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TITLE:
How Can a Client-Supplier Partnership Become More Successful?

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Preface

This master's thesis marks the end of our master's degree in Business Administration at the University of Stavanger Business School. It has been a long and educational process that has developed our academic abilities and given us valuable experience that will benefit us in the next phase of our life.

First and foremost, we must thank our supervisor, Associate Professor Bjarte Ravndal, for his advice and guidance throughout this process. His input has given us a greater understanding of the topic and made the work on this thesis possible. He has also sparked our interest in a topic that we are likely to continue to explore and develop our skills within.

Furthermore, we want to express our gratitude to our informants in Magnar Eikeland Gruppen and their suppliers EMO and Ricoh Norge for setting aside time to participate in our data collection, especially in a challenging time with Covid-19.

We would also like to thank our families for supporting us through this process. Without their support this thesis would not have been possible. Finally, we wish to thank our fellow students and professors at the Business Administration MSc program for making our years at the University of Stavanger a pleasant and educational experience.

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Abstract

Partnerships have become an increasingly important part of a firm's competitive strategy, but many of them seem to fail. The goal of this thesis is therefore to explore critical factors for partnership success and determine how a client-supplier partnership can become more successful. This is done by using the critical success factors presented by Kale & Singh (2009) and conducting a case study of the partnership between Magnar Eikeland Kontorutstyr AS and their supplier EMO, as well as the partnership between Magnar Eikeland Kontormaskiner AS and their supplier Ricoh Norge AS. The partnerships operate within the office supplies, and office machinery and digital solutions industry, respectively.

The data collection has occurred through structured interviews with relevant employees within each company and has provided us with a foundation to describe how various factors affect the cooperation between partners. Our research shows that the presented theory largely coincides with our findings. However, we have discovered that contractual complexity does not necessarily have a negative impact on the dynamic between partners if their relational capital is strong. In such cases, the complexity will not be interpreted as a sign of mistrust, but rather as a way of reducing uncertainty and facilitating increased cooperation.

Furthermore, when relational capital, knowledge exchange, and feedback routines are linked to specific individuals rather than organizations, partnerships are very exposed. Relational capital, knowledge exchange, and feedback should therefore be formalized and spread among several individuals in the partnered organizations to preserve these elements within the partnership. Moreover, partners' motives and intentions can change over time and have a significant impact on their partnership. It may therefore be wise to have mechanisms in place to address these changes, for example by having procedures for conflict resolution and contract amendments. Relational capital can act as a safeguard against conflicts by decreasing the barrier for expressing yourself freely.

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List of Abbreviations

CEO	Chief Executive Officer
MEK	Magnar Eikeland Kontorutstyr AS
MEKM	Magnar Eikeland Kontormaskiner AS
MEG	Magnar Eikeland Gruppen AS
EMO	EMO, department within Staples Solutions Norway AS
Ricoh Norge	Ricoh Norge AS
Staples	Staples Solutions Norway AS

1. Introduction

Partnerships and alliances have become a core part of a firm's competitive strategy, as they help maximize market control, enhance efficiencies, and gain access to new resources, capabilities and markets (Kogut, 1991; Ahuja, 2000; García-Canal, Duarte, Criado, & Llaneza, 2002). However, many partnerships tend to fail, exhibiting failure rates between 30% and 70% (Bamford, Gomes-Casseres, & Robinson, 2003; Dyer, Kale, & Singh, 2001; Lunnan & Haugland, 2008). Established research cannot provide a clear answer as to why this is the case but do highlight factors that are critical for partnership success. It includes elements such as compatibility, commitment, conflict resolution, choice of governance mechanism, and so on (Kale & Singh, 2009). The high failure rate implies that partnering companies have an incorrect understanding of what elements are important for a partnership to succeed. The aim of this thesis is therefore to uncover factors that to a greater or lesser extent increases partnership success. Our research question is as follows:

"How can a client-supplier partnership become more successful?"

Success is a relative term that can be defined in many ways, but in this thesis, we define it as partnered companies' ability to achieve a long-term partnership by increasing value creation beyond what they could have achieved on their own. To answer the research question, we will conduct a case study of two client-supplier partnerships in the office supplies- and solutions industry. The first partnership we seek to examine are between Magnar Eikeland Kontorutstyr AS ("MEK") and EMO, while the second is between Magnar Eikeland Kontormaskiner ("MEKM") and Ricoh Norge. The partnerships will be elaborated in part 1.1. The question is interesting because we can analyze important factors for having a successful partnership. It also gives us the opportunity to uncover new elements that are important for partnership success.

1.1 Background

MEK is a small sized retailer of office supplies in the B2B market that consists of 22 employees and had a revenue of 55 million NOK in 2019 (Proff.no, 2021b). Their main supplier is EMO, a nationwide B2B supplier of office products and currently a department within Staples Norway (EMO, 2021). In 2019, Staples Norway consisted of 400 employees and had a revenue of 1.5 billion NOK (Proff.no, 2021d) MEKM is a small sized retailer and service provider of office machinery, digital office solutions, and payment solutions. It had a revenue of 22 million NOK in 2019 and consists of 10 employees (Proff.no, 2021a). Their main supplier is Ricoh Norge, a nationwide supplier of printing products and solutions. In 2019, it consisted of 105 employees and had a revenue of 316 million NOK (Proff.no, 2021c). Both Ricoh Norge and EMO are part of large international corporations, while MEK and MEKM are local clients of their Norwegian branch. MEKM and MEK are part of Magnar Eikeland Gruppen and are situated at Sola, Rogaland County, Norway.

Half of the 50 largest companies in Rogaland operate within the oil- and gas industry (Næss, 2021), indicating that most businesses in Rogaland are directly or indirectly connected to it. Consequently, when the industry went into a downturn in 2014, it had a significant impact on many businesses in Rogaland, including MEK and MEKM (Board member MEG, 2021). As a result, it also had an indirect effect on their suppliers, as the suppliers' financial results are contingent on MEK and MEKMs performance. Furthermore, the transition towards a paperless society coupled with challenges brought by Covid-19 have put an additional strain on their business model and financial results. This has forced the companies to adapt in order to maintain their revenue and market position. For example, by meeting the increasing demand for disinfectant products or by offering document processing systems rather than print (Board member MEG, 2021). This process is easier to accomplish in a partnership, as the partners can get access to more knowledge and resources, enabling them to quickly identify new opportunities and increase their competitiveness. For example, the client operates close to the end-customer and has relevant information about the customer's preferences and demand, which can be very useful for the suppliers when they want to find new sought-after products to offer their clients. Consequently, the value of the partnership increases because both partners can help each other with developing and addressing the change in market demand. When handled correctly, partnerships can therefore result in significant benefits for both parties.

1.2 Thesis Delimitation

Although this thesis provides insight into the importance of various factors for achieving partnership success, it does not cover how much resources one must invest in them. This is because it would have required much more extensive research than what was possible due to the time and resources available. Furthermore, the study is limited to only two client-supplier partnerships in the B2B market, although the companies are involved in several more. The reason for this is that we want to get a more in-depth understanding of how partnerships work. We have not talked to every employee in every company, but limited ourselves to management and strategically placed employees who have a connection to the partnership. This is because we believe that these employees are the ones who have the relevant knowledge to shed light on our problem. The thesis is conducted as a case study, as it was deemed to be the most appropriate method of collecting data. This is because the number of employees in the companies would limit the quality of a quantitative study.

1.3 Layout

The thesis is structured as follows:

Figure 1 - Thesis Layout

Section 1 introduces the research question and the context tied to it. Thereafter, it briefly presents the examined companies and why partnerships are important. Finally, it presents some thesis delimitations.

Section 2 provides an overview of relevant theory that constitutes the foundation of this thesis. It includes critical elements such as key factors determining partnership success, an outline of the complex relationship between formal contracts and relational governance, and the "Relational View".

Section 3 presents the research methodology, explaining choice of research approach, data collection, and analysis. Furthermore, it gives the reader an opportunity to evaluate the thesis's validity and reliability. Finally, it presents some ethical considerations and methodical reflections.

Section 4 presents the data collected from interviews with relevant people within each firm, providing valuable insight into the inner workings of the two partnerships. The data is first structured in tables to give the reader a clear overview of the findings. Thereafter, the most important findings are summarized in a short paragraph under each table.

Section 5 discusses the results and research question in light of theory. The aim is to provide argumentation for what factors are critical for partnership success. Quotes from the data collection are included to highlight important points.

Section 6 offers concluding remarks and limitations of the study, as well as recommendations for further research on the topic.

Citations throughout the thesis are made according to APA 7th Edition guidelines.

2. Theory

In this section we will present the theoretical elements that will be used to discuss the research question. The purpose is to explain to the readers what established theory suggests are important factors for partnership success and to build a theoretical foundation for our empirical research. The theory is mainly focused around Kale & Singh's (2009) critical factors for alliance success, and includes factors such as complementarity, compatibility, commitment, contractual provisions, relational governance, trust and relational capital, conflict resolution, and relational view (See figure 2).

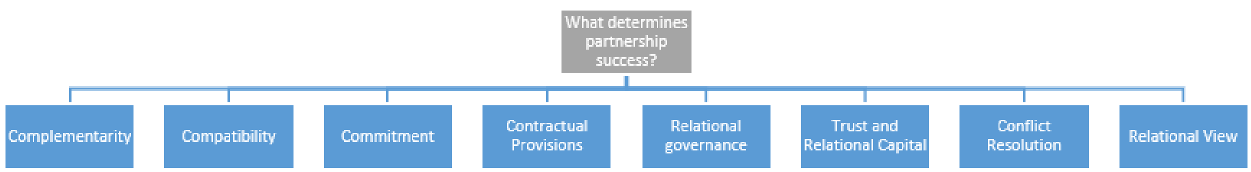

Figure 2 - Summary of Theory

2.1 What Determines Partnership Success?

A partnership can be defined as "a purposive relationship between two or more independent firms that involves the exchange, sharing, or codevelopment of resources or capabilities to achieve mutually relevant benefits" (Gulati, 1995). They can take on many different forms, ranging from joint ventures to equity and nonequity partnerships (Melville & Groves, 2015). According to Gulati (1998), the success of any single alliance or partnership is determined by some key factors that are important at each stage in the partnership life cycle. These include; (1) the Alliance Formation and Partner Selection stage, where firms select a fitting partner; (2) the Alliance Governance and Design stage, where firms establish appropriate governance mechanisms, and (3) the Postformation Alliance Management stage, where firms govern the partnership on a continuous basis to generate value (Schreiner, Kale, & Corsten, 2009; Kale & Singh, 2009).

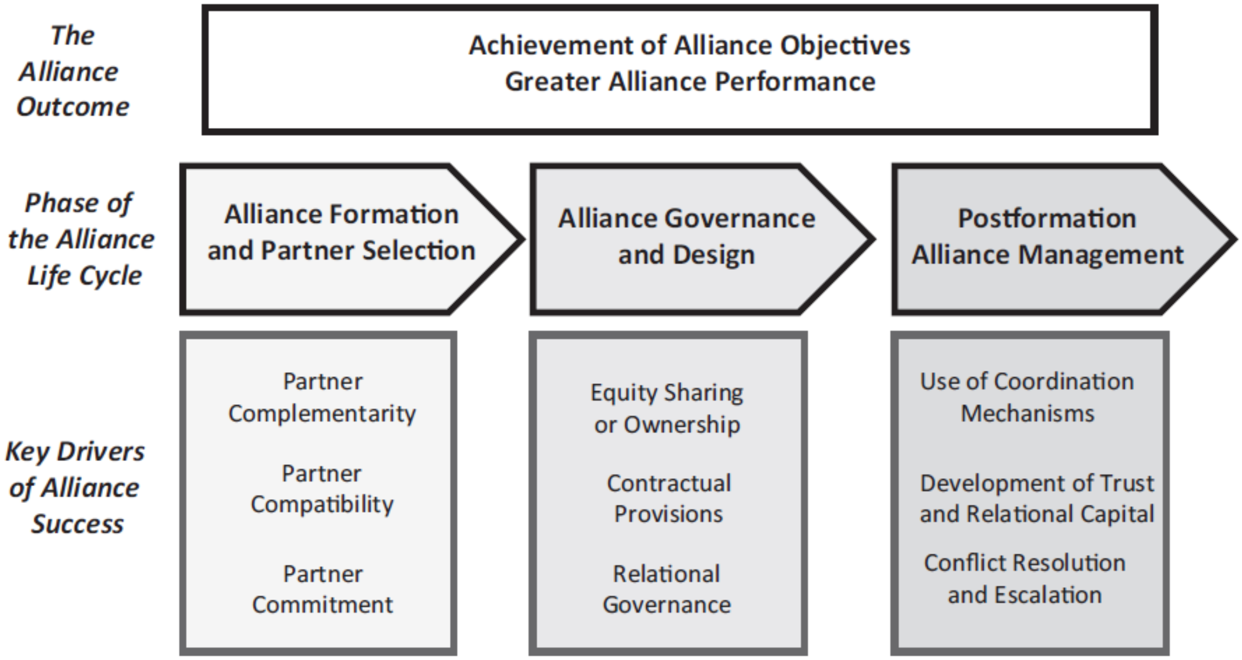

Figure 3 - Critical Success Factors (Kale & Singh, 2009)

2.1.1 Partnership Fit

Shah & Swaminathan (2008) suggest that partnership performance is dependent on three key attributes: (1) partner complementarity, (2) partner compatibility, and (3) partner commitment. Partner ***complementarity*** refers to the fit between business partners and whether they each provide something unique and/or valuable to the partnership (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Harrigan, 1988; Mowery, Oxley, & Silverman, 1996). Partner ***compatibility*** refers to the fit between firm cultures and the ways they conduct business, while partner ***commitment*** refers to partners' preparedness to invest resources and making sacrifices for the greater good of the partnership (Gundlach, Achrol & Mentzer, 1995).

