowering unit cost could be to agree to order larger batches from the supplier, which in turn influences the value of inventory negatively. Another example is one department being evaluated on whether deliveries arrive within the negotiated lead time, while a different department is evaluated on whether orders arrive on the confirmed delivery

date. Such misalignment could promote a behaviour where the second department could add a security buffer to the confirmed delivery date to increase the possibility of reaching their targets; however, in doing so they might surpass the negotiated lead time and leave the other department with poor performance. Despite of these misaligned performance measures, both team and non-team members express that if asked or confronted with the fact that it may help their contact person in other department, they would prioritize reaching a compromise rather than achieving their departments targets. This indicates that the personal relations overpower the performance measures. It also suggests that relations are a strong influencing factor in the effort of creating alignment. Based hereon, we argue that when evaluating the overall integration level the informal integration mechanisms should be taken into account as they interact with and affects the influence of formalized integration mechanisms owing to, for example, the relationships created. In the presented case the informal integration mechanism counterbalance – and to an extent hinder – the effect of a formally organized integration mechanism. We propose that the opposite scenario may also happen. In that instance an informal and formal integration mechanism may reinforce one another. Based on the above, the following fourth proposition is formulated:

P4. Formal/informal integration mechanisms hinder or strengthen other formal/informal integration mechanisms

The four propositions represent the initial findings from Case Company. Naturally, there is a need for further analysis of the data collected during the case study. The notion of informal integration needs further enrichment – also theoretical implications should be examined in relation to the concept.

CONCLUSION

The point of origin of this research was to compare and contrast two similar sourcing processes organised in different ways; one with a cross-functional team and one without. The preliminary findings suggest that with exception of the team then identical integration mechanisms (co-location and time allocated for supplier development) are promoted by management to achieve internal integration in both settings. The overall level of integration was evaluated to be medium for the case company as a whole. Whether the level of integration should be further nuanced for each commodity/sourcing task remains for further investigation as the research and data analysis progresses.

The similar integration levels were not a result of the team not contributing to integration. All members of the team expressed that the team positively influenced their collaboration and communication. Instead, the discovery of informal integration mechanisms in the form of an unofficial liaison person/integrator provided an explanation. The concept of informal integration needs further examination, and the case will be enriched with managerial testimonies concerning which steps management takes to ensure integration as well as how they view the role of the integrator.

Based on initial analysis of the empirical, qualitative data four propositions are formulated. These relate to the relations between formal and information integration mechanisms and suggest a relationship where two types of integration mechanisms influence each other. These relations are subject for further elaboration and testing in future research.

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