

EFFECT OF STRATEGIC NETWORKING ON SUPPLY CHAIN PERFORMANCE: EVIDENCE FROM SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES IN ELDORET TOWN, UASIN GISHU COUNTY, KENYA

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Abstract

The main purpose of the study was to determine the effect of strategic networking on supply chain performance of small and medium enterprises in Eldoret Town, Uasin Gishu County, Kenya. The study was guided by Transaction Cost Theory. This study adopted a correlation research design. A sample size formula was used to select a sample size of 30 SMEs. The study used random numbers to SMEs. Questionnaires were used to obtain the primary data. The data was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively using descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) and inferential statistics (Pearson correlation and multiple regression model). The findings indicated that networking intensity and strength networking have a positive and significant effect on the supply chain performance of SMEs. Thus; SME strategic networking strategies are important determinates of supply chain performance. Therefore, the study recommends that SMEs should have high level of cooperation and commitment with their network actors; they also need to have a broad external network that covers individuals from different age brackets, ethnic backgrounds and geographical locations. SME managers need to actively engage in networking within and outside of their existing business networks and more so with those that are of special relevance to their businesses in terms of knowledge and Technology.

Keywords: Networking Intensity, Supply Chain Performance, Networking Strength, Strategic Networking, SMEs

INTRODUCTION

Globally, improving supply chain performance of Small and medium industries is considered a vital element of the growth of Gross Domestic Product. Kraus, Harms, & Schwarz, (2006) but there is very little objective data relating activities to business supply chain performance in SMEs yet there are claims by academics and managers that activities do improve business supply chain performance (Simpson, Padmore, Taylor, & Frecknall-Hughes, 2006). Some researchers (Hashim, Khairuddin and Zakaria, 2007) have measured the supply chain performance of exporting SMEs by using the return on assets (ROA), return on sales (ROS), return on investment (ROI), and growth. Growth is based on the composite of the average supply chain performance of the ROA, ROS and ROI of the SMEs (BPCI). Based on their work on SMEs stated overall, financial measures are most widely used than other measures for supply chain performance measurement in SMEs.

Numerous factors that challenge the survival and growth of SMEs in both developing and developed countries, finance has been identified as one of the most important factor (UNCTAD, 2001; SBA, 2000). Having better networking strategies gives SMES the chance to develop their businesses and to acquire better technologies for production, therefore ensuring their competitiveness. Networking strategy is a useful way for SMEs owners/managers to expand expertise and knowledge (Gilmore *et al*, 2006). Due to the nature and simple structure of small firms and their frequent contacts with customers, all SMEs emphasis on direct relationship with specific customers and other important factors in networks strategies (Reijonen,2010). Gilmore, *et al*. (2006) recognized that networking activity could be informal even though it is important as it can help SME owners / managers utilize their limited resources and compete more effectively with their powerful competitors. Therefore, SMEs are often recognized as a suitable area for the forming of effective networks. Regarding the limitations that SMEs are faced with in gaining resources, networking is an important business dimension. Networking encapsulates owners/managers communicating activities with people, attending relevant trade events, gathering information regarding business activities in order to do business plan and performing activities (Gilmore *et al*, 2006). Nevertheless, the research evidences that are related to SMEs networking are inadequate. This is true especially in terms of activities, or the need for developing networks by SMEs in doing.

Networking is a naturally inherent aspect of SME owner-manager decision making, particularly those decisions relating to supply chain performance. This is because owner/managers must go outside the businesses' physical confines in order to do business and this business is -led activity (Gilmore, Carson, & Grant, 2001). However, as with many developing countries, there is limited research and scholarly studies about the SMEs and

networking strategies in Kenya particularly SMEs in Uasin Gishu County. According to an SME Baseline Survey (1999), fifty-six per cent of formal businesses are located in the Nairobi region. On the other hand, informal sector enterprises are more widely distributed, with the majority found in the rural areas. This survey highlights the regional distribution of enterprises in Kenya. However this data is generalized and does not give information specific to Uasin Gishu County. Given the importance the SME sector in areas of employment creation, growth and poverty alleviation, it is important that it is efficiently managed and developed but this has been lacking due to external factors that are beyond the owner-manager's control. These factors are inherent in the institutional environment of Kenya, which favors larger firms. Institutional gap left by the government of Kenya has proactively made the SME to avoid the risks involved through informal institutional settings of social networks. Risks are as well inherent in such arrangements but it is the ideal mechanisms through which the SME can operate under such environment (Birley *et al.* 1991). Hence, need to study effect of strategic networking on the supply chain performance of SMEs.

