

The customer perspective – an effective and efficient way to differentiate for companies in the globalization era

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Abstract: Anywhere in the world and in any market, the firms are facing more and more a major challenge to meet growing customer demand towards addressing specific business or operational needs of their customers. In a globalization era, a firm's customers are more oriented on how to create value for their own customers and such they are looking for an approach shift from their providers. Nowadays, the customers are expecting from their providers to better understand the value creation process in their organization. Through knowledge combination, the provider and the customer are acting like partners in the co-production of a customer solution to solve a specific customer business requirement. The expected approach is for

the provider to create value not for the customer but together with the customer. Even though a number of driving forces requires the shift of a firm's focus towards taking the perspective of the customers of that firm, it is not an easy task for any firm no matter the market it is operating in or the geographical area the firm is covering. But this shift could represent one effective and efficient way for the firm to differentiate in the market and to be rewarded with achieving a competitive advantage to be sustained over a longer period of time.

Keywords: value creation, sustainable competitive advantage, customer solutions.

JEL: L10, D40, M10

1. Introduction

Peter Drucker once wrote:

“There is only one definition of a business purpose: to create a customer... What the business thinks it produces is not of first importance – especially not to the future of the business and to its success. What the customer thinks he is buying, what he considers value, is decisive – it determines what a business is, what it produces and whether it will prosper”.

In most industries, some players are more profitable than others, regardless the average profitability of industry (Bharadway et al, 1993). According to these authors, the superior performers have something special and hard to imitate that allows them to differentiate themselves from their competitors that is referred in strategy literature to as sources of competitive advantages. The firms aiming for this differentiation in the industries they are operating in are in constant loop to find new ways to compete and to be successful. As Day (2004) argues the firms that have a strong focus on achieving the competitive advantage in the marketplace should consider a shift from the traditional approach on tangible resources towards building new core competences such as intangible

processes and relationships in order for them to enjoy success for a longer period of time.

Considering Drucker's quote from above that the reason that firm exists is to satisfy the customer, Wodruff (1997) sees the next major source of sustainable competitive advantage coming from a more outward orientation, specifically toward customers. This dissertation is an investigation into the potential of using the customer perspective as an effective and efficient way to differentiate against competition within the boundaries defined below.

This paper takes a managerial perspective for the discussion of the customer perspective, as the people on high management positions in the firm “must be able to act on the opportunities and threats; to be able to seize them by reconfiguring both tangible and intangible assets to meet new challenges” (Harreld et al (2007, p. 25).

The customer perspective – as a complete subject for discussion – is beyond the scope of any single paper. The field of inquiry in this paper is thus narrowed to the discussion of the customer perspective in the context of the developing and implementing customer solutions defined in the extant literature as integrated combination of goods and services designed to meet customer's

specific business needs (Miller et al, 2002). The rationale behind is the one Nordin & Kowalkowski (2010) suggest that in order for firms to address the challenges they are facing from the external environment such as the intense competition and lower margins they are trying to differentiate themselves by developing customer solutions rather than stand-alone products or services.

As the approaches of using customer perspectives when designing and implementing customer solutions varies from industry to industry, this paper narrows further the discussion to one single industry, specifically Romanian Information Technology (IT) sector. The main reason explaining the selection of this industry is that building the related internal capabilities towards offering customer solutions in the Information Technology (IT) sector provides the firm higher advantages against competition (Ceci & Prencipe, 2008).

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. A review of the extant literature on the main concepts of this paper is performed in Section 2. The following section (Section 3) covers an empirical study of the customer perspective in the particular context of the Romanian IT industry including the research objectives, the research design and the demographic data analysis. The findings from literature review and research results are discussed together afterwards in this section. At the end of this section, the conclusions from these findings are provided and based on them a set of recommendations are proposed in Section 4. The research limitations and the opportunities for future research are covered in Section 5. The overall conclusion is provided in the last section of this paper (Section 6).

