

Managing Global Networks: The Role of the Global Account Manager

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Abstract

As the business environment takes on a global perspective for many business-to-business organisations, so the area of Global Account Management has become an increasingly important issue for both researchers and practitioners. This working paper outlines a research project² on the role of the *Global Account Manager* in managing global business-to-business relationships. At the buyer-seller interface, the globalisation of business is augmenting the complexity of the internal and external networks which those in boundary roles, such as Global Account Managers, have to manage. Building on earlier research in the business-to-business literature including the work of the IMP group, a conceptual framework is presented as a preliminary model for understanding the roles and activities of Global Account Managers.

Introduction

It is 20 years since David Ford suggested that in managing long-term business-to-business relationships there is a clear role for a *relationship manager* who is the major 'contact man' for the client company and who takes responsibility for the successful development of the relationship with the client. It should be 'someone of sufficient status to co-ordinate all aspects of the company's relationships with major clients at the operational level' (Ford 1980).

The idea of the relationship manager promulgated by Ford (1980) has materialised during the 1980s and 1990s. Often referred to as the *national account manager* (Shapiro and Moriarty 1980, 1982, 1984a, 1984b; Stevenson 1980; Stevenson 1981; Tutton 1987; Wotruba 1996; Dishman and Nitze 1998), *major account manager* (Barrett 1986; Colletti and Tubridy 1987) and more latterly, in the UK and France, *key account manager* (Wilson 1993; Pardo, Salle and Spencer 1995; Millman and Wilson 1995, 1996; McDonald, Millman and Rogers 1996, 1997; Millman and Wilson 1998a; McDonald and Rogers 1998; McDonald and Woodburn 1999) this specialised form of managing customers is gaining increasing importance in business-to-business markets. A newer form of this specialisation is now emerging in response to increasing globalisation; the *global account manager* (Yip and Madsen 1996; Millman 1996; Ronkainen and Menezes (1996); Millman and Wilson 1998b; Senn 1999; Senn and Arnold 1999; Millman 2000).

Global Account Management (GAM) is a relatively new concept and thus, to date, has received little attention in the literature. It has emerged as a way of managing global customers that are of strategic importance to selling companies (Millman 1999a). The globalisation of business is making GAM an increasingly important issue for many multinational companies who are operating in a global environment. However, this is not simply a supplier-led concept as with many customer and relationship management initiatives. Global key accounts are also typically multinational customers who themselves have an expectation of being supplied and serviced worldwide in a consistent and co-ordinated way (Millman 1996). Multinational companies have begun to buy on a centralised or co-ordinated basis and in so doing have become *global customers* (Montgomery and Yip 1999). They seek suppliers who can treat them as a single entity and can provide consistent and seamless service across countries (Montgomery and Yip 1999).

In response to this requirement, supplying organisations are starting to implement GAM. In so doing, many are creating Global Account Managers, who are tasked with managing the critical interface between seller and buyer who are operating on a global basis. However, a review of the literature has revealed that research in this field is at a very early stage and, while broad generalised roles and competencies are discussed in the literature, there is a need to define in more detail, the roles, activities and skills required of Global Account Managers.

On one level, GAM can be seen as a more complex form of Key Account Management (KAM), and indeed, much of the literature puts it in this context (Montgomery and Yip 1999). However, the 'global' dimension of GAM adds a number of fundamentally different aspects that are not so evident in KAM. These include, for example, cross-cultural issues (to do with, for example, people, systems, processes), the management of globally dispersed and cross-cultural teams, the management of global versus local issues and conflict, managing global logistics competencies, the location of Global Account Managers and the management of global (and cross-cultural) communications. Global account managers need to manage complex internal and external *networks*, some of which, due to the global context, can also be described as *virtual networks*. This research focuses on the roles, activities and skills of Global Account Managers in managing their networks.