Study findings show that although the general indicators reflect positive growth among SME in terms of total business worth, turnover, gross profit and number of employees, they obscure incidences of stagnation or decline in growth (Kiraka, Kobia and Katwalo, 2013). Incidences of decline or stagnation were significant at between 15 to 30 percent across the four measures. Networking's in terms of services, markets and sources of raw materials were, however, less common among SME. The study found no evidence of significant differences in growth and networking's among enterprises across geographical regions, borrowing stream and age groups. Ideally, Supply chain performance of Small and medium enterprises are the major agents of economic growth and employment, finance on the other hand has been identified in many business surveys as the most important factor determining the survival and growth of small and medium sized enterprises in both developing and developed countries. Access to finance allows SMEs to undertake productive investments to expand their businesses and to acquire the latest technologies, thus ensuring their competitiveness and that of the nation as a whole. Poorly functioning financial systems can seriously undermine the microeconomic fundamentals of a country, resulting in lower growth in income and employment.

Currently, SMEs (Small and Medium Enterprises) in Uasin County face unique issues, which affect their growth and profitability and hence, diminish their ability to contribute effectively to sustainable development. Just to mention a few, there have been complaints regarding tedious registration and certification processes in Kenya. Various bodies have their requirements and require money and time. One option left to an entrepreneur is to evade the process but this proves more expensive at the end because of penalties given. For instance, for

an entrepreneur running chemical related business in town, a certificate is needed from the Ministry of Health or similar authority at county level to show that the products or services offered have been analyzed and found to be safe. The authorities may also require the product to conform to legal standards regarding composition.

Several studies have been conducted in this area; Study done by Fong, K.S & Tim ,M (2006) on Strategic networking and growth of Technology oriented SMEs in Singapore, found that firm growth is independent of the network range, but predicted by the intensity (frequency of contact) and the “richness” of relationships within the production network layer (e.g. with customers and suppliers). A study by Turyakira, & Mbidde, (2015) on networking on SMEs in Uganda found that networking factors can help to improve the survival rate of SMEs and may offer great opportunities for business competitiveness both locally and globally. However, still relationship is not clear with other research findings like Kitprem, Peng, Dennis,(2007) on Relationship between Strategic planning and SMEs in Thailand found that level of strategic planning is positively associated with growth of the SMEs. None of the studies has investigated so far the relationship between strategic networking on supply chain supply chain performance and small medium enterprises in Eldoret town, Uasin Gishu County, Kenya. Thus, this study therefore, examined the relationship between strategic networking on supply chain performance and SMEs in Eldoret town, Uasin Gishu County, Kenya. The researcher in order to avoid bias and to provide for a neutral point of approach, the following research hypotheses were tested.

H₀₁: There is no effect of networking intensity on supply chain performance.

H₀₂: There is no effect of networking strength on supply chain performance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Transaction cost theory by Ronald Coase (1937) concentrates on the relative efficiency of different exchange processes. If for the firm-as-a-production-function view the internalization of one or more stages of production might generate technological economies (that is savings on the costs of physical inputs), for the firm-as-organizational view it could lead also to transactional economies (that is savings on the costs of exchange inputs, when reduced amounts of resources are required to get the intermediate inputs). An intermediate step between pure market exchange and vertical integration is the use of short term and long-term contracts. The decision to enter durable contractual relationships by signing long-term contracts and the alternative vertical integration strategy share the same motivation: the choice among these options is then a matter of degree. Unfortunately, this implies that it is difficult to distinguish between them empirically (Raluca. 2005).

Following the transaction cost theory (Bahli, Bouchaib, & Rivard, Suzanne, 2003), firms evaluate the relative costs of alternative governance structures (spot market transactions, short-term contracts, long-term contracts, vertical integration) for managing transactions. Transaction costs could be defined as the costs of acquiring and handling the information about the quality of inputs, the relevant prices, the supplier's reputation, and so on. Contractual agreements are costly: costs have to be borne in order to negotiate and write the terms of the arrangements, to monitor the supply chain performance of the contracting party, to enforce the contracts. Firms emerge as a way of economizing on transaction costs in a world of uncertainty, where contractual arrangements are too expensive. The basic framework was enriched with the introduction of two concepts: bounded rationality (Bahli, Bouchaib, & Rivard, Suzanne, 2003.) and opportunism. The former underlines that human beings have limited cognitive competencies; if it is not possible to foresee each future contingency, all contracts turn out to be in some way incomplete. The latter is defined as self-interest with guile and is particularly important in small number bargaining situations. Where it is possible to choose among many firms, opportunism is not an important problem. If, on the other side, one contracting party has undertaken some specific investments in view of the future trade with a downstream or upstream firm, it is locked into that particular relationship: the ex-ante competitive situation shifts towards an ex-post bilateral monopoly.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Effect of Networking Intensity on Supply chain performance

