

## ENTREPRENEURIAL ACTIVITIES AS AN INITIATIVE TO ESTABLISH NETWORK RELATIONSHIPS – SELECTED ASPECTS

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**Purpose:** The purpose of this paper is to evaluate network relationships that underpin business success and how they should be effectively developed and managed in a volatile market environment.

**Methodology:** A review of the literature on the subject, theoretical concepts and models explaining the mechanism of the formation and functioning of network relationships in the context of entrepreneurship. The existing theories and concepts related to business networks are also analysed.

**Findings:** Entrepreneurial activities leading to the establishment of network relationships are part and parcel of the contemporary economy. The development of such relationships allows businesses to access new resources. However, the management of those relationships requires adequate competencies, including the capacity to build trust and manage cooperation in the long run. In this context, networking becomes a differentiating business strategy that may decide on the market success of the business. Network organisations also promote cooperation between various businesses, thus fostering entrepreneurship. Networked businesses can also share resources, knowledge and experience, which improves performance and stimulates faster growth.

**Originality/value:** To develop a comprehensive theoretical framework approach that integrates different perspectives on entrepreneurial activities and network relationships. By bringing together key concepts and theories from different fields, such as entrepreneurship, social network theory and resource and capability theory, it provides new insights into the role of network relationships in entrepreneurship development.

**Keywords:** entrepreneurship, organisational network, advantages and disadvantages of network structures.

**Category of the paper:** Research paper.

### 1. Introduction

Businesses operate in an environment marked by the presence of ever-more complex and multidimensional inter-organisational networks. For many businesses, joining a network is an opportunity to become competitive in the global market. For others, especially in the small

and medium-sized enterprise (SME) sector, network membership may become a necessity, as they could otherwise be eliminated from the market.

Under conditions of the imbalance of power, participation and cooperation in the network for smaller and less significant actors is often based on economic coercion, as a result of which they have no other option but to go with the conditions dictated by the integrator. Otherwise, they would risk exclusion from the network, and consequently deteriorating performance or even bankruptcy of the business.

Appropriate positioning in the network and the capacity to influence its other members is therefore one of the important success factors in the network model. On the other hand, incorrect positioning or inadequate strategy for operating in the network, in terms of the capacity to influence other members, may bring substantially less benefits than expected.

Whatever the reasons for deciding to join a network, entrepreneurs should be aware that certain benefits and a number of barriers to their development may follow from network membership.

## **2. Concept, types and characteristics of networks**

The concept of the network extends across a number of disciplines, from exact sciences to the humanities. The term "network", similarly to "system", "structure" or "strategy", can be classified as a concept from the management science, where closely interlinked economic, organisational or sociological references are of vital importance.

A network in the economic sense is an alternative to the imperfections and failures of the market, looking to identify the most effective coordination mechanism, which should ensure the freedom of exchange on the one hand, and indicate a certain level of planning activities on the other.

The concept of a social network was introduced by J.A. Barnes (1954), who argued that social connections between entities spread across the society on a network basis, and that relationships and connections between individuals 'wrap around' the society (Barnes, 1954). Therefore, the system of relationships among businesses forms the so-called social network structure (Granovetter, 1985) based on informal cooperative ties (Rumyantseva, Tretyak, 2003), which enables access to information, knowledge or financial support between the actors.

An economic network is primarily an organisational form that brings together a number of organisations driven by instrumental individual or collective goals, where they contribute to the network their ability to create value, such as knowledge resources, or access to the local or regional market (Borczech, Czakon, 2005).

At the organisational level, a network can be defined as a relationship between two or more entities involved in long-term cooperation that allows them to gain or maintain a competitive edge over other entities that do not belong to the network.

It can be concluded on the basis of the above definitions that a network in an organisational context defines the interdependence of actors involved in achieving a specific goal. A network is therefore a form of close cooperation between a limited number of customers, suppliers and other stakeholders, allowing a stable posture for businesses, while providing flexibility and adaptation to an evolving market.

