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How to Measure Relationships –
Merging Alignment and Outsourcing Research
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The literature has shown that relationship management between and within different entities is crucial in manifold contexts. The prominent IS research strands of IT business alignment and outsourcing relationships tackle this topic from different perspectives. We argue that there are strong overlaps of these concepts and claim for a consolidation of both research strands. We match both research stream's measurement constructs, show the overlap as well as the remainder and propose a unified model. This model consists of six dimensions and allows for a combined measurement of relationships between business and IT units within as well as across organizational boundaries.

Introduction

The literature has shown that relationship management between and within different entities is crucial in manifold contexts. Two prominent strands of IS research tackle this topic from different perspectives. The first is investigating operational IT business alignment (e.g (Bassellier and Benbasat 2004; Beimborn et al. 2006b; Nelson and Cooprider 1996; Reich and Benbasat 1996; Reich and Benbasat 2000; Wagner 2006)) while the second is research on IT outsourcing relationships (e.g. (Goles and Chin 2002; Goles and Chin 2005; Grover et al. 1996; Kern 1997; Lee and Kim 1999)).

In our work, we refer to *operational IT business alignment (opITBA)* as knowledge-based, directed, and effective interrelations between IT and business units at the inter-personal and operational level (Kearns and Lederer 2003; Reich and Benbasat 1996, 2000; Tiwana et al. 2003). The second concept incorporated in our work is IT outsourcing relationship quality (RQ). It describes the qualitative characteristics of an inter-organizational relationship between a service receiver and provider to achieve the participants' shared goals (Klepper 1995; Lee and Kim 1999).

We argue that there are strong overlaps of these concepts and therefore claim for a consolidation of both research strands where applicable. The different research works have almost never referred to each other or have not explicitly incorporated findings from the respective other side. One of the very few exceptions is (Sääksjärvi 2002). Thus, our motivation is to provide a bridge between these almost disjoint pieces of research by developing a unified alignment/relationship construct

which can be used in an intra- as well as in an interorganizational context. Aim of this paper is to identify the overlaps between the different constructs and to propose a research model which can be used in subsequent steps of qualitative and quantitative research in order to validate the overlap and furthermore to examine the antecedents (and their overlap) for this unified construct. Since many firms have outsourced their IT, opITBA and RQ already measure the same artifact.

Thus, the research questions of this paper are:

1)   *Theoretical: What is the overlap between relationship quality in outsourcing research and operational IT business alignment? What is the respective remainder?*

2)   *Conceptual: Based on the results, how can a unified relationship quality/ operational IT business alignment measurement model be developed?*

The remainder will first give an overview about the different research strands before a mapping of the different constructs is conducted. Subsequently, a proposal for a unified measurement model for RQ/opITBA is developed. The final section gives an outlook on our further empirical research which will be based on this conceptual work.

Theory

IT Business Alignment

IT business alignment has been found to be an important factor for generating business value from the deployment of information systems (Chan et al. 1997; Papp 1999; Teo and King 1996).

Prior research has identified two primary consequences of IT business alignment: increased IT effectiveness (Chan et al. 1997) and increased firm performance (Sabherwal et al. 2001). In contrast, misalignment of business and IT has been found to lead to undesirable organizational effects like poor utilization of scarce organizational resources, sub-optimal performance of business units and the organization, a cyclical relationship between higher IS spending and expectations for success, costly IS investments with low yield returns, missed identification of high potential IS applications, and lack of capitalization of first-rate technology-related ideas (Chan 2002; Lederer and Mendelow 1987).

