

Creating co-value among SMEs: the customer perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines which capabilities are critical in developing co-creation roles as a customer in order to improve collaboration of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with suppliers, partners and future partners. Using current literature, a format for a semi-structured qualitative interview was made. These interviews were conducted at nineteen randomly selected SMEs from different sectors. On the basis of the activities of a co-creation process drawn from former literature, other information about co-creation and SMEs and the interview findings, necessary resources and capabilities are formed to develop customer roles within collaborations. Findings suggest that SMEs can optimize co-creation with suppliers and partners to develop roles as co-diagnoser, co-producer and co-implementer. Key for developing these roles is to stay up to date within the specific knowledge field, to help the other parties come up with the best possible solution or innovation. Actively interfering should happen with regular meetings and conversations, to know what is going on in every step in the process. Knowledge and communication are the most important capabilities and resources a SME can obtain. This set of critical capabilities, roles and resources is the first clear set for SMEs to use in co-creation with other companies. This article discusses points for improvement and proposes areas for future research.

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Keywords

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, collaborating with other companies is getting more and more important for every organization to become and stay innovative. This phenomenon called 'co-creation' has risen over the past decade and started with the article by Vargo and Lusch (2004) about service-dominant logic in marketing. "It highlights e.g. the value-creation process that occurs when a customer consumes, or uses, a product or service, rather than when the output is manufactured".¹ To further explain co-creation, they wrote an article two years later in which they made clear that service dominant logic attributes importance to the value-creating processes that involve the customer as a co-creator of value.² The co-creation of unique value with customers begins with the changing roles of consumers from isolated to connected, from unaware to informed and from passive to active, according to Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004).³ However, apart from this paper in which the authors state what to do, relatively little is known about how customers engage in co-creation.⁴ Moreover, creating value by working together does not have to come singly from the side of the customer, the supplier in his role could also contribute to the co-creation process.⁵ In that case it could be said that from supplier to customer, the entire supply chain can be included to create co-value.

The first articles about this topic focus particularly at which items are important for the process to create co-value and not at how to create value together. Although, in an article by Stenroos and Jaakkola (2011) the authors use a framework in which value co-creation occurs in the context of knowledge intensive business services.⁶ An important asset for this article compared to others is that it includes a description on how to create co-value. A distinction is made between critical supplier resources and roles, activities and critical customer resources and roles, which together will form a clear set of necessary competences needed to create co-value.⁷ Stenroos and Jaakkola have conducted their research for knowledge intensive business services (KIBS), a group of businesses relying on professional knowledge within the services and operations. Interesting to see is that Muller and Zenker (2001) relate in their article about innovation and KIBS to the role of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and innovating. They state in the article that innovation is an interactive and evolutionary process and that especially SMEs are supposed to innovate in co-operation with other firms to optimally use own internal knowledge resources and combine them with competencies of partners.⁸ However, in the rest of the article nothing is written about how to co-operate as a SME. In general there has not been done any research on this topic, which is a pity, as 99% of all businesses in the European Union are SMEs.⁹

This lack of integrated knowledge of how to create co-value among SMEs will obstruct those companies and businesses to use it into practice. The purpose of this study is therefore to examine how SMEs can collaborate with other organizations to create co-value and become or stay innovative. Compared to larger companies, SMEs obviously have less resources to use, but they still have to keep up with competitors. On the basis of the framework in the article by Stenroos and Jaakkola (2011), I am going to explore in an abductive way how SMEs cope with various activities in a process of collaboration. More precisely,

this study is focused on determining what is critical in developing co-creation roles as a customer, to improve collaboration of SMEs with suppliers, partners and future partners. Besides, I want to see which those customer roles are.

Derived of the theoretical framework by Stenroos and Jaakkola (2011), theory is used to apply empirical data gathered from interviews conducted with managers of various SMEs. Relevant theory of their article is explained in the next section, both general and more focused on the customer role, just as some comments about SMEs. A more elaborated version of the way this research is done is described in the third section. Following on the method, findings from the interviews captures the fourth section. Finally, a conclusion of this study will be followed by implications and suggestions for further research to complete it. In that case the expectation is that this paper contributes to the knowledge within SMEs to better handle future collaborations with other parties.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Co-Value Creation

The process of value co-creation occurs during and after a problem solving process. Five collaborative activities constitute the process of creating co-value.¹⁰ These activities could follow each other linearly, parallel and repetitiously. Each activity has its characteristics and important actions to take into account.

