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1. Title page

- The manuscript title:
 - Boundary-spanning coordination: Insights into lateral collaboration and lateral alignment in multinational enterprises

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- Conflict of interest statement

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**Boundary-spanning coordination:
Insights into lateral collaboration and lateral alignment in
multinational enterprises**

Abstract

Interorganizational boundary spanning between multinational enterprises requires substantive internal “lateral collaboration” and “lateral alignment.” However, how actors coordinate laterally between multiple nodes and across multiple boundaries for interorganizational boundary spanning is unclear. This qualitative study of a large multinational demonstrates how actors collectively build and maintain interorganizational relationships through collective boundary spanning. To coordinate this activity, actors strategize and map contributors for collective action and then synchronize their communication and problem-solving to ensure lateral collaboration and alignment. This article contributes to the extant literature by providing a framework depicting how boundary-spanning coordination leads to lateral collaboration and lateral alignment.

Keywords

Collective boundary spanning, boundary-spanning coordination, collective bridge, lateral collaboration, lateral alignment.

Introduction

Interorganizational collaborations require multiple interpersonal interactions between companies at different hierarchical levels (Marchington & Vincent, 2004). Organized in parallel around the periphery of an organization, those multiple contacts allow for collective interorganizational boundary spanning, which creates a synergic effect leading to stronger relationships between organizations (Huang, Luo, Liu, & Yang, 2016). However, in multinational enterprises (MNEs) internal geographic and functional boundaries separate the individuals who collectively perform interorganizational boundary spanning. Thus, effective interorganizational boundary spanning *between* MNEs requires substantial internal “lateral collaboration” and “lateral alignment” across geographies and business units *within* MNEs.

For MNEs, boundary spanning provides a means for *lateral collaboration*, which is the creation of mutual commitment between hierarchically independent people who thus become constructively interdependent and achieve something together (Schotter, Maznevski, Doz, & Stahl, forthcoming). Boundary spanning facilitates collaboration between subsidiaries (Birkinshaw, Ambros, & Bouquet, 2017), organizational subunits (Hsiao, Tsai, & Lee, 2012; Schotter, Mudambi, Doz, & Gaur, 2017), and across geographies (Barner-Rasmussen, Ehrnrooth, Koveshnikov, & Mäkelä, 2014; Pedersen, Soda, & Stea, 2019). Still, research into boundary spanning generally focuses on the spanning of the boundaries between two nodes, or units, while lateral collaboration for interorganizational boundary spanning takes place across multiple nodes. More research is needed to understand the mechanisms

involved in the coordination of boundary spanning between multiple units within MNEs (Schotter et al., forthcoming).

Lateral alignment is distinct from lateral collaboration in that lateral collaboration focuses on achieving something together while lateral alignment focuses on harmonizing goals and processes across hierarchically independent people in order to act as one when performing collective action with or for an external entity. While lateral collaboration is for crossing nodes within an organization, lateral alignment is essential for harmonizing across nodes in preparation for external organizations (e.g., interorganizational partnerships). In interorganizational boundary spanning, individuals act collectively, not alone (Liu & Meyer, 2020). Such collective boundary spanning is particularly important for knowledge transformation (Tippmann, Scott, & Parker, 2017) and collective knowledge transfer (Zhao & Anand, 2013). Driving collective boundary-spanning activities toward collective goals requires coordination (Langley, Lindberg, Mørk, Nicolini, Raviola, & Walter, 2019, p. 64). Again, more research would help us to understand how collective boundary spanning is coordinated among hierarchically independent people (Goerzen, 2018).

Lateral collaboration requires coordination (Schotter et al., forthcoming), as does lateral alignment. Although researchers have studied the boundary-spanning practices of leaders (e.g., Birkinshaw et al., 2017; Butler, Zander, Mockaitis, & Sutton, 2012; Levina & Vaast, 2008) and practices that managers use to encourage boundary spanning (e.g., Hsiao et al., 2012; Orlikowski, 2002; Tippmann et al., 2017), the question of boundary-spanning coordination for lateral collaboration has

not been adequately explored. Therefore, I address this issue, framing the research around the question: “How do actors coordinate across multiple boundaries and between multiple nodes to ensure lateral collaboration and lateral alignment in multinational enterprises?” Using a grounded theory approach, I interviewed over 60 respondents and observed worksites in several European countries, the United States, and Japan. My findings indicate that boundary-spanning coordination facilitates lateral collaboration and alignment. Actors coordinate collective boundary spanning by creating and implementing strategies to form a collective bridge. This work includes the mapping and managing of individuals designated to span interorganizational boundaries and the boundary-spanning coordination practices of synchronized communication and global problem-solving, which together ensure global alignment and harmonized lateral collaboration.

This study extends the growing body of literature on collective boundary spanning and the collective bridge by introducing the notion of boundary-spanning coordination. The conceptualization of boundary-spanning coordination suggests that managing collective boundary spanning in global organizations encompasses more than just performing boundary-spanning activities. Rather, it entails a reflective and strategic approach to managing collective boundary-spanning activities of multiple individuals in different geographies and business units. The individuals who coordinate collective boundary-spanning activities decide where, when, and how boundary spanning happens, and who will engage in these activities. The theoretical perspective of the managerial side of boundary spanning—which has not yet been developed in the existing literature—provides another lens for the study of boundary activity.

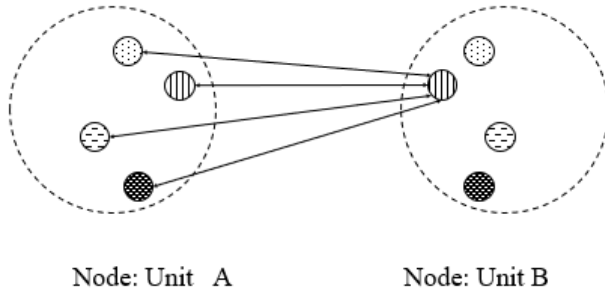
Literature Review

Interorganizational boundary spanning on a global scale

Interorganizational boundary spanning is required whenever two or more MNEs collaborate to find solutions to their global needs (Marchington & Vincent, 2004). Boundary spanning is “a set of communication and coordination activities performed by individuals within an organization and between organizations to integrate activities across multiple cultural, institutional, and organizational contexts” (Schotter et al., 2017, p. 404). Boundary spanning can facilitate creative problem-solving for nonroutine work (Tippmann et al., 2017) and positively affect interorganizational relationships (Huang et al., 2016). Within organizations, boundary spanning connects units like a rubber band to provide enough flexibility to allow separate units to respond independently and enough connectivity to ensure the units do not drift too far from the corporate strategy (Schotter et al., 2017).

In the case of collaboration between two large organizations, multiple contacts at different levels have a synergic effect, which improves the overall interorganizational relationship (Huang et al., 2016). Thus, the dual notions of flexibility and alignment require the linking of multiple bands at various points around the organizational periphery. Within organizations, Zhao and Anand (2013) conceptualize those links as the beams that make up a collective bridge. The authors’ description of *boundary spanning* as the linkage between multiple units and a single unit (e.g., Figure 1a) distinguishes it from a *collective bridge*, which has several direct interunit ties between the members of two units (Figure 1b). In other words, the creation and maintenance of collective bridges move beyond a boundary spanning structure (Zhao & Anand, 2013)

a) Many-to-one interunit boundary spanning.



b) An interunit collective bridge for transferring individual knowledge.

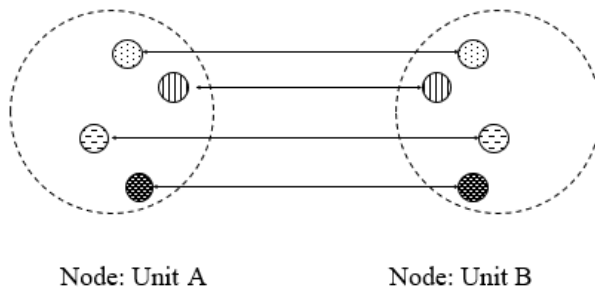


Figure 1: Differences between boundary spanning and a collective bridge (Zhao & Anand, 2013).