2. Background

2.1. Sources of sustainable competitive advantage

Within the strategic management literature one of the most widely accepted theoretical perspectives on competitive advantage (Priem & Butler, 2001) is the resource-based view of the firm (Barney, 1988; Diericks & Cool, 1989; Lippman & Rumelt, 1982; Reed & DeFillippi, 1990). The first attempt at formalizing the resource-based view of the firm (RBV) belongs to Wernerfelt (1984). He argued that firms may earn above normal returns by identifying and acquiring resources that are critical to the development of demanded products. The second belongs to Barney (1991) who stated that not all firm resources hold the potential of sustainable competitive advantage. Instead, they must possess four attributes: value, rareness, imitability, and substitutability (Barney, 1991) based on two fundamentals assumptions: that resources (and capabilities) are heterogeneously distributed across firms and that they are imperfectly mobile. Similarly, Peteraf (1993) argues that there are four conditions underlying sustainable competitive advantage: superior resources; ex-post limits to competition (including imperfect imitability and imperfect substitutability), imperfect mobility and ex-ante limits to competition.

In regards to theoretical approaches within the resource-based view, the first was Barney's VRIO framework. Barney argued that in addition to simply possessing valuable, rare, inimitable (which by then included non-substitutable) resources, a firm also needed to be organized in such a manner that it could exploit the full potential of those resources, if it was to attain a competitive

advantage (Barney, 1997; Barney & Wright, 1998). A second theoretical approach was proposed by Teece et al (1997) explaining how combination of competences and resources can be developed, deployed, and protected – the dynamic capabilities framework. According to these authors, the competitive advantage of firms is seen as resting on distinctive processes (ways of coordinating and combining), shaped by the firm's (specific) assets positions (such as the firm's portfolio of difficult-to-trade knowledge assets and complementary assets), and the evolution path(s) it has adopted or inherited. Whether and how a firm's competitive advantage is eroded depends on the stability of market demand, and the ease of replicability (expanding internally) and imitability (replication by competitors). Building on both set of scholars' work, Eisenhardt & Martin (2000) argued, that resources are no real value to the firm in isolation and that their latent value could only be made available to the firm via its idiosyncratic dynamic capabilities which are defined as "the organizational and strategic routines by which firms achieve new resource configurations as markets emerge, collide, split, evolve, and die" (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000, p. 1107).

One approach found in the extant literature is to extend the resource-based view towards a more outward orientation as the one proposed by Slater (1997). As a response to the environmental changes, this author suggests that a firm should have a market-oriented culture, which consists of three components: (a) continuous learning about customers, (b) a commitment to customer innovation, and (c) a process-focused organization. According to this author, a firm focusing on these three items will provide

superior customer value and will create sustainable competitive advantage. Similarly, Woodruff (1997) considers customer value as the next source for competitive advantage. In Woodruff's view, the customer value takes the perspective of the customers of a firm, namely their expectations in regards to the use of the product or the service of that firm. By having a good understanding of the customer's requirements and needs through continuous learning, a commitment to provide innovative products to customers and a focus on the customer value process, the firm will provide superior customer value and thus will be rewarded with superior performance as well as a sustainable competitive advantage. Therefore, the idea of the customer value extends the RBV toward customers, as one way in which competitive advantage can be achieved and sustained (Slater, 1997).

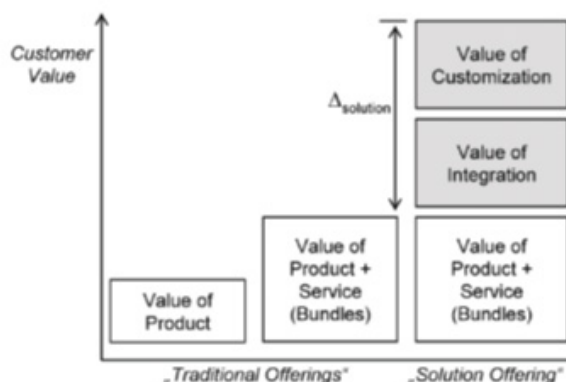
2.2. The concept of customer value

In the extant literature, there is no single commonly acknowledged definition of the concept of customer value. As Woodruff (1997) outlines there are a number of similarities among these definitions such as the perception of the customer value by the customers themselves rather than something determined by the provider. Much more, this author argues that this perception requires usually a trade-off between what the customer receives such as quality, benefits, worth, utilities and what he gives up to acquire and use the product such as the price of that product. Differences could be pointed out as well. For the scope of this paper, one difference is related to the circumstances within which the customers think about value (Woodruff, 1997).

