AALBORG UNIVERSITY
DENMARK

Organizing for inter-organizational learning in service networks

Peronard, Jean-Paul; Brix, Jacob

Link to publication from Aalborg University

Article information:

Users who downloaded this article also downloaded:

For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit www.emeraldinsight.com/authors for more information.

About Emerald www.emeraldinsight.com

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company manages a portfolio of more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as well as providing an extensive range of online products and additional customer resources and services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive preservation.

*Related content and download information correct at time of download.

Organizing for inter-organizational learning in service networks

Jean-Paul Peronard
Department of Business Development and Technology, Aarhus University, Herning, Denmark, and

Jacob Brix
Department of Learning and Philosophy, Aalborg University, Aalborg Oe, Denmark

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to consolidate existing research on 'service networks' and to frame this literature as a new 'context for learning'. Research from inter-organizational learning is used to qualify this consolidation and advances from inter-organizational learning are used to operationalize how service network actors in this new context can organize for inter-organizational learning to create more value for themselves and their customers.

Design/methodology/approach – By conceptualizing the learning context of a service network and the interrelated dimensions, an overview of the learning challenges for improved service performance is provided.

Findings – Inspired by the service triangle, the proposed framework highlights the learning challenges among two or more actors and the knowledge and skills needed for them to organize the service network. To build a collaboration characterized by trust, behaviors associated with transparency and receptivity are argued to be imperative.

Practical implications – The framework can increase the opportunities for inter-organizational learning in a service network. Knowing the learning context and the challenges associated with this learning allows for a more accurate intervention and allocation of resources to improve service network performance.

Originality/value – The novelty lies in the consolidation of the literature of service networks and the extension of the literature on inter-organizational learning hereto.

Keywords Inter-organizational learning, Exploration and exploitation, Service networks, Interorganizational learning, Loose coupled systems

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Seeking (strategic) renewal is one of the most important issues for organizations to remain relevant, and for decades, research has demonstrated that collaboration between

organizations is a valuable way to uphold this relevancy (Dyer and Singh, 1998; Knight and Pye, 2004; Schulz and Geithner, 2010; Ferrary and Granovetter, 2017). Because collaboration between organizations can take many forms, this study situates itself in the stream of literature that focuses on inter-organizational learning (Beeby and Booth, 2000; Holmqvist, 2004; Jones and Macpherson, 2006). In this vein, focus is on the relationships and the types of knowledge creation and absorption that occur between actors from different organizations so that they can achieve the outcomes that they expect from the collaboration (Lane and Lubatkin, 1998; Kohtamäki, 2010). In inter-organizational learning, attention is on the student–teacher organization dyad, and the types of learning are divided into a typology of being passive, active or interactive (Lane and Lubatkin, 1998). The unit of analysis is often to improve one's products by absorbing outside knowledge (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990) or to co-create new product offerings (Holmqvist, 2004).

The purpose of this study is to extend the literature on inter-organizational learning to an emerging phenomenon that is gaining academic attention: *Service networks*. A service network is defined as "two or more companies and/or organizations that, in the eyes of the customer, are responsible for the provision of a connected overall service experience" (Tax *et al.*, 2013, p. 455). Hence, a service network is a specific type of network that is based on the premise of a loosely coupled service provision system in which different organizations can choose to collaborate to offer increased customer value (Tax *et al.*, 2013; Henneberg *et al.*, 2013; Peronard and Brix, 2017). So far, research in the service network literature is divided into three branches, which include:

(1) How organizations in collaboration learn to explore and exploit new market potential?

(2) How knowledge-sharing activities are encouraged to incentivize interactive learning?

(3) How a service delivery that meets customers' expectations can be facilitated (Tax *et al.*, 2013; Henneberg *et al.*, 2013; Ekman *et al.*, 2016; Peronard and Brix, 2018)?

Inspired by the Service Triangle (Kotler, 1994), the first contribution of the paper is a conceptual framework that consolidates these three streams of literature into a uniform model that proposes how the "learning context" of a loosely coupled service network could take shape. From an inter-organizational learning point of view, this new learning context moves beyond the previously mentioned student–teacher learning dyad in inter-organizational learning. The learning context requires the actors to:

- identify how different product/service modules can be combined into a uniform service experience; and

- discuss and agree upon how their individual exchange behaviors have to be to deliver this service experience for the customers (Brusoni and Prencipe, 2001; Peronard and Brix, 2018).

These two requirements illustrate that inter-organizational learning in a service network context has to be orchestrated as an interactive process of organizing for exploration and exploitation among many actors, and not as a functional knowledge transfer process, as it is often conceptualized in the literature (Holmqvist, 2004; Bolton and Saxena-Iyer, 2009; Schulz and Geithner, 2010; Tyre and von Hippel, 1997).

