

The Network Manager and the Governance of Business Networks: Comparison with Managerial Figures in Management Literature

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ABSTRACT

Collaborating with other structures offers businesses – particularly smaller ones – excellent support to enable them to successfully face up to the challenges posed by globalised markets: by joining forces, creating systems and weaving networks of collaborative relationships with other businesses, SMEs can achieve the critical mass necessary to compete on global markets, because they can benefit from the “systemic” economies of scale that are typical of medium and large business, without losing any of the specificity that only a small manufacturing organisation can offer. However, the coordination and governance of a network is anything but simple, in view of the different types of distances (cognitive, psychological, cultural, geographical, etc.) that separate the businesses in the network. This explains the utility of a managerial figure outside the network (the Network Manager) with the ability to direct, coordinate and run the business network. This article focuses on the figure of the Network Manager, trying to define it by comparison with a few interesting managerial figures identified in the spectrum of management literature.

KEYWORDS

Business Networks, Governance, Network Manager, SME

INTRODUCTION

The globalisation of the markets has redrawn the boundaries within which economic operators move; while new forms of agreement have emerged on the supplies and sales front, there has also been a strong increase in competitive pressure.

If we look closely, we can see that globalisation is an intrinsically ambivalent phenomenon, in the sense that it has both strong positive potential and negative connotations. This takes into account the fact that not all businesses are capable of grasping the opportunities offered by the global market, transforming them into factors of competitive advantage: as a result, fractures emerge in the business world, which is increasingly divided between businesses capable of competing on the global market and those which remain on the side lines. Basically, globalisation has a lever effect, multiplying the opportunities for development and enrichment for those in a favourable position, but reducing the chances of recovery for those without specific resources and the ability to relate to others (Polese, 2004).

Among the economic operators that find it difficult to grasp the opportunities offered by globalisation, often even considering it a threat to their very survival, are the smaller businesses, which often do not possess the resources necessary to compete on enlarged markets because of their small size (Tresca, 2013).

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One potential solution that can help to overcome the size problem might be recourse to collaboration with other businesses, which represents a means of enabling smaller businesses to enter an external context, halfway between the mercantile concept of the export of goods (an increasingly simple and widespread approach adopted to enter foreign markets) and the more complex manufacturing concept, i.e. foreign direct investment (FDI), which can only be undertaken with huge resources.

By joining forces, creating systems and weaving networks of collaborative relationships with other entities, SMEs can achieve the critical mass that enables them to benefit from the “systemic” economies of scale that are typical of medium and large enterprises, without losing any of the individuality and specificity that only a small manufacturing organisation is able to offer.

A collaborative relationship between smaller businesses based on collaboration still appears difficult and hindered by various types of barriers and distances, which could render the management capability of individual businesses in the network deficient on their own. This is particularly obvious if the businesses collaborating with each other are geographically and culturally distant from each other, and therefore operate in different framework environments.

In order to reduce the cognitive, psychological and geographical distance between the various players collaborating with each other, the presence of managerial figure outside the network with the ability to coordinate and control the functioning of the network might prove useful.

In this respect, a significant grey area emerges from the many scientific works that focus on the concept of business networks regarding analysis of the managerial prerogatives that we should expect from a professional figure responsible for performing a role of strategic coordination and effective governance of a network of businesses (Meneguzzo, Cepiku, 2008; Butera, Alberti, 2012).

Management studies have on the whole tended to focus on analysis of the structures and management styles of a centralised figure, but they are deficient when it comes to investigating methods of governance that address contexts where several businesses are present. The difficulties entailed in undertaking similar studies are balanced by the significant opportunities that the results of this research could offer operators: to guide and support “almost businesses” and networks of enterprises, to help them to function as businesses capable of competing internationally and of innovating. (Butera, Alberti, 2012)

The main research goal is to offer a contribution to the systematization of the role played by the management officer in charge of the coordination and governance of a network (Network Manager) in terms of skills, functions, tasks, behaviors.

