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Problems when creating inter-organisational innovation teams

Mikael J. Johnsson*

Blekinge Institute of Technology, Campus Gräsvik, 371 79 Karlskrona, Sweden.

E-mail: mikael.johnsson@bth.se, mikael.j.johnsson@gmail.com

Cecilia Hyrén

Research Institutes of Sweden (RISE) ICT/SICS Västerås, Stora gatan 36, 722 12 Västerås, Sweden.

E-mail cecilia.hyren@ri.se

*Corresponding author

Abstract: This research aims to gain knowledge on how inter-organisational collaborative innovation and research projects can be initiated through a systematic workshop series. A series of workshops was planned and executed by an intermediary organisation. Sixteen participants representing academia, industry, and funding institutions were invited with the goal of initiating collaborative innovation or research projects. Data were collected through observations, statement-based questionnaires, and interviews. At the end of the workshop series, no projects were initiated. The problems were identified as the intermediary's lack of knowledge in selecting and preparing participants for this setting, but also the participants' lack of knowledge regarding innovation work and collaboration on an inter-organisational basis. Further research is suggested.

Keywords: innovation management; innovation team; inter-organisational; multi-disciplinary; collaboration; IoT; internet of things; NPD; development; research.

1 Problem

This research aims to explore if a new inter-organisational innovation team (innovation team) can be created to initiate new innovation or research projects (projects) through a workshop series conducted and facilitated by an independent intermediary organisation (intermediator).

The reason for this research is that a portfolio of diverse innovation projects is required to stay in business, because a degree of radical innovation increases the odds of future income (Nargij and Tuff, 2012). In addition, inter-organisation collaboration for innovation is preferable to competing (e.g. Hine and Ryan, 1999). However, when aiming for inter-organisational collaboration, a social dilemma develops in which all parties are better off not collaborating until they are clear in their intention of undertaking a mutual project (Leufkens and Noorderhaven, 2011).

In previous research, an intermediary has shown positive impact on collaboration between innovation team members (Johnsson, 2016). Therefore, this research aims to explore the creation of innovation teams with the purpose of initiating new inter-organisational projects through an intermediary. By understanding how innovation teams in such technical areas develop, one might develop methodologies to decrease time to market in future inter-organisational projects.

2 Current understanding

Innovation teams and innovation work

Innovation, defined as something new that is successfully implemented in the market, is necessary for organisations that want to stay competitive (e.g. Dobni, 2006; Tidd and Bessant, 2013). However, innovation work, defined as every step needed to develop an idea for the market, has increased in complexity due to the development of the innovation process. The reason is that time to market is of the essence (Barszak et al., 2009), resulting in more agile innovation processes instead of traditional stage-gate processes. To speed up innovation work even further, multifunctional innovation teams, defined as teams with the specific purpose of conducting innovation work, have emerged. Multifunctional or cross-functional teams perform better than individual persons, because the broader range of knowledge stimulates the creation of new ideas and increases the spread of knowledge, favouring creative performance (Arranz and Arroyabe, 2009; Smart et al., 2007). Small teams with four to six members perform better than bigger ones due to larger-team problems of increased complexity, information sharing, and social loafing (Hoegl, 2005; Wheelan, 2013). Innovation work is distinguished from other work and is preferably conducted in accordance with an innovation process. Recent research conducted by Johnsson (in press) suggests that innovation work conducted by innovation teams is conducted in four phases: 1) preparation, where team members are carefully invited in alignment with their competence and challenge to solve in the forthcoming project, and they are prepared for the coming innovation work; 2) ideation, where the ideas to develop are identified; 3) implementation, where the idea is developed to e.g. a product or service, and it is launched on the market; and 4) finally, harvesting, where values created through the work are collected to be utilised in further work.