Another differentiating criterion is the nature of the relationships between partners, allowing delineation of the networks of, for example (Castells, 2008):

- suppliers – a subcontracting arrangement between the customer and the supplier,
- producers – involving the combination of production capacity, financial and human resources, in order to expand product offerings and business reach,
- customers – being time-limited links between production companies and distributors, marketing channels, commercial intermediaries adding extra features to the product, and end-users in national or international markets,
- standard coalitions – formed by entities able to impose standards on a global scale in order to subordinate a certain number of businesses to the standards of, or compatibility with, their own product,
- technological cooperation – acquisition of product designs or modern production technology and exchange of scientific knowledge and R&D results.

Yet another classification criterion for network organisation is the durability and strength of the links between the network-forming entities. Based on that criterion, the following types of network organisations can be distinguished (Brilman, 2002):

- integrated, that is comprising dispersed entities that belong to one group in legal or financial terms,
- federated, that is groupings of legal or natural persons that form a community of their own needs and wish to develop on their own the ways of satisfying them (e.g. cooperatives or associations),
- contractual networks, formed by the conclusion of a licensing or franchise agreement between formally independent partners (hotels or restaurants),
- direct relationship networks, found primarily in politics or the world of religion, but also used in economic processes, such as door-to-door sales.

As classification criteria vary, an organisational network in broadest terms can be defined as a set of individual organisations linked by mutual relationships that enhance their capabilities, providing synergies in their activities and offering them economic and social advantages. A network can be viewed from three perspectives (Prowman, Human, 2000):

- as a research topic, in which one perceives a network order as formalised and non-formalised exchange relationships that guarantee the combination of independent interests,
- as an organisational form, in which hierarchy is replaced by partnership relationships, having a significant impact on growth, value creation, achieving competitive advantage, innovation, learning and efficiency,
- as a method for coordinating interaction, using the market mechanism and partner relationships, as a result of which members contribute unique value creation capabilities.

The strategic dimension of the network emphasises, above all, the interdependence of businesses and their complementariness in terms of resources, the effective use of instruments involved in coordinating the interaction, taking into account the price mechanism, the reduction of bureaucracy, the purposeful shaping of network participation dynamics and the efficiency of the interaction across the whole network and of the individual participants.

The essence of the organisational network, as a particular entity and environment, is defined by the following aspects (Gulari, 1998):

- asymmetry of position and participation in the network, as a natural property of its structure, which is treated as a function of the network size, the processes taking place, or the availability of resources and knowledge;
- social embeddedness resulting from social relations between network participants, and the development of the capacity for competitive activities. It influences the ability to make agreements with other actors based on trust, to identify with a given network environment, and the ability to adapt to changes in the near and more distant environment;
- the diffusion of organisational behaviours and decisions within the network, which results in an exchange of information and knowledge leading to the equalisation of potentials and unification of organisational or technology standards;
- the influence of the network on strategic decision-making processes, leading to the formation of interdependencies and interactions that mark out the area of sound managerial choices, which translates into the creation of competitive advantage.

**Table 1.**

*Overview of network relationship characteristics*

<b>Author</b>	<b>Features of network relationships</b>
H. Håkansson (1982)	proximity, complexity, long-term
G. Easton (1992)	mutual orientation of actors, dependence, mutual obligations, investment in network links, atmosphere of mutual contacts
D. Ford, H. Håkansson, J. Johanson (1992)	dynamics and degree of use, type of reciprocity, singularity, long-term relationships, links to near and more distant environment
K. Fonfara (1995)	continuity of links, multifaceted nature of relationships, complexity, immediacy, informal nature, symmetry

Cont. table 1.

D. McLoughlin, C. Horan (2000)	continuity, complexity, symmetry, informality, adaptations, cooperation and conflict, social dependencies
D. Ford, L.E. Gadde, H. Håkansson, I. Snehota (2003)	interaction, interdependence, incompleteness of organisations
W. Czakon (2005)	exchange, commitment, reciprocity
R. Błażlak (2010)	interaction, interdependence, infinity of links, exchange, reciprocity, reinforcing information channels
M. Odlanicka-Poczobutt (2011)	durability of ties, long-term cooperation

Source: author's own elaboration based on: Błażlak, 2010, p. 30; Czakon, 2005, p. 10; Easton, 1992, p. 22; Fonfara 2004, p. 12; Ford, Håkansson, Johanson, 1993, pp. 26-41; Ford, Gadde, Håkansson, Snehota, 2003, pp. 2-11; Håkansson, 1982, pp. 10-26; McLoughlin, Horan, 2000, pp. 287-289; Odlanicka-Poczobutt, 2011, pp. 344-345.