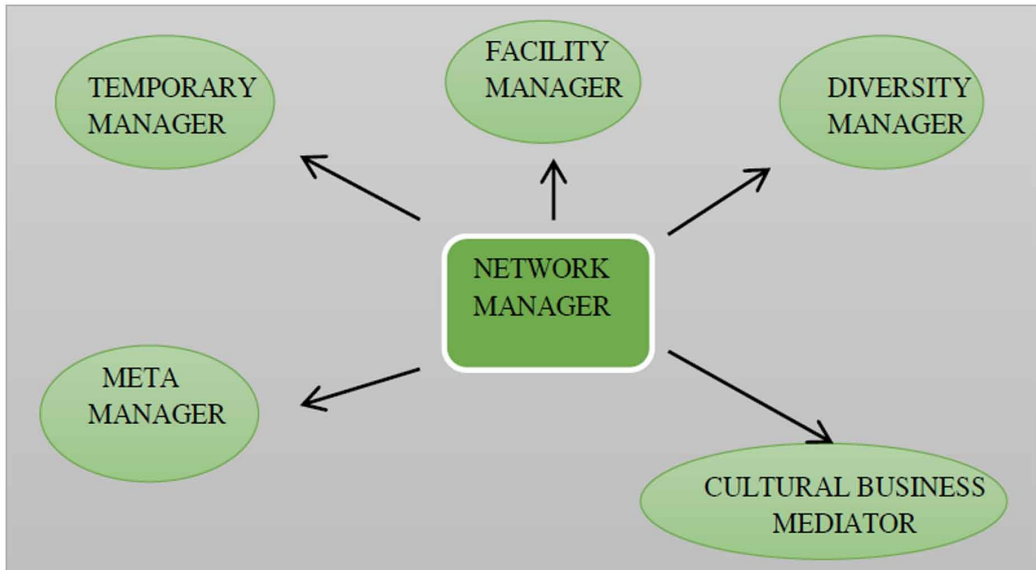
For the aforesaid goal pursuit, a survey of the management literature was carried out in order to track down potentially similar figures to the Network Manager; then a comparison was made between the figures identified and the “subject type” governance holder of a network of companies. The analysis of the connection points which emerged from the comparison led to the identification of some determinants. The consideration of the latter, properly contextualized to the specific network to be governed, could help to better delineate the role of a Network Manager, in relation to functions /tasks/skills.

A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE NETWORK MANAGER AND MANAGERIAL FIGURES IN LITERATURE.

The Network Manager has characteristics that allow confrontation with figures engaged in business governance. We refer, in particular, to figures such as: *Temporary manager* (Quarta, 2010; D’Egidio et al., 1997), *Facility manager* (Antoldi, Cerrato, Depperu, 2010; Cannatelli & Antoldi, 2010), *Diversity manager* (Taylor & Stacy, 1991; David & Robin, 1996), *Cultural business mediator* (Katan, 2004) and *Meta-manager* (Butera, & Alberti, 2012) (see Figure 1).

In this article, we will try to briefly put the profile of these managerial figures into context, in order to identify potential elements of similarity/dissimilarity with a Network Manager (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Overview diagram. SOURCE: Our analysis



2.1. The Network Manager as a Temporary Manager


Temporary management is a managerial and business practice that consists in temporarily entrusting the management of a (single) company, or part of a company or of a project, to highly qualified and motivated external managers, in order to take advantage, for a finite period of time, of the skills necessary to respond to a specific need, without necessarily having to burden themselves with overheads or to permanently modify their organisational structure (Quarta, 2010; D'Egidio, Moldeni, Treglia, Vergani, 1997). Corporate management thus becomes “short-term” and the figure of the Temporary Manager emerges, a professional figure recruited by the businessman to deal with a particular situation or a short-term project: when the situation has been resolved or the project concluded, the contract is terminated. Businesses usually have recourse to a Temporary Manager to deal with moments that are particularly crucial for the company (both negative and positive), such as: the start-up of a company, transition management, project management, crisis management, skill management, change management and generational change management.

