

Paper presented at SASE 2005 “What Counts? Calculation, Representation, Association”, 17th Annual Meeting on Socio-Economics, Central European University and Corvinus University of Budapest, Budapest, June 30 - July 2, 2005

Change and Innovation in Cooperative Economic Relations

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Abstract

Change in economy and society shows the need for innovation. Researchers suggest cooperation as a chance to meet this challenge. Since economic actions are based on social relations trust is the key preliminary to cooperation. It is (re-)produced in successful cooperative actions. In small companies cooperation practices in entrepreneurial networks are determined by the CEOs' activities. They gain different experiences and draw different conclusions, and they use social ties of different density. We reconstructed four cooperation patterns from theme oriented interviews with CEOs: Non-Active, Controltype, Participator, and Initiator. They result in a specific way to cooperate and in a specific set of economic relations being relatively stable. Theoretical concepts relating action and structure support the assumption that these patterns exist as structuring structures. They change more or less through learning processes initialized by conflicts. Such change might be interpreted by others as innovation. This assumption can be validated in the project based on the empirical data concerning cooperation within the company. Change and innovation can be identified there in the same way.

1 Introduction

The existence of global markets and the development from an industrial to a service and knowledge society are linked with deep structural changes. In this situation innovations are considered as important aspects determining the existence of a company in the future. (see Wirth 2002, Tödting 2002) According to Moldaschl (2000) an objectivistic definition of innovation leads to endless discussions about the state of the art. Dilger and Henninger follow his advice and interpret innovation as situated and relational, recursive and dilemmatic

processes. During such processes knowledge and experience of different actors are transformed into new processes and products. In this understanding new technological artifacts and new social or organizational solutions can be innovative (Dilger/Henninger 2002). We will interpret them as change from an actor's perspective and as innovation if other actors judge them as remarkable improvements or good examples.

The changes in the economic markets and society are connected with a need for innovation. This leads to new demands on the development and organization of a company, especially of small and medium-sized businesses. Considered that businesses act economically it is important to realize that economic actions are embedded in social structures and have to be considered as social relations (Granovetter 1985). They can be differentiated according to their density in weak and strong ties (Granovetter 1973). Weak ties between individuals lead to less dense networks bridging greater social distance than strong ties. They are important channels for individuals to pass ideas, influences, information etc. So they integrate into several communities. Strong ties lead to cohesive networks and result in overall fragmentation (ibid, 1378). Both ties built the basis for the development of a successful business.

To meet the described challenges researchers suggest companies to cooperate and to initiate networks. Entrepreneurial networks are seen as social structures connected with a positive impact on competitive position, knowledge transfer, business volume, hiring and innovation. They are considered as a coordination form of economic activities between the market and the organization (see Sydow 1993, Powell 1990). In economy they are strategically run by companies. They are polycentric and based on cooperative relationships between economical actors, who got the aim to create a so – called “win-win situation”. (see Aderhold/ Wetzels/ Meyer 2002, Klaus 2002). Dörsam and Icks (1997) consider cooperative relationships as a form of voluntary collaboration of two or more economical actors. They bring in and adjust their resources to achieve a common goal in joint actions. Trust is seen as the key premise for the cooperation within such a network, because business partners have to trust in the straightforwardness of each other. This means they must believe that the others do not exploit the situation for their own benefit. Consequently the role of trust in cooperation is to reduce the insecurity and to increase the predictability of the partner's behavior (see Corsten 2001).

In our research project¹ we analyze the social embeddedness of economic actions, especially of small software companies. Small software companies seem to be good examples for companies mastering the described challenges. They have to act in a global and local market at the same time. Their software must be able to run on computers reflecting the current state of technology that is defined globally. The specific realization of the software is determined by the technology of their customers. Moreover, they often serve customers not only locally but globally. Describing their cooperation processes and practices will give valuable hints, how a small company can survive in an economy that is determined by a global market.

