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The role of the boundary spanner in bringing about innovation in cross-sector partnerships

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the mutual value co-creation that can occur when both parties in a cross sector partnership learn to innovate within the relationship. Despite suggestions that there are often asymmetrical returns to the business partner, nonprofit partners also accrue benefits (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012). In particular we consider how the relationship is influenced by the actors' abilities to accommodate, adapt, learn and co-create solutions as they learn how to do things differently or better in response to the challenges they face. This is achieved using data from a longitudinal analysis of a cross-sector partnership between a business and an arts organisation in Ireland. This offers a unique opportunity to trace the emergence of the partnership over time, and, specifically, to consider the impact of innovations co-created by the actors involved. Our analysis will demonstrate that innovation at the level of the relationship emerged from the incremental problem solving processes of the individuals involved. This foregrounds the impact of individual boundary spanners and the import of social capital in realising the potential of this partnership. In this regard we put forward three key boundary spanning roles, boundary spanner as network builder, as entrepreneur, as facilitator/mediator. The paper concludes with suggestions for further research and consideration of managerial implications arising from this study.

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1. Introduction

Inter-organisational relationships between business firms and nonprofit organisations have become an important source of innovative solutions to business (Murphy, Perrot, & Rivera-Santos, 2012) and social problems (Selsky & Parker, 2005; Seitanidi, 2008). Waddock (1988) defines such arrangements as a commitment by a corporation to work with a nonprofit organisation whereby both parties work co-operatively to solve problems that affect them all and require time, commitment and active rather than passive involvement from all parties. Crane (1998) argues that developing partnerships offers partners the opportunity to co-create solutions with experts in a particular field, whereby such solutions have the potential to be a best fit for both organisations involved and society generally.

According to Austin (2010a) cross sector partnerships need to be conceived as learning organisations continually searching for more effective ways to generate value. This establishes an important role for innovation in these arrangements. However, recently Jamali, Yianni and Abdallah (2011) have asserted that the role of innovation and its potential implications for partnership outcomes have so far not been systematically explored. While innovation remains an understudied phenomenon in cross sector partnerships its importance has been recognised. For example, Holmes and Smart (2009) looks to business literature to consider the benefits accruing to firms who look outside the firm for sources of innovation. However, we wish to extend this to consider cross-sector partnerships as a source of innovation for both parties (Ameli & Kayes, 2011), but in particular the nonprofit organisation.

Much academic work in the area of cross-sector relationships has focused on key relationship success factors such as the need for trust (Seitanidi & Crane, 2009), commitment and shared values (Austin, 2010b). These success factors are conceived as mediating factors which are either present or not in the relationship. The problem with this conceptualisation is that it obscures the efforts of managers in both organisations to bring about an open collaborative environment. For example, it is possible that the true potential of any given relationship may not fully be realised at the outset, and, contra to Berger, Cunningham, & Drumwright's, (2004) assessment, not all partnership problems are predictable and capable of being 'dealt with' at the early stage of a relationship. As such, it is conceivable that the presence of relationship success

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variables (Parker & Selsky, 2004; Arya & Salk, 2006) have much to do with the behaviour of relational actors, rather than, a priori, being predictors of relationship success. More research is therefore required to understand "the role of individuals in affecting value creation" (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012, p. 24) within cross-sector partnerships. In this regard, it is necessary to investigate how actors, not only envisage the potential of a relationship to co-create innovative solutions, but how, through their actions, they contribute to the realisation of that potential. In particular, there is a need to explore how the relationship is influenced by the actors' abilities to accommodate, adapt, learn and co-create solutions.

This paper focuses on the role of individuals in affecting value creation (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012). Building on the work of Holmes and Moir (2007) and Holmes and Smart (2009), it considers the impact of individual actors in co-creating solutions. Inevitably, this demands analysis at the micro-level of the relationship Kolk, van Dolen, & Vock; Austin & Seitanidi, 2012; Vock, van Dolen, & Kolk, 2014) and this is achieved using data from a longitudinal analysis of a cross-sector partnership between a business and an arts organisation in Ireland[1]. This offers a unique opportunity to trace the emergence of the partnership over time, and, specifically, to consider the impact of innovations co-created by the actors involved. Our analysis will demonstrate that innovation at the level of the relationship emerged from the incremental problem solving processes of the individuals involved. This foregrounds the impact of individual boundary spanners and the import of social capital in realising the potential of this partnership. In this regard we will put forward three key boundary spanning roles, boundary spanner as network builder, as entrepreneur, as facilitator/mediator.

