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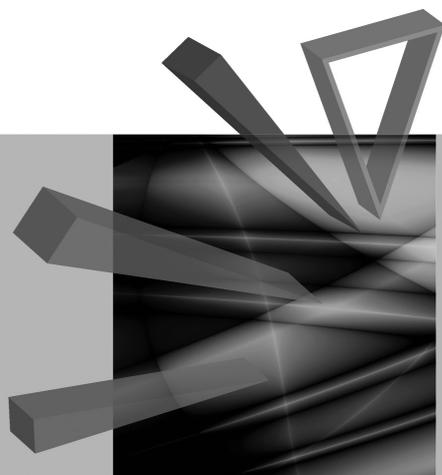
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HAS THE ECONOMIC LIBERALIZATION CHANGED FILIPINO BUSINESS NETWORKS? A CASE STUDY OF A SMALL TRAVEL AGENCY

Abstract: The aim of the article is to explore whether the greater market orientation imposed on the Filipino business has brought about also a transformation of business networks based on personal relationships into more contractual and transparent agreements. The article presents a case study of social dimension of business network of a Filipino small travel agency. The research has confirmed that the key element of business strategy in the Philippines is network relationships. The increased competition and changes in consumers' behaviour have forced companies to strive for cost reduction and enhanced efficiency. Therefore entrepreneurs simultaneously undertake a search for new business relations and strengthen their existing ones. Even if the strong personal ties, mutual obligations and trust are important, the essential factor for long and successful business relationships is mutual profitability and transparency.

Keywords: Philippines, social networks, business networks, business relationships, business culture, tourism industry.

1. Introduction

The business environment in the Philippines has been deeply transformed since the 1990s by important internal liberalization, economic reforms and opening to the global economy, reinforced by Internet expansion in the country. All this made the Filipino economy kick off in terms of economic growth, yet brought a clear rise in a competition pressure for domestic companies and forced changes in business practices among Filipino businesses. Bearing in mind that in the Philippines business means relationships principally based on personal ties, the aim of the article is to explore whether the imposed greater market orientation has brought about also a transformation of business networks based on personal relationships into more contractual and transparent agreements.

2. Inter-organizational networking

Inter-organizational networking, as evidenced in numerous studies and reports, is continuously and substantially increasing in number (e.g. number of projects carried out in networks, number of relationships in networks) as well as in diversity (cross-industry networks, variation in project nature and business profile of network members). In the literature there is a wide variety of different factors driving the formation of inter-organizational networks such as economies of scale and scope, risk reduction, technology exchange, international expansion, access to new markets, blocking competition.¹ However, A.P. Wiatrak concludes that all of those premises can be brought together under the umbrella of the perceived mutual benefits that allow further developing the economic potential of cooperating entities.² The nature of the relationships and their patterns within the inter-organizational networks become more complex and sophisticated thus challenging by raising the casual ambiguity of value chain processes carried out through those relationships.³ Hence, according to the network approach, relationships cannot be viewed and managed in isolation from the other relationships that form the network.⁴ Each relationship in the network represents a direct or indirect conduit to other relationships in the network through which resources may be accessed, combined or transferred.⁵ Existing research perspectives on the inter-organizational network cooperation provide a considerably abundant content for scientific exploration of value creation processes. However, an excessive proliferation of concepts impedes drawing valid insights since most of them are too narrow to allow for a comprehensive explanation of the multilateral interdependencies in the inter-organizational networking.⁶ Nevertheless, a widely acknowledged broad conceptual model of business relationships has been developed by H. Hakansson and I. Snehota.⁷ According to their model the business relationship network can be approached in terms of its basic layers: actors, activities, resources analysed on three levels: individual organization (network member),

¹ F.J. Contractor, P. Lorgance (eds.), *Cooperative Strategies in International Business*, Lexington Books, 1988; K. Sakai, N.H. Kang, *International Strategic Alliances: Their Role in Industrial Globalization*, OECD, Paris 2000.

² A.P. Wiatrak, Organizacje sieciowe – istota ich działania i zarządzania, *Współczesne Zarządzanie* 2003, no. 3, p. 9.

³ M. Najda-Janoszka, *Ochrona zasobów niematerialnych w sieciach kooperacyjnych*, Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego. Ekonomiczne Problemy Usług no. 650, Szczecin 2011, pp. 427–438.