After a short description of the project's design in section 2 we introduce a model drawn from our empirical data on how cooperative relations between companies develop in section 3. Cooperation on all levels need joint actions with positive results (re)producing trust. We argue that an entrepreneurial network needs cooperation on the highest level. In the following section we examine more closely differences in cooperative practices. We introduce typical patterns within the whole range of avoiding and initiating cooperative actions. In section 5 we analyze change and innovation in connection to these patterns. Our empirical data show all patterns as being relatively stable in business to business relations. Theoretical concepts on the relation of action and structure support the assumption that these patterns operate as structuring structures. Starting points for processes of change lay in negative experiences and the connected reflections. They might initialize learning processes. Do they lead to innovation? Only CEOs of the "Initiator" and "Participator" type organize or support entrepreneurial networking. They are innovative from a researcher's point of view. Does this mean that only their businesses will survive in the future? An analysis of the cooperation within the company and therewith of change and innovation will validate this assumption.

2 Design of the Project

In the project we conduct case studies in small software companies in different regions. We ask for their cooperation practices on individual, organizational and regional level using theme oriented interviews and non participative observation. Since organizational research assumes that CEOs have a strong influence on work and organization practices of the whole company (see Weinert 1998), we started the analysis with the CEOs cooperation practices. There are three leading questions for this part of the analysis: a) How do CEOs cooperate? b)

¹ The project is funded by the Volkswagen-Foundation (grant No.II/ 78383).

With whom and on what terms are CEOs ready and able to cooperate? c) Which conclusions can be drawn on change and innovation?

Conducting theme oriented interviews we get data describing and explaining the individual cooperation processes of the CEOs. So we are able to reconstruct their actions in relation to the situation and their reasoning (see e.g. Flick/ von Kardorff/ Steinke 2000, Bohnsack 2003). Within the project's case studies the CEOs are asked to tell about the history, organization and development of their company, and their cooperation practices. The material from the interviews is analyzed in a hermeneutic approach according to the method of Meuser and Nagel (1991).

All selected companies have less than thirty employees. The results drawn in this article are based on the interviews with CEOs in 10 companies located in two different regions in Germany. One is located in the eastern part, the other in the western part. The selection was raised according to the methodological concept of qualitative sampling (see Kelle/ Kluge 1999), which is based on the acceptance that specific structural characteristics of companies will correspond to differences in the social practices of the CEOs (ibid). So we looked for companies with different organizational frameworks. On one hand we chose small companies with main emphasis on customizing software. They customize standard software systems or software for a specific application domain developed by other companies. On the other hand we chose small companies with main emphasis on the development of new software systems. They customize and improve their own software products.

3 Genesis of economic cooperative relations

Cooperative relations need trust. Our results concerning the cooperation processes acknowledge: Trust is the most important precondition for cooperation between economic actors. Social ties based on longtime personal acquaintance and mutual trust built an important starting point for cooperation (see Kräuter 2004). Trust develops through joint actions with positive results. This (re-)production process of trust needs a certain amount of time and effort (see table 1).

| Level | Form of cooperation | Content of cooperation |
|---|--|---|
| Level 1: Networking <i>(little time and effort)</i> | a) Declare intention | Communicate a cooperation idea |
| | b) Exchange information | Talk about potential customers or technological developments in the sector |
| Level 2: Cooperation Test <i>(medium time and effort)</i> | Joint presentation | Talk about the company's strength and weakness; search together for customers |
| Level 3: Beginners Cooperation <i>(much time and effort)</i> | a) Outsourcing of certain business parts | Share work load and expertise |
| | b) Give away service or project parts | Constitute access to a pool of supplementing qualifications and expertise |
| Level 4: Advanced Cooperation <i>(very much time and effort)</i> | Share services and products | Work together handling additional services and customers if appropriate |

Table 1: Development of cooperative relations (Kräuter 2004)

The analysis of the empirical data has shown that the development of cooperative relations of small software companies can be described in four levels. Positive experiences with cooperative partnerships renew and increase trust. Increasing trust is a motivation for the CEOs to take more economical risk: They raise the amount of time and effort put into cooperative actions. So they come to a next cooperation level. Level 4 cooperation (“Advanced Cooperation”) is necessary for an entrepreneurial network. Negative cooperation experiences lead to less trust. They are a motivation for the CEOs to reflect on cooperative relationships and to specify the characteristics necessary for successful cooperative relations.

