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Team effectiveness and open discussion of conflict in collaborative new product development: A cross-national study[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This study contributes to the understanding of the mechanisms through which relational governance and formal contractual governance influence new product development performance. The study tests the hypotheses using data from British and South African new technology-based firms. The results indicate that team effectiveness mediates the relationship between governance and new product development performance and that the ability of collaborating firms to create an atmosphere of openness to discussing conflicting views, positively moderates the relationship between team effectiveness and performance.

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1. Introduction

Early observations by researchers such as Lewin (1945), Van de Ven (1989), and Weick (1989), who study how groups govern their interrelationships, highlight that understanding governance is complex but critical in determining intergroup outcomes. Woodside (2010) and Eisenhardt (1989) emphasize that more studies are necessary to clarify the paradoxes within intergroup and inter-firm research. Lewin (1945) draws attention to the inherent complexity in studying groups and group processes.

The current discussion around the governance of inter-firm relationships calls for research on “how” governance influences outcomes (Cao & Lumineau, 2015; Dyer & Singh, 1998). This study responds to the increase in recent calls to understand the mechanisms through which governance influences new product development outcomes (Lee & Cavusgil, 2006; Zhao, Cavusgil, & Cavusgil, 2014). This study examines whether collaboration team effectiveness is a mechanism through which governance influences NPD outcomes and whether such effectiveness mediates the governance–NPD performance relationship. Previous studies on team effectiveness draw attention to the lack of understanding of conflict in team processes (Benavides-Espinosa & Ribeiro-Soriano, 2014). Thus, this study seeks to contribute by probing the role of open discussion of conflicting issues on team effectiveness and NPD performance, and whether open conflict moderates this relationship.

In addition to seeking to understand how these factors mediate and moderate the governance–new product development performance relationships, this study contributes by clarifying the role of institutional environment, by examining these relationships in two different institutional environments, namely South Africa and Britain. The findings demonstrate that institutional environment influences the role of governance in collaboration.

First, this paper presents the conceptual framework. Then, the paper describes the methods used and the results. Finally, the paper discusses the results, draws conclusions, and notes the implications for managers.

2. Conceptual framework and hypotheses

In addressing the heightened pressures associated with collaborative new product development, researchers either emphasize the development of social processes between firms (Lee & Cavusgil, 2006) or highlight the need for formal processes and controls (Eisenhardt & Tabrizi, 1995). In addition to formal controls and social processes, studies suggest that the effectiveness of the new product development team has a significant effect on new product development performance (Ayers, Dahlstrom, & Skinner, 1997; Lawson et al., 2015).

2.1. Formal governance, team effectiveness and new product development performance

Formal governance refers to the presence of a contract between the two firms, which clarifies roles, responsibilities, development schedules, and intellectual property rights (Cao & Lumineau, 2015). Research reports that formal planning and formal controls in highly uncertain environments, such as new product development in technology-based

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firms, may not be very useful due to the uncertainties and unknowns in this context (Yli-Renko, Autio, & Sapienza, 2001). Checking adherence to schedules using real data and objective information, however, accelerates learning, because this method forces managers to continuously collect and evaluate data and make informed decisions about the direction of the development, thus, speeding up the development process (Eisenhardt & Tabrizi, 1995).

Studies often associate the effectiveness of the new product development team with higher levels of new product development performance (Griffin & Hauser, 2001). In particular, studies in the new product development context suggest that formal controls may improve team effectiveness. Milestones and schedules have a positive effect on team cohesion, because review points provide a forum for discussion, which encourages team integration and an effective working relationship (Eisenhardt & Tabrizi, 1995). Although review meetings of the progress of the project can be time consuming, the discussions allow managers to pick up problems earlier rather than later, allowing firms to iron out any problems in the collaboration relationship (Bonaccorsi & Lipparini, 1994). Therefore, comprehensiveness of the formal governance structure should have an association with higher levels of collaboration team effectiveness. This study postulates that collaboration team effectiveness mediates the relationship between formal governance and new product development performance.

H1. : Team effectiveness mediates the relationship between formal governance and new product development performance.

