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PAPER TITLE:

Investigating strategy tools from an interactive perspective

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ABSTRACT (250 words)

Purpose: This paper investigates how the strategic management concept of ‘strategy tools’ can be reinterpreted from an industrial network perspective. It considers how strategy tools are used to influence the substance of relationships and how firms engage in strategic action by using such tools.

Design/methodology/approach: Using case study research involving three focal firms, the paper scrutinizes use of selected strategy tools to examine how they are used to systematically relate to others and create benefits and affect development paths in business relationships.

Findings: Strategy tools can be viewed as an integrated part of a networking pattern of mobilizing resources, linking activities and relating actors. Seen in this manner, use of strategy tools can be interaction-facilitating or interaction-creating.

Research limitations/implications: In an interactive approach, strategy tools must be seen in relation to others as they are used in strategic (co-)action to engage and involve others. In this view, tools are strategic when used to affect the long-term development of important business relationships.

Practical implications: Practitioners should acknowledge that the use of a strategy tool to handle counterparts is emerging, and valuable only in relation to specific others. Because the value of strategy tools is unknowable until it is revealed how they can affect the substance of a specific relationship, there is no best-practice or one-size-fits-all approach.

Originality/ value: This paper illuminates the phenomenon of ‘strategy tools’ by considering it from both sides of the business exchange interface.

Keywords: strategy tools, strategic action, strategizing in networks, ARA model, Strategy-as-Practice

Paper type: Research paper

1. Introduction

Studies show how an interactive interpretation of the business landscape presented by the industrial network approach impacts how firms are assumed to act strategically (Gadde et al., 2003; Ritter et al., 2004; Baraldi, 2008). Moving away from traditional interpretations of firms acting according to previously formulated plans based on the best possible use of internal resources, these studies illustrate that strategizing can be considered “interactive, evolutionary and responsive” (Håkansson and Ford, 2002, p. 137). With the assumption that firms are embedded in relationships with several important counterparts (Håkansson and Snehota, 1989), strategic action is addressed from an industrial network approach (INA) with reference to firms’ embeddedness in business networks (Johanson and Mattsson, 1992). Therefore, in investigating how firms try to influence their strategic position and that of others, the systematic relation to others is emphasized (Håkansson and Snehota, 2006). Therein, strategic action is not being practiced “on” others, as depicted in general strategy literature; rather, strategizing encompasses action and reaction (Håkansson and Ford, 2002; Ford and Mouzas, 2013).

With this interactive interpretation, we revisit so-called ‘strategy tools’ (STs), a term typically associated with mainstream strategic management (Bowman et al., 2002; Rigby, 2001). STs have generally been defined as the “numerous techniques, tools, methods, models, frameworks, approaches and methodologies that are available to support decision making within strategic management” (Clark, 1997, p. 417). One research field that has extensively studied STs in terms of the “stuff” or “things” managers use daily in acting strategically is strategy-as-practice (SaP). SaP denotes STs as a subset of practices (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2006), and interpretation of STs has broadened of late through this empirically grounded approach (Kaplan and Jarzabkowski, 2006). Along this vein, STs can be conceptual, process-related or physical (Stenfors, 2007). Conceptual tools include frameworks such as SWOT (SWOT being the acronym for “strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats”), five forces analysis or portfolio matrices, while process-related tools can comprise checklists or project management templates. Physical tools can encompass computers and documents, or even PowerPoint slides (Kaplan, 2011). Simultaneously, strategy workshops and away days—in other words, taking time out from day-to-day routines to deliberate on the longer-term direction of the firm—have also been scrutinized as STs in SaP studies (Hodgkinson et al., 2006).

However, while presenting a more empirically derived and broader view of strategy and strategy-making than mainstream strategic management, SaP departs from specific ideas about the business landscape and consequently has a particular interpretation of what influences the firm’s strategy process. Coming from a strong sociological base, focus is on the “micro context” in terms of managers and their actions in interaction with other individuals within the firm, and on the “macro environment” of different societal institutions. While aiming to integrate the bifurcation between intra-organizational activity and extra-organizational aggregation (Whittington, 2006), the inherent assumption in discussions of STs has remained somewhat deterministic in nature and tended to connote one-sided managerial control. Strategic action is seen as taken by managers inside the boundaries of the single firm and any “outside” influence comprises an aggregated system of actors on a societal level. This contrasts with the INA, wherein a firm’s strategy is shaped according to those with whom

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3 there is a business exchange (Håkansson and Snehota, 1989). As Gadde et al. (2003) states,
4 strategizing implies that companies need a strategic orientation where resources, activities and
5 actors are considered simultaneously at the business-network level. This determines the firm's
6 "network position" (Håkansson and Snehota, 1989), which shapes its potential to influence
7 others. Strategic action has been used to refer to efforts by actors to influence (change or
8 preserve) their position(s) in network(s) (Johanson and Mattsson, 1992). The firm's
9 possibility of acting strategically is thus framed by "its portfolio of relationships and the
10 activity links, resource ties and actor bonds that arise from them" (Ford et al., 1998 p. 49).
11 This suggests that an understanding of the firm's attempts to act strategically must start from
12 the relationship level, i.e. from how it is connected and relates to relevant others through links,
13 ties and bonds.
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17 Therefore, to understand the use of STs from an interactive interpretation, we
18 investigate some traditional techniques used by managers to influence others within the
19 context of business relationships. Specifically, we investigate how the mainstream strategic
20 management concept of STs can be reinterpreted from the INA perspective by considering
21 how such tools are used to influence the substance of relationships and, in turn, how firms
22 engage in strategic action via such tools. The two research questions addressed are: (i) how
23 are STs used to affect the layers of substance of business relationships? and (ii) what role do
24 STs have for the firm's strategic action?
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27 The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 outlines how STs may be understood
28 when strategy is conceptualized as an interactive phenomenon, with focus on how STs may
29 affect resource ties, activity links and actor bonds. Section 3 describes how we approached the
30 study. Section 4 presents three complementary cases comprising three examples of the use of
31 STs in a relationship context. Section 5 analyzes this empirical material to pinpoint what we
32 consider interactive effects between STs and the substance of relationships. Section 6
33 provides suggestions for further research and managerial implications when STs are subject to
34 an interactive interpretation.
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38 **2. Strategy as an interactive phenomenon and the role of STs**

39 A main finding of the first industrial network studies is that firms often engage in close and
40 long-term relationships with a set of important suppliers and customers (Håkansson, 1982;
41 Ford et al., 1998, 2003). These relationships have a "substance" (Håkansson and Snehota,
42 1995) that goes well beyond the assumptions of traditional economic thinking; these are not
43 "arm's-length" relationships that can be easily traded off for others, but often contain "heavy"
44 physical and organizational adaptations entwining the individual firms (Håkansson and
45 Waluszewski, 2002). Such relationships stem from interdependencies of firms' resources and
46 activities, and develop through interaction processes in which patterns of mutual investments
47 form over time "that link the resources and activities of one party to those of another"
48 (Håkansson and Snehota, 1989, p. 190). To capture how the concept of STs can be
49 reinterpreted from the INA, we first review industrial network theory focusing on the strategic
50 action in each relationship layer.
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2.1 *The substance of relationships and strategic action*

INA considers firms as operating in a business landscape characterized by interdependency and interaction processes. Business relationships enable these interaction processes to occur (Dubois and Håkansson, 2002); while relationships are a means to deal with firm interdependency, they can also increase interdependence as adaptations occur between the parties. Business relationships are interconnected (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995), as they can hold important functions to other directly or indirectly related relationships of the respective parties. The Actor-Resource-Activity (ARA) model (Håkansson and Johanson, 1992) captures both the substance and interrelatedness of business relationships through three layers: actors, resources and activities.

As business relationships are the means to interact, they are resources in themselves, and through them, other resources (material and immaterial) can be tied together across firm boundaries to create new resource combinations. Business relationships can also be used to link activities of two or several parties to increase overall efficiency. Finally, over time, relationships create bonds between actors regarding social attitudes and orientation towards each other. Thus, established business relationships directly connect aspects of the firm's internal environment to specific business counterparts, so that, compared to traditional economic thinking, the boundary between the internal and the external environment of the firm is blurred. Or, as argued by Araujo et al. (2003), while the conventional view focuses on the boundaries of the firm as barriers towards others, an interactive perspective pays attention to their bridging function and the interactive processes of relating to and negotiating with others. Thus, "the drawing of boundaries is an interactive and negotiated process mediating a variety of internal and external relationships and involves more than establishing a difference between the inside and outside of the firm" (Araujo et al., 2003, p. 1257).