Collaboration, a key factor for innovation work

Even though innovation teams benefit from being small, the complexity when conducting innovation work has not decreased. Rather the opposite: research shows that time, innovation-related knowledge, and collaboration are key factors for innovation teams to succeed in their work (Johnsson, 2016). In a broader context, collaboration is a key factor as well. Prior research indicates that inter-organisational innovation work based on collaboration between users, customers, and suppliers is a more efficient way to innovate than using the traditional R&D approaches (e.g. Romero and Molina, 2011; Tidd and Bessant, 2013). It is also claimed that collaboration with competitors is successful in innovation work (Smith et al. 2008; Ritala and Hurmelinna-laukkanen, 2009). Furthermore, when creating innovation teams to work based on an inter-organisational setting, research claims that significant work should be done to identify partners who are established in distant areas and unknown to each other. Additionally, much attention should be focused on how much a company has to learn and how well it is able to learn from its

partner/s to assess plausible innovative performance. Even though diversity in technological capabilities between partners is required for innovation, it should not be too great, or partners may have problems learning from each other (Sampson, 2007).

Collaboration in an inter-organisational context is complex

Collaboration in an inter-organisational setting may be fruitful. Previous research demonstrates, however, that the combination of diverse competence (divergence) and genuine interest in working together (convergence) are of the essence, because the collaborative structure can easily become complex (Lubaktin et al., 2001). This is a jigsaw process in three stages: 1) to create trust among all parts, where all parts feel that they have a piece of the puzzle and feel confident that the other parts do not intend to steal it; 2) to define the purpose for each part to collaborate; and 3) to ensure that every part should gain from the collaboration and allocate resources to the joint project. Lubaktin et al. point out that most collaboration initiatives fail because companies generally are suspicious of loose couplings and tighten them up by implementing administration as a bridge, making the work difficult. Another reason for failure is that organisations tend to absorb each other's knowledge rather than work together, despite the best of intentions. To solve these problems, intermediating organisations may serve as a physical or virtual platform where the connecting parties can meet for interaction. The role of an intermediary, however, is far more complex than just offering a meeting place; he or she needs to handle, in addition to innovation management, aspects related to economics change management, systems theory, and auditing to develop innovation capability in the parties aiming for collaboration (Barnes and Francis, 2006). There are several benefits with an intermediary to move potential conflicts towards resolution by leveraging convergent interests between the collaborating parties (O'Mahony and Bechky, 2008) and to guide and support in the innovation process (Johnsson, 2017), and to support decision making between parties aiming to collaborate and reducing uncertainties (Kubr, 2002; Perner and Werr, 2013).

The problem from an industrial perspective, however, is that the product life cycle has become shorter and shorter, meaning that innovation work has to be conducted in an ever-increased pace (e.g. Menon et al., 2002). This leads to the need of establishing collaboration between parties interested in developing new products in an effective way, in order not to miss out on a potential business opportunity. In this perspective, the intermediary may play a significant role initiating collaboration between organisations wanting to create an inter-organisational innovation team. Therefore, this research aims to explore whether a systematic workshop series executed by an intermediary can stimulate the creation of inter-organisational innovation teams and initiate new innovation or research projects.

3 Hypothesis

H1: A systematic workshop series executed by an intermediary will stimulate the creation of inter-organisational innovation teams and the initiation of new innovation and research projects.

4 Research design

The workshop series and participants

Given the overall aim of creating inter-organisational innovation teams and initiating new innovation and research projects, a series of three workshops was planned in accordance with Lubaktin et al. (2001): 1) to develop trust between the participants; 2) to identify ideas for creating collaborative projects; and 3) to establish a new inter-organisational innovation team and initiate innovation- and/or research projects. The intermediary invited individuals from companies and academia in the area of internet of things (IoT) to apply to the workshop series. In the application, the applicants motivated their participation and committed to attend at all workshops. Individuals from sixteen organisations, including businesses, academia, and funding institutes, were selected to participate in the workshops. The intermediary organised and facilitated the workshops. The same facilitator organised all workshops but the second one.