Global Account Manager Roles

There are three distinct areas of research that have emerged during the 1990s that look at sales type roles in long-term relationships. The first of these areas is that described broadly as the *salesperson's role in long-term relationships*. The second, more specialised area, is that of *Key Account Management*. The third area is that of *Global Account Management*. Much of the work has been of a conceptual nature, with little empirical research being presented. Also, where the roles are discussed, they tend to be presented using broad general terms that do little to increase our understanding of what these people do. There is also a tendency to use terms that describe the roles in terms of their relationship with the customer, often neglecting the internal interfaces that would appear to be a major part of these individual's role requirement. Anecdotal evidence from the Cranfield KAM Club also suggests that a large part of the Key Account Manager's time is spent on activities such as portfolio analysis of key accounts, analysing key account information and key account planning (both short and long term). This aspect of the role is also neglected in the literature. However, in order to build a preliminary conceptual framework, such roles as have been identified in the literature are now examined.

Salersperson Roles in Long-term Relationships

It has been argued that the practice of personal selling and sales management is changing as a result of the increased attention on long-term, buyer-seller relationships (Biong and Selnes 1996; Wotruba 1996; McDonald, Millman and Rogers 1997; Weitz and Bradford 1999). A few studies in business-to-business markets (Legace, Dahlstrom and Gassenheimer 1991; Biong and Selnes 1995; Corcoran et al 1995; Wotruba 1996; Leuthesser 1997) and services markets (Crosby, Evans and Cowles 1990) have attempted to identify the roles, skills and behaviours required by salespeople in relational situations as opposed to transactional situations. A more detailed review of this literature can be found in Holt (1999).

Key Account Manager and Global Account Manager Roles

Millman and Wilson (1995) identified a number of roles for key account managers which had some strong similarities with those discussed in the literature for sales roles in long-term relationships (see Biong and Selnes 1995; Corcoran et al 1995 and Wotruba 1996). Weitz and Bradford's (1999) 'partnering' roles of salespeople are also similar, but they add the role of value creator. The KAM roles identified were: boundary spanning role of the relationship builder where the incumbent is simultaneously the negotiator, consultant, interpreter of customer needs/values, mediator, customer's advocate/friend, information broker; facilitating multi-level, multi-functional exchange processes; co-ordination and tailoring the seller's total offering to key accounts; promoting the KAM concept within their own company; responsibility for sales/profit growth of one or more key accounts, consistent with the business objectives of the seller's total portfolio of key accounts.

Building on the KAM work, Millman (1996) presented a tentative list of global account manager roles/responsibilities: co-ordination; key account planning; external relationship management; internal relationship management; sales and profit responsibility; negotiation; multi-cultural teamwork. Further work by Millman (1999b) on GAM roles and Millman and Wilson (1999) on GAM competencies are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: GAM Roles and Competencies

8 GAM Roles (Millman 1999b)	10 GAM Competencies (Millman and Wilson 1999b)
<i>Global account strategist Co-ordinator of the account's centralised and dispersed requirements Global account team manager/leader Information broker Relationship facilitator/builder Negotiator "Voice of the customer" (i.e customer's advocate Corporate "culture carrier"</i>	<i>Communication skills Global team leadership and management skills Business and financial acumen Relationship management skills Strategic vision and planning capabilities Problem-solving capabilities Cultural empathy Selling skills (internal and external) Industry and market knowledge (self and customer) Product service knowledge</i>

