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Value enhanced collaborative working: case study of a small management advisory firm

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Value Enhanced Collaborative Working: In Small Management Advisory Firm

1. Introduction

SMEs (Small and Medium Sized Enterprises) are an important part of the global economy. Statistics show the volume of their contribution. For e.g., the Department for Business Enterprises and Regulatory Reform's (2007) survey shows that 99.2% of all UK firms are small enterprises, 0.6% are medium sized enterprises while 0.1% are large businesses, making SMEs a major part of the UK economy. Given this fact, it is an important part of our industry that cannot be ignored. The European Commission (1996) defined SMEs as independent firms with a headcount of less than 50 employees, either on the basis of an annual turnover, or balance sheet, with a total not exceeding 10 million Euros. 98.2% of the construction sector comprises of businesses that fall within this SME category (Construction Statistics Annual, 2007). It is, therefore a vital part of the construction sector that needs attention. A large part of their business relies on collaboration and partnering with other businesses. How successful or not the collaboration is, would depend on the collaborative arrangements between the companies. These collaborative arrangements should be able to overcome the inherent issues associated with such collaboration by allowing partners to pool resources, exploit complementarities and provide quick and flexible access to external resources (Das and Teng, 2000; Anand and Khanna, 2000; Hoffmann and Schaper-Rinkel, 2001; Belderbos *et al.*, 2004). Thus, collaborative working has the potential to enable people and organisations to work more effectively with stakeholders and perform combined actions across various cultural, disciplinary, geographic and temporal boundaries (Hammond *et al.*, 2001; Attaran and Attaran, 2002).

This paper is an effort to understand the need for partners of a small management advisory firm to derive value from collaborative working. For this purpose, a case study of a small management advisory firm and its collaborating stakeholders is considered. Literature on collaborative working, concurrent engineering (CE) and value management (VM) philosophies has been critically reviewed to understand the gaps between the technology-driven tools that support collaborative working and the impact of human and social dynamics in the organisation. Further, based on the literature and case study, a conceptual framework of Value Enhanced Collaborative Working (VECW) is proposed to identify the major factors within VECW and how they would address the issues of collaboration in small management advisory firms.

2. Research Method

This research project is part of an Engineering Doctorate (EngD) program. The primary aim of the current project was to derive performance improvements to the sponsoring company (a small management advisory firm) through VECW. The first stage involved a comprehensive review of literature on collaborative working and the role of value within collaborative working. This led to a better understanding of collaborative working requirements in a small firm context and the barriers to derive value from collaborative working in the given context. Initially, exploratory observations helped to identify issues of collaborative working in the case study organisation (referred to as Firm A from here onwards). Initial observations highlighted that in Firm A there was:

- Limited business being generated by Associates;
- Limited financial/business value derived through collaboration; and
- Poor communication between Firm A and its Associates.

Following this exploratory observations, a detailed case study (see section 5.2) was undertaken to investigate how current practices were responsible for the issues highlighted in exploratory observations and identifying the factors that affect collaborative working within Firm A. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with different stakeholders in order to establish what factors were responsible for these issues and to establish attitudes towards collaborative working. The stakeholders consisted of Firm A directors, clients and Associates. The interviews were helpful in understanding the existing collaborative business model. In all, six face-to-face interviews were conducted (two interviews each with Firm A directors, clients and Associates). The scope of the interview questions covered a) current collaboration practices between Firm A and its stakeholders; b) barriers and enablers to collaboration between Firm A and its stakeholders; and c) information transparency and communication within the collaboration team. Analysis was carried out qualitatively. The interviewers were encouraged to illustrate through examples the barriers of existing collaboration model and the underlying reasons behind it. Findings of which led to the development of a conceptual framework that would consider the important factors for VECW in a small management advisory firm.

This paper presents findings of the study conducted to identify what motivates SMEs to collaborate with stakeholders to derive collective business benefits. and thus, identify issues or factors that enable SMEs to benefit from and sustain long-term collaborative working. These issues are then explored in more detail through the conduct of a case study of Firm A. By comparing and contrasting the findings of the literature review and the case study, it was possible to tease out the key components of a VECW, which subsequently led to the development of a conceptual VECW framework.