The Temporary Manager outlined here could be compared to a Network Manager in as much as he or she is considered a figure outside the network who is charged by the members of the network to manage, for a limited period, particular problems that the network has to deal with in the realisation of specific projects.

In particular, if a network sets itself the goal of introducing the businesses in the network to foreign markets, as part of an internationalisation programme, the Network Manager – whom we could describe as a Temporary Network Manager – will act as a bridge, helping to facilitate relations and fostering dialogue between the businesses in the network and between them and the meta-systems and sub-systems that make up the framework environment in which the network operates.

Should the network’s internationalisation programme also envisage recourse to exports, the Network Manager could be compared to a so-called Temporary Export Manager, a professional figure within the reach of the small and micro businesses in the network, who joins the company for a limited period, to support the networks in their internationalisation strategy, helping them to outline an export development plan, to identify the most promising destinations even based on

Figure 2. Synthesis scheme. SOURCE: Our analysis

NETWORK MANAGER					
in the role of:					
					
	TEMPORARY MANAGER	FACILITY MANAGER	DIVERSITY MANAGER	CULTURAL BUSINESS MEDIATOR	META MANAGER
FRAMEWORK VARIABLE	TEMPORARY NATURE OF INTERVENTION	TRUST	DIVERSITY	CROSS-CULTURAL	MEDIATION
	Temporary governance of the network: limited to implementation of the project undertaken; limited to solution of problems related to the point reached in its life cycle by the network	Promotion and strengthening of the relationship, investing in building up trust between the parties	Management of diversity existing between members of the network (even related to the managerial style adopted)	Fostering collaboration between entities from different cultures, through linguistic, cultural and business knowledge.	Impressing a basic strategy on the system; governing the political processes inside the network; creating the conditions to foster the expression of the network's potential.

the “strength” of the network, and to organise a dedicated export office. The Temporary Export Manager is a professional figure who is becoming increasingly important, in Italy in particular, because Italian Law demands his direct intervention in the running of companies that are interested in implementing an internationalisation strategy, if they wish to benefit from an interest-free subsidy known as an “internationalisation voucher.” The Network Manager responsible for coordinating the internationalisation programme of a network of SMEs should have a marked talent for problem solving, decision making and relating to others; he should also have a strong affinity with both the foreign market (socio-cultural, language affinity, etc.) and the original context. This affinity underpins the planning and operational management of the relations and links that need to be forged and consolidated, becoming fundamental because of both the peculiar nature of the network, which the Temporary Network Manager must try to enhance, and the expectations of the entities operating in the context, with which relations and bonds must be established. The Temporary network Manager

should have excellent entrepreneurial and leadership skills, because he is charged, on a temporary basis, with performing the role of “meta-entrepreneur”, i.e. a manager chosen to take charge of running not only a single business but a network of different businesses. He or she must therefore have the managerial or leadership skills and authority of an entrepreneur, which are necessary to perform the activities typical of the network. It is essential to establish a relationship of trust between the poles of the network and the Network Manager, in order to enable the latter to successfully perform his role of facilitator of the relations between the network and the interlocutors in its framework environment.

Whatever the meta-goals pursued by the network (the implementation of an internationalisation programme, or any other goal), the Network Manager could be considered a Temporary Manager inasmuch as he has been invited by the members of the network to take charge of the network dynamics typical of the particular phase of its life cycle that the network has reached. His involvement will therefore be “short-term”, limited to the solution of the problems typical of one or more phases in the network’s life (Tresca R., 2015).