Based on the Strategic Alignment Model (SAM) (Henderson and Venkatraman 1993), research has focused primarily on antecedents or enablers and inhibitors of alignment (Luftman et al. 1999). According to Reich and Benbasat (1996), alignment is "the degree to which the information technology mission, objectives, and plans support and are supported by the business mission, objectives and plans" (Reich and Benbasat 2000). They model alignment as consisting of an intellectual and a social dimension. The intellectual dimension is a refinement of content linkage as defined by Lederer and Mendelow (1989), differentiating between internal consistency (IT mission is internally consistent with business mission) and external validity (plans are comprehensive and valid with respect to external business and IT environment) (Lederer and Mendelow 1989). In contrast, the social dimension investigates interaction between actors, examination of values, and cognitive linkages on the operational level (Reich and Benbasat 1996; Reich and Benbasat 2000). Bassellier and Benbasat (2004) showed that business competence of IT professionals positively influences the intentions of IT professionals to develop partnerships with their customers (Bassellier and Benbasat 2004). Peppard and Ward (1999) provide a holistic view of the "gap" between business and IT units. Their framework contains values and beliefs of involved parties as an important factor to bridge this gap (Peppard and Ward 1999). The works of Reich and Benbasat (1996, 2000) show the importance of shared domain knowledge between business and IT personnel as well as communication between these two groups to be an important factor for operational alignment (Reich and Benbasat 1996; Reich and Benbasat 2000). Tiwana et al. (2003) add a cognitive dimension which covers psychological relationship issues such as trust, mutual understanding, and commitment (Tiwana et al. 2003).

Outsourcing Relationships

In recent years, the relationship between the outsourcer and the sourcing provider has received particular attention by IT outsourcing research because studies have revealed that the RQ is critical to outsourcing success and explains many of the

outsourcing failures in the 90ies and even today (Dyer and Singh 1998; Poppo and Zenger 2002). In several studies, around 25% of the responding outsourcers reported a "relationship failure" which lead to a break-down of the outsourcing relationship (Goles and Chin 2005).

 The outsourcing relationship is formed by two main elements (Dibbern et al. 2004): (1) the formal contract which explicitly specifies the tasks and obligations to be provided of each party, and (2) the psychological contract (Koh et al. 2004; Koh et al. 1999; Sabherwal 1999). The latter is based on both sides' mutual beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, and therefore refers to the dimension of RQ referred to in our work. Dibbern et al. (2004) further distinguish research into focusing either on relationship building or relationship management, but since we, in this paper, only focus on how to measure RQ, we abstract from this separation. RQ and relationship management are both intended to establish sufficient RQ.

The major works on conceptualizing and validating dimensions and determinants of RQ are (Blois and Kern 2002; Goles and Chin 2005; Grover et al. 1996; Kern 1997; Klepper 1995; Lee and Kim 1999; Marcolin and Ross 2005; Poppo and Zenger 2002; Willcocks and Kern 1998). Moreover, excellent reviews of the derived concepts are given e.g. by (Goles and Chin 2005; Kern and Willcocks 2000).

The works suggest that stable, well-performing partnerships must develop several characteristics such as aligning the partners' objectives and managing partnership controls and conflict (Marcolin 2002; Marcolin and Ross 2005). Thus, relationship research provides lists of factors which influence each other and – in combination – are supposed to lead to successful outsourcing relationships (or – more generally – inter-organizational relations), such as communication, commitment, coordination, cooperation, trust, etc. (Dwyer et al. 1987; Fontenot and Wilson 1997; Goles and Chin 2005; MacNeil 1974).

The items are classified into action variables (e.g. communication, coordination, conflict resolution) and context variables (e.g. trust, commitment, consensus), which are influenced by the first, in order to build a relationship exchange theory (Goles and Chin 2002).

Analysis

The SAM is essentially based on relationships (Henderson and Venkatraman 1993; Wagner 2006). Henderson and Venkatraman (1993) describe eight different relationships that are either cross domain relationships between business and IT or relationships between the strategic and the operational level (Henderson and Venkatraman 1993). Keen (1991) pinpoints the importance of relationships for alignment and states that "the key to alignment is relationships, not ´strategy`"(Keen 1991). This becomes even more evident if we change the focus to opITBA that is based on the interpersonal relationships of involved actors on an operational level. In turn, literature on outsourcing relationships analyzes relations of people and organizational units involved in outsourcing deals. This is quite similar to opITBA, with exception of an inter-organizational focus of outsourcing relationship literature.

The similarity of both literature strands allows us to compare these and identify constructs from both that are helpful for each other. In the following, we will identify the measurement dimensions of opITBA and of RQ from the literature and match these to create a unified measurement model for both approaches.

