Relational uncertainty in service dyads

Purpose: Relational uncertainty determines how relationships develop because it enables the building of trust and commitment. However, relational uncertainty has not been explored in an inter-organisational setting. This paper investigates how organisations experience relational uncertainty in service dyads and how they resolve it through suitable organisational responses to increase the level of service quality.

Design/methodology/approach: We apply the overall logic of Organisational Information-Processing Theory (OIPT) and present empirical insights from two industrial case studies collected via semi-structured interviews and secondary data.

Findings: The findings suggest that relational uncertainty is caused by the partner’s unresolved organisational uncertainty, i.e. their lacking capabilities to deliver or receive (parts of) the service. Furthermore, we found that resolving the relational uncertainty increased the functional quality while resolving the partner’s organisational uncertainty increased the technical quality of the delivered service.

Originality: We make two contributions. First, we introduce relational uncertainty to the OM literature as the inability to predict and explain the actions of a partnering organisation due to a lack of knowledge about their abilities and intentions. Second, we present suitable organisational responses to relational uncertainty and their effect on service quality.

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