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Conceptualizing the supplier switching process: An example from public procurement

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper develops a framework for switching a service supplier in a supply network.

Design/methodology/approach – The study builds on existing literature in the field of purchasing and supply management, public procurement and the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) approach, as well as on an illustrative example case, from the public procurement context, of a supplier switch in a service delivery process.

Findings – During a switching process the buyer must simultaneously manage the ending of a relationship with the incumbent supplier and the beginning of a relationship with a new supplier. Collaboration with the focal suppliers to develop a service process with standardized components prevents disruptions in the service processes and reduces the impact of the switch on the wider network.

Research limitations/implications – The conceptualization suggested in this paper needs to be further explored in different empirical contexts to assess its practical adequacy.

Practical implications – Practitioners responsible for service procurement can use our findings to develop collaboration with suppliers, both when it comes to service process development and to the switching process. Furthermore, we highlight the importance of ending competencies and the development of an exit plan to conduct a ‘beautiful exit’.

Originality/value – The paper integrates relationship initiation and ending studies, as well as procurement process models to develop a refined switching process framework. Many public procurements rely on short-term relationships due to the legal obligation to frequently invite suppliers to tender, thus understanding the supplier switching process is important both for private and public sector actors.

Key words Supplier switching process, supplier network, public procurement process, service supply.

Type of paper Case study

1. Introduction

Public procurement (PP) researchers have recently paid attention to collaboration between public buyers and private sector suppliers, emphasizing the benefits of long-term relationships (Essig and Batran, 2005; Lawther and Martin, 2005; Keränen, 2017). However, many public procurements rely on short-term, three to seven year, contracts (Torvatn and de Boer, 2017) due to the legal obligation to frequently invite suppliers to tender, which often leads to supplier switching. Yet, surprisingly little research has been conducted on the switching process in general (Bygballe, 2017; Dubois and Gadde, 2020), and in the PP context specifically.

By contrast, in business-to-business (B2B) research, the focus has over the years been on the linear development processes of business relationships (Håkansson, 1982), and on tools to strengthen the existing relationships between buyers and suppliers (Mitrega *et al.*, 2012, p. 739), whereas how to manage the dynamic aspects of a business relationship, that is, the initiation (Edvardsson, Holmlund and Strandvik, 2008), ending (Halinen and Tähtinen, 2002), and recovery (Salo, Tähtinen and Ulkuniemi, 2009; Fleming, Tähtinen and Kelliher, 2021), which are seen as integral parts of the relationship development process (Dwyer, Schurr and Oh, 1987), has gained less attention (Hurmelinna, 2018). In the PP context as well, the importance of supplier relationships has been recognized (Schiele, 2020), however, supplier relationship management studies are scarce (Patrucco, Luzzini and Ronchi, 2017). Furthermore, in practice, supplier management is only exceptionally the public procurement function's responsibility (Meehan, Ludbrook and Mason, 2016). The existing supplier relationship-related research in the PP context deals with topics such as supplier development (McKevitt and Davis, 2014, 2015), transition toward partnership thinking (Keränen, 2017), the implementation of public-private partnerships (Jones and Noble, 2008), and public-private collaboration for innovation (Edquist and Zabala-Iturriagagoitia, 2012; Edler and Yeow, 2016; Torvinen and Ulkuniemi, 2016). However, the beginning and ending phases of public-private relationships in the procurement context is limited. One of the few studies about relationship ending in the PP context is provided by Schreiner (2015), who presents a model of the end of a triadic relationship, and discusses the problems that ending a dyadic relationship in a triad brings. Some supplier selection studies in the PP context refer to switching costs (Uyarra *et al.*, 2017; Placek *et al.*, 2019), yet, the process of supplier switching in the PP context is missing.

Prior research focusing on supplier switching has been conducted in purchasing and supply management (Bygballe, 2017), marketing (Wathne, Biong and Heide, 2001; Ferguson and Johnston, 2011; Geiger *et al.*, 2012), operations management (Wagner and Friedl, 2007; Friedl and Wagner, 2012), and in business-to-consumer contexts (Roos, 1999). These studies mainly focus on separate aspects of the switching process, such as the decision to switch (Wagner and Friedl, 2007), switching behavior (Low and Johnston, 2006), barriers to switching (e.g. switching costs and interruptions in the service processes, Liu, 2006), switching inertia (Li *et al.*, 2006), and switching back to cooperate with a former supplier (Poblete and Bengtson, 2020). However, these studies do not provide a comprehensive view of how the switching process occurs and how it can be managed. An exception is a study by Bygballe (2017), which makes an important contribution to switching studies by conceptualizing supplier switching process in business relationships. Bygballe (2017) takes a practice perspective, and investigates micro-level interaction, that is, what the actors involved in the switching process actually do in their everyday activities, and how this influences the switching process and its outcomes.

This study fills this gap by suggesting a comprehensive supplier switching process framework in a service supply network. The trend to outsource public services adds the need for public-private collaboration (Arlbjørn and Freytag, 2012), and thus sales to public buyers is a significant part of business for many suppliers (Uyarra *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, understanding the switching process is equally important for private and public sector actors. We build our framework on the study by

Bygballe (2017); however, we focus on conceptualizing the switching process and describing its practical implementation in the service delivery process in the PP context. Furthermore, we explore the impact of the switch on the service process and on the supplier network.

