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# The communicational making of a relation-specific skill: contributions based on the analysis of a conversation to strategy-as-practice and resource- based view perspectives

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GRANEM (Universit  d'Angers)

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Mots-clés : communication, analyse de conversation, strategy-as-practice, ressource based-view, compétence relationnelle spécifique.

Keywords: communication, strategizing, resource-based view, relation-specific skill.

**Résumé:** L'objectif de cette communication est de proposer une analyse du fonctionnement des relations interorganisationnelles entre fabricants et transporteurs du secteur de l'ameublement en France inscrite dans la pratique des opérateurs des entreprises partenaires. Le choix d'une approche théorique d'essence communicationnelle a permis de comprendre le rôle central, car organisant, de l'activité conversationnelle de ces opérateurs dans la résolution efficace d'événements ainsi que la place essentielle des outils et des médiations symboliques. Parce qu'elle est constitutive (Cooren 2000, Taylor 1993), la dynamique conversationnelle des acteurs participant à la construction de ressources constituant le fondement de ce qu'Asanuma (1989) nomme une « compétence relationnelle spécifique ».

Ce travail dégage des éléments permettant d'articuler des propositions d'animation et de design (ergonomie des espaces de travail, développer l'interconnaissance, penser le rôle des responsables intermédiaires, réfléchir à des outils de soutiens ainsi qu'à la place des systèmes d'information interorganisationnel, etc.) de ces collectifs composés d'acteurs aux ontologies diverses (humains et non-humains). Ce faisant il contribue au courant de recherche ressources et compétences et strategy as practice.

**Abstract:** This paper proposes to study, from the micro level of a conversation, the making and the use of resources that allow the co-provision of a logistic service by operational-level employees in the French furniture industry. We aim to show these resources are central elements for these firms in order to increase the degree of adaptability, flexibility and reactivity of the service. Thus, they adapt their organization to the features of their changing environment. The case study distinguishes three types of actors: the formulator of the strategy, here the top management; the implementers, here the middle managers; and finally people who act as innovators by their everyday activity – operational-level employees, whose conversational interactions produce resources which allow to reach strategic goals. Consequently, we consider that the creativity they show in everyday organizing activity make these operators strategic actors. Based on the case of the leading European road haulage contractor for furniture called OUESTRANSPORT, we show how the transformation of the industry has forced (in a Porterian perspective) this company to propose a service that is more flexible, adaptable and secure. The resources created through interaction by operational-level employees contribute to the realization of this new strategy by creating what Asanuma (1989) calls a “relation-specific skill”.

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**THE COMMUNICATIONAL MAKING OF A RELATION-SPECIFIC SKILL:  
CONTRIBUTIONS BASED ON THE ANALYSIS OF A CONVERSATION TO STRATEGY-  
AS-PRACTICE AND RESOURCE-BASED VIEW PERSPECTIVES.**

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**Formulators, implementers, innovators**

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## **Introduction**

*“The economic environment is moving rapidly toward open markets, mobile labour and information abundance. Resources are increasingly tradable and security from market entry and strategic imitation is failing. From a resource based-view, the consequences are clear: the transparent becomes a precarious foundation for competitive advantage. In these fluid resources market, sustainable advantage must lie on micro assets that are hard to discern and awkward to trade” (Johnson, et al. 2003, p.4)*

Based on this statement by Johnson et al. (2003), we aim to study, from the micro level of a conversation, the making and the use of resources that allow the co-provision of a logistic service by operational-level employees in the French furniture industry. We aim to show these resources are central elements for these firms in order to increase the degree of adaptability, flexibility and reactivity of the service. Thus, they adapt their organization to the features of

their changing environment. The case study distinguishes three types of actors: the *formulator* of the strategy, here the top management; the *implementers*, here the middle managers; and finally people who act as *innovators* by their everyday activity – operational-level employees, whose conversational interactions produce resources which allow to reach strategic goals. Consequently, we consider that the creativity they show in everyday organizing activity make these operators strategic actors. Based on the case of the leading European road haulage contractor for furniture called OUESTRANSPORT, we show how the transformation of the industry has forced (in a Porterian perspective) this company to propose a service that is more flexible, adaptable and secure. The resources created through interaction by operational-level employees contribute to the realization of this new strategy by creating what Asanuma (1989) calls a “relation-specific skill”.

This empirical research (more than 35 interviews and 6 months of observation) pursues different kinds of contributions both theoretical and managerial. First of all, from a theoretical point of view, this work aims to contribute to the strategy-as-practice perspective (Denis, et al. 2007, Jarzabkowski 2004, Jarzabkowski, et al. 2007, Whittington 1996, 2006) by exploring contributions of a communicational-based perspective, more specially the Montreal School (Cooren 2000, Cooren 2004, Cooren, et al. 2006, Taylor 1993, Taylor and Van Emery 2000), to knowledge creation processes. For these authors, knowledge has not to be only understood as something an actor communicates to another. Instead, knowledge has to be seen as what must be constructed by people working together. Cooren et al. (2006, p.4) consider that “it is both a precondition of their interaction, and emerges in it, and out of it, to become the basis of their collaboration. It is thereby problematic: it depends on the dynamics of the interaction”. This knowledge constitutes resources for collective action when individuals have to face uncertain and complex situations. As Vaara (2006) argues, organizational communication works have rarely been used to study strategic phenomena, except the works of Samra-Fredericks (2005, 2004) studying rhetorical skills used by managers to persuade people and the recent works about strategic episodes (Hendry and Seidl 2003, Jarzabkowski, et al. 2006). We believe a communicational-based perspective is likely to help us achieve the objectives of the strategy as practice approach such as: deep understanding of actors’ rationales; highlighting norms that constrain and enable collective action; and understanding features of action linked to strategic concerns.