3. Collaborative Working Background and Context

A wide range of literature is available under the umbrella of collaborative working. The current research work is in the context of Firm A and hence literature related to collaborative working in SMEs and management advisory firms has been reviewed. It was seen that frequently, SMEs work on limited resources, be it, monetary or work-force related. Staff are often overloaded with multiple-tasks, which impacts on organisational performance and efficiency (Major and Cordey-Hayes, 2000). In addition, their governance and reward structures are different (Hausman, 2005); and they usually have fewer external contacts to increase their adaptation capabilities in response to changes in the economic, technological or competitive markets (Drozdow and Carroll, 1997).

Management advisory firms are often faced with situations where the nature of organisational problems within clients are barely structured and recognised (Creplet *et al.*, 2001; Kakabadse *et al.*, 2006). Such situations demand specialist knowledge and capabilities that can be provided by the management advisory firm. However, in case of an SME management advisory firm, it would be beneficial to establish synergies between people working in similar domains. Doing so would allow superior access to

human resources. A number of features can be added to the collaborative working environment in order to derive maximum value, for example, collaborative decision making by Cardell (2002) and Mudambi and Helper (1998); recognition of the need to actively manage multiple actors' interests by Boddy et al. (1998) and equitable benefit sharing by Cox (2001). To accommodate these different features that encompass collaboration; and therefore contribute towards generating added value, the term, VECW has been coined.

In its broadest terms VECW considers the varied perspectives discussed earlier and in doing so attempts to bring clarity to this 'modified' outlook. For example, some special features of this modified outlook to collaboration include greater commitment to problem-solving through agreed common goals, sharing of risks and rewards, faster and clearer communications between collaborators and flexibility of service. VECW enables consideration of collaborative working in this wider context. Considering the above, VECW is defined here as the collective work of two or more individuals, teams or organisations, undertaken with a strong commitment to enhance the value derived from a collaborative enterprise. It includes key concepts of partnering and alliancing, using technology driven tools as appropriate, and managing systematic social interactions in order to achieve a common understanding between collaborative teams.

In this paper's context, a small management advisory firm (such as Firm A) is defined as a private firm, which offers professional services, acts as a change-agent in client organisations and provides advice, analysis, focus, guidance, mentoring, questioning, problem-solving or delivering tasks. Considering its importance to know the role of value enhancement in collaborative working, there is a need to understand value and values.

4. Value and Values in Collaborative Working

Value is very subjective, as it is a matter of opinion, compared to cost which is a measure of the amount of money, time and resources to obtain a requirement. Also, value for a person can change constantly to meet the requirements and thus measuring value as a concept can be difficult (Shillito et al., 1992; Park, 2000). Any attempt to provide a definitive description must be valid in many different contexts (Woodhead et al., 2001). Although the concept of value can have many definitions, generally they are not divergent (Anderson *et al.*, 1993, Monroe, 1990; Gale, 1994; Woodhead, 2001). These definitions mainly address 'hard' attributes of values not the 'soft' attributes that Emmitt and Chirstofferson (2008) discuss. In some instances, value is related to a price or cost but other aspects such as utility, cultural significance and markets can also be relevant. In comparison, values are the morals and ideals, which are reflected in people's attitudes, behaviour and shaped through their social relations (Emmitt and Christoffersen, 2008). The importance of values is that once it is internalised it becomes, consciously or subconsciously, a criteria for guiding one's beliefs (Bruno and Lay, 2008). Values exist in relation to the values held by others and are thus not absolute and are in constant transformation. Hence, agreement of an objective best 'value' for a group can differ from the individuals' perception of value.

A collaborative organisation should regard value as the end-goal of all projects and thus it is imperative to discuss and agree on the value parameters (Emmitt and

Christofferson, 2008). These parameters are fundamental for achieving collaboration and therefore, stakeholder satisfaction. Hence, it is important that different stakeholders in this collaborative arrangement establish and use a shared “value” to “frame” a specific problem context for a given project or to run a series of collaborative projects (Austin et al., 2001; Emmitt and Christoffersen, 2008). Figure 1 helps in explaining how different stakeholders with different or similar values can work collaboratively towards a common goal and still achieve certain individual objectives. Here, plane 1 at the bottom gives that “strategic context” for the collaboration between the stakeholders. The collaborative team determines a specific problem context for a given project within the above “strategic context” based on the stakeholders’ common goal and shared set of values (Lu *et al.*, 2007). The process of identifying this common goal effectively requires a dialogue between stakeholders to explore and confirm set of values that form the basis of that project (common values), which is best carried out by face to face meetings (Emmitt and Christoffersen, 2008).