Due to the size and geographic diversity of MNEs, interorganizational boundary spanning happens in different countries or business units by the parallel efforts of multiple individuals separated by internal organizational boundaries. Thus, an interorganizational collective bridge differs from an interunit collective bridge, in that MNEs have internal boundaries. Therefore, some form of (internal) organizational lateral collaboration and alignment across geographic and functional boundaries is necessary for successful (external) collective boundary-spanning efforts between organizations. In other words, the interorganizational collective bridge requires boundary-spanning coordination between business units and across geographic barriers to align the collective boundary spanning taking place between organizations. Figure 2 depicts an interorganizational collective bridge with internal country and unit boundaries, and the boundary-spanning coordination needed to ensure lateral collaboration across internal boundaries.

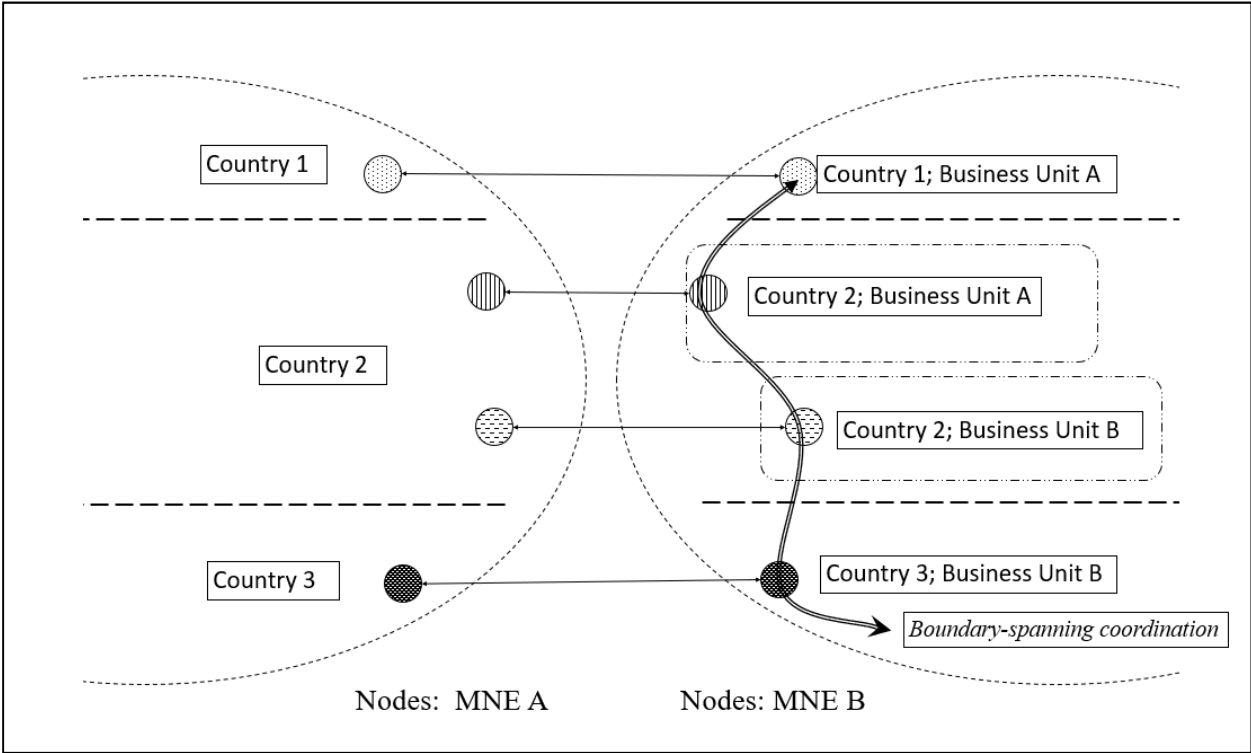


Figure 2: An interorganizational collective bridge.

Boundary-spanning coordination

The extant boundary-spanning literature identifies the different activities, or practices, that actors use to span boundaries. Those boundary-spanning activities (Marrone, Tesluk, & Carson, 2007) or practices (Levina & Vaast, 2005) generally focus on the spanning between two nodes, including: representation and negotiation (Adams, 1976; Alderich & Herker, 1977); information gathering and exchange (Alderich & Herker, 1977; Ancona & Caldwell, 1988; Pawlowski & Robey, 2004; Tushman & Scanlan, 1981); filtering (Alderich & Herker, 1977; Ancona & Caldwell, 1988); and translating (Ancona & Caldwell, 1988; Carlile, 2004). Boundary-spanning activities that are particularly important for MNEs include helping each other understand different points of view, overcoming biases and misperceptions (Birkinshaw et al., 2017; Butler et al., 2012; Distefano & Maznevski, 2000), and connecting individuals previously unknown to one another (Birkinshaw et al., 2017; Butler et al., 2012; Eisenberg & Mattarelli, 2017; Pedersen et al., 2019).

While collective boundary-spanning activities are especially important for knowledge sharing or transformation (Eisenberg & Mattarelli, 2017; Tippmann et al., 2017), more research would help us to understand “the orchestration of ‘collective bridges’” (Goerzen, 2018, p. 161). In multinational environments, effective interorganizational boundary spanning requires that individuals operate collectively (Liu & Meyer, 2020). Different from team boundary spanning (Marrone, 2010), which focuses on the aggregate boundary spanning between teams (Joshi, Pandey, & Han, 2009), collective boundary spanning focuses on collective and aligned action (Langley et al., 2019). Those collective boundary-spanning

activities must be managed if they are to be effective (Langley et al., 2019, p. 64), yet little is known about how collective boundary spanning is coordinated.

To date, research on boundary-spanning managers has generally focused on why boundary spanning is essential for effective management (Butler et al., 2012; Levina & Vaast, 2008) and how managers leverage boundary spanning. For example, managers use boundary spanning instead of command and control as an influencing mechanism in fluid MNEs (Birkinshaw et al., 2017). Brion, Chauvet, Chollet, and Mothe (2012) emphasize the importance of external coordination as a boundary-spanning activity in project management, but their interpretation of coordination focuses on negotiating and exchanging across boundaries rather than the coordination of collective boundary spanning. Overall, the extant literature on boundary-spanning managers focuses on the *performance* of managers' boundary-spanning activities rather than their *coordination* of collective boundary-spanning activities.

To understand lateral work across multiple boundaries in an MNE, we must expand our conceptual frameworks to include *boundary-spanning coordination*, which I define as “the strategies and practices used to coordinate collective boundary-spanning activities across multiple nodes.” As boundary-spanning coordination creates interdependence across internal boundaries, it is a key facilitator for both the lateral collaboration and lateral alignment needed for building a collective bridge between two MNEs. This study provides insights into how that happens.

Materials and Method

Research setting and design

The empirical work for this study draws on a larger qualitative research project in the global account management division of a high-tech multinational, which I refer to as MuNE. Because global account management requires both internal boundary spanning and external boundary spanning (Lacoste, Zindani, & Cuevas, forthcoming), the study of global account managers and their teams is particularly relevant to the study of boundary spanning coordination. MuNE provides complex and specialized business-to-business solutions for a limited number of large key multinationals. Within this organization, I focus on the members of the global sales teams, technical experts, and executive support who ensure the quality of the long-term interorganizational relationships between MuNE and 30 of its global customers. As complex solutions require the creation of customized solutions with several business units across the globe, this research setting provides an ideal environment for studying lateral collaboration and lateral alignment across multiple boundaries and multiple nodes.

The need for lateral collaboration and alignment across business units and countries was a central concern for managers in the organization, which prompted the introduction of “MuNE in sync.” Initiated by the CEO and supported by top managers, the program pushes global account managers to synchronize their global sales- and solution-related activities to serve customers as one team. While the program did not fundamentally change the need for lateral collaboration and alignment in the organization, it did create awareness regarding the challenges and practices involved with such issues.