How the individual firm is seen not only as related to specific counterparts in this direct way but also embedded in a network of interrelated business relationships impacts how it is assumed to engage in strategic action (Johanson and Mattsson, 1992). As stated above, strategic action refers to actors' efforts to influence their position(s) in network(s) (Johanson and Mattsson, 1992). Rather than placing the focal firm at the center, INA is based on the business relationships that influence the firm and through which the firm can influence others. Gadde et al. (2003) state that the firm's strategic orientation consequently needs to be applied in the three substance layers of business relationships; thus, the following section discusses the strategic implications of resources, activities and actors.

2.1.1 Strategic action in the resource layer

A number of empirical studies within different industries (e.g., forestry, pharmaceutical, fishing, construction) show that firms are characterized by interdependencies due to the resources they need to acquire from others. It has also been shown how the features and value of resources change depending on which other resources they are combined with (Holmen, 2002; Håkansson and Waluszewski, 2002; Penrose 1959). Thus, firms rely on relationships with specific counterparts to access essential resources. Furthermore, depending on how the resources can be or are combined, they represent a particular use or value to the respective counterparts.

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3 This heterogeneous character of resources has specific consequences for their strategic
4 importance. Firstly, it makes business relationships the firm's most important strategic
5 resource in that it is the means through which interaction occurs and other resources can be
6 accessed, combined and adapted (Gadde et al., 2003; Håkansson and Ford, 2002). Secondly, it
7 impacts how *others* can create value from the resource combinations that can be made.
8 Handling resources strategically is thus about identifying and striving for the *mutual* value
9 that can be obtained by using and combining them in new ways across firm boundaries
10 (Gadde et al., 2003). Thirdly, as resources become valuable through interaction and
11 adaptation processes within business relationships, they are also outside the full control of the
12 individual firm (Gadde et al., 2003). The way that firms combine resources (i.e. form resource
13 ties to specific counterparts) must thus be considered from a strategic viewpoint in terms of
14 which counterparts to prioritize and the level of investment made in relation to those
15 counterparts (Gadde et al., 2003; Håkansson and Ford, 2002).
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20 21 2.1.2 Strategic action in the activity layer

22 Through exchange processes of products and services, interaction provides opportunities for
23 the firm and its individual counterparts to relate other essential activities (e.g., production,
24 logistics) to each other to increase efficiency. Studies show how activities are linked across
25 firm boundaries to increase overall efficiency and to achieve learning among counterparts
26 (Jahre et al., 2006). Thus, interaction with others can be regarded as the most fundamental
27 firm activity (Gadde et al., 2003); it allows the firm to relate specific resources and activities
28 to specific counterparts from which the outcome can be new resource combinations and
29 activity links that increase efficiency and present learning opportunities.
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32 From a strategic viewpoint, while engaging in close relationships through mutually
33 adapted resources and linked activities means that firms can influence counterparts directly, it
34 also entails that the firms themselves will become directly or indirectly influenced by their
35 counterparts (Håkansson and Ford, 2002). The strategy process thus involves not just the
36 firm's "own" resources and activities, but relates to a larger resource constellation and activity
37 pattern involving several counterparts. Due to this direct influence that others have on the firm
38 and that the firm can have on others, as stated by Gadde et al. (2003, p. 395) "it is crucial for a
39 company to build interdependencies systematically" (see also Dubois, 1998). To do this, the
40 firm is dependent upon others; thus, strategic action involves trying to influence the activities
41 of important counterparts and mobilize them to build interdependencies in a systematic way
42 (Gadde et al., 2003).
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47 48 2.1.3 Strategic action in the actor layer

49 Some actions cannot be explained from the resource and activity layers alone. As an actor, the
50 firm depends on the actions and behaviors of others, but can also purposefully try to influence
51 these others. It can thus influence its network position, which Håkansson and Snehota (1989)
52 use to state the relational aspect of strategic positioning. They argue that positioning is
53 relational as it is directly connected to exchange processes between the firm and its
54 counterparts, and the outcome of this process will always be determined by what the parties
55 can achieve through this exchange—i.e. the performance of the objects exchanged. This
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3 performance is in turn determined by the specific value the parties can extract from the
4 exchanged objects by combining them with other resources and activities.

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6 Therefore, the firm's position is related to the value that *others* can achieve through
7 exchange processes with it, which are "individual and subjective" (Håkansson and Snehota,
8 (1989, p. 195). The importance of actors' subjective view of the surrounding network to
9 understand networking actions and outcomes is also inherent in Ford et al.'s (2003) model of
10 managing networks. As such, the position is not only "determined" by how the firm as an
11 actor perceives its own position and how it acts accordingly, but also how the exchanging
12 parties perceive the firm and how this perception is translated into actions and behaviors
13 towards the firm. "Network picturing" describes how managers relate perceptions about their
14 business network to decision-making and strategizing activities (Abrahamsen et al., 2016). A
15 strategic issue thus becomes finding an alignment between the perceptions and behaviors of
16 others with the firm's own perception and sense of direction (Håkansson and Ford, 2002). Or,
17 as expressed by Gadde et al. (2003, p. 361), "The key factor for successful implementation is
18 how the strategy of the individual firm relates to the ambitions and activities of those relevant
19 others."
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24 To develop the idea that STs can be viewed in terms of how firms operate within
25 business relationships, the following will consider the interpretation of STs within SaP studies.
26 Here, there has been considerable research momentum in generating the most state-of-the-art
27 thinking on STs.
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29 30 2.2 *The SaP interpretation of STs*

31 SaP studies use multiple interpretations of the practice lens (Rouleau, 2013), but is generally
32 presented as a perspective within the broader field of strategic management that considers
33 strategy not as something that a firm has but rather as something that people do (Golsorkhi et
34 al., 2010). One thrust is to take seriously the work and tools of practitioners themselves to
35 better understand strategizing. Therefore, one focus in SaP studies is on the "stuff" that
36 practitioners use on a day-to-day basis in the work of strategizing (Whittington, 2006;
37 Whittington et al., 2006). SaP studies consider STs as a subset of strategy *practices*, which
38 refer to shared routines of behavior, including traditions, norms and procedures for thinking,
39 acting and using "things" on a day-to-day basis (Whittington, 2006). Thus, the distinction
40 between tools and practices blurs. Nevertheless, SaP scholars argue that researching STs is a
41 practical endeavor (Whittington, 2003) because STs are visible, explicit and observable.
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45 46 2.2.1 *STs in broader terms*

47 SaP studies regard STs in broad terms as being useful. By focusing on the outcomes of using
48 tools (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2014; Whittington, 2006), SaP studies attempt to remove
49 STs from the imagery of instrumental use and managerial control in three ways. Firstly, STs
50 are conceptualized as "symbolic resources" that create spaces for debate and dialogue (Kaplan
51 and Jarzabkowski, 2006). Specifically, SaP authors conceptualize STs as a means to bring
52 actors with different viewpoints and interests together so that strategic choices can be made.
53 Secondly, STs are conceptualized as "strategy toys" that are used to facilitate creative strategy
54 work. Stenfors (2007) highlights a shortage of strategy toys and states that the serious play
55 (and routine use) of strategy toys facilitates discovery, innovation, flexibility, experimentation,
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3 risk taking, variety and search. SaP therefore recommends that research on STs should
4 consider the exploratory use of STs, and not their prescribed use. One example is the SWOT
5 analysis being used as an “ice breaker” rather than to conduct analysis or solve problems, as
6 the results of SWOT analyses often do not filter into subsequent strategic discussion (Hill and
7 Westbrook, 1997). Finally, STs are seen as “artifacts,” structuring information and providing
8 grounds for interaction around a common tool that is easily recognizable by participants in a
9 strategy task (Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2006). This is because users prefer tools that are
10 transparent, well-known and simple to use, rather than based on sophisticated mathematical
11 functions. Furthermore, as artifacts, STs can be conceptualized as “boundary objects”
12 attributed with meanings and actions that enable and constrain knowledge sharing across
13 boundaries (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2009).
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17 In sum, SaP studies have broadened interpretation of STs from an instrumental to a
18 more experimental angle, interpreting STs as symbolic resources, strategy toys and artifacts
19 (Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2006; Kaplan and Jarzabkowski, 2006; Stenfors, 2007). Within
20 SaP studies, following the general strategy literature’s tendency to differentiate between the
21 inside and outside of the firm, the boundaries refer to intra-organizational barriers, and how
22 STs enable or constrain interaction beyond intra-organizational boundaries remains on the
23 SaP research agenda (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009). Nevertheless, this opening up helps to
24 explain why STs may be used differently in different contexts, and why simple and flexible
25 tools are valued by practitioners. It also serves as a useful departure point to consider use of
26 STs in an interactive perspective, which emphasizes boundaries as bridging functions and the
27 interactive processes of relating to and negotiating with others.
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32 2.2.2 Viewing STs from INA: Two incongruent areas with SaP