Besides the consolidation of the service network literature, the secondary output of the study is the discussion of how inter-organizational learning theory can be used to explain

how interactive learning among service providers can be better understood, when they negotiate how their collaboration can *make, enable and keep new promises* to their customers. An aspiration with the study is also, that the new framework can be used proactively by practitioners. The argument is that the study clarifies the challenges and the skills needed to take active part in a service network, so the actors can organize joint activities for exploration and exploitation for the benefit of themselves, the other service network actors and for the customers.

The article is structured as follows. First, the literature on inter-organizational learning is presented to frame the theoretical stance of the study. Second, the literature on service networks is presented to provide the framing conditions for the new "context for learning". Theoretical advances from inter-organizational learning is used to qualify this work. Hereafter, the new framework is conceptualized inspired by the service triangle (Kotler, 1994), and finally, the implications and conclusions of the study are presented.

Inter-organizational learning

In studies of inter-organizational learning, focus is often directed at strategic alliances between organizations, such as networks (Larsson *et al.*, 1998; Beeby and Booth, 2000; Schulz and Geithner, 2010). The characteristics of such alliances are twofold. First, they represent an arrangement between at least two firms that establish exchange relationships but have not distributed ownership between them (Barringer and Harrison, 2000). Second, the knowledge created in such inter-organizational networks is claimed to lead to outcomes that could not have been achieved by the individual organization by itself (Schulz and Geithner, 2010). What distinguishes this branch of literature from studies of organizational learning, is that there is a *dual focus on learning*, which often is referred to as a "two-level-game". The argument for this "two-level-game" is based on following logic. First, for *inter-organizational learning* to create value for the individual organization, this organization has to be able to translate new knowledge into *intra-organizational learning*, for example, by intertwining new insights with existing routines (Holmqvist, 2004; Jones and MacPherson, 2006). Hence, a premise for inter-organizational learning to deliver local value is that the individual organizational actor has an organizational culture and organizational processes that enable and facilitate knowledge creation, integration and institutionalization of new insights that make sense to this organization (Brix, 2017). Second, knowledge stemming from *intra-organizational learning* processes can – for example, via knowledge transfer – be used to create *inter-organizational learning* (Jones and MacPherson, 2006). These processes can be operationalized if the logics and experiences of one organization's *exploitation routines* can be presented to the other organizational actors in such way, that this information can create variance in their institutional logics, so it becomes part of their activities related to *inter-organizational exploration* (Holmqvist, 2004; Schulz and Geithner, 2010). Hence, for inter-organizational learning to occur, it necessitates processes that both enable the collaborating actors to "open up" and share information with one another, and it requires that the actors are able to use new information from this collaborative setting to create local value (Holmqvist, 2004). In addition to this, when knowledge does not exist on beforehand in the inter-organizational setting, it has to be created as a collective learning process (Weick, 1979). In this process, meaning is negotiated between the individual actors as a dialectic interaction of sense-making and sense-giving, thereby transforming the subjective meanings of these individuals into a form of inter-subjective, inter-organizational knowledge (Brix, 2017). In short, inter-organizational learning concerns both new knowledge that is created in collaboration by the network actors and knowledge that is transferred from one actor to another (Jones and Macpherson, 2006).

Based on these distinctions between the literatures of organizational learning and inter-organizational learning, the key challenge in inter-organizational learning is to take the relevant individual knowledge and integrate it with that of the other actors in their "collective effort to explore and exploit" (Larsson *et al.*, 1998; Schulz and Geithner, 2010). This implies that new behavioral rules become relevant if an organization without prior experience in inter-organizational collaborations is invited to join a network or an alliance for the first time (Holmqvist, 2004). The ability to build and maintain trust between actors is imperative (Dovey, 2009) and Larsson *et al.* (1998) establish the importance of a high degree of both receptivity and transparency between the actors. In this regard, *receptiveness* is proxied by the degree to which an organization absorbs knowledge from an alliance partner, and *transparency* is proxied by the degree to which an organization is cooperative and discloses knowledge to the other partner(s): "Interorganizational learning is therefore a joint outcome of the interacting organizations' choices and abilities to be more or less transparent and receptive" (Larsson *et al.*, 1998, p. 289). Inter-organizational learning is consequently often defined by the use of Cohen and Levinthal's (1990) theory of absorptive capacity. Absorptive capacity is "a firm's ability to recognize the value of new, external knowledge, assimilate it, and apply it to commercial ends" (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990, p. 128). Lane and Lubatkin (1998) advance the theory of absorptive capacity in relation to inter-organizational learning by developing a taxonomy of the types of learning that occur between organizations: passive, active and interactive. *Passive learning* is about acquiring knowledge, for example, via seminars, books and journals. *Active learning* can include collaborating with external consultants to learn to use new software or to implement the use of new hardware into organizational routines. *Interactive learning* represents activities where complex and often tacit knowledge is created and implemented in collaboration with external agents (Lane and Lubatkin, 1998; Schulz and Geithner, 2010). Hence, the roles of the alliance members in passive and active learning are characterized as a "student-teacher" dyad, whereas the roles are more equal in the interactive learning approach (Jones and Macpherson, 2006). The ability of organizational members to utilize their prior knowledge to *identify* the potential value-adding activities in collaboration with the alliance partner(s) and to *realize* this potential for commercial ends in their own organization consequently is a requirement in the interactive learning approach (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990; Zahra and George, 2002; Brix and Jakobsen, 2013). The literature in this vein traditionally focuses on marketing-oriented alliances or technology-oriented alliances (Barringer and Harrison, 2000; Kohtamäki, 2010). *Marketing alliances*, for example, match companies with complementary distribution channels, and *technology alliances* seek collaboration with non-competitors who have new technical skills that might be relevant to the other organization(s) (Lane and Lubatkin, 1998; Jones and Macpherson, 2006). A context that has received limited attention in the inter-organizational learning literature is that of service organizations (Knight and Pye, 2004) and, more specifically, the emerging phenomena of service networks.