In his role as Temporary Network Manager, the Network Manager cannot be considered a simple network consultant: in fact, unlike a traditional consultant who limits his intervention to suggesting to the poles of the network the most advantageous decisions to any problems that have arisen, he would manage and execute in person, in virtue of the operating powers and the responsibility invested in him by the members of the network. Moreover, as the Temporary Network Manager, the Network Manager would have to guarantee a sort of exclusivity regarding the relationship established with a given network; in other words he would have to guarantee that his relationship with the network is unique and that he is not working simultaneously for more than one network.

And finally, the Temporary Manager should operate correctly from both a deontological and a professional perspective: the short-term nature of his intervention, the crucial nature of the areas affected and the degree of sensitivity of the information at his disposal might provoke very serious damage if the manager were to pursue personal objectives. In this regard, the Temporary Network Manager might act in a way that is not transparent, trying to create the premises to renew his contract, or even to transform it into a stable consultancy contract. In order to avoid similar behaviour the network must envisage safeguards, even considering the inclusion of specific clauses in the contract establishing that the Temporary Network Manager must transfer all the information in his possession constantly and must always manage relations in the network’s interest, so that he can be considered its representative.

Obviously, in his role as a Temporary Manager responsible for the temporary running of a network, the Network Manager is a more complex figure than a Temporary Manager operating within a single company, if only because he has to manage situations of greater organisational complexity: because he does not work for a single client but for a network, he must deal with several interlocutors at the same time, working so that concepts such as equality, correct revenue sharing and shared competencies can be applied equally, and combatting the old-fashioned individualism and competitive antagonism that has always accompanied SMEs.

Because his work will entail laying the foundations for equal collaboration from the very early days of the network, attenuating or even eliminating any initial and inevitable contrasts, it is obvious that his skills must include a clear capacity for mediation, which will be even more important than the skills required of the Temporary Manager of a single business.

And because he is linked primarily to a project shared by several businesses, the Network Manager must have specific competence regarding particular technical aspects, such as:

- Management of the drafting of an initial contract
- Management of inter-company processes
- Strong focus on the end goal
- Assessment and distribution of the necessary investment (of both economic and human capital)
- Distribution of competencies and management of problems related to copyright

The duration of the mandate is generally longer than that of a Temporary company Manager in view of the fact that a network project usually lasts 3 years on average, whereas the length of a Temporary Manager's contract is usually 1 year.

To conclude, we could say that, compared to a Temporary Manager charged with the "temporary" running of a single business, the professional effort demanded of a Network Manager is greater and lasts longer, and that his professional figure is more complete.

2.2. The Network Manager as a Facility Manager

The basic condition if any collaboration between SMEs is to succeed in the creation of a relationship of trust between the entities that make up the network; this is recognised as a real bonding element capable of preventing the emergence of opportunistic behaviour, which could be detrimental to the creation of network value.

However, trust is not a natural phenomenon but has to be built up gradually over time, the result of continuous and frequent interaction between the parties (mainly informal initially). The latter could be encouraged by specific activities conducted by an entity outside the network (an individual or an organisation), whom management literature identifies with the term "network Facilitator" (Antoldi et al., 2011), with characteristics that reflect an affinity with the Network Manager. In many cases this is a figure – introduced by McEvel and Zaheer (2004) and also defined by them as "Architects of Trust" – whose primary role is to promote and strengthen relations between businesses, fostering negotiations between the parties and helping the members of a network to create opportunities to foment mutual trust. Facilitating interaction between the parties and creating a social context that is favourable to collaboration are fundamental drivers for the network's success, which serve to lessen the probability of opportunistic behaviour, which are often behind the failure of any network, and to facilitate cooperation between entities and the consolidation of collaborative relations. As we learn from negotiation theories, the success of a relationship depends on a capacity for coordination and cooperation between the parties (Adair, & Brett, 2005). From a purely operational perspective, the Network Facilitator's job will therefore be to promote meetings, discussions and debate and to simplify their implementation.