In a study done by Chimucheka (2013) on Networks and Supply chain performance of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Different Stages of the Life Cycle: A Case Study of a Small Business in the Netherlands, The paper investigates the relationship between small business supply chain performance and the use of networks in the start-up and growth stage of the life cycle. A qualitative approach was adopted in exploring the effect of networks on small business supply chain performance. A case study of one firm in the Netherlands and an in-depth interview was conducted to complement a thorough literature review on entrepreneurial networks, small business supply chain performance and business life cycle. The study found a relationship between supply chain performance and entrepreneurial networks in both the start-up stage and the growth stage of the firm. Networks are important to small businesses for information and opportunity seeking, accessing resources and gaining legitimacy. Small business supply chain performance improves as a firm moves from start-up to growth stage of the life cycle. Understanding the factors that impact small business supply chain performance is

important for business advisors, policymakers and other relevant stakeholders to better serve the small business sector.

In study done by Bilian, Tang & Marquis (2014) on persistently learning: How small-world network imprints affect subsequent firm learning. They integrate and extend organizational imprinting and organizational learning theories in a study of how firms' small-world networks at founding have enduring effects on firm learning. They show that firms embedded in networks having denser clustering and shorter path lengths at founding are subsequently more inclined toward exploratory learning. They also demonstrate that subsequent network positions (closeness centrality and structural holes) strengthen the initial small world network imprinting effect. Results based on a sample of US venture capital firms from 1995 to 2003 largely support our hypotheses. Contributions to imprinting theory, the organizational learning literature, and inter-firm network studies are discussed.

In addition, Carson, *et al.*, (2004) conducted a study on Networking among SMES in UK using a sample size of 314 managers from SMEs in manufacturing sector. Findings indicated that marketing networking intensity shows SME owner-managers tendency to use marketing networks in doing marketing, which have resulted from integration between levels of networking, hence high supply chain performance of SMEs.

A study by Gilmore, (2006) on networking intensity on SME competitive advantage in Greece showed that a network that has lower intensity probably produced high quality of information with low rate of redundancy. The study used a sample of a 211 small firms and using the model of strong and weak ties was popularized by Granovett. This model suggested that strong ties always created among those contacts very close to the entrepreneurs and normally involved emotional and psychological support. The closed contacts might be their family members, relatives and friends who also provide financial support to the entrepreneurs based on long-term relationship.

Korir, Maru, Kipruto, & Koskei, D (2012) studied Effects of Network structure on supply chain performance of minor event management ventures in Kenya. The purpose of this research was to establish the relationship between network structure and supply chain performance of event management ventures (EMVs). Explanatory design was adopted. 271 entrepreneurs from three selected counties participated in the study. The fit indices of the structural model indicated that the model was acceptable. Thus they concluded that the hypothesis that network structure affects venture supply chain performance was not supported ($\beta=0.026$, $p<0.05$). Based on the findings, the study concluded that network structure does not affect venture supply chain performance.

Effect of Networking Strength on Supply chain performance

In study by Walter, W. P, Kenneth, W. K, Laurel, Smith-Doerr & Jason. Owen-Smith, (2011) on Network Position and Firm Supply chain performance: Organizational Returns to Collaboration in the Biotechnology Industry. They examine the relationship between position in a network of relationships and organizational supply chain performance. Drawing on ten years of observations (1988-1997) for nearly 400 firms in the human biotechnology industry, they utilize three types of panel regressions to unravel the complex linkages between network structure, patenting, and various firm-level outcome measures. Their results highlight the critical role of collaboration in determining the competitive advantage of individual biotech firms and in driving the evolution of the industry. They also found that there are decreasing returns to network experience and diversity, suggesting that there are limits to the learning that occurs through inter-organizational networks.

In their literature on social networks in organizations demonstrates that certain types of network topology are optimal. However, little research leverages the ample data created by people's electronic communications to refine and verify theories. This gap is problematic, because the literature on organizational networks suffers from the same deficits as much of the social network literature: both tend to be focused on small, static networks. In their study, they mitigate this gap by collecting and mining the largest organizational social network ever collected. They found out that not only does the population level topology of social network correlate with supply chain performance, attributes of the nodes in a social network such as human capital and status that can be beneficial to work supply chain performance. In addition to an individual's own human capital and network position, the human capital and status in one's network can be instrumental to one's success.