Data collection

The data for this study were collected over a period of 18 months using a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). The empirical work comprises observations from the United States, the United Kingdom, Sweden, the Netherlands, Germany, France, Switzerland, Romania, and Japan, and more than 60 interviews. Face-to-face interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours, and phone interviews (completed only when site visits were not possible) were generally between 30 minutes and 1 hour. I made observations from 13 site visits (two to five days) and two annual account meetings (three to four days, which began early in the morning and continued late into the night). I attended meals, meetings, team-building sessions, and social events, during which informal interviews occurred. All of those interactions provided a broad perspective of the challenges facing leaders and a rich understanding of the context in which such leaders function.

Overall, I interviewed 50 actors who directly contributed to the interorganizational relationships of 30 clients in 10 diverse industries: automotive, banking, oil and gas, communication, technology, and non-profit, as well as organizations in houseware, insurance, and tobacco. In many cases, it was the global account managers who coordinated the collective boundary-spanning activities between MuNE and the client. Still, there were times when non-global account managers assumed a coordinating role. In the data structure (Figure 3), I indicated managers whose contributors mentioned the quality of their ability to ensure lateral collaboration or lateral alignment by using the word “effective.” In addition to those who participated in collective boundary spanning, I included interviews with 18 actors

who supported this collective effort. Interviewing respondents with both senior management and business support roles was important as they provided an external view of the interorganizational relationships and boundary-spanning activities.

Theoretical sampling and analysis

The analysis of data and theoretical sampling was iterative—moving from initial coding to the detection of emerging concepts and back again. That process was undertaken in three phases.

Phase One. During the initial interviews and observations at the first three sites in Germany, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, I focused on the functioning of global teams. I based my research on grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), in line with exploratory work (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), and started with broadly framed and open-ended questions. I kept a journal in which I noted interview impressions and observations, as well as reflections and analytical “memos” with possible theoretical threads and emerging themes.

One theme that emerged from that method was how participants connected, liaised, and problem-solved across subunits, hierarchies, and geographies, and between the organization and client—activities that consumed a considerable amount of their time. I used several techniques (Charmez, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to establish the focus of my research, such as constant comparison with internal and external data sources, including academic literature (Gioia et al., 2013). That process led me to focus on the concept of boundary spanning. I used theoretical sampling (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to investigate that phenomenon further.

Phase Two. As mentioned, my early memos directed my choice of subsequent interviews and site visits. For example, I visited Global Accounts back offices to get

a broader perspective of the role of global account managers and the connections they made through their networks. I also included local sales representatives and technical directors in my research to understand their perspective of working across boundaries. During that time, I continued to interview global account managers in Japan and the United States to ensure the phenomenon was global, not just European. At that point, my focus narrowed as I sought to understand the boundaries that global account managers encounter and how they cross them. It was at the end of that phase that I realized that effective global account managers were doing more than just spanning boundaries: They were coordinating boundary-spanning activities.

Phase Three. I returned to the literature to find out more about the coordination or management of boundary-spanning activities. As I found few insights in that area, I reframed my research question as: “How do actors coordinate across multiple boundaries and between multiple nodes to ensure lateral collaboration and lateral alignment?” I went back through my observation notes and interview transcripts to focus on that question. I used NVivo software to code all references to global synchronization, alignment, and harmonization, as well as references to the “MuNE in sync” program. Within that subset, I used open coding to define the types of activities I found. Considering the research question, and inspired by Orlikowski’s (2002) work, I focused on social practices, defined as recurrent and situated social action that members of the organization engage in. I organized those social practices into first-order concepts (Gioia et al., 2013). I then grouped those concepts into themes that described them, thus leading me to second-order themes and aggregate dimensions. Figures 3 and 4 provide an overview of the data structure and their corresponding representative quotations.

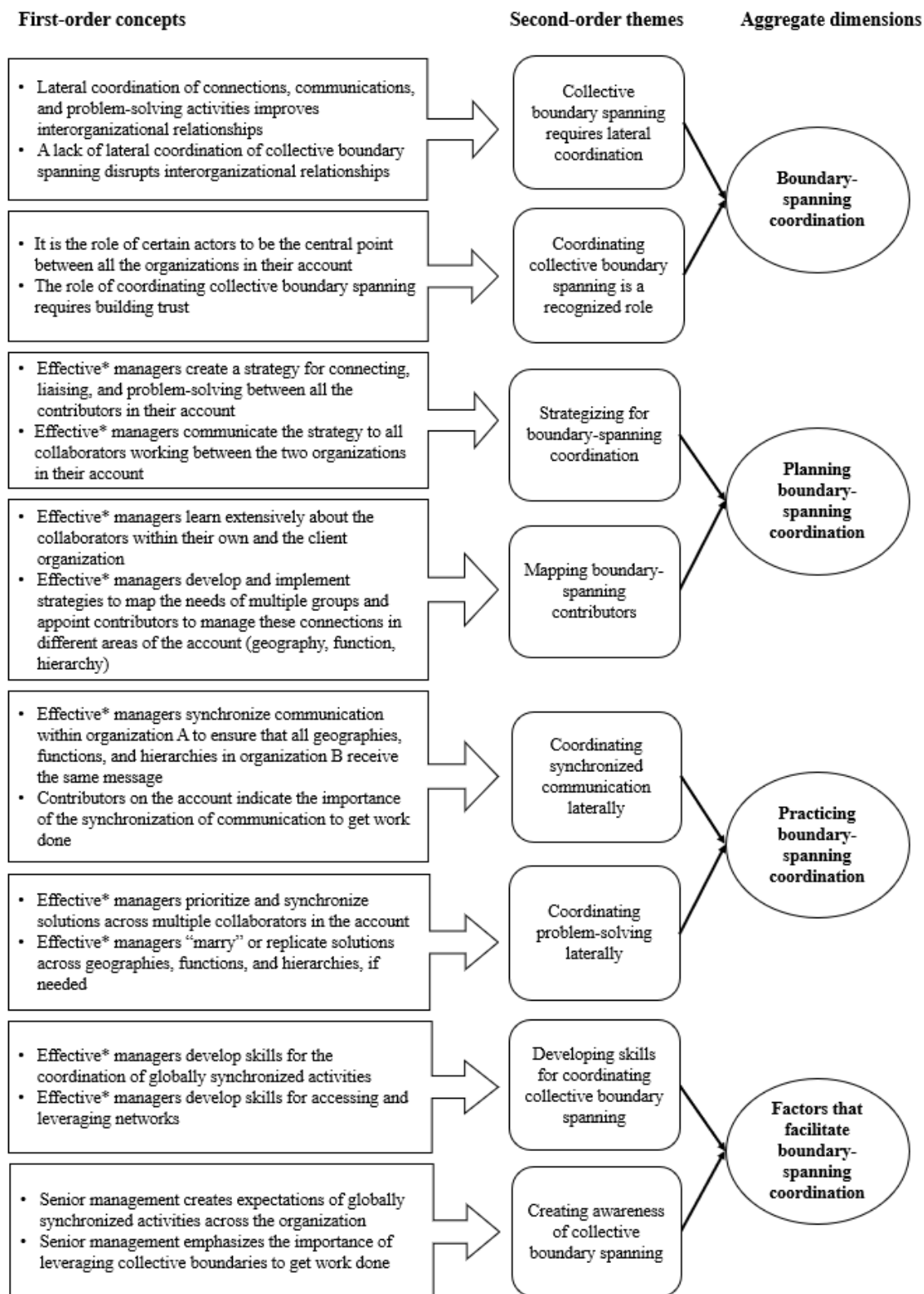


Figure 3: Data structure.

* Effective in the sense that these managers build lateral collaboration and/or alignment according to their contributors.