The paper is outlined as follows: first we will consider how innovation has been treated within the literature on cross sector relationships and what remains to be done in this area. In that we will outline specifically what role there may be for social capital and boundary spanners problem solving practices in this regard. This is followed by a detailed description of the longitudinal single case study methodology employed in this study. The data analysis that follows traces the emergence of particular problems in the relationship and the efforts of boundary spanners to resolve these problems while demonstrating particular boundary management skills. In our attempt to learn beyond this case we follow this section with an outline of key boundary spanning roles identified and how these contribute to our knowledge of cross sector relationships. The paper concludes with reference to both theoretical and managerial implications.

2. Cross-sector partnerships: innovation and the role of boundary spanners

This paper considers the mutual value co-creation that can occur when both parties learn to innovate within *and* because of the partnership, and not just the latter. Despite suggestions that there are often asymmetrical returns to the business partner (Laasonen, Fougère, & Kourula, 2012) nonprofit partners also accrue benefits (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012). Moreover, the relationship between the two can also benefit from innovation as partners learn how to do things differently or better in response to the challenges they face (Ameli & Kayes, 2011). Importantly, these are not purely economic or market based benefits, but also include social and personal benefits to the individuals involved (for a comprehensive list see Austin & Seitanidi, 2012). Innovation is conceived as (1) an interactive process involving multiple actors and relationships; (2) involving the exchange of different forms of knowledge—codified and tacit knowledge; and (3) a learning process where innovations arise from the exchange of different forms of knowledge, their exploitation and gradual appropriation and conversion into new forms (Jamali et al., 2011). However, we add to this to foreground the role of individual boundary spanners and the incremental 'every day' problem solving that occurs in business-nonprofit exchanges.

Further, while we are concerned here with relational innovation and not social innovation per se, we concur with Le Ber and Branzei's (2010) view that relational processes enable or hinder innovation; these include the active and deliberate actions undertaken by both parties in both organisations to respond to temporary failures or to actively seek out opportunities for relational level innovation. Unlike Le Ber and Branzei, however, we consider specifically the role of social capital as a driver of innovation as well as the role of the individuals in identifying opportunities and solving those problems that emerge during the partnership. The role of social capital has been deemed an important driver of innovation (Kanter, 1999). However, further work needs to be done in this area to understand more fully the conditions under which innovation is more or less likely (Jamali et al., 2011). We will advance our discussion of these in the following sections.

Within the extant literature on inter-organisational relationships is it widely acknowledged that the social relationships between interactants is a key enabler to successful relationship development (Hutt & Stafford, 2000; Harris, Malley, & Patterson, 2003). Many of the advantages of social capital have been identified, including: facilitating coordination and communication; amplifying reputations, and facilitating/resolving dilemmas accruing from collective action and value creation (Cohen & Prusak, 2001; Gonzalez et al., 2004). Social capital may be particularly important for innovation because knowledge is increasingly embodied within networks and alliances (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005). Within cross sector partnerships, social capital has been demonstrated to support relationship building (Murphy et al., 2012) and collective problem solving (Austin, 2010a). However, social capital may not emerge so easily within such partnerships and requires many elements including: strong connectivity, incentives for sharing knowledge, as well as trust and commitment (Jamali et al., 2011). Thus, it is likely that boundary spanners who build relationships play an important role particularly in knowledge exchange (Bennett, Mousley, & Ali-Choudhury, 2008; Holmes & Smart 2009). This is consistent with our understanding of business relationships more broadly whereby successful partnerships owe much to the actors who form social bonds with their counterparts (Marchington & Vincent, 2004) thereby supporting relationship development. Boundary spanners may have formal responsibilities to 'manage' innovation opportunities and outcomes, or may simply be informal 'conduits' to locate opportunities for innovation (Holmes & Smart 2009). Those who are most successful at fostering innovation have a wide range of interests that facilitate environmental scanning, as well as an internal locus of control that allows them to frame ideas as opportunities (Holmes & Moir, 2007). Boundary spanners therefore play a number of important roles including building effective personal relationships as well as demonstrating an ability to manage in non-hierarchical decision environments through negotiation and brokering (Williams, 2002).