In the context of offering customer solutions, the definition provided in section 1 highlights two key dimensions, the degree of integration and the degree of customization. Sawhney (2006) states that the value of integration and the value of customization represent the difference between the ‘whole’

(the value of the solution) and the ‘sum of the parts’ (the value of component products and services), as presented in Figure 1. According to Davies (2004) IS providers earn high profits when the value of the integrated package exceeds the value of individual components.

Figure 1 – Value added of solutions
(Burianek, 2011)



2.3. The customer perspective in the value creation context

“A process perspective on a business is the customer’s perspective [...] A process perspective requires that we start with customers and what they want from us and work backward from there” (Hammer, 1996, p. 12). Considering that the starting point when a firm’s focus is the customer perspective in designing a customer solution is not a product, but a desired outcome for a customer (Foote et al, 2001), the customer value involves two new dimensions. The first relates to the customer’s internal efficiency and cost structure and the other one relates to the customer’s external effectiveness and output, both of them allowing the customer to create new and more competitive offerings

(Normann, 2001). This author argues that the focus on customer’s business involves a change in the organization of value creation in which the customer is seen as a co-producer of value and a shift from a good-dominant logic to a service-dominant logic perspective. In good-dominant logic, the customer is a passive consumer who is targeted, segmented and marketed to and so the customer constitutes an operand resource that has to be acted upon to produce an effect (Vargo & Lusch, 2009). In contrast, the service-dominant logic views customers as operant resources, that is, dynamic resources that have the capability to act upon others, and therefore embraces a “market with” orientation in which the customer is seen as a partner who creates value in collaboration with the supplier and both parties enter into a dialogue

(Jacob & Ulaga, 2008). In line with these authors, Grönroos (2008) argues that customers actively assess the value of goods they buy on the basis of the solution and performance they provide in use – meaning that no matter whether they purchase goods or services, customers always acquire service experiences. Service is defined as the basic denominator of all exchange and therefore encompasses experiences arising from direct interaction with service providers as well as interaction with goods providers that become mechanism for service (Ballantyne & Varey, 2008). In this context of exchange service for service, service is considered to be the intangible elements that are exchanged between the customer and provider with the goods/service benefits being purchased (Lusch & Vargo, 2006).

The value being co-created by customer and supplier in an interactive process also implies that the providers can only make value propositions, defined as a collection of benefits that is promised to the customer in return for the payment (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2006). In the context of offering customer solutions, there is a shift in the value proposition from offering physical products, spare parts, and support services to delivery of performance, optimization and productivity (Bennett et al, 2001; Oliva & Kallenberg, 2003). According to Hünerberg & Hüttmann (2003) three value propositions can be differentiated in the context of integrated solutions: (a) usage based (related to the intensity of using the integrated solution); (b) performance based (related to the performance levels of the customer solutions); and (c) value based (related to the customer economic results of using the solution such cost savings realized, revenues generated etc.). Anderson et al (2006) argue that to make customer value propositions

persuasive, the providers must be able to first demonstrate and after that to document them using value word equations.

Ballantyne & Aitken (2007) argue that when considering a customer perspective in the context of offering customer solutions, the providers have to successfully coordinate the compilation of resources for the customer and to develop strong relationships and networks with customers and suppliers. With customers, the providers enter into a dialogue as well as co-create service experiences and, thus ultimately, value through direct or indirect (for example, via goods) interaction. With suppliers they share and integrate operant resources such as specialized skills and knowledge (Cova & Sale, 2008a). Furthermore, Normann (2000) argues that for co-creating the value, the relationship between the players is more complex; it is more interdependent and reciprocal rather than sequential and it does not take the form of value chains but of networks in order to develop value propositions. Thus, all parties involved in economic exchange are resource-integrating and service-providing enterprises that have the common purpose of value co-creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2008b).