2.2. Relational governance, team effectiveness, and new product development performance

Relational governance (Jayaraman, Narayanan, Luo, & Swaminathan, 2013) refers to the presence of relational norms and trust, which have developed through the inter-firm relationship and which serve to control the behavior of collaboration partners. New product development is a creative process where often many unknowns and potential problems arise from conditions of uncertainty and a lack of prior knowledge (Lawson et al., 2015). Studies often associate creativity with team processes where established social norms foster idea generation and lateral thinking, and deter unconstructive criticism (Lawson et al., 2015). Informal communication increases the exchange of ideas and thereby improves the effectiveness of a team (Carey, Lawson, & Krause, 2011). Ayers et al. (1997, p. 110) note that:

Relational norms facilitate the flow of information that enables people to present contingencies that may jeopardize performance. Flexibility provides the opportunity to make adjustments that increase the market value of new products. Conflict harmonization and solidarity enable people to resolve disputes that may prolong development.

Bonaccorsi and Lipparini (1994) find that higher levels of alliance team effectiveness (where the alliance is between the firm and a supplier) positively influence new product development performance by shortening development time. They also find a positive association between effective firm–supplier working relationships and the rate of new products developed. Drawing on these observations, this study postulates that collaboration team effectiveness mediates the relationship between relational governance and new product development performance.

H2. : Team effectiveness mediates the relationship between relational governance and new product development performance.

2.3. The moderating influence of open discussion of conflict

Lewin (1945) argues that examining conflict when examining group processes is essential. This study draws on the research of

scholars such as Rahim (1983) and Jehn and Mannix (2001) and proposes that the atmosphere that the two collaborating firms create will either promote the discussion of conflicting views or stifle discussion. Following Jehn and Mannix (2001), who highlight how an atmosphere that promotes the open discussion of conflicting issues enhances teamwork and ultimately improves performance, this study hypothesizes that open discussion of conflict positively moderates the relationship between team effectiveness and NPD performance (Fig. 1).

H3. : Open discussion of conflict positively moderates the relationship between team effectiveness and NPD performance.

3. Method

The research design follows Woodside's (2010) recommendation to use exploratory interviews in the preliminary stages of research to provide a good preparatory step to a more detailed research work. The use of qualitative exploratory interviews also complements later quantitative survey research by informing the design of the questionnaire and assisting in the interpretation of the survey results (Song & Parry, 1997). The study follows the guidelines by Song and Parry (1997) in doing cross-national research.

The preliminary stage of this study consists of semi-structured exploratory interviews with three groups of firms, firstly, new technology-based firms, secondly, with large, established firms, and thirdly, with law firms. These interviews take place in both South Africa and in Britain, to obtain a holistic understanding of collaborative new product development. From the interviews and the literature, the study develops a survey instrument, which the study pretested and administered first in Britain and then in South Africa.

This study is part of a larger study of collaborative new product development in South Africa and Britain. Other articles drawing on the British data are Parker (2012) and Parker and Brey (2015).

3.1. Sample and data collection

For the South African sample, the study uses the “Who owns Whom” database, and the INET BFA databases to construct a list of firms who had less than 100 employees, were younger than 10 years old, and operated in the Computer, Communications, and Electronic Technology Sectors. These databases report the contact details of the firms, the names of the key directors or managers, a history of the firm (in particular, the date of establishment of the firm), the nature of the firm's business, and the number of employees.

Five hundred and twenty firms met these criteria. The study contacted these firms to participate in the study. After three sets of reminders, the study obtains 102 responses.

The study obtains the British sample from the FAME database, which is an extensive database on company information in the United Kingdom. Company information in the database comes from Companies House. Registration with Companies House is compulsory for all limited companies in the United Kingdom. The FAME (Financial Analysis Made Easy) database reports the company's financials and, very importantly, information regarding the year of establishment of the firm, ownership of the firm (independent or subsidiary), the names of the directors, firm size and industry classification, and contact details for each firm. The sampling frame in this study uses the same sampling criteria as for the South African list of companies. 1071 firms in the FAME database fulfilled the necessary criteria, with 110 useable responses. The study compared early and late respondents using two-tailed t-statistic tests across the variables used. No statistical differences appeared and the results show no evidence of non-response bias (Armstrong & Overton, 1977).