Although understanding of the role of individuals is less developed within cross-sector partnerships, there is an appreciation that micro level interactions between leaders and staff in partnering can impact levels of trust and degree of effort expended

[1] It should be noted that the focal relationship under study was considered by the actors involved as a (community based) sponsorship, but as such it cannot be easily labeled transactionary as Seitanidi and Ryan (2007) have done as it has clear integrative 'learning organisation' qualities (Austin, 2010a) and therefore the relationship is being viewed generally as a cross-sector partnership.

Table 1
Overview of phases in primary data collection.

Primary research collection phases	
Phase one	
Feburary '01	First contact with Financial Controller (telco) and General Manager (ArtOrg)
May '01	1st interview with General Manager (ArtOrg)
May 01	First interview with Financial Controller (telco) and PR Manger (telco)
Phase two	
End September beginning Oct '01	Desk research in Artorg (over 3 weeks) Held brief (30 min) meeting with General Manager (ArtOrg) at end of each day at ArtOrg offices
Last week October '01	2nd interview with Financial Controller (telco)
From September '01 till '06	Numerous emails between General Manager (ArtOrg), Financial Controller (telco) and researcher
March/April '02	Analysis of data and development of ten year case synopsis
December 2002	Sent Fergal McGrath and Financial Controller (telco) a copy of "10 year review"
June 2002	Confirmation from General Manager (ArtOrg) that 10 year review was fair account of relationship (on proviso of certain change, which were made)
Up to Feburary '03	Further round of literature review
Phase three	
October '03	Held interview with new GM at ArtOrg as well as with the Artistic Director, with follow up phone interview with GM soon after
Autumn '03	Integration of further data
May 2003	Financial Controller (telco) signs of on 10 year review as fair account of relationship
January '04	Further integration of field work and literature
September '05	Final Interview with original General Manager (ArtOrg)

on implementation, for example (Vock et al., 2014). The role of managers in assembling knowledge configurations, identifying opportunities from innovation search activities and making connections between network lines across organisational boundaries has also been acknowledged (Holmes & Smart 2009). Beyond these few studies, however, relatively little is known about how managers, in boundary spanning roles, bring about partnership level innovation.

Moreover boundary spanners are inevitably confronted with "the accountability interface between their role as organisational representative and that of partner in a multi-agency environment" (Williams, 2002, p. 12); where these accountabilities may at times be in conflict. Thus, boundary spanners must be adept as resolving many kinds of emergent tensions within cross-sector partnerships, where they must at once faithfully represent their own organisation, while developing empathetic relations within their counterpart in the partner organisation. Colloquially we might call this a battle on two fronts. In this paper we will build on this research on the boundary spanner to elucidate the many and varying roles these actors play within both organisational and the relationship level innovation.

3. Method

The cross sector relationship explored here focuses on a multinational telecommunications organisation with a subsidiary facility in the west of Ireland (hereafter referred to as 'Telco') and a local arts organisation who run a multidisciplinary annual arts festival (hereafter referred to as 'ArtOrg'). The formal relationship began in earnest in 1991 and formally ended in 2002.[2] Data was collected pertaining to this period and beyond, using both historical and real-time data collection methods (Halinen & Törnroos, 1995). See Table 1 for an overview of primary data collection phases. This research takes a process focused perspective, which calls for methodologies capable of capturing the evolution, co-evolution, development and decline of cross sector relationships (Selsky & Parker, 2005). Single point-in-time studies are insufficient (Pettigrew, 1997) with different methodologies required to provide a nuanced understanding of how interaction influences relational partners and the relationship itself. Although longitudinal studies are the most effective way to understand process and structural changes in inter-organisational relationships (Halinen, 1998), they remain rare because of the difficulty of securing access to data over time (Olkkonen, Tikkanen, & Alajoutsijärvi, 2000). This study is one of a very few that enables key transition points to be examined so as to trace the emergence of the relationship over time, and in particular the role of boundary spanners in bringing about relational level innovation.

