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SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH PAPER

Public Support and Inter-firm Collaborations in Women-Owned Firms

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A B S T R A C T

This study goes beyond the descriptive analyses of women entrepreneur's networks, and advances the idea of interdependency between the different types of relationships they build. It emphasizes that developing ties with support institutions can reinforce and legitimate them in the interactions with peers organisations. The results of the research on a sample of Spanish women-owned business reveal that as the level of support obtained through the relationships with public entities increases, the average social interaction with clients and collaborators and the quality of relationships with collaborators increases. Further, we suggest that purposeful management of inter-organisational relationships can represent a valid instrument for overcoming lack of legitimacy and gender barriers.

KEW WORDS: *gender, inter-organisational relationships, women-owned business.*

Introduction

The debate around the existence of gender differences in the creation and management of firms and whether these differences are due to structural barriers or to socialization into masculine and feminine roles has formed the central axis of research on women's entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, there is an increasing number of studies proposing that

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gendered processes are implicit to organisational structures and that viewing entrepreneurship itself as a gendered activity would provide useful insights on women's entrepreneurship (Patricia Lewis 2006; Kiran Mirchandani 1999). If the studies that tackle the perspective of gender directly focus on explaining differences, the causes of these differences (discrimination or socialization), and ways of overcoming them, is it also necessary to continue advancing knowledge of this group of entrepreneurs and their businesses. Anna de Bruin, Candida Brush and Friederike Welter (2007) point out the shifting focus of attention, from studies that compare men and women to studies that compare samples of women to each other, thus raising the question, "What can we learn about entrepreneurial activity in general by studying women entrepreneurs?"

Research on women-owned business has underlined that the quantity and quality of the external relationships of the firm with its environment are critical for being successful (Sara Carter, Susan Anderson and Eleanor Shaw 2001). As the nature of the relationships that firms develop influences the extent to which they can access resources and the processes of acquiring these resources (Andrew Inkpen and Eric Tsang 2005; Oana Branzei and Ilan Vertinsky 2006), the necessity to overcome the initial theoretical discussions based on one generic kind of network and to examine in detail the characteristics of different types of ties and the interactions between them becomes imperative (Inkpen and Tsang 2005).

Responding to these calls for research and following Choonwoo Lee, Kyungmook Lee and Johannes Pennings (2001), our study establishes two kinds of relationships that women-owned firms develop: support relationships and peer-to-peer relationships. In the first category, we include relationships with public and private institutions and banks that provide access to resources such as financing or public recognition, thus constituting a support network. The second category includes collaborations of a different kind with other firms such as clients, providers, competitors, based on an explicit exchange of resources and constituting a network of peers.

We analyse the interdependencies between these two kinds of relationships in a sample of businesses created by women, thus emphasizing the way in which firms can use relationships with one category of actors to improve their access to other actors and the resources they hold. Our main aim is to explore the question of the extent to which firms gain legitimacy in the relationships with their clients and collaborators by developing support relationships with public institutions and private organisations. In addition, we propose that advancing knowledge on these issues allows us to describe the reach of the support policies and acknowledge their importance for women entrepreneurs.

This analysis has important implications for women entrepreneurs and policy makers' practice. For women entrepreneurs it offers insights on the conscious management of support relationships in order to develop and intensify peer-to-peer relationships. For policy makers it draws the attention on the important role they play in legitimating women-owned business and the benefits these firms can harvest.

The study is structured as it follows: we devote the first section to a brief review of the literature on the external relationships of firms created by women, focusing on the two kinds of relationships introduced above and the connections between them. After, the paper provides an explanation of the study developed, the results and the main conclusions.

Literature Review

Relationships with Support Entities

Relationships with support entities include those with all of the public and private entities that offer resources such as financing, reputation or advising. This category includes relationships with financial entities, institutions, foundations, publications, commercial organisations, etc. We will first review the existing literature on the financial support obtained by women-owned business and after focus on the social and legitimating support.

Of all the studies on entrepreneurs and gender, the topic of the woman entrepreneur's access to financing is the most sophisticated and mature. It has been developed in greatest depth in terms of cumulative research, although it also remains the area most marked by lack of explanatory theories (Carter, Anderson and Shaw 2001).