Boundary-spanning coordination		
Collective boundary spanning requires lateral coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lateral coordination of connections, communications, and problem-solving activities improves solutions for interorganizational relationships • A lack of lateral coordination of boundary spanning between organizations disrupts interorganizational relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bjorn, Chief Account Technologist, Germany: “What we are lacking at the moment is a moderator between the different directions or the different views. To provide a customer with a solution, you have to drive it in a minimum of three different business units. There is a very, very low probability that the other three business units are sitting at the same table. I bring all the business units to the table. There is a better outcome if we are all working together.” • Salman, Regional Account Manager, Germany: “I have tons of problems. Every time we have to go into a country, we have to encourage the local business unit to go for this or that. We have to explain to the customer what is involved in this or that. The customer expects that MuNE acts centralized as one. We are not able to do that. The structure prevents decision-making.”
Coordinating collective boundary spanning is a recognized role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is the role of certain actors to be the central point between all the organizations in their account • The role of coordinating collective boundary spanning requires building trust 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Giuseppe, Global Account Manager, UK: “One of the criticisms from the bank was that they can’t work with MuNE because we have 20 salespeople around the world all selling into the bank. That’s way down now, by the way. One of my main roles is to act as a central point between MuNE and the bank to ensure that we have touch points [for each geography], but those touch points are actually one single point of entry.” • Elias, Regional Account Manager, Germany: “[The manager] had built up a level of trust between the two organizations. He had built up the key relationships and he was very generous with giving us access to those relationships. He leveraged his part of the organization to make sure that we’re moving collectively.”
Boundary-spanning coordination planning		
Strategizing collective boundary spanning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective* managers create a strategy for connecting, liaising, and problem-solving between all the contributors in their account • Effective* managers communicate the strategy to all collaborators working between the two organizations in their account 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agatha, Regional Sales Director, Nordics: “We all talked about what the mission is ... it was a very good baseline for everyone: We are the team, this is what we are here for, this is what we do. I took the mission and the vision, and we discussed how we are going to work together, how do we engage with each other, how are we going to communicate with each other. I told them that I had a strategy that I wanted to execute, and they signed off on it, said yes. They understood it and they approved it.” • Franz, Global Account Manager, Germany: “Account strategy, going forward what direction do we want to take the account as a whole ... [is] the overarching theme that everybody in the account is aware of.”
Mapping boundary-spanning contributors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective* managers learn extensively about the collaborators within their own organization and the client organization • Effective* managers develop and implement political strategies to map the needs of multiple groups and appoint collaborators to manage these connections in different areas of the account (geography, function, hierarchy) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tanner, Global Account Manager, Switzerland: “Also, what I’m doing is [studying] the customer. It’s about linking the right information to the right people at the customer site but also at the internal level. I’m telling them to talk to this one, talk to this one ... so interlinking people.” • Malcolm, Global Account Manager, UK: “My job is to educate: How my customer works, thinks, goes to market, their business drivers, and pain points. How to get things done in that organization. People misunderstand the power base of politics. They can be talking at the wrong level. I help them get to the right place, facilitate the meeting for them with my customer.”

Boundary-spanning coordination practices		
Coordinating synchronized communication laterally	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective* managers synchronize communication within organization A to ensure that all geographies, functions, and hierarchies in organization B receive the same message • Collaborators in the account indicate the importance of the synchronization of communication to get work done 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goyo, Regional Account Manager, Germany: “The effective leader has excellent communication skills, keeps the team and the customer informed ... The message that is coming from our organization to the customer is consistent. Not two or three people going to the same customer and telling different stories. We are always on the interface between our organization and the customer. You [can do] a great job if leaders manage to keep consistent communication.” • Dale, Technical Director, Switzerland: “One of the things that I would expect a global account leader to do as normal behavior would be to take a global view of an account or customer. That for me means simple things like global pricing and parity solutions. We offer the same thing, ideally, in every country. It simplifies things.”
Coordinating problem-solving laterally	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective* managers prioritize and synchronize solutions across multiple collaborators in the account • Effective* managers “marry” or replicate solutions across geographies, functions, and hierarchies, if needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elias, Strategic Business Developer, Europe: “That was really collaboration between Camille and me, managing my internal stakeholders really well to make sure that we were doing the same thing. We’re behaving like one team. He was great at making that happen.” • Nielson, Sales Technician, Sweden: “The opportunity itself ... you could see them as individual projects going on. Once one project is gone, the next opportunity or next project starts again and, depending on the size, it takes longer or not, but the global account manager’s role is really to be the overall glue between all those different opportunities and the overall customer relationship.”
Factors that facilitate boundary-spanning coordination		
Developing skills for coordinating collective boundary spanning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective* managers develop skills for the coordination of globally synchronized activities • Effective* managers develop skills for accessing and leveraging networks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Axel, VP European Projects: “In this kind of job, it is really [about] educating people to work together, and it’s not simple because in every single business unit you have different goals. So, you must think beyond the boundaries. ... You need to have these people go and make it happen, so you need to find the solution, so you have ... a lot of coaching. I spend, yeah, a lot of time coaching, coaching, and coaching.” • Jack, Talent Specialist, United States: “One of the best pieces of advice I got from my MuNE mentor buddy was: ‘If you’re spending more than 10 minutes looking for an answer, stop and ask for help [from the network] ... Anyone who agrees to be a mentor has the mindset that “I’m here to help you.”’”
Creating awareness of collective boundary spanning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senior management creates expectations of globally synchronized activities across the organization • Senior management emphasizes the importance of collective boundary spanning to get work done 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elias, Strategic Business Developer, Europe: “[Thanks to the CEO,] I think that we’re moving in a positive direction. Before, there [were] more problems; it’s really individuals who are choosing to behave in a tribal manner. Now, corporate forces you to constantly demonstrate that you have thought about a synchronized approach.” • Octave, VP Global Sales, Europe (coaching account managers how to collaborate across business units): “The only way to go is to go big ... We have great people who’ve done it before, but it might not be someone you know ... Use your network, we need global engagement.”

Figure 4: Representative quotations for first-order concepts.

* Effective in the sense that these managers effect lateral collaboration and/or alignment according to their contributors.

Results

At MuNE, there are three major divisions of global account management: the Americas, Asia Pacific–Japan, and Europe–Middle East–Africa. Each division focuses on a limited number of key customers that have their headquarters in the region but operate globally. In each division, between 50 and 150 global account managers manage the technical needs, provide customized solutions, and tend to all aspects of the interorganizational relationship for a specific global client. To accomplish that, global account managers leverage the skills of multiple contributors who perform boundary-spanning activities with the client locally and within specific business units (e.g., specific products or services). Based on the global and local technical needs of the client, local MuNE representatives span the boundaries between the client and the technical experts at MuNE to find technical sales solutions. Global account managers need to coordinate those collective boundary-spanning activities to create lateral alignment across different countries and business units. Figure 5 provides an example of the collective boundary spanning of a given interorganizational relationship.