33 There are at least two incongruent areas in placing an interactive lens on STs, in contrast with
34 the concept’s treatment in SaP studies. One area is the level of embeddedness. SaP takes a
35 broad sociological perspective that considers strategy as a broad field of social activity whose
36 practices are important to society as a whole (Whittington, 2004; Whittington, 2011). The SaP
37 context entails a systemic perspective of strategy (Whittington, 2001), where the objectives
38 and practices of strategy depend on the particular social system in which strategy-making
39 takes place. Contrastingly, in the INA, the firm is embedded in relationships with identifiable
40 counterparts and strategizing is understood from the perspective of the individual and
41 interconnected relationships (Johanson and Mattsson, 1992; Håkansson and Ford, 2002;
42 Gadde et al., 2003).
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46 The second area is the interpretation of (extra-organizational) actors. In SaP studies,
47 the interpretation of strategists has begun recognizing not only senior executives but also
48 middle managers (Balogun, 2003), and extending to more peripheral managers (Regnér,
49 2003). SaP interprets extra-organizational actors as including management consultants,
50 business schools, financial institutions, business media, state institutions and pressure groups
51 (Whittington et al., 2003; Clark, 2004). In contrast, actors in the INA are in some way part of
52 exchange processes in direct or indirect contact with the individual firm, which highlights the
53 significance of relationships. If we insist on using the term “strategists,” then “anyone who
54 can affect the long-term development of an important business relationship is potentially a
55 strategist” (Baraldi et al., 2007, p. 892). Under an interactive lens, there are more classes of
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3 actors in an industrial system where business relationships and networks are of strategic
4 relevance, and strategists are no longer faceless when exchange processes are considered.
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6 7 *2.3 Placing an interactive lens on STs*

8 What happens when we use an interactive perspective of the ideas, methods and elements that
9 the mainstream strategic management denote as STs? Researchers highlight a common
10 misconception that the industrial network approach to strategy is equivalent to strategy
11 making as a submissive process with the purpose of surrendering to the will of others (Bizzi
12 and Langley, 2012; Wilkinson and Young, 2002; Öberg et al., 2016). Admittedly, strategizing
13 is a cumbersome task due to the parallel activities of other actors (Baraldi et al., 2007), and an
14 integral part of strategizing is flexibility and responsiveness to other parties (Axelsson and
15 Easton, 1992). However, while strategizing is interactive and contingent on the actions and
16 reactions of others, the industrial network approach posits that “the individual firm still needs
17 to act, to try to control...and influence, to suggest ideas and initiatives, to set limits and to
18 seek opportunities” (Harrison et al., 2010, p. 948).
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21 Applying an interactive lens to STs, we can further draw on the notion of strategic
22 action (Johanson and Mattsson, 1992), which has been interpreted as purposefully challenging
23 others and creating change in the network. However, such action must be aligned with the
24 resources and activities of others to have any desirable effect, as neither the firm nor its
25 strategy works in isolation. This also relates to the degree of influence or control the firm has
26 over its business relationships. While increased control can reduce risk, it can also decrease
27 the dynamics of others, which can negatively impact the ability to change and innovate
28 (Håkansson and Ford, 2002). The ways the firm relates to and interacts with its counterparts
29 are thus essential managerial actions, and “listening, reflecting and reacting to others become
30 central activities” (Håkansson and Ford, 2002, p. 136). We suggest that STs can be viewed in
31 terms of how they are embedded in a series of acts and counteracts. Furthermore, STs in an
32 interactive sense can, for instance, encompass how managers prepare for the next encounter
33 with important business counterparts on a day-to-day basis, how meetings are set up with
34 important customers and suppliers, or how plans are discussed with, developed with and
35 communicated to these important counterparts.
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38 As outlined above, from the INA, strategizing involves other actors and needs to
39 contribute to the *mutual* value created in the exchange processes with these individual actors
40 (Johanson and Mattsson, 1992; Gadde et al., 2003; Håkansson et al., 2009). Thus, business
41 relationships are viewed as the firm’s main strategic resources and interaction is an essential
42 strategic activity (Ford et al., 2010; Ford and Håkansson, 2006). This standpoint implies that
43 the boundaries between the firm’s internal and external environment are blurred compared to
44 traditional economic thinking, from which conventional views of STs stem. Rather than
45 atomistic and separate units of clearly defined internal and external resources and activities,
46 firms are viewed as highly interconnected through the resources and activities they combine
47 and mutually develop across firm boundaries (Håkansson and Waluszewski, 2002). Acting as
48 “bridges,” business relationships enable firms to relate to others and gain access to other
49 crucial resources and activities. Because interaction is central within this business landscape,
50 the assumptions posited by mainstream ST thinking, despite being extended by SaP, become
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3 problematic, and we believe there are important insights to be gained by re-thinking the role
4 of STs from an interactive perspective. This is where our two research questions come in.
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7 **3. Methodology**

8 To capture and analyze the interactive effects of ST use, this study uses multiple cases. Three
9 focal firms in the construction and oil and gas (O&G) industries in Norway—ConstructionCo,
10 LiftCo and ContractorCo—were chosen to allow for variation in both industry context and
11 relationship types, and to enable analysis of important and complex relationships.
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13 ConstructionCo is a family-owned business with stakes in advanced offshore
14 engineering, infrastructure and construction. Its main customers are public entities such as the
15 county authority and road authority, as well as builders of residential homes. Our empirical
16 example is located within the subdivision of civil construction specializing in building
17 residential homes, and constructing public infrastructure (e.g., highways, bridges and
18 municipality schools and hospitals). LiftCo is a Norwegian subsidiary of a worldwide leader
19 in the design, manufacture and sale of equipment and components used in O&G drilling and
20 production. LiftCo is an internationally acknowledged supplier of innovative, high-technology
21 solutions. Our example is located in the sub-segment of this Norwegian subsidiary responsible
22 for manufacturing and assembling components of lifting and handling systems, including
23 cranes and winch systems for offshore construction, drilling and production. ContractorCo is
24 a global provider of products, systems and services to the O&G industry that has evolved
25 from its origins in shipbuilding and manufacturing components for machinery and equipment
26 in Norway. Its main customers are international, national and independent O&G companies
27 around the globe. Our example is located within the business area (BA) responsible for
28 maintenance, modifications and operations services and solutions for extending the life of
29 O&G fields.
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35 Using the industrial network approach, the unit of analysis for the collection and
36 processing of empirical material is the firm's business relationships. In analyzing how STs are
37 used to affect business relationships, the ARA model is implemented to trace effects in
38 specific resource ties, activity links and actor bonds. Furthermore, from the standpoint of the
39 focal firm, both the supplier and customer perspectives are sought in order to investigate a
40 variety of ST use. The study can be considered abductive (Dubois and Gadde, 2002, 2014;
41 Dubois and Gibbert, 2010), as the cases consider ST use as a sensitizing concept when
42 entering the empirical world (Blumer, 1954). Additionally, we use an iterative process of
43 revisiting the empirical material while reviewing the INA literature on strategizing. The
44 empirical material is then analyzed using an interactive interpretation to trace effects in ties,
45 links and bonds. Below, we explain our choice of cases, sources of data and how the empirical
46 material was interpreted.
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51 *3.1 Choice of cases*