Beginning in the 1980s, new firms with high growth potential and great needs for capital found an increase in sources of financing. In spite of this apparent abundance, the proportion of capital attracted by women entrepreneurs' firms has been much lower than the number and potency that these firms represent in the economy (Patricia Greene et al. 1999).

Susan Marlow and Dean Patton (2005) argue that the restrictions on women's access to financing are part of a wider system of disadvantages in which women are affected by stereotyped thinking that portrays them as inferior to men. They stress that access to financing constitutes a challenge for many entrepreneurs, but it seems that women experience additional disadvantages associated with gender, a fact that limits their capacity to accumulate savings and generate attractive histories for formal financiers and capital risk societies.

The literature review on this topic poses two important conclusions for our work. First, that almost all of these studies employ only financial indicators of the entrepreneurial performance, ignoring that performance is a multidimensional construct (Balaji Chakravarthy 1986). This dominant perspective on performance places women-owned firms as low-performing compared to their male counterparts and less attractive for receiving support and recognition from the financial institutions, as they are located mainly in low-growth economic sectors and women's criteria for performance is recognized to go beyond the financial results, to a more holistic perspective of the organization as a social entity. Secondly, that the majority of the research treating the subject of finance, networks and gender focuses on the role that networks play in accessing financial resources and its consequences for subsequent performance, ignoring that the relationships with financing entities may influence other variables than performance, as for example the relationships with peers.

Regarding the relationships with other public and private organisations, previous studies have shown that generally, government agencies or foundations exercise a significant influence on the networks of firms (Bill McEvily and Akbar Zaheer 1999). Walter Powell (1990) offers numerous examples of how culture or local social organisations have been critical for explaining the formation of inter-organisational networks in the U.S. as well as in other countries. Studies of the structures of relationships between firms in East Asia from an institutional perspective have emphasized differences related to cultural, political and historical context (Lisa Keister 2001). Yet, the research that considered the institutional aspects of networks focused mainly on the interventionist role of institutions and private entities in fostering the development of networks (Keith Provan and Brinton Milward 2001). This literature doesn't make a case for women entrepreneurs networks and the lack of research on women entrepreneurs' relationships with institutions, represents another example of the problems of legitimacy generated by the tendency to conceptualise the entrepreneurial act as "masculine" (Pernilla Nilsson 1997; Lewis 2006).

Institutional theory highlights that an organisation has more possibilities for survival if it obtains legitimacy, social support and approval from the entities in the institutional arena. Such external legitimacy raises the status of the organisation in the community, facilitating the acquisition of resources. When certain visible relationships are interpreted as signs of quality that confer status on a firm, the price of the products and services seems to increase (Joel Podolny 1993; 1994). Likewise, relationships with institutions seem to diminish the disadvantage of being a small business (Joel Baum and Christine Oliver 1991). Baum and Oliver (1991) also find that the firms which develop relationships with institutions show a significant advantage for survival that increases with the competitive intensity. This advantage also depends on the characteristics of the organisation that has established the relationships and the legitimacy of the relationships themselves.

Relationships with Peers

In the category of relationships with peers, we have included different kinds of inter-organisational collaboration with clients, providers, competitors and other firms. Several authors have shown that inter-organisational relationships such as strategic alliances and long-term relationships with clients and providers are important paths of access to information, resources, markets and technologies (Ranjay Gulati, Nitin Nohria and Akbar Zaheer 2000). Inter-organisational networks offer a wide variety of knowledge and benefits for survival, innovation and performance; but issues of competition, information control and trust between the members make the effective construction of networks a highly complex topic (Daniel Brass et al. 2004).

Most studies of women entrepreneurs that treat the question of relationships with peers focus on analysing access to financial resources through these entities (John Becker-Blease and Jeffrey Sohl 2007; Richard Harrison and Colin Mason 2007) or on how relationships that women establish differ from those established by men (Stan Cromie and Sue Birley 1992; Ritch Sorenson, Cathleen Folker and Keith Brigham 2008). Very few studies analyse in depth the relationships that women-owned firms establish with their clients, their providers or competitors, the way in which these relationships support the development of the business by offering access to resources, the discovery of new and valuable clients and collaborators, or the accumulation of social capital, knowledge of the market and new business opportunities. These issues are the subject of a deeper and wider analysis in the general literature on entrepreneurs and social networks. In this sense, previous research emphasizes that the social interaction that takes place in collaborative relationships as well as the quality of these ties provide several benefits for the interacting firms (Joel Baum, Tony Calabrese and Brian Silverman 2000; Helena Yli-Renko, Erkko Autio and Harry Sapienza 2001).