Figure 1: Arriving at Common Value in VECW for Different Stakeholders (Based on Lu *et al.*, 2007)

Different stakeholders bring different perspectives based on their expertise, experiences, backgrounds and objectives. Planes 1a and 1b are the preferred individual values related to the strategic context of the two stakeholders. Here a perspective is a particular viewpoint in which a stakeholder perceives a problem. According to Figure 1, these different perspectives are a result of the different values

that the stakeholders hold due to their individual nature of work, or the individual objectives and aspirations (planes 2a and 2b in figure 1) through the collaborative effort in the project. The stakeholders then need to dynamically co-construct each other's contrasting/complementary perspectives to achieve a shared understanding of the project. This common understanding is the collective vision of the project.

5. VECW – A Case Study

5.1 Background of Case Study Organisation

In order to investigate the key components and issues associated with collaborative working and the effect it has on enhancing (and deriving) value, a detailed case study of Firm A, a small management advisory firm within the UK, was conducted. The organisational structure of Firm A comprises of four directors and two full-time employees. The directors have several years of experience in a wide range of industries such as construction, manufacturing, water engineering and service and utility sectors. Firm A collaborates with Strategic Partners to develop licensed proprietary management tools that are used to resolve and manage different collaboration related issues ranging from organisational alignment to partnering and change management. It works closely with a group of Associates, who share resources and collaboratively work on different projects. In the context of Firm A, Strategic Partners are the experts of a particular field providing new tools in fields, while Associates are the consultants working with Firm A collaboratively and providing their services. The firm operates on a collaboration model where collaborators and directors share resources, expertise and knowledge to achieve business objectives. Figure 2 shows the collaboration environment within Firm A divided into inner-core, transient-core and outer-core. Firm A directors and employees form the inner core of the collaboration environment. Associates and Strategic Partners are part of the external core as they are not directly involved in management of Firm A activities. However, if any of the Associates or Strategic Partners take an interest in further development of Intellectual Property (IP) or acquire projects for the collaboration environment then they are considered to be in the transient core, where they work closely with the inner-core Firm A directors. The motivation for being in the transient-core is greater financial rewards and a chance to be part of the inner-core by taking up a directorial role for sustained business generating collaborative efforts.

Figure 2: Business arrangement of Firm A

The business structure of Firm A is such that there is a core team of Directors, who collaborate with Associates on projects of varying sizes and budgets. The current structure does not require an Associate to have formalized agreements for collaboration. The strength of such a voluntary collaborative arrangement is that there is flexibility in terms of who to collaborate with. The downside, however, is that there is no binding requirement that necessitates Associates to collaborate or bring in new projects. Such an arrangement or flexible structure has limitations, as neither Firm A Directors nor the Associates have guaranteed hard monetary incentives to continue collaboration in the future. To ascertain long-term sustainability this needs to be considered.

A VECW framework has the potential to address some of the issues highlighted and in doing so inform other SME advisory firms with similar (VECW) business models. In short, the research investigates the impact of collaborative working strategies on Firm A where limited resources lead to a dependence on Associates for important business processes. To ground the framework, it was important to know the existing attitudes towards collaboration in Firm A and its stakeholders. This was followed by identification of major issues that can be divided under the common themes to form the conceptual VECW framework. The case study interview participants were two Directors of Firm A, two Associates and two Clients.

5.2 Case Study Analysis and Findings

The case study was analysed with respect to the scope of the questionnaire being divided into three parts, i.e. Firm A's collaboration practices, enablers and barriers to collaboration and information transparency within Firm A collaboration, as mentioned in the research method section. Each interviewee was asked to describe their roles and responsibilities with respect to collaboration with Firm A, typically ranging from winning projects, through to the implementation of the project. The roles and responsibility of the Associates in the collaboration as envisaged by the Clients as

Comment [c1]: rephrase

well as Associates was more at business level activities where, Associates provided Firm A with their services in implementing projects with Clients. However, in addition, Firm A directors expected more strategic business generation involvement by the Associates as part of this collaboration. Increased incentives were in place for the strategic work of Associates but were not clearly communicated to the Associates as evident from Associates' lack of knowledge. There was a lack of shared vision and communication gaps between the collaborating parties, indicating *people issues* in collaboration that needed attention.

Comment [c2]: give example?