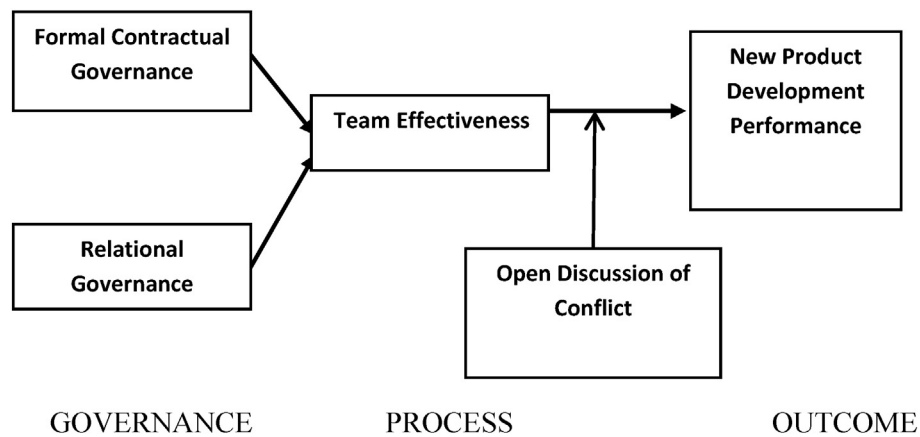


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

3.2. Measures

This study uses measures from the extant literature and interviews, and each item uses a 7-point Likert scale, where “1” represents “not at all” and “7” represents “to a great extent”. Table 1 presents the items and factor loadings.

3.2.1. Open discussion of conflict

The study adapts the measure for this construct from Jehn and Mannix (2001). This measure examines the extent to which collaborating firms create an atmosphere where open communication exists around conflicting viewpoints without any fear. This measure comprises 4 items and the Cronbach alpha is 0.87 (Britain) and 0.85 (South Africa).

3.2.2. Formal governance

This scale results from the exploratory interviews. This scale measures the degree of codification of roles, schedules, budgets, and plans. Additionally this scale measures whether the safeguards documented include confidentiality clauses and clauses that detail intellectual property ownership (Cao & Lumineau, 2015). The scale comprises 4 items and the Cronbach alpha is 0.77 (Britain) and 0.81 (South Africa).

3.2.3. Relational governance

This study draws on empirical studies examining the extent to which trust and norms such as flexibility and a willingness ‘to give and take’ have developed between groups (Ayers et al., 1997; Cao & Lumineau, 2015). This scale comprises 4 items and the Cronbach alpha is 0.75 (Britain) and 0.73 (South Africa).

3.2.4. Team effectiveness

Ayers et al. (1997, p. 111) define “perceived effectiveness” as the perception that the engagement between two groups is “worthwhile, productive and satisfying.” Song and Parry (1997, p. 15) further suggest that integration is the “process of achieving effective unity of efforts in the accomplishment of new product development success.” Kale, Dyer, and Singh (2001) observe that a component of collaboration effectiveness is the degree to which collaboration partners behave in a harmonious, well-integrated way.

This scale measures the extent to which the two firms have a high level of integration, that the team is effective in meeting objectives, and that they would be willing to engage with each other in the future. Team effectiveness comprises 3 items and the Cronbach alpha is 0.85 (Britain) and 0.87 (South Africa).

3.2.5. New product development performance

Following Lawson et al. (2015), this scale measures the extent to which the collaborative NPD has met schedule and profit targets. The scale comprises 3 items and the Cronbach alpha is 0.77 (Britain) and 0.74 (South Africa).

3.2.6. Control variables

The interviews highlight the significance of firm size (number of employees), age (years since founding), and the size of the collaboration partner (number of employees). The analysis therefore includes these variables as control variables. The descriptive statistical analysis reveals that these variables have skewed distributions. Using the values’ natural logarithm in the statistical analysis addresses this problem (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998).