Service networks: a new context for inter-organizational learning
In the following, a service network is argued to represent a new context for inter-organizational learning. As reminder, a service network is defined as "two or more companies and/or organizations that, in the eyes of the customer, are responsible for the provision of a connected overall service experience" (Tax *et al.*, 2013, p. 455). In service network research, scholars such as van Riel *et al.* (2013) focus on service innovation in the market (customer focus); Tax *et al.* (2013) and Ekman *et al.* (2016) emphasize the delivery process (enabling the service delivery); and Jones *et al.* (1998) and Peronard and Brix (2017, 2018) discuss the critical factors for both organizing and managing network activities

(management perspective). While these three streams of literature further the understanding of service networks as a researchable phenomenon, no attempt has so far been identified that seeks to synthesize or integrate these perspectives. In the following, these perspectives on service networks will be related to inter-organizational learning, and afterwards, the next section will develop a consolidation of the service network literature building on this discussion.

The generally accepted premise for a functioning service network is, that the individual actor has to both explore and exploit new potential service constellations together with other actors and, at the same time, learn to function and thrive in collaboration with these actors (see for example Peronard and Brix, 2018). However, as a service network is a loosely coupled system (Tax *et al.*, 2013), special attention needs to be given from all participating actors to the learning context so that customer expectations can be understood and met by these actors. The challenge in this regard is that many opportunities exist to create the foundation for increased customer value (Tax *et al.*, 2013) and that each actor only has a partial understanding of these opportunities (Peronard and Brix, 2017). Understanding what creates the positive customer experience and developing a relevant joint business model according to this is important (Peronard and Brix, 2018). Consequently, a service network is, therefore, characterized as being an emerging form of collaboration (van Riel *et al.*, 2013; Henneberg *et al.*, 2013) that contains a variety of complex and equivocal issues that need to be addressed (Jones *et al.*, 1998; Henneberg *et al.*, 2013). Service networks can hence be characterized as being a complex, social phenomena (Krogstrup, 2016). This is argued, because the customer-centric orientation in different service networks will be context-dependent, and the opportunities and uncertainties related hereto will therefore be locally determined (Peronard and Brix, 2017). Hence, the perspectives represented by the inter-organizational learning literature presented above become relevant, as continuous collaborative actions and adaptations to customer needs are required by the service network actors. To be responsive, it is important that the service network actors are: 1) receptive and transparent to each other (Larsson *et al.*, 1998) and 2) that the actors interact to understand each other's perspectives (knowledge domains) and arguments for advantages and disadvantages when new initiatives are being proposed (Schulz and Geithner, 2010). To enable a service network that takes these issues and uncertainties into consideration, the literature of inter-organizational learning will also stress the importance of the collaboration being based on trust and the flow of accurate and complete information among actors (Dovey, 2009; Kohtamäki, 2010). A creation of overlap in the actors' knowledge domains and the ability to identify, develop and test creative solutions together becomes crucial (Jones *et al.*, 1998; Peronard and Brix, 2017). Such a context for learning requires that service network actors create alliances that focus on interactive learning (Lane and Lubatkin, 1998), as there are no standard rules for serving customers in complex social settings. Hence, knowledge does not exist *ex ante*, and therefore, passive or active learning orientations (the learning dyads) cannot contribute to resolve this complexity (Lane and Lubatkin, 1998).

Moreover, to create variance in the individual actors' own logic (Holmqvist, 2004), it is argued that the marketing orientation presented above could be a beneficial approach to recognize potential interdependent opportunities (Barringer and Harrison, 2000; Zahra and George, 2002). This argument is based on the premise that focus in service networks is more on combining social activities with potential products or technologies, than integrating one technology with another technology platform (the technology orientation).