Also, the communicational-based perspective we propose to use, because it enables to show organizational outputs from a micro analysis, constitutes a response to criticism to the resources based view perspective (Barney 1991, Barney 2001, Hamel and Prahalad 1989,

Prahalad and Hamel 1990). These works would indeed suffer of a very high level of abstraction (Priem and Butler 2001). As explained by Ambrosini et al. (2007), works based on the RBV perspective propose few outcomes for managers about the process of construction of such resources. According to Johnson et al. (2003: 7), the “resource-based view will advance as it shifts toward a micro level perspective capable of capturing both detail and activities”. This paper pursues such a goal. The resource approach considers that competitive advantages are built on some core competencies but also on global coherence of the management system. Thus, as knowledge-creating institutions (Grant 1991), firms have to recognize the importance of knowledge management because in the RBV perspective competitive advantage comes from collective learning. In that respect, our research aims to help organizations with developing deep understanding about managerial actions leading to the co-provision of a service.

This study focuses on the real work of operators whose naturally occurring talk-based interaction is likely to produce a very strategic core competency that Asanuma calls (1989) “a relation-specific skill “. Such a skill constitutes the basis for developing a “relational quasi-rent” (Aoki 1988) making collaboration more efficient than market or hierarchy. As Asanuma explained: “Basically [a relation-specific skill] is the skill required on the part of the supplier to respond efficiently to the specific needs of the core firm. Formation of this skill requires that learning through repeated interactions with a particular core firm be added to the basic technological capability which the supplier has accumulated” (Asanuma 1989, p.22). In Asanuma’s works, “technological capabilities” have to be understood as human, material and symbolic means that help collaboration.

This paper is structured as follows. The first section, by highlighting the main elements of organizational communication-based works, outlines the main reasons why we adopted such a perspective. The second section describes the methodology used in this study. We then indicate the results that show how and why communicational-based resources help to face the new expectations of the market. We conclude by discussing contributions of the article to RBV and SAP perspectives as well as suggesting some managerial application.

## **Theoretical backgrounds: Talk in organizations**

Communicational perspectives on organization and coordination are based on two movements. The first, proposed by French researchers in social science, studies operators’ talk as a consequence of evolutions in production system. The other movement is grounded in

the linguistic turn taken by social sciences. These two perspectives on talk have evolved in parallel but never met until recently.

### ***Talk and new organizational forms***

French research in social sciences (communication sciences, linguistic, sociology, management), developed in the 1980s, constitutes this first main trend in the organizational communication perspective (Borzeix 2001, Borzeix and Fraenkel 2001, Boutet 2001, Girin 2001). These authors show that work evolved because of globalization, computerization and the development of service companies. This transformation of work led to new monitoring and assessing techniques for workers. The central postulate is as follows: the consequence of these changes is an evolution of the value of talk at work. Whereas it was initially considered as chattering or lounging about, especially in the Taylor perspective, talk as sign of commitment is more and more valued within new organizational forms. Talk seems to have become a tool that makes work more efficient. A cognitive function is given to talk through the activities of deliberation, argumentation or debate within operational teams. In this perspective, talk is the forgotten dimension of classical organizational approaches that have very often tried to remove it from working activity by attempting to enable organized collective action with little or no talk. Talk is not any more the prerogative of managers (Grönn 1983, Mintzberg 1973), but also a core resource for collective action for operational-level employees. Thus, talk constitutes a key element for companies to achieve success (Detchessahar 2001, 2003, Zarifian 1995, 1996).

### ***The linguistic turn: talk at the very heart of organizing***

Parallel to this French movement, we observe in English-language research, what has been called a linguistic turn in organizational research (Alvesson and Karreman 2000). These two authors observe a convergence of works in social sciences studying social phenomena – like organization, identity, coordination and cooperation – through language and talk. These works refer to communicational theories to emphasize Weick's sensemaking and organizing processes (Weick 1979, 1995). This linguistic turn made naturally occurring talk-based routines a constitutive element of organization. Communication thus has an organizing dimension (Cooren 2000). Giroux (2006) notices that by presenting organization as a process, Weick opens the way to works that believe communication is *this* organizing process. So, what Weick tells us without theorizing it is that organization, as an ongoing organizing process, is the outcome of participants' communicational interactions.

Based on such a vision as well as ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967) and conversational analysis (Sacks, et al. 1974) perspectives, Boden (1994) was the first to study this iterative

process. She shows how people construct organization in meetings and how these people get constrained but also enabled by the organization (i.e. the structure) they have built.