Although each of these attributes are critical to partnership success, emerging research shows that their relative importance is tied to context. For example, partner complementarity appears to have a more significant impact on partnership success when there is a considerable age gap between the firms (Rothaermel & Boeker, 2008), or when it is difficult to specify the desired outcomes of the partnership. Typically, complementarity is a sign of strong interdependence between partners, implying that it has a positive influence on partnership performance only if partners have developed the requisite mechanisms to manage those interdependencies (Dyer & Singh, 1998). Similarly, partner commitment appears to be key in partnerships where it is easy to specify the desired outcome, but difficult to achieve it. In such partnerships, firms must be willing to invest resources in the relationship and pledge to cooperate with each other even if circumstances change. Generally, firms must be aware of such contingencies while selecting partners that are generally complementary, compatible, and committed (Kale & Singh, 2009).

2.1.2 Governance and Design

After a partnership is formed, the partners are exposed to a wide range of transaction- or coordination hazards that can have an adverse effect on performance. Hence, it is crucial to implement appropriate governance mechanisms to ensure partnership success. According to Kale & Singh (2009), literature has emphasized three types of effective governance mechanisms: (1) Equity Ownership, (2) Contractual Provisions, and (3) Relational Governance.

Equity ownership is put forward as an effective governance mechanism by Eccles & Williamson (1987). When firms enter partnerships, they expose themselves to the risk of opportunistic behavior from their partner if they have invested in relation-specific assets, or if the market conditions meeting the relationship are uncertain. To mitigate the risk of such circumstances, partners can create an equity-based partnership, where they can either take an equity stake in the other firm, or come together in a new, independent venture where both firms take a stake. An equity-based partnership has three governance properties to mitigate risk. Firstly, equity aligns the partners interests and would make opportunistic behavior damage their own investment (Hennart, 1988). Secondly, it introduces organized supervision to monitor the partnership's daily operation and can address incidents as they come about (Kogut, 1988). Lastly, equity ownership introduces collective dividend relative to the firms' share, thus incentivizing cooperation (Kale & Singh, 2009).

Contractual provisions (i.e. formal contracts) in the partnership agreement can also be an effective governance mechanism (Poppo & Zenger, 2002; Reuer & Arino, 2007). A formal contract can, for example, specify the mutual rights and obligations of partners by stipulating each firm's contribution to the partnership, clarify what the expected outputs are, or describe procedures for exchange and conflict resolution. Furthermore, it can specify sanctions for breach of contract or outline ways in which the relationship will end (Reuer & Arino, 2007). According to the theory of transaction cost economics, firms should always craft contractual arrangements that secures the delivery of a desired good or service at a minimal cost. However, as exchange hazards increase, so must the contractual safeguards, leading to increasingly expensive contracts (Klein, Crawford & Alchian, 1978; Eccles & Williamson, 1987). Consequently, firms should only craft complex contracts in situations with a high probability of contractual breach and/or costly repercussions. Williamson (1991) presents three types of exchange hazards that call for contractual safeguards: asset specificity, measurement problems and uncertainty. ***Asset specificity*** takes place when partners invest in relation-specific assets (i.e. assets that only generate value in that particular relationship). Consequently, a partnership termination would render the assets useless, making them a target for opportunism. Therefore, firms must craft contractual safeguards to eliminate the incentives for such behavior. ***Measurement problems*** arise in situations where it is demanding to measure the performance of partners. Consequently, partners are less motivated to abide by their contractual commitments. To mitigate this exchange hazard, contracts can specify performance expectations and allow for third-party monitoring. The contractual complexity will typically increase linearly with the difficulties of measuring performance (Poppo & Zenger, 2002). ***Uncertainty*** transpires in exchanges where the outcome is unpredictable and calls for partners to be flexible when facing unforeseen events. If partners have a formal agreement that facilitates contract amendments, they may eliminate any uncertainty that may arise (Poppo & Zenger, 2002). Eccles & Williamson (1987) argues that the more comprehensive these exchange hazards are, the more important contractual safeguards become. The increased complexity results in higher transaction costs and makes it harder to enforce. In situations like this, it may be more sustainable to vertically integrate (Williamson, 1991; Poppo & Zenger, 2002).

Research suggests that the trust, values, and processes that arise from frequent interaction among business partners can act as governance mechanisms by themselves. (Macneil, 1978; Noordewier, John, & Nevin, 1990). This type of informal governance is typically referred to as "relational governance" (Kale & Singh, 2009). The argument is that frequent interaction builds relational norms of flexibility, unity, and information sharing, making partners more willing to adjust to unanticipated events, collaborate under difficult circumstances, and share critical know-how with each other (Poppo & Zenger, 2002). Thus, transaction costs are minimized, as partners do not have to craft overly specific contracts to cover every possible contingency or responsibility (Dyer & Singh, 1998). For example, one can eliminate time-consuming contractual negotiations if firms trust each other to behave in a fair and sensible way. In addition, monitoring costs can be reduced as third-party monitoring becomes redundant. Moreover, adaptation costs are significantly reduced as partners are willing to be flexible in unexpected circumstances (Kale & Singh, 2009). Finally, partners are incentivized to behave politely, as poorly handled conflicts or bad behavior will likely be reported to a third party, potentially ruining a firm's reputation (Gulati, 1995).

Relational governance can also alleviate the need for contractual safeguards against asset specificity, measurement problems, and uncertainty. Because partners expect to work together for a long period of time, they are not overly concerned about investing in relation-specific assets. Similarly, they are not worried about accurately measuring short-term performance, as they are confident their output will level out over time. The willingness to be flexible in unforeseen circumstances may also help them deal with future uncertainty (Macaulay, 1963; Bradach & Eccles, 1989; Adler, 2001; Poppo & Zenger, 2002).

Even though relational governance may enhance the performance of partnerships (Saxton, 1997; Zaheer, McEvily & Perrone, 1998), it can be difficult and costly to implement (Larsen, 1992). Furthermore, the parties may become too interconnected and block new impulses or information from the outside world to enter the alliance (Uzzi, 1997). Therefore, the exchange hazards should be relatively large before undertaking the considerable costs of implementing relational governance (Poppo & Zenger, 2002).

2.1.3 Partnership Management

For a partnership to succeed, it must be managed on an ongoing basis. Two aspects are crucial in this stage: (1) managing coordination, and (2) developing trust. Without sufficient coordination, business partners will not achieve the expected benefits of their relationship. Coordination problems can occur if partners lack requisite knowledge of how their actions influence each other, what type of decision making procedures the other firm is using, how to correctly distribute resources, or how to exchange information (Gulati, Lawrence, & Puranam, 2005; Gulati & Singh, 1998; Schreiner et al., 2009). Such problems may occur even if the partners principally agree on how to proceed in their business venture. To avoid these problems, partners can choose between three different mechanisms: programming, hierarchy, and feedback (Galbraith, 1977).

Programming is about creating explicit instructions for what tasks each partner is responsible for doing, and when they should be completed. By enhancing the consistency and predictability of partner behavior, one can minimize dissatisfaction and speed up decision-making processes, thus improving coordination (Kale & Singh, 2009). If firms can implement routines for extensive knowledge exchange, they can further enhance coordination (Dyer & Singh, 1998). Hierarchy involves making formal roles with authority, where the person(s) or structures in charge facilitate and supervise exchanges between partners. Feedback involves partners regularly informing each other about their actions or decisions, and periodically evaluating the status of the partnership and making necessary adjustments. The degree to which these mechanisms are used is dependent on the interconnectedness between partners. Typically, the more interdependent partners are, the more complex coordination mechanisms are needed (Gulati et al., 2005; Gulati & Singh, 1998).

Trust and Relational Capital

Research suggests that trust is an integral part of why alliances succeed, because it lowers transaction costs and improves collaboration between partners (Kale & Singh, 2009). Trust can be divided into two different elements: (1) a structural aspect centered around the belief that alliance partners will not act opportunistically, as such behavior would backfire on themselves (Bradach & Eccles, 1989), and (2) a behavioral component centered around the belief that alliance partner's will act reliable and with integrity (Madhok, 1995). The latter aspect is especially crucial for partnership performance in the postformation stage (Kale & Singh, 2009). Trust is built through a continuous process of interaction, negotiation, dedication, and implementation between partnering firms (Ring & Van de Ven, 1994). For example, it can be developed by willingly exposing oneself to risk by making one-sided investments, leaving it up to the counterpart to decide if they want to reciprocate. Consequently, trust emerges as a result of showing you are willing to put yourself in a vulnerable position to make the partnership successful (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995). Another way of building trust is to fulfill all promises and obligations, and only make commitments that are within your capabilities (Zaheer & Harris, 2006).

A third way of creating trust is to build so-called "relational capital", which refers to the trust, friendship, and respect between partnering firms, shaped by social interaction at an individual level (Kale, Singh, & Perlmutter, 2000). If the same individuals interact with each other over an extended period, they strengthen their social relations and increase their understanding of each other's working approach (Schreiner et al., 2009). Lastly, interfirm trust is influenced by institutional factors such as the location of the firms or the surrounding national culture (Dyer & Chu, 2003), or the presence of specialized mechanisms to promote exchanges between firms (McEvily, Perrone & Zaheer, 2003).

The creation of trust between business partners is critical for many reasons. For example, it lowers the barriers for information sharing (Dyer & Chu, 2003), minimizes the risk for opportunistic behavior, and promotes flexibility in the event of emerging contingencies (Doz, 1996). Thus, trust allows partners to share critical knowledge with each other while simultaneously protecting each other's proprietary knowledge (Kale et.al., 2000). Research has also shown that trust has a positive correlation with how satisfied firms are with their business partners and how well they are able to co-create and achieve mutual goals (Schreiner et al., 2009). As a result, the partnership is likely to become more extensive and persist for longer (Jap & Anderson, 2003).

Conflict Resolution

Conflict management is a crucial aspect of postformation partnership management (Borys & Jemison, 1989), as it may positively or negatively impact the relationship (Deutsch, 1969). Successful conflict management includes a variety of factors, such as agreeing on mutually beneficial decisions (Bazerman & Neal, 1993), establishing procedures for comprehensive two-way communication between partners (Cummings, 1984), and facilitating honest and frequent interaction to generate close interpersonal ties (MacNeil, 1980). Joint problem solving strengthens relationships and facilitates an environment that encourages cooperation. Conversely, the use of harmful techniques like suppression or coercion (Deutsch, 1969), as well as an installed attitude that only one party can win, will likely have a negative impact and jeopardize the continuance of the partnership (Kale et al., 2000).

Monitoring (i.e. the use of formal mechanisms to oversee potential conflicts) is another important aspect of conflict management, as it highlights potential problems and increases awareness among business partners. Furthermore, differences in organizational culture can play an important role in conflicts (Harrigan, 1988; Parkhe, 1993). By addressing these differences in a transparent and direct way, one can reduce the potential for partnership conflict and increase the probability of partnership success (Kale et al., 2000).

The conflict management process can have a significant impact on the dynamic between business partners, and act as a learning mechanism and safeguard for proprietary assets. Additionally, it creates a sense of fairness and justice, as partners get an equal opportunity to present and argue their point of view. Thus, they become more willing to accept the outcome of a decision process. The conflict management process also affects individuals' personal view of trust and commitment (Kim & Mauborgne, 1998), and may positively influence their feelings toward the other party. Consequently, successful conflict management can encourage the creation of relational capital between partners (Kale et al., 2000).

The communication and interaction facilitated by conflict management may also encourage learning among partners. This process is heavily influenced by how close and frequent the interaction between partners is, particularly the degree to which individuals in the respective firms meet face-to-face. As mentioned, two-way communication and collaborative problem solving are both key elements of conflict resolution, meaning that they both facilitate close interaction among individuals across firms. Consequently, they can also function as potential channels for learning and knowledge transfer between partners. Additionally, the perception of fairness and justice that emerge from successful conflict management might make it easier for partners to share know-how and information with each other (Kim & Mauborgne, 1998).

2.1.4 How Formal Contracts and Relational Governance can Act as Substitutes

Formal contracts and relational governance have traditionally been regarded as substitutes, implying that the existence of either minimizes the necessity of the other (Larson, 1992; Gulati, 1995; Dyer & Singh, 1998; Macaulay, 1963; Poppo & Zenger, 2002). Research suggests that firms can reduce transaction costs by substituting formal agreements with informal governance mechanisms based on trust and collaboration (Adler, 2001). This is based on the previously mentioned theory that interfirm trust facilitates flexibility and minimizes opportunistic behavior, thereby eliminating the necessity for third-party monitoring and overly complex contracts. Consequently, firms save valuable time and resources, reducing their transaction costs and improving their efficiency (Gulati, 1995; Uzzi, 1997). Formal contracts can also hinder the emergence of relational governance, as they may be interpreted as lack of trust and confidence between partners (Macaulay, 1963). However, if a contract is not sufficiently specified, it may encourage opportunistic behavior (Bernheim & Whinston, 1998).