Based on these perspectives on service networks, there are at least three conditions that are important from an inter-organizational learning perspective. *First*, a service network is a customer-centric approach to service provision in which constellations of separate services

provide enhanced customer value.; this means that service networks may exist whether the service providers accept it or not (van Riel *et al.*, 2013). The argument is that service providers have the choice to proactively seek increased customer value by framing a service constellation with other organizations. Such a collaborative orientation is argued to achieve significant market leverage for the service network actors by not only accessing external resources but also by exploring and identifying new market possibilities that otherwise would have been left uncharted (Henneberg *et al.*, 2013). Hence, participation in a service network also generates value to the network actors. *Second*, the value creation in service networks is complex, as it is a systemic value-in-use and value-in-context approach (Vargo and Lusch, 2011; Chandler and Vargo, 2011; Ekman *et al.*, 2016). This implies that the customer value of an individual service increases when used and combined with other relevant services in the network (van Riel *et al.*, 2013). *Third*, service networks involve complex processes of combining services that emerge and change in the various stages of the collaboration (Scott and Laws, 2010; Ekman *et al.*, 2016). Although it is difficult to make a prediction about the outcome of service network processes, coordination among actors can, according to van Riel *et al.* (2013) and Ekman *et al.* (2016), increase conditions for increasing customer value. This may involve sensing, learning, responding, adapting and experimenting, which according to Peronard and Brix (2017, 2018) are imperative behaviors when navigating in a complex, social arena. A particular mindset for the collective network is hence required, and the exchange contexts and content of the individual service actor has to be transparent for all network participants (Kohtamäki, 2010) so that they can learn to act and react as a loosely coupled unit. The following section consolidates the service network research into a generic framework in which a new context for learning is synthesized. The theoretical stance of inter-organizational learning is used to discuss the framework's proposed context for learning in relation to a market-oriented approach to value creation.

Proposing a framework for the 'learning context' in service networks

To understand inter-organizational learning processes in a complex arena such as a service network requires a holistic perspective, so the actors can organize joint activities for exploration and exploitation and combine their offerings into an integrated service provision (Pinho *et al.*, 2014; Hillebrand *et al.*, 2015; Peronard and Brix, 2018). Inspired by the service triangle (Bitner, 1995; Grönroos, 1996; Kotler, 1994), a consolidation of the service network literature is proposed to define how the boundaries of a service network can be framed as a 'context for learning'. The service triangle is based on following assumption: *An organization that emphasizes excellent services needs to continuously work on interconnecting three key actors: customers, employees and the organization* (Kotler, 1994). These three constituents are the endpoints in the service triangle, and the argument is that by aligning the three sides of the triangle, the organization is able to increase service performance (Bitner, 1995; Grönroos, 1996). Because the scope of the service triangle is oriented towards single organizations, it is argued that it needs adjustment to fit with the learning context of service network – see Figure 1.

Based on the discussion above, the context for learning in service networks is proposed to be a place in which two or more organizations learn:

(1) to identify potential new actors in the service network and create a shared value proposition (making the promise);

(2) to assess actors' expectations and combine skills and knowledge that are relevant to the shared value proposition (enabling the promise); and
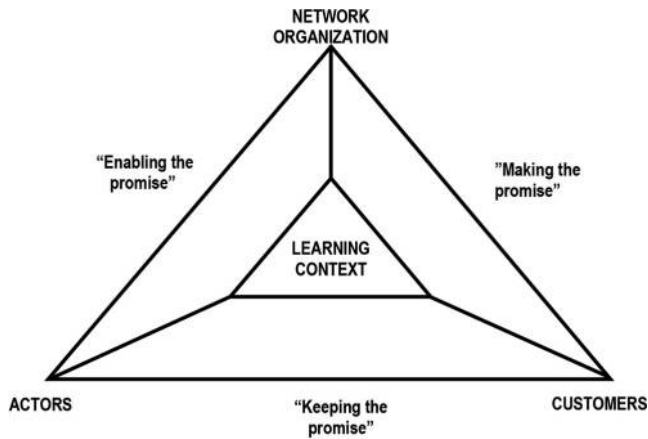
Source: Authors' developed framework, inspired by the service
marketing triangle

(3)   to modify and facilitate the delivery process among the service providers so that
the service network is more likely to provide positive customer experiences
(keeping the promise) (Bitner, 1995; Grönroos, 1996; Kotler, 1994).

These three key activities are discussed below.