Parallel to the original work of Boden, researchers (Cooren 2000, Cooren 2004, Taylor 1993, Taylor and Van Emery 2000) use sociolinguistic works (Austin 1962, Greimas 1988) to redefine the link between organization and communication as a mediation. They search for organization within communication because they conceive communication as an action and a means to create signification. These researchers, mainly based in Montreal, propose a theory of the constituting dimension of communication. In this particular organizational communication perspective, organization is seen as a place of language or speech practices: a “discursive community” (Taylor 1993) operating in two ways, through conversation and texts. Conversation is defined as an activity involving language (in the form of discussions, reports, memos, meetings and various instruments, etc.); this is how individuals interact on an everyday basis and coordinate their various forms of action at the micro level. “Text” in this case refers to oral or written “traces” allowing action and reducing ambiguity and the potential for misunderstanding. Texts originate in various ways: the architecture of work areas, written items, stories (Boje 1991), organizational metaphors (Cornelissen, et al. 2008, Grant and Oswick 1996, Oswick and Richards 2004), rituals (Trice and Beyer 1984), stigmatized people (Goffman 1975), management instruments (such as diagrams, graphs, or an Inter-organizational Information System) (Detchessahar and Journé 2007) and ways of using these tools (Arnaud 2007). All such items contribute to influencing the practices of those involved. Conversation is by nature ephemeral, showing the diverse reality of the organization and its constantly changing and emerging nature. Text is aimed at stabilizing the organization and at ensuring the inclusion and action of the organization’s members in a shared activity of particular significance or an organizational discussion. There is a tension between these forms of communication, with conversation producing and confirming the texts, with the latter, in turn, limiting the conversation. The knowledge we study below has to be understood as texts constructed by conversational activity. It constitutes products created by the social dynamic of actors, that can be used by them to become more efficiently coordinated. Finally, they are resources based on which a relation-specific skill can be built and thus a competitive advantage achieved.

All these authors are more concerned by how people collectively produce knowledge in order to work together than by how one actor communicates knowledge to another. Such knowledge is understood to evolve according to everyday interactions, meaning everyday



issues people have to face, as well as according to the appearance of new actants (human or not, i.e. new employee or new information technology).

As an extension of the communicational viewpoint opened up by Taylor (1993), Cooren (2000) proposed a theory of the organizing or structuring dimension of communication. We are presenting here the main elements in that theory. It should assist us in exploring this relational quasi-rent (Aoki 1986, Asanuma 1989) based on something created specifically from collaboration and that is not attributable to either of the individual firms. Cooren's theory makes use of and includes the strengths of the theory of speech acts (Austin 1962) and also that of semiotic narrative theory (Greimas 1988) to explain how conversation coordinates the actions of each person. For Cooren, coordination is a process (that includes speech acts and physical acts) for organizing activities between individuals (including the involvement of instruments or "tools") over time. This process, if all goes well, gets organized into a sequence of actions that result in the accomplishment of specific objectives. The narrative schemas identified by Greimas (1988) in tales and stories provide, for this purpose, a useful starting point to analyze the sequences of actions. The items narrated are thematic texts, given a sequence and structure through tension between a subject, operating as the main character in the narrative, and an object, which is what the subject wants. As an example, the purpose of a conversation may be to find a solution to a problem. Greimas writes that narratives have four stages: manipulation, competence, performance and sanction. When you analyze the social and organizational universe (rather than just the world of the narrative), you find that the individuals implicitly apply this structure in the course of their everyday interactions. The people involved thus converse by making use of speech acts and physical acts in such a way as to construct and establish action programs: programs that approximate to Greimas's stages. Thus, once the other person has been drawn into the action schema (within manipulation phase), what is called the competence stage begins. In that stage, the subject (the person who has been induced to act) encounters setbacks (specific problems such as uncooperative individuals, equipment breakdowns, etc.) and is assisted (perhaps by colleagues or by acquiring new information), affecting the person's ability to achieve the desired end (the "object", or aim of the conversation). The performance stage occurs when the situation is accomplished. Finally, the sanction phase constitutes the reward for the accomplished performance (generally thanking) (for more detail see Groleau and Cooren, 1998). If we assume the generality of this schema, it follows that any conversation therefore brings action programs into play, and these give structure to the communication and reveal heterogeneous

collectives (with both human and non-human components (texts)) (Callon and Latour 1981). It is these collectives that achieve the action.

By using this communication perspective, we aim to show how employees produce knowledge through communicational activity and how they use this knowledge as resource to deal with emerging issues (Eisenhardt and Santos 2002). We consider this particular knowledge as a constitutive of Asanuma's relation-specific skill. In this article we use the very wide acceptance of the notion of 'resource' as Barney (1991) defined it. A resource is understood to be anything within the firm (assets, activities, technologies, social resources, etc.). It will be perceived as a source of sustainable competitive advantage if it is at the same time Valuable, Rare, Inimitable and Non-substitutable (VRIN). The value of a resource does not so much depend on its existence than on its utilization by people through their everyday activities (Ambrosini, et al. 2007, Johnson, et al. 2003).

## **Methods: linking micro events to macro issues**

Like the theoretical background – conversation /text – the methodological protocol we developed takes the form of a tension, which aims to identify and analyse sources of empirical evidence corresponding to these two theoretical elements. In order to do this, we transformed the initial theoretical tension into a *methodological tension*. This methodological tension must make it possible to avoid criticisms such as “where is the organisation in your conversational analysis?” (Cooren 2006, Cooren 2004, Mcphee, et al. 2006) and to show what is present or absent behind what is said. In order to study the building of strategy on a daily basis, we needed a coherent unit of analysis (Yin 2003), which we decided to be that of the notion of situation.