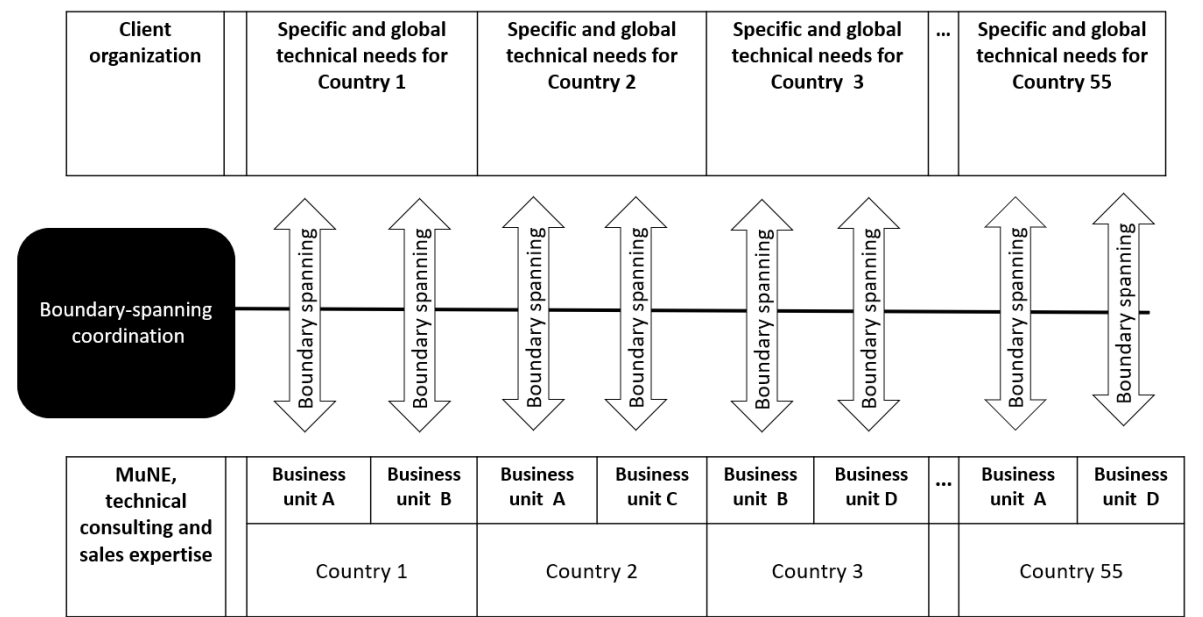


Figure 5: The coordination of collective boundary spanning in interorganizational relationships at MuNE.

Such coordination is difficult because contributors to a global account are not members of the same team. Nielson, a sales technician in Sweden, explains:

It is assumed that if you put different people together in a room, or as part of a virtual team, because they need to work for one specific customer, that automatically, you have a team. The fact is that they all have different business units, and different targets, and different masters that they need to serve. It doesn't necessarily make it a team.

Thus, ensuring lateral alignment poses several challenges. First, the contributors working for the account represent different business units and require different expertise (e.g., products from Business Unit A vs products from Business Unit B; products from Business Unit C vs services from Business Unit D), so they do not have the same agenda. Second, contributors have different positions in sales (e.g., presales representatives, account managers, country or regional account managers, technical sales managers) or different technical roles (financial expertise, technical directors, strategic business developers, etc.), so they do not have a common

professional background. Third, contributors represent different geographies, so they generally do not know each other. Finally, contributors serve multiple global clients and, given that few contributors spend more than 40% of their time on a given account, they do not invest in getting to know other contributors in the account. Despite those difficulties, close lateral collaboration and alignment of boundary-spanning activities remains critical for MuNE's performance. The following section provides a detailed look at how that collaboration and alignment happens in MuNE.

Boundary-spanning coordination

Collective boundary spanning requires lateral coordination. The contributors working on the global accounts at MuNE span boundaries between the client and experts at MuNE to create technical solutions that meet the client needs. At the local level, contributors build relationships with the client and with a variety of stakeholders in MuNE (technical, financial, legal, and sales experts in different business units). Those contributors act as intermediaries to perform various boundary-spanning activities between the local MuNE business unit and the local client, such as exchanging information, connecting people, facilitating relationships, and creating complex technical solutions with and for the client.

Those local activities must be harmonized at the global level to align the information, processes, and business offers from different business units and in different countries. Mariana, a UK account manager for an Italian multinational, explains:

Because we are all talking to the same customers, it's crucial that we have a biweekly call and everybody participates, because one of the specialists can be talking to the same person that another specialist talked to two days before, so we need to be aligned.

If boundary-spanning activities are not harmonized laterally, the client receives mismatched offers, prices, and/or incompatible solutions from all over the globe, thus giving the impression that MuNE is disorganized. Baldwin, a regional account manager in the UK, provides the following example:

[MuNE] is an international company, so it operates in 170 or 160 countries, but there are individual businesses—individual country businesses because of the tax, corporate law, currency. You can do global frameworks, but transactions tend to be done in-country. It's under country-specific terms and conditions, employment law. That makes it difficult [...] It's increasingly important that we operate as one organization. Because we are such a big organization, we have lots of people representing lots of different interests. It is very difficult. Communication is very important to get the right message, to be seen as one organization.

A lack of global alignment weakens MuNE's position as a trusted solution provider.

Takeo, a global account manager in Japan, struggles with the need to coordinate internally so that the customer sees one team:

The customer always expects us to have a single point of contact but, in reality, there is no single point of contact. That is why I have an issue. We always have to overcome.

Coordination is essential to ensuring lateral collaboration and alignment.

Coordinating collective boundary spanning is a recognized role. To overcome the challenges outlined above, individuals from the client organization must be connected with aligned contributors from MuNE. Global account managers often assume that connecting role because they are ideally placed to foster and coordinate relations between the client and all internal stakeholders. That is a role that all contributors recognize. Quentin, a global account manager in Switzerland, explains: “We're the drivers within our organization and on the customer side. I am calling people to make sure we are aligned with the same communication and objectives.”

As such, the role moves beyond simply spanning boundaries to coordinating collective boundary-spanning activities between clients and the company. Fons, a

technical manager in the Netherlands, talks about his work on a Swedish account with the global account manager Camille:

Camille is the main, prime contact for the account. He coordinated the offer for the Netherlands, for Sweden, and for Germany. Camille is sort of the center of a web and he has all his peers. He is the key person. He's in the center of this account. He talks to the right people within the account and, on the other hand, he knows who to contact in all the countries. So he has the right skills and information he needs from the countries in his pocket.

Collective boundary spanning begins with investing in the relationship and creating trust between MuNE and a client. For global account managers, strong relationships and trust are the foundation of their role, as Giuseppe explains after taking on a struggling account with a bank:

My role is the relationship that I am supposed to be creating between MuNE and the bank. We lost two fairly large contracts over the last three years, which had a significant impact on the relationship. This year really is all about rebuilding and trying to build back trust in the relationship.

Giuseppe explains how important this role is for the client organization: "When I came into this role I was actually interviewed by the bank as well to make sure I fit with the criteria that they wanted." He also explains how the trusted relationship with the client creates commitment to his account across the organization:

The only way to do that [get people to invest in his account] is to have the relationships, have [a] primary relationship with the customer. I need to be in a position where, if we are working on some business, there are people I can talk to in order to move that business over the line.

The coordination of collective boundary spanning between organizations is a recognized role, and establishing solid relationships between the two entities is a prerequisite for successful collective boundary spanning.

Planning for boundary-spanning coordination

Strategizing for boundary-spanning coordination. Having a clear and organized strategy for boundary-spanning coordination helps ensure lateral alignment. Alex explains the importance of having a strategy to coordinate contributors on the account:

The model is very spread out because you have people in different organizations, in different geographies, in different business units, with different skills. So, what you need is to set a vision, have very clear objectives, and really track across those objectives. It's about setting and sharing the vision but also sharing the way to execute in order that everybody is aligned.

In addition to having a strategy for boundary-spanning coordination, it is critical that the account strategy is clearly communicated and synchronized for global account managers, senior management, technical experts, and local sales representatives on various accounts to collaborate and function as one team. Yann, a regional account manager working in the Middle East and Africa, explains the importance of understanding the strategy for success on an account:

The difference between Account A and Account B was the global account manager. At Account A, you have one key accountable guy involved everywhere, for any topic, that includes the strategy, and we understand what he expects from us. As long as you have the strategy in place, you fix 90% of the problems.

Some global account managers, such as Hugh in Germany, co-construct strategies to ensure alignment:

The business-related information is where we have projects with the client. Business-related information with regard to a project that we have at the moment, and the client-related or the customer-related information, is where I share and I would like my customers, my colleagues to share their thoughts about the strategy we have, the customer has, and how we could align.

Ensuring that all contributors understand and align to the strategy of the account helps them benefit from the interorganizational relationship.