4 Differences between cooperation practices

CEOs use cooperative relations with their customers, but also with other business partners to maintain and/or increase their business success. Cooperating with business partners they gain different experiences and draw different conclusions. There are also differences in how they use social relations for business partnerships. The quotations in the first subsection will give an impression on main differences we found in the empirical data. They show the variety of

cooperation practices among the CEOs. They lead to the identification of different patterns. The different cooperation patterns and their relation to situation and personality are described in subsection two.

4.1 Examples from the empirical data

The following interview quotations give an impression of the different experiences of four CEOs with cooperative relations. Their experiences show how they practice cooperation. They draw different conclusions, and especially negative experiences motivate them to express preliminary conditions for successful partnerships. Some quotations give insights in the social relations they can rely on.

Peter is the founder of a small software company. The company develops and sells an own software product. He is one out of three CEOs and responsible for sales and marketing. Peter reports on a partnership in sales and marketing that did not work out.

Peter: „[Den Vertrieb] ... mittlerweile wieder selbst machen, mehr oder weniger. Es hat sich herausgestellt das die Branche so komplex und kompliziert ist, dass es eigentlich kompetent vor Ort kein Fremder einfach mal so herstellen und vorstellen kann. D.h. es kommen dort Fragen im medizinischen Bereich, im pflegerischen Bereich, die sind auf jeden Fall schwer zu beantworten, das geht einfach nicht. Das ist wirklich unmöglich.“

Translation: “[sales and marketing] ...is left for me, more or less. The domain is so complex and complicated that no one who is an outsider can produce or sell our product. There are always questions in the domain, medical questions, questions concerning the care work, questions difficult to answer. It's impossible, no chance.”

He probably did not know the sales partner before. He concludes: A partner in marketing and sales has to be someone who is familiar with the working practices in the company, and who is competent in the application domain. The negative experience reduced his trust in cooperative relations and he did not start a new one in sales and management, neither in other parts of his business. Another reason for his lack of business partners might lay in the preconditions he names as a consequence of his negative cooperation experience. He would only cooperate with an autonomous business partner familiar with his company and the application domain. The chance to find such a person seems to be very small.

Dora and her husband have founded a small software company. The company customizes specific standard software. They configure the system according to the needs of their customers and develop certain software parts that help to integrate the software into their

already established work organization. Both are CEOs. She is responsible for the company's work and business organization. Her husband directs the software development activities. Dora has outsourced the hardware purchase of the company. Two of her staff members have founded an own company in the same building. She buys all her hardware parts there. Dora describes this relation as "regular" business relation: She orders, they deliver and send a bill, she pays.

Dora: „Ein- und Verkauf hat eine Zuarbeit von <Firma M.>, <Firma M.> nennt sich das, der vorrangig den Einkauf tätigt als Großhandel. Das machen zwei Mitarbeiter. Das ist eine Firma, getrennt für sich, das ist eine GmbH & Co. KG. Dort gibt es mehrere Gesellschafter, ist aber hier im Hause, aber völlig getrennt, ist aber mein Einkauf. ... Das ist eine geschäftliche Beziehung. Ich bestelle dort regulär, kaufe regulär, bekomme eine Rechnung gestellt und muss die bezahlen. Akkurat, sauber, fertig. Das sind Kapitalgesellschaften und da gibt es besondere Vorschriften.“

Translation: “We buy hardware from <company M>. They act as a wholesaler. It's managed by two members of my staff. But it's a company on its own, a GmbH & Co. KG. There are also associates. It's in this building, but an extra company, and they are my hardware store. ... It's a business relation. I order, they sell, I get a bill and pay. Correct business.”

Cooperation is something for her she would do with other companies customizing software. For this situation she describes a negative scenario. She assumes that other software companies customizing specific standard software will not only avoid to cooperate with her, but explicitly try to work around her company.