For Journé (2001, 2007), the concept of situation makes it possible to understand how the handling of phenomena whose essence and boundaries are unclearly defined and which must be managed with limited time and knowledge can be organised. Inquiry, as defined by Dewey's pragmatic philosophy (Dewey 1938), through a series of framings, in Goffman's interactionist sociology (Goffman 1981, 1974), appears as a fundamental component of the operational and managerial activity. By using the concept of situation as defined by Journé and looking to Goffman's position concerning what he referred to as the neglected situation we can conclude that the situation is always collective and involves communication. So, it is possible to limit the situation to the network of conversations which emerges and allows to resolve the emerging problem.

Throughout the period of primary data collection, we tried to follow the methodological tension, which is to say that we constantly tried to access both texts and conversations in situation, in order to be able to establish links between them during the analysis stage. We did this by several means.

*Direct observation* (Yin 2003): We used the observational system proposed by Journé (2001, 2005). Journé distinguishes 4 strategies according to the length (short or long) and the position (fixed or variable) of the observation. This system of dynamic observation, as Journé calls it, actually makes up “a system for collecting and constructing primary data, aiming to reconcile contradictory experiences of precision, completeness and relevance of data. It must make it possible to identify unexpected events whilst at the same time producing data relating to the routine workings of the firm under study.”

**Table 1: Dynamic observation system (Journé 2001, 2005)**

<b>Position</b>	<b>Fixed point of observation</b>	<b>Variable (movable) point of observation</b>
<b>Duration</b>		
<b>Long observation period</b>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Approach 1</b></p> <p><b>Objectives:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- exhaustiveness;</li> <li>- recording the time pattern of the watch and the variety of activities.</li> </ul> <p><b>Observation method:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- experiencing life with the team;</li> <li>- continuous observation, with immersion in the team’s culture;</li> <li>- discussion with the people involved.</li> </ul> <p><b>Triggering of action:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- routine;</li> <li>- spontaneous (discussions).</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Approach 3</b></p> <p><b>Objectives:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- exhaustiveness;</li> <li>- recording the role of each category of people involved.</li> </ul> <p><b>Observation method:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- monitoring of one person throughout a watch;</li> <li>- continuous observation.</li> </ul> <p><b>Triggering of action:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- planning the categories of people to monitor during the “immersion” week;</li> <li>- choosing a person, with that person’s consent (otherwise, impossible).</li> </ul>
	<b>Short observation period</b>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Approach 2</b></p> <p><b>Objectives:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- obtaining details;</li> <li>- recording the ways that heterogeneous resources interact.</li> </ul> <p><b>Observation method:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- notes taken over a period of 30 minutes;</li> <li>- discontinuous observations during a watch.</li> </ul> <p><b>Triggering of action:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- random checks during the watch;</li> <li>- routinely when one team takes over from another.</li> </ul>

For Conversations, Journé’s strategy number 4 (short and variable) which is only possible thanks to the three others. This strategy is the one which aims to take detailed notes on the

arising and the resolving of problems which are supposed to contribute to the development of the individual and collective skills of the employees. In order to do this, I used not only a Dictaphone but also a notebook, for two reasons: to record what had been said when the noise level was such that the Dictaphone could not record well enough, and also to note the non verbal elements such as interaction with tools or facial expressions which carry meaning and play a role in the resolution of the problem. It is important to note that there is a real tension between the two elements, which contribute to each other. This means that in order to really understand the conversations, the external observer needs to have sufficient information concerning the participants' personal and professional backgrounds as well as concerning events, the teams, the firms, the past relationships between the firms and the individuals and the workings of the industry in general. All these elements are texts that are accessible thanks to the three others strategies as well as interviews and document analysis.

*Interviews to provide a reconstruction of the background:* This research used a series of 35 interviews, averaging 75 minutes, looking at individuals. The interviews took place in an office away from other activities, and used a structured format of open-ended questions. This provided an opportunity to collect discursive data and thus record features that would make it possible to understand modes of behavior, whether conscious or unconscious. This technique also allows understanding of organizational realities, as experienced by the people involved (Demers 2003), and makes it possible to appreciate some of the subjective aspects relating to the participants in the conversations analyzed (reflecting their social background and career paths) (Rouleau 2003). Also involved are how the partnerships are represented, and introspective reviews from the situations encountered that were observed by the researcher. More generally, interviews were carried out with the aim of understanding the concerns and needs of the various people involved in furniture transport and logistics. It was therefore important to talk to all the people involved in the issues (both the client and the service-provider) and also to obtain the most varied sample possible, in terms of levels within a hierarchy and potentially different viewpoints (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). With this outlook, we have also met the clients of the transport firms studied. These interviews help get a better idea of a client's specific constraints and thus put into perspective the transport firm's view of how the logistical service is carried out. In addition, with the aim of acquiring a better idea of specific features in the furniture sector, interviews were carried out with people responsible for purchasing and ensuring supplies in industrial and food-processing firms (Eisenhardt 1989). These interviews have revealed the specific features of the furniture sector, particularly in respect of the products transported: furniture that is either unfinished or in kit

form, but in all cases is fragile and needing specific handling techniques, involving time limitations that are less of a restriction in, for instance, food-processing.