Workshop 1 - building trust

The main purpose of the first workshop was to establish trust and to let the group members get to know each other. This workshop served to provide a clear picture of the prerequisites with the workshop series by sharing individual experience and expectations; it also clarified the expected output from the workshop series. At the first workshop, the participants were to define an area to work on within IoT and convey a group sense of the opportunities and challenges existing within the selected area. As inspiration, two relevant problem areas were presented. The participants divided into two groups based on their interest, and representatives from the intermediary organisation supported further discussions in each group. The result of the first workshop was identifying a focus area and the most important steps to take it further.

Workshop 2 - identifying ideas to develop

The second workshop was conducted two weeks after the first. The purpose was to clarify problems to solve and how to work within the focus area, so that the participants could align with the overall goals and purpose of the workshop series. During the workshop, the participants performed a brainstorming exercise focusing on business development processes with a service perspective. The aim was to develop a system map of the problem/challenge, with to the goal of delivering ideas for collaborative projects. The workshop ended with the participants specifying commitments that they could make to the two identified collaborative projects.

Workshop 3 - establishing collaboration

The third workshop was conducted approximately three weeks after the second one in order to concretise the identified ideas from the prior workshop. During the workshop, an open space exercise took place with the aim to concretise and select projects to proceed with, resulting in an action plan for further development in collaboration with the participants. At this point, it was clear that collaboration among the participants was not established, and they were unfamiliar with how to conduct further work without the intermediary. Nevertheless, they wanted to pursue the work towards collaboration projects. Therefore, it was decided to extend the workshop series with two additional workshops. At the end of the workshop, the participants reviewed homework in which they were supposed to link

the selected projects to their everyday lives as well as find collaborative ways to realise the identified ideas.

Workshop 4 - motivators and financing opportunities

The fourth workshop was conducted approximately four months after the third. The main focus was on summarising what was done during the previous workshops due to the long time between them. The purpose was to go deeper in the process in the formation of collaborative projects, to identify the participants' motivations for participating in collaboration projects, and to identify financing opportunities for the projects. The workshop resulted in a clearer picture of potential collaborative projects and a clarification of the participants' driving forces for realising the projects.

Workshop 5 - conceptual ideas to business ideas

The fifth workshop was conducted approximately one month after the fourth. The purpose for this last workshop was to continue the concretisation of the collaborative projects, based on the previous driving force inventory, and to form the identified ideas into business ideas. The workshop series ended with three business ideas for further development by the participants in collaboration, but neither concrete collaboration nor new projects were officially initiated by the end of the workshop series.

Data collection and analysis

Data in this longitudinal ethnographic study, spanning through five workshops in six months, were collected from rich field notes (notes), statement-based questionnaires consisting of 16 statements referring to the participant's engagement and possible outcomes of the workshop series, verbal reflections with the intermediary and moderators after each workshop, and interviews with the participants after the last workshop. In the interviews with the participants, which were audio recorded and conducted together with the intermediary, an interview guide was used. Each interview lasted for approximately 20 minutes, followed by reflection between the intermediary and the researcher. When analysing the field notes, two aspects were in focus. First were observations of how the participants related to the group development process as suggested by Wheelan (2013): 1) forming, where the group is gathered and the members try to find their place in the group; 2) storming, where conflicts occur due to factors such as deviant goals and expectations; 3) norming, where the members start collaborate; and 4) performing, where the group transforms into a team, working together towards a unite goal. Second was the groups' development towards inter-organisational innovation teams in relation to Lubaktin et al's (2001) process towards inter-organisational collaboration, as described above.

5 Findings

Significant findings were that, in this research, five workshops were not enough to initiate new projects. In general, all participants were polite and respectful of each other's opinions, even though they did not agree at all times. After the first workshop, two groups were created in which all participants, according to the questionnaires, were convinced that a new innovation or research project would be initiated by the end of the third workshop. This feeling decreased for each workshop. Still, all participants looked forward to the next

workshop in the series. The facilitator's effort was considered as crucial for the work to progress, and assessed as a success factor among the participants.