⁴ H. Hakansson, I. Snehota, *Developing Relationships in Business Networks*, Routledge, London 1995.

⁵ H. Tikkanen, J. Kujala, K. Artto, The marketing strategy of a project-based firm: The four portfolios framework, *Industrial Marketing Management* 2007, vol. 36, pp. 194–205.

⁶ Ch. Ellegaard, J. Geersbro, Ch.J. Medlin, *Value Appropriation within a Business Network*, Competitive paper IMP ASIA Conference, December 6–10 2009, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

⁷ H. Hakansson, I. Snehota, *op. cit.*

dyadic relationship, network of relationships between individual organizations.⁸ Network actors as organizations, groups of individuals, or single individuals, control the two other variables of the model. Bonds between network actors can have economic, social, informational, technical features, therefore substantially influence the perception and the identity of those actors within a particular network. The emergence of bonds between actors requires development of a mutual commitment.⁹ Network actors perform interlinked activities concerning transformation and transfer of resources. Hence, the activities performed in different relationships of the network can complement each other or be in competition, depending on their position in the wider activity chain. Similarly, transformed or transferred resources in one relationship can either complement or compete with resources transformed or exchanged in another relationship in which an organization is involved.¹⁰ In the network, activity links form wider activity chains which in turn form complex activity patterns in which web of actors manage resource constellations on strategic and operational level.¹¹

The nature of business relationships between network actors conceptualized by H. Hakansson and I. Snehota can be further approached by identifying relationships as forms of exchange among partners evaluated in terms of costs and rewards.¹² According to exchange theory only those relationships whose expected worth is positive are continued and developed.¹³ There are two types of exchange relationships: economic exchange based on formal specification of mutual obligations and social exchange regulated by implicit agreement defining non-specific reciprocal obligations.¹⁴ Both types of exchange involve expectation of future return, yet in economic one the return is defined while in social exchange the nature and time of reciprocation is not specified, implicating development of high level of trust between the partners. In order to explore the social dimension of business networking it is necessary to understand the basic principle of the conception of relationship exchange: “an individual who supplies rewarding services to another obligates him. To discharge this obligation, the second must furnish benefits to the first in turn.”¹⁵ In social connections those mutual obligations

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ H. Hakansson, I. Snehota, L.E. Gadde, D. Ford, *Managing Business Relationships*, John Wiley & Sons, 2011.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² R. Cropanzano, M.S. Mitchell, Social exchange theory: An interdisciplinary review, *Journal of Management* 2005, vol. 31, no. 6, pp. 874–900.

¹³ Ch. Ho, Exchange-based value creation system for network relationships management, *The Journal of American Academy of Business* 2006, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 202–209.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ P. Blau, *The Dynamics of Bureaucracy*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1964, p. 89 after: C.P. Zapata, J.E. Olsen, L.L. Martins, Social exchange from the supervisor’s perspective: Employee trustworthiness as a predictor of interpersonal and informational justice, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 2013, vol. 121, no. 1, pp. 1–12.

arise along with development of kinship ties, behaviour patterns and shared cultural background. Kinship and friendship form the social capital of the network which firms accumulate in order to make their relationships more stable, intense, reliable and trustworthy. Social connections are an important source of both reward and punishment, thus the social exchange is recognized as a relationship maintenance.¹⁶ M. Granovetter by pointing at family ties in business relationships underlines that more dense and cohesive social network renders deviances from norms, discourage free-rider behaviour since shared ideas and norms are easier to enforce.¹⁷ Consequently, close geographical proximity of partners provides ground for common norms and customs, historical background and enhances rather collaborative than opportunistic behaviour.¹⁸ Moreover, the strength of a tie defined as the combination of the emotional intensity, amount of time spent, and intimacy is directly interrelated with a development of mutual trust and a rich flow of information between partners.¹⁹ Thus it is not surprising that according to H.B. Thorelli²⁰ network management involves not only information exchange, marketing, and technology transfer, but also interpersonal relations. The business practice confirms that statement since “many industry leaders [...] have learned the hard way that attending to the human side of [...] relationships can mean the difference between success and failure.”²¹

3. Business relationships in the Philippines

The Filipino business culture results from an Asian mix of many ethnic groups present in the country,²² 333 years of Spanish colonization, 44 years of American occupation, and dominance of the Catholic Roman Church. Because of these factors, even if the business culture in the Philippines bears a strong resemblance to that in the other countries of the Southeast Asia, it also has some individual features. It is based on *pakikisama* (importance of conformity to group norms and decisions)²³ combined with maintenance of smooth interpersonal relations.²⁴ Together these rules are supposed to secure a harmony – so desirable by Asian people.