*Document analysis:* This related to the study of organizations' documents such as position sheets, profitability indicators for each trip, quality-indicator sheets and also forms recording malfunction codes. We have, in addition, analyzed press articles covering the sector and the firms studied. Lastly, the data collected were processed thematically using NVivo 7 software.

## **Building a relation-specific skill within a road haulage company within the French furniture industry**

### ***Highlighting the macro dimensions***

The field of study is that of furniture transport. In 1999, OUESTRANSPORT was 4<sup>th</sup> in the French industry of haulage contractors for furniture. In 2001, after acquiring the 2<sup>nd</sup>, the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup>, OUESTRANSPORT became the leading European firm of road haulage contractors for furniture with a turnover of 100 million Euros and 1100 employees throughout France and a couple of bordering countries. This rapid external growth can be explained by the need for haulage companies to develop a new offer because of the transformation of the industry.

Indeed, haulage companies have had to face, over recent years, an increasing complexity of their activity, which can be explained by several factors. First of all, we have been able to observe a great rationalisation of production by furniture manufacturers. Signs of this rationalisation are the reduction of the volume of stocks and better management of them, thanks to the "just in time" approach. This leads to new demands on the conveyors, in terms of rapidity and quality of the service they offer. Another aspect is the decrease in the size of the individual-batches, which has a direct impact on the increasing complexity of the organisation of all the deliveries. Basically, it implies putting more different individual-batches within a single vehicle, which means that each truck will have to carry out more separate deliveries. A final aspect of this increasing complexity is a reduction in the forward planning time of deliveries, and a trend towards two deliveries a week instead of just one. Because the system was becoming relatively more fragile, it became necessary to densify the interaction between the collaborators. This densification first became apparent by means of a large-scale concentration of companies involved in furniture transport. This concentration was due to the fact that not all the haulage companies were able to face the new demands such as the need to create a national or even Europe-wide network. Another aspect of the

densification was the fact that the increasingly complex nature of the service implied more contacts between higher-level interlocutors. Finally, densification was also due to a transformation of the characteristics of the demand, requiring a denser supply of technical and material facilities. Clients need tracking software, and the possibility to exchange computerised data. Acting as formulators, top managers of OUESTRANSPORT had thus to propose a new service that would be more secure, flexible and adaptable. For a long time, OUESTRANSPORT had considered computerization (via tracking software) of interfirm relationships as THE answer to create a “relational skill”. As OUESTRANSPORT’s CEO explained: *“Echo.log is the tracking software that is going to structure our relations with customers. Operators will no longer have to call each other now! I gave a demonstration to some Italian and Chinese clients one week ago, they were very impressed!”*. Acting this way, we believe they were omitting to develop actions allowing to encourage collective learning – by encouraging social resources creation – among employees that have to work together.

**The analyzed conversation**

The analyzed conversation takes place between two employees, one manufacturer (Leila for CALBERFRANCE) and one conveyor (Jean-Luc for OUESTRANSPORT), talking about a delivery. Based on the network of conversations we collected as well as interviews, this section only describes the studied situation. The next section will go further in the analysis of resources created and used by operational-level employees to improve coordination.

The conversation begins with the usual presentation of the speakers and the firms they belong to. We noticed line 3 that Jean-Luc (JL), the operational manager recognized his client, Leila. It is clearly her voice that allows JL to identify his interlocutor. This shows that there have been previous interactions, they already know each other. Line 13, when Leila tells JL that she has been contacted by (someone from) OUESTRANSPORT the day before, she doesn’t use any name. In doing this, she highlights the very impersonal of that relationship which is clearly not the case between herself and JL. Indeed, line 11, she explains her problem to JL by using words that reveal the degree of proximity between these two actors despite the fact they don’t belong to the same company. We often observe within the conversations we collected, a very strong relationship between employees of manufacturers and conveyors. They both use the term “client” to mean the consignee. Conversations thus occur as between people of the same team having to serve someone else, here the consignee Toast & Chocolate.