Table 1: The workshops' purpose, agendas, researcher observation, workshop results, and reflections by the intermediary.

WS	Purpose	Agenda	Researcher observation	Result WS	Reflection intermediary
#1	Get to know each other.	Presentations of each other.	The participants are discussing openly and sharing ideas.	The participants got to know each other's expertise and areas of interest.	Positive atmosphere.
	Convey a clear picture of the prerequisites with the workshop series.	Keynote about the focus area and a following discussion about the purpose, the expectations and the area to work in.	The areas were generally described as and not as specific problems.	Participants had a common picture of the task.	The participants were interested and engaged.
	Intro to opportunities and challenges in IoT from academic and industry perspective.	Identification, clustering and selection of the focus area's challenges.	The moderators supporting the groups to keep focus, resulting in progress.	As the participants get to know each other, the discussion became more intense. Two subgroups were created through self-organization. An identified focus area and the most important steps to take from now	The academic introduction was not very clear. Fruitful discussions were all participants were contributed.
	Conclusion	Summing of WS1 and a discussion	Discussions between participants	The participants volunteer for	The time schedule was a bit forced.

		about next steps.	continued after workshop.	task to conduct until next time.	
#2	Identify ideas to develop in collaborative project.	Keynote introduces to service innovation.	Three participants are discussing with keynote.	The subgroups aligned in projects to develop.	Too long introduction.
	Clarify of what to solve and how to work within the focus area.	Brainstorming exercise (rich picture) through a business development process.	In the exercise, the prior two groups are transformed to three groups. The participants are not sure were to belong, or work.	Communication platform Slack was established.	Too abstract exercise, the groups did not understand what to achieve. The exercise did not lead to any clarification of the project's objective or purpose.
	Conclusion	Summing of WS2 and a discussion about next steps.	The three groups are developing ideas to work on. There is a problem to define the owner of the data, and what to charge for, i.e. the value is not clear.	Two collaborative projects were selected.	Unclear goal with the workshop.
					The time schedule was a bit forced.
#3	Initiate collaborative project.	Selection of projects to proceed with.	The participants are back to two projects	Two projects were selected.	Very rare that all participants attend at all workshops.

			again, and one participant with an own project idea.		
	To concretize the identified projects.	Concretization of the selected projects towards collaborative project.	Concrete suggestions to projects are presented, but do not get real attention.	An action plan for developing the projects.	The methodology in overall was good.
	Conclusion	Summing of WS3 and a discussion about what to do.	Energy dropped during the workshop. There are potential for collaborative projects, but the participants have problems to commit to other ideas.	The participants continue discussing after workshop. Two additional workshops	More time for ideation and concretization needed. Missing customer at the workshops.
#4	Go further in the process in the formation of collaborative projects.	Sum up prior workshops and the progress between workshops.		No progress in any of the ideas.	
	Identify roles and drivers for collaborative projects.	Exercise to, on their own and in groups, describe and discuss what motivates the participants to join a collaborative project, and		Two out of sixteen participants know what they want to get out of a collaborative project.	Participants that were not facilitated, stopped to discuss, there is a great value to facilitate group discussions.

		what their role may be.			
	Finance for collaborative projects.	Presentation of opportunities for funding.	There are several opportunities for funding if dedicating time for application and invest time to participate. The interest from the participants is low however.	No discussions on how to initiate a research funding application or project. One participant will make move towards customer to discuss collaborative project.	The participants would like the intermediary to invite customers to the network.
#5	To get a better understanding of customer needs	Customer presentation of concrete problem,	The intermediary highlights a suitable call for funding, no participant pay attention.	The groups discuss the customer's problem with high level of energy.	Everyone was very engaged and positive discussing the customer's concrete problem.
	Continue work on concretizing of the collaborative projects.	A business models exercise with focus on customer's problem, need, and potential solutions.	One participant comments that this work does not align with prior workshops' work, resulting in new focus. This participant also	No collaborate project was initiated, but interest to continue meeting.	There was no natural drive for investing time to applying for funding.