### 3. Strategic aspects of network establishment and operation

When analysing the strategic components of a network, particular attention should be paid to those features that ensure the success of the project it implements, i.e. meeting the requirements and expectations of the main network participants or customers of the project. By using systems approach, strategic components of network establishment and operation affecting its organisational aspects are identified below.

**In terms of organisation**, a strategic component of network establishment and operation is the identification of the network type. The rules of cooperation between the actors allow us to identify the role of the leader, resulting from the principles defined in mutually approved agreements, is to (Tubielewicz, 2017):

- ensure proper implementation of the project as a whole, which involves, for example, day-to-day coordination of the network partners' work, as well as continuous monitoring and control of all project activities,
- ensure due performance of the network partners' duties, which involves, inter alia, systematic analysis of the phenomena occurring in the network,
- grant powers of attorney necessary for proper functioning of the network,
- represent the network partners externally and internally,
- draw up and sign documents on behalf of the entire network,
- mediate on key issues including transfer of funds, reporting between network partners and the project sponsor,
- intervening if there are identified abnormalities in the project task implementation process,
- modify the course of the project, make changes or launch new activities to improve project implementation.

The operation of a network established to implement a specific project, is **formally** based on the agreement between the participating entities, which does not, however, create a new business entity. Strategic provisions incorporated in the agreement form the basis for the project implementation. They usually have a strong bearing on the key success factors of the network's operation and so are cornerstones of the project's success. Formal rules of the network operation are based on mutual obligations of the network members to work together in order to achieve predefined objectives. The rules that are established between the partners and the cooperation between them require practical development of suitable rules for the cooperation.

Strategic factors influencing and conditioning cooperation between network partners include (Tubielewicz, 2017):

- definition of the role of each partner, the rules of interaction, the level of rivalry and competition between partners,
- definition of representatives and the decision-making area,
- principles of communication between network partners to ensure that tasks are carried out efficiently (communication technology, teleconferencing, shared repository of information),
- definition of instruments that ensure proper coordination of activities,
- definition of the scope and level of cooperation as well as rivalry and competition,
- individual expectations and views on the operation of the network,
- degree of trust between partners,
- mutual openness, including the ability to learn about the network partner's internal organisation,
- readiness to learn together to ensure project implementation,
- mutual commitment of the network community to focus on cooperation and interaction between businesses.

The cooperation of businesses that are network members seeks to attain the objectives set for the network. On the one hand, the cooperation is governed by a formal agreement; and on the other, the numerous interdependencies that may arise during the project implementation may prevent legal regulation of every situation that may affect the cooperation. This may be due to a number of factors, such as the development of relationships between entities in the network environment, influencing the closer and more distant environment, but also organisational culture of the respective network partners.

#### 4. Advantages and disadvantages of network structures

The benefits of network cooperation, allowing members to attain objectives that are instrumental in achieving competitive advantages, are prompting more and more companies to join or establish networks. Alongside the potential benefits, however, network participation also entails some risks, so it is strategically important for businesses to find suitable solutions for effective cooperation between networking businesses.

One of the reasons why enterprises join network structures and establish them in the business environment is to defend themselves against the effects of potential economic crises.

There are many reasons behind the rise of network structures, such as: phenomena and changes in the economic and social environment for business, as well as changes in the structure of resources and their sustainable use.