Alignment Dimensions

Communication is reported to be an important social dimension of opITBA (Beimborn et al. 2006a; Beimborn et al. 2006b; Reich and Benbasat 2000; Wagner 2006). Communication between business and IT unit can be formal or informal (Teo and Ang 1999). Chan found that informal communication structures are more important for opITBA than formal ones because they are more enduring and organizations can react more quickly to external shocks (Chan 2002). Tiwana et al. (2003) refer to the communication between business and IT units as structural linkages, characterized by strength and frequency of social interaction (Tiwana et al. 2003). Strength and frequency of communication are drivers that influence alignment (Teo and Ang 1999). An increase in the amount of communication is regarded as driver that improves alignment and in turn performance related measures (Chan 2002). As we focus on dimensions of opITBA, only the communication quality instead of quantity can be used to measure adequately.

Shared domain knowledge is identified in the literature to be another important dimension of opITBA (Beimborn et al. 2006a; Beimborn et al. 2006b; Reich and Benbasat 2000; Wagner 2006). Reich and Benbasat (2000) define shared knowledge as "the ability of IT and business executives, at a deep level, to understand and be able to participate in the others´ key processes and to respect each other´s unique contribution and challenges" (Reich and Benbasat 2000). This definition goes beyond mere communication. The development of a general understanding of the counterpart's processes and goals is required (Reich and Benbasat 1996). Likewise, Nelson and Cooprider define shared knowledge "as an understanding and appreciation among IS and line managers for the technologies and processes that affect their mutual performance" (Nelson and Cooprider 1996). Subramani et al. (1999) develop a similar construct called "perspective taking" that is, basically, comparable to shared knowledge (Subramani et al. 1999). Perspective taking is defined as the "cognitive ability to understand the point of view of another" (Long 1993). In contrast to the shared knowledge definition of Reich and Benbasat (2000) and Nelson and Cooprider (1996), the concept of perspective taking is broader than shared knowledge and contains elements (i.e. trust) from the cognitive opITBA dimension described in the next paragraph (Subramani et al. 1999). In this approach, we apply Reich and Benbasat's (2000) definition because it contains both the elements of mutual understanding of processes and the appreciation towards each other.

The *Cognitive dimension* contains elements like trust and influence (Beimborn et al. 2006a; Beimborn et al. 2006b; Wagner 2006). Trust refers to mutual expectation that the other party will not behave opportunistically in future transactions of the partnership (Nelson and Cooprider 1996). Influence is the positively connoted possibility to influence the decisions of the relationship partner (Nelson and Cooprider 1996). Mutual influence is supported by law of reciprocity, the expectation that one positive deed of a party will be returned by a positive deed of the other party within a relationship (Cohen and Bradford 1989). Nelson and Cooprider (1996) report that trust and influence have an impact on shared knowledge (Nelson and Cooprider 1996). This impact will be taken into account in the measurement model.

Relationship Dimensions

Research on relationships between outsourcing customers and their service providers has got rather late into focus of research in recent years. Empirical approaches identify a multitude of constructs that comprise the social perspective of outsourcing (Goles and Chin 2005; Kern and Willcocks 2000). Based on the relational exchange theory, Goles and Chin (2005) harmonize this untidy amount of concepts and identify eleven constructs that depict relationships between outsourcing customers and their vendors (Goles and Chin 2005):

Commitment represents the mutual pledge of outsourcing partners to conduct a sustaining relationship with a long time focus (Fontenot and Wilson 1997; Henderson 1990). This contains the willingness to devote effort and resources to support the mutually agreed upon relationship (Fontenot and Wilson 1997; Goles and Chin 2005).

Consensus is the "extent of general agreement between parties" (Mejias et al. 1996). This refers to the mutual understanding on an operational level based on the decisions made on the strategic level (Goles and Chin 2005). Strategic decisions often do not contain detailed instructions how to implement them on the operational level (Kanter 1994). Therefore, consensus on the strategic level will alleviate operational implementation (Goles and Chin 2005).

Cultural Compatibility refers to shared values and beliefs of individuals within a partnership (Deshpande and Webster 1989). Congruence of these norms in an outsourcing relationship might ease mutual processes and goal achievement (Kern 1997).

Flexibility is "a bilateral expectation of willingness to make adaptations as circumstances change" (Heide and John 1992). Flexibility is required in outsourcing relationships to react to changing market conditions (Goles and Chin 2005). Especially relationships in the technology intensive area of IT outsourcing require regular adjustment due to a fast moving environment.