Not all Associates were involved or even interested in collaborating at a strategic level to generate new business. They were quite contented with offering their services at a business level, after projects were won. These Associates formed the outer core of the collaborative working environment. However, Firm A directors failed to distinguish such group from the inner or transient core groups (discussed in Section XXX) involved in strategic activities like business generation. The analysis of these interviews was a direct pointer towards *process issues* that failed to cover both these groups of Associates. Firm A directors felt this might be the result of a lack of formal processes to identify the appropriate Associates for the collaboration. From Firm A's point of view, Associates should possess fundamental consultant skills, such as experience, functional transferable skills and objectivity, among other things. Also, consistent with management literature (e.g. Kakabadse *et al.*, 2006) the consultants' responsibilities for managing Client expectations and strategic transfer of skills were considered equally important. As far as the selection of Strategic Partners was concerned, it was based on the tools they developed and their potential use projects that required those tools. Thus, the selection process of strategic partners was clearly defined, however, there was no clear selection policy for Associates. Clearly, an area that needs attention.

Comment [c3]: state How? why?

Clients pointed out the visible barriers to the collaboration model of Firm A. They felt that at times Firm A Associates have 'digressing' agendas as compared with Firm A and other Associates. The Client compares Firm A with similar Associate-based organisations and feels that these organisations are aligned to an idea and it is thus easy for a Client to understand them. The challenge for Firm A is to create synergy among Associates that is evident to the Clients. As one Client pointed out "The business would get a boost when groups' intent is clear to the market." Since the literature is clear about the important role of personal client-consultant relationships for any consulting project success, it is important to clear such vague messages (Kakabadse *et al.*, 2006 and Czerniawska, 2006). Hence, it is a *people issue* in terms of communicating the intent clearly to the market and a *process issue* to help the Associates clear that to the market.

In the last section of the questionnaire, all the case study participants were asked their views on information transparency. The Associates and Clients were comfortable with the information transparency. However, a lack of knowledge of tools available with Firm A and its stakeholders was a concern for the Associates. These tools are based on different philosophies of collaboration including strategy exploration, value frameworks, readiness diagnostics for collaboration and cost management in multi-alliance projects. The Associates felt they need training or workshops on the tools available with Firm A to understand their uses in different projects. This lack of understanding of the collective technical competency and know-

how of different tools and techniques was a setback to the core business idea behind this collaboration expecting Associates to market the services of Firm A. Hence, *tools issues* were unique in that, it led to inability of Associates to market Firm A collaboration technical competencies to prospective Clients.

An overall analysis of the case study thus revealed the issues related to *people*, *processes* and *tools*, leading to the following consequences prevalent in the organisational collaboration between Firm A and its stakeholders:

- Associates and Strategic Partners have little incentive to generate new business for Firm A. Hence more incentives through process changes should generate more business leading to VECW over a sustained period.
- A diverse range of Associates who do not share the same vision as the Firm A directors. It was a direct reflection of the lack of communication between Firm A and collaborators, hence a gap in the people issues.
- Lack of understanding of the collective competency and know-how of tools and technologies. Tools factors help in identifying the core competency of the collaborative environment.

Next section describes the conceptual VECW framework. A conceptual framework is required here to set the different issues identified in the interview findings and organise them to communicate them effectively. It is an overview of ideas and practices involved in VECW that will shape effective collaborative working in Firm A.

6. Conceptual VECW Framework

The conceptual framework forms part of working hypothesis prepared for VECW and it defines descriptive categories (factors) as stated by Shields (1998). The conceptual framework identifies sub-factors within these factors that needs to be considered to improve the collaboration efforts of Firm A and Associates based on literature review and the case study interviews.

As mentioned in the previous section, the majority of collaboration issues could be divided into three major issues i.e. Processes, People and Tools. Researchers like Prasad (1996), Austin *et al.* (2001) and Khalfan (2001) suggested similar factors to control the character of an organisation in their studies. Prasad's work was based on manufacturing organisations, while Austin *et al.* referred to design chains and Khalfan adopted a construction organisations' perspective. Table 1 below is a comparison of Prasad (1996) and Austin *et al.*'s. (2001) view of these factors.

Table 1: Factors Affecting Character of an Organisation (Prasad, 1996 & Austin et al., 2001)

Factors affecting organisation	Prasad (1996)	Austin <i>et al.</i> (2001)
Processes	Consists of policy, practice and procedure to help in design of business, management, cultural, technical and operational processes.	Combined effectiveness of collaborating organisations is ensured by no duplication of processes.

People	Consists of the value system of an organisation and human factors such as cultural, social, training and intelligence.	It is the simple ability of people to work together.
Tools	Consists of the tools and technology available with the organisation.	The design processes are allocated based on the organisation's technical competency.