4. Results

The results of the exploratory factor analysis appear in Table 1. Factor analysis using maximum likelihood extraction with oblique rotation serves to extract the factors. Five clear factors emerge with eigenvalues above 1.0. All factor loadings exceed 0.40, and thus are significant (Hair et al., 1998). The resultant scales present good reliability with Cronbach’s alpha higher than 0.70 (Hair et al., 1998). Ordinary least squares regression (OLS) analysis examines the research hypotheses (Carey et al., 2011). Tables 2 and 3 present the results of the regression analyses.

H1 postulates that team effectiveness mediates the relationship between formal governance and NPD performance. Similarly, H2 proposes that team effectiveness mediates the relationship between relational governance and NPD performance. The study tests mediation using a staged approach appearing in Baron and Kenny (1986). According to Baron and Kenny (1986), the satisfaction of the following three conditions is necessary to provide evidence for mediation:

1. An association between the independent variables (formal and relational governance) and the proposed mediator (collaboration team effectiveness).
2. An association between the mediator and the focal dependent variable (new product development performance).
3. The significant relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable must become non-significant, while the relationship between the mediator and the dependent variable is significant, for full mediation to exist.

In the first regression, the study regresses the predictor variable formal governance against the mediator variable, team effectiveness, resulting in a positive significant relationship with formal governance. In the second regression, the study regresses the two predictor variables

Table 1
Factor analysis.

Items	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Open discussion of conflict</i>					
When conflicts arise, we (our firm and partner):					
1. Openly share concerns and issues.	0.85 (0.79)				
2. Try and keep differences of opinion quiet (R).	0.73 (0.71)				
3. Treat issues in a conflict as a win–lose contest (R).	0.72 (0.73)				
4. See constructive changes on the project because of conflict.	0.89 (0.86)				
<i>Team effectiveness</i>					
1. We would easily engage in another alliance with this partner.		0.78 (0.83)			
2. To what extent did this alliance meet the performance objectives set?		0.81 (0.79)			
3. The integration between our two firms was very good for this project.		0.80 (0.89)			
<i>New product development performance</i>					
1. To what extent was this product developed within the scheduled time?			0.79 (0.73)		
2. To what extent has this product met profit objectives?			0.82 (0.78)		
3. To what extent did working with this partner allow us to develop this product faster?			0.77 (0.72)		
<i>Formal contractual governance</i>					
1. Roles and responsibilities in each firm are clearly defined by the agreement.				0.83 (0.85)	
2. Schedules and milestones are detailed in the agreement.				0.79 (0.80)	
3. The agreement lists safeguards (such as confidentiality).				0.76 (0.75)	
4. Intellectual property rights are detailed in the agreement.				0.70 (0.77)	
<i>Relational governance</i>					
1. To what extent do you trust the alliance partner?					0.69 (0.73)
2. We have developed personal as well as business relationships with this partner.					0.71 (0.75)
3. We have been willing to make changes for the benefit of the alliance.					0.79 (0.77)
4. They have been willing to make changes for the benefit of the alliance.					0.71 (0.68)

Values in parentheses () are for the South African sample, (R) indicates reverse-scored.

against the dependent variable, NPD performance: both predictors have a positive, significant relationship. The mediator also has a positive, significant relationship with NPD performance. Finally, the study regresses both predictors and the mediator against the dependent variable.

For the British sample, the significant relationship between relational governance and NPD performance is non-significant when the regression includes team effectiveness. This result indicates that team effectiveness fully mediates the relational governance–NPD performance relationship. These results support H2 in the British sample. In examining H1, although formal governance is less significant when team effectiveness is in the regression, formal governance continues to have a significant relationship with NPD performance, indicating that team effectiveness partially mediates the relationship.

For the South African sample, the relationship between relational governance and NPD performance is not significant (showing a lack of

satisfaction of Baron and Kenny's (1986) conditions), thus failing to support H2. In examining H1 in the South African sample, the results are the same as with the British sample. That is, when team effectiveness is in the regression, the relationship between formal governance and NPD performance becomes less significant, thus providing evidence of partial mediation by team effectiveness and partial support for H1 in both South African and British firms.