Making the promise
The first challenge is to identify other potential actors in the service network and create a
value proposition. Peronard and Brix (2017) propose how social creativity can enable this
work via bricolage and the coupling of different logics stemming from different (potential)
network actors[1]. In this first part of the early stage, framing and scoping of a service
network, the actors collaborate by using their prior knowledge to recognize opportunities of
potential new service constellations (their potential absorptive capacity) (Zahra and George,
2002). For the identification of potential service constellations, scholars have suggested a
number of methodological approaches, for example, including social network analyses
(Tax *et al.*, 2013) and service blueprinting (Bitner *et al.*, 2008). The questions that initially
have to be raised are qualitative in nature. *Which kind of customers do we share with other
firms? Are there (major) opportunities that we can capitalize on if we collaborate? Will the
service network enable us to provide a better service for our customers? Will there be any
restrictions to the joint action in consideration? Will the participation be inefficiently time-
consuming?* These are not questions with straightforward answers, as they relate to the
actors' interpretations of a possible service constellation. Because the context of a service
network is a complex, social phenomenon, these questions are only answered through
negotiation of meaning between the actors and the creation of inter-subjective knowledge
(Weick, 1979; Brix, 2017). The implication of this line of reasoning is twofold. First, actors
need to be able to fit together each individual's domain-specific talents and knowledge to
produce overall service network excellence. This will require skills on a metacognitive level
since achieving a shared understanding of the service delivery becomes essential for the
network's development (Ellis and Hopkinson, 2010). In this regard, sense-making and sense-

giving is the continuous effort among actors to inter-subjectively understand their mutual connections and how they relate their individual knowledge to customer expectations (Brix, 2017). Second, actors have to stitch together fragments of meanings, resolve issues and find answers to ill-defined business prospects or pitfalls to increase their comprehension of the network's value proposition. Here, the aspect of transparency and receptivity are important (Larsson *et al.*, 1998) so that the actors can develop a high degree of interpersonal trust and free flow of information concerning their individual and shared meanings (Jones *et al.*, 1998; Dovey, 2009; Schulz and Geithner, 2010).

After having defined and framed the service constellations, the second challenge is to "connects the dots" for the customers so that they can be informed about the promises made to them (Englis and Solomon, 1996; Peronard and Brix, 2018). When initiating the collaboration, the actors make sense of the output and the effects of the joint activities performed by them to enable the linkages. By doing so, the actors seek to understand and improve their context for learning by creating a shared mental model of the service network (Lane and Lubatkin, 1998). When actors interact and communicate about the results of participating in the service network, the differentiation between the output of participation and the outcomes/effects of it should be made explicit (Krogstrup, 2016). It is thus important that actors learn to deal with ambiguity and accept that they collaborate in a non-linear, complex and social context (Krogstrup, 2016), as network actors must calibrate their different understandings into a coherent business model of the joint service provision (Peronard and Brix, 2018). Calibration of opinions on the joint service provision is an imperative task when 'making the promise' to customers so that a coherent value proposition is communicated by all actors to the (potential) customers.

Enabling the promise
A key question for service network actors is how to construct the "promise" so that it makes sense to the customers. The network actors should, therefore, be actively engaged in explaining the "why" and "how" of the full service provision in the joint business model to the customers (Henneberg *et al.*, 2013; Peronard and Brix, 2018). This explanation can be made through cross-referencing (Reingen and Kernan, 1986) or co-branding (Blackett and Russell, 1999). The argument is that service network actors should influence the customers' meaning creation proactively through constructed narratives (Peronard and Brix, 2018).

The pre-conditions for enabling actors to be effective in their collective endeavor are for them to agree on "what to do" and "how to do it". The success of enabling this precondition depends on whether the mindsets and capabilities of the service network actors can be united (Das and He, 2006; Ekman *et al.*, 2016) and whether (potential new) actors can build relationships in which they are able to combine "hard" business interests and "soft" social interests with the ones of the other network actors (Henneberg *et al.*, 2013; see also: Kohtamäki, 2010). A special area of attention is the actors' ability to work with the potential absorptive capacity to decode the added value of emerging service constellations and the ability to align expectations among actors for effectiveness and efficiency if/when realizing this potential (Zahra and George, 2002). Consequently, to avoid tension and controversy between different and conflicting views in the service network, it is once again stressed, that a high degree of transparency and receptivity between the actors is present (Larsson *et al.*, 1998). Such openness in dialogue becomes a critical issue for service network actors, as customers may have different needs and desires that vary over time and from one situation to another: The more dynamic the external environment is, the more the service network will have to learn to adjust to changes in the environment to maintain a relevant service provision (Peronard and Brix, 2018). Hence, explaining to the customers the "why" and

"how" of the full service provision is an imperative task for service network actors, just as the promise has to be continuously relevant for the customers so that a high level of satisfaction can be maintained (Tax *et al.*, 2013; Henneberg *et al.*, 2013; Ekman *et al.*, 2016).