		indicates having an own agenda for further work.		
Conclusion	Summing of WS5.		The participants continue discussing after workshop.	Workshop for 2 h including lunch was a good setup.
				Use the same facilitator in all workshops if possible
				Moderators in group discussions improved discussions and progress.

Table 2: Examples of quotes from the rich field notes and interviews.

Respondent	Quote
R1	<i>“The best part was the network. It would have been good to have the customer focus earlier, we were all suppliers to some extent. Overly broad questions, make it more concrete and focused. I want to be a part of a subgroup (a new group after the workshop series), but I don’t want to drive or manage it.”</i>
R2	<i>“I think the meetings created great value. I also think the intermediary and the neutral place where the workshops were conducted on is a great value as well. It is a problem that the industry want spin offs from research but they don’t want to conduct research themselves.”</i>
R3	<i>“One big problem with developing new services on IoT is that it is very difficult to access data.”</i>
Customer	<i>“I find it very interesting to meet companies, they have a lot of data that they don’t know what to use for, but they don’t want to share it either.”</i>

Intermediator	<i>“The methodology overall was good. Still, I am disappointed that we didn’t get further in the process. The preparation work was not properly executed. Too many participants were invited, and from a multi-disciplinary perspective there was lack of competencies.”</i>
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From a group development perspective, the participants deviated in goals and expectations, resulting in long discussions regarding potential roads to take towards a collaborative project. However, due to the abstractness when ideating and the number of participants, they struggled to come to a consensus. Innovation teams are suggested to be no bigger than six people, as bigger teams result in problems of agreeing on ideas to work on and social loafing (Johnsson, 2017). In this case, the participants were divided into two smaller groups, in accordance with Hoegl (2005), not exceeding the suggested number of members. However, the groups were not stable, transforming from one workshop to another. This hindered the teams from maturing, because every time a new member is added or lost, the team dynamic process started over (Wheelan, 2013). These effects are important to address in initiating another workshop series on the same or another topic.

Regarding innovation team creation, the intermediary lacked competence in inviting and preparing relevant participants with the purpose of creating a multi-disciplinary inter-organisational innovation team. This resulted in too many participants who were too homogeneous regarding competence, not representing what is required from a multi-disciplinary perspective (Romero and Molina, 2011; Tidd and Bessant, 2013).

Regarding collaboration with competitors, the observations and interviews revealed that some of the participants were competitors, looking to find clients among the participants, or to find customers as a result of completing the workshop series. This finding indicates that the participants had not reached the level of maturity where they could see competitors as potential colleagues in a collaborative project as highlighted in prior research (Hine and Ryan, 1999; Smith et al. 2008; Ritala and Hurmelinna-laukkanen, 2009). From Lubaktin’s perspective, the participants developed trust to the level that they discussed potential business ideas openly. Thus, all members did not feel safe that this knowledge would not be adopted by another organisation, meaning that the workshop partly led the participants through the first step of three-step process. The second step of understanding why collaboration was of interest was not completely fulfilled either. The notes revealed that not all of the participants were looking for collaboration with all of the other participants; they were not in conflict, but it was clear that they did not share the same interest in a collaborative project. The third step, collaboration, was not accomplished met through the workshop series. The observations revealed that few of the participants had the potential to initiate collaboration. They shared the same view of what a collaborative project would lead to and how to develop a project together. This is important to address in a future workshop series. The participants did not choose the other participants to the workshop series; however, all participants were well aware of the organisations and individuals who were attending, because they were provided with a list of attendees, and they could therefore choose not to attend if there were organisations they considered inappropriate to collaborate with. At the end of the fifth workshop, no project was initiated. Companies representing consultancy services seemed to forget why they volunteered to the workshop series in the beginning, expecting to provide their services to the other participants, working on their own as demonstrated by Leufkens and Noorderhaven (2011). The smallest companies had no funding allocated for participating in a collaborative project based on