In particular, entities from the small and medium-sized enterprise sector that demonstrate lower financial, human resources or technical potential are keen to operate within business networks as they are seen as offering opportunities in an increasingly competitive market. Those opportunities include (Lachiewicz, Zakrzewska-Bielawska, 2012):

- Improved market access resulting from the economy of scale, which is important in globalising markets.
- Less operating uncertainty and risk, afforded by the creation of network partner relationships.
- Increased flexibility in business operations, as resources can be reallocated more flexibly and costs are lower.
- Higher competitiveness of businesses forming networks through their higher operating pace, and easier adaptation to market conditions.
- Effective use of existing potential and growth opportunities (specialisation, coordination of activities).
- Easier access to scarce resources and their quick transfer between network members.
- Acquisition and exchange of information by applying state-of-the-art communication methods.
- Lower costs of acquiring and disseminating information.
- Improved business innovation in the area of technology, organisation and marketing (unified technical and technology standards and transfer of innovations); increased R&D spending.
- Cooperation in the implementation of projects and exchange of ideas between partners.
- Better position vis-à-vis banks, suppliers and other organisations.
- More opportunities for market expansion.

The operation of networks, and economic networks in particular, also involves disadvantages, because economic downturns or crises affecting one member business may spill over and result in the collapse of other network members.

Disadvantages of developing network structures include (Lachiewicz, Zakrzewska-Bielawska, 2012):

- mismatching of network partners (incompatibility of organisational cultures of the partner businesses),
- higher transaction costs as the number of partners increases,
- restrictions on access to information, resulting, for example, from distrust of partners,
- adverse changes in the external operating conditions of the businesses (e.g. a decline in demand for network products, less favourable legal solutions),
- reluctance of network partners to cooperate,
- striving for operational independence to benefit one's own organisation only,
- conflicts between the network headquarters and partner companies,
- reluctance to transfer innovation, ideas and competence,
- coordination issues when the network grows exceedingly large.

The above barriers may significantly undermine performance of the entire network structure and thus make it more vulnerable to undesirable economic phenomena.

## **5. Network links and entrepreneurial development**

The globalisation of the economy and the accompanying diversification of business activities renders it necessary to ensure access to and use of knowledge on the functioning of markets, processes, products, technologies. Entrepreneurial businesses are those that, among other things, introduce changes that are beneficial to themselves and their customers in all areas of their activity, continuously improve the quality of their products, cooperate with other companies in the industry and create conditions for acquiring and using knowledge (Włodarczyk, Janczewski, 2010).

Entrepreneurship of network organisations is the outcome of the activities of the network organiser and the network members. The cooperation between network members, the systematic improvement of the product and the demand for knowledge are instrumental in being entrepreneurial.

Activities undertaken by networked businesses are guided by the idea that the business is a part of a broader system of mutually interacting entities. The internationalisation of business is an important element in the development of the links and interactions between suppliers, their customers and other stakeholders. Such activities improve the outcomes of work of the

business as compared to operating alone, without establishing any relationships (Nowacki, 2014).

In an increasingly competitive market, companies are moving more and more towards collaboration with other actors in order to autonomously develop specific capabilities and resources. For a networked business, opportunities open up to be better informed as regards the development of activities in domestic and foreign markets by establishing new contacts. The internationalisation of the business as discussed here is strongly conditional on the nature, intensity and development of the various links within the network, the position in the network, as well as the future opportunities created by a given system of ties (Limański, Drabik, 2010).

Business cooperation relations become more important in those businesses that are forced to respond quickly to developments in their market environment. In this context, networking is a response to the rapid progress of science, advanced technology or entrepreneurial growth. Quick and effective combination of human resources, capital or technology in manufacturing processes, creates better prospects for a competitive advantage (Drabik, 2015).

There are five stages in the development of those relationships, not only covering modern technology but also activities of other business. The pre-relationship stage comes first, and involves the search for a potential partner as a source of complementary resources. That search is typically driven by growing market requirements, which cannot always be met by the incumbent business partners. The motivation may also be the existing partner's defaulting on contracts, higher prices of supplied goods and services, or the company's policy of seeking alternative opportunities for resources or innovative products in the market (Światowiec, 2006).

The second stage, involving the establishment of cooperation, begins with the negotiation of terms and conditions, the development of procedures and ways of working between entities based on the benefits and costs of maintaining cooperation. At this stage, it is very important to create adequate channels of communication between the stakeholders, in particular that the bond created at this stage is very fragile and extremely easy to break.

The next (cooperation) stage is about reducing the distance between the stakeholders, as well as about realising and maximising benefits. At this stage, delivering on the commitments becomes very important, which ultimately increases the satisfaction from the relationship.