Keeping the promise
Delivering services to the target customers is a complex process, as it depends on both the co-creation of customers (Ekman *et al.*, 2016) and on "a series of exchanges that may extend over a considerable amount of time and with a variety of service providers contributing to the experience" (Tax *et al.*, 2013, p. 454). The challenge for the service network actors is to make their offerings available as promised and to ensure that no one performs below the standard that has been agreed upon (Bourdeau *et al.*, 2007). One goal of the delivery process becomes the integration and reinforcement of the meaning and value that customers associate with the service experience stemming from the joint business model (Solomon, 1988; van Riel *et al.*, 2013). These customer insights are imperative elements of the learning context and these insights can be used to improve or expand existing service provisions when the logic of the customers meets the logic of the service network actors and generates variance (Larsson *et al.*, 1998 – see also Schulz and Geithner, 2010). However, this usage of the customers' knowledge is complicated, as customers may form their own idiosyncratic opinions of what the service network *may have promised* (Grönroos, 1996; van Riel *et al.*, 2013).

"Keeping the promise" is hence a matter of getting to know and to influence customers' expectations. Consequently, collecting and interpreting customer feedback is an important part of keeping the promise, as it provides input for the continuous improvement of the joint business model (Zahra and George, 2002; Peronard and Brix, 2018). Arguably, this emphasizes the importance of the service network actors' ability to make sense of the situation and for them to adapt and reorganize the activities in the joint business model accordingly. Because the service network is a loosely coupled system, there is a balance to be achieved in terms of the degree of the coupling (Tax *et al.*, 2013; Peronard and Brix, 2018). If the network participants have too few (or no) variables in common, then the network becomes decoupled, and if the participants become too tightly coupled, then they are unable to act individually (Orton and Weick, 1990). It is argued, that the process to identify a balance-point in the coupling of these service constellations is a delicate matter that requires interactive learning (Lane and Lubatkin, 1998) with a high degree of transparency and receptivity (Larsson *et al.*, 1998). If a balance between individuality and interdependence is to be achieved in such circumstances, then it will depend on an ability of the service network actors to be responsive to change, absorb uncertainties, avoid opportunistic behavior, formalize decision-making and obtain economic returns (Brusoni and Prencipe, 2001). The success is hence rather dependent on the actors' ability to identify, adopt and use market information for commercial purposes, both for the benefit of themselves and the other service network actors and for the increased value creation to their customers (Zahra and George, 2002).

Implications
By consolidating the literature on service networks into the proposed framework, the study identifies key barriers and opportunities to inter-organizational learning that exist in the new "context for learning", that takes shape as a *marketing-oriented type of collaboration* (Barringer and Harrison, 2000). To understand and mitigate this complexity, the conceptualization is inspired by the Service Triangle (Kotler, 1994). The framework builds on the *interactive mode of learning* proposed by Lane and Lubatkin (1998), and it emphasizes the importance of the service network actors' behaviors related to *receptivity* and *transparency* (Larsson *et al.*, 1998) to generate *trust* between them (Dovey, 2009). The

managerial implications related to the study are twofold. First, the proposed framework can enable business professionals in qualifying their work in relation to the creation and/or retention of a service network in their shared search for value creation. Second, the inter-organizational learning perspective used to develop this framework demonstrates the importance of spending time on building strong relationships between the actors and that many opportunities can be recognized, if/when different organizational actors engage in processes of meaning negotiation of how and why certain joint business models might be beneficial for themselves and the customers.

Limitations
The proposed framework represents a simplified response to manage the complexity of inter-organizational learning in service networks. Various external factors such as market conditions, national economy and advances in technology have been omitted from the framework, as they only to a small extend are controllable. The framework thus represents a conceptual construct that can act as a starting point for further theoretical discussion and empirical testing.

Conclusion
The purpose of this study has been to discuss how the generation of – and participation in – a service network can be qualified from an inter-organizational learning perspective. This endeavor was operationalized by unfolding the literature on service networks to understand the generally accepted premises for delivering better value, both for the network actors and for the customers. Two key contributions are identified in this endeavor. The first contribution is the creation of a framework that proposes a consolidation of the service network literature, being the *customer focused* (van Riel *et al.*, 2013), the *service delivery focused* (Tax *et al.*, 2013; Ekman *et al.*, 2016) and *the management focused* streams of literature (Jones *et al.*, 1998; Peronard and Brix, 2017, 2018). Inspired by the service triangle (Kotler, 1994), this consolidation represents the framing of a "learning context" for service network actors. This framing of the learning context can be used to understand the processes of interaction that are needed to identify, create and deliver improved value both to customers and the service network actors (Zahra and George, 2002; van Riel *et al.*, 2013; Peronard and Brix, 2018). The study's second contribution is twofold, as the literature on inter-organizational learning is both *extended to* the new context for learning, and it is *used to qualify* this new context for learning. More specifically, the literature on inter-organizational learning is used to suggests how actors in service networks via *interactive learning* (Lane and Lubatkin, 1998) can create new knowledge about the customers and the market when recognizing opportunities for new service constellations or when improving or extending existing service constellations (Zahra and George, 2002; Schulz and Geithner, 2010; Henneberg *et al.*, 2013). The focus in this process is on the interactions of the service network actors that need to be *transparent and receptive* (Larsson *et al.*, 1998) to generate *trust* among them (Dovey, 2009). The argument is that these attitudes and behaviors can result in a strong collaboration, that enables value creation and thereby continuous relevancy of the individual actor organization and their shared service network (van Riel *et al.*, 2013; Tax *et al.*, 2013; Peronard and Brix, 2018).