The role of the network Facilitator is crucial, above all in the very early stages of a network's life, when every effort must be focused on building up relations between the partners, investing in the gradual organisation of the social context of the relationship that emerges from the daily dynamics of the interpersonal and inter-organisational relations between the parties (Castaldo, 2004). In other words, the position taken and the activities performed by the network Facilitator undergo significant changes as one stage of a network's evolutionary process evolves into the next, gradually decreasing as the relationship of trust between the members of the network is consolidated (Cannatelli, & Antoldi, 2010).

In the light of the above, we could therefore consider the Network Manager as a network Facilitator who is engaged primarily in managing the early stages of a network's life cycle, whose role gradually decreases as the relationship of trust between the parties achieves full maturity.

2.3. The Network Manager as a Diversity Manager

Management literature contemplates another interesting managerial figure, the Diversity Manager (Cox & Stacy, 1991; Mandrell and Kohler-Gray, 1990; Etsy, 1988), who is a managerial figure responsible for actively and strategically tackling the inevitable diversities (even related to the management styles adopted) that exist inside any organisation, with the objective of turning them into a competitive advantage throughout the system.

Starting from the assumption that business decisions must be taken in a climate of trust, acceptance and appreciation, Diversity management becomes a management model which, by considering the differences between the parties as precious assets for success, enables an organisation to take them on board, in order to learn from them and to grow thanks to them. The principle underlying this model

of governance can be summed up as follows: “We are all on the same team with our differences – not despite them” (Thomas and Ely, 1996, p. 10).

Basically, we could say that Diversity Management can be considered the active, conscious development of a far-sighted managerial process, which focusses on the strategic and communicative value of the acceptance of differences and the use of certain differences and resemblances as a potential value of the organisation, a process that creates added value for the business (or the organisation in general).

The logical process that underpins the implementation of a similar management practice emerges from this definition. In other words, the implementation of a similar approach to the management of diversity must respect certain potential steps, which succeed each other in a well-structured logical sequence. First of all, it is necessary to recognise the existence of differences (and/or similarities) within the organisation, in order to raise awareness among participants of the need to consider diversities as potential critical factors for the creation of added value throughout the organisation.

Acceptance of the existing differences and their appreciation (sequential to awareness of their importance as a means of increasing the systemic value) is the basic condition for achievement of effective management of the diversities noted. In other words, high awareness of the existence and importance of differences is a necessary condition, but it is not sufficient to acquire the right value, which is the result of proper, efficient diversity management. This means, in particular, incorporating ideas and practices related to diversity into managerial and learning practices inside the network and its environment in the best possible way. In detail, it will be necessary to select/compose the specific mix of diversities that can provide a strategic advantage, boosting the organisation’s ability to reach its set objectives (Thomas, 2006: 122), and to then define the activities to be undertaken in order to implement an effective strategy (for the business or network), which can translate into an asset for the identity of the business or network in question.

From a purely organisational perspective, the Diversity Manager will therefore aim to build up a network structure supported by a mentality based on (Cox & Blake 1991):

- Pluralism: mutual learning among members of the network
- Full structural integration of all schools of thought, so that they are well represented inside the network
- Absence of prejudice and discrimination in the system
- Equal identification of minorities

The means to be used are essentially the following:

1. Leadership (the support and authentic commitment to diversity of the top management of the businesses in the network)
2. Training (the management and enhancement of diversity in the network)
3. Research (the constant and up-to-date collection of information and professional experience in the various schools of management thought present in the network in order to pinpoint the various potential problems and to identify appropriate solutions in the education process)
4. Analysis of and changes to current management theories
5. Follow-up (programmed periodical checks in the network through focus groups)

To conclude, one of the duties of the Network Manager, in his role as Diversity Manager, will be to attract, retain and combine diversities which, if suitably managed, can generate a mix of unique, inimitable resources and skills, which can create competitive advantage for the entire network.