Social interaction goes one step beyond the stipulated interactions for a formal relationship between two firms. Some authors have stressed that social interactions are developed over time in dyadic relationships, as the actors come to know and trust each other (Andrea Larson 1992; Peter Smith Ring and Andrew Van de Ven 1994). The benefits of a strong social interaction are reflected by the increased intensity in the exchange of information and knowledge acquisition (Larson 1992; Yli-Renko, Autio and Sapienza 2001). Intense social interaction with clients also strengthens a firm’s ability to recognize and evaluate relevant external information in order to transform it into specialized information and know-how, providing understanding of the operations that clients perform and by extension a more effective way of communicating with them (Jeffrey Dyer and Harbir Singh 1998). These elements influence positively the quality of relationships with clients. By intensifying the frequency and depth of information exchange, social interaction enables knowledge of the reciprocal expectations of the actors involved, development of common norms and objectives in the relationship, and an increase in the trust between parties, all of which are fundamental coordinates of a high-quality relationship (Janine Nahapiet and Sumantra Ghoshal 1998).

The quality of the ties with clients is a very important factor in the acquisition of resources through these relationships (Yli-Renko, Autio and Sapienza 2001). Dyer and Singh (1998) have stressed the need for informal norms of reciprocity and trust as mechanisms for governing the inter-organisational relationships that facilitate collaboration between firms and knowledge sharing. Norms of reciprocity and trust give firms the control and freedom necessary to exchange a wide range of resources, take risks with each other, innovate, and share information freely (Larson 1992).

Given the befits of building quality relationships and developing intense social interactions with clients and collaborators, firms should focus on the factors that stimulate these elements and devote efforts to enhance their effect.

Interdependencies Between the Relationships Developed

Prior studies have shown that in conditions of uncertainty a firms' previous relationships are an important decision factor. These studies analyse such elements as the number of previous alliances between partners (Ranjay Gulati 1995). Their results support our premise that firms' relationships with support organisations such as public and private financing and non-financing entities can constitute an important calling card for the firms in other bilateral relationships due to the latter's much more public content. They become a guarantee of trust for accessing more knowledge of the partner and for increasing the network of contacts.

Given that networks can offer information on the behaviour of others, it is reasonable to expect that the presence of third parties (such as support entities) can motivate collaboration between two or more firms. Various studies have shown that relationships with symbols of legitimacy, such as prestigious public and private entities, affect the survival of firms (Baum and Oliver 1991). These relationships can grant special benefits in markets where the results are difficult to evaluate directly (Brass et al. 2004). They can also benefit actors whom some general perception places at a disadvantage with respect to others, as is the case for firms created by women. Toby Stuart, Ha Hoang and Ralph Hybels (1999) find that when faced with uncertainty concerning the quality of new firms, third parties base their reasoning on the reputation of these firms' business partners. More specifically, the support of government agencies and other organisations seems to become a competitive advantage for firms that receive it.

Based on these results, we can deduce that if a firm develops a good reputation through relationships with financial, public and private institutions and receives public recognition from them would be supported for intensifying the social interaction with its peers and raise the benefits of quality inter-organisational relationships. Consequently, the firm will have access to more resources, while also gaining support to diversify and widen its partner network (Yli-Renko, Autio and Sapienza 2001).

Obtaining financing from banks and public institutions for a business project is both a critical resource and a promise of success, but being called "promising" by prestigious public and private entities is a guarantee for a current or potential business partners. This support confers legitimacy on the firm, and positively affects a firm's relationships with its peers.

The Study

The previous literature review reveals the need to analyse the extent to which women-owned businesses that show good relationships with support entities (in terms of obtaining financing and public recognition of their performance) have:

- greater levels of social interaction with their clients than other firms that receive less support.
- greater levels of social interaction with their collaborators than other firms that receive less support.
- higher-quality relationships with their clients than do other firms that receive less support.
- higher-quality relationships with their collaborators than do other firms that receive less support.