2.1.5 How Formal Contracts and Relational Governance can Act as Complements

Poppo & Zenger (2002) suggests that formal contracts and relational governance may complement each other, meaning that combining the two can enhance partnership performance to a greater extent than either mechanism by itself. For instance, they argue that a clearly specified contract in conjunction with relational norms can provide a framework for improved coordination between partners. Additionally, the contracting process in itself may encourage relational governance as partners must negotiate and agree on the contractual terms governing their relationship (e.g. mechanisms for conflict resolution, penalties for breach of contract, and expected output from the relationship) (Williamson, 1991). Moreover, by specifying penalties for partnership termination, one incentivizes longevity in the relationship, thus fostering relational governance (Poppo & Zenger, 2002). However, relational governance and formal contracts may also complement each other in reverse. As it is nearly impossible to foresee and specify every contingency in a formal contract, it may not be sufficient to preserve a partnership in the face of adversity. Even if it includes procedures for contractual refinements, it does not guarantee that the partners will come to a mutual agreement (Poppo & Zenger, 2002). Relational governance may complement these limitations by promoting flexibility and agreement when conflicts and unforeseen circumstances arise (Macneil, 1978). Simply put, it creates a mutual desire to "carry-on" with the partnership despite any difficulties (Macneil, 1980). Thus, as formal contracts become increasingly complex, the presence of relational governance can increase the likelihood of continuing the relationship, and thereby further protect specific investments from early and expensive termination (Poppo & Zenger, 2002). Relational governance can also improve the quality of formal contracts, as partners can incorporate their experiences in contractual revisions (e.g. successful ways of exchanging goods or services, sharing information, and better ways of measuring and monitoring performance). Consequently, the complexity of formal contracts increases. Finally, relational governance can act as a safeguard against exchange risks that are not specifically guarded by a formal contract (Poppo & Zenger, 2002).

2.1.6 Relational View

The resource-based view (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984) argues that competitive advantage is largely the result of firm heterogeneity and focuses on maximizing return through developing and deploying a firm's core resources. Resources must be valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable in order to create a sustainable competitive advantage over competing firms (Barney, 1991). Dyer & Singh (1998) on the other hand suggest that a firm's critical resources may extend beyond firm boundaries and be embedded in interfirm relationships. However, they emphasize that interfirm relationships can only generate a competitive advantage if they are far removed from the characteristics of arm's length market relationships (i.e. limited information exchange, nonspecific asset investments, separable technological and functional systems within each firm, low transaction costs and minimal investments in governance mechanisms). This is because the market allows firms to replace partners with little cost, as other firms can offer nearly identical goods. Consequently, market relationships are unable to generate relational rents, as there is nothing unique about a particular market relationship that enables it to generate supernormal profits that cannot be replicated by a different arm's length partner. A relational rent can be defined as the increased output that two or more firms can generate by working together (Dyer & Singh, 1998). Basically, it is a synergistic effect that gives the partnership value beyond what they could achieve individually. Dyer & Singh (1998) characterize four sources of relational rents:

1. Investments in relation-specific assets.
2. Substantial knowledge exchange, including the exchange of knowledge that results in joint learning.
3. The combining of complementary, but scarce, resources or capabilities, which results in the joint creation of unique new products, services, or technologies.
4. Lower transaction costs than competitor alliances, owing to more effective governance mechanisms.

Investing in Relation-Specific Assets

Partnering firms can generate competitive advantages by investing in relation-specific assets, meaning that they must do something that is unique or specialized to their relationship. According to Eccles & Williamson (1987), there are three variations of asset specificity: (a) site specificity, (b) physical asset specificity, and (c) human asset specificity. For the purpose of this study only the latter is relevant, as the partnerships have not made physical or site-specific investments. *Human asset specificity* refers to transaction-specific knowledge and skills accumulated by employees over a long period of time and is not easily transferable to other relationships (e.g. employees with years of experience in using a customized computer software) (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Kenton, 2020; Eccles & Williamson, 1987). It may create a competitive advantage by improving the speed, efficiency and accuracy of interfirm communication and knowledge-sharing processes, thus improving product quality and time to market (Asanuma, 1989; Dyer, 1996).

Knowledge-Exchange Routines Between Partners

Knowledge-sharing routines are essential for achieving competitive advantages, as they increase the learning output of each firm, and thus their ability to stay ahead of the competition (Levinson & Asahi, 1995). An interfirm knowledge-sharing routine can be defined as "*a regular pattern of interfirm interactions that permits the transfer, recombination, or creation of specialized knowledge*" (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Grant, 1996). A study by Powell, Koput & Smith-Doerr (1996) found that networks rather than individual firms are the driving force behind innovation and technology development, and that partners can generate rents through having a higher-level of knowledge sharing routines. Grant (1996), Kogut & Zander (1992) and Ryle (1984) split up knowledge into information and know-how, where information is described as knowledge that can be easily communicated without compromising its principle meaning. Know-how is described as knowledge that is tacit, intricate, and hard to convey to others. Due to the complex properties of know-how compared to information, the ability to share critical know-how will probably result in more sustainable advantages for business partners, and have a higher probability of outperforming firms that are lacking this ability (Kogut & Zander, 1992).

A firm's ability to utilize new knowledge is mainly due to its absorptive capacity, which is *"the ability of a firm to recognize the value of new, external information, assimilate it, and apply it to commercial ends"* (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990, p. 128). However, firms may not be able to absorb knowledge equally from different partners. This is referred to as *partner-specific absorptive capacity*, and is dependent on two things: 1) to what degree the partners possess similar know-how, and (2) to what degree the partners have established routines for repeated interactions (Dyer & Singh, 1998). Furthermore, partner-specific absorptive capacity is strengthened as people in the partnership eventually learn where crucial expertise is located within each of the firms. Arrow (1974), Badaracco (1991), Daft & Lengel (1986) and Marsden (1990) suggest that knowledge-sharing routines are more likely to succeed depending on the level of direct, close, and comprehensive in-person interactions between employees across firms. Importantly, firms must be equally incentivized to share knowledge, be transparent, and not act as passive recipients. Incentives could take the form of equity ownership or informal norms of mutual knowledge exchange. Research has shown that equity ownership is an especially effective mechanism for aligning interests and encourages greater knowledge exchange across the partnership than contractual clauses do (Kogut 1988; Mowery et al., 1996).

Resource Complementarity Between Partners

Partnering firms can generate relational rents by utilizing their partner's complementary resources. Dyer & Singh (1998, p. 666) define resource complementarity as *"distinctive resources of alliance partners that collectively generate greater rents than the sum of those obtained from the individual endowments of each partner"*. In order to generate rents from complementary resources, it is critical that neither of the firms are able to buy these resources from elsewhere in the market. Additionally, it is important that the resources cannot be divided, as this will incentivize firms to forge partnerships in order to reap the benefits of each other's resources.

If partners each contribute unique resources to the partnership, this can create a synergistic effect where the combined value of the resources exceeds the value of them individually. However, all resources of a business partner may not be complementary and give synergistic effect, and it is therefore important to assess the amount of complementary resources that your partner has. The larger the proportion of complementary resources, the larger is the potential for generating relational rents. However, it can be very difficult to identify partners and their complementary resources, as firms may have; (1) different levels of partnership experience, (2) different capabilities when it comes to analyzing partnership resources, and (3) different positions in social and economic networks, thus affecting their ability to gather information about suitable partners (Dyer & Singh, 1998). The rents associated with complementary resources can only be achieved if the firms have compatible operating systems, procedures for decision-making, and cultures that allow for coordinated efforts (Buono & Bowditch, 1989).

Effective Governance

Governance structure plays an important part in generating relational rents as it has a significant impact on both transaction costs and partners' desire to participate in value creating activities (Dyer & Singh, 1998). A core objective for partnerships is therefore to select a governance structure that minimizes transaction costs and increases efficiency (North, 1990; Eccles & Williamson, 1987). Typically, there are two types of governance structures: (1) Contractual provisions enforced by third parties and (2) Self-enforced informal agreements. The latter can be divided into two subcategories: (a) Formal safeguards and (b) Informal safeguards.

Formal self-enforcing safeguards are typically financial investments designed to align the economic incentives of partners. For instance, the purchasing of equity stakes in each other's companies or joint investments in relation-specific assets. The objective is to discourage opportunistic behavior, as this would decrease the value of the investment and result in economic loss. Furthermore, it incentivizes partners to develop their relationship, seeking to increase the co-creation and value creating activities, ultimately increasing the value of their investment.

Informal self-enforcing safeguards are non-formal agreements that rely on goodwill and personal trust. Several scholars have suggested that informal safeguards can be a very effective and inexpensive method of reducing transaction costs, thereby improving performance (Barney & Hansen, 1994; Hill, 1995; Uzzi, 1997). This is because partners do not have to craft overly complex contracts to facilitate and monitor every transaction. Instead, they can rely on their partners to act reasonably in transactions due to the underlying trust between them (Dyer & Singh, 1998).

3. Methodology

In this chapter, the choices made with regards to the use of research methods, data collection, and analysis will be explained. We start by introducing our choice of research strategy and design. Thereafter, we explain how we selected interviewees and how we went forward when designing the interview guide. We then describe how the data collection was conducted, and how we progressed when structuring the qualitative data. Afterwards, we present some reliability and validity concerns, as well as some ethical considerations to show that the research has been conducted in an orderly manner. Finally, we offer some methodical reflections.

3.1 Research Strategy and Design

Theory suggests that a case-study is an appropriate research strategy when attempting to answer “how” or “why” questions (Yin, 2018). Because our research question seeks to uncover how a client-supplier partnership succeeds, a case-study is therefore the logical choice. This can also be substantiated by the fact we have no influence over the circumstances and are focusing on a contemporary real-life partnership. Moreover, the case method enables us to get an insight into the dynamics of the partnership and factors that may influence partnership success (Yin, 2018). The goal is to provide a deeper understanding of what makes partnerships succeed. We apply an exploratory and qualitative approach based on primary data to highlight various factors that can provide an insight to our research question.

Prior to designing our research question, we conducted a thorough theoretical search to find theory that may explain relevant factors for partnership success (Yin, 2018). Thereafter, we looked for suitable partnerships to address this theory. After communicating with several firms, we came to a conclusion that Magnar Eikeland Gruppen was the most suitable choice. Through further communication with the organization we were able to find two supplier-relationships that were suitable as a case study. Consequently, we ended up with an embedded, single case-study with multiple units of analysis (Yin, 2018).

3.2 Interviews

According to Yin (2018), interviews are the best source for gathering data in a case study, due to their ability to explain "how" and "why" questions. To ensure a successful interview, the researcher must construct and ask reasonable questions and analyze the answers appropriately. Additionally, one must conduct the interview in a safe environment to ensure that the interviewees feel comfortable (Yin, 2018).

3.2.1 Interview Guide

The interview guide is structured, meaning that the content, form, and order of the questions are determined in advance (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009. This ensures that the interviewees' answers are equivalent and comparable, as they are given within the same context (Yin, 2018). However, to avoid adding obstacles to spontaneity and improvisation, there was an opportunity to ask follow-up questions. To ensure that the interviews did not take a direction that was irrelevant to the study, much emphasis was put on the relevancy of follow-up questions.

The interview guide (see appendix A) consists of 23 questions and covers critical aspects such as the importance of relational governance versus formal contracts, the significance of relational capital and how to build it, as well as communication and knowledge exchange between partners. While designing the questions, a great emphasis was placed on their content and form, as well as who would be answering them. For example, instead of using "why"-questions, most of the questions were formulated as "how"-questions to ensure that the interviewees did not answer in a defensive manner (Yin, 2018). The questions are also open-ended, meaning that the interviewees are not bound by fixed alternatives and are free to answer the questions as they see fit. This allows for more creative and unforeseen answers, which may provide information that one would not have gotten otherwise.

3.2.2 Selection of Interviewees

In this study, 13 individuals were selected as potential interviewees and later contacted. Among these, 11 agreed to be interviewed. The two who declined were from EMO and Ricoh Norge. Seven of the interviewees are employees in various positions at MEK and MEKM and were selected based on their affiliation with their respective suppliers. Furthermore, one person from EMO and two persons from Ricoh Norge were interviewed due to their direct connection with MEK and MEKM, respectively. In addition, a board member from Magnar Eikeland Gruppen was interviewed due to this person's more general insights about the two partnerships.

Company / Position	**MEK**	**EMO**	**MEKM**	**Ricoh**	**MEG**	Sum Total
Management	1	1	1	1	0	4
Procurement and sales	5	0	0	1	0	6
Board Member	0	0	0	0	1	1
Sum Total	6	1	1	2	1	11

Table 1 – Interviewees

3.3 Data Collection

The data collection process started by visiting Magnar Eikeland Gruppen's physical locations at Sola and asking around for people to talk to regarding supplier relations. After speaking with a procurement manager and a CEO in one of the subsidiary companies - briefly introducing the research question and thesis - an idea was formed about who could provide the most relevant information. The potential interviewees were then contacted via email or in-person and asked to take part in a comprehensive interview that could provide data for the research question. After agreeing to participate, individual meetings were scheduled to take place shortly thereafter. The management in MEK and MEKM also put us in contact with management at their respective suppliers (EMO and Ricoh Norge), enabling us to start an e-mail correspondence with them and book meetings. All interviewees were informed that the interviews would not exceed 45 minutes and were sent the questions by email a few days in advance, so that they could prepare. We reached out to them a couple of days before the interview to ask if there was anything that needed to be clarified.

The interviews were conducted from 17.03.21 to 06.04.21. Six of them were held face-to-face at Magnar Eikeland Gruppen's facilities, while the remaining four were conducted via Microsoft Teams due to Covid-19 and geographical distance. The physical interviews were handled by only one of the researchers due to Covid regulations and concerns. The interviews lasted between 15 and 35 min, depending on the interviewee's ability to answer the questions. This was seen as ideal considering factors such as fatigue and time constraints among the interviewees. All the interviews followed the same interview guide and were conducted as individual in-depth interviews in order to present the interviewee's personal experiences and opinions, as well as facts.

The interview data was prepared for analysis by transcribing the audio recordings to written text. Thereafter, the findings from each partnership were rephrased into keywords and smaller sentences in two separate tables to give the reader a clear and structured overview of the collected data. Finally, the main findings from each table were summarized in short paragraphs to convey the most essential information to the reader.

3.4 Reliability and Validity

As the interview guide consists of open-ended questions, the study's findings could have been different if the interviews had been conducted again. This weakens the reliability of the study to a certain extent, but it can still be argued that the findings are reliable as long as the interviewees were asked the same set of questions. This is because the questions were given within the same context, ensuring equivalent and comparable answers (Yin, 2018). Leading questions were avoided to ensure more reliable answers.