Networking strength offers an important route for individual SMEs to address their problems as well as to improve their competitive position. By coordinating their activities, enterprises can collectively achieve economies of scale beyond the reach of individual small-scale firms and obtain bulk-purchase inputs, achieve optimal scale in the use of machinery and pool production capacities to meet large-scale orders. Inter-enterprise cooperation also enables SMEs to specialize in their core businesses and give way to an external division of labor thus improving their efficiency in production. Joint work also encourages enterprises to learn from each other, exchange ideas and experience to improve product quality and take over more profitable market segments (Gilsing, 2005).

Individual SMEs experience difficulties in achieving economies of scale in the purchase of such inputs as equipment, raw materials, finance and consulting services and are often unable to take advantage of market opportunities that require large production quantities,

homogenous standards and regular supply therefore network strength was aid in providing financial stability hence high supply chain performance. Small size is also a constraint on internalization of functions such as training, market intelligence, logistics and technology innovation, while preventing the achievement of a specialized and effective internal division of labour. To preserve their narrow profit margins, small-scale entrepreneurs in developing countries are often unable to introduce innovative improvements to products and processes and this limits the scope of firms to take advantage of new market opportunities (Witt, 2004).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a correlation research. The basic idea behind correlation research was to examine relationships between strategic networking on supply chain performance and SMEs in Eldoret town, Uasin Gishu County, Kenya.

Population and Sample

The population of study comprised registered SMEs where owners/managers in Uasin Gishu County were targeted. According to Uasin Gishu County records there are 10252 registered SMEs, (Company Registrar, 2013). Out of these 2053 SMEs are in Eldoret Town. The study only targeted SMEs within seven sectors, namely; financial services, Retail, Telecommunication, Agriculture, Hospitality, Professional services and Workshop services. A sample size of 30 was selected using cluster sampling technique.

Data Collection Instrument

Self-administered Questionnaires were used to obtain the primary data required for the field. This research employed a Likert scale i.e. strongly disagree to strongly agree, in rating the various responses. The respondents were required to read, understand and tick an appropriate choice. The respondents comprised of the SME manager/owners in Eldoret town. Under this study, reliability were determined through cronbach alpha method. Cronbach alpha values for the two sections (0.812 and 0.711) were above the accepted range of 0.7.

Descriptions of Data Analysis and Presentation

Data was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Data analysis was facilitated by use of SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) Computer package. Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Descriptive methods were employed in analyzing qualitative data where frequencies and proportions were used in interpreting the respondent's perception of issues that were raised in the questionnaires so as to answer the research questions.

Descriptive statistics such as frequency distribution, percentages, means and standard deviations were calculated and data presented in form of tables, graphs and charts were used. Inferential statistics was used to draw implications from the data with regard to the regression model.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This section is devoted to the presentation, discussion and interpretation of the findings. The presentation of findings was done based the hypothesis of the study. The study findings revealed that 335 questionnaires were distributed to the respondents. 258 questionnaires out of the 335 were returned, which gives a response rate of approximately 77% percent. In the study, 58% (150) of the respondents are male and 42% (108) are female. This indicates that more male individuals are in business. Further, 41.5% of the SMEs have been in operation for 11 to 15 years, 234, 74% of the respondents confirmed that there between 11 to 20 employees.

Networking Intensity

The researcher examined the effect of networking intensity on supply chain performance. The findings indicated that SMEs have continued networking (mean = 4.3, SD = 0.552).It is also evident that they have been using networking since they started their business (mean = 4.17, SD = 0.509).Further, SMEs intend to continue using networking to market their product (mean = 4.01, SD = 1.006).Similarly, SME have used networks to market their products. However, SME have used networks to market their products. Thus, the respondents were generally uncertain in regards to the use of networks to market their products (mean = 3.22, SD = 1.131).

Table 1: Networking Intensity

	Mean	Std. Deviation
I have used networks to market my products	3.22	1.131
I intend to continue using networking to market my product	4.01	1.006
I will continue networking	4.3	0.552
I have been using networking since I started my business	4.17	0.509

Networking Strength

In this section of the study, the researcher sought to establish the effect of networking strength on supply chain performance. Table 2 presents the findings of the study. As evidenced in table 2, SMEs have strong trust with their network actors (mean = 4.41, SD = 0.545).Also, SMEs and their network actors have a relationship beyond business (mean = 4.34, SD = 0.905).As well, SME have high level of cooperation between their business and network actors (mean = 4.34,

SD = 0.535). Besides, SMEs and their network actors are committed to each other (mean = 4.32, SD = 0.523). With SME indicating high networking strength they are able to obtain route for individual SMEs to address their problems as well as to improve their competitive position.

