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### **Shaping spaces of innovation communities - The role of promoters in German-Japanese networks**



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**Shaping spaces of innovation communities - The role of promoters in  
German-Japanese networks**

(イノベーションコミュニティの空間形成：日独のネットワークプロモーターの役割)

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**Abstract**

From a Management Geography perspective, this project surveyed how proximity affects managerial networking for intercultural synergy creation. The main hypothesis was that the closer the proximity of the promotor, the better the performance of the intercultural team. A questionnaire survey was conducted with members listed by German Japanese Business Association DJW. A mixed methods approach combining data from online questionnaire, transcripts from interviews and participative observation was applied. Embedded multiple case studies showed that agile members' intercultural communication in networks had an important role in transforming the association towards an innovative community. Intercultural competence development is crucial for the success of an intercultural innovation community. This research provided better understanding of the role of interculturally competent boundary spanners in the creation of innovative platforms promoting intercultural understanding.

Japanese: 本プロジェクトでは経営地理学の視点から、近接性と経営的ネットワークが異文化間の相乗効果創出にどう影響するかを調査した。プロモーターとの近接性が高いほど、異文化チームのパフォーマンスが向上するという仮説をたて、日独産業協会会員へのアンケート調査、インタビュー調査、参与観察を実施し、それぞれで得られたデータを組み合わせる混合法を用いて検証した。その結果、ネットワークにおける異文化コミュニケーションが、組織を革新的なコミュニティへと変革する上で重要であることが示された。本研究により、異文化理解を促進する革新的なプラットフォームの創出における、異文化能力を持つ境界連結者の役割についての理解が深まった。

**Keywords**

Management geography, Proximity, CultureBoundary spanning, Mixed method, Cultural synergy, Innovation community, Intercultural networks

**1. Introduction and background (研究開始当初の背景)**

Startups and SMEs struggle to globalize their businesses since different cultures create innovations differently. Promoters of intercultural networks fulfilling managerial goals including innovation and synergy creation were surveyed by a new approach that differentiates spatiality under the umbrella of Management Geography (Taira & Schlunze 2022). A review of the geographical literature of innovation management and innovation clusters reveals an emphasis on various proximity dimensions. A theory of proximity and knowledge networks that applies also to the context of innovation in the intercultural contexts is still missing (Fichter 2009; Balland, Boschma, Frenken 2014). Thus,

Boschma's (2005) fivefold classification of proximity dimensions has been extended to grasp dynamics of innovation and synergetic networks in relational space. This study provided empirical evidence nurturing a theory of synergy creation that explains the formation of an inter-cultural innovation communities from a management geography perspective.

## 2. Research objective and purpose (研究の目的)

The initial hypothesis stated that there is a relation between the proximity of the promoters, the formation of the innovation community and the performance of the network. It was assumed that only cross-cultural competence creates (inter-)cultural proximity that enables the promoter to function successfully as a boundary spanner between geographical and cultural distance locations. The model suggests that geographical, institutional, organizational, social, cognitive and cultural proximity affect the extent to which cultural synergy is realized that enables promoters to integrate various actors into networks.

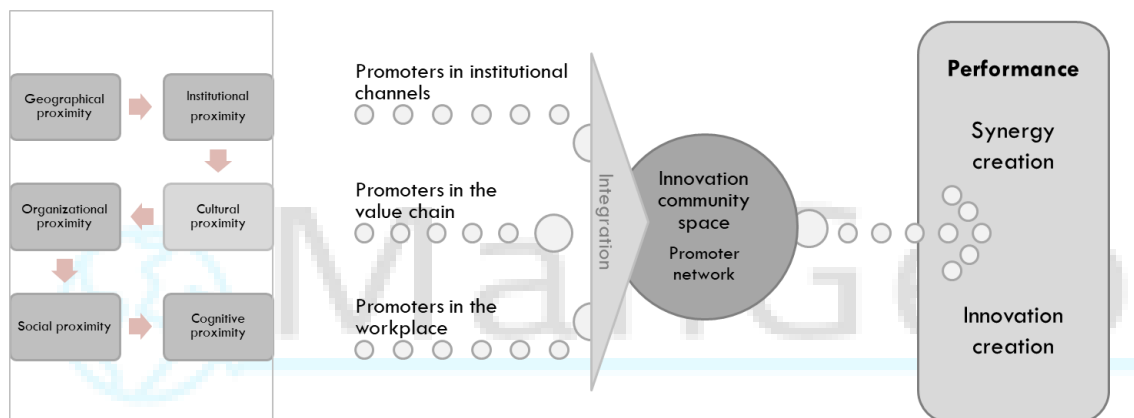


Figure 1: Proximity affecting performance of networkers

Based on this model (Figure 1) I assumed that promoters need to balance the six proximities in purpose to succeed with the creation of intercultural spaces for innovation communities able to perform above average. The research objective was to observe patterns that enable knowledge transfer and exchange of diverse promoters impacting the performance of innovation community positively. Where can we find intercultural successful promoters and which locations do they link? What kind of proximity enables a promoter to create spaces for innovative networks? Do promoters take a leadership in creating spaces for the innovation community?