2.4. Key success factors for an effective customer perspective based differentiation

As suggested by a number of authors (Galbraith, 2002; Sawhney, 2006), when choosing the customer perspective to differentiate in the market the provider's focus should not on the product itself but actually on the customer and his requirements and these are the basis of defining all the value creation activities. In line with this view, Tuli et al (2007) argue that if the aim of a firm is to

satisfy a customer's business needs, the firm should focus on the customer's value creation processes, defined as a series of activities performed by the customer to achieve a particular goal (Payne et al, 2008).

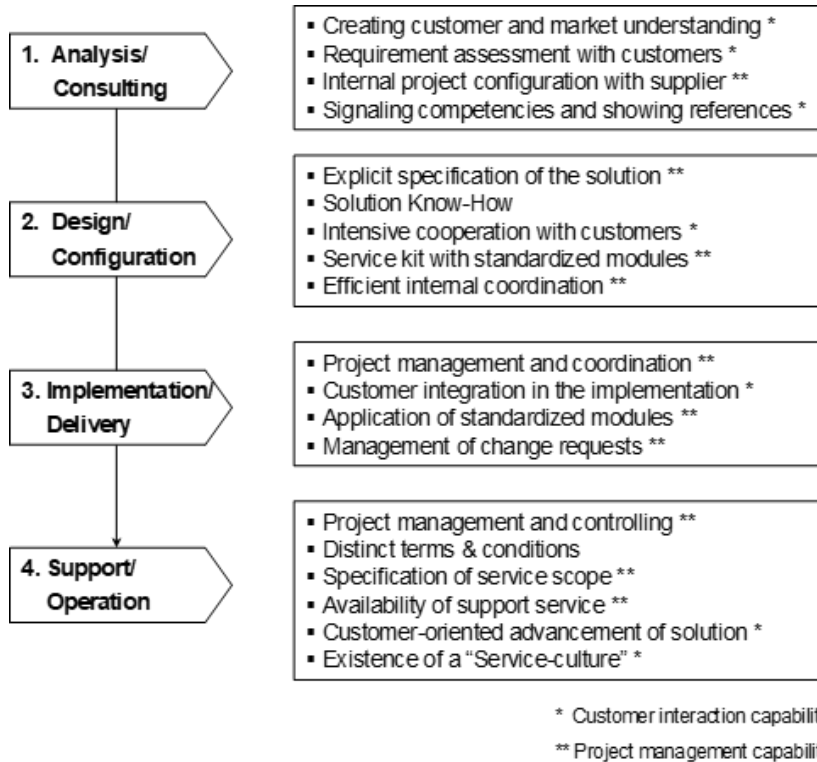
In the context of offering customer solutions from a customer perspective, most researchers proposed sequential processes to describe the development and implementation of an integrated solution. According to Sawhney (2006), the solution development process begins with the analysis of a customer problem by defining customer outcomes and mapping customer activities and ends with the identification of products and services needed to solve the entire problem, before moving on the integration (implementation) stage. Similarly, Storbacka (2011) proposes a four-stage process to create integrated solutions: develop solutions, create demand, sell solutions and deliver.

Based on an empirical research, Tuli et al (2007) demonstrated that an integrated solution involves "a set of customer-supplier relational processes comprising (1) customer requirements definition, (2) customization and integration of goods and/or services and (3) their deployment, and (4) post-deployment customer support and all of which are aimed at meeting customers' business needs" (p. 5). These authors observed that the difference resides in two relational processes that many suppliers underemphasize, but considered crucial by the customers: requirements definition and post-deployment support. They are in agreement with Brady et al, (2005b) who propose a four-stage process for developing and deploying an integrated solution throughout its lifecycle that include: strategic engagement phase (pre-bid activities); value proposition phase (bid or offer

activities); systems integration phase (project execution activities); and operational service phase (post-project activities). Based on the work of Tuli et al (2007), Burianek et al (2011) derived a four-step iterative process of value creation comprising (a) analysis/consulting, (b) design/configuration, (c) implementation/delivery, and (d) support/operation.

Grönroos (1984) points out that in many cases, customers' perceptions of service delivery processes may be more important determinants of their assessment of service quality than the outcomes derived from the service delivery. Therefore, identifying the success critical activities within each step of this four-stage process is crucial (Burianek et al, 2011). Figure 2 highlights a number of factors these authors identified through conducting an empirical research.