By asking open-ended questions, the interviewees might answer the questions indirectly, or fail to provide information that is relevant to the study. This could potentially undermine important information and prevent critical elements from emerging. The validity of the study may be impaired by this. Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic might have skewed the interviewees' answers, as several interviewees point out the impact it has had on the partnerships over the last year. Consequently, the findings could have been somewhat different if the pandemic had never occurred, thus weakening the reliability and validity of the study.

As the interview questions have been specifically created for this thesis and not tried before, it is difficult to validate them. However, the validity increases as the questions are a product of the scientifically validated theory presented in section 2. The questions were also sent to the participants prior to the interview, where they were encouraged to look over the questions and provide feedback if anything was unclear. This was important to ensure that the questions were understandable and that the interviewees were able to answer them.

Furthermore, the use of audio recordings and transcripts results in an accurate reporting of information. Several direct quotations from the interviewees have been used, ensuring that their statements are reproduced as accurately as possible. The transcripts were also sent to the interviewees for revision, giving them an opportunity to correct or adjust their answer, and potentially add something new, thus increasing the validity of the data.

Disclosure of Potential Bias

A potential weakness in the study is that one of the authors has a potential bias due to being a part of the Eikeland family and a member of the MEG board. He also has prior employment history at both MEK and MEKM. The potential bias implies that the researcher might have had a self-interest in portraying MEG in a favorable light. Similarly, it might have compelled the interviewees to present themselves and their employer in a more desirable way, seeing as the researcher could potentially have influenced decisions that could have put an end to the partnership or affected the interviewees in other ways. However, they appeared to be open, honest, and reflective in their answers. As people from both sides of the partnerships were interviewed, it provided a diverse and balanced set of experiences and opinions, and thus more valid data about the topics being investigated. Furthermore, the second researcher has no direct ties to any of the companies in the study and could put an objective view on things when bias occurred. Nevertheless, to increase the reader's confidence in the objectivity of the thesis, the researcher has signed a Disclosure of Potential Bias form (see Appendix E). The potential bias can also be viewed as a strength as it gives the researcher an in-depth knowledge about the industry and the firms in question. His existing relationship with many of the employees could have made them more willing to participate in the study and led to more open and honest answers.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines and potential ethical dilemmas that could arise during the data collection process have been an area of focus. It has been important to be open and honest about the purpose of the study and to protect confidential information. A research application was sent to and approved by the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD).

All the interviewees were asked to sign a statement of consent prior to the interview, informing them about the purpose of the project and what participation entailed for them. By signing it, they agreed to the use of audio recordings and how it was stored and used. However, the participants had already consented to this in the preliminary conversations prior to the interview. The statement of consent also informed about the researchers' responsibility to process the information according to ethical guidelines.

Transcripts were made without changing the content so that the written and oral presentation was identical. No demographic variables were included, ensuring anonymity for the interviewees. The transcripts were then sent to each respondent by email to give them an opportunity to review and alter their statements. They were also informed about their right to claim confidentiality and withdraw from the study.

3.6 Methodical Reflections

Ideally, we would have preferred to conduct more interviews, but due to the size of the companies the number of people with relevant knowledge was limited. Consequently, it was hard to find interviewees with sufficient knowledge to answer each question. It also meant that it was not possible to perform a pre-test prior to the actual data collection, as it would decrease the number of interviewees. However, all the interviewees provided some insightful information. Furthermore, because we sent the interview guide to the interviewees in advance, they may have prepared their answers in a more desirable manner then what it would have if asked then and there.

4. Results

This chapter presents the findings from the data collection and will provide the basis for the discussion. The findings are first presented in two separate tables where the supplier and client firm are divided into separate columns to showcase how they each responded to the different questions. The questions are listed chronologically from Q1 to Q23 and the responses have been rephrased into smaller sentences and keywords. It is not specified which employee has given which answer. Lastly, some of the main findings are summarized in a short paragraph under each table to convey the most essential information to the reader.

4.1 Magnar Eikeland Kontorutstyr and EMO

	Magnar Eikeland Kontorutstyr	**EMO**
Q1 - How long have you been in a partnership together?	- Since 2002 with EMO. But the partnership dates back to 1996 when it was called Rich. Andvord	- Started in the middle of the 90's, but there was a form of cooperation before that also
Q2 - Before entering the partnership, did you conduct any due diligence of their potential complementary resources? If so, what were you looking for?	- Yes. Level of seriousness, ability to deliver, competitive prices, and product range	- Things like local presence, ability to act in the local market, size, and solidity were crucial elements. MEK probably also had assessments towards EMO regarding product width, follow-up, orders etc. Over time the parties have adapted to mutual expectations
Q3 - How does your partner complement your existing resources and capabilities in terms of bringing something unique and/or valuable to the partnership?	- By offering the right products at the right price - EMO have a large product range, and enables MEK to buy different brands from one supplier - The relationship has changed quite a bit over the years as	- Local presence, knowledge of market, access to local customers, sizable salesforce, ability to reach out to sizable customers through tender procedures - Customer relations, distribution and logistics

	other suppliers can offer more competitive prices. EMO has primarily become a logistic partner	function
Q4 - How is your partner`s working approach and culture an advantage or obstacle for cooperation?	- After Staples bought EMO the culture changed, and some of the knowledge disappeared with people being laid off in that process - Since EMO was purchased by Staples, the company has essentially become a competitor, thereby limiting cooperation	- An absolute advantage. People at MEK are hardworking and put an effort into their job. They really care about the company they work for and want it to succeed - You can trust MEK to do what they have said they will do - Similar expectations of each other. You know what the other party brings to the table
Q5 - How willing are you to adapt to unexpected events and find common solutions in the face of adversity?	- Very adaptable. E.g. due to Covid the firm has changed a large part of its product portfolio and are now selling a lot of masks, gloves, disinfectant alcohol etc. - Office supplies have been exchanged in favor of facility supplies. 75 % of the current products were not there 10 years ago - No common solutions - MEK is very solution-oriented. The company works jointly with suppliers to find good solutions that prevent MEK's customers from being harmed - Very willing, after expressing concerns and problems followed by relocating their warehouse they met up and came to an agreement	- The goal is to be as agile as possible. Try to meet the demands of the end customers, for example there have been times where EMO has sat down together with MEK to make documentation that our customers required - Try to adapt to the changing demand, the products EMO is mainly selling now have changed from what was sold 20 years ago
Q6 - How willing is your partner to make short-term sacrifices to realize long-term benefits?	- Used to be very willing, but changed after the previous account manager quit - Much less willing after becoming a part of Staples. This	- Very willing. MEK could have found cheaper products in many instances by searching the market, but they do not do this, because they

	probably has to do with the fact that EMO delivers directly to customers, thus becoming a competitor of MEK	realize the long-term benefit of building a strong value chain with EMO. This is also a prerequisite for building a long-term relationship
Q7 - Which governance mechanisms are used in your partnership?	- No ownership, based on formal contracts and relations. - Formal contracts, as well as personal relationships built up over many years	- Mostly relational, the contract is the foundation of the partnership, but is not used or highlighted in the daily business. There are some concrete terms regarding prices, price changes, delivery etc. But the partnership is mostly governed by expectations and relations. There is no ownership, strictly a contractual relationship
Q8 - Can you give a brief description of the formal contract?	- Competitive prices and delivery terms	- Price and delivery terms - Expectations of what the firms want to achieve with the partnership, and how it shall be developed - Mechanisms for revising and terminating the contract
Q9 - What type of procedures do you have for amending the contract?	- Regular meetings between the management of the two companies - Employees can provide input - A lot of things is addressed there and then	- No specific routines other than a “customer plan” which is a dynamic document where the partners write down the most important improvements to implement from one year to another - There is also a mutual plan with MEK where the parties write down goals and what can be done related to increasing product range and developing our concepts
Q10 - To what extent do you use contractual safeguards?	- Few safeguards, as EMO is primarily a logistics partner - Mainly safeguards around delivery terms	- Contractual safeguards are rarely used, instead relying on mutual trust and communication. However, if

		there are major disagreements, there are some contractual safeguards that the parties can resort to - Resorting to contractual clauses means that the parties have moved too far apart from each other for it to be a constructive partnership
Q11 - How does the contract affect the dynamic between the partners?	- As EMO is primarily a logistics partner, the contract has limited effect on the dynamic between the partners - It does not affect the daily work tasks, and it has never been necessary to look up the contract	- Recently there was a revision of the contract where part of the purpose was to simplify it to increase partnership dynamic. - Goal to have a contract which is flexible and one can easily include new propositions
Q12 - How often do you communicate with your partner?	- Daily communication about delivery of goods and logistics. - - Weekly or monthly communication between management - Communication happens mostly over Teams - When needed. Used to be very often. Max 1 time per month after Covid. Perhaps less frequently, but it can also be 2-3 times a month	- Daily communication, depending on the level
Q13 - How often do you meet your partner face-to-face, and is it the same people meeting?	- Annual "Kick-off" event where salespeople from both companies meet face-to-face - Management meets once or twice a year - Always the same people who meet - Used to be several times a year, lately maybe once or twice - A Salesperson from EMO visited MEK 5-6 times a year between 1998 and 2017. He was	- The goal is to have four customer development meetings with decision makers at MEK per year - There should also be a physical presentation of new products, campaigns, discounts, and so on, four times a year, or every sales cycle. Sales and procurement at MEK also participate here - It is usually the same people

	incredibly solution-oriented and had a great relationship with MEK’s sales personnel. There was communication several times per week. After he quit, there has been a large turnover of EMO account managers - After Covid there has been no face-to-face contact - Normally, MEK and EMO meet at a fair called “Metro”, but this was cancelled due to Covid	who meet
Q14 - How have the trust, values, and processes that have arisen through frequent interaction with the partner affected the need for contractual clauses?	- A good relationship with the supplier results in more trust, limiting the need for overly specific contractual clauses - The contract is simple and the partnership is very informal, so there are few contractual clauses	- Simpler and flexible contract, few contractual clauses
Q15 - How important is mutual trust in the partnership?	- Extremely important, and absolutely necessary if one is to cooperate for a long period of time - Important to have established trust, but the partnership is also weighed down by some bureaucracy from EMO’s owners - Very important. However, it is not at the same level as it was before the merger with Staples	- Very important, especially in long lasting partnerships. To have the basic trust is crucial, because one can collectively develop a joint value chain where both win in the market and do their part of the job - A basis for this form of cooperation
Q16 - What have you done to build trust with your partner?	- Behaving properly and dealing with negative things in a good way	- Try to do what we say, and say what we do - Open and honest, and treat any propositions in a serious manner
Q17 - What routines do you have for giving feedback to each other?	- Immediate feedback if something is wrong. Not afraid to tell things as they are - Easy to complain, less common to complement each	- Periodic meetings with written summaries - Follow up points in summary in the next meeting

	other - Use forms for reporting damaged goods, delivery time, insufficient orders. Often addressed in contract meetings - A lot of oral communication, as well as E-mail, but nothing formal - Regular feedback through forms and communication	
Q18 - Have you established any routines for knowledge exchange in the partnership? If so, what are they?	- Annual "kick-off" where EMO brings along their sub suppliers, and offers training on various products - No "kick off" during Covid - Joint visits with sub suppliers and some coursing - No knowledge exchange currently due to Covid - Used to be more, feel like it has been less lately. More with previous account manager	- Have sometimes shared information between each other's departments, for example product departments - Communicating regularly - Created an E-learning portal, which conveys information from EMO's suppliers to MEK. The portal also offers courses on products, and allows MEK to communicate directly with EMO suppliers - Cyclus presentations 4 times every year, informing MEK of new products, trends, and campaigns
Q19 - How do you handle conflict?	- By talking to each other over the phone or by sending an E-mail - Want to resolve conflicts as quickly as possible - Being able to resolve conflicts is an essential part of being a good supplier - Few major conflicts, usually come to an agreement - Communicating as soon as possible usually solves the problem - Try to communicate and negotiate	- By talking to each other until you reach common ground - There are also mechanisms in the agreement that the parties can formally resort to, but these have never been used - If the parties cannot agree on something, they simply move on - Problems are solved through dialogue and by clarifying expectations - Important to have the right level of expectations, so as not to give promises you

		cannot keep, or give the impression of something that creates an expectation that is not real
Q20 - Do you or other employees have unique relationship-specific competence?	- People have different contacts and special relationship with both suppliers and customer	- The partners know each other well and are able to solve problems because of their long and good relationship.
Q21 - What is it like to do business with your partner? What impact does this have on transaction costs?	- Easy when the products they offer are a success among MEK's customers, but difficult when they are not - Usually fine, however there have been some problems in some cases we have used "drop shipping", and when EMO merged their storage facilities with Staples. Where consequences have led to more work to fix faulty deliveries etc. - Easy, but EMO has a slightly cumbersome procurement system. Other than that, relatively smooth	- Easy - A well-established and good partnership that does not need much formal governing, which reduces transaction costs. - Structures are set up and well-proven, keeping transaction costs down - The long-term nature of the partnership also reduces transaction costs, as the parties can find the most efficient way to work and solve problems
Q22 - Have any concrete changes been made to the formal contract? If so, what has changed?	- Yes, previously there was an agreement that the parties would cooperate in the market, but this changed when EMO joined Staples	- Yes. The old contract was very comprehensive and based on an international standard that did not fit this type of collaboration. The parties have therefore crafted a new contract that is shorter and much easier to understand - In the wake of the NOK downturn two or three years ago, EMO had to deviate from the price regulation mechanisms in the agreement to continue to have availability of goods purchased in foreign currency - During the Covid pandemic there has been a period of

		force majeure on transportation
Q23 - Is there anything you would like to add that we have not covered in the other questions?	- MEK currently purchases 25 % of all goods from EMO, but it used to be 50%	- Nothing to add

Table 2 - Summary of Responses from MEK and EMO

The table shows that the relationship between MEK and EMO has changed a lot since EMO was acquired by Staples, one of MEK's largest competitors. Additionally, a skilled EMO account manager responsible for most of the interaction between the partners resigned some years ago. MEK explains that these things have made the partners less willing to sacrifice and cooperate with each other. Furthermore, the partnership contract is simple and includes few contractual safeguards. It is rarely used in the day-to-day operation, and the partners have no particular routines for amending it. The contract has a few mechanisms for conflict resolution, but these have never been used. Conflicts are primarily handled through dialogue and by clarifying expectations, and if they cannot agree on something, they simply move on. They mention that it is important to have the right level of expectations, so as not to give promises you cannot keep, or give the impression of something that creates an expectation that is not real.