Mapping boundary-spanning contributors. Mapping is part of the planning of boundary-spanning coordination and includes identifying the right MuNE people in the relevant business units and geographies and connecting them with the corresponding people in the client organizations. Mapping requires learning about the global client organization to understand the various positions of its employees. Don, a global account manager in the United States, studies the client in detail:

What is the [customer's] tagline? What does their CEO introduce themselves as? From there, you then go down into their business units: How are they structured and what is their strategy? What are they trying to accomplish? Where are they trying to fit in the market? Then, from there, you go one level down again to talk about KPIs and their financial metrics. It's you, going through the company, right at the bottom, then you start working out, "Okay, they want to do all that"—now you've got the linkages.

When making such links, managers need to consider the level (e.g., in terms of decision-making, hierarchy, technical expertise) of the parties that will span the boundaries between the two organizations. Yannick, a global account manager in France, explains how to connect people: "Not at the high level, but at the right level. You put high-level people in front of high-level customers. You match the right associates with the right level." Mapping not only facilitates the relationship between the companies but also ensures coordinated information exchange. Although the amount of detail that goes into the mapping between the client organization and MuNE varies depending on the account manager (from a very deep scan of the client to a more general mapping session), the practice is common among laterally aligned accounts.

Boundary-spanning coordination practices

At MuNE, two main types of boundary-spanning coordination practices emerged: Synchronizing communication and solving problems laterally across multiple boundaries.

Coordinating synchronized communication laterally. Communication between all contributors must be synchronized and coordinated to ensure clear and effective interorganizational interactions. David, a global account manager in Switzerland, explains how he coordinates that:

I coordinate who is reaching out to who, with what message. If they are not aligned and coordinated, I don't let them contact the customer. Simple. I mean, today, I am very, very strict about that. I don't allow any kind of fights or potential conflicts ... between business units or local organizations [in front of customers].

David's boundary-spanning coordination across local levels ensures quality client services at the global level.

Regardless of the types of role in the account, contributors to collective boundary spanning agree that synchronized communication is critical for accounts. Dale, a technical director, describes how David's coordination affects the contributors on the team: "Ask anybody. [The information] is absolutely clear. There is only one answer, one story, and that's the end of it." Throughout the organization, contributors at local levels like Dale indicate the importance of coordinated communication for effective work.

Coordinating problem-solving laterally. Within a given client account, multiple and parallel initiatives and problem-solving activities occur between MuNE and the client in different geographical areas, and at different organizational levels around the world. Good boundary-spanning coordination includes the ability to understand all those local initiatives and problems, and to solve them at the global level. That practice ensures a synchronized approach across business units and geographies:

I'll get pricing leaders involved; I will warn legal that we're probably going to need their help, so I do all their "housekeeping," if you will. Then [I] create a series of standard

follow-up meetings that get everybody on [the same] page ... my responsibility is to make sure we're moving in the right direction.

With their central role between the customer organization and MuNE, global account managers have the global visibility and influence to determine whether initiatives can be replicated from one geography to another or whether it would be more efficient to combine them. Pehr, a global account manager in Sweden, clarifies:

Since I'm the top part of all the different discussions, I can say: "Okay, these fit together, and these two are aligned, and these run in two different parallel projects." I can tell the customer and the management of the customer [that] it makes sense to combine these two different projects or three different projects.

In that way, all the global boundary-spanning activities are synchronized and managed, thus contributing to effective lateral collaboration across the MNE.

Factors that facilitate boundary-spanning coordination

Development. To encourage lateral collaboration and alignment, the human resources department provides an official mentoring system for new executives and managers. Higher-level managers also help their employees to develop the necessary competencies. Giuseppe, a recently promoted account manager, explains how his manager creates learning opportunities:

By recommending mentors or giving me guidance in the right direction. It's important for her to understand the pressures and the challenges that we're under within the global account community and within the client community. [She] helps with coaching around that.

Development also takes place within the global account department, as senior account managers coach newer account managers to help improve their skills. Heilwig, a new account manager in Germany, says: "My senior colleagues always offer to help me with information or getting connected with the network." More

experienced managers explain the importance of maintaining networks so that boundary-spanning coordination is smoother. Bjorn, for example, comments:

To increase the probability of a positive outcome, I use the “MuNE in sync” approach. You need to engage with different chief technology officers in the different business units. I really need to maintain this network.

Overall, the development of skills in boundary-spanning coordination generally happens informally through discussions or coaching sessions with mentors, managers, and senior colleagues.

Awareness. Another way MuNE facilitates boundary-spanning coordination is by creating awareness about the importance of acting as one team. It was for that reason that MuNE’s CEO initiated a program to help synchronize the sales approach for global clients. Senior management promotion of and support for the program helped members of the global accounts team change the way they connect with their clients. Elias, a strategic business developer, indicates:

The new CEO is very focused on what is called “MuNE in sync.” The clients want to see us integrate our products, and our services, and our advisory ... Now it has become much easier to be able to just do the right thing, rather than only focusing on your division’s objective.

Senior management’s introduction of and support for the “MuNE in sync” program highlighted the importance of aligning lateral collaboration across the globe to facilitate acceptance of coordination of boundary-spanning activities. The vice presidents of the global accounts department in Europe–Middle East–Africa reinforce that message through formal and informal interactions, and during global account meetings. Clark, the vice president of one European region, for example, announced the following at their yearly meeting: “The results for our company have turned a corner thanks to the CEO and how we make ‘MuNE in sync’ happen.”

How boundary-spanning coordination leads to lateral alignment

Global account managers and contributors agree on the importance of synchronizing strategy, communication, and sales initiatives across the globe to ensure aligned collective boundary spanning between MuNE and client organizations. However, the complexity of the organization and the challenges it faces are such that collective boundary-spanning activities need to be coordinated laterally. To ensure lateral alignment, boundary-spanning coordination must be planned: First, global account managers create a strategy, then map multiple and parallel connections from MuNE to the client organization to ensure global coverage. Once the collective bridge has been put in place, two main boundary-coordination activities are necessary. The first is synchronized communication across multiple boundaries and nodes to ensure the collective boundary-spanning activities between MuNE and the client are aligned. The second is leveraging global visibility to problem-solve across the collective bridge. Together, those activities lead to lateral collaboration and lateral alignment across multiple boundaries. To facilitate boundary-spanning coordination, top managers can help develop boundary-spanning skills as well as create overall awareness of synchronized collective boundary spanning. Finally, if lateral alignment is not achieved, managers can adapt their plan for boundary-spanning coordination and how to implement the related practices through feedback loops. Figure 6 illustrates a theoretical framework of that process.