2.4. The Network Manager as a Cultural Business Mediator

Numerous types of diversity need to be dealt with at the heart of any network, and cultural diversity is among the most significant, above all in the case of networks that are the result of cooperation between businesses in different countries.

In this regard, literature contemplates a professional figure, albeit referred to as a single business, who possesses characteristics that make him comparable to a Network Manager: the so-called Cultural business mediator. He is a figure who, in addition to possessing cultural and economic experience, is also able to transfer “trust”; in other words, he is a person in whom the other business interlocutors have confidence for the development and evolution of negotiations. His role is to create trust and to reduce the risk of resistance, building up what amounts to a “collaboration space” between the parties, particularly in their business contacts and in international trading networks.

If we look closely, we can see that the Cultural business mediator combines the characteristics of two other professional figures, the cultural mediator and the commercial intermediary, blending the two. In particular, he has the linguistic-cultural skills of the cultural mediator, which are essential to facilitate and foster the success of early meetings and the subsequent development of the relationship between entities from different cultures. He takes on board the commercial intermediary’s economic business knowledge, which is equally useful to guarantee the good outcome of the relationship established between the parties.

Basically, the Network Manager, as a cultural business mediator, is much more than a mere interpreter and much more than a commercial intermediary; he is a person who facilitates communication, comprehension and action between people or groups with different languages and culture. The role of the mediator is performed by interpreting the expressions, intentions, perceptions and expectations of each cultural group in relation to the other, establishing and balancing communications between them. In order to function as a link, the mediator must understand both cultures, being to a certain extent “bicultural”, a person worthy of trust, who represents and substitutes it (Katan, 2004).

2.5. The Network Manager as a Meta-Manager

The expression Meta-management has been used in literature when describing the governance of networks; this term refers in particular to “a combination of meta-managerial roles whose fundamental duty is to ensure that the network of businesses adapts dynamically to changes in the environmental contexts” (Norman, 1979).

The so-called Meta-manager would be responsible for the performance of meta-managerial activities; this figure could be identified with various entities, such as: the Chambers of Commerce, business associations, development agencies and leading companies that collaborate or compete with each other. Whatever the specific figure chosen to perform these meta-managerial duties, it will identify a managerial profile that could merge with that of a Network Manager.

In particular, it has been underlined that the role of a Meta-manager varies according to the configuration adopted by the business network for which this type of governance is deemed necessary. The significant determining elements can be limited to the following (Butera & Alberti, 2012):

- The point reached in its life cycle by the business network,
- The sector from which the poles of the network originate,
- The profile of the network poles (managerial characteristics and strategic profile),
- The degree of openness to the non-local and international context.

The first element refers to the network’s life cycle, recognising the existence of a close correlation between the main activities that must be performed by the Meta-manager and the particular point in its life cycle that the network has reached. Each stage of a network’s life cycle requires that a number

of specific activities/competences/capabilities be performed by the Meta-manager as a priority before others (Tresca, 2015).

The second element focuses on the sector from which the poles of the network originate. Starting from the assumption that the type of production performed by the network entails tackling different types of problems, the Meta-manager must harmonise his intervention, taking into due consideration the core business of the network that he is responsible for running.

In terms of managerial characteristics and its strategic profile, the profile of the network poles will trigger managerial efforts of varying levels of intensity. From this perspective, networks made up of small businesses with little link between them might, for example, have greater meta-managerial needs (Butera Alberti, 2012).

The fourth element, which considers the network's degree of openness to the non-local, international context, underlines the Meta-manager's ability to support networks that are projected into environments and markets that cross local boundaries.

Whatever the particular configuration of the network, a network Meta-manager will have to perform the following activities:

1. Impressing a basic strategy on the network;
2. Taking charge of the governance of the network's internal political processes, managing the distribution of power and resources;
3. Creating the cultural, strategic and organisational conditions favourable to express and enhance the potential of the network.