Diagnosing the needs is the first of five steps. An identification of the needs and goals is necessary to know what the customer really wants and to proceed with the process. Some customers are inexperienced and need a supplier to assist the customer in formulating their problem or needs, otherwise it is possible that parties lack a mutual understanding of the goal. This might give problems later on in the process.

The second activity is designing and producing the solution. A negotiation process is needed to specify the problem and come up with an optimal value proposition for the solution. In this process, the supplier proposes different solution options, and the customer evaluates these. Although designing the solution is very time consuming, it is seen as the most important activity in creating optimal value.

The organization of the process and the resources is the third one. Organizing the problem solving process and the required resources is a key activity in the value co-creation process.¹¹ Suppliers often structure the process and identify, activate, integrate and collect relevant resources to make value creation possible.

The fourth step is managing value conflicts. Key for this activity is to deal with deviating views regarding optimal value by interacting smoothly between parties. Customers could have unrealistic expectations concerning the benefits. On the other hand, some suppliers position themselves as arrogant, while they do not appreciate any contributions by customers.

The last activity, implementing the solution, includes the way the new solution is implemented within the company. Both supplier and customer can run this process; suppliers could help the customer utilize the solution in a way that provides greater value, where the customer can utilize an advice independently of the supplier.¹²

Most parties benefit from this process in the long run. Stenroos and Jaakkola (2011) state: "It differs between direct monetary

¹ See Vargo, S.L. & Lusch, R.F. (2004), p. 14.

² See Vargo, S.L. & Lusch, R.F. (2006), p. 181.

³ See Prahalad, C.K., Ramaswamy, V. (2004), p. 4.

⁴ See Woodruff, R.B., Flint, D.J. (2006), p. 193.

⁵ See Payne, A.F., Storbacka, K., Frow, P. (2007), p. 2.

⁶ See Stenroos, L.A., Jaakkola, E. (2011), p. 23.

⁷ See Stenroos, L.A., Jaakkola, E. (2011), p. 22.

⁸ See Muller, E., Zenker, A. (2001), p. 2.

⁹ See Website European Commission. (2016)

¹⁰ See Stenroos, L.A., Jaakkola, E. (2011), p. 20.

¹¹ See Stenroos, L.A., Jaakkola, E. (2011), p. 21.

¹² See Stenroos, L.A., Jaakkola, E. (2011), p. 22.

benefits as decreased costs or increased revenues, indirect monetary benefits as usability of the solution and reliability, and non-monetary benefits as a better sense of relief due to expert support or a better image through a relationship with experts.”

2.2 Active Customers

Customers create co-value with their suppliers and partners by actively participating to the five steps within the process. In the collaboration with these other parties, customers take diverse roles, depending on the activity of the process. Moreover, it is important to know which resources are relevant and how to use them. Eventually, it has to result in an optimal value creation not just for themselves, but for their suppliers and partners as well. For the diagnose of the needs, it is of great importance that the customer acts in the role of co-diagnoser. If the customer does not provide the supplier with the necessary information about budget, schedule, usage and the context of the business, it is impossible to start. These resources are critical for customers to contribute to the value creation process.¹³

When the solution is going to be designed and produced, customer can influence this step largely. In accordance, the supplier will find and choose the best way. Customers can take the co-designer and the co-producer role in this step by respectively articulate their knowledge, interests and other details to the suppliers and by informing suppliers about existing materials to use and new industry requirements. Obviously, these proactive customers are often seen as equal partners rather than clients.

However, in the third step where the process and the resources are organized, insecure customers do not know their information and resources are that usable. This often results in a lack of involvement from the customer side.

To avoid value conflicts, customers have to make sure that in dialogue with the supplier, clear agreements are made about the expected value and required investments. Visits of experts and other consultants can contribute to the perception of the customer.

As already mentioned above, the customer could utilize an advice independently of the supplier. In this way, the customer acts as a co-implementer of the solution. However, a condition for that is that the customer needs to possess the necessary knowledge.

Eventually, after the process customers should have benefit and gained value. If this happens, customers begin to act as co-marketers by recommending suppliers and the value they bring. Moreover, customers will have more understanding of the entire process by looking at their supplier or partner. You could think of the available solutions, an understanding of the requirements and expectations, pricing, negotiating and evaluating.