We develop the theoretical framework for the supplier switching process by integrating the public procurement process and relationship ending and relationship initiation studies, which are derived from purchasing and supply management, Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) and PP literature. We use an illustrative case example from the PP context to demonstrate a real-life switching process and to refine the theoretical framework. The service delivery process in the focus of this study consists of standardized components developed in cooperation with three focal actors, the *buyer* and two service suppliers. The suppliers' role is as a value facilitator, providing the buyer with resources and interactive processes that facilitate the customers' value creation, thus, during interactions with the buyer, the suppliers get involved in joint value-creation processes (Grönroos, 2011). One of the suppliers is acting as an *intermediary* to simplify the supplier network, and the other supplier is a *technology provider* that enables the technical development of the service delivery process. Such buyer-supplier-supplier triads (Choi and Wu, 2009), also called supplier innovation triads (Potter and Paulraj, 2020), are noticed to be important in developing products and services. In the buyer-supplier-supplier triad, the supplier-supplier relationship is collaborative (Dubois and Fredriksson, 2008), and in which the two suppliers collaborate to develop services to satisfy the buyer's needs (Holma, Bask and Kauppi, 2015), and in which the intermediary provides specialized and valued services to the buyer (Vedel, Holma and Havila, 2016). A triad is seen as the smallest unit of a network that enables investigation of the connectedness of actors (Smith and Laage-Hellman, 1992; Ritter, 2000); thus, taking a triad as a starting point when modelling the switching process and exploring the impact of the process on the wider supplier network is relevant.

The illustrative case example describes a process in which the buyer switches a service supplier without disruptions in the service delivery processes and changes in the wider supplier network. We take the buyer's perspective, but at the same time we point out that a complete understanding of the switching process benefits both the buyers and suppliers. This study contributes to the purchasing and supply management literature by providing a comprehensive supplier switching process framework in a network context. Furthermore, we add to the limited research on supplier relationship management in the PP context. Managers dealing with purchasing and supply management issues can use the empirically grounded framework to develop procurement processes.

The paper is organized as follows. We start with a literature review in which we build the theoretical framework of a supplier switching process. Thereafter, we describe the research process and present an illustrative example of an actual supplier switching process. Subsequently, we use the switching process framework developed in the theory part and the illustrative case example to explore the switching process in detail. The summary and discussion section relates the findings to earlier research, and develops an empirically grounded framework for the supplier switching process. The final section concludes the study and suggests avenues for further research.

2. Conceptual framework

In this section we develop the theoretical framework for supplier-switching process by integrating literature from B2B relationship development studies addressing the initiation and ending phases, as well as procurement process models from the PP context.

2.1 Initial phases of a supplier relationship

In the relationship development models studied mainly in the B2B context, relationship initiation is generally seen as the first phase of the life cycle of a relationship, which starts when the buyer and the supplier become aware of each other (Edvardsson, Holmlund and Strandvik, 2008). This relationship initiation phase has had different names: for example, pre-relationship state (Ford, 1980), awareness (Dwyer, Schurr and Oh, 1987), and pre-engagement (Leonidou, 2003). According to Dwyer et al. (1987: 16) any type of bilateral interaction starts the next phase of a possible relationship, that is, the exploration phase, in which the potential exchange partners first consider the possibility of exchange. However, the relationship development models discussed above do not describe the different activities that feature relationship initiation. Recently, Aarikka-Stenroos, Aaboen, Cova and Rolfsen (2018), relying on relationship development, project marketing, and international business literature, focus on initiation contributors, and divide the initiation phase into two sections: the pre-initiation and actual initiation. Pre-initiation includes phases of awareness, match, and attraction, whereas the actual initiation includes accessing, defining exchange and building conditions, and planning for the future. In the public sector, the buyer is obligated to follow the principles of nondiscrimination, equality, transparency, and proportionality to ensure all the suppliers have equal opportunities to tender (Torvatn and de Boer, 2017), thus, the beginning of a relationship cannot be based on a criterion such as attraction.

In the PP context, research on relationship development is largely absent (Schiele, 2020); thus, we complement the initiation phase conceptualization with studies on the initial phases of the PP process. McKevitt and Davis (2013), for example, divide the PP process into three phases: pre-tender, tender, and post-tender. The *pre-tender phase* includes both the buyer's internal and external activities in which the potential suppliers can be involved (Holma *et al.*, 2020). Patrucco, Luzzini and Ronchi (2017) have provided a detailed description of the initial activities in the PP process, which cover pre-tender and tender phases. They list the activities as follows: (1) budget and demand management, (2) definition of requirements, (3) scanning the supply market for available solutions, (4) identifying suitable suppliers, (5) tender design, (6) tender evaluation, (7) supplier selection, and (8) negotiation and contract awarding. After the contract has been awarded, the buyer may have further discussions on the contract terms and conditions (Patrucco, Luzzini and Ronchi, 2017:252).

Supplier selection is important for both B2B and PP buyers, because if the relationship turns out to be dysfunctional from the beginning due to an unsuitable partner (Lavie, 2007), not even superior supplier management can help in overcoming poor partner screening and selection (Cummings and Holmberg, 2012). In the public tendering context, price typically plays an important role even though the selection would be based on the most 'economically advantageous' tender. The price criterion is important also because of its capacity to differentiate among a shortlist of similar proposals (Roodhooft and van den Abbeele, 2006). In addition to price, suppliers can be evaluated based on perceived experience and competence, understanding of the customer's needs, relationship and communication skills, and the likelihood of compliance with contractual and administrative requirements (Day and Barksdale, 1994). The short-listed potential partners can be assessed by their technological and delivery competences, successful partnering references, trustworthiness, and strategic network positioning (McCutcheon and Stuart, 2000; Partanen and Möller, 2012). The study of industrial firms by Wilkinson, Young and Freytag (2005) emphasize symmetry in certain features of the supplier, for example, with regard to trends in market development, technology, innovativeness, the probability of a relationship, even though 'perfect match' is not regarded as obligatory.

