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## **Managing CSR implementation in SMEs through differentiated networks**

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### **Abstract**

**Track:** Managing sustainability through global networks

**Keywords:** Corporate social responsibility, network, implementation, relationships

### **Purpose of the paper:**

The objective of the communication is to propose an analytical framework for the management of CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) implementation within SMEs. For SMEs, the CSR issue appears to be a key strategic challenge but due to resource and competence constraints and limitations, managers face a complex task of concrete implementation. In order to craft this framework, the research combines two relevant strands of research that have been devoted to the subject of CSR implementation. The first one is mainly represented by the work of Maon, Lindgreen and Swaen (2009) about the topic of innovation phases. Through the elaboration of an analytical framework, these authors identify qualitative steps which differentiate levels of interactions and network configurations, thus providing interesting insights on the subject in its dynamics aspects. The second one, in line with the work on innovation networks and innovation management (Conway and Steward, 2009; Håkansson et al., 2004) shows the importance of network configurations and multiplexity (i.e. intertwined networks of relationships that contribute to innovation adoption) for the understanding of innovation. Finally the research proposes a syncretic perspective on the topic of CSR implementation in SMEs grounded in the network and innovation management literature.

### **Research method:**

The study has mobilized the systemic combining methodology (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). The research methodology is mainly qualitative and abductive (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). In this approach, the research is centered on case studies seen as projects and as tools, with a cross fertilization between concepts and reality. It forms the basis for analytical generalization (Yin, 2003). We validate our approach by using concrete examples of CSR implementation in SMEs in France. Data collection on networks has been done through several channels: business sources such as market and sectoral studies, articles and archives

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as well as direct interviews with food managers and major stakeholders. Data analysis has mobilized software tools and techniques such as QSR NVivo 9 and Pajek.

### **Research findings**

Two critical dimensions of the process of managing CSR implementation are mobilized in this analytical framework: firstly the consideration of the implementation phase, which will play a key role in the approach because it allows characterizing the nature of learning phenomena at work and their intensity; secondly the nature of network relationships and interactions between the partners involved in each phase, that they be organizations or individuals, and jointly the specific situation of a given company within its network. This analytical framework allows for a decryption of key resources and stages mobilized during the implementation process. Consequently we show that, when implementing CSR, SME managers will simultaneously mobilize different types of networks (of individuals and organizations) and will promote networking activity in the form of exchange of knowledge flows and resources that will support the innovation process. In linking network structure and networking activity to the contingent specificity of innovation phases, the study proposes an analytical framework of CSR implementation mainly centered on network structural and interactive aspects of learning phenomena.

### **Contribution**

The main outcomes of the research can be sketched at two levels. Firstly, it adds new knowledge on CSR innovation management, where complex learning processes are to be considered. The main theoretical contribution is to show that, in the management of CSR implementation, a complete and simultaneous understanding of learning processes in differentiated networks of organizations and individuals at micro and meso levels is necessary. The network theory allows for this perspective on network forms, seen as formal structure well as support for networking interactive activity. The network as a structure constitutes the formal architecture which gives possibilities of real channels of knowledge creation and sharing (related to CSR), while the network as a support channel provides opportunities for interactive and networking activity. More especially this networking activity (mainly interpersonal contacts) is necessary to enrich the exchanges for learning. Secondly the research, in its operational aspects, constitutes the basis for the proposal of an analytical framework and tools useful for managers in their will to set up CSR principles.

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