In the empirical analysis, we have taken a sample of the population of Spanish firms started by women registered on www.e-empresarias.net. This web is a service provided by the Program of Entrepreneurial Support for Women, promoted by the Women's Institute and the National Council of Chambers of Commerce. This service seeks to bring new technologies to women entrepreneurs and businesswomen, offer them free advice and create a network between them.

Women can sign up at www.e-empresarias.net if they have been admitted to the Program of Entrepreneurial Support and wish to complement the face-to-face advising provided by their Chamber of Commerce with this on-line service. However, any woman who wishes to join may form part of the network of users of the Program for Entrepreneurial Support for Women. This is a national program that is developed in all regions and provinces of Spain.

The data were collected from June to November 2006, through an email questionnaire sent to all of the women registered on www.e-empresarias.net. The message sent with the survey explained that the study was directed to women entrepreneurs and described the research goals. Of the 3136 questionnaires sent, approximately 20 percent were returned because the email address was not valid. The 118 questionnaires received correspond to a 4.7 percent response rate, a rate close to the average of 6 percent for mail surveys in other studies (Eren Ozgen and Robert Baron 2007). After the incomplete questionnaires were eliminated, the number of surveys used in the study was 111.

The descriptive analysis of the sample showed that 80 percent of the women surveyed had some university education and 61.2 percent of the women entrepreneurs had more than five years of experience in the activity they developed.

The business was a personal initiative for 71.2 percent of the women surveyed and a group initiative for 22.7 percent; only 5.5 percent inherited the business. As to motivations for starting a business, the analysis of the multiple responses shows that 22.6 percent of the women started a business because they perceived a business opportunity, 18 percent for independence in their work, 37.7 percent as a personal challenge, 9.4% percent as an alternative to being employed by someone else and the same percent for necessity, because of the difficulty to find a job.

As to the firms' characteristics, 68.1 percent had been functioning for less than 5 years and 88 percent less than 10 years. Most of these firms were small, 93.7 percent having fewer than 10 employees. As to the sector of activity, the firms were concentrated primarily in the service sector and to a lesser degree in the sectors of commerce, construction and manufacturing industry.

Measurement of Variables

Relationships with support entities. To measure the independent variable relationships with support entities, we used a 5-item scale of 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree), adapted according to the measure used by Lee, Lee and Pennings (2001) for relationships with sponsors. The items refer to the extent to which the firm has received financial support from public and private finance organisations for projects that it undertakes alone or in collaboration with other firms, the extent to which these organisms have recognized the firm publicly as promising, and the extent to which the firm has received public recognition in general.

Relationships with peers. In the group of peers, we distinguish both at conceptual and operative effects between clients and other collaborators, since clients have a special status among collaborators in general and have been treated separately in the previous literature on networks. We measure two dimensions of these relationships, social interaction and quality, adapting them to the scales used by Yli-Renko, Autio and Sapienza (2001).

Quality of relationships with clients. To measure the quality of relationships with clients, we asked the respondents to evaluate six items on a 7-point scale (1=totally disagree; 7=totally agree). The items refer to the degree to which relationships with clients show that: neither party tries to take advantage of the other if it has the opportunity; both parties try to avoid making requirements that can damage the relationship; promises made by both sides are kept, and knowledge of the market and information concerning needs and tendencies in the market are obtained through these relationships.

Quality of relationships with collaborators. We measured this variable in a similar way to the previous one, but used four items referring to the following conditions: neither party tries to take advantage of the other if it has the opportunity; both parties try to avoid making requirements that can damage the relationship; and both parties keep promises made reciprocally.

Social interaction with peers (clients and collaborators). As in the case of quality of relationships, we distinguished between clients and other collaborators. In both cases, we used a 7-point scale (1=totally disagree; 7=totally agree). For measuring social interaction with clients, we used four items to show the closeness of relationships with clients, personal knowledge of the clients and the transmission of informal work knowledge through these relationships. To measure social interaction with collaborators, we used two items relevant to the closeness in relationships and personal knowledge of collaborators.

We performed an analysis of reliability in order to evaluate the internal consistency of the scales used, assuming that their elements are combined additively. Table 1 shows the Cronbach's Alpha values for the five variables employed. In all cases, the values are higher than 0.7, thus showing a good level of reliability (Joseph Hair et al. 2008).