2.3 Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are non-subsidary, independent firms.¹⁴

They represent 99% of all businesses in the European Union.¹⁵ The EU has a guideline how to see which firm is an SME, based on numbers of staff, turnover and balance sheet. This is shown in table 1.

Small firms are the vast majority of business enterprises in all countries. Research efforts are focused on stimulating and supporting SMEs, both at a national and at an European level.¹⁶ For SMEs it is very different to acquire information and other

resources. They are more relying on personal tips and informal mechanisms of information exchange, as these companies have limited access to costly professional information. To own a network of intra-sectoral and cross-sectoral relations is very helpful in this case.¹⁷

Table 1. Description EU for small and medium-sized enterprises.

Company category	Staff headcount	Turnover or	Balance sheet total
Medium-sized	< 250	≤ € 50 m	≤ € 43 m
Small	< 50	≤ € 10 m	≤ € 10 m
Micro	< 10	≤ € 2 m	≤ € 2 m

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Data Collection

The collection of data in this research is done by conducting semi-structured interviews at nineteen SMEs. Advantages of a semi-structured interview compared to a structured interview is that there is an option, new ideas are brought up during the interview and there is still an open space for conversation, while structured interviews are more fixed and do not allow any diversion.¹⁸ At more than 90% of the companies we conducted an interview, the interview respondent was the owner or the manager. This is quite important, while the manager or owner knows what is going on in the company at all fields, including former collaborations with suppliers, partners or customers and he or she knows how the company behaves in every situation. According to the theoretical model of Stenroos and Jaakkola (2011), described earlier in this paper as well, general interview questions are formulated based on the five activities of the process of value co-creation. For every activity, open questions are asked to the respondent how and why his or her company deals with it. In total twelve questions are asked in which the respondents have to answer as their role as a supplier. Subsequently, with a little change in design, the same twelve questions are asked again, however, now as their role as a customer. In this case there is a sample of nineteen suppliers and nineteen customers. The nineteen companies are randomly selected and operating in very different markets, which increases the variation and reliability of the sample. For this paper I will look more at the twelve questions the respondents answered in their role as a customer. That data is relevant for my research. A format of all interview questions is shown in appendix 1.

3.2 Data Analysis

The conducted interviews result in a data set with raw data slightly over 100 pages. The next step is the coding of the data, so it becomes useful. According to Corbin and Strauss (1990), there are three types of coding: open, axial and selective. The first and the second one will be used and therefore explained first. In open coding, certain observations are compared with others for similarities and differences, then they are given conceptual labels. Conceptually similar observations are in this case grouped together to form categories.¹⁹ Furthermore, from the moment on those categories are identified they form the basis for sampling. In following observations, researchers should look for identical answers and take note of differences within the observations, e.g. the length or the amount. Another positive point of open coding

¹³ See Stenroos, L.A., Jaakkola, E. (2011), p. 20.

¹⁴ See OECD SME and Entrepreneurship Outlook, Paris. (2005), p. 17.

¹⁵ See Website European Commission. (2016)

¹⁶ See Spence, L.J., Schmid, R., Habisch, P.A. (2003), p. 18.

¹⁷ See Spence, L.J., Schmid, R., Habisch, P.A. (2003), p. 19.

¹⁸ See Dooley, D. (1995), p. 111.

¹⁹ See Corbin, J., Strauss, A. (1990), p. 12.

is the decrease in subjectivity and bias, as questioning and constant comparisons are used.²⁰

In axial coding, further development of categories takes place by looking for indications of difference within categories. As soon as an analyst notes an observation, he or she needs to determine the conditions that influenced that observation. This can be the context in which it is carried out and the action. Moreover, the consequences of the observations are of importance as well. As a result, conceptual linkages become more specific.²¹

As mentioned before, the sample exists of nineteen randomly selected SMEs from various industries. The companies differ in size from two employees at one company to 190 in another. Furthermore, eleven from the nineteen firms describe their market as stable, where six name it an unstable market, two are doubting. A detailed description of the sample is shown in table 2 below.