52 In reality, important relationships between firms tend to be complex and vary in their
53 substance depending on the existence, type and strength of resource ties, activity links and
54 actor bonds (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). Instead of presenting detailed case studies of the
55 three focal firms, we present three empirical examples of tool use in each dimension of the
56 relationship (ties, links and bonds, respectively).
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3 Each specific tool is identified to analyze how it is used to affect selected relationship
4 dimension(s). The relationship layers are described as separate elements and are central to
5 each example of tool use. However, this is a simplification because the layers are tightly
6 related and function in parallel to one another. As per Ragin (1992), the process of “casing”
7 goes from company level, to relationship level and then to relationship dimension level. Thus,
8 the cases function as an intermediate and temporary product.
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11 12 *3.2 Data sources*

13 This study is based on in-depth interviews and document studies of three focal firms. In the
14 research design, the selected informants had at least a working, if not extensive, knowledge of
15 the most important business relationships. Using semi-structured interviews (Kvale and
16 Brinkmann, 2009), the interview questions were designed to pinpoint possible aspects of
17 using tools in a network context. Firstly, questions were crafted to direct informants to talk
18 about their three top business relationships and how these counterparts are involved in the
19 firm’s strategizing. Secondly, another set of questions led participants to talk about which
20 tools are involved in the firm’s thinking about the counterparts and what the firm is doing in
21 its relationships to the counterparts. The interviews thus reflected the informants’ view of
22 tools pertaining to the most important business relationships.
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26 Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted between February and May 2013
27 with eight informants (see Appendix). The interviews averaged 90 minutes, beginning with
28 the informants replying to the prepared questions and leading to more open discussion. All
29 interviews were recorded. In several cases, the same informant was interviewed more than
30 once. In order to analyze the transcript focusing on meaning (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009),
31 each interview was transcribed verbatim.
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34 Alongside the interviews, publicly available reports on both the firm and the industry,
35 including articles in the business press, newspapers, press releases, and information from
36 other types of organization, such as INTSOK (Norwegian O&G Partners) and the Federation
37 of Norwegian Construction Industries, were consulted. Most interviews were scheduled as
38 part of a company visit in its domiciled city, which included a walkthrough in the relevant
39 departments. This enabled a first-hand view of certain physical tools, such as databases and
40 documents, and a better understanding of products and facilities mentioned by the informants.
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44 *3.3 Interpretation of empirical material*

45 Data analysis progressed with the transcribing, coding, categorization and condensation of the
46 interview text and writing of case summaries in a non-linear way. In our empirical material,
47 tools and relationships are deeply entwined. In every relationship, a variety of STs are
48 embedded that are used to systematically relate to others. At first glance, tools range from
49 being conceptual (customer portfolio thinking), process-related (process templates, supplier
50 scorecards), physical systems (in-house supplier databases or sales management systems) or
51 extending to practices such as supplier days and conferences. Such a heterogeneous collection
52 of tools does not readily lend itself to being organized.
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55 Given our study focus, we selected three tools from the empirical material for further
56 scrutiny using the three dimensions of the business relationship. These tools are framework
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3 agreements, conferences and supplier scorecards in the most important relationships in
4 ConstructionCo, LiftCo and ContractorCo, respectively.

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6 The next section focuses on the three layers of business relationships outlined in the
7 theoretical section. First, two different business relationships are used to describe the use and
8 non-use of framework agreements as a tool. Here, we deemed the resource dimension as most
9 useful to exemplify the interactive use of tools. Second, both a direct and an indirect customer
10 relationship are used to illustrate how tools can influence the indirect party. In this case, the
11 activity dimension illustrates tool use in networking. Third, the development of one specific
12 business relationship shows the interactive effects of tool use. Here, the actor dimension was
13 clearly the most prominent in terms of renewing social bonds in the relationship.
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16 17 **4. Three cases of ST use by substance of relationships**

18 *4.1 The resource layer: Framework agreements in the ConstructionCo–ConcreteCo* 19 *relationship*

20 4.1.1 Background, strategic issues and challenges

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22 According to the department procurement manager (DPM), ConstructionCo’s strategic
23 initiative entails increasing consulting engineering services in order to relocate fabrication to
24 countries with lower labor costs. Therefore, ConstructionCo aims to internationalize its
25 sourcing to reduce costs, but not quite to the old motto of “best price wins.” This is because
26 ConstructionCo also describes itself as newly transitioning into this higher awareness about
27 strategic supplier thinking. Undergoing such a fast-paced transition to work with international
28 suppliers rather than just Norwegian suppliers is challenging for ConstructionCo. A dedicated
29 position, international procurement manager (IPM), has been created to oversee international
30 business relationships, but at least three challenges remain. Firstly, not only does
31 ConstructionCo operate within a project-based environment that is typical for construction
32 firms, but it also practices a dual reporting structure, such that each purchaser is accountable
33 to the procurement department and to the incumbent project manager. This setup makes it
34 challenging for the procurement department to obtain an overview of its most important
35 business relationships, especially international ones. Secondly, the nature of buying (from
36 planning and tenders to contracts, post contract, and installation) in the construction industry
37 is typically a long, drawn-out process subject to much handing-off from one function to
38 another (e.g., purchaser to project manager, site manager, finance and billing). Important
39 suppliers have various experiences due to the long process within the business relationship,
40 which is compounded by the dual reporting structure. Thirdly, the idiosyncrasies of the
41 Norwegian construction industry, where planning and building happen in parallel rather than
42 consecutively, makes it practically difficult for the IPM to consolidate volume (from the
43 projects) when going out into the market. This aspect entails a particular challenge for
44 ConstructionCo to handle up-and-coming international suppliers.
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52 4.1.2 ConstructionCo’s two most important relationships (supplier perspective)

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54 ConcreteCo is an international producer and deliverer of cement products. It is one of
55 ConstructionCo’s most important suppliers because the rate of concrete hardening impacts the
56 construction process, making delivery time-critical and proximity to construction sites crucial
57 due to Norway’s harsh climate conditions, mountainous geographical relief and often widely
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3 spaced settlements. ConcreteCo has become ConstructionCo's preferred supplier for most
4 projects due to its geographic penetration of ready-mix concrete plants in Norway and ability
5 to produce products at the specified chemical composition. ConstructionCo–ConcreteCo
6 interaction occurs at many corporate levels and functions (from engineering to finance)
7 beyond the procurement department at any one time. ConcreteCo actors actively initiate
8 ongoing meetings with ConstructionCo in order to know "how ConstructionCo plans to do
9 things in the future and if [ConcreteCo] are a part of them." ConcreteCo actors always want to
10 know how ConstructionCo thinks in terms of selecting and involving ConcreteCo. One
11 example is that should ConcreteCo not be selected for a ConstructionCo project, the news is
12 disseminated almost instantaneously within ConcreteCo and follow-up ensues immediately by
13 an appropriate ConcreteCo actor with an individual in ConstructionCo to identify what
14 ConcreteCo could do to put the situation right.
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19 4.1.3 Role of framework agreement in the ConstructionCo–ConcreteCo relationship

20 Although ConstructionCo states it is a newly internationalizing firm, the project culture is still
21 deeply entrenched in using local suppliers rather than international ones. Therefore, there is
22 tension in balancing the use of local versus international suppliers, even with the formalized
23 role of IPM. ConstructionCo's relationship with ConcreteCo is subject to many internal
24 challenges regarding coordination between its purchasing department and the project teams
25 themselves, especially in using an international supplier such as ConcreteCo. The strong
26 project culture operating as independent silos in ConstructionCo means that decision-making
27 authority concerning ConcreteCo resides at project level in a decentralized manner, where the
28 IPM has little overview of how ConcreteCo can fulfill upcoming needs. Both the relationship
29 atmosphere and interaction processes mean that the project teams do not systematically
30 accord ConcreteCo its hard-earned preferred-supplier status. Ongoing ConstructionCo–
31 ConcreteCo interaction involves constantly disassembling into a multi-project interaction
32 environment wherein it is "difficult for the big ship to sail in one direction." To nurture the
33 necessary routines and communication channels, ConstructionCo has created a framework
34 agreement tool.
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40 Framework agreement is a common term and generic tool to formalize prices, delivery
41 times and scope of responsibility among the more important suppliers in a procurement
42 department. It is also used to formally designate preferred-supplier status. However,
43 ConcreteCo's framework agreement is also described to contain clauses to "tie the supplier
44 more closely" with ConstructionCo to "use their expertise in that field." Or, according to the
45 IPM, to "access free tips and tricks" from ConcreteCo, who are considered "professional in
46 their field." Two or three times a year, ConcreteCo is obligated to hold meetings with
47 ConstructionCo to not only share product knowledge but also be updated on market
48 movements regarding important actors. The additional clauses in the framework agreement
49 are important to ConstructionCo, who acknowledge that they are only "starting to get
50 international muscles."
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55 4.1.4 Contrasting with the ConstructionCo–PlumbCo relationship