Table 1: Viability analysis and descriptive statistics.

Variables	**Nº of ítems**	**Cronbach's Alfa**	**Means**	**SD**
Relationships with support entities	5	0.840	3.60	1.79
Quality of the relationships with clients	6	0.734	5.94	0.74
Quality of the relationships with collaborators	4	0.890	6.06	1.05
Social interaction with clients	4	0.723	5.56	1.13
Social interaction with collaborators	2	0.791	5.83	1.32

Results

The first step in our analysis was to check for the existence of women socio-demographical characteristics and firm characteristics that might condition the perceived level of support. We considered the following variables: woman's age, marital status, level of education, motivation, percentage of capital owned and the firm industry. The results are shown in Table 2 and 3. They reflect no statistically significant differences in the perceived level of support with respect to the analysed variables. Nevertheless, we can observe higher level of perceived support in the case of divorced women and when the main motivation for starting a business was the discovery of a business opportunity (Table 2). The perceived level of support is also greater when the owned percentage of capital is less than 100 and in less traditional industries for women as constructions (Table 3).

Table 2: Perceived level of support differences depending on social and demographic characteristics and motivations of women entrepreneurs.

Category	N	Means	Significance
Age			0.668 (n.s.)
20-30 years old	15	3.41	
30-40 years old	54	3.81	
40-50 years old	33	3.34	
More than 50 years old	6	3.60	
Marital Status			0.689 (n.s.)
Single	32	3.61	
Married	48	3.49	
Divorced	15	4.07	
Other	12	3.31	
Education			0.917 (n.s)
Master and Phd	42	3.59	
Bachelor	43	3.63	
Secondary	7	3.14	
Professional Training	14	3.47	
Motivation			
Discovered opportunity	24	4.14	
Independence	19	3.33	
Economic necessities	10	3.38	
Personal challenge	40	3.58	
An alternative to being an employee	10	3.21	
Others	3	3.60	

Table 3: Perceived level of support differences depending on characteristics of women-owned business.

Category	N	Means	Significance
Property			0.183 (n.s.)
Shared property	22	4.03	
50% Ownership	36	3.75	
100% Ownership	42	3.22	
Industry			0.452 (n.s.)
Stockbreeding, agriculture, extraction	1	1.00	
Manufacturing	6	3.73	
Constructions	7	4.02	
Commmerce y repairing	9	3.34	
Education	9	4.13	
Health and veterinary activities, social service.	9	2.86	
Social activities and community service	12	3.28	
Real estate and renting activities, business services	36	3.52	
Others	15	4.32	

In order to analyse if the support relationships improve the peer-to-peer relationships, we classified the sample into two groups, distinguishing between low-level support relationships (point values of less than 4) and normal and high support relationships (point values greater than or equal to 4). The research proposes that the women-owned firms that develop stronger relationships with support entities (in terms of obtaining financing and public recognition for their performance) exhibit higher levels of social interaction and higher-quality relationships with their clients and collaborators.

Table 4 shows the results of the analysis of variance. The significance level of the F-test in the table is 0.016 for social interaction with clients, 0.004 for social interaction with collaborators, 0.021 for quality of relationships with collaborators, and 0.288 for quality of relationships with clients. This confirms that there are significant differences in the intensity of social interaction with clients and collaborators and in the quality of relationships with collaborators but not in the quality of relationships with clients with respect to the support received. The data for the measurements reveals the structure of these differences: as the level of support obtained through the relationships with support entities increases, the average social interaction with clients and collaborators and the quality of relationships with collaborators increases.

Table 4: Differences in relationships with peers betteen women's firms.

Relationships with peers	**Low-level of support**	**Medium-high level of support**	**Significance**
Quality of the relationships with clients	5.87	6.03	0.288
Social interaction with clients	5.34	5.89	0.016*
Quality of the relationships with collaborators	5.86	6.34	0.021*
Social interaction with collaborators	5.53	6.27	0.004**

** p< .05; ** p <.01*

Discussion and Conclusions

The current work advances knowledge of inter-organisational relationships in firms created by women, tackling little-explored topics both in this specific area and in the wider area of entrepreneurial networks: the influence of one kind of relationship on another. It also emphasizes the richness of this line of research and its almost unexplored possibilities for future studies.