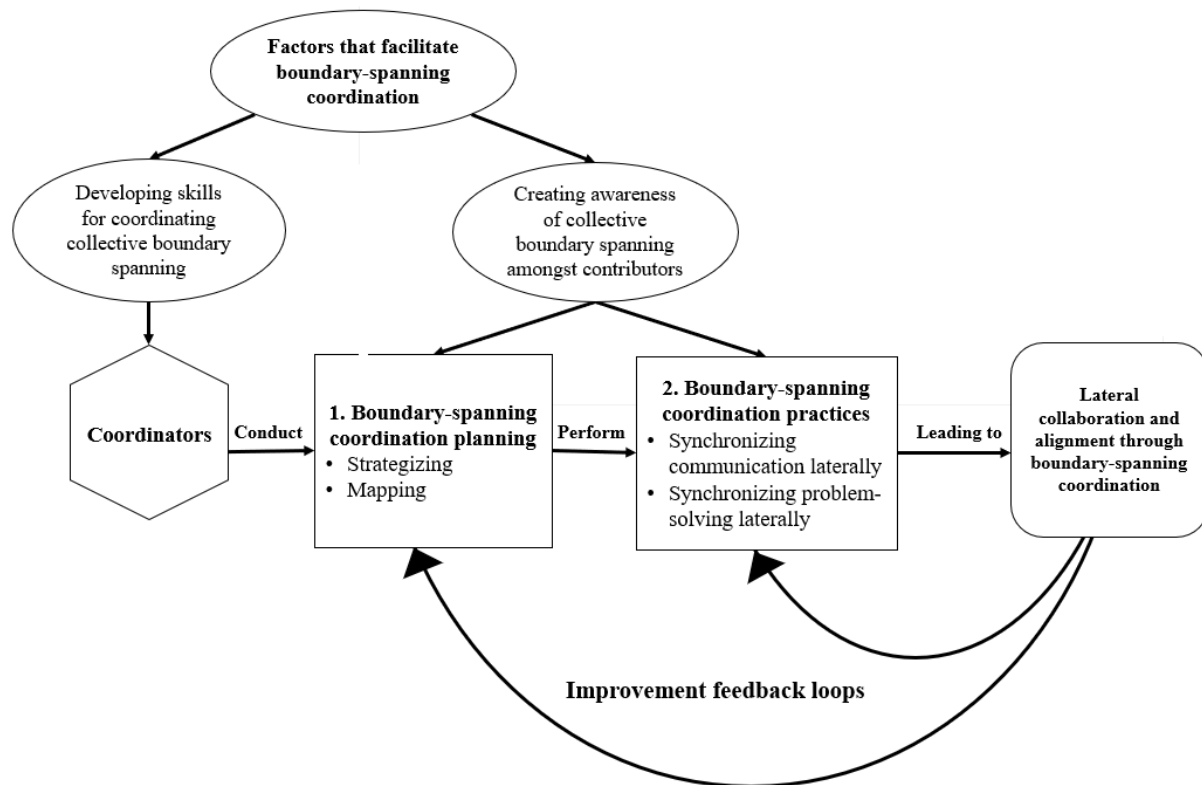


Figure 6: Theoretical framework for boundary-spanning coordination.

Discussion

This qualitative study takes an in-depth look at how the individuals in the global account management division at MuNE, a high-tech multinational, collaborate across the globe to serve 30 of their key clients. I found that boundary-spanning coordination enabled the successful formation of a collective bridge between the two organizations. A key individual was responsible for harnessing and driving the collective boundary spanning of multiple and hierarchically independent contributors in different geographies and business units. By introducing the concept of boundary-spanning coordination, I have made contributions to knowledge and literature in the interorganizational collective bridge, collective boundary spanning, and lateral collaboration and lateral alignment.

Contributions to the study of collective bridges in interorganizational relationships

This study contributes to research on collective bridges (Zhao & Anand, 2013) and interorganizational relationships. By extending Zhao and Anand's (2013) collective bridge concept from interunit to interorganizational, I show the need for—and how to achieve—lateral coordination in both building the bridge (through the planning of boundary-spanning coordination) and maintaining it (through boundary-spanning coordination practices). Together, the planning and practice of boundary-spanning coordination highlight ways of successfully managing the complexity of interorganizational relationships. Future research in interorganizational collective bridges can provide a better understand of the management of global accounts strategies and more specifically of the interactions between the supplier and their customers (e.g., Shi, White, Zou & Cavusgil, 2010) as well as global account leadership (Lacoste, Zindani, & Cuevas, forthcoming).

Beyond the solution provider–client relationship demonstrated in the study, these findings are meaningful for understanding how to build and maintain interorganizational relationships in other domains such as strategic alliances, joint ventures, or partnerships, which may also require lateral collaboration (e.g., Mikami, Ikegami, and Bird, forthcoming). This contribution to the interorganizational collective bridge may be particularly important for understanding how to establish effective governance in interorganizational knowledge transfer. It provides an alternative method of control and coordination to the culture integration perspective proposed by Sarala, Junni, Cooper, and Tarba (2016). Boundary-spanning coordination provides a means to avoid the potential

pitfalls associated with the maintenance of a collective bridge, such as lack of direction and control, which could engender confusion and conflict (Zhao & Anand, 2013).

Contributions to collective boundary spanning

Current research on boundary spanning in MNEs demonstrates some of the positive outcomes of successful boundary spanning, such as trust (Roberts & Beamish, 2017), better interorganizational relationships (Huang et al., 2016), and creative problem-solving (Tippmann et al., 2017). Current research is also beginning to provide evidence of collective boundary spanning (e.g., Liu & Meyer, 2020; Tippmann et al., 2017). However, the extant literature does not clarify how companies coordinate collective boundary spanning among individuals from different backgrounds and with different agendas to achieve these positive outcomes (Goerzen, 2018). This study provides insights into the matter by introducing the concept of boundary-spanning coordination. To ensure lateral collaboration and/or alignment across multiple boundaries, key actors must actively coordinate collective boundary-spanning activities.

While previous studies have highlighted the importance of driving collective boundary spanning to pursue goals (e.g., Langley et al., 2019), this study shows how it happens, providing a framework for future research on the coordination and management of collective boundary spanning. This approach allows scholars to enrich the current literature of activities of managers in boundary-spanning roles (e.g., Birkinshaw et al., 2017; Brion et al., 2012) by researching how managers actively coordinate boundary-spanning activities and collective boundary spanning. The coordination of collective boundary spanning is particularly important for

research into the complex coupling of stable structures with more dynamic and temporary collaboration (e.g., Doz & Kosonen, 2008; Santistevan & Josserand, 2019) because it allows for dynamic practices and agility across multinational structures. Moreover, this study adds value to research on the ability to leverage and integrate knowledge across the globe (e.g., Meyer, Mudambi, & Narula, 2011; Mudambi & Swift, 2011), and to align and drive the collective boundary-spanning activities that are essential for interorganizational global projects, initiatives, and global client support.

Contributions to understanding lateral collaboration and lateral alignment

Previous theoretical research that suggests that structural interdependence derived from mutual commitment facilitates lateral collaboration (Schotter et al., forthcoming). The theoretical framework of boundary-spanning coordination contributes to that premise by explaining how to coordinate across multiple boundaries and among multiple nodes to achieve lateral collaboration. At MuNE, it is done in two steps. The first step is to examine the groups that need to be spanned and identify key individuals at the right levels in the appropriate geographic locations to ensure global coverage between the two organizations. Such strategizing and mapping—finding the right people at the right levels and matching them with the right people in the right locations—is vital for establishing trust and confidence in mutual commitments. The next step is to synchronize communication across the multiple nodes by managing communication from the organization itself to ensure that it is aligned; controlling who says what to whom and when. Additionally, this study adds to the framework of lateral collaboration, the notion of lateral alignment. Indeed, in MuNE, there is a need for lateral alignment to maintain interorganizational collective bridges, which is accomplished through boundary-

spanning coordination. More specifically, synchronized communication and problem solving seem to be more linked to the notion of lateral alignment.

Investigating the distinct practices that contribute to either lateral collaboration or lateral alignment could be an interesting opportunity for future research.

Lateral alignment (organizing processes and communication to drive collective action with or for external entities) and lateral collaboration (achieving something together) create strong commitment. While some researchers found that lateral collaboration can be improvised through boundary objects with little interactions between individual across subsidiaries (Stendahl, Tippmann, & Yakhief, forthcoming), this is not the case with boundary-spanning coordination. Boundary-spanning coordination requires extensive cross-boundary organization and communication to ensure alignment. Those repeated interactions create strong network ties that help overcome implicit and explicit boundaries in MNEs (Castellani, Perri, & Scalera (forthcoming). Overall, these results provide some evidence to support the Maznevski (2016) proposition that the social interactions between the coordinator and the contributor create behavioral interdependence. The quality of the boundary-spanning coordination combined with the trust and relationships built with the client determines whether the contributor formally commits to collective boundary spanning. On the other hand, strategizing and mapping ensure that coordinators identify, and can rely on, the right contributors. Figure 7 illustrates that relationship.