H3 postulates that open discussion of conflicting issues positively moderates the relationship between team effectiveness and NPD performance. The testing of this hypothesis appears in Table 3. In both the British and the South African samples, the interaction term is positive and significant, indicating that open discussion of conflict positively moderates the relationship between team effectiveness and NPD performance. The control variables, firm size, firm age, and collaboration partner size are non-significant in all the regressions.

Table 2
Regression analyses, tests of hypotheses 1 and 2.

	British sample				South African sample			
	Team	NPD	NPD	NPD	Team	NPD	NPD	NPD
<i>Direct effects</i>								
Formal governance	0.16**	0.40***		0.33**	0.21***	0.49***		0.41**
Relational governance	0.59***	0.25**		0.07	0.43***	0.14		0.04
<i>Mediating effects</i>								
Team			0.47***	0.40***			0.39***	0.37***
<i>Controls</i>								
Firm size (log)	0.08	0.24	0.11	0.15	0.09	0.17	0.09	0.06
Firm age (log)	0.01	0.15	0.09	0.07	0.11	0.09	0.15	0.03
Partner size (log)	0.05	0.07	0.03	0.01	0.15	0.11	0.07	0.05
Adjusted R ²	0.41	0.24	0.23	0.33	0.37	0.27	0.26	0.29
Overall model F	25.99***	8.59***	17.26***	13.09**	21.05***	10.59***	19.37***	11.39***

Figures in the table are standardized beta coefficients.

The p-values reflect one-tailed tests for hypothesized relationships.

** p < 0.01.

*** p < 0.001.

Table 3
Regression analysis, test of hypothesis 3.

	British sample	South African sample
	NPD	NPD
<i>Direct effects</i>		
Team	0.21**	0.29**
Open conflict	0.04	0.07*
<i>Moderating effects</i>		
Team × Open conflict	0.15***	0.31***
<i>Controls</i>		
Firm size (log)	0.02	0.06
Firm age (log)	0.06	0.07
Partner size (log)	0.11	0.03
Adjusted R ²	0.21	0.26
Overall model F	9.72***	14.01***

Figures in the table are standardized beta coefficients.

The p-values reflect one-tailed tests for hypothesized relationships.

* p < 0.05.

** p < 0.01.

*** p < 0.001.

The magnitude of the beta coefficient of the interaction term in the South African sample is double that of the beta coefficient in the British sample, indicating that open discussion of conflict has a stronger positive influence on the team effectiveness–NPD performance relationship in South African firms as compared to British firms. This result draws attention to the fact that among South African firms, the relationship between team effectiveness and NPD performance receives greater influence from the open discussion of conflict than among British firms. The results support the hypothesis that the collaborating team is more effective and has better NPD performance if firms create an atmosphere where dissenting voices are free to express themselves. The need to create an open atmosphere seems more necessary in South Africa.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The direct relationship between governance and collaboration team effectiveness shows that relational governance has a stronger positive association with collaboration team effectiveness than formal governance does. This result suggests that the development of relational governance between NPD participants increases participants' satisfaction with the relationship, which is evident in their willingness to work with each other again, as well as in their perception that they are working effectively together. This finding supports much of the channel and strategy literature which has drawn on the relational exchange perspective and which has found a strong positive link between trust, relational norms, and measures of satisfaction with the inter-firm exchange relationship and effectiveness of the inter-firm relationship (Lee & Cavusgil, 2006).

Relational governance has a stronger association with collaboration team effectiveness, whereas formal governance has a stronger positive direct association with NPD performance. The strong positive association of formal governance with NPD performance is somewhat surprising because previous studies examining the linkage between performance and collaboration governance emphasize the need to employ relational rather than formal contractual governance mechanisms (Yli-Renko et al., 2001).

This study hypothesizes that team effectiveness mediates the relationship between governance and NPD performance. Team effectiveness has a positive association with NPD development performance. Team effectiveness fully mediates the relationship between relational governance and NPD performance in the British sample. However, team effectiveness only partially mediates the relationship between formal contractual governance and NPD performance in both British and South African samples. That is, although the strength and significance of the association between formal contractual governance and new

product development performance decreases when team effectiveness appears in the model as a mediator, formal governance continues to have a significant positive direct association with NPD performance.