Prasad concentrated on the organisational elements while Austin *et al.*'s analysis focuses on how best to achieve these factors. Prasad's (1996) manufacturing organisations are different from the traditional engineering view as they have a more value-centric view; where instead of just providing a manufactured product they might even provide the subsequent service supporting those products to generate more value for the client. Austin *et al.*'s (2001) design chains are considered similar to management advisory firms as parallels exist between a design chain; where different people/organisation are involved in providing a service, which satisfies common objectives of the project. Hence, identification of the issues from the case study interviews and Prasad's (1996) classification of organisational elements to control the character of organisations helped in deducing the VECW framework into the three elements of Process, People and Tools. Austin *et al.* (2001) helps in identifying the routes to achieve these factors to facilitate VECW in Firm A.

The case study interviews highlighted issues within each of these factors in the context of Firm A and their work as a management advisory business. The factors are broad subjects in themselves and thus, further subdivision gave particular focus to the small management advisory business. Further subdivision of the factors was based on the challenges faced by the firm in the current situation.

6.1 Process Factors

Firm A, like most management advisory firms, is a service organisation. Ideally, Firm A should have a process map that specifies a set of logically related activities and resources that yield a certain output. However, the case study analysis reflected that Firm A directors although recognizing discrete processes for each stage of a project, lack a written process map for the organisation. This has resulted in different collaborating stakeholders not conversant with their roles and responsibilities in collaborative working environment.

A detailed process map forces the enterprise to look at how functions must co-operate in order to achieve collaboration among the stakeholders (Gibb et al., 2006). Figure 3 below gives 'As Is' process map at a high level of Firm A's collaboration efforts. The processes identified here are based on the information provided by the case study interviews. It is evident that the processes are project-based (operational) rather than strategic in nature and there is no clarity on how to involve the stakeholders to get more value out of it. It also has no consideration of the instances when there are no prospective projects available for particular Associates, to sustain a collaborative relationship. The result being Associates have no real communication with Firm A's directors.

Comment [c4]: why? evidence?

Comment [c5]: state why? evidence? what sort of input?

Comment [c6]: explain why the as is process was considered? give example for clarity.

Figure 3: High level 'As-Is' processes in Firm A collaboration

Development of the processes would result in an improved business model, where processes are in place to ensure that the relationship with Associates is sustained when projects are not forthcoming for the Associates. A process map for this new method of working would reflect its 'To-be' processes. The 'To-be' process map will constitute all process activities as value added operations with a degree of flexibility and variability in terms of their repetitive nature (McAdam *et al.*, 2005). Thus, the important sub-processes of the process factor in VECW can consist of the following:

- Stakeholder Integration – consisting of developing strategic business processes e.g. selection of stakeholders, communication with stakeholders and positioning them in the overall process map;
- Detailed Process Mapping – Map the 'As-is' process at the sub-process levels to find all value generating process for this collaboration;
- Recommended Processes – consisting of the 'To-be' processes and ways of incorporating the 'to-be' processes.

The conceptual framework for VECW is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Framework for VECW

6.2 People Factors

A key aspect of collaborative working is the ability of individuals to share knowledge. There are several factors that can influence knowledge sharing ranging from social and organisational to extremely personal (Coakes *et al.*, 2008). In the conceptual VECW framework, these factors are described as the **people factors**. An important people factor in Firm A is the role of communication since most Associates and Strategic Partners are geographically dispersed. Another issue which was reflected in the case analysis interviews was the need to sustain long term relationships with the Associates. This would require a better understanding of the Associates' value system, the need for regular face-to-face interactions and most importantly participative decision making (Jackson, 1999; Lu *et al.*, 2007; Emmitt and Christoffersen, 2008).

Comment [c7]: state why?

In the current scenario, the communication of roles of Associates and Strategic Partners in running of this collaboration is not well defined at the start of the relationship. A recommendation is to sign a new type of partnership agreement between the stakeholders that will include these people issues that are not covered in the existing partnership agreement. The current agreement of Firm A is prepared more with Yli-Renko *et al.*'s (2001) view of protecting oneself from opportunism, while another more sustainable and positive use can be creating and maintaining a long-term relationship between the parties (Frankel *et al.*, 1996). A Collaboration Charter can be this new flexible agreement that helps the stakeholders to create a long term sustainable relationship and achieve the overall objective of the collaboration. Here a Collaboration Charter can be defined as a written document generated for the formation of the collaboration that outlines the collaboration's distinctive character, values, goals, milestones and output. A thorough analysis of the existing agreement in the ongoing research will determine the essential inclusions within this charter and the significance of periodic review of the charter. It is acknowledged that the Collaboration Charter is one way of solving some of the communication issues but it needs to be followed with other efforts.