4.2 Magnar Eikeland Kontormaskiner and Ricoh Norge

	Magnar Eikeland Kontormaskiner	**Ricoh Norge**
Q1 - How long have you been in a partnership together?	- Over 20 years	- Over 20 years
Q2 - Before entering the partnership, did you conduct any due diligence of their potential complementary	- Guaranteed, but not working in the company at the time. Not sure what the deciding factors were	- Not working in the company at the time - Currently analyzing the partnership's key activities to see how valuable the

resources? If so, what were you looking for?		partnership is to both parties
Q3 - How does your partner complement your existing resources and capabilities in terms of bringing something unique and/or valuable to the partnership?	- Provides us with the products the market wants, as well as technical competence needed for servicing	- Local presence and affiliation in Rogaland - Good sales and service apparatus in place
Q4 - How is your partner`s working approach and culture an advantage or obstacle for cooperation?	- Proactive and follows global trends. However, this can also be a disadvantage, as the Norwegian market is not always mature enough	- Decisive and active in the market - Fitting sales culture - Good customer portfolio - Not afraid to try new things or fail
Q5 - How willing are you to adapt to unexpected events and find common solutions in the face of adversity?	- Small organization, thus very adaptable - Work closely together and find a common solution	- Slow to adapt due to being a global company - Trying to be as agile as possible - MEKM is more agile
Q6 - How willing is your partner to make short-term sacrifices to realize long-term benefits?	- Extremely good at having a long partnership perspective. Therefore willing to make short-term sacrifices for the greater good	- MEKM is willing to go to great lengths. They look much more at the long-term than the short-term - MEKM is agile and tries to adapt to changing market circumstances
Q7 - Which governance mechanisms are used in your partnership?	- Formal contract and the relations built up over time	- A mix of formal contract and relational governance - Partner Account Managers govern the partnership based on trust and relations (with people at MEKM) - The formal contract can clarify if there are major disagreements
Q8 - Can you give a brief description of the formal contract?	- Discount mechanisms, pricing, bonus goals and terms that depend on MEKM’s ability to meet or	- Partner categories, bonus goals and terms, requirements regarding product display and demonstrations.

	surpass the projected budget	
Q9 - What type of procedures do you have for amending the contract?	- A yearly revision, where the parties can express their wish of contract changes. This is not written in the contract, but something that the parties have mutually agreed on	- A yearly revision - Want to adapt the contract in line with the market
Q10 - To what extent do you use contractual safeguards?	- The safeguards include pricing, delivery time, service response time etc. - We are obligated to use original Ricoh Norge parts when servicing our customers	- Quite a few safeguards - MEKM has to achieve certain parameters. E.g. they need to achieve a certain level of growth to receive a bonus - No bonus is rewarded if the contract is terminated by either party
Q11 - How does the contract affect the dynamic between the partners?	- It is not a hindrance for business or transactions. It is relatively simple, especially in comparison to how it was before - It is rarely looked at in the day-to-day operations - The main concern is to be able to deliver on the agreed upon results and budgets, and getting the correct prices	- The content of the old contract led to many misunderstandings - Therefore moved from a large legal document to a much smaller and simpler one that is easier to deal with. The parties now fully understand the content
Q12 - How often do you communicate with your partner?	- Several times a week	- Weekly. This is the responsibility of the Partner Account Managers. However, as MEKM is very forward-leaning and like to speed things up, I (sales manager) am also in regular contact with them
Q13 - How often do you meet your partner face-to-face, and is it the same people meeting?	- Usually the same people meet. However, when introducing new products, product specialists might be brought in - Met face-to-face 4-5 times a year before Covid - Often meet on Teams during	- Normally 4-5 times a year - Typically only sales that meet, but at some occasions service is also included - Have not met face-to-face in over a year due to the Covid-19 pandemic. All communication nowadays

	the pandemic	occurs via Microsoft Teams - It is always the same people that meet - Great dynamic
Q14 - How have the trust, values, and processes that have arisen through frequent interaction with the partner affected the need for contractual clauses?	- The built-up trust is very important and has lessened the need for contractual clauses - If disagreements arise, the parties try to talk to each other rather than resorting to the contract	- Trust and values are important, but they are not sufficient to govern the partnership. Some contractual clauses are needed to safeguard against opportunism - Trust and values make the partnership better, and lessens the need to enforce contractual clauses - The old contract was over 20 pages long, while the new one is only 8 pages
Q15 - How important is mutual trust in the partnership?	- Absolutely crucial	- Extremely important - When trust is established, business follows
Q16 - What have you done to build trust with your partner?	- Achieving good results - Generating leads and supporting them. This goes both ways	- By keeping promises - Treating the partner fairly - Face-to-face meetings at MEKM is the most important factor, as physical presence creates more trust
Q17 - What routines do you have for giving feedback to each other?	- No formal routines, but there is regular communication - In precarious situations the parties send written requests to each other	- Monthly contact with the sales manager - Recently implemented “gameplans”, which look at sales and what activities are most important. It also entails constructive feedback and strategy discussions from both parties
Q18 - Have you established any routines for knowledge exchange in the partnership? If so, what are they?	- Continuously sharing customer experiences through weekly meetings - Ricoh Norge has created a portal that offers various courses. It also functions as a	- Monthly “webinars”, including certification courses, sales courses, and in general tips and tricks regarding software and products

	chat forum, where the parties can share customer experiences, challenges, and so on	
Q19 - How do you handle conflict?	- Conflicts are handled immediately, usually by talking to each other over the phone - Neither party is afraid to tell things as they are - In more precarious situations the parties send written requests to each other in order to have things documented - Few disagreements, often solved through verbal communication - One instance where a Ricoh Norge partner account manager was too controlling, trying to dictate MEKM actions. After conveying this to the management of Ricoh Norge, the manager was quickly replaced	- "Head on" - Important to have an open dialogue where both parties can present their point of view - Usually addressed verbally - Often goes back and forth, but the parties try to meet in the middle - Willingness to assist each other in difficult situations - No major disagreements - Certain minor disagreements, but these are solved through dialogue - Some products are not successful, and then it is important to take things in return without creating unnecessary hassle for the partner - Can have heated discussions without creating any mistrust or ill-will
Q20 - Do you or other employees have unique relationship-specific competence?	- Yes, product specialists at MEKM have a close relationship and cooperation with specialists at Ricoh Norge, and this cannot easily be replaced	- Yes, people possess different knowledge, competence, and experience
Q21 - What is it like to do business with your partner? What impact does this have on transaction costs?	- As easy as it can be. - It requires very little energy, time, and resources, thus limiting the transaction costs.	- Easy, due to the trust and relations that have been established - Transaction costs correlate with how good the relation is with the partners, better relation equals lower transaction costs etc. - MEKM is happy to help us

		reach our budgets before the year-end by placing a larger order in exchange for a better discount
Q22 - Have any concrete changes been made to the formal contract? If so, what has changed?	- It has been simplified	- Yes, waiting on a standardized contract from Ricoh Europe - Changes regarding geographical delimitations and potential contractual improvements. The contract has become much easier to revise and is no longer binding for an extended period of time - A force majeure clause was triggered as a consequence of failing market conditions and euro exchange rate
Q23 - Is there anything you would like to add that we have not covered in the other questions?	- Nothing to add	- Nothing to add

Table 3 - Summary of Responses from MEKM and Ricoh Norge

The table shows that MEKM and Ricoh Norge have a well-functioning partnership. They are not afraid to express their opinion and can have heated discussions without creating any mistrust or ill-will. The companies regard mutual trust as an extremely important element and mention that when trust is established, business follows. However, they explain that trust is not sufficient for governing their partnership, and that some contractual safeguards are needed to protect against opportunism. The partnership is therefore based on a relatively complex contract that lays down guidelines for the partnership, but it is rarely enforced due to the high level of mutual trust and ability to resolve issues through dialogue. The companies mention that they are willing to go to great lengths to help each other.

5. Discussion

In this chapter the findings will be discussed in relation to presented theory and situational context. The discussion will follow the structure of the theory section, albeit with a few exceptions. For example, “Relational View” and “How Formal Contracts and Relational Governance can Act as Substitutes/Complements” will not be discussed under their own headings, as these theories are not a part of the critical success factors highlighted by Kale & Singh (2009). Nevertheless, they include important elements for substantiating crucial points in the discussion and will be touched upon where it is relevant. Furthermore, important elements such as Feedback and Knowledge Exchange, Communication, Relation-specific Competence, and Transaction Costs will be discussed as part of other headlines. Quotes and information from various answers in the results section are included in the discussion to highlight important points. The quotes will be marked from Q1 to Q22.

5.1 Partnership Fit

5.1.1 Partner Complementarity

In a client-supplier partnership, the success of either party is contingent on the other. The client depends on the quality and availability of the supplier’s product, while the supplier depends on the client’s ability to sell the product. Consequently, both parties have a vested interest in performing due diligence before entering a partnership to make sure that the other party has the necessary capabilities. This was also emphasized by the firms themselves in the interviews:

> *“We looked at whether they were a serious supplier with a good ability to deliver, and whether they had competitive prices and product range”* (MEK, Q2).

> *“Before entering the partnership with Magnar Eikeland, complementary things such as local presence, ability to process the local market, size, solidity, and so on, were crucial in our assessment”* (EMO, Q2)

Similar things were echoed by MEKM and Ricoh Norge (MEKM; Ricoh Norge, Q2), showing that all the firms had specific criteria for selecting a partner. This suggests that having complementary resources is an important factor when forming a partnership. The findings show that the companies still complement each other (MEK; EMO; MEKM; Ricoh Norge, Q3), indicating that their partner complementarity has a potential for generating relational rents (Dyer & Singh, 1998). However, the results also show that the partnership performance of MEK and EMO has worsened over the years (MEK, Q3), suggesting that complementary resources may not always generate relational rents and contribute to partnership success. A possible reason for this could be that the resources are not critical enough to generate rents as they can be purchased elsewhere in the market (Dyer & Singh, 1998). For example, MEK can find a different supplier able to supply them with similar products. Furthermore, the worsened relationship could be an indication that they lack the requisite mechanisms to manage their interdependencies, and thus explain why their inherent complementarity does not have a positive effect on their partnership performance (Dyer & Singh, 1998). Consequently, if partnership complementarity is to contribute to partnership success, it might need to be based on unique resources that cannot be procured elsewhere, and the partners must have mechanisms for managing their interdependencies.

5.1.2 Partner Compatibility

Companies often differ in terms of culture and work approach. Some have a bureaucratic work approach weighted down by planning and paperwork, while others may have a more “hands-on” approach, emphasizing efficiency and progress. Similarly, some companies have a culture that values innovation, while others have a culture valuing efficiency. The more compatible the culture and work approach between two companies are, the more likely they are to succeed with a partnership (Kale & Singh, 2009). Our findings reveal that there is a considerable difference between the two partnerships in terms of work approach and culture. Perhaps most interestingly, EMO and MEK have a widely different perception of their partner compatibility. While EMO believes there is a seamless fit between their work approach and culture, MEK expresses that their compatibility has changed dramatically since EMO was acquired by Staples. According to MEK, the acquisition resulted in layoffs within the EMO organization and caused EMO to become a large competitor, selling the same products and competing for the same customers (MEK, Q4). However, both companies act in a professional manner, and express that they can trust each other to live up to their word (EMO, Q4). This shows that even though MEK is in a somewhat squeezed situation where their main supplier is also a competitor, both are serious actors with a professional business practice.

The MEKM-Ricoh Norge partnership paints a different picture, as the companies have a similar perception of their partnership compatibility. They both perceive it to be an advantage for cooperation, describing it as “decisive and active” (Ricoh, Q4) and “proactive” (MEKM, Q4). The rest of the findings support this assumption and can partially explain why the MEKM-Ricoh Norge partnership has been relatively more successful than the partnership between MEK and EMO. The two partnerships thus illustrate that compatibility can have a significant impact on partnership success. By finding a partner that is compatible with one’s own culture and work approach, one creates a foundation for cooperation and joint value creation, thus increasing the likelihood for partnership success. Furthermore**,** the partnership between MEK and EMO illustrates that partner compatibility can change over time due to changes in market conditions. As a result, the partners’ motives also change as the partnership becomes exposed to increased competition and opportunism. To address this, partners must communicate regularly and work to ensure that their culture and work style converge and not diverge. This could for example be done by clarifying expectations for each other in the contract. Being adaptable and agile under changing circumstances could be beneficial as well as communicating and agreeing on motives. It is also important that partners perceive each other’s compatibility in the same way, or this factor will not have a positive influence on partnership success.

5.1.3 Partner Commitment

Theory suggests that partner commitment, i.e. partners’ willingness to adapt to changing circumstances, invest resources, and make sacrifices for each other are key elements in achieving partnership success (Kale & Singh, 2009). The findings indicate that these elements are also important in the examined partnerships. For example, they express a common desire to be agile and adapt to changing circumstances:

> *“We try to be as agile as possible so that we can respond to whatever may come”* (EMO, Q5)

> *"75% of the current products were not there 10 years ago"* (MEK, Q5).