¹⁶ Ch. Ho, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ M. Granovetter, The impact of social structure on economic outcomes, *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 2005, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 33–50.

¹⁸ N. Hansen, Competition, trust and reciprocity in the development of innovative regional milieux, *The Journal of the RSI* 1992, vol. 71, pp. 95–105.

¹⁹ M. Granovetter, *op. cit.*

²⁰ H.B. Thorelli, Networks: Between markets and hierarchies, *Strategic Management Journal* 1986, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 37–51.

²¹ Ch. Ho, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

²² With the two most important non-indigenous minorities being the Chinese and the Spaniards. Especially the former play an important part in many sectors of the Filipino economy.

²³ Still it is slightly less developed comparing to the Asian neighbours (which may result from the American heritage).

²⁴ B. H. Roffey, Strategic leadership and management in the Philippines: Dynamics of gender and culture, *Labour and Management in Development* 2000, vol. 1, pp. 2–31.

In general, the successful business relations in the Philippines require well-developed initial bonds, strong commitment and mutual obligations, long-term perspective and benefits.²⁵ Well-developed initial bonds may be based on a family relationship or a referral by a third party. To be established they require a personal familiarity (concerning family, personal background and status), respect, personal trust, and liking. In other words, to establish successful business relationships Filipinos have to know, like and trust their potential partners.

An existing business relationship requires strong commitment, mutual fulfilling of obligations and maintenance of cordial personal relationships. For it continues to be first of all a personal tie. This makes things difficult when there is a change in firm's representatives or employees while the trust and ties must be built from a start. Unless a new man is a member of the old man's family.

The main objective of business relations is a long-term benefit. Hence the decisions are taken in no hurry. Negotiations are seen as a joint-venture problem-solving process. This process has to be smooth enough to let all partners "save face" (which is so typical of Asian people) and not to offend a personal pride (typical of the Spanish culture). The deals are usually worked out by a group even if the final decision-making is quite hierarchical. In this long-term perspective of the deal the partners' commitment and trust are more important than written contracts. This commitment is based on interpersonal relationship, not an inter-firm one.

The dominant personal character of business relationships in the Philippines economy makes the country prone to corruption, even if gift-giving for many Filipinos is just a form of nourishing business relationships and personal payments may be treated as rewards for getting a job done. On the other hand, it is also a quite common way of securing a business survival or raising a competitive edge – especially in relations with the public sector.²⁶ In fact, as the Filipino bureaucracy rates among the worst in Asia,²⁷ the infrastructure and logistics are often poor and unreliable, the judiciary is overburdened and the law enforcement is not very stringent, the challenges for business operations are quite significant²⁸ and bribery may be a solution. Even more so, as the Philippines are considered to represent booty capitalism, where an oligarchic state is dominated by an elite maintaining its control over politics and economics,²⁹ which encourages corruption and patronage. This way, by Western standards the corruption is widespread in the country.³⁰

²⁵ L. Katz, *Negotiating International Business – The Negotiator's Reference Guide to 50 Countries around the World*, BookSurge Publishing, Charleston 2006.

²⁶ A.J. Sison, A. Palma-Angeles, Business ethics in the Philippines, *Journal of Business Ethics* 1997, vol. 16, no. 14, pp. 1519–1528.

²⁷ PERC, *Report on Corruption in Asia*, Political & Economic Risk Consultancy Ltd., 2013.

²⁸ DFAT, *Philippines. Doing business*, www.austrade.gov.au/Export/Export-Markets/Countries/Philippines/Doing-business, 2013 (retrieved 29.05.2013).

²⁹ P.D. Hutchcroft, *Booty Capitalism: The Politics of the Banking in the Philippines*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1998.

³⁰ The Philippines ranked 100 out of 174 countries in the Corruption Perception Index 2012 of Transparency International.

In summation, the most powerful relationships in the Philippines are based on family ties. And for many years family alliances, kinship dynamics and personal alliance system has underpinned the political and business structures and processes in the country.³¹ In this context, the relationship networks are of strategic importance for a business success.