Table 2. Sample description SMEs

SME	Industry	Size (employees)	Market description
1	Construction	50 - Medium	Stable
2	Construction	50 - Medium	Stable
3	Landscaping	14 - Small	Stable
4	Physical tools for Advertising	6 - Micro	Stable
5	Air conditioning	50 - Medium	Stable
6	Chip technology	190 - Medium	Stable
7	IT	10 - Small	Unstable, turbulent
8	Construction	15 - Small	Unstable
9	Construction	75 - Medium	Stable, movements in the market
10	IT	45 - Small	Unstable, turbulent
11	Architect	2 - Micro	
12	Chip technology	45 - Small	Stable
13	Construction	89 - Medium	Stable
14	Insurances	35 - Small	Unstable, turbulent
15	Law	5 - Micro	Stable
16	Coating	35 - Small	Not stable nor instable, movements in the market
17	Work environment facilitation	7 - Micro	Unstable, many new developments
18	Engineering	20 - Small	Stable, slow market
19	Security	10 - Small	Unstable, many new developments. Not turbulent.

The data is going to be coded per concept. Every activity is one concept, making five concepts in total. Per concept answers from all respondents are compared with each other. In this way similarities and differences are quickly identified. Similar

observations will be counted, different observations will be named separately. Besides that, according to the axial coding theory of Corbin and Strauss (1990) the conditions are checked as well, while not every general observation is the same. Eventually, it should become clear how the companies are dealing with every situation, step and activity, what the boundaries are and what they can do better. The result of the coded data analysis is described in table 3.

4. RESULTS ANALYSIS

The first two questions the respondents needed to answer were regarding the identification of the customer needs. Most companies know from experience what their demand actually is. They are going to the suppliers themselves and tell the supplier exactly what they want and how. However, these companies exist already for many years and building lots of knowledge and experience over the years. Obviously, for firms who just started it is impossible to copy this. Other respondents told their needs are identified by the supplier experience and knowledge. These suppliers are trusted by the customers, by means of conversation, everything is explained by the supplier, in which the customer agrees with the collaboration. Communication, lack of knowledge and lack of the necessary skills are seen as the largest obstacles in the diagnosis of the needs of customers. Which means that there is a difference in the perception of a certain type of knowledge field between the customer and the supplier.

The managers pointed out that most companies do not have an actual internal process when the solution is designed and produced. However, some companies send employees to their suppliers to learn from them and bring it back to their own organization. Others hire one specific employee whose job it is to make sure that the supplier finishes the job to the company its satisfaction. Four respondents mentioned their curiosity, they are constantly interfering in the design and production process. The satisfaction of the customers is guaranteed by asking questions about the progress, testing occasionally and one more experienced managers trust their suppliers due to a long lasting relationship. Lastly, more than 50% of the companies take a role as producer or director in this step of the process. They feel comfortable with taking the lead, making sure everything is under control. Honesty and openness by the supplier is very important for customers, then there are no surprises at least. Other managers expect proactive suppliers who are trustworthy. In the organization of the process and the resources, four respondents like suppliers who are taking action, provide the customer with service and satisfy to the assignment given. All other managers pointed out that a conversation results in more clarity, which eventually creates more value. Finding out which resources are relevant is according to half of the respondents a matter of experience. Some say it is due to an open atmosphere on the work floor and one marks that it is going without saying. What resources are in that case of importance is good to know. Knowledge that specialists bring to the firm is without doubt most mentioned. Moreover, communication is again a topic which is named as well. Besides, good to know is that every respondent called people, partners and a network of contacts essential resources for further development and collaboration. There is some diversity in the role the supplier takes within the organization process. Most are participating a lot, with a big role, acting as an active leader conform their assignment. Four managers marked the small role of the supplier, where three just said it depends on the case.

Managing value conflicts is the fourth point we conducted in the interview. The respondents was asked how they deal with a difference in the expected value. Seven of the respondents try to

²⁰ See Corbin, J., Strauss, A. (1990), p. 13.

²¹ See Corbin, J., Strauss, A. (1990), p. 14.

overcome this problem by handling the problem in time. They want clarity so problems can be solved during the collaboration. Three persons mentioned they solve it with the help of a clear set of rules. However, still six managers would fire the supplier and stop the work agreement. These differences in expectation can have three reasons who are brought up quite a lot. Poorly formulized agreements is one of them, if this is the case the problem starts mostly already in the beginning of the process. Some suppliers handle the case differently than the customer expected. A difference in knowledge could occur as well, this becomes clear when people mistreats appointments made during a conversation.