Note
1. For concrete managerial insights about the role of the organizer and the rules of engagement of the participants in such a bricolage-setting aiming at service network constellations, see Peronard and Brix (2017, pp. 101-103).

References

Barringer, B.R. and Harrison, J.S. (2000), "Walking a tightrope: creating value through interorganizational relationships", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 26 No. 3, pp. 367-403.

Beeby, M. and Booth, C. (2000), "Networks and inter-organizational learning: a critical review", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 7 No. 2, pp. 75-88.

Bitner, M.J. (1995), "Building service relationships: it's all about promises", *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol. 23 No. 4, pp. 246-251.

Bitner, M.J., Ostrom, A.L. and Morgan, F.N. (2008), "Service blueprinting: a practical technique for service innovation", *California Management Review*, Vol. 50 No. 3, pp. 66-94.

Blackett, T. and Russell, N. (1999), "What is co-branding?", in Blackett, T. and Boad, R. (Eds), *Co-Branding – the Science of Alliance*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, pp. 1-21.

Bolton, R. and Saxena-Iyer, S. (2009), "Interactive services: a framework, synthesis and research directions", *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, Vol. 23 No. 1, pp. 91-104.

Bourdeau, B.L., Cronin, J.J., Jr and Voorhees, C.M. (2007), "Modeling service alliances: an exploratory investigationr of spillover effects in service partnerships", *Strategic Management Journal*, Vol. 28 No. 6, pp. 609-622.

Brix, J. (2017), "Exploring knowledge creation processes as a source of organizational learning: a longitudinal case study of a public innovation project", *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, Vol. 33 No. 2, pp. 113-127.

Brix, J. and Jakobsen, H.S. (2013), "Corporate creativity: introducing the creative idea solution© framework", *International Journal of Innovation and Learning*, Vol. 13 No. 4, pp. 388-405.

Brusoni, S. and Prencipe, A. (2001), "Managing knowledge in loosely coupled networks: exploring the links between product and knowledge dynamics", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 38 No. 7, pp. 1019-1035.

Chandler, J.D. and Vargo, S.L. (2011), "Contextualization and value-in-context: how context frames exchange", *Marketing Theory*, Vol. 11 No. 1, pp. 35-49.

Cohen, W.M. and Levinthal, D.A. (1990), "Absorptive capacity: a new perspective on learning and innovation", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 35 No. 1, pp. 128-152.

Das, T.K. and He, I.Y. (2006), "Entrepreneurial firms in search of established partners: review and recommendations", *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior and Research*, Vol. 12 No. 3, pp. 114-143.

Dovey, K. (2009), "The role of trust in innovation", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 16 No. 4, pp. 311-325.

Dyer, J.H. and Singh, H. (1998), "The relational view: cooperative strategy and sources of interorganizational competitive advantage", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 23 No. 4, pp. 660-679.

Ekman, P., Raggio, R.D. and Thompson, S.M. (2016), "Service network value co-creation: defining the roles of the generic actor", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 56, pp. 51-62.

Ellis, N. and Hopkinson, G. (2010), "The construction of managerial knowledge in business networks: managers' theories about communication", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 39 No. 3, pp. 413-424.

Englis, B.G. and Solomon, M.R. (1996), "Using consumption constellations to develop integrated communications strategies", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 37 No. 3, pp. 183-191.

Ferrary, M. and Granovetter, M. (2017), "Social networks and innovation", in Bathelt, H., Cohendet, P., Henn, S. and Simon, L. (Eds), *The Elgar Companion to Innovation and Knowledge Creation*, EE Elgar Publishers, Cheltenham.

Grönroos, C. (1996), "Relationship marketing: strategic and tactical implications", *Management Decision*, Vol. 34 No. 3, pp. 5-14.

Henneberg, S.C., Gruber, T. and Naudé, P. (2013), "Services networks: concept and research agenda", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 42 No. 1, pp. 3-8.

Hillebrand, B., Driessen, P.H. and Koll, O. (2015), "Stakeholder marketing: theoretical foundations and required capabilities", *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol. 43 No. 4, pp. 411-428.