Table 2: Networking Strength

	Mean	Std. Deviation
I have strong trust with my network actors	4.41	0.545
I and my network actors are committed to each other	4.32	0.523
We have high level of cooperation between my business and network actors	4.34	0.535
I and my network actors have a relationship beyond business	4.34	0.905

Correlation Analysis

A significant correlation exists between networking intensity and SME supply chain performance (0.370) – Pearson correlation significance at 0.01 and 0.000 significance < 0.05 which implies significant correlation. Also, there is a significant correlation between networking strength and SME supply chain performance (0.466) – Pearson correlation significance at 0.01 and 0.000 significance < 0.05 which implies significant correlation.

Table 3: Correlation Results

	SME Supply Chain Performance	Networking Intensity	Networking Strength
SME Supply Chain Performance	1		
Networking Intensity	.370**	1	
Networking Strength	.466**	.459**	1

Regression Results

Coefficient of determination explains the extent to which changes in the dependent variable can be explained by the change in the independent variables or the percentage of variation in the dependent variable (supply chain performance) that is explained by all the two independent variables (networking diversity, networking strength). The independent variables that were studied, explain only 26.7% change in supply chain performance as represented by the R². This therefore means that other factors not studied in this research contribute 73.3% of the change in supply chain performance. The significance value is 0.000 which is less than 0.05 and the F critical (value = 23.017) thus the model is statistically significant in predicting SME supply chain performance.

Table 4: Regression Results

	Unstandardized		Standardized Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	T	Sig.
(Constant)	1.886	0.297		6.361	0.000
Networking intensity	0.148	0.043	0.21	3.457	0.001
Networking strength	0.239	0.042	0.364	5.756	0.000
R Square	0.267				
Adjusted R Square	0.255				
F	23.017				
Sig.	.000b				

a Dependent Variable: SME supply chain performance

Hypothesis Testing

The study has established that networking intensity has a positive and significant effect on supply chain performance (beta = 0.21, $p < 0.05$). In agreement with the results, a study by Chimucheka, T, (2013) on Networks and Supply chain performance of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Different Stages of the Life Cycle revealed that there is a relationship between supply chain performance and entrepreneurial networks in both the start-up stage and the growth stage of the firm. Consistently, Carson, et al., (2004) conducted a study on Networking among SMES in UK and found out that SME owner-managers tendency to use marketing networks in doing marketing results in high supply chain performance of SMEs.

The results have also revealed that networking strength has a positive and significant effect on supply chain supply chain performance (beta = 0.364, $p < 0.05$). In line with the findings of the study, networking strength makes it possible for enterprises to learn from each other, change ideas and experience to improve product quality thereby improving their supply chain supply chain performance (Gilsing, 2005). Also, Witt, (2004) echoes that small scale entrepreneurs are unable to introduce innovative improvements to products and processes thus making it a challenge for them to take advantage of emerging market opportunities. Nonetheless, this can be made possible through networking strength whereby SMEs can specialize in their own business and give way to network actors to improve their efficiency in production.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, networking intensity has a positive and significant effect on the supply chain performance of SMEs. The study has therefore produced new information and contributed to the existing body of literature by describing the connection between networking intensity and SME supply chain performance. The positive relationship between the use of networking to market

products and supply chain performance supports earlier views that have inferred that networking is important for the high growth of firms. Nonetheless, the results of this research need to be further studied to better understand the concepts behind this phenomenon.

Networking strength enables SMEs to improve their competitive position. Through the cooperation between SMEs and network actors, SMEs are able to overcome some of their challenges such as in research and development, training, innovation, production and marketing. Network actors aid the SMEs in achieving economies of scale and improving efficiency in production. Ultimately, the commitment between the network actors and the SMEs result to improved supply chain performance.

The results of the study are indicative of a positive association between networking strength and supply chain performance. It is therefore necessary for SMEs to have high level of cooperation and commitment with their network actors. Also, SMEs need to make use of network actors so that they can introduce innovative improvements to products and processes that would enable them gain a competitive edge over competitors.

It is evident from the results of the study that networking diversity plays a key role in enhancing SME supply chain performance. It is therefore necessary for SMEs to have a broad external network that covers individuals from different age brackets, ethnic backgrounds and geographical locations. With increased closeness and tightness of a network, the quality of resources can improve. SMEs can also benefit from product innovation through transfer of knowledge and technology.

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