Those actions by network participants lead to growing mutual attractiveness of the partners, reduce uncertainty and risk inherent in the cooperation and strengthen the motivation to maintain and further develop the relationship. A well-established cooperation can go beyond its original scope and intensity, and the increasing benefits reduce the chance of seeking other ties that could potentially become a liability to each partner (Limański, Drabik, 2018).

The culmination of the development of partner networks is the stage of long-term cooperation, marked by stabilisation and sustainability of the relationship. It is the outcome of joint ventures and increases the participants' experience of the cooperation, which leads to the development of operating standards, procedures, systems and relational norms.

Despite its many advantages, sluggish economy can also lead to some stakeholders returning to old routines, causing the collaboration to lose its cooperative nature that maximises the value of the exchange value for all stakeholders. In extreme cases, it can induce opportunistic behaviour from one of the parties, which exploits the commitment and standard behaviour of the partner. In that case, the quality of the relationship may deteriorate or one of the partners may withdraw if the other party becomes overdependent on the relationship, which may lead to the network collapse.

Business activities undertaken to establish and operate business networks therefore need to ensure and strengthen the competitive market position of the participating businesses and to establish such forms of cooperation between economic operators that ensure access to additional resources necessary for innovation, among others (Glückler, Dehning et al., 2012).

The operation of network enterprises makes it possible to combine various entrepreneurial initiatives by exploiting the existing potential of the partners that form the network, such as their organisational, process or information capacities. All those factors are controlled by the businesses and allow them to implement an operating strategy that increases the efficiency and effectiveness of their operation (Barney, 1991).

Entrepreneurial actions therefore seek to reduce the overall input required to launch new goods and services to the market, while facilitating the enterprise to direct the company's limited internal resources towards creating and sustaining a competitive advantage (Grabowska, 2014).

The entrepreneurial spirit of a network organisation manifests itself primarily in the creation of suitable conditions supporting the operation of the participating businesses, their mutual cooperation and growth. At the same time, the activities of the network organiser and its participants should be profitable, contribute to the creation of a new and better product, and offer benefits for the businesses and their staff alike.

Entrepreneurial activities of networked businesses are the outcomes of the market activity of the network and its participants, its marketing effort, resources, innovations, investments, quality of services, image, or how it acquires knowledge and cares for the environment. Such a broad range of factors to assess the “entrepreneurial quality”, or entrepreneurship, is instrumental in developing metrics to assess organisational networks, and select those metrics that are the most suitable (Table 2).

**Table 2.**

*Components and metrics to assess the organisational network's entrepreneurship*

<b>Component of a network entrepreneurship assessment</b>	<b>Metrics of entrepreneurship</b>
Network activity in the market	Market share, reach, expansion into other markets, occupation of new niches
Marketing	Distinctive goods and services, broad market offering, competitive price, promotions, advertising, sales growth
Network resources	National and EU financial resources, knowledge, materials
Investments	Investment activity, share of resources allocated to investments
Innovation	New services, new technologies, improvements, readiness to innovate
Quality	Specialisation, quality systems, increase in customer satisfaction

Cont. table 2.

Corporate image	External and internal business image, recommendations from important customers, reputation in the environment, CSR activities
Knowledge	Continuous training, investment in training, professional improvement, increasing professional qualifications
Environmental aspects	Waste recycling, sustainability
Local community	Development of family businesses, creation of new jobs, cooperation with local organisations, support for local and regional initiatives

Source: Janczewski, 2005, p. 118.

## 6. Summary

Achieving a competitive advantage in the market increasingly more often involves the establishment of international relations and a network approach to strategy based on the cooperation of business. Market globalisation forces companies to cooperate with other entities, building around themselves a network of both economic and social interdependencies.

The basis for the activities of a network organisation is its creation, understood as a network of external and internal links, which are established through the organisation of contacts and contracts. This enables the integration and coordination of many diverse organisations and the exchange and creation of new knowledge, experience and skills, and thus the addition of value to the links and processes of the value chain and supply chain.

Therefore, the strategic management process of networking businesses, in particular from the SME sector, requires the integration of multiple business, technology and distribution processes in order to achieve a competitive advantage in the market.

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