their own resources. Even though there was a mismatch in this aspect, there were no open conflicts, but collaboration was not initiated. However, all participants remained interested in meeting as a knowledge network to discuss IoT from different perspectives, still positive that it might result in a future joint project. All thanks to the intermediary who facilitated and guided the participants forward.

The notes and interviews revealed that the participants found that the time to get to know each other was too short and that the process in general was unclear. The biggest issue, however, was that the overall scope was assessed to be too big and abstract, leading to difficulties in identifying anything concrete to collaborate about. Despite the participants being experienced consultants, they were unfamiliar with the abstract part in the innovation process. They struggled to understand that potential solutions to IoT problems could be conceptualised and presented to customers without being developed in advance, and that this process could lead to a collaborative project, as recommended by e.g. Johnsson (2009). The intermediary believed that the participants would have found it easier to progress if illustrations of their purpose and progress had been used throughout the workshop series. Positive outcomes however, were that the participants found the new network valuable, the workshops well executed and inspiration for new ideas, and that the participants aimed at meeting as a knowledge network for further discussions.

Based on the findings, the hypothesis in this research is not confirmed. Despite the structured, well-organised, and well-conducted workshops, there was not enough time within this research to develop the level of trust or mutual interest needed to initiate new projects, which might be related to the fact that the participants had not met each other in this way before. Even though the participants signed up with the intention of initiating new collaborative projects together, there was no "spark" to ignite the engine, which might have been solved with a more systematic invitation and preparation of participants prior to the first workshop. The main learning outcomes were the following: to identify a customer's problem and invite participants with competence aligning with that problem, to present the customer's problem in the first workshop so as not to get trapped in the abstract phase of the innovation process, to have a call for funding early in the process, to repeatedly remind the participants about the workshop series' purpose, to have less participants attending, and to have additional time to develop trust. However, from another point of view, there also was a customer presence, as academics were participating at the workshops, looking for potential participants for forthcoming research projects. There was also a funding organisation looking for potential projects to fund. From this perspective, these actors could have been more active, demonstrating research and industry problems more explicitly to invite collaboration.

6 Contribution

This research contributes to prior research by indicating that new inter-organisational innovation teams are not easy to create. Doing so requires more than engaged participants and experience in conducting workshops based on the innovation process. This case highlights the importance of selecting team members based on multi-disciplinary premises in accordance with Johnsson (2017), introducing the selected participants' innovation work as demonstrated by Tidd and Bessant (2013), and initiating the collaborative project through a process as demonstrated by Lubaktin et al. (2001). Additionally, it requires participants that really want to develop a mindset to collaborate on an inter-organisational

basis. The conclusion is that the intermediary was knowledgeable in innovation work and in the practical aspects of conducting workshops, but lacked knowledge in selecting and preparing the participants. In addition, the participants were immature in innovation work and collaborating with other organisations when developing new products and services. As a result, the participants were hindered to develop their knowledge to a level where new projects could be initiated within the set timeframe, which is subject to adjustments in further workshop series. One suggestion is to invest time in activities regarding selection criteria and preparation of selected participants prior to the workshops.

7 Practical implications and future research

From a practitioner's perspective, as intermediators and innovation managers, the experiences from this research may be valuable when planning for similar activities. The biggest lesson learned from this research is that one should take into consideration that it requires not only understanding of workshop facilitation but also an investment of time. These are necessary to prepare invited participants for the forthcoming work and not lose momentum after the workshop series begins. This research is limited to a small study, and its size affects its generalisations; further studies in the same or similar setting is suggested.

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