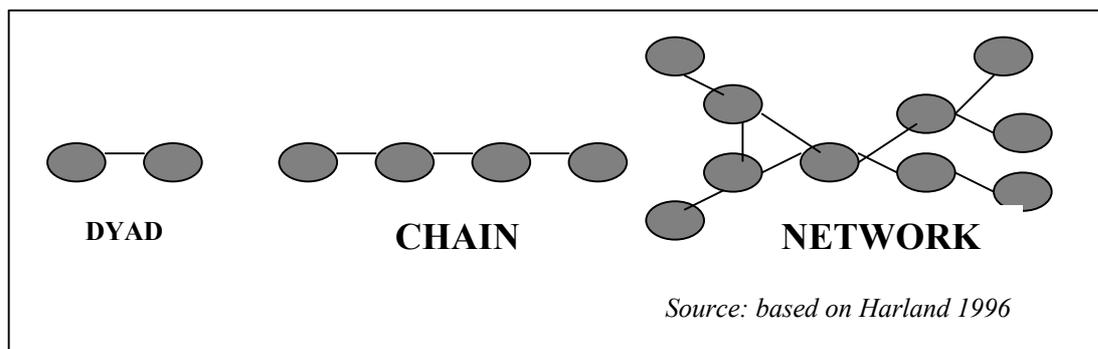
However, there is a lack definition of what many of these labels mean which can be addressed more thoroughly through empirical research.

The Dyadic Interface: An Interorganisational Network

A Global Account Manager operates at the interface between the buying and selling company. Understanding the nature of the buyer-seller interface between organisations is important in business-to-business markets for three reasons. Firstly, there are generally several people involved in the relationship on both sides of the interface, bringing a complexity that it not often found in consumer marketing. Secondly the nature of business-to-business products and services can be complex and often project-based, so that the purchase, installation and usage can all take a long time. Thirdly, the complexity of product and interface goes some way to explaining why those in boundary roles (see below) are so important in the management of the interface and the relationships between organisations. For GAM, the interorganisational interface is likely to be a highly complex network.

It is possible to study buyer-seller relationships in a ‘dyadic’ context (eg Anderson and Weitz 1989; Moorman et al 1992, Millman and Wilson 1996), as part of a ‘chain’ (Harland 1996) or as part of a ‘network’ (Anderson et al 1994; Holmlund and Törnroos 1997) as shown in Figure 2 based on Harland (1996). This research project, which is focusing on the buyer-salesperson relationship at the buyer-seller interface, will take a dyadic context, since it is necessary to look at both parties in the relationship as a dyad (Wilson 1978). This is supported by the ‘dyadic paradigm’ theoretical approach proposed by Bonoma, Bagozzi and Zaltman (1978). The dyadic relationship is the basic irreducible building block of interfirm relationships (Mummalaneni 1995). It can be used as the basis for studying a number of marketing phenomena ranging from salesperson-purchasing agent interactions to interfirm relationships and strategic alliances (Wilson and Mummalaneni 1986).

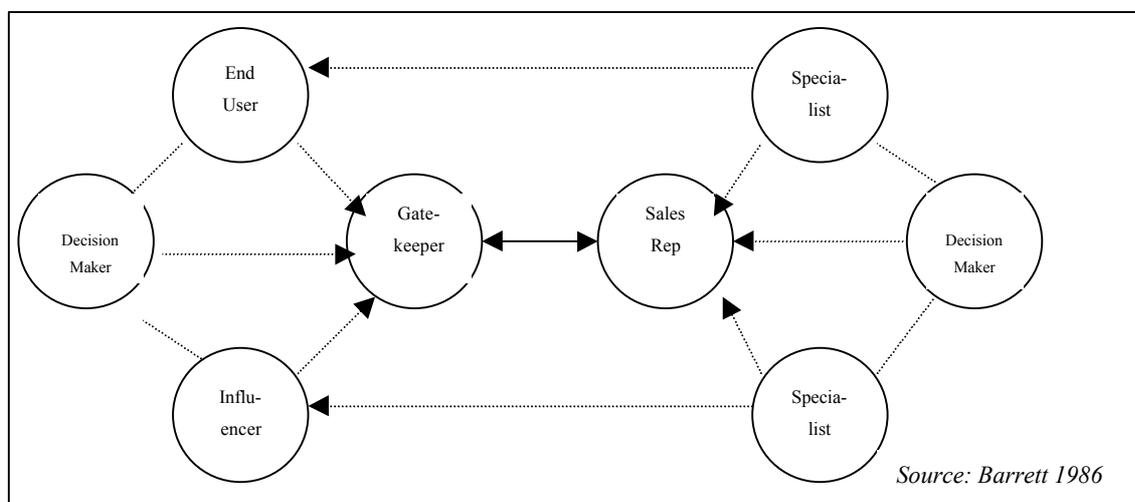
Figure 2: Different contexts of buyer-seller relationships