The last point is the optimization of the implemented solution, in which customers have various options how to do this. SMEs could ask for the supplier its advice, which is agreed in the contract at the start of the collaboration. The next option is the possibility to take training courses, which will increase the knowledge of the new innovation. A brainstorming session with the supplier will increase the efficiency. Lastly, suppliers could get the space to implement the solution within the company of the customer. This will give the supplier a higher amount of time to optimally install the innovation within the firm.

Most managers stressed out the importance to keep on innovating, keep on growing, but to stay and act as the relatively small company they are. As is shown in the description of the findings in the paragraph above, obtained from the interview sessions, SMEs hold lots of close relationships with suppliers or partners. Therefore, arrogant behavior, when people feel and act like they are more than they actually are, is counterproductive for collaboration in the future. In e.g. interview four, the manager talked about the feeling he has for certain partners and suppliers which results in him giving a specific assignment or treat to them, not just because of the product or service they deliver, but more because of the relationship build over the years and the chance of getting it back later. SMEs have less financial resources and less human resources as larger firms. The risk to innovate is bigger, as if it fails, it will be one of few, where in large organizations it will be one of many, so they can afford it. In the first paragraph of the results analysis, it could be seen that the SMEs deal with this in their approach. Firstly, when you are a small organization, you have to use the advantage of simple, direct and clear communication. Secondly, with few human resources, quality is even more important in terms of knowledge and specialism towards the supplier. Lastly, in creating co-value customers point out that the supplier has to do their job and meet the demand with an as optimal possible outcome. However, active involvement and participation is needed from the customer to guarantee this, in that way both parties make sure satisfaction from both sides is obtained.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper makes a contribution to both literature and practice by examining the critical aspects necessary for customer SMEs to develop roles in collaborating and creating co-value with suppliers and partners. Previous studies gave little explanation for SMEs how to act as a co-creator of value. Frameworks about general resources and roles were not focused on SMEs, but more at KIBS and larger organizations. Especially for SMEs it is of major importance to optimally use their own internal resources in combination with competencies of partners in order to maintain innovative.²² Therefore, a contribution with such a framework for SMEs is necessary. Certain critical roles and resources are defined as key in good relationships with suppliers

and partners in every step of collaboration. This was possible with use of the derived activities of a co-creation process in the work by Stenroos and Jaakkola from 2011, and the findings of a large scale semi-structured interview with nineteen managers of SMEs.

The first step of a process of collaboration is the most important one. If there is no clarity in the identification of a problem or a difference in perception of the value one wants to achieve, companies could better stop working together. Customers need to act as a co-diagnoser, in which own knowledge, effort and some experience are critical in developing this role. With knowledge about the problem or suggested outcome, customers can clarify in an appointment or conversation exactly what they want from their supplier, who normally already has the expected know-how. Concerning the limited resources of an average SME, they can better wait for the supplier to design a solution, as there is a reason the supplier will provide the customer with a product or service and they do not do it themselves. However, from the moment on the solution is almost designed, customers need to direct and lead the production with the knowledge obtained from experience and tests. A necessary condition is in that case that they have contracted honest and proactive suppliers, otherwise the customer cannot act as a co-producer of the solution. In creating as much value as possible, regular appointments and conversations between all parties are common when the process is organized. Partners and other network contacts will increase innovativeness and can be of competitive advantage, while this could be seen as an extra resource. Normally, it is quite hard for new SMEs to be involved in this part of the process, as experience and specialist knowledge are key in organizing the resources and process in particular. On the other hand, suppliers mostly take the active leader role, in which it is a possibility for the customer to act on the background. It could be possible that there is, despite the good agreements when identifying the problem, still a gap between the expected value of the customer and the supplier due to similar reasons as explained in that step; communication is the main problem. Pre-handling can overcome this situation by setting clear what the expectations are. At the moment the solution is ready, again knowledge, gained by training courses, can help optimize the solution within the customer its company and a role as co-implementer becomes possible.