Both public and private sector organizations can establish *framework agreements* to simplify the pre-tender and tender phases. Negotiating a framework agreement makes it possible for all organizational units to use a shared framework agreement for their operative purchase, and thereby

benefit from purchasing synergies (Karjalainen, Kemppainen and Van Raaij, 2009). Organization-wide agreements are negotiated with a selection of preferred suppliers, and instead of running the procurement processes in parallel, each organizational unit decides upon their own specifications, suppliers, and contractual agreements (Karjalainen, 2011). In the PP context, the framework agreements are subject to the European Union procurement rules and they define the terms and conditions under which specific purchases can be made during the contract period (Meehan, Ludbrook and Mason, 2016).

2.2 Ending a supplier relationship

Research on relationship ending is missing from the PP studies, thus, in conceptualizing the ending of a relationship, we rely on theoretical studies and empirical research conducted in the B2B context. An often-cited process model of relationship ending has been developed by Halinen and Tähtinen (2002). The model applies the IMP approach, and thus investigates relationships as a part of a broader network of relationships. The model includes the following stages: assessment, decision-making, dyadic communication, disengagement, network communication, and aftermath. In the *assessment stage*, people involved in the relationship start to evaluate the relationship and how it could be ended. In the *decision-making stage*, the decision to end is taken. In *dyadic communication*, the potential decision of exit is communicated to the partner. In the *disengagement stage*, the actors gradually start decreasing business actions and discussing practical issues related to the ending process, for example, contract disengagement, property rights, and final invoices. The ending process in itself can have effects on a company's internal functions, for example, discontinuity of production and reorganizing functions (Lam *et al.*, 2004). In the *network communication stage*, the rest of the actors in the network are informed of the switching decision. Ending is mentally processed and finalized in the *aftermath stage*, in which learning from the relationship is concluded (Halinen and Tähtinen, 2002). Holmlund and Hobbs (2009) highlight the importance of a proper 'aftermath audit' of each ended relationship.

Managing the relationship-ending process is important, because a badly handled dissolution process can spoil the company's reputation. A good reputation is particularly important for public buyers, because suppliers prefer providing their services to private sector buyers due to the prevailing bureaucracy in the public sector, and if the buyer is not attractive enough, then in the worst case, no tenders will be submitted (Schiele, 2020; Kelly *et al.*, 2021). Alajoutsijärvi, Möller and Tähtinen (2000) discuss dissolution quality and communication strategies in the relationship-ending process. They use the expression 'beautiful exit' in which the focus is on the quality of the dissolution process and that of the dissolution outcome. However, concrete management of relationship ending has been noticed to be challenging, because the overall corporate relationship management strategy may lack a specific ending strategy (Holmlund and Hobbs, 2009). Alajoutsijärvi, Möller and Tähtinen (2000), Giller and Matear (2001), and Pick (2010), too, highlight the importance of ending strategies, and Havila and Medlin (2012) suggest the development of ending competences. Tähtinen, Blois and Mittilä (2007) claim in their conceptual paper that the ending process may take several forms depending on the state of the relationship. The process may range from a simple and quick ending that follows a contractually agreed route to a complex, slow, and flexible ending process in which the individuals involved try to pursue a beautiful exit together. Furthermore, Tähtinen, Blois and Mittilä (2007), based on Caplow (1968) assume that in continuous relationships, where the actors are related to each other for the time being, the dissolution process would take more time than the ending of an episodic relationship, which is established for a specific time for a certain purpose. Relationships between public buyers and private suppliers are examples of such time-bound relationships, where the competitive tendering process used in open tendering procedures restricts establishing strategic long-term relationships (Erridge and Greer, 2002). Episodic relationships dissolve when the time is over, and

dissolution is expected and perhaps even planned when these relationships begin (Tähtinen, Blois and Mittilä, 2007).

In summary, thus far, studies of switching processes have remained a largely unexplored area (Bygballe, 2017). The relationship development literature and studies on the initial phases of a procurement process do not explain how relationships and various activities are handled during a switching process when the relationship with the incumbent supplier exists simultaneously with supplier selection and the initiation of the relationship with a new supplier. Likewise, the studies related to the ending of a relationship list specific ending activities and help to understand the importance of the ending process, but these studies do not elaborate on the process where the ending of an incumbent supplier relationship and the beginning of a new relationships overlap, that is, how the incumbent supplier is substituted by a new supplier. Furthermore, case studies in relationship-beginning and -ending processes are scarce, for example, the ending-process model by Halinen and Tähtinen (2002) and relationship termination management framework by Pick (2010) are based on conceptual studies.

2.3 Framework for supplier switching process

Due to the short-term nature of public contracts and the regular tendering processes, understanding the switching process is essential for both public buyers and suppliers. We acknowledge that integrating the literature discussed above gives good advice toward conceptualizing the switching process, which is discussed in this subsection. The structure of our switching process framework with its three phases (before, during, and after switch) is inspired by the conceptualization of Bygballe (2017). The Bygballe's model starts with a driver, either exogenous or endogenous, that activates the process. The first process phase, the initiation, describes the motivation and efforts that drive the switch. The second process phase, the substitution, represents the actual switch where the actors produce and reproduce knowledge, connections, and interfirm routines. The third process phase includes practices for institutionalizing the new relationship and attempts to conclude the old relationship. Furthermore, the model includes a restoration process of repairing the existing relationship (Bygballe, 2017).

Our model (Figure 1) is focused on the activities at the inter-organizational level of the procurement process, whereas Bygballe is focusing on the micro-level activities and social commitment at an individual level. In our model, the *before switch* phase consists of activities included in the pre-tender and tender phases (McKevitt and Davis, 2013; Patrucco, Luzzini and Ronchi, 2017). Supplier selection can result either in continuing collaboration with the incumbent supplier, or establishing a relationship with a new one. Selecting a new supplier starts a switching process. *The during switch* phase is an intersection of the ending and the beginning processes with sequentially overlapping activities. *The after switch* phase includes the contract implementation before the new relationship is institutionalized (Halinen and Tähtinen, 2002).