Figure 2 – Critical success factors for creating effective solutions
(Burianek et al, 2011)



As Tuli et al (2007) suggest, in the context of designing customer solutions, the customers consider the fulfilment of their business needs a key metric for evaluating a customer solution's effectiveness.

3. The customer perspective in the it industry

As highlighted in section 1, the focus industry of this paper to conduct the empirical study is the IT industry in general and Romania market in particular.

3.1. Research objectives

Following the literature review as well as based on the findings of other similar

research projects such as Tuli et al (2007) in the U.S.A. and Burianek et al (2011) in Germany, in order for firms to effectively use the customer perspective when designing customer solutions, they should focus on the critical success factors of value creation relational process of customer solutions, as detailed in section 2.4.

Green et al (2004) suggest that too often it is assumed that practices from one sector can be simply transferred to others and that the managerial practices are universally applicable irrespective of context. Therefore, the main research objective is to determine the key success factors the providers should focus to effectively use the customer

perspective in order for them to differentiate in the Romanian IT market. For this purpose, a descriptive research study was conducted to examine the validity of the findings outlined in the previous paragraph by collecting and analysing the data from the players operating in the Romanian IT market.

Starting with the empirical investigation of current practices in designing, developing and implementing customer solutions in the Romanian IT market, this research aims to provide the companies operating in this market a number of recommendations in regards to the critical success factors they have to focus to differentiate themselves from their rivals.

3.2. Research design

The approach selected for the research study was mainly deductive, as existing theory was used to conduct the empirical research (Saunders et al, 2009). Some inductive elements were included to gain some insights from respondents about the current practices of offering customer solutions in Romanian IT sector. As proposed by these authors, considering the deductive approach for this research study, it has been adopted a survey strategy, being a popular and common strategy in business and management research.

As the research project takes the perspective of providers and because there was no extant database of providers offering customer solutions – due to the novelty of IS concept – a procedure was developed to estimate this population and to extract a sampling frame from that population. Considering that, in fact, integrated solutions are services led (Cerasale & Stone, 2004) the population was set as the Romanian IT

services companies. Due to the small size of Romanian IT services market, a purposive sampling was selected using author's judgement to select cases that will best enable to answer the defined research question and meet the research objectives (Neuman, 2005).

As outlined in section 1, a customer solution is a combination of goods and services designed to satisfy a customer's needs and such they are included in the offering of small Romanian IT services providers only on exceptional basis. Ceci & Masini (2011) observed that IS provision is significantly more common among large firms. These authors argue that there are at least two good reasons for this phenomenon. First, the resources and capabilities to offer integrated solutions may not be available to small firms on a large basis. Second, small firms may even deliberately decide to concentrate all their efforts on one specific offering based on the assumption that the specialization could provide them a clear advantage over larger firms (Ceci & Masini, 2011). Furthermore, the Romanian IT market is consolidated around few players (Top 10) controlling in total more than 50% of the market in terms of market share according to the last available report at the preparation date of the research study published by Pierre Audain Consultants (2013). Based on these considerations, the sample was set as Top 10 leading IT services providers.

The selection of the participants was made based on a number of criteria to facilitate a useful output for data analysis. First, the research focus was on the customer solutions from a managerial perspective and therefore people on higher management positions (general and senior management) were selected for the sample. Second, the target participants at director level were carefully

chosen to ensure appropriate experience, background and familiarity to participate to the research study in a thoughtful manner proven through their direct and personal involvement in selling, developing, deploying and/or supporting integrated IT solutions.

For the primary data collection, a structured questionnaire was selected as the research instrument.

The questions included in the questionnaire were developed by the authors of this paper based on the findings from the literature review.

As paper-based questionnaire was used for data collection, the data transfer from the completed questionnaires was done manually using Microsoft Excel. As data analysis was planned to be performed by computer, a coding scheme was established prior to data collection and incorporated it into the questionnaire (Saunders et al, 2009) by assigning a number to each response for a particular question. The data analysis was performed using descriptive statistics.