Managers of SMEs can use this study as a guideline for future collaborations with suppliers and partners. The roles and necessary resources and capabilities to perform these roles fit perfectly with the relatively little financial and human resources most SMEs have. Knowledge about the specialism the company works in is critical in optimizing co-creation. It could be said that quality goes before quantity, while SMEs have a limited number of employees. However, with the right knowledge co-creation would not be of any problem. Moreover, without communication you could never achieve high performance collaborations because both parties need to know what is going on in every step of the process. These aspects center the development of roles as co-diagnoser, co-producer and co-implementer. In short, SMEs can collaborate properly without all the resources larger companies normally do have, as long as they keep on improving their communication skills and knowledge in the field.

²² See Muller, E., Zenker, A. (2001), p. 2.

Table 3. Observations respondents SMEs

Question:	Observation, axial between brackets:	Frequency by SME number:
1. Identification needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conversations (Trust) - Experience/Knowledge (Trust) - Demand from customer (Experience) - Not/ too little 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1/2/8/9/12/18 - 3/5/7/10/16/17 - 4/6/13/14/15/19 - 11
2. Obstacle in identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No communication (Price) - Not clear (Knowledge) - Not business related (Relationship too good) - Product/value (Lack of quality/skills) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1/8/14/15/17/19 - 2/11/12/13 - 3 - 6/7/10/16/18
3. Internal process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - One worker makes sure the job will finish (Job duty) - Interfering (Curiosity) - Learning (Knowledge) - No process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1/3/7/11/15 - 2/10/12/18 - 8/9/16/17 - 4/5/6/13/14/19
4. How to know you are satisfied?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Asking questions (Knowledge) - Testing (Critical reflection forms) - Experience (Trust) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1/3/6/7/10/11/15/17/18/19 - 2/5/8/9/12/13/16 - 4
5. Role and expectation of supplier?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Producer/Director (Lead) - Co-worker - No role - Proactive expectation (Trust) - Honesty/Openness expectation (Clear) - Quality expectation (Efficiency) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1/2/4/7/8/9/10/12/16/17/18 - 14 - 3/5/6/11/13/15/19 - 1/2/3/8/10/14 - 4/5/6/7/8/9/11/12/15/16/17/18/19 - 13
6. Process facilitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Supplier takes action/provides resources/gives service (Assignment) - Conversation/Appointment/Creating more value together (Clarity) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1/2/4/6 - 3/5/7/8/9/10/11/12/13/14/15/16/17/18/19
7. How to find relevant resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Experience - Employees speak (Open atmosphere) - Without saying 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1/3/4/6/8/9/10/12/15/17/19 - 2/7/16 - 5
8. Which resources?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communication (Clarity) - Knowledge (Specialists) - People, partners and a good network of available contacts are mentioned by everybody. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1/4/8/9/17 - 2/3/5/6/7/10/12/15/16/19
9. Participation supplier	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Big role, active leader (Assignment) - Small role (Passive) - Depends on the case 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1/4/7/9/10/12/14/15/17/18/19 - 3/6/8/16 - 2/5/13
10. How to deal with difference in expected value with supplier?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pre-handling (Clarity) - Set of rules (Strict) - Cancel work agreement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1/4/7/10/15/16/17/19 - 2/12/14 - 3/5/8/9/13/18
11. Why difference in expected value with supplier?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Poorly formulized agreements (Communication) - Difference in knowledge (Communication) - Difference in handling (Different perspective/attitude) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1/4/5/7/8/13/15/16/17 - 2/3/6/19 - 10/12/14/18
12. How to optimize solution?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Training course (Knowledge) - Giving space (Time) - Asking for advice (Contract) - Brainstorming (Increasing efficiency) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1/3/5/7/9 - 2/12/19 - 4/10/14/15 - 8/13/16/17