> *"We are a large global company, so we are a little slower than a smaller company in Norway, but we try as best we can. I would argue that Magnar Eikeland is better at adapting than we are, but we try to have a type of underlying trust that enables us to reach our goals when faced with changes."* (Ricoh Norge, Q5)

This underscores the importance of adaptability, as it is critical to meet changes in demand and customer preferences to stay relevant in the market. Failing to do so may result in a loss of market share and can potentially cause bankruptcy. Because both partnerships have lasted for more than 20 years, it shows that the companies have the necessary capabilities to adapt to changing circumstances. One could argue that the joint development between partners can foster trust and a sense of solidarity between them, as going through difficult and changing circumstances together can give a sense of accomplishment. The ability to adapt to changing circumstances could therefore be one of the main reasons for why the partnerships still exist today, and thus an important element for having a long-term collaboration.

The findings show that the conflict of interest between MEK and EMO has made them more reluctant to invest resources in the partnership (MEK, Q6). MEKM and Ricoh Norge on the other hand have not been affected by such a conflict and show a great willingness to contribute resources to the relationship (MEKM; Ricoh Norge, Q6). This may be an indication that the more partners' interests align, the greater the probability is for them to invest resources in the partnership. The alignment of interests can be achieved by clarifying intentions and expectations towards each other. For example, by making a unilateral investment it signals one's commitment to the partnership, as well as an expectation that one wants the partner to reciprocate the investment. This will enhance partners' confidence in that they are working towards a common goal, which may build additional trust between them (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995)

The conflict of interest between MEK and EMO has also led them to no longer being as willing to sacrifice for each other. The replacement of a skilled account manager at EMO has reinforced this attitude. MEK emphasizes that the former account manager was very solution-oriented (Q13), and that since he left, the replacement has been less cooperative. This indicates that individuals can have a significant influence on the cooperative nature of a partnership, and that they cannot easily be replaced. Consequently, it is important to implement measures to keep these individuals within the organization or base the cooperation on several individuals, as this will minimize the risk of compromising the collaboration.

MEKM and Ricoh Norge express a willingness to go to great lengths to help each other. For example, MEKM makes an extra effort to help Ricoh Norge reach their budgets:

> *"MEKM is happy to help us reach our budgets before the year-end by placing a larger order in exchange for a better discount"* (Ricoh Norge, Q21)

The sacrifice signalizes that MEKM wants Ricoh to succeed and that they value the partnership. The reason for this could possibly be explained by MEKM and Ricoh Norge's built-up relational capital. By continually clarifying expectations towards each other the partners have been able to generate a level of trust which makes it easier to make such sacrifices, as they know that the other party will reciprocate it at some point. MEK and EMO on the other hand have not clarified expectations towards each other in the same way and do therefore not have an equally solid relational capital, which may explain why they are not as willing to sacrifice. This may be an indication that the more relational capital one has, the more willing one is to sacrifice for the partner and help each other to achieve one's goals. The sacrifice also sends a signal that one seeks to have a long-term relationship, further cementing one's commitment to the partnership.

5.2 Governance and Design

How a partnership is managed can have a significant impact upon its success. It is important to select a governance type that fits the nature of the collaboration and the circumstances one operates in. In some instances, the need for contractual safeguards is of utmost importance due to the risk of opportunism. In other cases, the partnership is best served by relying on trust, as contractual safeguards and formal governance would inflict unnecessary transaction costs. Sometimes, the partnership could be facing more complex challenges where equity ownership may help to align interests. In this case study, none of the partnerships are based on equity, as this is not a typical governance mechanism in client supplier relationships of this size. It is also not suitable considering that the suppliers might need to have equity ownership with all their clients in order for everyone to compete on equal terms. Instead, they are based on a mix of formal contracts and relational governance (MEK; EMO; MEKM; Ricoh Norge, Q7). While the contract constitutes the basis of the partnerships by outlining certain ground rules, they are mostly governed through relational mechanisms:

> *"The contract is the foundation of the partnership, but is not used or highlighted in the daily business. There are some concrete terms regarding prices, price changes, delivery etc. But the partnership is mostly governed by expectations and relations*" (EMO, Q7)

The belief is that trust and communication are sufficient tools for solving disagreements and governing the partnership on a day-to-day basis. This seems to have worked relatively well in both partnerships, but to varying degrees. For example, there has arisen some uncertainty in the partnership between MEK and EMO (MEK, Q4, Q6, 15), due to them not being able to resolve their conflict of interest in the wake of Staples' acquisition of EMO. However, they still have a significant relational capital that enables them to overcome this uncertainty and bring about a productive collaboration. MEKM and Ricoh Norge on the other hand have not encountered such issues. Their built-up trust and relational capital have enabled them to govern the partnership without any major hiccups. However, the formal contract still acts as a safeguard that can be used if major disagreements should occur:

> "*The formal contract can clarify if there are major disagreements*"
> (Ricoh Norge, Q7)

This suggests that formal contracts can be an important tool when one is faced with considerable challenges and relational governance is insufficient for coming up with a solution that the partners can agree on. Basically, contractual provisions can provide guidance in situations where one is unable to come to an agreement through dialogue.

Contract and Relational Governance

Every business partnership is based on a formal contract, as it outlines basic rules for the relationship and can safeguard the partners against contingencies. It also helps partners maintain compliance and can facilitate cooperation between them. However, the contract's role can vary a lot from one partnership to another, depending on the type of governance mechanism one is using. A partnership based on relational governance will most likely have a simpler contract than a partnership based on formal governance, as trust and relational capital can limit the need for contractual provisions (Macaulay, 1963; Bradach & Eccles, 1989; Adler, 2001; Poppo & Zenger, 2002). This assumption is confirmed in our case study, as both partnerships are largely based on relational governance and have relatively simple contracts. They address basic things such as price, delivery terms, and mechanisms for revising and terminating the contract (MEK; EMO; MEKM, Q8). However, MEKM and Ricoh Norge have added more in-depth contractual provisions regarding bonus-payment, product display, and use of service components (Ricoh Norge, Q8). This makes the contract a bit more complex, but limits uncertainty and the potential for measurement problems.

Having a formal contract that facilitates amendments can eliminate uncertainty (Poppo & Zenger, 2002). The interviews reveal that both partnerships have a formal contract that includes procedures for contractual amendments, but that they utilize them at varying degrees. While MEKM and Ricoh Norge have annual contract revisions to maintain flexibility and adapt to changes in the market, EMO and MEK have no specific routines for revising the contract (MEK; EMO: MEKM; Ricoh Norge, Q9). It appears as MEKM and Ricoh Norge want to avoid being bound by a contract that does not reflect the current market situation. The reason for this may be that if their contract is not properly specified, they risk being exposed to opportunistic behavior from the partner (Bernheim & Whinston, 1998). Consequently, it is important to have procedures for amending the contract so that one can continuously adapt it to current circumstances and ensure that the partner's motives and interests are aligned. One can argue that having formal procedures for amending the contract at regular intervals can develop the relationship, as it requires the partners to address and agree on difficult issues. It also enables partners to incorporate best practices in the contract as the partnership develops. As a result, the contracting process itself encourages relational governance (Poppo & Zenger, 2002). If there is a conflict of interest and neither partner is willing to address it, it may lead to weaker relational governance and a worsening of the partnership. This may be a part of the reason for why MEK and EMO have not come to an agreement regarding their conflict of interest, and why MEK refers to EMO as a logistic partner rather than a supplier (MEK, Q3).

Contractual safeguards can be an important tool to protect partners against opportunism and contingencies. However, theory suggests that an excessive use of safeguards can undermine trust (Macaulay, 1963). The challenge is therefore to find a balance where the contract can protect partners' core interests, but also provide a solid foundation for collaboration. The findings show that the partnerships value and use safeguards quite differently, in that MEKM and Ricoh Norge have "quite a few safeguards" (Ricoh Norge, Q10), whereas MEK and EMO have fewer safeguards and are more reluctant to use them:

> *"Resorting to contractual clauses means that the parties have moved too far apart from each other for it to be a constructive partnership"* (EMO, Q10)

MEKM and Ricoh Norge's use of contractual safeguards do not appear to have had any negative consequences for the partnership but have rather clarified expectations and simplified cooperation. For example, the fact that MEKM must achieve a certain level of growth in order to receive a bonus ensures that uncertainty and measurement problems are avoided (Ricoh Norge, Q10). This is quite interesting, seeing as the partnership between EMO and MEK is affected by a high level of uncertainty. They could potentially benefit greatly by including safeguards that address the underlying conflict of interest. However, doing so could possibly jeopardize their relational capital if they are unable to reach an agreement**,** which may explain why the partners have never properly addressed the issue in their contract.

Macaulay (1963) suggests that contractual complexity can have a negative effect on the trust and confidence between business partners. Interestingly, both partnerships have simplified their contract in recent years, as the previous iterations did not fit well with their type of collaboration and made things unnecessarily complicated (EMO; MEKM, Q22 & Ricoh Norge, Q11). As a result, the contracts have become much clearer and easier to deal with (MEKM; Ricoh Norge, Q11 & EMO, Q22). Nevertheless, it appears to have had limited effect on the dynamics between the partners, especially for MEK and EMO:

> *"As EMO is primarily a logistics partner, the contract has limited effect on the dynamic between the partners"* (MEK, Q11)

This seems to indicate that the contractual complexity is not what is affecting the dynamic between the partners, but rather their conflict of interest. When EMO was acquired by Staples, they effectively became a direct competitor of MEK, which increased the uncertainty and worsened collaboration. This has led them farther away from the cooperative supplier relationship they used to have, towards a more transaction based logistic partnership. Consequently, a contract simplification may not be sufficient to improve a relationship dynamic, unless it addresses the underlying problem. One could even argue that it could be beneficial to add some contractual complexity, as it would clarify roles and potentially promote more extensive collaboration.

Although the contract between MEKM and Ricoh is a bit more complex and includes more safeguards than the contract between EMO and MEK, it does not seem to affect the trust and dynamic between the partners. Instead, it appears to play an important role in mitigating exchange hazards such as uncertainty and measurement problems and facilitate a more extensive collaboration. This may suggest that contractual complexity has no significant bearing on the dynamic between partners if it is kept at a reasonable level.

5.3 Partnership Management

5.3.1 Trust and Relational Capital

Trust is perhaps the most fundamental thing in a successful partnership, as it helps to strengthen the relational capital between firms. It is built through being honest, transparent, and living up to expectations. In many instances, it can be more important than a formal contract, because one trusts the other party to conduct business in an honest way where both parties can create value. Having trust makes partners more willing to share experiences and knowledge with each other, but it can also lead to some challenges, for example if one of the partners exploits the trust of the other to act opportunistically. Therefore, it is important to think about the credibility of the partner to ensure that one's trust is not exploited. The importance of trust is highlighted in the interviews:

> *"Extremely important, and absolutely necessary if one is to cooperate for a long period of time"* (MEK, Q15)

> *"When trust is established, business follows"* (Ricoh Norge, Q15)

The level of trust between MEK and EMO has changed significantly since EMO was acquired by Staples (MEK, Q15). Although the companies still trust each other, there is a lot of uncertainty around the fact that they are competitors in addition to being partners. The companies' failure to address the situation has caused a considerable rift in the partnership. This illustrates the importance of clarifying roles and expectations in the contract, as doing so could eliminate uncertainty and maintain trust. However, the partnership also shows that if the level of trust is high in the first place, one can overcome uncertainty and preserve the relationship through difficult times. This indicates that trust can function as a sort of relational safeguard and be an important element for building long-term partnerships.

The partnership between MEKM and Ricoh Norge also showcases the importance of trust. By having a high level of mutual trust, the companies have been able to implement safeguards and clauses in the contract without it creating any mistrust between them. This has resulted in a contract that lays down clear guidelines on how transactions and interactions should take place, which practically eliminates uncertainty and lowers transaction costs. Furthermore, the accumulated trust makes business transactions easier, as one trusts the partner to not act opportunistically. Moreover, since trust can function as a safeguard to maintain the relationship through challenges, it is crucial not to breach it.

While trust can be relatively hard to build up, it does not take much to destroy. Therefore, it is something that must be continuously maintained in order to preserve and strengthen the relationship. MEK and EMO mentions that behaving properly and fairly, as well as keeping one's promises, are important factors for building trust (MEK; EMO, Q16).

> *"Try to do what we say, and say what we do"* (EMO, Q16)

Similar things are expressed by MEKM and Ricoh Norge, but they also emphasize the importance of knowledge sharing, face-to-face meetings, and providing support when needed (MEKM; Ricoh Norge, Q16). In sum, these findings suggest that good business etiquette is an essential factor for building trust between partners. It can also strengthen the relational capital in the partnerships, and make partners better equipped for handling challenges and disagreements.

Theory suggests that the trust, values, and processes that arise through frequent interaction may limit the need for contractual clauses (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Poppo & Zenger, 2002). The findings seem to confirm this:

> *"The built-up trust is very important and has lessened the need for contractual clauses"* (MEKM, Q14)

This is also shown by the fact that the companies have simplified their partnership contract over the last couple of years (EMO; MEKM; Ricoh Norge, Q22). While the previous contracts were comprehensive documents that caused a lot of confusion and discussion, the new contracts are simpler and easier to understand. This has clarified expectations and obligations between the partners. However, contractual simplicity may not always be a positive, as illustrated by the MEK-EMO partnership. When EMO was acquired by Staples and became a competitor, it was never properly addressed in the contract. As a result, the partners had no contractual clauses to fall back on when the competitive element became problematic. This shows that it is not always sufficient to rely on trust and relational capital to lead you through difficult situations. Sometimes one might need a certain level of contractual clauses to protect against opportunism and lay the ground rules in a partnership. Otherwise, one risks ending up in a situation where neither party is pleased with the status quo. However, it is important to not go overboard, as this can be perceived as a lack of trust and could potentially compromise the relationship.