However, within the dyad, the buyer-seller interface is also often represented as a network, since ‘commonly, several individuals from different functional areas, at different levels in the hierarchy and fulfilling different roles become involved in inter-company interactions’ (Håkansson 1982:20). While the buyer-salesperson interaction may lie at the heart of the relationship, other key players are also involved, making complex interactions between people (Webster and Wind 1972). The KAM is often represented as managing both internal and external networks (Pardo 1994). To explain the behaviour of the buyer-seller dyad, it is posited that it is first necessary to know the decision dyad with respect to the task at hand (Wilson 1978).

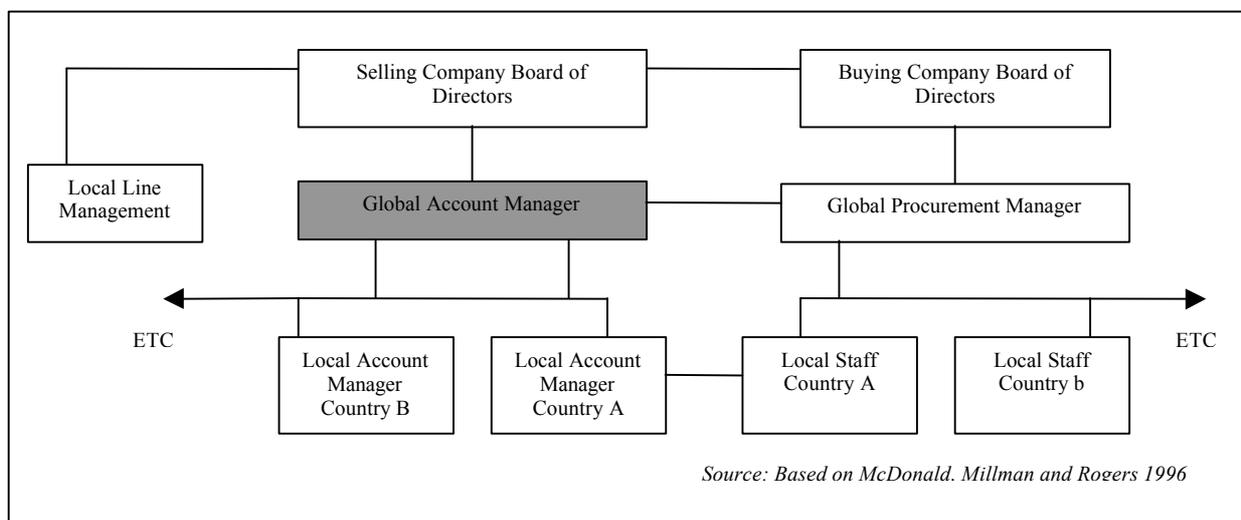
The buying centre literature (Wind 1978a; Wind 1978b; Gultinan 1978; Bagozzi 1978; Johnston and Bonoma 1981) has recognised this from the buyer's perspective for some time (eg Robinson, Farris and Wind 1967). Webster and Wind (1972) describe the roles involved on the purchasing side as the user, influencer, decider, buyer and gatekeeper. More recently, it has been recognised, particularly with the emergence of KAM that the selling organisation has a similar structure, sometimes referred to as the selling centre (Hutt, Johnston and Ronchetto 1985, Spekman and Johnston 1986). A selling centre is defined as 'interfunctional decision units of selling organisation members who are involved in initiating and maintaining exchange relationships with industrial customers'. Barrett (1986) illustrated the extension of the buying centre model to include the selling side of the relationship as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: The Buyer-Seller Interface Relationship



Based on empirical research, McDonald, Millman and Rogers (1996) give an example of the type of interface that can apply for Global Account Management (see Figure 4) which reflects the conceptual models of the buyer-seller interface.