6. DISCUSSION

Based on the findings and outcome of this study, it could be said that SMEs now know what is important and how they need to act to create co-value from a customer perspective. However, the derived capabilities, roles and resources are a result of interviews at nineteen SMEs within one country. To come up with better established capabilities, research should be done in multiple countries and with a larger sample. In that case it can be investigated whether roles and resources differ among SMEs from various countries and regions. Another possibility is to specifically do research in different sets of markets, so that managers can use different sets of capabilities, resources and roles in every single business market they are active. Besides, this research is launched according to one single theoretical framework. All respondents could identify their process of collaboration with the activities set by Stenroos and Jaakkola (2011), so it could be said this path is taken correctly. However, to come up with a bigger study, it is optional to use other frameworks as well. Eventually this study certainly contributes to the existing literature of co-creation, as it is the first one with a set of capabilities to develop roles for SMEs in a customer role. The options explained above will improve the reliability of the research and the horizon of the set even more.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper proposes areas for future research. Researchers can choose to work further on the set of capabilities pointed out in this paper. It could be very interesting to have a specific set of guidelines how to improve communication among SMEs. Furthermore, as already mentioned before, the sample to examine critical capabilities, resources and roles can be extended abroad, regionally or to an industry study. This research is done just with a qualitative interview, for future contributions and expanded research quantitative studies are certainly necessary. If these options are taken and future research will be done, SMEs can optimize more and more co-creation processes in coming collaborations.

8. APPENDICES

Appendix 1: SMEs interview format:

Interview nr:

Voor onze bachelor studie zijn wij bezig met een onderzoek naar samenwerking onder middel en kleine bedrijven. We hebben een bepaald theoretisch proces en deze zouden we graag met u willen doorlopen. Het komt er eigenlijk op neer dat we benieuwd zijn naar jullie rol als leverancier in samenwerking met partners en klanten, zowel bedrijven als particulier. Daarnaast is uw rol als klant in samenwerking met leveranciers en partners ook van belang voor ons. Aan de hand van vijf thema's willen wij dit onderzoeken.

Naam bedrijf:

Functie geïnterviewde:

Branche / Markt:

Aantal werknemers:

Turbulentie van de markt:

(stabiele markt, in beweging, technologische ontwikkelingen naast elkaar?)

Leverancier:

Klantbehoefte identificeren:

· Hoe identificeert u de klantbehoefte bij uw klanten?

· Wat zijn barrières/obstakels in het identificeren van klant behoeftes?

Vormgeven en bedenken van een mogelijke oplossing

· Hoe verloopt het proces nadat de klantbehoefte is geïdentificeerd bij uw klanten?

· Hoe komt u erachter of de mogelijke oplossing de klantbehoefte bevredigt?

· Wat is uw rol in dit proces, wat houdt deze rol precies in volgens u? Wat verwacht u van uw klant?

Organisatie van het proces en de middelen

· Hoe faciliteert u het proces om het probleem op te lossen / om samen te werken?

· Hoe komt u erachter welke middelen relevant zijn voor de organisatie van het proces?

· Welke middelen (mensen, kennis, processen, partners?) gebruikt u in de organisatie van het proces?

· Hoe participeert de klant in het proces? (actief, grote rol, kleine rol)

Omgaan met verschil in verwachtingen

· Hoe gaat u om met verschillen in de verwachte waarde van de oplossing tussen u en de klant?

· Waardoor zou het verschil in de verwachte waarde tussen u en de klant kunnen zijn ontstaan?

Invoeren van de oplossing

· Hoe zorgt u ervoor dat de klant de oplossing succesvol kan inzetten?

Klant:

Klantbehoefte identificeren:

· Hoe wordt uw eigen klantbehoefte geïdentificeerd door uw leverancier?

· Wat zijn barrières/obstakels in het identificeren van uw klant behoeftes door uw leverancier?

Vormgeven en bedenken van een mogelijke oplossing

· Hoe verloopt het proces bij u intern nadat de klantbehoefte is geïdentificeerd door uw leverancier?

· Hoe komt u erachter of de mogelijke oplossing die uw leverancier biedt uw klantbehoefte bevredigt?

· Wat is uw rol in dit proces, wat houdt deze rol precies in volgens u? Wat verwacht u van uw leverancier?

Organisatie van het proces en de middelen

· Hoe wordt het proces gefaciliteerd om het probleem op te lossen / om samen te werken?

· Hoe komt u erachter welke middelen relevant zijn voor de organisatie van het proces intern?

· Welke middelen (mensen, processen, kennis, partners) zijn hierbij van belang?

· Hoe participeert de leverancier in het proces?

Omgaan met verschil in verwachtingen

· Hoe gaat u om met het verschil in verwachtingen in waarde tussen u en de leverancier?

· Waardoor komt het verschil in de verwachtingen in waarde tussen u en de leverancier?

Invoeren van de oplossing

· Hoe zorgt u als klant ervoor dat u de oplossing optimaal ingezet kan worden?

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