56 PlumbCo is an important supplier to ConstructionCo. PlumbCo is handled very differently in
57 terms of tools from ConstructionCo's perspective. PlumbCo is a local supplier of plumbing
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3 and engineering services with a long history of operation in Norway. ConstructionCo
4 describes itself to be closest to and prefer this Norwegian supplier due to their long history of
5 successful cooperation. It is understood within ConstructionCo's internal units and project
6 teams that PlumbCo is preferred for all ConstructionCo's plumbing and engineering services
7 in all its projects. Because plumbing plans and scope of work entail "many interfaces with the
8 other sub-contractors" with "a lot of heavy engineering," ConstructionCo and PlumbCo work
9 together to plan complex systems (e.g., channels and pipes, air and water, radiators, electrical),
10 drawing on one another's knowledge and coping with ever-changing standards such as energy
11 demands. ConstructionCo has always involved PlumbCo when drawing together other actors
12 (e.g., architects and engineers) to find the best concepts. The DPM's stated, "over the years,
13 we have found a team that solves this in a good way. PlumbCo...has always been with us."

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17 ConstructionCo and PlumbCo enjoy good relations across all levels in the corporate
18 hierarchy at both firms. The DPM highlighted that because they have a long-lasting and
19 complex content relationship, no legal instruments are necessary. Rather, the interaction is
20 based on a "mindset of collaboration and honesty," where ConstructionCo and PlumbCo "are
21 not trying to benefit from each other so the other party loses."

22
23 The DPM also emphasized that the relationship is very transparent. To avoid
24 overwhelming PlumbCo, ConstructionCo has to balance volumes among several suppliers and
25 this is always openly discussed and agreed upon with PlumbCo. Thus, the business
26 relationship involves trying "to work together towards the customer, and in many ways share
27 the risk towards the end customer." The relationship with PlumbCo is long term, and legal
28 instruments have never been important. In the words of the DPM, "we don't have this kind of
29 talk with them about planning for the future...as long as ConstructionCo has the same people
30 we have today, and PlumbCo has the same, the relationship will stand and develop...it is not
31 formalized in any way."

32 33 34 35 36 *4.2 The activity layer: How conferences are used in the LiftCo–DrillCo relationship*

37 4.2.1 Background, strategic issues and challenges

38 LiftCo operates within the offshore O&G industry, which according to the area manager for
39 business development (AMBD) is often characterized as cyclical, where new builds and
40 contracts on new rigs depend on oil prices. Such cycles consequently allow for different
41 players in the market at different points in time. Previously, there was more competition
42 among smaller shipyards building drill rigs. However, due to favorable oil prices (at the time
43 of the interviews), the prevailing trend was shifting towards building drill ships in fleets
44 instead of individually customized vessels, as established operators perceive that they are the
45 ones who will operate the drill ships for the next 20 years. At the time of the interviews, there
46 was a lot of scaling up with the consolidation of mega shipyards around the world to meet the
47 demand of these experienced players who appreciate technology and quality, and specialized
48 vessels.

49 50 51 52 53 4.2.2 LiftCo's most important customer

54 ShipyardCo is one of LiftCo's most important customers according to its accounting books.
55 ShipyardCo, headquartered in East Asia, is a worldwide leader in the building of drill ships
56 and platforms. Bigger shipyards have been increasingly important to firms like LiftCo
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3 because they “can get their engine going” and “there are a lot of optimizing things to come,”
4 according to the AMBD. It has become strategic and important for LiftCo to transition
5 orientation from smaller shipyards to mega shipyards, and to deliver and execute on a larger
6 scale (building a fleet of drill ships rather a single order) than before.
7

8 However, according to the AMBD, the most important customer is a more indirect one:
9 DrillCo. DrillCo owns and operates an advanced and diversified fleet of harsh-environment
10 jack-up rigs, deepwater semi-submersible rigs and ultra deepwater drillships. Considered one
11 of the most experienced operators, it supports global O&G production by providing high-
12 efficiency drilling services to oil companies around the world. DrillCo is technology driven
13 and strives to be an early adopter of technology. DrillCo is indirectly connected to LiftCo
14 through ShipyardCo.
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17 LiftCo differentiates between the customer who pays and the customer who is
18 deciding what to buy. LiftCo sees that it is DrillCo, its indirect customer, with whom it needs
19 to actively engage and communicate. As stated by the AMBD, “the customer that is paying is
20 actually not the one that we need to influence the most.” Even though ShipyardCo is LiftCo’s
21 direct customer, it is actually DrillCo that drives its sales.
22

23 To LiftCo, the biggest customer on its books (ShipyardCo) does not correlate with the
24 most intense and highest level of interaction (DrillCo). The AMBD described that LiftCo has
25 more interaction with DrillCo than with ShipyardCo: “it is not enough just to talk to the direct
26 customer, we need to be stimulating the market for the users of the product, it is a symbiosis.”
27 In fact, the director of business development (DBD) revealed that the aim is to use the
28 shipyard as an intermediary and, when necessary, to “disconnect the shipyard” to reduce lines
29 of communication.
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33 4.2.3 Role of conferences in the LiftCo–DrillCo relationship

34 With its diversified portfolio of rig types, DrillCo is viewed as *the* technology partner of
35 LiftCo. Alongside actively envisioning DrillCo as a major counterpart to maximize its
36 learning potential because “it is driving technology, driving the performance, driving the
37 safety of the equipment,” the AMBD emphasized actively pursuing more arenas to increase
38 interaction with DrillCo. One step is active enrollment in relevant professional organizations
39 (e.g. the Society of Petroleum Engineers and International Association of Drilling Contractors)
40 to try to be visible in the market.
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43 According to the AMBD, the tool in use is systematic planning towards relevant
44 conferences, which is used to create arenas for interaction with DrillCo. This calls for more
45 than taking an active role in preparing for conferences and working in tactical sections, with
46 the aim of envisioning how the industry will evolve and what kind of capability is expected in
47 the future. It is helpful to be perceived as actively putting out new technology in the market
48 by disseminating papers to explain the technology’s workings and lessons learned. LiftCo
49 describes the use of conferences in relation to systematic planning, in that a plan is being put
50 in place (strategically set up from the top of corporate business) such that everyone in LiftCo
51 knows the important conferences for the year to engage this important business counterpart.
52 Such systematic planning of conferences is part of the annual plan, and synchronized with the
53 sponsorship budget by LiftCo. By presenting papers and talking to presenters from DrillCo,
54 the conference is an important arena of interaction with DrillCo. As the AMBD related, joint
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3 presentations are sometimes also possible, and even developing joint written publications for
4 industry dissemination. Aply, the AMBD described conferences “as a sort of playground,
5 where ideas and opportunities are grown” with DrillCo.
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8 4.2.4 Role of conferences extends to LiftCo–ShipyardCo relationship

9 Using conferences as an interactive arena also impacts the LiftCo–ShipyardCo relationship,
10 complementing the use of various formal means to handle the relationship. LiftCo needs to
11 give ShipyardCo confidence that LiftCo’s equipment will fit the vessels that ShipyardCo
12 provides to DrillCo. Conversely, DrillCo needs to be influenced to organize future dialogues
13 with ShipyardCo in favor of LiftCo.
14