Dora: „Das (Anm.: Kooperieren) können Sie zwar in der Theorie machen, aber in der Praxis nicht. Nicht in so einer wirtschaftlichen Situation. Bis dahin hatte ich den Kunden, ab morgen – kann es sein – hat ihn jemand anderes, der ja auf jeden Fall versucht mich zu unterlaufen. Die anderen Lieferanten, die Softwarelieferanten, sprechen unsere Kunden direkt an und versuchen auf jeden Fall uns zu unterlaufen, zu umgehen und den Kunden abzuwerben.“

„Und der andere versucht mich auszuschalten, denn wenn er den Kunden ganz haben will, muss er mich auch ganz ausschalten. Und dann wird er nicht mit mir die andere Hälfte noch machen, sondern sucht sich einen anderen Partner.“

Translation: „That's (cooperation) plain theory. It's not working in practice. Not in an economic situation like this. Today I have a customer and tomorrow it's his one – very likely. He will definitely try to get around me. The other suppliers, software suppliers, talk to our customers and want to support them.”

“If he wants the customer totally for himself, he tries to knock me out. And he does not ask me to do my part. He will look for another partner.”

Other companies customizing software would not work cooperatively with her. In contrary, they would call the same customers and try to take them over not asking her company to do its customization parts. Because of her practical experiences she is convinced that business

relations work out only under formal regulation. Potential cooperation partners would compete and work against her. She has no trust in informal cooperation and seems to have no chance to develop some.

Dora: „Diejenigen, mit denen ich jahrelang zusammengearbeitet habe, die sind alle weg. Wer hat sich schon selbständig gemacht, und wer hat sich 1990 gleich selbständig gemacht. Ich habe ja gekündigt in meinem VEB. Wer hat schon damals gekündigt?“

Translation: „I have lost all my colleagues when I got self employed. Who else got self employed in 1990? I had quit my job. Who left his job at that time?“

Dora has no relations to former colleagues, a common source for business partnerships. It appears she is only relying on family ties – she has founded the company with her husband – and formal regulated business relations – the business of two of her staff members buys her companies' hardware.

Ben is founder and CEO of a small software company, which customizes specific standard software for middle sized and large companies. He cooperates with other customization companies and suppliers up to level 3 (see table 1) Ben is able to use these relations to increase his business opportunities, but he also pays his cooperation partners back in money or in order shares for giving the business opportunity.

Ben: „Ja, das ist weit gestreut und weniger lokal geprägt, sondern wirklich mehr von der fachlichen Ebene, wo ergänzt man sich, wo hilft man sich, wo machen wir Projekte gemeinsam, wo gibt es Kunden, die das brauchen, was wir machen. Also die Partner bringen uns auch vertrieblich öfters mal mit rein in die Projekte.“

„Meistens ist es so, die identifizieren den Bedarf, die wissen wir können das und dann geben sie uns den Tipp und dann kriegen die entweder von uns etwas dafür oder die kriegen auch Anteile an dem Auftrag.“

Translation: „Oh yes, they are everywhere, hardly round here. It's more a technical question. Where can we complete each other, where can we help each other? Where are projects for us, where are customers that need our services? Often enough they have need for us in their projects.“

“Usually they see the need for our competence and give a hint. And then they get something back or parts of the deal.“

Ben considers his cooperative relations as barter relations. He gets business and pays business back. Because of his positive cooperation experiences he developed some trust in informal business partnerships. He uses cooperative relations to business partners in the same application domain to maintain his business. These relations are somehow connected to relations to former staff members.

Ben: „Da gibt es z.B. die <Firma X.>, die ist ein weltweit tätiger Dienstleister und Softwareanbieter in dem Bereich. Sitzen, glaube ich, in <Gebiet Y.> oder auch in <Gebiet Z.> und haben Ableger hier in <Land Y.>. Dort sind mittlerweile viele unserer ehemaligen Kollegen von anderen Firmen auch untergekommen.“

Translation: „For instance, there is a company <x>. A big one. They offer their services and software worldwide. In <area Y>, or <area z>, I'm not sure. They have an office here. In the mean time a lot of our former colleagues have been hired there.“

Paula is one out of five founders of a small software company, which develops two special software systems and software on individual demands. She is responsible for marketing, public relations, and the organization of the company. She is cooperating with many partners in the local area, but also nationwide and in other countries. She has gained a lot of positive experiences and cooperates on all levels (see table 1). She conducts projects with cooperation partners. Out of a cooperative relation to a customer she is founding a joint venture (see table 1, level 4).