3.3. Research results and discussion of findings

Understanding the broad needs of a customer was seen by 57% of respondents as being crucial in the early stage of designing a customer solution. Delineating in the analysis phase of both current and future needs of the customer was considered important by 60% of respondents. Another crucial aspect in selling customer solutions revealed by the research was building trust to get to "know the right people" in the customer organization, as reported by 74% of respondents. Only 52% of respondents confirmed that the assigned teams from the provider

and customer organization are involved in the requirements' discovery process during the analysis phase of a customer solution. An even lower number of respondents (35%) had a positive response about the assigned team from the provider probing multiple stakeholders in the customer organization when asking questions to identify customers' needs. When asked about the provider's involvement in defining the internal project configuration with the customer, many of the respondents (65%) reported that clear responsibilities throughout the whole lifecycle of the customer solution needs to be agreed with the customer from an early stage. No participant to the survey provided a negative response in this regards that leads to an assessment of a high level of criticality for this activity.

In the design phase of a customer solution, both the provider and customer participate together and agree upon a clear solution specification, as 83% of the participants provided positive in this regard. A same number of respondents provided positive feedback when asked to rate the importance of customer transparency and openness to avoid later cost intensive solution adjustments. A similar high number of respondents (74%) reported that involved staff from IS are assigned to have solution-specific experience, qualification and know-how of provider organization.

A quite high number of respondents (61%) provided positive results about a provider that can do a better job when using information and guidance from the customer about its stakeholders during IS implementation. Although, only few survey's participants (30%) validated through their positive responses that the assigned project team

makes use of customer knowledge when customizing and integrating products comprising an IT solution to suit the customer's operating environment. Customer's openness to making adjustments to modify its routines and processes was validated as being important to accommodate the components of an IT solution by 40% of the respondents only. Regarding the coordination of IS provider's internal processes with the customer's processes, more than half (57%) of the respondents considered it as being a critical activity during the implementation of a customer solution.

3.4. Conclusions from findings

The respondents to the survey provided good results in regards to the fact that the development and the implementation of a customer solution demands intense interactions between the provider and the customer, including reciprocal adaptation, mutual relationship investments and risk taking, which is in line with the extant research into the relational characteristics of solutions (Tuli et al, 2007; Cova & Sale, 2008b). As research results shows, learning from most challenging or unsuccessful projects of implementing customer solutions from the past, Romanian providers started to view customer's openness and willingness to be involved during the development and implementation stages as a major determinant of their role in customer's value creation process. Based on the responses to the survey, the current practices in Romania show that there are still some lacks in this regard for a number of reasons. The comments from the survey revealed that not always and not all customers are ready, able or even willing to co-operate with the

providers on the value-creation level. This is in line with Hakanen & Jaakkola (2012) who provide a reason for that: value co-creation engagement may demand several changes in the customer's strategy, operations and mindset that are not always well received.

Biggemman et al (2013) argue that some degree of flexibility is also necessary both for providers and customers when implementing customer solutions. In addition, the customer should be open to make adjustments for modifying its routines and processes to get the most value of the solution (Burianek et al, 2011). In both areas, the results of the empirical study in the Romanian IT market were only modest.

4. Recommendations

Based on the conclusions drawn upon the literature review as well as the research results, this paper provides a set of practical recommendations at managerial level for the Romanian IT providers to follow as a response to address the main area of improvement. This was suggested through the empirical study, namely how to effectively manage the conflicting interests of multiple stakeholders inside the customer organization.

Two main recommendations are proposed when considering the stakeholders perspective within the customer organization and they are based on the work of Biggemann et al (2013) who highlight the importance of involving multiple stakeholders from customer organization in identifying the current and future needs of the customer.

First, in order to improve the willingness of different stakeholders within customer organization to participate in the process

of understanding the customer's needs, the IS provider could propose a preliminary consulting phase for analyzing the internal implications of an integrated solution, as the solution affects the interests of several internal stakeholders who would be expected to collaborate. As an implementation plan for this recommendation, a free-of-charge consulting engagement could be proposed in a very early stage with a defined scope of work scanning past, present and future IS contextual situation. High profile consultants from IS provider with strong expertise in the area of integrated solutions should be assigned to deliver this engagement to conduct a high professional assessment of the customer situation and highlight best practice projects from the past. The rationale behind this proposition is the one Biggemann et al (2013) suggest, namely new potential customer benefits of (and obstacles to) the solution could be outlined during this assessment as the process dynamics of solutions could lead to the change of stakeholders' interests over time during the development of the integrated solution.