Figure 4: Global Account Management: An Example



In summary what these models show is that in researching GAM at the level of the buyer-seller interface, it is likely that the following will need to apply:

- It will require research to take place on both sides of the dyad; taking the view of just one party (customer perspective or supplier perspective) is insufficient. This view is backed up by previous research eg McDonald, Millman and Rogers (1996).
- When studying the Global Account Manager roles it will not be sufficient to research just the Global Account Manager. The Global Account Manager is managing and operating within a network of actors (Iacobucci 1996). The views of all these actors will need to be considered.

Both these factors are supported theoretically by reference to role theory and boundary role theory.

Theoretical Underpinnings: Role Theory and Boundary Role Theory

Role Theory

Role theory explains how each focal position in an organisational structure is presented with a set of *role expectations* (Katz and Kahn 1978) which are prescribed by multiple *role senders* (Christopher, Jüttner and Palmer 1999). In looking at the role of *relationship managers*, Christopher et al (1999) explain how in a relationship manager's role set, there are at least three primary groups of role senders; superiors, customers and other members of the customer-interfacing team. Customer-interfacing team members typically represent different functions in the organisation.

'Each category of role sender may be considered as a stakeholder group with whom the focal manager has some level of interdependence due to authority structure, workflow or resource exchange relationships' (Christopher et al 1999). Thus role theory demands that the tasks of the Key Account Manager or Global Account Manager have to be seen both in relation to role responsibilities and in relation to the network of relationships in their environment (Christopher et al 1999).

Boundary Role Theory

Earlier literature on boundary roles also underpins the above approaches. A boundary position is defined by Kahn et al (1964) as one which requires extensive interaction with persons who occupy positions in another system, either another unit within the same organisation or another organisation altogether (Organ and Greene 1972).

A boundary spanning (or agent) role in business-to-business organisations is defined as those people who operate at the periphery of an organisation (Singh and Rhoads 1991) and who constitute the interorganisational linkages (Organ 1971) eg salespeople and purchasers. Organ (1971) argues that these roles are strategically important as 'linking pins' for several reasons:

- it is through their behaviour that the organisation adapts (or fails to adapt) to changes in the environment

- it is through reports of the boundary spanners that other organisation members acquire their knowledge, perceptions and evaluations of the organisation's environments
- it is through the vigilance of these roles that the organisation is able to monitor and screen important happenings in the environment
- they function as 'sensory organs' for the organisation

Spekman (1979) extended Organ's largely one-sided view to include the 'role sender' aspect of the boundary spanner; an influence agent attempting to influence the decisions and behaviours of those individuals with whom he/she interacts, both inter-organisationally and within his/her organisation. This extended role fits well with the dyadic interface models discussed above. Schneider (1994) refers to these roles as constituting the 'boundary tier' between their own organisation (the 'co-ordination tier'), and the 'customer tier'. Leaders of organisations should have considerable interest in the type of person who is best suited for these roles (Organ 1971).

The key boundary roles within the 'selling centre' in business-to-business markets are salespeople and major, national, key or global account managers. However, it is not just salespeople and key account managers who interface with the customer. Increasingly the 'inside sales force', eg customer services (ordertakers, technical service, help desks, after-sales service), is influential in buyer-seller relationships (Boyle 1996). Boyle suggests this is due to emerging technologies and the need to find more economical ways of managing customer relationships in view of the investment required in a field sales force. Anderson and Narus (1986) also support this view. These inside roles could also be viewed, with respect to KAM and GAM as part complementary and part supplementary to the Key Account Manager or Global Account Manager. They may also form part of the Key Account or Global Account team where organisations have structured KAM and GAM in this way. Thus, those in boundary roles are likely to interface with a number of different key people both within their own organisation and within the customer organisation. This is congruent with role theory.