Interdependence "represents the extent to which each party's behaviors, acts, or goals are dependent for their occurrence on the behavior, acts, or goals of the other party" (Goles and Chin 2005; Gundlach and Cadotte 1994). In a relationship between outsourcing customer and service provider each party has complementary assets and acknowledges each others achievement by means of these assets (Gundlach and Cadotte 1994).

Trust is defined as the expectation that the other party will behave truthful even if opportunisms is possible (Grover et al. 1996).

Communication refers to the bilateral, formal or informal exchange of information (Anderson and Narus 1990). As a dimension of relationship quality, "communication" refers to the qualitative aspect, i.e. how effectively and efficiently communication takes place.

Conflict Resolution is the ability of people involved in an outsourcing relationship to solve disagreements over goals, roles, and procedures (Dwyer et al. 1987; Goles and Chin 2005).

Coordination refers to "managing interdependencies between entities to accomplish agreed-upon tasks" (Goles and Chin 2005).

Cooperation is described as the general spirit of companies in a relationship to willingly help out each other and is defined on a higher hierarchical level with the goal to achieve mutual benefits on the operational level (Anderson and Narus 1990).

Integration is "intertwining various attributes and processes of the relationship into each party's structure, policies, and procedures" (Goles and Chin 2005).

Matching of Alignment and Relationship Constructs

After the introduction of the constructs for opITBA and outsourcing relationships from literature, the overlap between both as well as the "residual sets" will be identified. The overlap is differentiated in identical and complementing constructs. The residual set contains constructs that contribute to opITBA and to the outsourcing relationship literature. Finally, constructs that do not fit in any of the prior categories are described. Figure 1 summarizes the matching results.
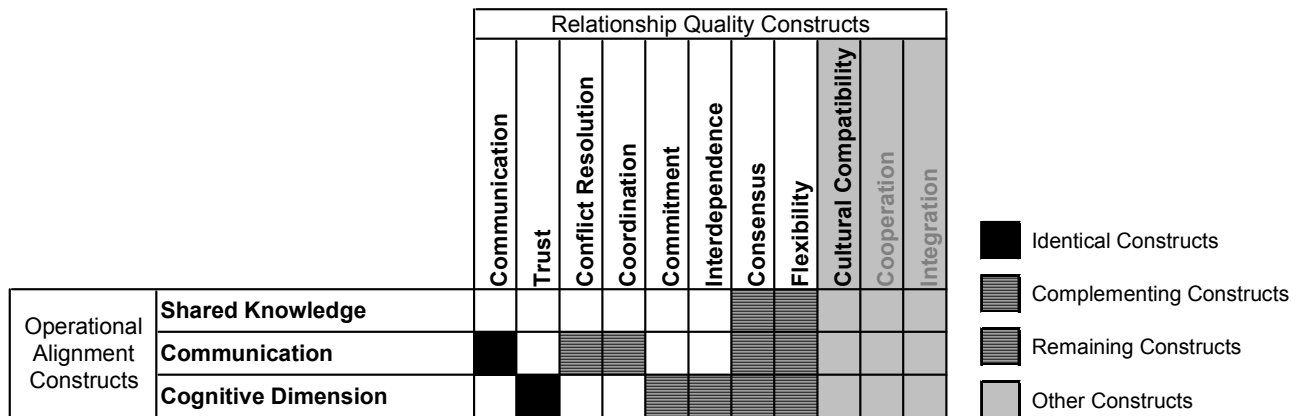

Figure 1. Matching of Operational IT Business Alignment and Relationship Constructs

Identical Constructs

The relationship constructs *communication* and *trust* are identical with constructs from opITBA and are depicted in figure 1 by black squares. Communication in the relationship context is described in the same way in the opITBA literature, whereas the construct of trust is part of the cognitive dimension in opITBA literature (Beimborn et al. 2006a; Wagner 2006). The definition of trust in both research strands is equal.

Complementing Constructs

Four of the relationship constructs add interesting perspectives to the existing opITBA dimensions (diagonally marked squares in figure 1). *Conflict resolution* and *coordination* enhance the opITBA communication, whereas *commitment* and *interdependence* add further value to the cognitive dimension of opITBA.