These are certainly complex activities; while they highlight all the difficulties entailed by the strategic running of a business network, they also oblige the Meta-manager to adopt managerial behaviour inspired by principles such as:

- Continuous interaction with the network's key interlocutors, both public and private, in order to generate an effective process to learn and enhance the identity of the system;
- A firm determination to pursue the project for strategic governance of the network, even in the face of resistance to change;
- Calibrated management of communications, particularly in situations where the generation of consensus is critical;
- The representation of the political, social and economic forces working within the network (Butera Alberti, 2012).

The complexity of the role of an MM, generated by the large number of duties to perform, the heterogeneity of the mechanisms that need to be activated, the variety of interlocutors with whom to dialogue, the search for knowledge sharing, complementarity and synergies between the poles of the network, and so on, is associated with a series of obstacles that act as a brake on its activities, such as (Visconti, 1996):

- A significant propensity for individualistic attitudes, which eventually limit the impact of any intervention by the business network as a whole;
- The need to coordinate traditionally divergent positions, like those typical of public institutions and private organisations, has consequences in terms of knowledge sharing, decision making and the non-optimal use of resources;
- The difficulty of undertaking continuous action, due to an extreme articulation of management and a continuous striving for legitimisation, can provoke possible delays and resistance to change.

Awareness of the difficulties of meta-managerial activities and of the existence of many obstacles that can hinder their implementation should however act as a stimulus to research, which must suggest the best managerial practices to be adopted to achieve effective network governance (see Figure 2).

CONCLUSION

It is well-known that the collaboration between companies is considered one of the privileged ways through which business units (especially of small size) meet the challenges of the globalization of markets: SMEs can benefit through networks both from the advantages of companies of large dimensions (economies of scale system) and the benefits arising from the specific characteristics of small businesses.

However, the governance of an enterprise network is really complex, having to put together inevitable differences among the participants to better manage complex networks and distances of various kinds (cognitive, psychological, cultural, geographic) among the companies belonging to the networks.

Hence the usefulness of the presence of a managerial figure outside the network (neutral), a NM, with a capacity of planning, coordination and governance of the network.

Since this is a managerial figure, whose presence is more and more urgent to ensure a reticular governance of success, we believe that increasingly directed management studies should concentrate on this figure: to give details of the connotations (tasks, functions, skills); to suggest both managerial instruments, suitable to support its role as a strategic guide of the network, and effective strategies to manage the increasingly accelerated dynamic of innovation involving the members of the network.

The research was aimed at outlining the figure of a NM identifying, in particular, the main tasks, functions and responsibilities covered by his role.

To achieve that aim, a comparison was made between the NM and some managerial subjects, found in the national and international literature, performing activities of coordination and managerial governance which have intriguing connotations that allow a useful comparison with the figure of reference.

In particular, the research has shown those prerogatives, which typify five managerial figures, which could meet the figure of a manager called to handle a business network.

More in detail, a network manager will be:

- A *Temporary manager* to the extent that the governance of the network that he controls is limited in time, being conditioned to implementation of a project or to solve problems related to one particular phase in the life cycle of the network;
- A *Facility manager* if his role is mainly to promote and strengthen the relationship between partners, investing in building up trust among the parties;
- A *Diversity Manager* who is required to manage the diversity existing among members of the network (also related to the managerial style adopted);
- A *Cultural Business Mediator* if he works to encourage collaboration among entities from different cultures, through linguistic, cultural and business knowledge;
- A *Meta-Manager* to the extent that he will be mostly engaged: to impress a basic strategy on the system; to govern the political processes inside the network; to create the conditions to encourage the development of the network's potential.

The conclusions of the research work could be for both managerial operators of corporate networks and experts of network dynamics, and get to drive business networks to function as subjects capable of international competitiveness and continuous innovation.

Future studies will have to analyse more in detail how network managers will have to face emerging social and technological trends affecting the innovation dynamics of the network members (e.g., social media, open innovation) and find out effective strategies to react.

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