Communication

Communication is an important tool for building trust and relational capital between partners. This is because it necessitates interaction between people, which builds social bonds and enables companies to learn about each other's procedures and preferred way of working. This simplifies coordination and reduces transaction costs. Furthermore, it helps clarify expectations, as one is continuously informed about the partner's actions and wants. As a result, you can limit misunderstandings and inefficient use of resources. If you have built up a certain level of relational capital, you can effectively reduce the need for contractual clauses, as you trust the partner to not act opportunistically. Neither party wants to risk their reputation or compromise the relationship, as they may have spent a lot of time and resources nurturing it.

The findings reveal that the partners communicate frequently with each other, depending on the level. While the sales- and purchasing departments communicate daily or weekly, the management communicates far less often, perhaps only once a month (MEK; MEKM; EMO; Ricoh Norge, Q12). The frequent interaction has provided a good foundation for building trust and relational capital with the partner and may explain why the partnerships have lasted for so many years. It can be assumed that the frequent communication has made it easier to address challenges and disagreements on an ongoing basis and is one of the reasons for why both partnerships have a contract with few contractual safeguards.

The way partners communicate may also have an impact on whether the partnership succeeds. When partners communicate face-to-face, they get an opportunity to express themselves through body language. If the physical and verbal communication match, the credibility of the message increases, enhancing trust. Furthermore, it facilitates small talk more easily, which can provide access to information that one would not have gotten otherwise. The small talk also enables the sharing of personal experiences about family, friends, and hobbies, which builds a deeper bond between the individuals. Personal interaction also provides a greater opportunity to showcase one's intelligence and humor than what would have been possible in a non-physical setting. This may affect the partners' impression of each other, and thus the creation of relational capital between them. Face-to-face interaction also shows that one cares and is committed to the relationship, as one must invest time and resources to meet up in-person. Additionally, if there is a conflict between partners, meeting in-person shows character and says something about one's intent to resolve and compromise.

A consistency in the people meeting can also be an important factor (Schreiner et al., 2009), as it takes time to build relational capital. When people learn to know each other, they also learn how to collaborate to get things done. However, there is also a risk in having the same people meet. For example, if two individuals have built a close relationship over many years, and one of them resigns, their relational capital will exit the partnership. Consequently, it can be a good idea to have procedures for sharing best practices and relational knowledge throughout the organization, as it can prevent such loss.

The findings show that the partners meet face-to-face 4-5 times a year, and that it is usually the same people who met. However, since the Covid-19 pandemic hit, there has not been a single meeting (MEK; EMO; MEKM; Ricoh Norge; Q13). Ricoh Norge and MEKM have not been as affected by these circumstances as MEK and EMO, whose partnership seems to have become even less cooperative and more centered around routine business transactions. However, it appears as this dynamic had started to change years prior when the previous account manager quit:

> *"A salesperson from EMO visited MEK 5-6 times a year between 1998 and 2017. He was incredibly solution-oriented and had a great relationship with MEK's sales personnel. There was communication several times per week. After he quit, it has not been the same"* (MEK, Q13)

It therefore seems as if the relational capital between MEK and EMO partly disappeared when the former account manager resigned, and that they have been unable to rebuild it ever since. This indicates that face-to-face interaction by itself is not sufficient for creating a good partnership dynamic, but is highly dependent on who is interacting, as people may have different skills in building social relations. However, if EMO had had procedures for addressing such a challenge, they could for example have tried to share the account manager's experience and relational knowledge with his replacement or another employee. This could potentially have preserved the relational capital and made them able to have a better relationship today. It is therefore important to be aware of the fragility of relational capital and how easy it can disappear if someone for example were to resign.

Feedback and Knowledge Exchange

MEK and EMO explain that they have good mechanisms and routines for providing feedback to each other, but that these primarily apply to negative things (MEK; EMO, Q17). It includes notification for defects and forms for reporting deviation in delivery times and orders (MEK, Q17). MEKM and Ricoh Norge explain that they do not have any formal routines for providing feedback to each other (MEKM; Ricoh Norge, Q17), but that they do have monthly "Gameplan" meetings where they discuss sales and activities and have the opportunity to give constructive feedback to each other (Ricoh, Q17).

One can argue that the "negative" feedback given between MEK and EMO is not very constructive for developing a partnership beyond incrementally improving one's procedures. If the negative feedback goes beyond what is reasonable, it could also damage relational capital. The feedback given between MEKM and Ricoh Norge on the other hand is more constructive as it has a clear purpose of improvement in mind. It makes it easier to understand and live up to each other's expectations and helps them make the necessary adjustments to eliminate misunderstandings and inefficiencies. The positive nature of the feedback also helps them improve their relational capital and increase their commitment to the partnership.

By sharing valuable knowledge with your partner, you effectively put yourself in a vulnerable position, exposing yourself to potential opportunism. However, it also sends a signal that you have good intentions towards the partnership and are willing to invest in it. In addition, it gives firms access to knowledge that enables them to improve efficiency and deliver increased value. This is because the knowledge shared is being processed and analyzed by more resources than what it would have been if the parties were to keep it to themselves. Consequently, the partners' absorptive capacity also increases.

It is important that the knowledge exchange is mutual so that one partner does not feel exploited. Worst case, this may lead to the partner not wanting to share information in the future, and one could end up in a situation where there is no knowledge exchange between the partners. This will destroy value creation in the partnership and may create an underlying mistrust between the parties that can jeopardize the entire collaboration. It is therefore important to agree on how knowledge exchange should occur in the first place, so that one has a framework to relate to and can eliminate potential opportunism. Knowledge exchange can also promote innovation as partners can inform each other about trends and needs in the market, and then use this information to create new products.

As the partners possess similar knowledge and operate within the same industry, the basis for knowledge exchange should be greater (Dyer & Singh, 1998). However, the findings indicate that this is only the case in the MEKM-Ricoh Norge partnership. The explanation could lie in the way they exchange knowledge. While MEKM and Ricoh Norge share knowledge on many levels and between several employees (MEKM; Ricoh Norge, Q20), the knowledge exchange between MEK and EMO has primarily been tied to the EMO account manager (MEK; EMO, Q18). Consequently, when the former account manager resigned, the partnership lost most of its knowledge sharing routines. They have not been able to reestablish them with the new account manager (MEK, Q18). This suggests that knowledge sharing routines should be formalized and tied to the organizations, rather than individuals, so that they are not lost when people exit. One can do this by programming explicit instructions for what information each partner is responsible for sharing, and when it should be shared. This will improve the consistency and predictability of knowledge exchange between partners, thus improving coordination and minimizing the impact of key personnel leaving the organizations (Kale & Singh, 2009). In addition, the partners may generate rents through having better knowledge sharing routines than competing partnerships (Dyer & Singh, 1998). Furthermore, the findings indicate that knowledge exchange works better when it is distributed between several individuals, as it can be continued by others when key personnel decide to quit. It may therefore be a good idea to spread knowledge exchange routines between several people to mitigate the risk of the routines disappearing.

Relation-Specific Competence

In any partnership, some people will acquire knowledge and experiences that cannot be directly transferred to other partnerships. In the interviews with MEK it was repeatedly pointed out that the previous account manager from EMO was very good at communicating with MEK and had built up a good relationship with MEK's employees for more than 15 years. Basically, he facilitated better collaboration between MEK and EMO by improving the speed and quality of interfirm communication and knowledge-sharing processes. When he left, the replacement was not able to maintain it to the same degree (MEK, Q6, Q13, Q18). This shows how human asset specific knowledge and skills accumulated by an employee over many years is not easily transferable (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Kenton, 2020; Eccles & Williamson, 1987). If EMO had had procedures to disseminate the relationship-specific knowledge that the account manager had about the way in which he interacted with MEK, to the replacement, the partners could perhaps have had a better and more in-depth collaboration today. Moreover, the findings show that product specialists at MEKM and Ricoh Norge have built close relationships with each other (MEKM; Ricoh Norge, Q20). However, it can be assumed that their relationship-specific competence is not as unique as the previous EMO account manager had with MEK, because it is more based on information exchange rather than dissemination and coordination of value-creating activities.

5.3.2 Conflict Resolution

Theory suggests that the ability to handle conflicts is an important element for achieving partnership success. Not only for de-escalating disagreements, but also for developing one's partnership, as joint problem solving can facilitate an environment that encourages cooperation (Kale et al., 2000). Importantly, the partners must get an equal opportunity to present and argue their point of view, as it can increase the likelihood that they will accept the end-result**.** If partners are dissatisfied with an outcome or the process itself, it could weaken the trust between them. MEK and EMO explain that they have established formal procedures for handling conflicts, but have never used them:

> *"There are also mechanisms in the agreement that the parties can formally resort to, but these have never been used*" (EMO, Q19)

The parties emphasize that they are able to solve most conflicts by communicating and clarifying expectations with one another (MEK; EMO; MEKM; Ricoh Norge, Q19). In those instances where they fail to compromise, they simply move on (EMO, Q19). This may be interpreted as they have a good dynamic for solving disagreements and that the process itself is not something they shy away from. However, MEK and EMO seem to steer clear of the fact that there is a conflict of interest with EMO being a competitor. Their reluctance to address it may be because they know deep down that they will not be able to come to an agreement. Consequently, the conflict seems to undermine the relational capital in the partnership and is a barrier for broader cooperation between the partners. This suggests that if such conflicts are never addressed, the relational capital may disappear or be stifled, causing the partnership to crumble. Consequently, the partnership can become more transactional in nature, rather than a collaboration with common goals.

MEKM and Ricoh Norge have a more direct approach to conflict resolution and are not afraid to jeopardize their relational capital in the process of resolving conflicts:

> *"Neither party is afraid to tell things as they are*" (MEKM, Q19).

This shows that the companies have a high relational capital that enables them to express themselves freely, without jeopardizing their relationship. Consequently, rather than letting problems develop any further, they can deal with them "head-on" (MEKM, Q19). For example, when a Ricoh Norge account manager was deemed to be too "controlling", it was quickly addressed without creating any further issues (MEKM, Q19). This indicates a desire to maintain the relational capital as one signals to the partner that their concerns are important and that one is willing to accommodate them to maintain the relationship.

The takeaway from this is that relational capital can have a profound influence on partners' ability to address and resolve conflicts. The stronger their relational capital is, the easier it is for them to resolve conflicts, as they can communicate and address difficult issues without having it negatively impact their relationship. Furthermore**,** by addressing conflicts in a serious and structured manner, partners can send a signal that they are committed to the partnership and respect each other's opinion. This can help build trust and strengthen the relationship between partners.

Transaction Costs

The ease of doing business can have a significant effect on transaction costs in a partnership. If the partners can interact and transact smoothly, they can use their resources in a more cost-effective and appropriate way, thus reducing transaction costs. Which is especially important the more often you transact, as costs would accumulate for each transaction. As previously mentioned, the partners have built a high level of relational capital which has limited the need for formal governance. Consequently, they do not have to craft complex contracts or engage in extensive monitoring of each other, saving them a lot of costs. Moreover, the duration of the partnerships has enabled them to clarify expectations and learn effective ways of collaborating and solving problems, which has lowered transaction costs even further.

> *"The long-term nature of the partnership also reduces transaction costs, as the parties can find the most efficient way to work and solve problems"* (EMO, Q21)

One can also assume that the quality of the relational capital has an impact on transaction costs. If partners have a high relational capital and show a willingness to accommodate each other's needs, they will look past disagreements and work together to find a common solution as quickly as possible. This can save them a lot of time and resources.

> *"Transaction costs correlate with how good the relation is with the partners, better relation equals lower transaction costs"* (Ricoh, Q21)

The takeaway from this is that transaction costs appear to be heavily influenced by the strength of relational capital between partners. Having a strong relational capital limits the need for formal procedures that demand a lot of resources, thus reducing transaction costs. Furthermore, the length of a partnership enables partners to learn best practices and procedures of the partnership, which also affects the costs.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore critical factors for partnership success and find out how client-supplier partnerships can become more successful. Not unsurprisingly, much of our findings coincides with the presented theory. However, we also uncover some new elements that can help expand knowledge in the field. For example, it appears as partner compatibility will only create a foundation for cooperation and joint value creation as long as the partners have an equal perception of their inherent compatibility. Moreover, a sudden change in partners' motives and intentions can have a significant impact on the dynamic of a partnership. For instance, it can lead to the emergence of an underlying conflict of interest that can have a profound impact on partners' willingness to invest and sacrifice for each other. Consequently, it is important to have procedures for amending the contract so that one can continuously adapt it to current circumstances and ensure that the partner's motives and interests are aligned. In addition, we find that individuals can have a significant influence on the cooperative nature of a partnership and cannot easily be replaced. Consequently, it is important to implement measures to keep these individuals within the organization or base the cooperation on several individuals, as this will minimize the risk of jeopardizing the collaboration.

Furthermore, we have discovered that contractual complexity does not necessarily have a negative impact on the relationship between partners if their relational capital is strong. This is because the partners will have goodwill and look at the increased complexity as a way to improve the collaboration, rather than as a signal of mistrust. However, this requires that the contract is relatively simple in the first place. Moreover, when relational governance, knowledge exchange, and feedback routines are closely linked to specific individuals rather than organizations, it puts partnerships in a vulnerable state. This is because these elements could be lost when the individuals exit the organization, which will result in worse conditions for cooperation. Consequently, partners could benefit by formalizing their routines for knowledge exchange and feedback as this will preserve them within the partnership if key individuals leave the organizations.