Boundary role ambiguity among sales and marketing professionals has also received attention in the literature (eg Singh and Rhoads 1991; Singh 1993) and serves to reinforce the view that those in boundary roles have to manage a number of different expectations which includes those of managers, co-workers and customers.

The Importance of Personal Contact

In addition to the roles outlined above, it is worth exploring the personal contact model promulgated by Cunningham and Turnbull (1982) in the context of global account management. In managing the buyer-seller interface, interpersonal contact is of prime importance. Personal contact is described by Cunningham and Turnbull (1982) as the means by which inter-company relationships are established and maintained. Looking at personal contact from the dyadic perspective (based on a case study approach) they suggest that the roles of the personal interactions at the buyer-seller interface are: an information exchange role, which encompasses the transfer of 'hard' and soft 'data'; an assessment role: the assessment of a supplier's competence or a customer's suitability frequently involves personal judgements as well as objective facts; these judgments are improved through interacting with the other party in both formal and informal situations; a negotiation and adaptation role: negotiation will generally take place over a wide range of topics with personal contacts being the normal means of persuasion and negotiation. Similarly,

adaptations to products and services are discussed; a crisis insurance role: contacts are often formed as a form of crisis insurance on both sides of the relationship – when a major problem or crisis occurs these contacts are utilised often as a means of obtaining rapid action; a social role: when people meet other people whom they like, a social relationship may develop which may continue even if the contact is moved to another function within the organisation; an ego-enhancement role: a second form of social contact occurs when an individual deliberately establishes contact with senior people in the supplier or buyer organisation because they believe it will enhance their status in their own organisation.

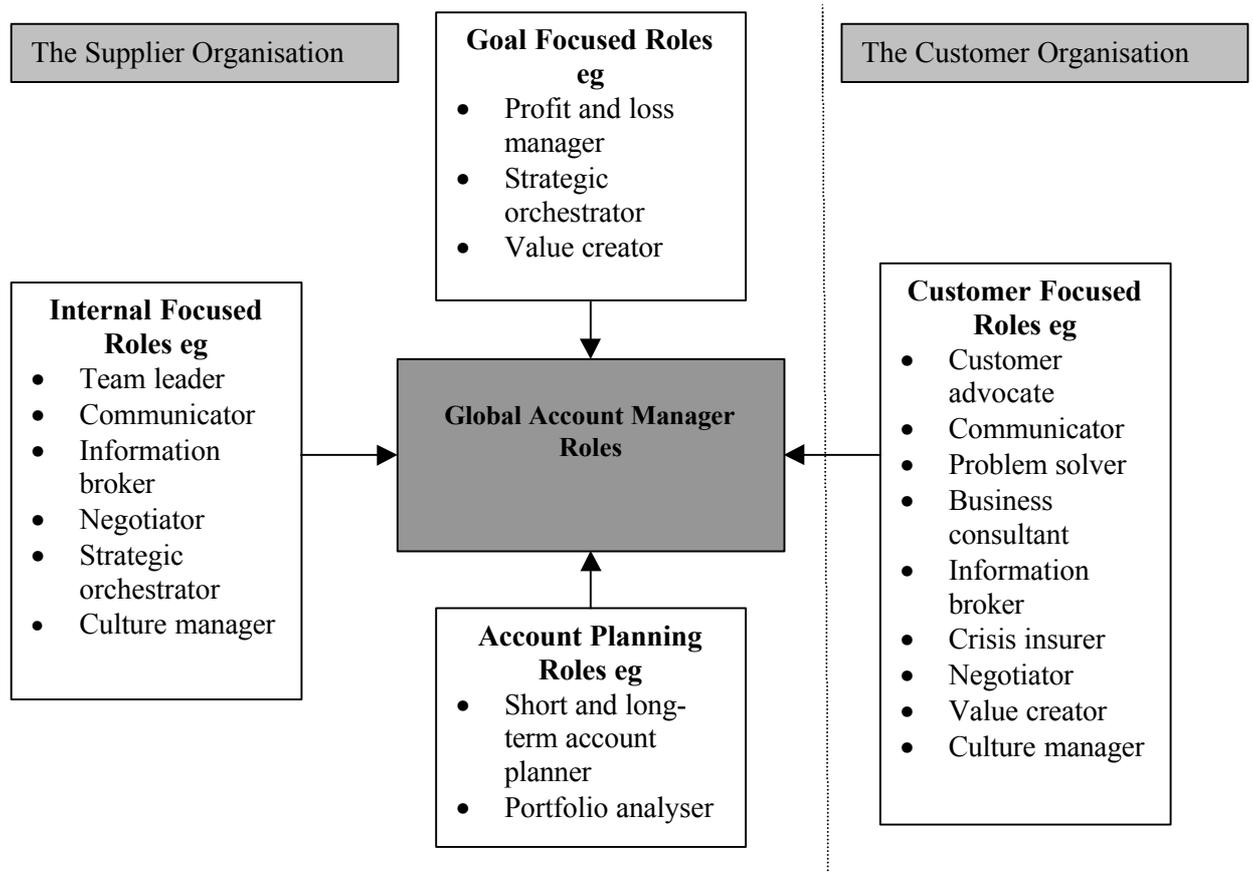
This research on personal contact is helpful as it can also contribute to understanding the types of roles that Global Account Managers may need to adopt if they are to successfully manage long-term relationships in a global environment. What is interesting, is that for global account management, the personal contact between the two parties is likely to have a significant virtual element.