15 LiftCo relies on regular meetings with ShipyardCo driven by each project within the
16 relationship to meet delivery schedules and coordinate capacity. Additionally, LiftCo keeps
17 data about ShipyardCo in its internal databases that attempt to quantify interaction in the key
18 customer relationship. One database is known internally as the “sales vault,” and is essentially
19 an internal Web-based database for firm-wide customer intelligence work in order to
20 understand “what did the customer want, what did they buy, and what did they pay.” It is also
21 a channel to product experts who are decentralized within LiftCo and its mother company.
22 Another form is dedicated engineering databases. Known internally as the “experience
23 database” in LiftCo, this serves to do “a lot in detecting or getting information about how
24 LiftCo does business with ShipyardCo, and what are the challenges, if [any], and what do you
25 need to remember the next time.” Yet another is its in-house sales development tool, which is
26 the main intra-organizational route for handling important customer relationships to track all
27 leads and generate bill plans and customer reports. It is part of standard operating procedures
28 for all employees working in the sales and business development areas to use it. However,
29 these tools would not be sufficient to meet the demands of interaction with DrillCo and
30 ShipyardCo simultaneously.
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37 *4.3 The actor layer: How supplier scorecards are used in the ContractorCo–PipesCo* 38 *relationship*

39 4.3.1 Background, strategic issues and challenges

40 ContractorCo’s ambition is to remain a preferred supplier to the oil majors, with a reputation
41 for being reliable but costly. High quality and safety standards have become part of its
42 corporate mantra in the aftermath of the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill, and this remains a
43 challenging area as it works with many sub-suppliers to secure its flexible cost base. In
44 handling its important suppliers, ContractorCo relies heavily on its in-house supplier
45 information system. As the vice president of strategic sourcing (VPSS) put it, “many
46 employees are involved in supply chain activities and supplier development activities but they
47 don’t necessarily reflect that is what they are doing.” Having a relatively efficient information
48 system is helpful, but can also undermine efforts to maintain rich interactions with
49 ContractorCo’s sub-suppliers.
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54 The evolution of a highly robust and sophisticated in-house supplier information
55 system was shaped as ContractorCo operates in an organizational setup comprising very
56 strong and independent projects. A challenge is that no one in this setup has a full overview of
57 ContractorCo’s most important supplier relationships. The language used to manage key
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3 suppliers relies on their type of contractual mode (framework agreements or enterprise type
4 contract, or parallel frame agreements) in ContractorCo. As a kind of shorthand, these
5 contractor modes refer to, respectively, a supplier who (1) is of high priority and should
6 always be used, (2) takes on more responsibilities and is integrated in the project teams, or (3)
7 is subject to competition regarding price and delivery time from project to project. Due to the
8 persistent challenge in gathering timely and comprehensive feedback of supplier experiences,
9 ContractorCo has prioritized resources to develop an in-house supplier information system
10 (operational one year before the interviews were conducted).
11

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13 Within this system, there is a supplier performance evaluation module and a supplier
14 scorecard is provided by gathering six criteria of information for each important supplier.
15 These criteria are considered appropriate for supplier development and evaluation, while
16 avoiding excessive detail. For ContractorCo, supplier scorecards are described as a more
17 reliable way to “get some signals” on how collaboration with the most important suppliers has
18 proceeded during the project period. The scorecard is accompanied by trend curves for each
19 supplier, encompassing both positive and negative trends. The VPSS described the system as
20 being viewed favorably in the organization (and even by its important customers) and heavily
21 relied upon as an internal communication tool. Specifically, the trend curves were described
22 as useful for analyzing suppliers before supplier meetings to understand where the suppliers
23 need to improve. Furthermore, such analysis is used to disqualify suppliers if they are
24 underperforming, do not show willingness, or are perceived as unable to improve.
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30 4.3.2 PipesCo: One of ContractorCo’s most important suppliers and a relationship in 31 transition

32 Considered one of ContractorCo’s most important suppliers, PipesCo is one of the world’s
33 leading distributors of piping materials and valves, in close collaboration with its sister
34 companies and manufacturing partners. ContractorCo, being a major O&G contractor, where
35 the volume of piping, pumps, valves, separators and tanks used is significant, uses PipesCo
36 extensively across all of its BAs. Besides being lauded as a piping specialist with the most
37 extensive stock of standard and non-standard products, and flexible with urgent deliveries,
38 PipesCo understands the harsh Norwegian climate, as well as safety standards. Therefore,
39 PipesCo has become one of ContractorCo’s most important and high-volume suppliers.
40 ContractorCo–PipesCo interaction occurs at many levels and functions and involves not just
41 the case study BA, but also other BAs with ContractorCo.
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45 Previously, ContractorCo dealt mainly with PipesCo due to their knowledge of North
46 Sea climate conditions and stringent safety requirements. However, this is fast changing as
47 many international players have caught up with this knowledge, introducing a fresh element
48 of competition that was virtually non-existent before.
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50 Therefore, unlike the previous decade, where PipesCo would undisputedly be
51 ContractorCo’s most important supplier, ContractorCo’s relationship with PipesCo has been
52 undergoing drastic transition, with other European and East Asian suppliers constantly
53 seeking to address the product requirements (especially in response to the stringent
54 Norwegian market) and to penetrate the piping market. Thus, the preferred-supplier status of
55 PipesCo is described to be more vulnerable than before.
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4.3.3 Role of supplier scorecard in the ContractorCo–PipesCo relationship

The preferred supplier status of PipesCo has undergone a drastic relegation. At the time of the interviews, ContractorCo had emerged from its latest rounds of ongoing supplier reviews (for its most important suppliers). According to the VPSS, ContractorCo wanted to reevaluate its sourcing strategy for piping supplies in order to have one supplier for the domestic market and one for the international market, to ensure that tough Norwegian standards are met. However, the supplier review process led to awarding not two but three parallel agreements: one to PipesCo, one to another major player and a third to a joint venture between one small local supplier and a big international player.

PipesCo was therefore emerging from its lost privileged status as it transitioned to a “parallel frame agreement” with ContractorCo. This agreement covers most standard clauses (e.g., buy-back, storage), except for prices, with PipesCo. This transition implies that PipesCo must adapt its approach to compete on prices and delivery time with other contenders, project to project.

This empirical example of a specific criterion in the supplier scorecard was captured in what was described as an ordinary meeting between ContractorCo and PipesCo. At a selected point in the meeting, in the presence of the entire PipesCo supplier management team, the VPSS logged on to the supplier information system and pulled up its scorecard and trend curves. PipesCo had been unaware that it had been underperforming based on ContractorCo’s expectations. Rather than providing ambiguous feedback, the VPSS used the scorecard and trend curves interactively with PipesCo. Both positive and negative trends according to all six criteria (timely delivery of goods and services, quality of goods and services, timely delivery of documentation, quality of documentation, environmental and safety standards, collaboration and responsiveness) were presented to the PipesCo team. As PipesCo’s representatives were taking in this visual information, the VPSS encouraged them to look at their performance evaluation. He stated that they were underperforming, as digitally captured on the supplier information system. The VPSS stated: “I can even show them which projects are getting really bad feedback- the documentation... late, quality of documentation- that is an eye-opener for them!”

5. Analytical discussion

Across the three cases, it is evident that the way conventional management methods and techniques, or STs, are used is directed towards trying to influence important counterparts in specific ways. However, simultaneously, this behavior aims at developing specific resources and activities and facilitate future interaction between actors. Thus, the examples illustrate how the firms use STs to affect existing ties, links and bonds, and develop new ones.