## 3. Research method (研究の方法)

This research is a single case study on the Japanese-German Business Association (DJW) with multiple units investigating cultural synergy creation and the formation of an innovative, intercultural community. A mixed methods approach of quantitative and qualitative research combines a)

questionnaire, b) personal interviews and c) participative observations. Heightening the validity by triangulation allowed a deeper understanding of the phenomenon as a whole.

- a) A database of promoters was built up by conducting an online questionnaire using MyNetworkMap, an innovative online questionnaire able to visualize networks. More than one hundred agile DJW members were selected and contacted by direct mailing. 63 persons, among them 51 German and six Japanese members and six non-members others, have filled out the online questionnaire.
- b) A stratified purposeful sampling helped to selected units of managerial subjects and/or experts in Japanese German businesses for the case study project (Patton 2002). Aligned members were contrasted with not aligned but agile promoters of intercultural teams. Those interview partners were asked to share their stories of synergy creation.
- c) As a leader of the working group (AG) Intercultural management I conducted a participative observation survey discussing with agile members intercultural trust, cultural synergy creation, and innovation creation and finally intercultural competence. The working group held sixteen meetings at the DJW Teams workspace between March 2021 and March 2023.

The software SPSS has been used to analyze the data obtained by the online questionnaire. Covid-19 precaution made it difficult but also possible to interview twenty-eight individuals in February and March 2022. Sixteen follow up interviews and twelve with other DJW members were conducted in February 2023. Transcripts were analyzed using MAXQDA with a coding system surveying steps of synergy creation. Based on Nancy Adler with Allison Gundersen (2008) idea of synergy creation and knowledge creation process shown by Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995) was applied to lead the analysis of interview transcripts. Accordingly, an original coding system has been designed. Coding system evaluates a) Awareness, b) Interpretation, and c) Solution in respect to the various space levels (real, relative, relational, topical and/or virtual space).

#### 4. Research results (研究成果)

I found intercultural successful promoters in various locations all over Germany stretching from Düsseldorf to Berlin and Munich linking to clients located in Tokyo, Nagoya, and Osaka. Cultural and cognitive proximity enables a promoter to create spaces for innovative networks. Cultural competent boundary spanners able to build trust, ably their cultural understanding with appropriate goals take also leadership in creating spaces for the innovation community.

Analyzing and positioning of the role of promoters in German Japanese networks creating innovative spaces an extended set of the proximity dimension were investigated.

- a) Geographical proximity: Most people slightly agree that the travel times are too long, and the costs are too high, but most members would disagree that border formalities constitute a problem.
- b) Institutional proximity: Most members neither agree nor disagree that law and regulations are too different but found that associations are supportive.
- c) Cultural proximity: Most people agree that language constitute a problem. They also found that the business culture and career development is much different.
- d) Organizational proximity: Most people slightly agree that organizational contexts and the leadership approach is too different.

- e) Social proximity: Most members disagree that trust issues constitute a problem.
- f) Cognitive proximity: Most members agree that identity and group belonging are too different and that also the way of achieving is too different.

Behavioral intelligence: Most members change their verbal and non-verbal when a cross-cultural interaction requires it. They vary the rate of speaking and alter facial expressions when a cross-cultural interaction requires it. They are eager to learn about international partners' perceptions on teamwork. DJW member perform with high behavioral intelligence, but they are aware that more than artificial adjustment is needed. Most members join the DJW AG Intercultural Management meetings highly motivated to learn about their international partners' perceptions on teamwork and related issues. They are aware that the artificial cultural adjustment is needed and effective, but they wish to advance to a deeper understanding increasing their cognitive awareness about intercultural differences and similarities.

Intercultural team / network: Japanese are most frequent, and they are agile network partners. First tier network partner possesses a leadership function and tend to be strong. The first-tier linkages are contacted several times and/or once a week. DJW members usually prefer face-to-face contacts but second messaging and third video conferencing.