Paula: „Also wir haben zwei Partner. Die einen sind in <Stadt Y>, die eine Domäne haben, die kommen aus der <Fachbereich X>, aus diesem Bereich. Mit denen machen wir sehr viel zusammen. Und da machen wir im Prinzip die Programmierung und sie haben eben die Kontakte, machen den Vertrieb bzw. haben das ganze Know-how aus dem fachspezifischen Bereich.“

„Und dann gibt es noch ein Unternehmen in Italien, in <Gebiet X.>. Das sind im Prinzip unsere Kunden. Allerdings ist daraus eine Partnerschaft erwachsen, dass wir jetzt auch gemeinsam ein Tochterunternehmen gründen, ein Joint Venture.“

Translation: „We cooperate with two partners. One is in <city Y>. They are in a specific domain. We work together a lot. We do the programming work and they have the know how for sales and marketing in their domain, they know the customers.“

“Another partner is a company in Italy, <area X>. They are our customers. But now we will also partners for a joint venture.“

These positive experiences increased her trust in cooperative relations and motivated her to take more economical risk. She also cooperated with someone she had not known before.

Paula: „Ja. Und dann war die Entscheidung eigentlich schon gefallen. Dass wir gesagt haben, o.k. probieren wir es zusammen. Sind dann aber im Laufe der Zeit eben nicht auf demselben Weg geblieben. Das ist schade. ... Ich glaube, das Risiko ist immer da. Also, auch wenn wir das jetzt einschätzen. Möglicherweise wäre es etwas anderes gewesen, wenn die Firma nicht so weit weg gewesen wäre, sondern in <Stadt Y.>. Da kenne ich – glaube ich – genügend Leute, wo man auch vorher sich schon einmal informieren kann und die Zuverlässigkeit oder die Zusammenarbeit in anderen Projekten abschätzen kann. Also in dem Fall weiß ich zufällig, ich habe privat noch einen Bekannten in <Land Z.>, in <Stadt Y.>, die auch mit dieser Firma, mit <Arbeitsgebiet L.> zusammen arbeiten. Und die haben jetzt ähnliche Erfahrungen. Insofern kann ich nur sagen, hinterher ist man schlauer.“

Translation: „Yeah. And then the decision was made: Ok. Let's try it together. It did not work out. It's a pity. I believe there is always some risk. Today I see a chance, if the company would be not so far away, e.g. in <city Y>. I know enough people there that I could have asked for information. Their experiences would have helped me to see how reliable they are and how to work with. Especially in this case I know someone in private in <region z>, <city y>. She is working with this company. She has made the same experiences. It's always the same: You are wise after the event.”

The negative experience gives reason to her to express conditions necessary to assure success in cooperative partnerships not based on a social relation with the business partner. Next time she would – in advance – ask friends and partners for experiences with the respective person or company. She also mentions spatial proximity as helpful for both, information seeking in advance and cooperation. For her those aspects support also cooperation with partners based on social relations. At the same time it becomes clear that she can rely on a lot of social relations that she had gained in her former working activities. She has been very active as organizer of social events for founders before she started her own business.

Paula: „Hinzu kommt, dass ich noch sehr aktiv war im <Verein A.>, das hat hier damals die Gründerszene beherrscht. Hatte regelmäßig einmal im Monat Infomärkte gemacht, wo 80 bis 100 Leute zusammen kommen, die hier in der Szene aktiv sind. Und wo man halt viele Verbindungen und Netzwerke und so etwas hatte.“

Translation: „And also I was very active in <non profit A>. We were leading the founders' scene. I organized monthly networking events with 80 to 100 business people. There I got a lot of connections.“

The interview sequences of Peter, Dora, Ben and Paula show differences in two directions: the experiences of cooperative activities and the kind of social relations for business partnerships. Concerning the cooperative activities it has been shown that Peter does not foster business relations. Dora stays in a formal regulated contact to staff members that resell hardware. Both do not see any benefit of informal business partnerships. Ben and Paula cultivate informal contacts to business partners. Ben understands them as barter relations that help him to stay in business. Paula uses and develops them to expand her business. Concerning the use and range of social relations for business partnerships it has been shown that Peter does not cultivate them. He would use only strong social relations to staff members. Dora is using strong social relations to family and staff members for her cooperative activities. Ben and Paula also use weak social ties to former colleagues and business partners in the same domain. Moreover, Paula cooperates with business partners in other domains and even tries to cooperate with partners not known before.