We have also found that relational capital can be a key prerequisite for achieving partnership success. By having a high level of relational capital, partners seem to be more willing to commit to the partnership and help each other reach their goals. For example, by helping each other reach their budgets. The relational capital thus increases the belief that the counterpart will reciprocate the sacrifice in one way or the other and sends a signal that one is willing to sacrifice oneself for the benefit of the other, which helps to build trust and confidence in the partnership. A high level of relational capital can also function as a sort of relational safeguard as it decreases the barrier for expressing yourself freely, making it possible to eliminate conflicts before they evolve into something substantial. Consequently, it is important for partners to continuously build relational capital.

To conclude, we believe that if partnerships focus on these factors in addition to the critical success factors mentioned by existing theory, they can increase value creation beyond what they could achieve on their own. Consequently, their partnerships will become more successful.

6.1 Limitations

The study only looks at companies selling office equipment and machinery in the B2B market, which suggests that the findings may not be applicable to partnerships in other industries and markets. Furthermore, the limited number of partnerships being analyzed means that meaningful use of statistical techniques for generalizations is not possible. Moreover, the thesis does not elaborate on the relative importance of each factor for alliance success, nor does it take into account how the different factors interact. One can assume that these aspects would have had a significant impact on the study’s findings. Furthermore, one can argue that the study's findings are overly based on the conflicts between MEK and EMO, which may cast some of the results in doubt.

6.2 Further Research

Given the study’s limitations, further research is needed to enhance the confidence in our findings. Future studies should therefore analyze a larger sample of partnerships, and preferably across many different industries and markets. This would provide more data and enable the use of quantitative techniques, which would make the results more generalizable.

Furthermore, it could be interesting to take things a step further and analyze the importance of each factor for partnership success, as well as how they correlate and interact with each other. Moreover, it could be interesting to analyze whether the length of the partnership plays any role in which factors are important. Finally, one might analyze the research question in light of different theories to see whether there are other factors that might influence partnership success.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Q1 - How long have you been in a partnership together?

Q2 - Before entering the partnership, did you conduct any due diligence of their potential complementary resources? If so, what were you looking for?

Q3 - How does your partner complement your existing resources and capabilities in terms of bringing something unique and/or valuable to the partnership?

Q4 - How is your partner`s working approach and culture an advantage or obstacle for cooperation?

Q5 - How willing are you to adapt to unexpected events and find common solutions in the face of adversity?

Q6 - How willing is your partner to make short-term sacrifices to realize long-term benefits?

Q7 - Which governance mechanisms are used in your partnership?

Q8 - Can you give a brief description of the formal contract?

Q9 - What type of procedures do you have for amending the contract?

Q10 - To what extent do you use contractual safeguards?

Q11 - How does the contract affect the dynamic between the partners?

Q12 - How often do you communicate with your partner?

Q13 - How often do you meet your partner face-to-face, and is it the same people meeting?

Q14 - How have the trust, values, and processes that have arisen through frequent interaction with the partner affected the need for contractual clauses?

Q15 - How important is mutual trust in the partnership?

Q16 - What have you done to build trust with your partner?

Q17 - What routines do you have for giving feedback to each other?

Q18 - Have you established any routines for knowledge exchange in the partnership? If so, what are they?

Q19 - How do you handle conflict?

Q20 - Do you or other employees have unique relationship-specific competence?

Q21 - What is it like to do business with your partner? What impact does this have on transaction costs?

Q22 - Have any concrete changes been made to the formal contract? If so, what has changed?

Q23 - Is there anything you would like to add that we have not covered in the other questions?

Appendix B: Approval from the Norwegian Center for Research Data

NSD sin vurdering

Prosjekttittel

Masteroppgave Siviløkonomi, spesialisering Strategisk Markedsføring ved UiS

Referansenummer

997783

Registrert

06.04.2021 av Frederik Eikeland - fe.svendsen@stud.uis.no

Behandlingsansvarlig institusjon

Universitetet i Stavanger / Handelshøgskolen ved UiS

Prosjektansvarlig (vitenskapelig ansatt/veileder eller stipendiat)

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Type prosjekt

Studentprosjekt, masterstudium

Kontaktinformasjon, student

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Prosjektperiode

12.03.2021 - 15.06.2021

Status

19.04.2021 - Vurdert

Vurdering (1)

19.04.2021 - Vurdert

Det er vår vurdering at behandlingen av personopplysninger i prosjektet vil være i samsvar med personvernlovgivningen så fremt den gjennomføres i tråd med det som er dokumentert i meldeskjemaet med vedlegg den 19.04.2021, samt i meldingsdialogen mellom innmelder og NSD. Behandlingen kan starte.

TYPE OPPLYSNINGER OG VARIGHET

Prosjektet vil behandle alminnelige kategorier av personopplysninger frem til 15.06.2021.

LOVLIG GRUNNLAG

Prosjektet vil innhente samtykke fra de registrerte til behandlingen av personopplysninger. Vår vurdering erat prosjektet legger opp til et samtykke i samsvar med kravene i art. 4 og 7, ved at det er en frivillig, spesifikk, informert og utvetydig bekreftelse som kan dokumenteres, og som den registrerte kan trekke tilbake. Lovlig grunnlag for behandlingen vil dermed være den registrertes samtykke, jf. personvernforordningen art.6 nr. 1 bokstav a.

PERSONVERNPRINSIPPER

NSD vurderer at den planlagte behandlingen av personopplysninger vil følge prinsippene i personvernforordningen om: lovlighet, rettferdighet og åpenhet (art. 5.1 a), ved at de registrerte får tilfredsstillende informasjon om og samtykker til behandlingen formålsbegrensning (art. 5.1 b), ved at personopplysninger samles inn for spesifikke, uttrykkelig angitte og berettigede formål, og ikke behandles til nye, uforenlige formål dataminimering (art. 5.1 c), ved at det kun behandles opplysninger som er adekvate, relevante og nødvendige for formålet med prosjektet lagringsbegrensning (art. 5.1 e), ved at personopplysningene ikke lagres lengre enn nødvendig for å oppfylle formålet

DE REGISTRERTES RETTIGHETER

Så lenge de registrerte kan identifiseres i datamaterialet vil de ha følgende rettigheter: innsyn (art. 15), retting(art. 16), sletting (art. 17), begrensning (art. 18), og dataportabilitet (art. 20).

NSD vurderer at informasjonen om behandlingen som de registrerte vil motta oppfyller lovens krav til form og innhold, jf. art. 12.1 og art. 13.

Vi minner om at hvis en registrert tar kontakt om sine rettigheter, har behandlingsansvarlig institusjon plikt til å svare innen en måned.

FØLG DIN INSTITUSJONS RETNINGSLINJER

NSD legger til grunn at behandlingen oppfyller kravene i personvernforordningen om riktighet (art. 5.1 d),integritet og konfidensialitet (art. 5.1. f) og sikkerhet (art. 32).

For å forsikre dere om at kravene oppfylles, må dere følge interne retningslinjer og/eller rådføre dere med behandlingsansvarlig institusjon.

MELD VESENTLIGE ENDRINGER

Dersom det skjer vesentlige endringer i behandlingen av personopplysninger, kan det være nødvendig å melde dette til NSD ved å oppdatere meldeskjemaet. Før du melder inn en endring, oppfordrer vi deg til å lese om hvilke typer endringer det er nødvendig å melde: https://www.nsd.no/personverntjenester/fylle-ut-meldeskjema-for-personopplysninger/melde-endringer-i-meldeskjema

Du må vente på svar fra NSD før endringen gjennomføres.

OPPFØLGING AV PROSJEKTET

NSD vil følge opp ved planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet.

Lykke til med prosjektet!

Appendix C: Statement of Consent

Vil du delta i forskningsprosjektet

«Sentrale faktorer for å lykkes med leverandørforhold»

Dette er et spørsmål til deg om å delta i et forskningsprosjekt hvor formålet er å undersøke sentrale faktorer i leverandørforhold. I dette skrivet gir vi deg informasjon om målene for prosjektet og hva deltakelse vil innebære for deg.

Formål

Formålet med prosjektet er å undersøke sentrale faktorer i samarbeid med leverandører. Vi ønsker å undersøke styringen, kontraktsmessige mekanismer, og relasjonelle forhold i leverandørforholdet mellom Magnar Eikeland Gruppen og noen av deres selskapers mest sentrale leverandører. I hovedsak vil se på forholdet mellom Magnar Eikeland Kontorutstyr og hovedleverandøren EMO, samt forholdet mellom Magnar Eikeland Kontormaskiner og hovedleverandøren Ricoh Norge. Innspill rundt andre leverandørforhold vil potensielt også bli nevnt.

Sentrale forskningsspørsmål inkluderer viktigheten av relasjon vs. kontrakt og hvordan detter påvirker transaksjonskostnader, viktigheten av relasjonell kapital og hvordan dette bygges, styring av partnerskap, hvordan øke verdien av leverandørsamarbeid, med mer.

Prosjektet er en masteroppgave ved Universitetet i Stavanger, og markerer avslutningen på en mastergrad i Økonomi og Administrasjon.

Hvem er ansvarlig for forskningsprosjektet?

Universitetet i Stavanger er ansvarlig for prosjektet.

Hvorfor får du spørsmål om å delta?

Du har fått spørsmål om å delta, da du sitter i en sentral stilling knyttet til leverandørforholdene til din arbeidsgiver. Kriteriet for å bli trukket er at du sitter på informasjon og erfaring rundt leverandørforholdene til Magnar Eikeland Gruppen's underliggende selskaper.

Hva innebærer det for deg å delta?

Hvis du velger å delta i prosjektet, innebærer det at du deltar i et intervju. Dette vil ta opp mot 1 time å fullføre. Intervjuet inneholder spørsmål om kontraktsmessige og relasjonelle forhold, hvordan leverandørforholdet blir styrt osv. Vi tar lydopptak og notater fra intervjuet, hvor lydopptaket vil bli transkribert og slettet i etterkant.

Det er frivillig å delta

Det er frivillig å delta i prosjektet. Hvis du velger å delta, kan du når som helst trekke samtykket tilbake uten å oppgi noen grunn. Alle dine personopplysninger vil da bli slettet. Det vil ikke ha noen negative konsekvenser for deg hvis du ikke vil delta eller senere velger å trekke deg. Det vil ikke påvirke ditt forhold til arbeidsgiver.

Ditt personvern – hvordan vi oppbevarer og bruker dine opplysninger

Vi vil bare bruke opplysningene om deg til formålene vi har fortalt om i dette skrivet. Vi behandler opplysningene konfidensielt og i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

Frederik Eikeland, Sven Ivar Ueland og Bjarte Ravndal ved UiS vil ha tilgang til opplysningene.

Navnet og kontaktopplysningene dine vil vi erstatte med en kode som lagres på egen navneliste adskilt fra øvrige data, og datamaterialet vil bli lagret på en kryptert skylagringstjeneste.

Du vil ikke kunne gjenkjennes i den ferdige masteroppgaven, ettersom ingen personlige opplysninger blir publisert.

Hva skjer med opplysningene dine når vi avslutter forskningsprosjektet?

Opplysningene anonymiseres når prosjektet avsluttes/oppgaven er godkjent, noe som etter planen er 15. Juni 2021. Personopplysninger og lydopptak blir slettet ved prosjektslutt.

Dine rettigheter

Så lenge du kan identifiseres i datamaterialet, har du rett til:

- innsyn i hvilke personopplysninger som er registrert om deg, og å få utlevert en kopi av opplysningene,
- å få rettet personopplysninger om deg,
- å få slettet personopplysninger om deg, og
- å sende klage til Datatilsynet om behandlingen av dine personopplysninger.

Hva gir oss rett til å behandle personopplysninger om deg?

Vi behandler opplysninger om deg basert på ditt samtykke.

På oppdrag fra Universitetet i Stavanger har NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS vurdert at behandlingen av personopplysninger i dette prosjektet er i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

Hvor kan jeg finne ut mer?

Hvis du har spørsmål til studien, eller ønsker å benytte deg av dine rettigheter, ta kontakt med:
Universitetet i Stavanger ved Bjarte Ravndal, bjarte.ravndal@uis.no, tlf: 51831593
Frederik Eikeland, frederik.eikeland@gmail.com, tlf: 90982279
Sven Ivar Ueland, svennyue@hotmail.com, tlf: 47843710

Vårt personvernombud: Åse Lea, ase.lea@uis.no, tlf: 51833747

Hvis du har spørsmål knyttet til NSD sin vurdering av prosjektet, kan du ta kontakt med:

- NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS på epost (personverntjenester@nsd.no) eller på telefon: 55 58 21 17.

Med vennlig hilsen

Frederik Eikeland	Sven Ivar Ueland
(Forsker)	(Forsker)
Frederik Eikeland	Sven I. Ueland

Samtykkeerklæring

Jeg har mottatt og forstått informasjon om prosjektet "sentrale faktorer for å lykkes med leverandørforhold", og har fått anledning til å stille spørsmål. Jeg samtykker til:

☐ å delta i intervju

Jeg samtykker til at mine opplysninger behandles frem til prosjektet er avsluttet

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(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)

Appendix D: Transcription Approval

Hei!

Vedlagt finner du transkriberingen av intervjuet.

Vennligst se gjennom og ta kontakt om det er noe du ønsker å endre eller slette. Hører vi ikke fra deg innen 15.04.2021 anser vi at det er ok for videre bruk.

Mvh. Frederik Eikeland og Sven Ivar Ueland

Appendix E: Disclosure of Potential Bias

Disclosure Statement

Name: Frederik Eikeland

Below is a list of factors that might be viewed as biasing this thesis:

- Board membership in Magnar Eikeland Gruppen AS
- Family ownership of Magnar Eikeland Gruppen AS
- Prior employment history in Magnar Eikeland Kontorutstyr AS and Magnar Eikeland Kontormaskiner AS
- Annual board membership fee from Magnar Eikeland Gruppen AS.

☑ I am not aware of any factors that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this thesis.

Frederik Eikeland | 23.02.21

Signature | Date