Still, the business environment in the Philippines has been deeply transformed since the 1990s by important internal liberalization economic reforms and opening to the global economy. This coincided with the Internet expansion in the country.³² All this made the Filipino economy kick off in terms of economic growth. During the last 20 years the average GDP growth rate was of very respectable 4.4% in real terms. The country has been also counted among the “Next 11” by Goldman Sachs in 2005 and often qualified as an “Asian Tiger,” expressing the belief in its continued future economic development.

However, the economic expansion has also brought a clear rise in a competition pressure for the domestic companies, which has been only reinforced in many sectors by the Internet expansion. These factors have forced some changes in business practices among the Filipino businesses: i.e. appointing to executive positions professionals and skilled managers from outside owners’ family, attempts to build on solid management and market fundamentals rather than political preferential treatment.³³

It is interesting to explore whether the imposed greater market orientation has brought about also a transformation of business networks based on personal relationships into more contractual and transparent agreements. One could expect more efficiency-oriented and short-term transactions in the Philippines. Even more so, considering that in the last 30 years in the Western economy transactions have clearly replaced relationships, risk externalization substituted for trust, and the business perspective have dramatically shortened.³⁴ Has this phenomenon reached the Philippines?

4. Social network of a Filipino travel agency

In order to explore whether the greater market orientation imposed on Filipino business has brought about also a transformation of business networks based on personal relationships, an empirical investigation of social dimension of business

³¹ W.G. Davis, M.R. Hollnsteiner, Some recent trends in Philippine social anthropology, *Anthropologica* 1969, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 59–84; M.R. Hollnsteiner, Reciprocity as Filipino value, [in:] M.R. Hollnsteiner (Ed.), *Society, Culture and the Filipino*, vol. 1, Ateneo de Manila University Institute of Philippine Culture, Quezon City 1975, pp. 84–91; C.H. Lande, Parties and politics in the Philippines, *Asian Survey* 1968, vol. 8, no. 9, pp. 725–747.

³² Despite the fact that only 25% Filipinos were using the Internet in 2010, the Philippines get good marks on the Internet’s social and economic impact on Filipinos’ lives, World Web Foundation, *Web Index 2012*, <http://thewebindex.org/data/all/country/PHL> (retrieved 29.05.2013).

³³ B.H. Roffey, *op. cit.*

³⁴ P.H. Dembiński, *Finance: Servant or Deceiver? Financialization at the Crossroads*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2009.

network of the Filipino travel agency – Kenstar Travel – was undertaken. The empirical research was carried out during April and May 2013 by using qualitative method of a case study, since it is most relevant method to study multidirectional interdependencies in their natural context. Qualitative methods are not dedicated to test hypotheses, rather they allow for comprehensive answering the research questions by focusing on thorough study, description and explanation of complex phenomena. The chosen research method was implemented by using a semi-structured survey and a semi-structured interview with former and current managers of Kenstar Travel. The sample selection was based on a pragmatic criterion of data availability and was conceptually driven by the inter-organizational network theory which underpinned the research question.

Kenstar Travel is a Filipino travel agency founded in 1982. According to the EU definition Kenstar Travel can be classified as a small business (12 employees, turnover in the range of 2.6–13.5 million USD). As a travel agency the firm offers international and domestic package tours, hotel booking and reservation, air tickets, travel insurance and visa documentation assistance. The business has experienced a clear rise in competition pressure (also from former partners) and a change in consumer behaviour (with clients becoming more demanding, cost conscious and independent in arranging their trips by Internet).

In case of tourism industry the existing consumption pattern causes a natural formation of bundles of services provided by different entities.³⁵ The tourist product in the form of a tourist experience implies a multilateral interdependence between tourism business. According to the literature this interdependence is the starting point for the creation of co-operative structures. It was therefore not surprising that Kenstar Travel cooperates with numerous tourism service providers. Nevertheless, according to obtained results the main business partners of Kenstar Travel represent East Asian countries. This geographical and to a certain extent also cultural proximity provides a sound ground for common norms, customs, mutual understanding and long-lasting collaborative relationships.³⁶ In fact, most of indicated business relationships have a long history of over 20 years. This impressive duration and stability of business relationships stem from an attentive and careful partner selection and further from a continuous nurturing of established relations. The most important criteria for selecting a business partner used by Kenstar Travel include price, quality and personal familiarity. Relatively strict application of the last criterion is evident when looking at the status of partners at the start of the collaboration, i.e. almost all of them were classified as acquaintances or friends. However, it is important that Kenstar Travel search for partners not only among friends, thus providing flows of novel, non-redundant information.³⁷ Nevertheless, the owners of Kenstar Travel are

³⁵ A.M. Hjalager, Repairing innovation defectiveness in tourism, *Tourism Management* 2002, vol. 23.