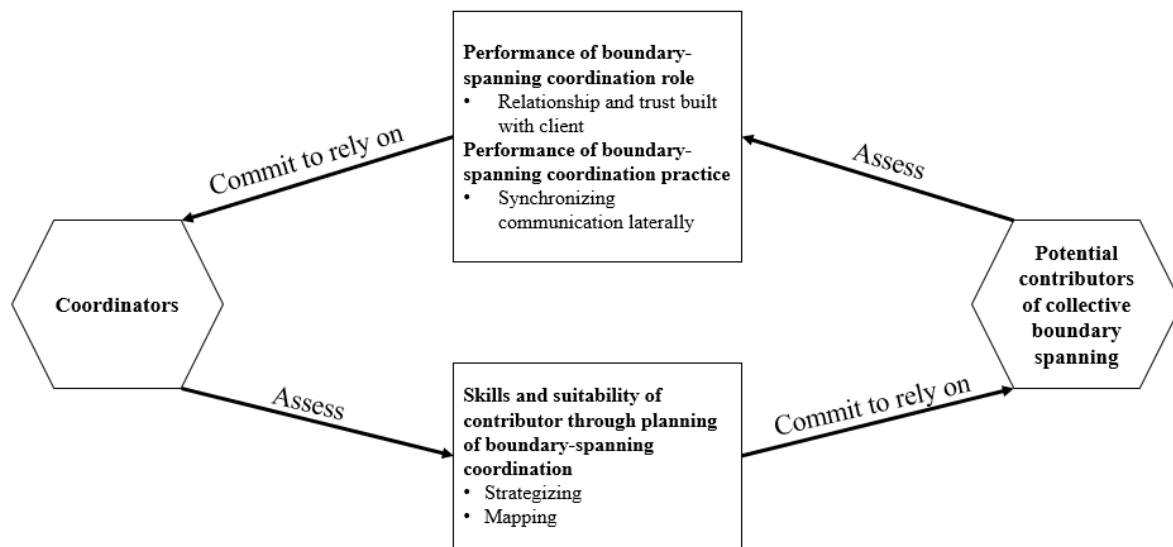


Figure 7: Structural interdependence by mutual commitment through boundary-spanning coordination.

Boundary-spanning coordination also includes local problem-solving to harmonize solutions at the global level and to “leverage the opportunities of global connectedness” (Schotter et al., forthcoming) by aligning, connecting, replicating, and sharing problem-solving techniques across strategic areas of the organization. In terms of structural interdependence (Maznevski, 2016; Schotter et al., forthcoming), synchronizing problem-solving laterally does not seem to create commitment, although this type of problem-solving requires lateral collaboration. Is it possible that lateral alignment is a precondition of lateral collaboration? Again, determining the relationship between those two concepts is important for future research.

Managerial relevance

Leaders in global organizations face increasing difficulties in achieving alignment across global subunits, geographies, and hierarchies (Schotter et al., forthcoming).

Boundary-spanning coordination offers an operational solution to that problem for both senior and middle management.

Senior management. Having the ability to synchronize activities in dynamic global environments while permitting the flexibility needed for complex problem-solving has become essential for today's multinationals. Researchers have indicated the use of multicultural teams for local-to-global knowledge sharing (Baba, Gluesing, Ratner, & Wagner, 2004; Hajro & Pudelko, 2010; Lagerström & Andersson, 2003). Senior managers can leverage boundary-spanning coordination as an alternative to the team method. At the global level, boundary-spanning coordination allows for the collection of information from individuals in strategic local positions in order to align and diffuse knowledge across the global organization.

For lateral alignment of interorganizational endeavors, senior managers can designate individuals to focus on and manage collective boundary-spanning activities between organizations. Designating a specific individual for that role would help to clarify the actions required to build and maintain the interorganizational bridge to improve the overall relationship. Research on lateral collaboration and performance (Celo & Lehrer, forthcoming), supports the idea of designating the role of lateral collaboration to a limited number of influential individuals positively influences performance. In this light it will be important for senior managers to recruit individuals who have—or can develop—the skills needed for boundary-spanning coordination.

To facilitate lateral collaboration, senior managers can implement specific programs for global alignment to improve lateral collaboration between multiple business

units. Such programs not only highlight the importance of aligned collective boundary spanning but also motivate contributors to align their practices to increase their influence with outside organizations.

Middle management. Boundary-spanning coordination is a process comprising two interdependent parts that represent the actions a manager can take to improve lateral alignment and/or collaboration across geographies and business units. Management may struggle to improve collaboration across business units (see Schotter et al., forthcoming) when it focuses on one part of the boundary coordination process while overlooking the other. For example, managers might be emphasizing cross-boundary communication in their teams while not ensuring that the outgoing communication is synchronized, which is vital for lateral alignment. Likewise, only focusing on synchronized communication while neglecting the planning aspect, could be problematic. Indeed, strategizing how to manage collective boundary-spanning practices and making the right connections between people is a vital part of lateral collaboration and alignment.

The theoretical framework for boundary-spanning coordination also provides opportunities for improvement and development. For example, to improve their ability to plan boundary-spanning coordination, managers can study the business units and geographies, not only to identify those that most need to collaborate but also to deliver training on (or at least make contributors aware of) collective boundary spanning in the appropriate areas. Finally, middle managers can assess themselves to determine which skills they need to develop for more effective collective boundary spanning.

Implications for a post-pandemic world. Flatter organizations, dynamic collaboration, and the advances in digital technologies, combined with the need for the creation of deep and complex knowledge from dispersed sources, require agile, human-based coordination systems (Schotter, 2021). The disruption of international travel and decrease of face-to-face interactions during the COVID-19 crisis has only accelerated and augmented the need for strong leadership and coordination processes (Hitt, Holmes, & Arregle, 2021). More particularly, the COVID-19 crisis may have a lasting impact not only on the ways in which MNEs manage their cross-border activities but also on the mobility of key personnel for the inter-firm linkages necessary for knowledge production (Van Assche & Lundan, 2020). It is very likely in a post-pandemic world that boundary-spanning coordination will become even more critical as a means to create behavioral interdependence across business units and internal geographic barriers and to ensure lateral collaboration and alignment across MNEs.

Conclusion

This study on the coordination of boundary-spanning activities provides insights into how MNEs create lateral collaboration and lateral alignment. Although it provides new understandings and perspectives, it also has some limitations that indicate opportunities for future research. As this study focused on one MNE, it is unclear therefore how other organizations enact or experience these practices. Future studies could compare several multinationals to provide more insights into the creation of strategies for coordinating boundary-spanning activities and their implementation. For example, how does the context of the organizations involved change the boundary-spanning coordination? Another possible avenue for study is the importance of senior management roles in interorganizational collective bridges.

The senior management of the MNE analyzed in this study created a program to synchronize practices in global accounts to improve interorganizational effectiveness. How important is the role of senior management in facilitating global boundary-spanning coordination? Investigating multiple organizations at multiple levels would provide opportunities for understanding boundary-spanning coordination in different contexts.

Future research could also investigate the various aspects of boundary-spanning coordination in pursuit of lateral alignment. For example, how do mapping schemes differ? How closely do global account managers examine client organizations, how much time do they spend on the activity, how much importance is attached to the activity, and how do variations in those activities contribute to effectiveness in higher levels of lateral alignment and global coverage? Future studies could investigate the practices or controls used to align communications along the collective bridge and/or the management of multiple problem-solving solutions.

Another potential area of research would be to focus on the roles, traits, and practices of the individuals who are coordinating collective boundary spanning.

In this study, part of the role of those who coordinated collective boundary spanning was to ensure mutual benefits (Schotter et al., 2017) between the client and MuNE.

Thus, in addition to boundary-spanning coordination, those individuals were boundary spanners between the two organizations. To date, it is unclear whether boundary-spanning coordination is a regular part of the role of boundary spanners (e.g., Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014; Eisenberg & Mattarelli, 2017; Furusawa & Brewster, 2019, Pedersen et al., 2019; Roberts & Beamish, 2017; Schotter et al., 2017)? If not, are particular or different traits needed in that more managerial side of boundary spanning? Are higher levels of organizational skill, legitimacy, and

leadership needed to be successful in such global roles? Despite these limitations, this study contributes to our knowledge of collective bridges in interorganizational relationships, coordinating collective boundary spanning, lateral collaboration, and lateral alignment, and opens a novel area of research in MNEs.

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