Organizational change: Most members agree that they would initiate change within the intercultural team. They like to participate pro-actively in the development of the intercultural team. To conclude the German members have observed that not integration but assimilation is the success concept to working together with Japanese partners.

Leadership: Most members agree strongly that it is necessary to study leadership and business ethics in intercultural teams to lead the team more efficiently. To conclude, their study of leadership in different cultural settings is most important to team performance and synergy creation.

Performance: Most members stated that their cultural ability helped to improve the team performance. The self-assessment of their members' performance shows that they are confident to create innovative solutions and/or cultural synergy.

Synergy / Innovation creating: Visualizing agile members networks an effort was made to discover network patterns according to the theory of innovation (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995). Socialization, Externalization, and Combination, Internalization pattern were identified and discussed. *Socialization* at DJW platform leads to the strength of ties and closure. The Working group and squad leaders create closed networks with strong ties. They function as a field of experiences shared by promoters. The behavioral intelligence of promoters helps to deepen the communal experiences. The promoters build with strong relationship and promote *externalization* embedded within safeguarded spaces and networks. The promoters deepen the dialogues within the network using their cultural experiences. Facilitating the relationships by *combination* with weak ties, promoters can acquire or create novel and idiosyncratic information efficiently bridging structural holes. They are mediating between organizations and/or DJW team members. They are the key personnel to obtain, integrate and transmit information and knowledge. Their intercultural competence is important for the inter- and intra-organizational success. In the *internalization* phase the strength of strong ties and close result in a high-density network. Intercultural competent promoters were often assisted to cooperate in another networks through communication providing supervision and guidance. It appears that the network gained efficiency due to shared values, expectations and common goals improving teamwork in real space and on virtual spaces such as the DJW Networking Hub including workspaces of several working groups (AGs).

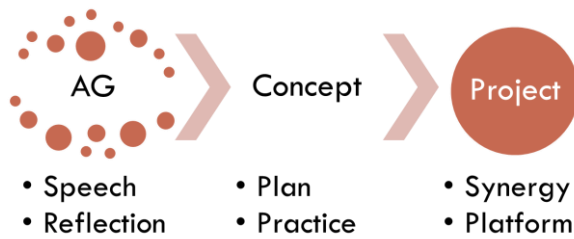


Figure 2: Creating cultural synergy and/or innovative platforms

In relative space cognitive processes were observed at different time horizons. These processes are building proximity by following a long-term perspective. Awareness about cultural differences enabled agile members to taking leadership in intercultural teams. Concentration of clients and potential customers in real space enabled them to take advantage of geographical proximities but they also used digital channels. Relational space is provided by the DJW as a forum for knowledge exchange and ideas. New topical spaces for specific topics of interest were created during participative observation. Squads helped to create a preferred marketing strategy for the association and expanded the membership in Japan.

Participative observations (AG Intercultural Management) showed that agile members created projects like during corona crises a virtual museum tour and hosting a start-up of the Working Group Sustainability (AG Nachhaltigkeit, Nov.2023). It appears that behavioral intelligence in DJW members helps to create proximity that enables the promoter to function successfully as a boundary spanner between geographical and cultural distance locations. Cultural awareness is most important to achieve social and cognitive proximity. The results let us infer that the balanced – cultural, social and cognitive - proximity heightens the possibility of innovation and synergy creation. Higher levels of operational integration generally led to greater organizational changes supporting the formation of spaces of innovation communities.

Japanese firms advancing to the Germany and the European market often receive support by the surveyed, agile DJW members who function as intercultural competent boundary spanners. These boundary spanners are aware of cultural differences and similarity in the relative space. Their ability to interpret these differences enables them to use appropriate channels creating of innovative spaces for intercultural networks in the relational space. Shaping in real and/or virtual workspace they promote the emerge of an intercultural, innovative community. The interview results from embedded units on agile but with the DJW not aligned bi-lingual or so-called *hybrid* managers showed that a) it is important to establish constructive communication building trust by sharing information that promotes business exchanges; b) be aware of communication barriers but interpreting situations in a synergetic way that spurs solutions between cultures involved; c) the most important role of the hybrid manager is to bridge cultures involved in creating good solutions or even cultural synergy. This research with a mixed method design has got a lot of limitations related to the scope of the survey but this investigation showed clearly evidence for the intercultural synergy creation processes and succeeded to observe the formation of an innovative community creating proximity in real, relative, relational, and topical spaces between geographical distant cultures.

## **Acknowledgement**

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