While the three substance layers of relationships are intertwined, for the sake of clarity the discussion of each example focuses on the relationship dimension that the current ST was shown to (or aiming to) affect the most: resource ties, activity links or actor bonds. In the framework agreement example, this was used to mutually gain access to specific knowledge, as discussed through the resource dimension. The conferences example illustrates the process of developing specific activities in relation to new business opportunities, discussed through the activity dimension. Lastly, the example of the scorecard, used for “goal matching” between the focal firm and its supplier, was discussed through the actor dimension. Table 1

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3 summarizes how the selected tools were used in the three substance layers of the business
4 relationships in the three companies. Given the three dimensions' interconnectedness, each
5 tool affects all layers of the relationship, though to varying degrees. We use our empirical
6 material to trace the interactive effects of the respective tools in the relationship dimension
7 that is most apparent. In this section, we analyze ties, links and bonds in the tool use examples
8 in ConstructionCo, LiftCo and ContractorCo, respectively.
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11 (Insert Table 1 around here)
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17 *5.1 Use of framework agreements to create resource ties*

18 In ConstructionCo's relationship to PlumbCo, no agreement or tool was necessary. Here, the
19 relationship was based on the same people being involved and their experience of working
20 together. This experience had emerged over time and interaction was characterized by
21 informal agreements. However, as a newly internationalizing firm, ConstructionCo must try
22 to relate to international actors outside Norway. Three interactive effects can be discerned in
23 the use of framework agreements with ConcreteCo.
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26 (1) *Overcome hurdles of communication with internal network.* Use of a framework
27 agreement first emerged between ConstructionCo and ConcreteCo to overcome resistance
28 from its strong project teams, who are more accustomed to using local suppliers than
29 international ones, and to reinforce the preferred-supplier status of ConcreteCo. The
30 framework agreement allows the procurement department of ConstructionCo to arbitrate in
31 the inconsistencies of the project teams in using ConcreteCo, such that ConcreteCo should
32 always be able to review its price amidst competing offers.
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35 (2) *Motivate ConcreteCo to share product knowledge.* Given ConstructionCo's status
36 as a newly internationalizing firm, the framework agreement unfolded into a catalyst in the
37 ConstructionCo–ConcreteCo relationship to access and develop knowledge regarding how
38 concrete was being used by other actors—in terms of both skills and technology—outside
39 Norway. This knowledge was considered a strategic resource as ConstructionCo was
40 venturing into more international sourcing. The framework agreement thus developed into a
41 way of motivating ConcreteCo to share knowledge on both the product and how others were
42 using concrete production, especially outside Norway. In its ambition to internationalize its
43 supplier base, ConstructionCo needed to learn about the different ways in which concrete is
44 utilized. By drawing upon one of its most important relationships (ConcreteCo) as a channel
45 of learning and embedding this commitment legally via the framework agreement in the
46 relationship, ConstructionCo ensured systematic sharing of such knowledge by ConcreteCo at
47 least twice yearly. Thus, the framework agreement was used to strategically exploit the
48 resources made available in the relationship.
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53 (3) *Act as bridge for ConcreteCo to access ConstructionCo's resources.* With
54 ConstructionCo firmly established in Norway with a strong network of local and loyal
55 suppliers, the framework agreement also allows ConcreteCo to potentially gain access to
56 ConstructionCo's resources, including product combinations, and competences in terms of
57 harsh climate conditions for use and delivery of concrete. Thus, ConcreteCo, being a foreign
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3 supplier, gained valuable knowledge in terms of the ways concrete is used by local actors in
4 the Norwegian context.

5 Taken together, the framework agreement facilitated interaction by enabling the
6 handling and development of important resource ties by negotiating the mutual benefit of
7 enriching each other's knowledge of concrete use within and outside Norway. The way that
8 ConstructionCo and ConcreteCo developed their resource ties also affected their respective
9 network positions, ConstructionCo in the international market and ConcreteCo in the local
10 one. Therefore, through the existing business relationship, the framework agreement
11 functioned as a mutual tool in co-developing the two actors' resources in their respective
12 processes of strategic positioning.
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17 *5.2 Use of conferences to develop activity links*

18 Amidst the return to established operators in the O&G industry, LiftCo must try to relate to
19 mega shipyards in Asia, where ShipyardCo has emerged as a major customer, rather than
20 small European shipyards. Additionally, LiftCo must engage in activities linked to building
21 fleets of drill ships, rather than individual ones. The use of conferences arose because LiftCo
22 wanted to actively explore embedding into its current practices different ways to increase
23 interaction with DrillCo. The ways conferences are used to handle and create activity links are
24 threefold.
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27 (1) *Capture and realize efficiency in coordination efforts.* As acknowledged by the
28 AMBD, DrillCo is one of LiftCo's most significant partners regarding interaction. DrillCo has
29 become particularly significant to LiftCo in terms of designing complex specifications of
30 lifting equipment in response to activities performed by ShipyardCo in Asia. Instead of
31 catering to one vessel, which was the way of working before established operators returned to
32 favor, the task on hand was to design complex, high-end specifications that will cater to a
33 fleet of vessels. Presenting and putting out new ideas of technological improvements under
34 the umbrella environment of conferences is a way for LiftCo to interact in order to learn (e.g.,
35 which technology to prioritize and develop) and to build and increase interdependencies, and
36 capture and realize efficiency in coordination, with DrillCo.
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40 (2) *Broaden activity links in anticipation of new business opportunities.* With the
41 transition to alternative methods of extracting O&G, LiftCo must anticipate adaptation of
42 activities (its own and others'). As described by the AMBD, conferences are used "as a sort of
43 playground" where ideas and opportunities are grown. LiftCo is opening up to being
44 influenced by and trying to adapt to new types of activities outside its comfort zone of
45 offshore drilling, including the supply of land rigs and land equipment. Such initiatives cater
46 to very different organizational structures, an area that LiftCo is relatively unfamiliar with.
47 Considered a new business segment where land rigs and equipment are customized very
48 differently, LiftCo needs to gain knowledge about how additional actors perform these
49 specialized operations, as they are usually hired directly by operators such as DrillCo.
50 Synchronizing and matching the development of lifting and handling systems with activities
51 related to land rigs is a way to change its network position to pursue new opportunities.
52 Driven by the need for unconventional O&G, LiftCo needs to broaden its activity links, and is
53 doing so in interaction with DrillCo to guide evolution of its activity patterns. This will enable
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3 LiftCo to maneuver (build interdependencies systematically) into a more favorable network
4 position.

5 (3) *Provide the possibility of another interactive effect: Influence ShipyardCo in the*
6 *presence of DrillCo.* As the DBD disclosed, the yards were used as a partner to pull through
7 larger concepts. In its direct relationship to ShipyardCo, experimenting with conferences was
8 not the priority. Here, the relationship was based on formal mechanisms to manage timelines
9 and coordinate production, using regular meetings and deep databases. However, when
10 considering the indirect relationship to DrillCo, the conference arena allows LiftCo and
11 ShipyardCo to be present simultaneously, extending to one more player which is DrillCo in
12 the “playground” to engage in systematic trial-and-error processes.

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14 Overall, conferences help to create interaction that may not be easily achieved in the
15 relationship otherwise. It may also be possible to extend use of conferences to more than one
16 important actor to the focal firm, as LiftCo has done due to the interconnectedness of
17 relationships.
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22 *5.3 Use of supplier scorecards to renew actor bonds*

23 The recent turn of events (supplier review, change of contractual modes) at ContractorCo has
24 inadvertently undermined actor bonds in the ContractorCo–PipesCo relationship, since
25 ContractorCo now has three piping suppliers. PipesCo considers the network position of
26 ContractorCo to have changed as it is now framed by three suppliers instead of just PipesCo.
27 The actor dimension is particularly useful to illustrate how actors elicit cooperation from
28 others. This empirical example is that of ContractorCo attempting to mobilize PipesCo as the
29 possibility to use the supplier scorecard unfolded in interaction between ContractorCo and
30 PipesCo. Three aspects become apparent in this case.

31 (1) *Match goals mutually.* Rather than being a passive scorekeeper for internal
32 communication, the scorecard emerged as a tool to share specific goals. As a tool, the
33 scorecard can be used actively and creatively to influence an important business counterpart
34 towards specific types of goals. Improving the quality of documentation has become a priority
35 in the O&G sector following the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill. Rather than leaving it to
36 chance, the VPSS used the scorecard to influence which type of goals (in this case, quality of
37 documentation) PipesCo should commit to. In highlighting PipesCo’s shortfalls in relation to
38 a specific criterion, the scorecard became a tool to match goals between ContractorCo and
39 PipesCo. PipesCo gained an understanding of ContractorCo’s expectations (according to its
40 six criteria) for working together. The openness of the VPSS at ContractorCo allowed
41 PipesCo to reflect on and commit to what has become a mutual goal.