Conflict resolution, the ability of people involved in an outsourcing relationship to solve disagreements over goals, roles and procedures, is a good measure of communication quality in opITBA. The same applies to *coordination* that is also an expression of communication quality, because effective coordination is reached through high-quality communication (Fussell et al. 1998).

Commitment enhances the element of trust within the cognitive dimension of the opITBA literature. Besides the mere mutual expectation that the other party will not behave opportunistically in future transactions of the partnership (i.e. trust) commitment adds a long-term orientation and the pledge to commit resources to sustain this partnership.

Interdependence is quite similar to the element influence in opITBA literature. Influence mainly emphasizes the mutual ability to influence each others decisions (Nelson and Cooprider 1996). Interdependence adds the factor of complementarity of services and goods within a partnership and its mutual acknowledgement to the mere possibility of influencing each other´s decisions.

Remaining Constructs

Contribution to opITBA

Consensus and *flexibility* (horizontally marked squares in figure 1) are unique constructs from the relationship literature and have not been used for measurement of opITBA so far.

Consensus fits very good to opITBA measurement based on the SAM by Henderson and Venkatraman (1992). Strategic fit and the integration of strategic and operational business and IT domains are regarded as important for IT value creation (Henderson and Venkatraman 1993). Consensus, defined as the mutual understanding at an operational level based on the decisions made at the strategic level, fits perfectly to hitherto opITBA literature that is based on the SAM. Tasks on the operational level are dependent on strategic decisions that guide these tasks (Henderson and Venkatraman 1993). The construct of consensus bridges the gap between the operational and strategic level of the SAM. Consensus focuses on the functional integration between business and IT units on the operational level as well as on strategic fit between strategic and operational level that are both postulated by Henderson and Venkatraman (1993) as important to achieve IT business value. Consensus can be used for measuring opITBA to identify the general consensus at the operational level (i.e. the consensus in terms of short term business goals) derived from strategic long-term decisions (i.e. strategic management decisions).

Flexibility to make adaptations when circumstances change is deemed to be required for successful outsourcing relationships because of the quickly changing market environments and the overall length of (IT) outsourcing deals (Goles and Chin 2005; Grover et al. 1996). The intra-organizational relation between business department and IT unit is characterized by long-term (or even infinite) cooperation and is also affected by fast changing technology developments. Achieved alignment at a certain point in time will decline if no further efforts are undertaken. Flexibility to adapt the achievements that led to a superior alignment at a point in time is required to sustain a high level of alignment over time (Sabherwal et al. 2001). Hence, flexibility should also be considered with respect to the postulation of alignment theory in order to recognize IT business alignment as a dynamic construct (process view) that evolves over time (Avison et al. 2004; Henderson and Venkatraman 1993; Peppard and Breu 2003). Flexibility between IT and business units is a construct integral to measure the level of adaptability and sustainability of alignment.

Contribution to outsourcing relationship literature

Shared knowledge, an essential part of opITBA literature, is not mentioned in the literature on outsourcing relationships. This is surprising, because of the comparable situation of the relation between business and IT units in an alignment (=in-house situation) and an outsourcing circumstance (= cross company situation). Despite the fact, whether the IT unit is part of an external firm or not, it has to provide appropriate services to the business unit. Since alignment research has shown that shared knowledge is a critical part of operational alignment and, thus, an important factor of superior IT provision, it should also be considered in inter-organizational business-IT relationships.

Other Constructs

Cultural compatibility (shaded column with black font in figure 1) is an important factor of outsourcing relationships, especially when outsourcing crosses geographical and not only organizational boundaries (Winkler 2006). In some cases,

cultural differences in offshoring relationships are reported to be an insuperable barrier (Winkler 2006). However, if the focus is turned back to IT business alignment within organizations, cultural differences are a less important factor. Peppard and Ward (1999) report that the argumentation of cultural differences between business and IT units are an excuse, rather than a cause of ineffective working relationships (Peppard and Ward 1999). Admittedly, there are cases where differences between intra-organizational relationships, e.g. between business units and IT departments, are reported to hinder work (Luftman et al. 1999). But these cases cannot be compared to difficulties that arise by inter-organizational or even offshoring relationships. Hence, cultural compatibility is a concept which should be considered in RQ measurement in general but will be less relevant in an intra-organizational context.