Second, the openness of different stakeholders who may not want from various reasons to participate in the value creation process during the development and the implementation of an integrated solution could be improved by the IS provider assuming in the very beginning a role of value facilitator instead of value co-creator (Hakanen & Jaakkola, 2012). In this role the supplier of a customer solution will provide the stakeholder from the customer organization deep information on how to develop technology and processes to get the most value of the solution and the stakeholder will use the knowledge provided by the supplier by themselves. As an implementation plan for this recommendation, this activity should be performed any time during the development

and the implementation stages of an integrated solution when such a stakeholder is identified. The person recommended to be assigned to play this value facilitator's role should be selected based on a number of two decision criteria. The first one is the required level of knowledge in developing integrated solutions and the other one is the personal bond with that stakeholder, as this person assigned by the IS provider will play a consultative role of discussing related value creation themes until the stakeholder will feel comfortable enough that this person nominated by the IS provider should fully assume the role of value creation co-participator.

5. Future research directions

As any empirical work, this empirical study is subject to certain limitations, based on what several opportunities for future research on the topic of integrated solutions are provided.

As this research project took the perspective of the providers, one limitation arises from the unit of analysis. Indeed, the defined general research question was to determine the main focus of the providers to use the customer perspective when designing customer solutions as an effective and efficient way to differentiate in the market.

The research design provides some other limitations. As the research study is cross sectional it offers a static view of the customer perspective in the context of the customer solutions with limited information about the impact of time perspective. The survey strategy provided limitations as well in regards to the collected data that are limited to the number of questions included in the questionnaire. Finally, due to the complexity of the topic of this paper, the research narrowed the empirical study to one industry raising

limitation issues in regards to the generalization of the results. It can be argued though that the contextual analysis could enhance learning about integrated solutions at more general level.

These research limitations and the respondents' comments collected through the open questions included in the questionnaire were the sources for future research on the customer perspective when designing and implementing customer solutions.

The research took the provider's perspective. As recent conceptualizations of customer solutions recognize the need to consider the broader business network and other parties that potentially influence or are influenced by integrated solution (Spencer & Cova, 2012; Gebauer et al, 2013), a future research avenue could take a network perspective to empirically investigate the extent to which companies in a network could have more potential for becoming value co-creators than when acting alone. In addition, the responses provided by the survey participants an interesting avenue for future research. In the survey participants' view, the value is co-created within a broader network with actors interacting in a longitudinal rather than iterative relational process of resource integration. Therefore, future longitudinal empirical research are called for in order to better understand the complexity of the customer perspective when developing customer solutions.

6. Conclusion

Integrating the results from the empirical research study with the findings from the extant literature review, few managerial conclusions could be drawn.

The research study conducted in the Romania IT market provided in a considerable extent an empirical evidence for the critical success activities of the four stages value creation process suggested in the extant literature and summarized in Figure 2 in other capital goods sectors from more developed countries where the customer perspective in the provision of integrated solution has emerged. Therefore Romanian providers should focus on these factors/activities if they want to differentiate from the competition. In the same time the research project identified some areas of improvement in the contextual situation of the Romanian IT market in order for these factors/activities to fully contribute to effective and efficient use of customer perspective when developing and implementing customer solutions.

The review of the extant literature outlines that the complexity of the customer perspective experienced within specific industries and contexts seems to be easily overlooked in empirical studies that focus on a variety of different industries. The market opportunities, the structure of the competition and the main drivers towards offering customer solutions could differ considerably among industries, countries and particular contexts. This paper highlights that the contextual dimension has to be considered in order to capture the complexity of phenomenon of creating a customer-centric organization. This is in line with the contingency theory, where "the effectiveness of an organization is dependent on the congruence between its structure and its context, including the characteristics of the internal organization and the characteristics of the organization's external environment" (Lakemond, 2001, p. 5).

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