42 (2) *Align perceptions as a concerned and engaged customer to PipesCo.* Although not
43 pre-planned, the VPSS moved strategically to confront and motivate PipesCo. Thereby,
44 ContractorCo used the scorecard to “teach” PipesCo. In turn, PipesCo was “learning” as an
45 outcome of the scorecard’s application.

46 (3) *Renew actor bonds amidst recent turn of events in relationship.* As ContractorCo
47 and PipesCo take time to adjust their new relationship, this intervention serves to renew the
48 actor bonds between them, where ContractorCo is a concerned and engaged customer who
49 wants to develop PipesCo and is considering PipesCo’s interests, and where PipesCo is made
50 explicitly aware that it remains an important supplier to ContractorCo.
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3 This empirical example shows how the scorecard is used to facilitate interaction in the
4 relationship, particularly in renewing bonds connecting the two actors' perceptions and values
5 as ContractorCo transitions to handling three parallel piping suppliers as opposed to one.
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8 **6. Concluding remarks**

9 This paper revisited STs from an interactive viewpoint. If a firm is seen as in control of its
10 resources and activities and as shaping its strategy based on how this internal structure can be
11 used to position it against others, the idea that strategic management methods and techniques
12 are practiced "on" others is not strange. Thus, from a mainstream strategic management
13 viewpoint, the concept of STs is unproblematic. However, from an INA perspective, a firm's
14 most important strategic resource is its business relationships; thus, its strategy will largely
15 form in relation to and interaction with relevant others (Gadde et al., 2003; Håkansson and
16 Ford, 2002). Therefore, STs are potentially any "stuff" that can be used to affect the long-term
17 development of an important business relationship. In efforts to broaden the concept of STs,
18 SaP studies have tried to consider a more "interactive" view (Baraldi et al., 2007).
19 Nevertheless, these studies convey the idea that strategic action is shaped mainly within the
20 firm, while any external influence is that of actors impacting general ideas about strategy,
21 rather than those with which there is a business exchange.
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26 Our investigation of how conventional STs are practiced shows how they can be used
27 as tools in terms of affecting business relationships, both existing or developing. However,
28 whether these tools actually present any strategic usefulness, as well as their content and
29 effect, vary in relation to different counterparts and depend on the nature of the business
30 relationship. This is in accordance with earlier assumptions in the industrial network view
31 (Håkansson and Snehota, 1989). Thus, a specific method or technique may only be an ST in
32 the sense that it can be used strategically, in relation to specific others. This depends on
33 whether it can be used to affect the ties, links or bonds of those specific relationships. The use
34 of STs is thus relationship-specific in the sense that whether and *how* they are used depends
35 on the specific relationship. The empirical examples illustrate that STs can be used to
36 mobilize resources, link activities and relate actors in new ways. However, whether they can
37 (or cannot) do so will emerge from the interaction processes with specific counterparts.
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41 In putting the selected STs under further scrutiny using the relationship dimensions,
42 the three examples highlight how STs are embedded within relationships, which comprise
43 ongoing acts and counteracts. It therefore reveals why the unilateral interpretation of strategic
44 action and use of STs as being practiced "on" others is problematic. Through an interactive
45 interpretation, STs must be seen in relation to specific relevant others as they gain particular
46 strategic value only in relation to those. Thus, under an interactive lens, using STs in strategic
47 (co-)action is a way to engage and involve others. This further extends the SaP treatment of
48 STs in considering the firm context and its strategic action.
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51 In interpreting strategizing as an interactive activity, tools can be viewed as being used
52 to handle resource ties, activity links and actor bonds. When tools are considered alongside
53 the relationship substance, they become an integrated part of a networking pattern in order to
54 get desired effects regarding positioning the company in the overall network. We further
55 suggest that STs under an interactive lens can be distinguished as either interaction-
56 facilitating or -creating.
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3 Understanding ST use in an interactive perspective has several interesting implications
4 for research. Specifically, in-depth single-case studies could be developed to investigate ST
5 use from both sides of the relationship, focusing on a particular tool. Here, the IMP toolbox
6 comprising an evolving set of interactive strategy tools that could be useful in a world of
7 networks and interaction (Cheng and Holmen 2015) could provide inspiration for possible
8 tools to follow. As stated by Dubois and Gadde (2002, p. 554), “the interaction between a
9 phenomenon and its context is best understood through in-depth case studies.” Studies can be
10 designed to understand how the STs emerge from the relationships and are drawn upon to
11 motivate, relate, or involve when working strategically with important business counterparts.
12 Studies can also consider how STs are shaped by and shape the relationship, drawing on
13 resource interaction literature (Baraldi et al., 2012; Håkansson and Waluszewski, 2002). This
14 could reveal more concepts of ST use in an interactive context, especially when studies have
15 revealed different ways of involving counterparts (Harrison et al. 2010), and have categorized
16 strategies pointing to differences in what part of the network is considered and what part is
17 included (Öberg et al., 2016). It can also be very interesting to focus on ST use on new
18 ventures from an interactive view where generic patterns in network development have been
19 found to exist (Aaboen et al., 2013). Focusing on the three dimensions of relationships
20 suggested in this paper represents a first step toward interpreting ST use in strategic action in
21 an interactive context. Future research in this direction could aim to discover additional uses
22 of ST in an interactive context.

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28 Regarding managerial implications, practitioners should be sensitized that use of an
29 ST to relate to important counterparts becomes emerging, interacted and valuable only in
30 relation to specific others. That is, the relationship is still the starting point and is unique, and
31 there is no best-practice or one-size-fits-all approach, as the tool’s value is unknowable until it
32 is revealed how it can affect the substance of a specific relationship. Finding a purposeful
33 interactive way of using a tool is one opportunity to engage in strategic action. A particular
34 interaction can augment a tool’s potential or a particular relationship can undermine its use.
35 Every practitioner should analyze their relationship embeddedness, and those of their
36 immediate connections, in order to grasp the variety of STs available.

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Table 1 Overview of informants, business relationships and tool use in the respective dimensions

	Focal firm	Important relationship(s)	Selected tools	Tool use in relationship dimensions			Specific use of tool in the relationship: Interactive effects identified
				Actor	Resource	Activity	
1.	ConstructionCo Sub-division of construction firm specializing in constructing public infrastructure (e.g. highways, bridges, schools, hospitals, residential homes)	ConcreteCo Supplier of cement, concrete PlumbCo Supplier of plumbing services	Framework agreements (Supplier perspective)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Overcome hurdles of communication with internal network - Motivate ConcreteCo to share product knowledge (use of concrete by other actors) - Act as bridge for ConcreteCo to access ConstructionCo's resources
2.	LiftCo Subsidiary of worldwide leader in the design, manufacture and sale of equipment and components used in O&G drilling and production	DrillCo Owner and operator of drill ships ShipyardsCo Major shipbuilder in Asia	Conferences (Customer perspective)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Capture and realize efficiency in coordination with DrillCo; provide a "playground" where ideas and opportunities are grown - Act as platform for learning about land rigs and broadening activity links - Provide interaction space to influence ShipyardsCo in the presence of DrillCo
3.	ContractorCo Business unit responsible for maintenance, modifications and operation services and solutions to the O&G industry	PipesCo Supplier of pipes and pipe fittings	Supplier scorecard (Supplier perspective)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Match goals mutually with PipesCo - Align perceptions as a concerned and engaged customer to PipesCo - Renew actor bonds amidst recent turn of events in relationship

Note:

- Major emphasis
- Secondary emphasis

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Appendix

Overview of informants and interviews conducted

Firm	Role of Informant	Length of interview (mins)	
		First interview	Second interview
Supplier perspective			
ConstructionCo	Department Procurement Manager (DPM) ¹	100	75
	International Purchasing Manager (IPM)	120	165
LiftCo	Purchaser—Fabrication	60	-
ContractorCo	VP, Strategic Sourcing (VPSS) ²	105	30
Customer perspective			
ConstructionCo	Department Manager—Sales and Market	65	-
LiftCo	Area Manager, Business Development (AMBD)	75	90
	Director, Business Development (DBD) ³	90	30
ContractorCo	VP- Strategy and Business Development ²	120	-

¹In conjunction with visit to the department

²In conjunction with visit to the corporate headquarters and strategy department

³In conjunction with visit to the department including tour of factory, test beds etc.

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