**Conversation 1**

1	Actors	Utterances	Resources
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2	Jean-Luc	OUESTRANSPORT, good morning ?	
3	Leila	Yes, good morning, CALBERFRANCE speaking=	
4	Jean-Luc	= Good morning Leila !	They know each other
5	Leila	Who is speaking?	
6	Jean-Luc	Jean-Luc.	
7	Leila	Ah, Jean Luc, how are you doing?	
8	Jean-Luc	Fine, what about you?	
9	Leila	Fine, fine, I'm very annoyed right now =	
10	Jean-Luc	=why?	
11	Leila	Because she pissed me off, the client, Toast and Chocolate in Angers!! [aaarrggghh]	Stigmatized people
12	Jean-Luc	[ooohhhh]	
13	Leila	Yesterday already, I was called by your company to tell me that AVM 44 (a haulage subcontractor) took back her delivery, but she didn't understand why! Well, I've been told that there was a problem (to access the delivery place with a big trailer). She told me "I don't understand it. Every day, there were big trucks going through! It just has to be before 10am blah blah and so on!!!" (.) And so, I've been told that AVM 44 would call her back the next day (so this morning) to plan a new appointment and that she would be delivered this morning. And now, she just phoned me to say "I have nothing!".	
14	Jean-Luc	(JL makes a sound to show his sympathy to): Mummf!	
15	Leila	So I advise her to call AVM 44 and, there, she answers " <i>ah, great, so I now have to do it myself!!!!</i> " (with a shrill tone indicating that the client is not committed to the resolution of the issue). "Ok, don't move, I'll do it!" (answered Leila). I just had a look at Echo.log, but I didn't find anything. So I'm calling you.	Interfirm information system (Echo.log)
16	Jean-Luc	Ok, lets check that together.	
17	Leila	Ohhhhh! She annoyed me!!! Arghhhhhh!	
18	Jean-Luc	(He starts looking on his computer. While waiting for information from the computer, he asked Leila) (2) Otherwise, no pick ups this week Leila?	ERP (Harmony)
19	Leila	No. We did it on purpose. (The Thursday of this week is a public holiday, which always makes it difficult for OUESTRANSPORT to pick ups)	Knowledge of organization
20	Jean-Luc	Good. Very good.	
21	Leila	Yes, in order to avoid you to go up to=	
22	Jean-Luc	=no, well, no we (the driver) just arrived this morning (so he could have collected)	
23	Leila	Yes, he told me that. He just called.	
24	Jean-Luc	Did he?	
25	Leila	Yes, he always calls or steps by. And sometimes, it works out well that he's here even though nothing was planned.	
26	Jean-Luc	((JL just opened on his computer the deliveries for Toast and Chocolate)) So, Toasts and Chocolate (3)	
27	Leila	It was collected 2 weeks ago.	Knowledge of organization
28	Jean-Luc	Yes, it dates from the 13th of May (4) I've got a code : 95422 (10)so do I have any details? (6) a cupboard, a bed and a chest (4) Ok, no details. Can you hold the line while I call Agedis ?	New process

29	Leila	No, it is AVM 44 that is supposed to deliver !	
30	Jean-Luc	Yes, but it Is Agedis' furniture. Because AVM44 delivers for Agedis anything that is inaccessible or for private individuals. So we hand it over to AVM44. I'll call=	
31	Leila	= Yep, and also check what that access problem is! Because we'd better not end up with the same problem as last time! [[laugh]]	Ritual joke
32	Jean-Luc	[[laugh]] (.) In any case, Angers, rue de Bruxelles-euh rue St Aubain in Angers, it is tricky. But we are used to it!	Knowledge of organization
33	Leila	Yes, absolutely. It's not the first time. That's why I don't really understand!	They know each other
34	Jean-Luc	(Surprised) Not the first time you say ?!	
35	Leila	Absolutely not !	
36	Jean-Luc	Ok, but maybe it was some day we couldn't deliver it ourselves and so (understand : the delivery was given to AVM)	
37	Leila	It has to be in the morning.	
38	Jean-Luc	Yes, I know, but we don't always do what we want !	
39	Leila	Yes, I supposed so.	
40	Jean-Luc	Ok, hold the line.	
41	Leila	Ok	

This proximity can be partly explained by the managers' will to create very strong link between employees that have to cooperate everyday as the operational manager of conveyors explains: *"There is a specific state of mind within this furniture industry. Our clients (manufacturers) like having a specific interlocutor here. This is why we very quickly divided France into areas, so that people call the right place. We really customized our service. They call each other by their real name! We have very close relationships"*.

Such an organization encourages the realization of the manipulation phase, which is the phase through which people engage other people in the realization of action. When clients call their conveyor, they know where they are calling. They know they are calling the person they need. This proximity between manufacturers and conveyors makes "a couple" that is very often against the consignee. Consignees are often considered as playing a negative role in this three way collaboration process (manufacturer, conveyor and consignee). This can be explained by the fact that the consignee's employees often refuse to cooperate by insisting on their authority as 'client'. On lines 13 and 15, Leila explains the whole situation to JL. We can notice, by the tune and rhythm of her voice, that the conversation with the consignee did not go smoothly. Leila didn't like the way the consignee employee talked to her. This woman preferred to use her authority with Leila rather than get involved in the resolution process by inquiring about the situation. By doing this, the consignee tends to be stigmatized by Leila and perhaps by JL. This very weak commitment has negative consequences on the creation of trust between these actors as well as between their organizations. In this situation, the



difficulty to create a specific-relation skill can be explained by the consignee's lack of commitment in the coproduction process. It is this commitment that is valued by operators through naturally occurring talk-based interactions. When people don't accept the simultaneous conception of the service, then we sometimes observed operations of "sabotage" by operators. Such operations consist, for instance, in delaying a delivery because a manufacturer or consignee didn't get fully involved within the interactions but rather used their authority.

Line 18, while waiting for his software to be ready, JL questions Leila about the weekly collection. Leila's answer is very interesting to us. Her answer clearly indicates that she as well as her company ("we") know OUESTRANSPORT's ways of working. This is why they didn't plan any furniture for collecting (lines 19 & 21).

Line 31 illustrates the use of what we call "ritual joke" that is shared by Leila and JL ("*Because we'd better not end up the same problem as last time! [[Laugh]]*"). "Last time" refers to an unfortunate event two years ago. A truck driver that had to make delivery in Nantes town center with a two-trailer truck was stuck in the middle of a main street for 4 hours, unable to move. Because of this, traffic in the town center had been stopped. Since this day, references to this unfortunate event are regularly made by Leila and JL. It indicates that the situation is fairly complex and that mind is required.