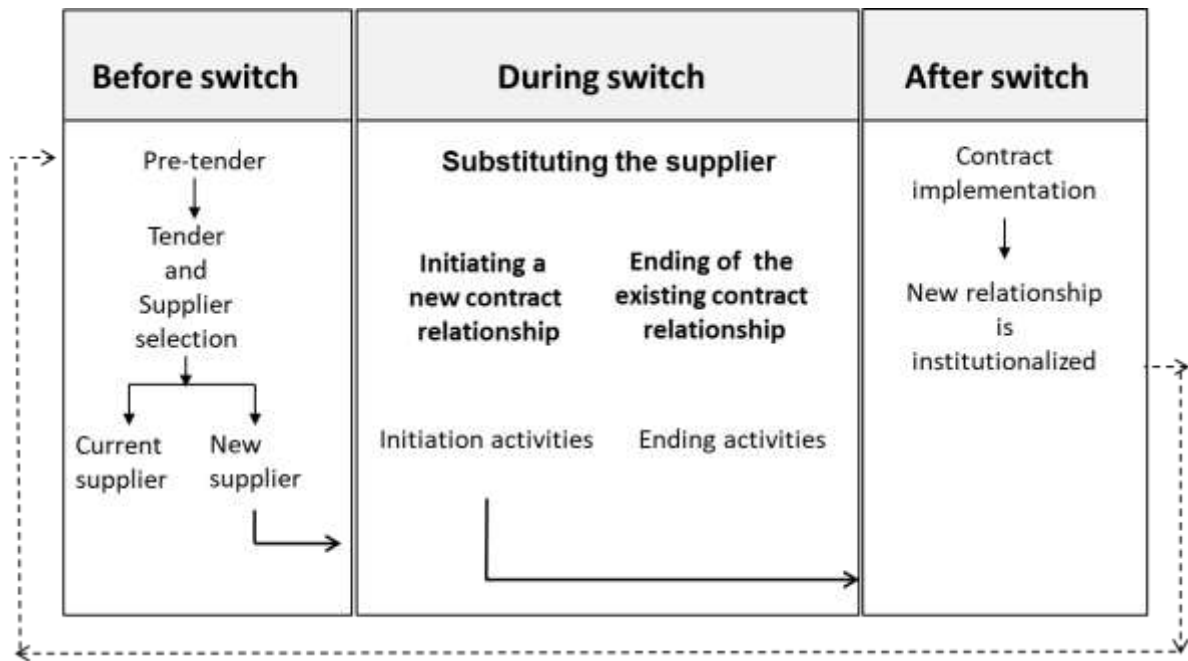


Figure 1: Framework for supplier switching process (developed from Bygballe, 2017; Halinen and Tähtinen, 2002; McKevitt and Davis, 2013; Patrucco, Luzzini and Ronchi, 2017)

3. Research process

In this section we first describe the research process. Thereafter, we give background information on the illustrative case. We present the focal actors and their involvement in the service delivery process in which the switch occurs, that is, the Travel Management process (TM-process), motivate the case selection, and explain the data collection methods.

We developed the framework of the supplier switching process (Figure 1) further in the PP context through an abductive process in which conceptual development and a real-life illustrative case example were intertwined (Nenonen *et al.*, 2017). Abductive investigation can generate understanding that is both novel and functioning from the managerial perspective (*ibid.*), and ‘systematic combining’ of empirical observations and theory expand the understanding of both theory and practice (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). We began with a phenomena that is observable, but not adequately addressed in the current research (Jaakkola, 2020), that is, the supplier switching process in the PP context. We started the research process inductively by summarizing and integrating current understanding of relevant theories. We employed literature that deals with the business relationship development, supplier relationship management, PP, and inter-organizational relationships and networks. When studying relationship development models and supplier relationship management, we noticed the lack of research in the PP context, and specifically the lack of studies on supplier switching process. We used PP process models and relationship management research to structure the switching process, and the network approach by the IMP-group to understand the switching process in a network context.

During the research process, we had continuous access to a real-life case of a switching process in the PP context, which we use as an illustrative case example in developing the switching process framework. When developing the framework, we had regular discussions with the Head of Procurement in the public buyer, with whom we shared our findings. The two main authors wrote extensive case descriptions, and created tables and figures about the switching process. The tables and figures functioned as the basis for the discussions. Thus, reflecting on the framework took place in real time in collaborative theorizing processes with the Head of Procurement (Nenonen *et al.*, 2017). Håkansson and Waluszewski (2007), for example, propose interaction between

academics and practitioners to produce context-specific knowledge to avoid the gap between theory and practice (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006). Nenonen, Brodie and Peters (2017), too, suggest theorizing with managers as an effective way of producing both academically rigorous and managerially relevant knowledge, and Crespin-Mazet and Ingemansson-Havenvid (2021) argue that practitioners should bring their own knowledge and competencies to their collaboration so that the knowledge can be used and further produced in other contexts.

3.1 The focal actors

The case involves the Buyer and its two suppliers, the Travel Management Company (TMC), and the Technology Provider (TeP), as the focal actors. The case is about the ending of the Buyer-TMC1 relationship and the beginning of the Buyer-TMC2 relationship as a result of competitive tendering. The service delivery process (TM-process), which is the focus of our study, has been created and developed in collaboration with the Buyer, the TMC1 and the TeP. As in service delivery processes generally, customer and supplier processes have merged into a coordinated, interactive process in which both the buyer and suppliers are active (Grönroos and Ravald, 2011). There are two specific features in the Buyer's corporate travel. First, the tendering intervals are short, which leads to regularly occurring supplier switching processes. Second, the travelers are price and market conscious and technologically skilled. The expectations for the travel services are cost efficient services and smooth service processes, which put pressure on the quality of travel management technology.

