

The shift from owning to sharing: employing action research to facilitate SMEs' business model transformation

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Abstract: The sharing economy has witnessed tremendous growth in a multitude of industries around the world over the past decade. Access to, and a more sustainable use of, resources, cost saving potential, and a multitude of strategic benefits have been identified as attractive opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to engage in business-to-business (B2B) sharing with some frustration by governments, researchers and practitioners that so little actual B2B sharing can be observed in industry practice. It remains a strategic challenge for SMEs to manage the shift from resource ownership to sharing since that transition requires a permanent change in their business model.

In light of the transformational nature of this qualitative research gap, an Action Research methodology has been developed and implemented in partnership with a selected sample of Swiss SMEs favourably inclined towards B2B sharing activities. While discussing how Action Research might bridge the research gap and develop tangible, empirically grounded management recommendations, this paper also contributes specific Action Research methodology for other cases of transformational nature which present an ever more frequent and common scenario in business management research.

Keywords: Action Research, sharing economy, business-to-business (B2B), small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), business model transformation, sustainable development.

El cambio de tener en propiedad a compartir: utilizando la Investigación Acción para facilitar la transformación del modelo de negocio de las PYME

Resumen: La economía colaborativa ha experimentado un enorme crecimiento en multitud de sectores de todo el mundo durante la última década. El acceso a los recursos y su uso más sostenible, el potencial de ahorro de costes y una multitud de beneficios estratégicos se han identificado como oportunidades atractivas para que las pequeñas y medianas empresas (PYME) participen en el intercambio entre empresas (B2B). Sin embargo, hay cierta frustración por parte de los gobiernos, los investigadores y los profesionales porque se observa poco intercambio en la práctica de la industria. Sigue siendo un reto estratégico para las PYME cambiar de tener la propiedad de los recursos a compartirlos, ya que esa transición requiere un cambio permanente en su modelo de negocio.

Debido al carácter transformador de esta investigación cualitativa, se ha desarrollado una metodología de investigación-acción, que se ha puesto en práctica en colaboración con una

muestra seleccionada de PYMES suizas favorables a compartir B2B. A la vez que se discute cómo la investigación-acción puede salvar la brecha de conocimiento y desarrollar recomendaciones de gestión tangibles y con base empírica, este artículo también aporta una metodología de investigación-acción específica para otros casos de naturaleza transformacional que empiezan a configurar un escenario cada vez más frecuente y común en la investigación de la gestión empresarial.

Palabras clave: investigación-acción, economía colaborativa, business-to-business (B2B), pequeñas y medianas empresas (PYMES), transformación del modelo de negocio, desarrollo sostenible.

1. Benefits and obstacles of the B2B sharing economy

Sharing, sometimes referred to as collaborative consumption, mostly appears as a peer-to-peer-based (P2P¹) activity of obtaining, giving, or sharing the access to goods and services, coordinated through community-based, often online services (Decrop et al., 2018; Hamari et al., 2016; Weiber & Lichter, 2019). In the broader context, sharing can be associated to what is described as a civilizational crisis of the early 21st century where scientific and technological discoveries allow for a new relationality by means of re-communalization of social life for individuals and corporate citizens alike (Escobar, 2021; Maffesoli, 2020; Wielecki, 2020). Ownership is substituted by access to resources, while at the same time infrequently used assets are used more frequently, resulting in “shared” use (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). While society and governments face the depletion of planet earth’s resources in the post-liberal market society of the 21st century (Foord, 2014), sharing could offer a more sustainable alternative to consumption (Daunorienė et al., 2015; Demary, 2014; Georgi et al., 2019; Hamari et al., 2016).

Relatively few cases of business-to-business (B2B) sharing have been described so far, though specific sharing in some industries takes place already (Eschberger, 2020) with a growing global community of pioneers emerging in the post-COVID era (Radjou, 2021). For more companies to actively participate in B2B sharing, a better understanding is needed on the transformational effort required to shift a company’s business model from ownership to sharing (Choi et al., 2014) for which the cyclical nature of Action Research is particularly well suited.

1.1. Sustainability

A more efficient use of (existing) resources avoids additional, individual ownership creating economic sustainability at companies and the macroeconomic level (Daunorienė et al., 2015; Demary, 2014; Georgi et al., 2019). B2B sharing prevents the purchase of new assets or resources, which systematically avoids overproduction and depletion of resources, improving ecologic sustainability (Acquier et al., 2017). Sharing goods with a significant CO₂ footprint

¹ Peer-to-peer (P2P) and consumer-to-consumer (C2C) are often used synonymously in literature ignoring the fact that two companies could also be considered as peers and would thus need to be included in P2P