³⁶ N. Hansen, *op. cit.*

³⁷ M. Granovetter, *op. cit.*

persistently and actively engaged in developing established business relations towards close personal relations. The mutual commitment is developed on the basis of personal bonds that are nurtured by a constant and direct contact between introduced family members. Consequently, partners described formerly as acquaintances became close friends. In other words, accumulated social capital in the form of kinship and friendship transformed weak ties into strong ones with a long-term perspective for further development.³⁸ Moreover, all of main business partners are used as intermediaries for searching and establishing new business relationships. Nevertheless it has to be underlined that although Kenstar Travel develops and maintains very strong and close personal relationships with business partners, it does experience a disloyal and dishonest conduct of partners, even those with a long collaborative history. Hence, the indicated high level of trust to a partner does not exclude considering strategic option of replacing this particular business relationship. Kenstar Travel admits that even if the strong personal ties, mutual obligations and trust are important, the essential factor for their long and successful business relationships is mutual profitability and transparency.

The relationships within the boundaries of the firm are also driven by strong personal bonds. All the key employees are Filipinos, representing common cultural background for mutual understanding. Similarly as in the case of tourist service partners, with the most important employees Kenstar Travel maintains long and stable relationships. Key workers have on average over 20 years of work experience in the agency, and have been employed on the basis of a personal familiarity (some of them are family members). Due to intensive development of established relationships employed workers once acquaintances became trustworthy friends. The same is in process for a group of relatively new collaborators (with an employment period of about one year) – they have also already become friends and the firm regards their employment in the medium time perspective, without any search for alternative collaborators.

Interestingly, comparing relations with tourist services providers and employees only in the case of the latter the firm identifies the reciprocal nature of the relationships. While cooperating with other tourist companies, Kenstar Travel perceives its position as a receiver of relationship outcomes.

5. Conclusion

The research has confirmed that the key element of business strategy in the Philippines is network relationships. In fact they seem indispensable to succeed in business. The business relationships are based principally on personal ties, including family bonds. The relationships are long-lasting, quite strong and founded on high level of trust, and – last but not least – on mutual profitability. Entrepreneurs consciously develop

³⁸ *Ibidem.*

and strengthen their networks. Still, quite common disloyal behaviours of collaborators make the trust not unconditional.

The increased competition and changes in consumers' behaviour have forced companies to strive for cost reduction and enhanced efficiency. Therefore entrepreneurs simultaneously undertake a search for new business relations and strengthen their existing ones. This is a clear difference to the Western experience where the same factors transformed relationships into transactions, replaced the trust by risk externalization and shortened the business perspective. The difference is probably due to the inefficiency of markets in the Philippines (especially in terms of widespread corruption, insufficient judiciary capacities and weak law enforcement increasing monitoring and enforcement elements of transaction costs). A further exploration of this difference offers an interesting area for future research.

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CZY LIBERALIZACJA EKONOMICZNA ZMIENIŁA FILIPIŃSKIE SIECI BIZNESOWE? STUDIUM PRZYPADKU MAŁEGO BIURA PODRÓŻY

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest zbadanie, czy wymuszona na filipińskich firmach bardziej prorynkowa orientacja spowodowała także transformację sieci biznesowych opartych na więziach osobistych w kierunku porozumień bardziej kontraktowych i przejrzystych. Artykuł prezentuje studium przypadku wymiaru społecznego sieci biznesowej małego biura podróży. Badania potwierdziły, iż sieci biznesowe są kluczowym elementem strategii biznesowej na Filipinach. Zwiększona konkurencyjność i zmiana zachowania konsumentów wymusiły na firmach redukcję kosztów oraz zwiększoną efektywność. Dlatego też przedsiębiorcy jednocześnie poszukują nowych kontaktów i wzmacniają relacje istniejące. Przy całej istotności silnych więzi osobistych, wzajemnej zależności i zaufania, kluczowymi czynnikami determinującymi długie i udane relacje biznesowe jest wspólny zysk oraz przejrzystość.

Słowa kluczowe: Filipiny, sieci społeczne, sieci biznesowe, kultura biznesowa, turystyka.