The TMC is a service supplier, acting as an intermediary that simplifies the supplier network by distributing a variety of travel- and technology-related services to the Buyer. Purchasing travel services from a TMC allows the Buyer to focus on its core competencies, and thereby save time and administrative costs by not being involved in the daily service deliveries. The TeP provides travel-related electronic-based technology solutions, for example, electronic travel reservation services that are typically called global distribution systems. The TeP in our case is known for its extensive service offerings and technology support. For the TMCs, the TeP provides e-solutions to automate service processes, for example, for issuing tickets, invoicing, and bookkeeping. These solutions help the TMCs to manage their corporate clients' travel policies, the travelers' profiles, and the use of corporate rates. The TeP distributes travel suppliers' (for example airlines and hotels) services to the TMC. Thus, the TeP and TMC complement each other in providing travel related e-services to the Buyer.

The Buyer has no direct relationship with the TeP, because the TeP's strategic decision is to cooperate only through the TMCs. However, despite the indirect relationship with the Buyer, the TeP's sales person attends the service development negotiations when needed, for example, in the traveler profile integration between the Buyer's Electronic Travel and Expense Management System (EMS) and the TeP's e-Travel Management System. Typically, the Buyer suggests developments in the services, and thereafter the TMC and TeP in cooperation seek solutions and adapt them to the Buyer's needs. Thus, the buyer is dependent on the interactive relationships between the TMC and the TeP to enable a fluent operational-level travel process. An additional important actor in the process is the Government Procurement Unit (GPU). The procurement of products and services follows the national procurement legislation and the European Union directives. The GPU has been set up to increase the efficiency of procurement of products and services required for the public administration in Finland. The abbreviations that we use in the remaining part of this study are listed below, and Figure 2 illustrates the main actors in the TM-process and their network connections.

TMC =	Travel Management Company
TeP =	Technology Provider
EMS =	Electronic Travel and Expense Management System
GPU =	Government Procurement Unit
TM-process =	Travel management process

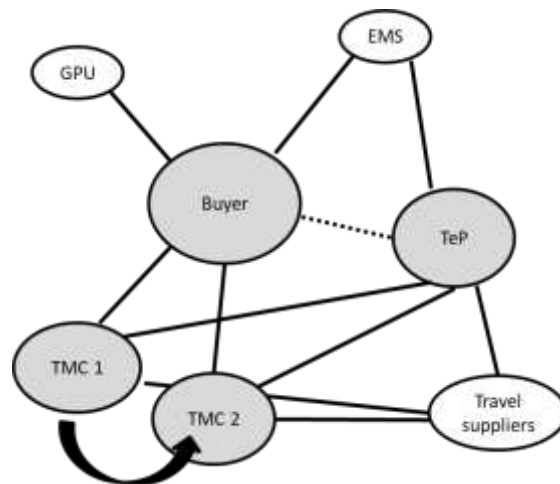


Figure 2: The main actors of the TM-process and their connections (solid line = direct relationship; dotted line = indirect relationship; arrow = switch of the TMC)

3.2 The TM-process

The Buyer's travel purchases are centralized and all the travel bookings are directed via TMC. The Buyer has a dual role as a buyer of public travel services and the TM-process consists of two levels. First, the purchasing policy decisions are made at the *managerial level*, which denotes that the Buyer is a corporate buyer. Second, at the *operational level*, the Buyer's employees (travelers) are the end users of the travel services. This type of role setting is typical for indirect sourcing, and it is in line with the description of Holma (2012) and van der Valk, Wynstra & Sumo (2013). An organization can comprise two types of customers: the corporate buyer and the end customer. We consider both these levels because they are intertwined, and the TMC interacts with both the corporate buyer and the travelers. Thus, the switch of the TMC may have an impact on both the levels. Figure 3 visualizes the TM-process and its two levels. The traveler's process at the operational level is illustrated in the upper process flow in the figure. The planning of the trip starts by creating a travel plan in the EMS, and bookings are made through the TMC. Thereafter is the trip. After the trip, the traveler fills in the travel claim in the EMS, in which information of travel costs for reporting purposes is also collected. This operational-level process is enabled by the contracts that the Buyer negotiates at the managerial level with the EMS and the TMC. The TeP and the TMC together adapt booking services to the buyer's needs.