6.3 Tools Factor

Periodical review of collaborative tools available with Firm A helps to identify gaps in the portfolio of tools to sufficiently provide the type of business their clients expect. The case study interviews identified no formal process for selecting tools. The different tools available with Firm A are stand-alone with no obvious overlap or synergy. A desk study review of the tools concluded some of these tools were exploratory in nature, while some others were questionnaire based or used a technology platform.

Portar (1985) discussed the inability of organisations to understand and implement different tools, when they fail to realise the synergy between these tools. Firm A is not a single-product entity and hence, synergy between the tools would help in the sharing of tangible and intangible resources as well as providing holistic view of the overall capacity to the client. The understanding of the synergy between the different tools available would result in compromise costs (Osegowitsch, 2001). The quality of a collaborative project team (Directors and Associates) may suffer as Associates are

forced to divide their attention and training among several tools which leads to compromise costs. The conceptual VECW framework considers such costs by further developing the tools and help the collaboration in delivering better services to their clients.

7. Further Development

The conceptual VECW framework recognises the diverse interests and expertise of the stakeholders (Associates and Strategic Partners). The people factor within this framework will ensure stakeholders understand the primary goal of the collaborative environment and work towards it by agreeing to common goals. Associates and Strategic Partners are essentially organised in a structured way through the process factors to deal with potential disparity of power and/or resources for dealing with the issues at hand. The People and Process factors together give structure to sharing of risks and rewards, and enable faster and clearer communications while keeping flexibility of service among stakeholders. The Tools factor of the conceptual VECW framework will develop competencies of the different stakeholders and align strategically multiple stakeholder collaborations towards a primary goal. Lastly, due to the structured format of the conceptual framework, information transparency would improve among the stakeholders. Formalised feedbacks, joint IP, planning and explicit sharing of information help to enhance long term sustainable relationship of the stakeholders.

This paper established the conceptual structure to VECW based on the literature review and the case study of a small management advisory firm. The way forward with the research program is to further develop the conceptual VECW framework into a comprehensive VECW framework. It would involve developing all the three factors in further detail and develop specific actions within each of the factors to ascertain robust development of the comprehensive framework. The development of the comprehensive framework would be followed by an evaluation with Firm A, Associates, current Clients and academics through a day long strategic workshop.

8. Conclusions

The motivation for collaboration within SMEs is to provide quick and flexible access to external resources. This paper is an effort to understand the need for partners of a small management advisory firm to derive value from collaborative working.

The research was based on the case study of the apparent failure of a particular SME management advisory firm to derive value from its collaborative model. Firm A case study identified in the existing collaboration model issues such as limited success to win new projects, lack of common vision among Associates and the firm Directors, lack of understanding of tools available to Associates through their alliance with Firm A and inability to understand the collective competencies of each other. The collaboration is not generating much financial value or enough business value in terms of networking and knowledge to the Associates to keep them actively engaged in the arrangement. The inability of the Associates to engage at a strategic and tactical level in this relationship, limits the core business aspirations of Firm A.

In order to solve these issues, a methodology called Value Enhanced Collaborative Working (VECW) was established in the context of a small management advisory firm and a conceptual VECW framework proposed and discussed. The major components of this framework consist of Process, People and Tools factors. These factors were based on the literature review and case study findings. The framework gives a structured approach to agree common goals, share risks and rewards, provide faster and clearer communications and information transparency between stakeholders.

The research method concentrates on the issues faced by Firm A. The developed conceptual VECW framework should ideally work for any organisation of a similar size or providing similar services but a research limitation is the lack of empirical evidence based on more case studies. This research has provided a conceptual framework with the important sub-factors within each of the process, people and tools factors. Future research will establish specific actions to achieve those sub-factors. Lastly an overall evaluation of the comprehensive VECW framework should help in making it more robust.

The developed conceptual VECW framework has the potential to solve collaboration issues in any SME firm, but the conceptual framework is a guideline and it would require the constant supervision by senior management in the firm. VECW is an approach to understand the different needs of stakeholders in an SME collaborative environment to effectively collaborate with the help of the people, process and tool factors.

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