Line 28, the software doesn't give any valuable information. JL decides to call Agedis, a small company within OUESTRANSPORT that is dedicated to a very upmarket consignee. Line 29, Leila does not understand why JL wants to phone Agedis since she told him line 13 that AVM44 was the one concerned. This shows again that she knows how OUESTRANSPORT usually works. We then learned that a new procedure has been implemented within OUESTRANSPORT as explained by JL's colleague: "*we have been told not to phone Agedis' subcontractor any more but Agedis itself. The problem now is that it constitutes another intermediary and the client has to wait while Agedis is getting information!*". This new procedure directly influences the way interactions are articulated (the structure of action program). This directive imposes a new helper that may not be the most efficient one within the action program. JL phones Agedis, but the right person is not available. He will have to call back later. (We didn't transcribe here these small conversations because we don't believe them to be useful for our demonstration).

Thirty minutes later, Delphine from Agedis calls JL back. She hasn't any information on her computer. She has got to phone AVM 44. A few minutes later, Delphine phones back again. She informs JL that delivery is planned for 11h30 because the consignee Toast &

Chocolate is not supposed to be open before 10h. JL phones Leila and then accomplishes the action program opened by the client (line 94). Finally, Leila rewards JL (line 101).

**Conversation 1**

91		Jean-Luc calls Leila back.	
92	Jean-Luc	Leila, Jean-Luc speaking	
93	Leila	Yes Jean-Luc.	
94	Jean-Luc	So, concerning Toasts & Chocolate in Angers. It seems that it is planned for this morning. Delivery for 11.30 am.	
95	Leila	Ok.	
96	Jean-Luc	Because, you client doesn't open before 10h. So It will be done this morning by 11.30.	
97	Leila	Ok. Fine. I'll call=	
98	Jean-Luc	= So, she doesn't have to worry!	
99	Leila	Yeah, because, she hasn't been called back, that's why...	
100	Jean-Luc	So, every thing was already planned.	
101	Leila	Fantastic. Thanks a lot, JL.	

The analysis of this conversation finally reveals very clearly how well they **know each other**. Because they know each other they have been able to act as innovators, creating resources to help the collaboration process. We detect **kindness** and **trust** between them. They know **the concrete way of working of** their partner. We also observe **specific ways of using the tracking software** as well as **stigmatization of people** who do not respect the expectations of the collaboration. All these elements, built by and through communicational activity, help to establish customer loyalty and give trust to clients in a certain level of quality of service. Clients feel they are dealing with a high quality interlocutor who is able to adapt himself to different firms. Clients also experience the feeling of transparency and security in their relations with their partner. Since these notions of quality, security and adaptability are at the heart of the current demand of logistic services by furniture manufacturers, they constitute central resources on which a relational skill can be developed. The following section comes back to these resources.

**Contributions**

Contributions to the RBV perspective are first developed. Based on this subsection, we then propose implications for managerial matter. Finally, we use recent SAP agenda as described by Jarzablowki et al. (2007) to emphasize contributions of this paper to the practice perspective.

***To Resource based-view perspective***

As the RBV perspective suggests (Barney 1991, Hamel and Prahalad 1989), competitiveness requires an organizational capacity to manage and develop immaterial assets

such as resources and competencies. Based on Asanuma's work, we assumed these resources are constitutive of a relation-specific skill. However, contrary to Asanuma, who states that a relation-specific skill only depends on the service provider, we believe collaborators have to show their commitment in the collaboration. Such a commitment between partners has to be developed by an increasing interaction between operational-level employees that have to cooperate on a daily basis. In this respect, a relation-specific skill is constituted by a set of social resources stemming from the communicational dynamic of actors. Also, as mentioned by Johnson et al. (2003, p.4), "sustainable advantage must lie on micro assets that are hard to discern and awkward to trade". We believe the resources studied in this paper constitute such assets. These are constituted by ritual jokes, stigmatized people, trust, specific use of tools, etc. and correspond to what Berger and Luckman (1966) call a social stock of knowledge. For these two authors, an accumulation of real-life experiences determines what is available and common to people that rub shoulders with each other and constitutes a social stock of knowledge. A large part of this stock is constituted by pragmatic knowledge. This is valuable as long as it allows to resolve problems. Understanding about the way knowledge is socially distributed as well as the concrete working of the system people have to deal with, what some call "knowledge of organization" (Dubar 1998), is essential. In this respect, talk constitutes a means to create but also to share knowledge that is part of the social stock.

Because it helps to face emerging situations, we believe the social stock of knowledge does not have to be codified or standardized. Nevertheless, the social stock is structured by what is produced through communicational activity. The analyzed conversations have shown that naturally occurring talk-based interactions produce different resources that help operational-level employees to construct a relation-specific skill in phase with new strategic and organizational objectives. We first observe what we called "**ritual jokes**". These imply that people know each other but also have shared real-life experiences. The actors have a common past. Such jokes help people to involve people when the situation is delicate, complex and uncertain. So, they contribute to collective performance.

**Stigmatized people** (Goffman 1975) also constitute a sign of shared meaning concerning what is an efficient job means. It gives information about the team's values as well as what is expected from every single actor. Cooperation is expected from everyone (people and organizations) concerned by the collaboration process. If not, the employee in question and perhaps his/her organization are likely to be stigmatized and the efficiency of the collaboration can be penalized.