The Conceptual Framework

The above literature review has revealed that little empirical research exists that seeks to identify the roles of global account managers beyond a list of broad roles and activities. It is not always clear from the labels given to the roles, a) exactly what the meanings are and b) how these would be interpreted in practice. The proposed research will attempt to define more precisely what these roles mean and how global account managers and the other stakeholders interpret the roles in practice.

However, in order to build a conceptual framework for the proposed research, some of the roles discussed in the literature, have been adopted as a starting point for operationalising the research. While the roles that emerge from the data collection and analysis may well be different from those presented in the framework, it is suggested that it is helpful to have an initial set of roles that are based in the literature. So, based on the literature review, including the theoretical perspectives, it has been possible to build a preliminary conceptual model around key types or groups of roles for global account managers. This conceptual model is presented at Figure 5. The groups are not mutually exclusive, but do reflect the boundary role situation of the global account manager.

Figure 5: A Conceptual Framework for Global Account Manager Roles



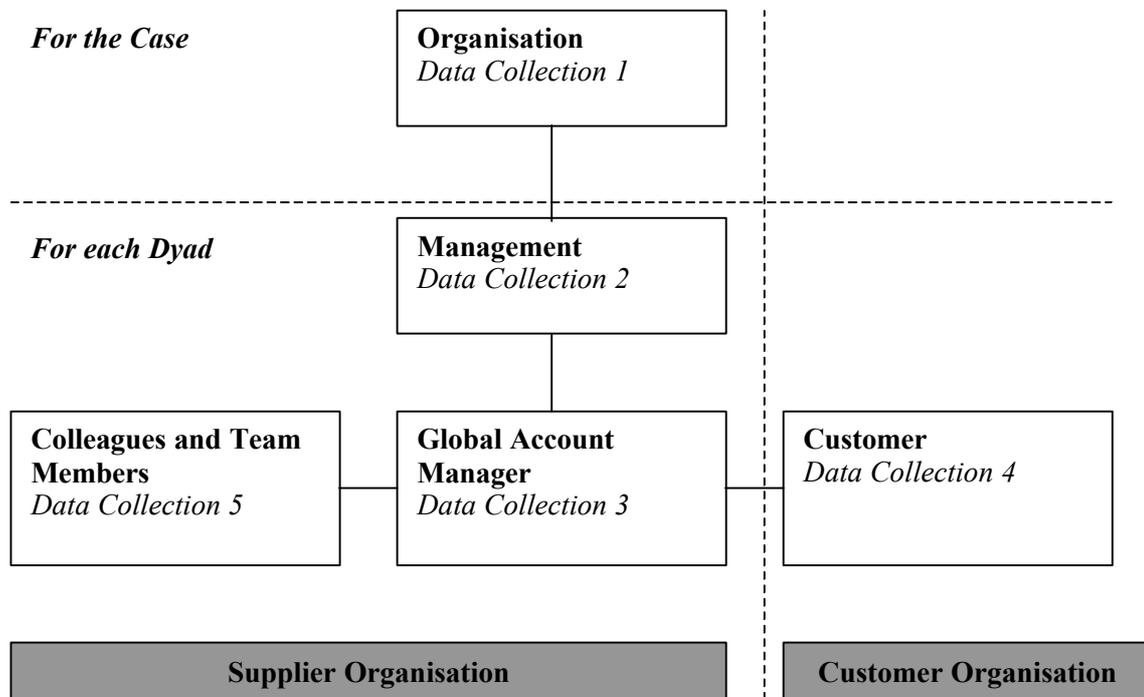
Proposed Research Design

The research design is based on a multiple, holistic case study research design (Yin 1994). A case study has a number of advantages. It allows for data collection on multiple levels, analysis on multiple levels and recognises that context is important. It is also an approach that is appropriate for theory-building (Eisenhardt 1989). It is intended to undertake the research on three relationships in three case study organisations, giving a total of nine dyadic relationships. The case study organisations will be multi-national suppliers who have established long-term relationships with identified strategic customers. Case studies have also been used for many years as the prime methodological approach in Europe for researching business-to-business markets. This has been promulgated, in particular, by the IMP Group (Cunningham 1980; Håkansson 1982; Hallen, Johanson and Seyed-Mohamed 1991). It is thus felt to be an appropriate and supported methodology for the proposed research.

The case organisations will be multi-national companies (suppliers) who have an existing Global Account Management structure. As such, these will be considered to be those organisations who have some competence in global account management. If possible, they will be in different industries in order to ascertain the extent to which some aspects of the roles may be context specific.