Cooperation and *integration* are drivers of opITBA/RQ, not dimensions (shaded columns with grey fonts in figure 1). Decisions about B2B cooperation made by strategic management have to be implemented at the operational level. These cooperation decisions influence the opITBA/RQ dimension without being part of it. This can be, for example, the management decision to start a project, which in turn will stimulate the communication between project partners.

Integration, the intertwining of structures between partners, influences opITBA/RQ in the same way as cooperation. As an example, the creation of liaison units between partners on different organizational levels may encourage communication quality between partners and therefore this intertwining decision has an impact on opITBA/RQ without being part of it.

Proposing a Measurement Model for Operational IT Business Alignment and Relationship Quality

The derived constructs are now combined in a single model to create a measurement model for opITBA and RQ (figure 2). Shaded boxes are constructs from the relationship literature, while white boxes stem from the opITBA literature. White boxes with bold lines are opITBA constructs enhanced with elements from the relationship literature.

Based on the finding from literature of both strands, this measurement model measures the same artifact, previously called opITBA in an intra-organizational context and RQ in an inter-organizational context. The extensive congruence of both research strands should also be incorporated in the wording. We decided to label the main construct as "relationship quality", since the "relationship" term can be used in a more generic context (Heide and John 1992; Ye and Agarwal 2003).
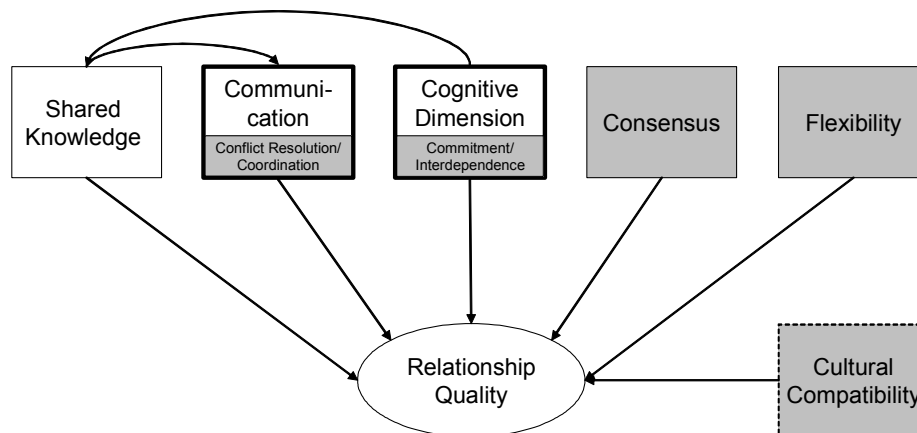

Figure 2. Relationship Quality Measurement Model

Literature on opITBA reported dependencies between the opITBA dimensions which are depicted in figure 2. The model represents a second-order construct of relationship quality, being formed by the different dimensions, which additionally show causal relationships among themselves. Reich and Benbasat 2000 show a positive impact of shared knowledge on communication between business and IT executives (Reich and Benbasat 2000). Within their empirical approach, Nelson and Cooprider (1996) illustrate that mutual trust and influence (part of the cognitive dimension in this model) both positively influence shared knowledge (Nelson and Cooprider 1996). The depicted relationship between shared knowledge and communication will also work in reverse: regular communication can positively influence the shared domain knowledge of

IT and business people. We did not find any evidence for impact between the dimensions derived from relationship literature. Nevertheless, there may be further connections between the dimensions in figure 2. Flexibility, for example, might influence the cognitive dimension, as mutual flexibility to improve a relationship might increase trust between both parties.

Since cultural compatibility has been argued to be only relevant in an inter-organizationally context it is not part of the core model (i.e. dotted lines).

Conclusion and Further Research

The research strands of IT business alignment and IT outsourcing relationships are comparable in major aspects, as they both focus on the measurement of relationships between business and IT units. They differ in that IT business alignment deals with intra-organizational and outsourcing relationships with inter-organizational relationships. Both offer a couple of constructs to measure this relationship, whereas opITBA shows the smaller fraction. We identified two identical constructs (communication and trust), four complementing constructs (conflict resolution, coordination, commitment, and interdependence) and three constructs that are unique for each of the research streams. Consensus and flexibility, derived from RQ literature, both offer new insights to the measurement of IT business alignment, while shared knowledge, an integral part of alignment literature, can contribute to the measurement of outsourcing relationships.