The positive association of relational governance with collaboration team effectiveness and its positive relationship with NPD performance suggests that when a good integration of the new product development participants from the two firms exists and they have an effective working relationship, the development process and product performance increase. Although this finding is intuitively appealing, the finding contrasts with the findings of research on the relationship between relational norms, team effectiveness, and NPD performance in an in-house cross-functional setting (Ayers et al., 1997). Ayers et al. (1997) find that no significant relationship exists between team effectiveness and NPD performance. They also find that, contrary to the findings of this study, relational norms negatively influence new product development performance.

The regression results for the South African sample do not evidence a significant relationship between relational governance and NPD performance, and therefore in the South African sample, H2 lacks support. The divergence of results between the two samples with regard to H2 is interesting. The results suggest that the significant relationship between relational governance and NPD performance, which finds support in the British sample, does not find support in the South African sample. Another observation is that the magnitude of the beta coefficients for formal governance in the South African sample are much larger than the coefficients in the British sample; this result indicates that South African firms are placing more emphasis on formal governance mechanisms in collaborative new product development. These findings are supportive of the discussion Cao and Lumineau (2015) present; where they postulate that those countries that have weaker institutional structures will tend to use formal governance more than countries where institutional structures are stronger. The World Bank *Doing Business Report* (2015) shows how legal institutional structures in South Africa and other Sub-Saharan African countries are much weaker than in Britain and other OECD countries. The GEM Report (2015/2016) also highlights that innovation-driven new firms receive much less support in South Africa than in Britain (Kelley, Singer, & Herrington, 2016).

The exploratory interviews conducted, particularly with law firms and new technology based firms, reveal that some law firms have developed a specialized ability to draw up contracts and to guide new firms in collaboration, in Britain. This is not evident in South Africa, and so new firms often struggle to get adequate advice regarding collaboration, consequently they tend to be more vulnerable in collaborating with large firms, and need to find ways to address this vulnerability.

Open discussion of conflicting issues positively moderates the team effectiveness–NPD relationship in both British and South African samples. This result draws attention to the observation that, without free discussion, good ideas remain muffled and teams will agree with another to the detriment of the innovation, showing “groupthink,” as researchers such as Janis (1983) warn. Open discussion therefore has an important role in new product development collaboration in helping teams improve the new product. Although conflict seemingly works against teamwork, this study indicates that open discussion of conflict promotes constructive debate and healthy teamwork.

This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, the study presents evidence that shows that team effectiveness mediates the governance–NPD performance relationship, and that team effectiveness is a mechanism through which governance influences outcomes, in certain institutional environments. Second, the study sheds light on the divergence of opinions regarding conflict; the study shows that creating an open atmosphere supportive of diverse opinions, has a positive influence on the team effectiveness and NPD performance relationship. A third contribution of this study is that the institutional environment does affect how governance influences collaboration outcomes, and that the strength of institutional structures influences how managers govern their collaborations.

6. Practical implications for managers

The results of this study point to five implications for managers of firms engaging in collaborative new product development projects. Firstly, managers should invest in the social processes necessary to develop a relational governance structure because a higher level of relational governance presents a strong association with an increased ability of the new technology based firm to work effectively in collaboration teams. Secondly, although overwhelming to some, managers need to equip themselves with an understanding of contracts and the use of formal governance to improve their co-ordination in collaborating with another firm. Thirdly, managers should optimally strive to develop a “governance structuring competency,” that is, the ability to construct a formal governance structure that facilitates coordination and minimizes risk, while supporting the development of trust and relational governance, which are necessary for building an inter-firm relationship. This implication is particularly important for new product development collaboration because balancing the apparent tension between formal and relational governance is imperative. Product development demands strong relational and team processes, and creativity, whereas the heightened co-ordination requirements of product development spanning two independent firms calls for the use of formal controls to make co-ordination more efficient. Fourthly, creating an atmosphere where managers from the two different firms can openly express conflicting views positively influences the collaborative NPD. Finally, when collaboration occurs in diverse countries, the differences in institutional environment will influence the relationships between collaboration governance and NPD performance.

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