4.2 Cooperation patterns

The above described differences in the cooperation practices lead to the identification of typical cooperation patterns found in the sample. The cooperation practices of Peter, Dora, Ben and Paula are prototypical² examples of each of the identified typical patterns.

Peter's cooperative actions can be seen as prototypical for the "Non-Active"-Pattern. An ideal type has none or only few experiences with business to business cooperation, so he can not develop trust in cooperation. He has high demands on an adequate partner and the results of the cooperation, allowing the use of strong social ties only. He neither sees the process of nor the benefit for cooperation. His cooperative practices hinder the development of cooperative relations.

Dora's cooperative actions can be seen as prototypical for the "Controltype"-Pattern. An ideal type has none or only few experiences with business to business cooperation, so he can not develop trust. In this pattern personal distrust, uncertainty avoidance, and an emphasis on the danger of cooperation hinder the development of business partnerships. These personal characteristics are linked with a high need of control allowing the use of strong social ties and formal regulated relations only.

Ben's cooperative actions can be seen as prototypical for the "Participator"-Pattern. An ideal type has mostly positive experiences with business to business cooperation. Through these experiences he has developed some trust and sees the advantages of cooperative relations. He relies on weak social ties in his decision to cooperate. He has an idea of the cooperation process and develops cooperative relations according to this model. That means he usually puts a small amount of time and effort in new business relations and waits for the feedback.

Paula's cooperative actions can be seen as prototypical for the "Initiator"-Pattern³. An ideal type has diverse and mostly positive experiences with business to business cooperation. Through his activities he has developed a lot of trust in cooperative relations. He sees them as part of his business expanding the range of his activities. He develops own cooperation

² According to Kelle/Kluge (1999) types are idealistic constructions. What can be observed in practice is never similar to them. However, it reassembles central correlations.

³ CEOs of „Initiator“-type are mostly found in the western part of Germany.

activities and relies on weak social ties. His idealistic view on cooperation also leads him to try non-typical cooperation constellations according to the process or the preliminaries.

All four cooperation patterns can be positioned on a line. The patterns to the left tend to avoid cooperation and the patterns to the right tend to initiate it (see figure 1).

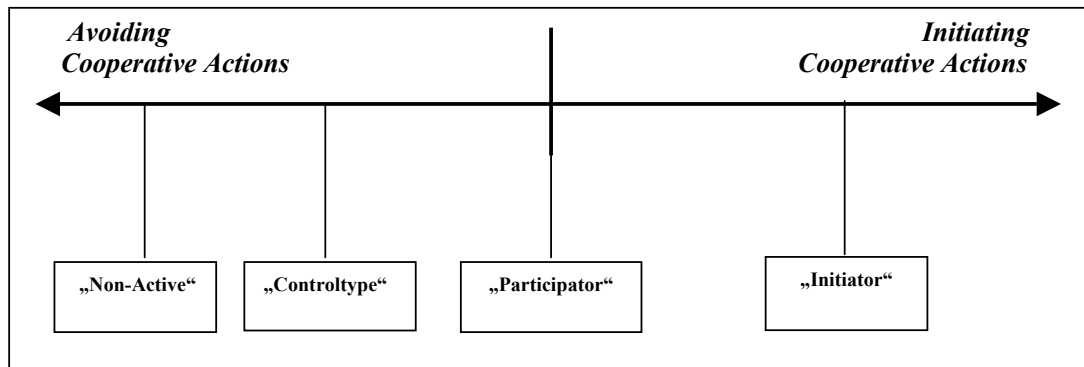


Figure 1: Typical patterns of cooperation practices (Kräuter 2004)

The “Non-Active” and “Controltype” cooperation pattern use none or formally regulated relations to business partners. Strong social ties are a preliminary for cooperation. CEOs cooperating along this pattern tend to avoid cooperation opportunities. The “Participator” and “Initiator” cooperation pattern use informal relations to entrepreneurial partners on base of weak social ties to maintain and expand their business. The “Participator” cooperates but is oriented on the model how cooperation develops. The “Initiator” is more active and risky.