Few studies analyse in depth the relationships at the level of the organisation for firms started by women. There seems to be a focus on the social relationships of the women entrepreneurs and the gender composition of the networks in which they participate (Sue Birley 1985; Peter Rosa, Sara Carter and Daphne Hamilton 1996), neglecting the way these relationships are used to achieve organisational goals and the interactions that might exist between different kinds of ties. As opposed to previous studies that analysed the effects of the institutional support adopting an interventionist point of view, we analyse the role that relationships with institutions and financial entities play in the everyday life of the firm, without taking into account the actions that institutions develop specifically for the purpose of stimulating the cooperation between firms.

There has been a lot of evidence that the economic action is embedded in the social context that it occurs (Brian Uzzi 1997). The social constructions generated along the time around the concept of gender seem to have played an important role in the perception of women-owned business as less performing, undermining the access of this kind of firms to resources, and especially to financial resources. Despite the lack of convergence in results regarding these aspects, the polemics around them have positioned women-owned firms in a disadvantageous situation as a business partner. It seems that some of the clues to this situation are lying in the same social context: support relationships can enable the women-owned firms as a trustful business partner in the eyes of the clients and others collaborators, as they positively influence the social interaction and the quality of these relationships.

Firms that receive formal recognition or formal support from public or private institutions are practically recommended by these institutions as they invest resources in those organisations. This way they attract others companies´ interest which is translated into a deeper social interaction and a deeper involvement.

Various authors have called attention to the lack of studies that consider the value of different kinds of relationships (Ranjay Gulati and James Westphal 1999; Ha Hoang and Bostjan Antoncic 2003) and the need for examining the interactions between various dimensions of the networks and relationships (Inkpen and Tsang 2005). The study performed aims to advance in this direction, analysing the variation of relationships with peers with respect to the relationships with support entities, focusing specifically on the way in which the quality of the relationship with clients (an element that corresponds to the governing dimension of the relation, cf. Hoang and Antoncic (2003)) and the social interaction with clients (an element that corresponds to the content dimension of the relation, cf. Hoang and Antoncic (2003)) are influenced by the relationships with support entities.

The results obtained show that the legitimacy conferred by working with public and private support organisms and the prestige of achieving some formal recognition from them lead clients and collaborators to intensify their social interaction with the firm. However, we found no differences in the case of quality of relationship with clients. This can be explained by the fact that, due to the content and the nature of the relationship itself and the special status that the clients occupy among other peers, the quality of relationships with clients depends first on other factors, such as the products and services that they receive, contractual conditions negotiated, etc., more than on the support and legitimacy that their partners receive from public and private entities. Conversely, relationships with other peers, where different priorities do not intervene as in the case of clients, can be strengthened by the fact that the firm receives support from public and private organisms.

The study finds no statistically significant differences in support relationships regarding certain characteristics of women entrepreneurs and their businesses, which suggests that the perceived level of support doesn't depend on these variables. Nevertheless, the results reflect greater levels of perceived support depending on the marital status or the industry where the firm is located, indicating the need to study in depth these issues in future studies.

We consider the present work to have significant implications for practice – both for the support entities and for women entrepreneurs. For support entities, the results of this study call the attention to the very important role that these entities can play in legitimating women-owned firms in their interactions with other actors in the market. Table 4 points out the low levels of support women-owned firms benefit. The creation of prizes and public recognition actions for these firms, based on other kinds of results than exclusively the financial ones or the creation of special grants can represent an important support instrument. Much of the literature on women's entrepreneurship has emphasized the need to draw on more diverse kinds of indicators than the financial ones, in order to have a holistic image of women-owned business performance. There is an imperative need for the policy makers to acknowledge that the outcomes of a firm go beyond its financial performance and have to meet the needs of all its stakeholders and accomplish its aim as a social organisation. Formal recognition of other kinds of performance can change the present perceptions of women-owned businesses as less performing than their male counterparts and legitimate them in the peer-to-peer exchange relationships.

For women entrepreneurs, this study stresses that developing strong relationships with prestigious public and private entities can be used to open the doors to more intense interaction with their clients and collaborators, while also seeming to influence the quality of relationships with their collaborators. These questions advocate for a more conscious and strategic management of inter-organisational relationships.

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