Holmqvist, M. (2004), "Experiential learning processes of exploitation and exploration within and between organizations: an empirical study of product development", *Organization Science*, Vol. 15 No. 1, pp. 70-81.

Jones, C., Hesterly, W.S., Fladmoe-Lindquist, K. and Borgatti, S.P. (1998), "Professional service constellations: how strategies and capabilities influence collaborative stability and change", *Organization Science*, Vol. 9 No. 3, pp. 396-410.

Jones, O. and Macpherson, A. (2006), "Inter-organizational learning and strategic renewal in SMEs: extending the 4I framework", *Long Range Planning*, Vol. 39 No. 2, pp. 155-175.

Knight, L. and Pye, A. (2004), "Exploring the relationships between network change and network learning", *Management Learning*, Vol. 35 No. 4, pp. 473-490.

Kohtamäki, M. (2010), "Relationship governance and learning in partnerships", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 17 No. 1, pp. 41-57.

Kotler, P. (1994), *Marketing Management, analysis, planning, implementation, and Control*, Prentice-Hall International, London.

Krogstrup, H.K. (2016), *Evalueringsmodeller*, Hans Reitzel, København.

Lane, P.J. and Lubatkin, M. (1998), "Relative absorptive capacity and interorganizational learning", *Strategic Management Journal*, Vol. 19 No. 5, pp. 461-477.

Larsson, R., Bengtsson, L., Henriksson, K. and Sparks, J. (1998), "The interorganizational learning dilemma: collective knowledge development in strategic alliances", *Organization Science*, Vol. 9 No. 3, pp. 285-305.

Orton, J.D. and Weick, K.E. (1990), "Loosely coupled systems: a reconceptualization", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 15 No. 2, pp. 203-223.

Peronard, J.P. and Brix, J. (2018), "Sensemaking in collaborative networks: creating and balancing activities in open business models", *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation Management*, Vol. 22 No. 6, pp. 545-561.

Peronard, J.P. and Brix, J. (2017), "Business development in interfirm collaborations: proposing a theory of social creativity in service networks", *Journal of Creativity and Business Innovation*, Vol. 3, pp. 89-111.

Pinho, N., Beirão, G., Patrício, L. and P. Fisk, R. (2014), "Understanding value co-creation in complex services with many actors", *Journal of Service Management*, Vol. 25 No. 4, pp. 470-493.

Reingen, P.H. and Kernan, J.B. (1986), "Analysis of referral networks in marketing: methods and illustration", *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 23 No. 4, pp. 370-378.

Schulz, K.P. and Geithner, S. (2010), "Between exchange and development: organizational learning in schools through inter-organizational networks", *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 17 No. 1, pp. 69-85.

Scott, N. and Laws, E. (2010), "Advances in service networks research", *The Service Industries Journal*, Vol. 30 No. 10, pp. 1581-1592.

Solomon, M.R. (1988), "Mapping product constellations: a social categorization approach to consumption symbolism", *Psychology and Marketing*, Vol. 5 No. 3, pp. 233.

Tax, S.S., McCutcheon, D. and Wilkinson, I.F. (2013), "The service delivery network (SDN) A Customer-centric perspective of the customer journey", *Journal of Service Research*, Vol. 16 No. 4, pp. 454-470.

Tyre, M.J. and von Hippel, E. (1997), "The situated nature of adaptive learning in organizations", *Organization Science*, Vol. 8 No. 1, pp. 71-83.

Van Riel, A.C., Calabretta, G., Driessen, P.H., Hillebrand, B., Humphreys, A., Krafft, M. and Beckers, S.F. (2013), "Consumer perceptions of service constellations: implications for service innovation", *Journal of Service Management*, Vol. 24 No. 3, pp. 314-329.

Vargo, S.L., Lusch, R.F. (2011), "It's all B2B ... and beyond: toward a systems perspective of the market", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 40 No. 2, pp. 181-187.

Weick, K.E. (1979), *The Social Psychology of Organizing*, Addison-Wesley, Reading.

Zahra, S.A. and George, G. (2002), "Absorptive capacity: a review, reconceptualization, and extension", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 27 No. 2, pp. 185-203.

288

About the authors

Jean-Paul Peronard is an Associate Professor of Marketing and Business Innovation at Aarhus University, Denmark. His research interests are the cultural and social aspects of marketing and management, with a particular focus on culture, technology and innovation. He has participated in several research projects on themes related to technology and innovation.

Jacob Brix is an Associate Professor of Innovation and Organizational Learning at Aalborg University. He holds an Industrial PhD in innovation management and a PhD in Business Communication. Brix's research encompasses the design and organization of the knowledge creation, diffusion and depreciating processes that enable innovation to occur in both public and private organizations. Brix is visiting scholar at the Lally School of Management at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York. Jacob Brix is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: brix@learning.aau.dk