We also noticed **specific ways of using the tracking software**. By transmitting information, this tool constitutes a means to investigate organizations and support the communicational dynamic. Operational-level employees can't rely solely on with standardized informations given by the tracking software. This is not enough. Rather than doing things instead of people, we believe IIS have to be integrated in larger considerations about managing interfirm operational-level teams. Indeed, operators have to prove to each other their involvement in collaboration by showing they possess what Dubar (1998) calls "**knowledge of organization**", which means they know how their partners works. They know what the specifications of their products are as well as their organizational processes. Giving such a proof is very important because it creates **trust**. When somebody wants to talk to a specific person, it is because he/she trusts him/her more than the interfirm information system. People expect their interlocutor to commit to a precise waiting period, a certain quality and willingness to implement means of action to ensure the success of the partnership because they *trust* this particular person. We believe such a trust can be explained by the fact that they have something the IIS haven't: "knowledge of organization". Trust has been proved many times before. In this respect, trust constitutes a specific asset for collaboration and has to be developed.

All these resources have been socially constructed by operational-level employees through naturally occurring talk-based interactions. In doing this, these employees acted as innovators because their production constitutes the very heart of Asanuma's relation-specific skill and thus RBV's core-competency allowing to reach new strategic and organizational goals. We believe the resources revealed by the conversation fit Barney's VRIN criterias (for Valuable, Rare, Inimitable and Non-substitutable). These resources are valuable because they help operational-level employees to coordinate efficiently. In doing this, they allow the organization to develop a relation-specific skill consisting in flexibility, adaptability, security and quality. Then, they are rare because such resources depend solely on the people involved. Changing people would make these resources disappear. Because of that, they are also not easily imitable. These resources are indeed grounded in the people that create and use them. Finally, the resources are also non-substitutable despite the trend to standardize knowledge by means of information technology. As explained above, we strongly believe relying only on computerization would be a mistake considering the global need for organizations to be more and more reactive and flexible.

### ***To practice***

The operational manager of OUESTRANSPORT explains what he would like to do: *“I want us to be capable of discussing with customers how we improve together the way we collaborate. We have to be more communicative. We have to get richer communication. All the time, in everyday interactions. We must know what is going on at our client’s without being there. This is only that way that we are going to learn from our customers and that they are going to learn from us. This is really a project of mutual integration: sharing our problems with our customers because many of them are bound to the way they work. We want to create “a couple” between operators who have to work together. It also means using the tools of human beings that are beautiful machines! Every time we make a manipulation, or an act of language, we have to tell ourselves “I am TEZOR” (a customer) for example.”* So, how is that possible to make this become reality?

We consider that interactions have to be encouraged. The creation and diffusion of what we have called “Knowledge of Organization” require a certain degree of stability of employees within their company. We also believe interaction will be more efficient if people know each other. It is possible to organize meetings between employees (conveyors and customers) for example. Encouraging interactions also implies thinking about the animation of these workgroups. On this point, it seems to us interesting and important to wonder about the role of the intermediate manager (Rouleau 2005, Westley 1990) who should act here as an implementer. They are supposed to “do” strategy every day, because the way they act is seen by everyone and so constitutes a means to influence the way employees also act. In the perspective we propose, these managers go from a role of decision-making superior passing down decisions to a role of activity leader! Leadership may also at times mean reassuring operators who take decisions, by sharing the responsibility for these decisions (Arnaud 2008, Honoré 1999). The more middle managers adopt this type of behavior, the more involved people will be in the communicational processes and so in the construction of a relation-specific skill.

Encouraging interactions also implies tools that encourage conversation. They are tools that display information. Such tools are no longer tools that constrain human behavior but rather allow actors to explore organizations. They will be used as a basis for conversation and thus for collective learning. In this respect, it is possible to question the role of computerization and more specifically Interfirms Information Systems (IIS) in the collaboration. In the haulage company we studied, when the IIS was set up, it was supposed to coordinate instead of the actors. However, the analysis of the “black box” of the collaborative sphere shows that computerization constitutes nothing more than an actant

which, by reducing the needs for cognitive activity, frees interpersonal communication that produces knowledge, instead of closing it. The condition is that managers don't forget to socially connect operational-level employees among themselves. Standardization and the social stock of knowledge are thus both essential to collaboration processes.

***To strategy as practice perspective***

Adherents to this perspective agreed on the importance researchers must give to processes and practices realized by people in their everyday activity that are linked to strategic concerns. In this respect, we believe researchers have to contextualize their study in order to propose a realistic articulation between micro events (here the resources created through talk) and macro issues (the necessary strategic adjustment because of the evolution of environmental forces). Also, like traditional strategic works, the strategizing movement is interested in strategists. The difference is that people who "do" strategy are not only top managers. It is no longer only seemed as a top-down process. As SAP studies increasingly demonstrate, middle managers as well as lower-level employees are also important strategic actors. By focusing upon the communicational aspects of operational-level employees' activity, this research has tried to demonstrate that such aspects are significant for firm survival and competitive advantage. In this respect, this paper is understood to contribute to the SAP agenda such as developed by Jarzabkowski et al. (2007). We believe this study contributes to axes 2, 4 et 5 by respectively: going deeper into the link between praxis and practitioners by focusing on communicational construction of social resources by operational-level employees; using new theoretical backgrounds to study the contribution of the social dynamic of actors to strategic concerns; grounding the practice research on a specific methodological protocol focusing upon the notion of situation as a network of conversations.

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