Knowledge creation and inter-organizational relationships: the development of innovation in the railway industry

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Purpose – The main purpose of the paper is to explore the relationship between the design of inter-organizational connections, the processes for knowledge creation and transfer, and innovation. The study aims to focus on the partnership between Firema, a medium-large Italian company in the rail industry sector, and TEST, a research consortium.

Design/methodology/approach – The coordination model defining the cooperative relationship is interpreted in the temporary project network (TPN) framework. In applying the methodology of case study analysis, a semi-structured in-depth interview was used as a tool and, in particular, interviews aimed at privileged observers.

Findings – TEST, acting as a meta-organizer, has the crucial role of organizing, governing and tuning the network of university departments, in synergy with Firema. The analysis draws attention to the possibility that TPNs are embedded in "latent networks", in which inter-organizational ties are routinely activated in order to accomplish a specific project.

Practical implications – The authors provide a pragmatic description of the TPN-related innovation activities and this may be valuable for managers and/or policy makers who wish to know about best practices in organizing networks directed to innovation. Practical considerations and methods that increase knowledge transfer while minimizing inter-organizational coordination costs are explored.

Originality/value – This study was able to expand the understanding of TPNs in two respects. First, only a few studies have adopted the TPN framework to investigate the inter-organizational coordination mechanisms among small or medium organizations. Second, the findings related to the TPN structural properties – time, team, task and context – deviate from how some have framed the ideal type TPN as in most senses unique, solving one-off tasks between relative strangers.