The cooperation patterns show certain interrelations to individual, entrepreneurial, and societal structures. High demands on others, distrust and uncertainty avoidance, open mindedness and taking risks relate to specific personal structures that have to be interpreted in connection with the social development of the individual. At the same time business characteristics influence cooperation patterns. Large projects, a wide variety of very specific aspects etc. might demand cooperation for small companies. Moreover, the proportions of the social relations do also relate to historical aspects in the development of the society. For instance, the transformation of the political system in the eastern part of Germany resulted in a loss of social relations; and the different political systems supported different values, which are still influencing the economic activities of managers (see Schwarz 2000).

5 Change and Innovation – A prospect

Research sees networking and regional cooperation as preliminary for companies to meet the challenges connected to the changes in economy and society. Only CEOs following the “Participator” and “Initiator” pattern work toward entrepreneurial networking. Does that mean that only their businesses will survive in the future? Are the other CEOs able to change their cooperative practices? How long will it take and is it really necessary? At the moment all four of them stay in business. Have CEOs following the “Non-Active” or “Controltype” pattern other ways to do their business successfully?

Our empirical data show these patterns as being relatively stable. Slight changes occurred in consequence of negative experiences. Then the CEOs expressed their reflections on conditions for successful cooperative activities. But these experiences did not lead to major changes in their cooperative actions. We assume these patterns frame the cooperative actions of individuals and create them. We interpret them as structuring structures for the actions of individuals. They stay in relation to an individual and its socialization, the structures of the organization, and past and present societal conditions. This structuring structure emerged through social actions in the past and determines current and future social actions of an individual. In consequence this cooperation patterns should also remain effective when the CEO is organizing the cooperation within the company.

Concepts that analyze the general genesis, development, and change of such structures is Bourdieus work on the inner and outer structure of individuals (Bourdieu 1979) and Giddens work on the relation of structure and action (Giddens 1984). Both see a general possibility for change that is at the same moment restricted to time and space (Giddens) and the social field someone is socialized into (Bourdieu). In the context of a company change and innovation is connected to learning in working processes (Brown/Duguid 1991). It is conceptualized as intentional individual learning starting in situations where problems in action arise based on a lack of alternatives to the practiced activities (Holzkamp 1993). It is also conceptualized as learning in “communities of practice” (Lave/Wenger 1991). They are (re-)constructed through a common, meaningful practice leading to joint actions, mutual engagement and a shared repertoire (ibid.).

Our analysis of cooperative actions is so far based on interviews with the CEOs and concentrates on business to business cooperation. These interviews present their experiences

and understanding of cooperation at a certain point of time. With these data we are able to answer questions about situations that are interpreted as problematic by the CEOs and have the potential to motivate learning processes. In our data negative experiences with cooperation seem to be problematic. We are able to identify learning processes and their results. Here our material reveals reflection processes resulting in a specified knowledge of conditions for successful cooperation as a chance of learning and change. And we are able to identify, whether these changes are interpreted as innovations from others or not. For that reason we related it to the state of research.

The case studies in the project offer additional material – unstructured observation protocols and interviews with the staff – useful to prove the validity of the cooperation patterns within the company and therewith to prove the theoretical conceptualization as structuring structures. If the practices of the CEOs to organize cooperation within the company follow the same cooperation patterns we are able to analyze change and innovation concerning the cooperation within the company. Then again we need to find problematic situations (e.g. conflicts in the working group), initialized learning processes (e.g. reflection processes), and their results (e.g. new rules and regulations). The perception of these processes of change by others (e.g. customers, researchers) will give some hint on innovation. Such an analysis will sharpen our descriptions of the cooperation patterns. The results will show change from an individual's point of view and innovations in the perspective of others.

6 Acknowledgements

We thank Werner Dilger for valuable comments on an earlier draft of the paper.

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