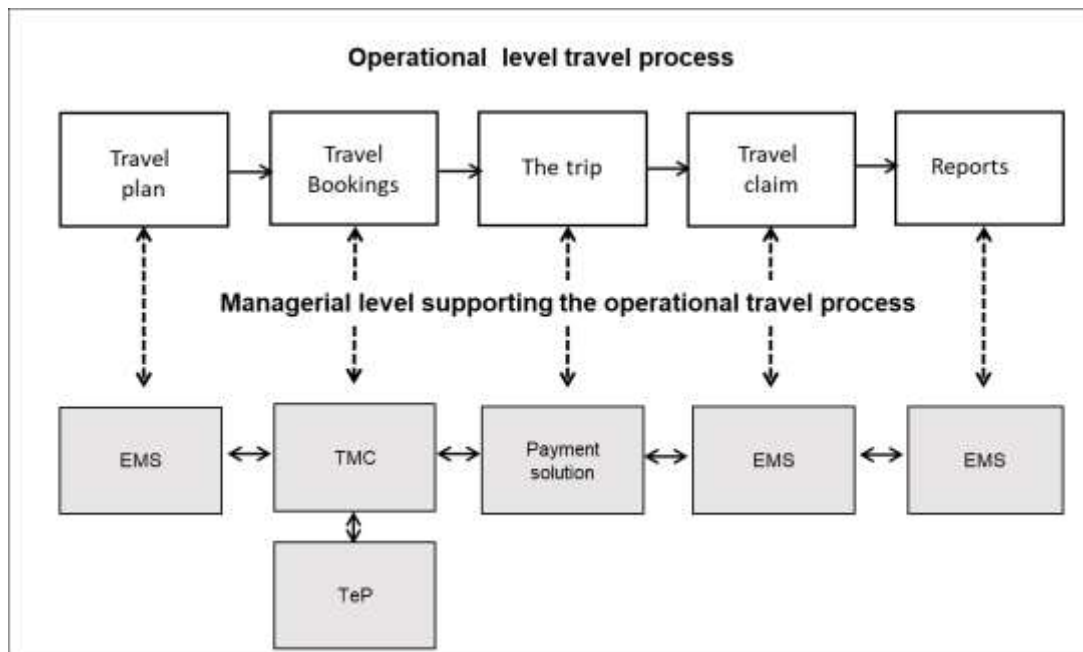


Figure 3: The Buyer's TM-process and its main actors and activities

3.3 Case selection and data collection

Case examples are valuable to illustrate conceptual contributions because they provide a real-life foundation for phenomena that may otherwise be exceedingly abstract (Siggelkow, 2007), specifically when the focus is on a scarcely researched topic (Eisenhardt, 1989) such as the supplier switching process. However, in this study the current illustrative example should be treated as illustration of the developed theoretical perceptions rather than as a complete case study.

We selected the case for two main reasons. *First*, the Buyer is an important client for any travel supplier because of its high volumes of travel (c. 3,200 travelers and 16,000 trips yearly, of which the majority are international) and centralized travel procurement, which ensures the use of the negotiated contracts and prevents maverick buying. *Second*, the Head of Procurement who is responsible for travel purchases and supplier relationships is known for his interest in developing service processes in cooperation with the suppliers. The suppliers are aware of the positive spillover effects that this type of co-development has on the suppliers' processes, and on the development of the travel industry in general (Polonsky, 2021).

The data that we use to describe and analyze the supplier switching process in the PP context was gathered in connection with a longitudinal empirical study, in which we explored the TM-process and its modular architecture. We collected data from interviews and observations as well as from company documents and industry reports. Furthermore, we conducted semi-structured interviews with the GPU and with the TMC1 and the TeP. The GPU's insights were important in understanding the PP context and the cooperation between the GPU and the other units of the government. The interviews with the two suppliers added to our understanding of their collaboration with the buyer, as well as of the technology behind the TM-process. Thus, when we started exploring the switching process, we had a comprehensive understanding of the TM-process and the collaboration between the focal actors in developing this process.

4. Supplier switching process in a public procurement context

In this section, we use the switching process framework developed in the theory part (Figure 1) and the illustrative case example to explore the switching process in detail. In our analysis the focus is on the before switch and during switch phases. The third phase, which starts the actual contract period and concerns the institutionalization of the new relationship, is out of the scope of our study.

4.1 Before the switch

Before the TMC was switched, the Buyer used the GPU's framework agreement for corporate travel purchases. This framework agreement enabled cooperation with three TMCs, from which the Buyer had selected the TMC1. The tendering process resulted in the switching process in the focus of our investigation.

The pre-tender phase activities started by deciding on the procurement procedure. The Buyer had two options: it could organize its own open tendering or use the GPU's framework agreement. The Buyer found the GPU's framework agreement the most economically feasible choice. According to the Head of Procurement, the estimate for organizing its own tendering by open procedure would have taken about ten working days before publishing the invitation for tender, and five working days for processing the tenders and preparing the contract award notice. Thus, the GPU conducted the *tendering* and the initial activities related to the assessment and decision-making stage.

The GPU's tendering resulted in a shortlist of three TMCs for further negotiations, but the TMC1 was not in this list. To select one of the three shortlisted TMCs, the Buyer applied three main selection criteria. *First*, the service solution provided by the potential TMC should be widely in use, including a variety of market options, and the services needed to be cost efficient. *Second*, there should be a wide variety of services available for global and local travel. *Third*, the TMC's services should include an e-solution that fits the Buyer's operational TM-process, that is, are easily integrated with each other. The time to evaluate the potential TMCs' tenders required approximately four working days in total.

The Buyer made the final selection between the shortlisted suppliers by using an Excel worksheet with the required booking types, the quantity of bookings, and additional services, which ranked the TMCs automatically according to the predefined criteria. This kind of formal ranking method would not have required physical interaction with the TMCs. However, the Buyer found this phase important and organized face-to-face meetings with all the three short-listed TMCs to discuss the needs for the travel services and reporting requirements. In these meetings, the Buyer also opened preliminary discussion of the management of the switching process, that is, how to smoothly and cost-efficiently implement the potential switch at the end of the contract period. We can conclude that by using the GPU's framework agreement, the final *selection* of the TMC2 was easy and straightforward for the Buyer.

4.2 During the switch – substituting the TMC

The *contract negotiations* and signing the service agreement with the TMC2 included discussions of the details of the service, customer-specific service definitions, service levels, the Buyer's TM-process's integration needs, operational details, reporting requirements, etc. The negotiations took only three days because the service agreement was based on the framework agreement.

The *ending* of the TMC1 relationship followed a predefined exit plan. The main practical issues were the collection of detailed booking data from the TMC1 and updating the TMC1 extranet

pages to inform travelers about the ending of the relationship. These tasks were mainly performed by the TMC1. The booking data was used for monitoring and comparing ticket prices over the TMC change. After the execution of the exit plan, an aftermath meeting was organized with the TMC1 to summarize the experiences of the switching process.