We matched both research stream´s constructs and propose a unified measurement model that consists of six dimensions: shared knowledge, communication and the cognitive dimension, containing trust and influence, stem from the alignment literature whereas consensus, flexibility and cultural compatibility are derived from outsourcing relationship literature. Cultural compatibility applies in case of inter-organizational relationships. To meet the congruence of both approaches we harmonize the wording of both approaches and label the main construct as "relationship quality".

Further research will primarily consist of empirically validating the construct and embedding it into the larger context of measuring what are the drivers and inhibitors of RQ. In order to get deep insights about what are the relevant facets of the developed construct but also to be able to validate it, we propose a sequential data collection process of both case studies and a subsequent quantitative approach which is fed by the case study findings. Applying such dual approaches in IS research is claimed for by Mingers (2001) who found that only a small minority of all empirical research works applied more than one research method (Mingers 2001). Since case study research has been accepted as a valid and valuable research approach within the positivist paradigm (Benbasat et al. 1987; Iivari 1991; Lee 1989), the combination of both approaches for data collection and analysis allows to deeper focus on specific aspects of reality and thereby getting a richer understanding of the object of analysis.

For the aim of this research we intend to conduct multiple case studies in order to be able to compare the differential impact of the different dimensions of relationship quality in in-house vs. outsourcing relationships. Therefore, firms with IT outsourced to a third-party vendor vs. firms with IT cooperatively sourced to a joint data processing center vs. firms with in-house provision of IT will be compared. To reduce the impact of further organizational factors which might affect the constructs, we will restrict the case sample to one particular (and furthermore rather homogeneous) industry, i.e. the German banking industry. Many German banks have outsourced or cooperatively sourced their IT many years ago which allows us to choose from a sufficient number of possible cases and to draw comparative inferences in a quite controlled setting.

As mentioned above, our research does not only focus on how to measure relationship quality but furthermore on developing and testing a model of drivers and inhibitors of this essential construct. Therefore, findings derived from the case studies will help to reshape the introduced measurement model as well as the upstream causal model which affects it. A cross-sectional survey in the same industry is intended for testing this model. Since Hirschheim (2003) has claimed for empirical outsourcing research at a more granular level to derive new and more reliable findings, our survey will (cross-sectionally) focus on three different core banking processes, which will be mortgage processing, securities processing and administration, and payments processing, in order to measure relationship quality between the related business unit and the supporting IT unit. Since there is a lot of dynamics in the industry (e.g. frequent updates due to regulation issues, various business process outsourcing and process restructuring activities), a tight relationship between business departments and IT unit shows to be very important. Moreover, the banking industry contains a high number of firms which have outsourced their IT. Thus, it provides the necessary differential groups for analyzing the impact of the different relationship dimensions and factors (i.e. drivers and inhibitors).

When deriving a general RQ construct from different strands of IS research, we do not intend to pause at the IT business relation. We furthermore believe that the same construct can effectively be used to measure other relationships as well,

although different dimensions will naturally get a stronger impact. The targeted empirical domain offers great opportunities to test this proposition. In all of the three banking processes listed above, there is the tendency of outsourcing parts of the process (i.e. selective BPO). Thus, the interface between, e.g., front office and back office in mortgage processing can either be intra-organizationally or inter-organizationally. By conducting group-wise comparisons we will be able to dig deeper into a generalized understanding of RQ.

Consequently, we can summarize the intended goals and contributions of our overall research as follows:

- As the eventual theoretical contribution, we intend to unify the networks of alignment and outsourcing relationship factors to provide a profound step towards a general theory of (inter- and intra-)organizational linkages. We aim at disclosing the network of antecedents for greater relationship quality.

- The managerial contribution would be identifying the most significant and important drivers of relationship quality in different settings but within a single control system. What leads to effective relationship management in IT business relationships? Which screws could and should be utilized on both sides of the relationship in order to reach a successful and sustainable relationship?

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