The research design is in Figure 6. As suggested by Yin (1994) it is important to identify the probable sources of evidence that you require in order to answer your question. In this case the sources have been organised into five key groups.

Figure 6: Proposed Data Collection Design



This design is also supported theoretically in the literature review and, in particular, by boundary role theory and the literature on business-to-business organisational interfaces. In order to understand fully the roles of the global account manager, it will be necessary to collect data from the global account managers themselves and from their customer, manager and colleagues/team members. Given that the research topic is about a specific type of *job*, the data collection design is also supported in the human resources literature on job analysis as described by Lee (1999). For example, when analysing a job, it is likely that the job analyst will need to ask supervisors, job incumbents, peers/sub-ordinates questions about a given job's roles.

Expected Contributions to Knowledge

Academic

It is proposed that the research will bring a greater understanding of the roles of global account managers by carrying out this empirical study. In this sense it will help to build theory in the arena of managing complex business-to-business relationships and build on theory already established for key account management. It should also contribute to boundary role theory where those in boundary roles may be managing across boundaries of physical distance.

Practitioner

For managers, it should provide a profile of the types of roles global account managers will need to adopt in managing global strategic customer relationships. It should also provide information that can help managers to choose, train and mentor those people who are likely to be most successful at managing global accounts in complex business-to-business relationships.

Summary

From the review of the literature it is clear that there is a lack of empirical research which focuses on the roles of global account managers in managing strategic customer relationships. This paper has introduced a proposed research project which aims at better understanding global account manager roles. Based on a review of the appropriate literatures, a conceptual framework is proposed as a basis for the empirical stage of the research. This is a preliminary conceptual model that is likely to change as a result of the empirical research.

The paper has also introduced a proposed research design based on multiple case study methodology. The theoretical background and underpinning for both the conceptual framework and the research design is role theory and boundary role theory.

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