The contract *implementation* started with a kick-off meeting including all key persons from the Buyer's travel services, TMC2, and TeP. The implementation was built on the TMC2's standard implementation plan, which was modified to the Buyer's needs. In the implementation plan, a weekly meeting schedule was agreed, including necessary teleconferences. Most of the tasks in the plan were routine checks and configurations in the IT system, for example, the creation of a customer organization hierarchy and traveler profile data link. In cooperation with TMC2 and TeP, some changes in the online distribution system were implemented for improved service, for example, to better support the travel policy and to respond to the travelers' expectations to prioritize the cheapest flights in the search engines.

The contract implementation took nine working days over a six-week period. The switching process was flawless and the travelers were able to book travel immediately with the TMC2 from the first day of the new contract. Thus, the well-preplanned switch of the TMC did not induce changes in the operational level travel process. The online booking link in the EMS remained the same (only the actual https link in the background was redirected). The call center phone number for offline bookings changed, and the Buyer updated the travel policy information. The Buyer also distributed the TMC2's contact information to travelers via the intranet and weekly newsletters. Additionally, two-hour information events were organized for travel secretaries to support a smooth switching process.

5. Discussion

We noticed in our literature analysis that supplier switching is an under-researched phase in buyer-supplier relationship development and procurement process studies, and specifically in the PP context. Therefore, by integrating studies related to the procurement process, relationship ending, and relationship initiation, derived from purchasing and supply management and PP literature, as well as the IMP approach, we developed a theoretical framework for the supplier switching process. We applied the theoretical framework to analyze an illustrative example of a supplier switching in PP context, and to conceptualize the framework further.

Our example illustrates an actual switching process in a public service delivery context, in which the incumbent supplier relationship ended, and a new relationship substituted in its place. The use of the framework agreement, which can be used in all the different units in the public administration, makes the switching process different from the models developed in the prior research. The government owned GPU can take care of some of the pre-tender activities. For example, the assessment and decision-making regarding the ending of the incumbent supplier relationship was made by the GPU. Furthermore, the preselection of the potential partners was simplified due to the shortlist selected by the GPU. By contrast, the Buyer put a lot of effort into the communication and disengagement phases during the switching process.

The aftermath phase was realized in accordance with a pre-prepared and detailed exit plan, as recommended by Halinen and Tähtinen (2002) and Holmlund and Hobbs (2009). The buyer's and the selected supplier's common interest for process development had an impact on the final supplier selection (cf. Wilkinson, Young and Freytag, 2005). A contract was signed after face-to-face meetings, and the detailed service specifications made the negotiations effective. As a learning outcome from the relationship ending, the contract included an exit plan.

Based on the analysis of the switching process, the following findings are presented. *First*, ending an incumbent relationship and beginning a new relationship are overlapping phases in supplier

switching process, thus, during a switching process, the buyer must simultaneously manage the ending of a relationship with the incumbent supplier and the beginning of a relationship with a new supplier. This is important from the relationship management point of view, because current research is, for one thing, mainly focusing on strengthening the existing relationships (Mitrega *et al.*, 2012), and for another, treating the relationship beginning and ending as separate phases (Bygballe, 2017). Furthermore, the tendency has been to consider the beginning and the ending of relationships to exist at the opposite ends of a continuum, and the development has been seen to proceed chronologically in this order (Hurmelinna, 2018). As our refined switching-process framework (Figure 4) illustrates, only internal activities before the switch progress proceeded in predefined order. Furthermore, prior research mainly investigates the beginning and ending of a relationship from one actor's (buyer's) perspective. Because the practical tasks during the switch are related both to running down the services from the incumbent supplier and organizing service deliveries with the new supplier, both these suppliers' involvement in the switching process is important. However, the smooth switch would not have been possible without the technology back-up from the TeP.

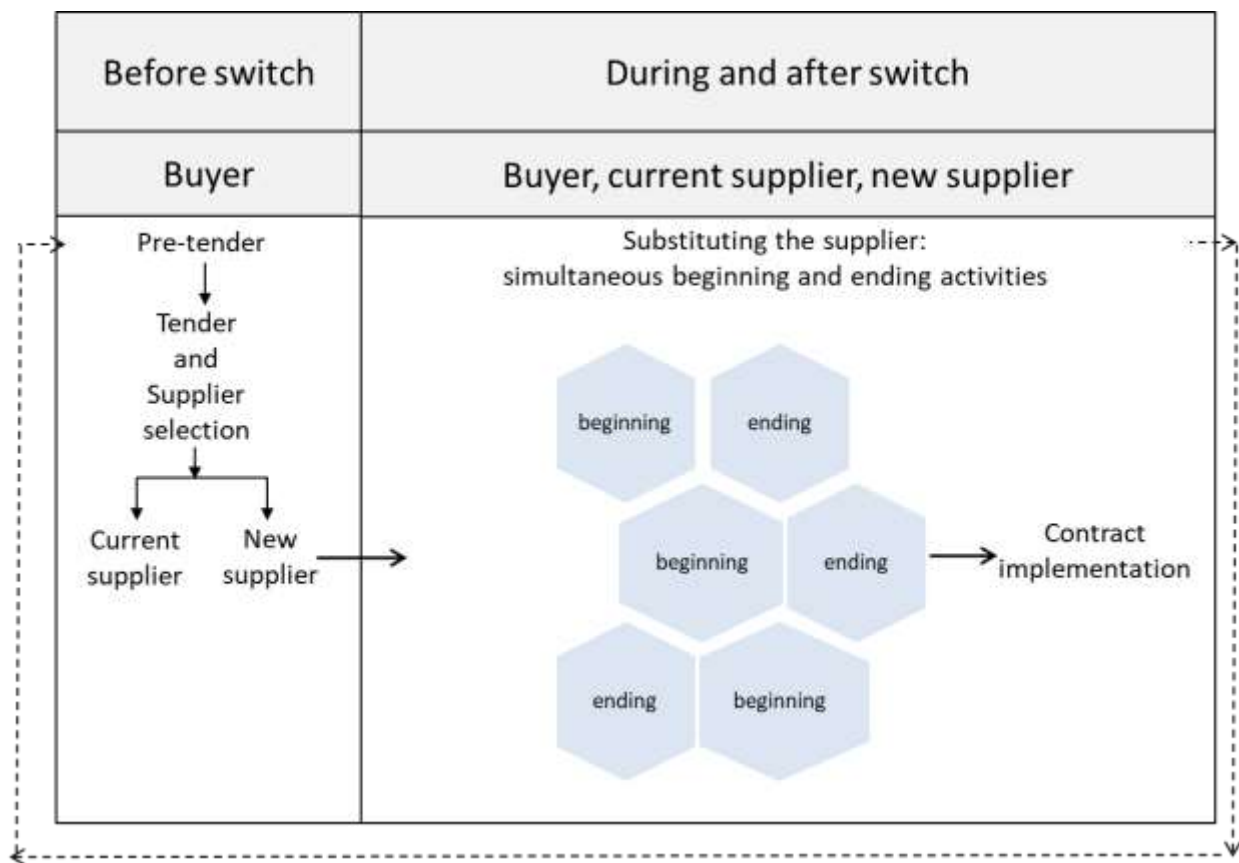


Figure 4: Refined framework for supplier switching process

Second, our illustrative case presents an example of a well-designed service process created in public-private collaboration, a gap revealed in PP literature by Obwegeser and Müller (2018). The service process was designed with standardized components with well-integrated interface management practices in collaboration with the three focal actors, which made switching less complicated (Dubois and Gadde, 2020). Thus, such a collaboration can be regarded as a part of the ending strategy, specifically in time-bound (public-private) relationships, to ensure continuity in the service processes. Unlike the study by Schreiner (2015), in which the ending of a dyadic

relationship in a triadic setting led to problems, for example, coalition formation between two actors, our study demonstrates a well-functioning collaboration between the three actors during the switching process. With the help of a well-designed service process developed in three-party collaboration, the buyer can reduce switching costs and avoid discontinuities in daily functions (Nielson, 1996; Wathne, Biong and Heide, 2001), as well as use the new design of the switching process in future cases. The role of the intermediary became important, and we were able to recognize the value of the supplier (in our case the intermediary) acting on behalf of the buyer (Nätti *et al.*, 2014), even after the contract ended (e.g., informing the end users about the supplier switching). The intermediary also reduced the need for social interaction between the buyer and suppliers (Havila, Johanson and Thilenius, 2004) and helped in network communication in the ending process (Halinen and Tähtinen, 2002). This finding confronts the study by Uyarra *et al.* (2014), who established that suppliers refer to lack of interaction with procuring organizations and the buyers' low competence as the main barriers to innovation through PP. Prior research also claims that public actors lack purchasing skills (Lian and Laing, 2004); however, the well-designed service process in our illustrative case indicates the buyer's professionalism and capability to collaborate with the suppliers. Moreover, service process standardization increases the predictability of the provided services (Lindberg and Nordin, 2008).

Third, ending a relationship generally leads to changes in the wider network (Halinen and Tähtinen, 2002). We noticed that a well-developed service process with standardized components and a well-managed switching process benefits not only the buyer's internal functions, but also creates stability in the connected supply network. In the prior research, a change in a dyad has been claimed to be received and acted upon by other actors in the network, framed as a connected change by Halinen, Havila and Salmi (1999) and Havila and Salmi (2001), and a 'domino effect' by Hertz (1998). Our study shows that such a remarkable change as a supplier switch can be implemented without rearranging the supply network.

6. Conclusions, contributions, and avenues for further research

Prior research on the supplier switching process is limited (Bygballe, 2017; Dubois and Gadde, 2020); thus, our *first* and main contribution is the theory development through conceptualization of the switching process and a refined framework for the switching process, which we developed by integrating different research streams: PP, purchasing and supply management and the IMP approach, and by modifying the framework with the help of an illustrative example from an actual switching process. Existing research on relationship ending and beginning has investigated these two phases as separate phases of the buyer-supplier relationship (Bygballe, 2017), and the models of procurement processes do not discuss the phase in which the supplier is switched. *Second*, studies on supplier-relationship management are limited in the PP research (Schiele, 2020). Specifically, we highlight the simultaneous management of ending and beginning relationships when substituting a supplier. *Third*, for network researchers, our study presents an example of a switching process that can be conducted without causing changes in the wider supplier network.

Managing the service procurement process is more challenging compared to goods procurement (Wynstra, Rooks and Snijders, 2018), and many organizations are struggling to organize service procurement processes more efficiently (Ellram and Tate, 2015). Therefore, practitioners responsible for service procurement can use our findings to develop collaboration with suppliers, both when it comes to service process development and the switching process. Furthermore, for practitioners we highlight the importance of ending competencies and the development of an exit plan to conduct a 'beautiful exit' (Alajoutsijärvi, Möller and Tähtinen, 2000).

Our study has limitations, which provide avenues for further research. First, this research is conceptual, using one illustrative case as an example of a switching process in the PP context. Additional empirical research on supplier switching is needed, and the model offered in this study must be further explored in different empirical contexts to assess its practical adequacy. Second, our study investigated switching process from a public buyer's perspective. To get a complete picture of the switching process, the end users' perspective should be investigated. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches could be applied when studying end users' experiences of a supplier switching process. Third, our study is limited to the investigation of relationships at the inter-organizational level; thus, the impact of the switch on personal relationships and social bonds between the buyer and suppliers would be important to explore.

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