While the case itself is over ten years old, the issues raised by the study, the experiences of both organisations, and boundary spanner strategies to resolve and transform the relationship are contemporary. Analysis demonstrates that the relationship between Telco and Artorg transformed from a bounded sponsor/sponsee relationship into a multi-dimensionally cross-sector relationship, which continued to meet the needs of both parties in ways that were novel and not predictable from the outset. Insights are generated that are relevant beyond this case through the process of analytical generalisation (Yin, 1984). In our discussion of the case, we demonstrate how the issues faced by the actors and the nature of relationship development can inform current thinking on Cross Sector relationships.

The evidence presented here is based upon a high level of access to the data, which provides opportunities for historical and real-time analysis (Halinen & Törnroos, 1995). Real time data, in the form of in-depth interviews (9 in total), was collected between 2001 and 2005, and included key boundary spanners from both organisations. In 2001 in-depth interviews were undertaken with the Financial Controller and the Public Relations Manager at Telco; the financial controller was able, due to his long-term involvement, to discuss the relationship from the outset. It was hoped that other members of Telco staff involved in the relationship could be interviewed. However, at this time Telco were downsizing and many of these personnel had already left the company. This limitation was overcome by ArtOrg providing unprecedented access to historical and documentary evidence. Interviews were

[2] It is important to note that while the formal relationship ended in 2002, informal support between Artorg and Telco continued after this. Moreover, staff who had at this time left Telco and went to establish their own businesses or join other locally based companies continued to support Artorg, thus widening their network of supporters. It is difficult therefore to assign a single end point to the relationship (see work of Havila & Wilkinson, 2002).

Table 2
Summary of the case over four phases.

	Emerging phase (yr 1–3)	Learning phase (yr 4–6)	Deepening phase (yr 7–10)	Transforming phase (10–11+)
Context	• Telco get new MD • ArtOrg plans larger scale events	• ArtOrg experienced increased production costs and box office shortfall • ArtOrg encounters financial crisis following expansion • Telco forced by higher management to freeze financial value of their sponsorship – portfolio – Telco (Galway) increased in-kind support to balance this	• ArtOrg continue to grow, going form 1 to 2 week festival • Planning difficulties mean that ArtOrg cannot run a planned revenue generating event • ArtOrg face new financial difficulties	• Telco face major challenges in their external environment • Telco began to rationalise operations and initiated redundancies • Telco's problems intensified over this period, with increase redundancies following • plant reduced to minimum staff at end of this period
Process	• Formation and regular meeting of Telco festival committee • Weekly communications between financial controller (Telco) and festival managing director • ArtOrg personalised aspects of festival for Telco employees and suppliers • Telco show high level of responsiveness to emerging ArtOrg requests • Tensions evident re co-ordination of Telco employee free tickets and volunteers	• Telco called for greater financial control on part of ArtOrg • Increased interaction specifically in relation to responding to financial crisis • ArtOrg developed calculative tools for control of free ticket allocation (to Telco) • Alternative to free tickets offered to Telco employees (discounts, priority booking)	• ArtOrg take pro-active approach in requesting support from Telco for new financial difficulties • Telco introduce ArtOrg to Deloitte and Touche and support an audit of ArtOrg operations • ArtOrg took control over co-ordination of Telco employee volunteers	• Development of corporate partnership deal took 7 month process to complete; involving solicitors in signing contracts for the first time • ArtOrg began to market their event management expertise to other organisations within the Telco network • Redundant staff who joined other firms, or started new business became part of ArtOrg's sponsorship network
Content	• 13 fold increase in financial support to ArtOrg by Telco • Free tickets to Telco staff • Telco employees acting as volunteer stewards at events • Venue branding op for Telco • Small scale corporate entertainment events run by ArtOrg for Telco • In-kind supports: advice on financial management, logistics and office furniture on loan • ArtOrg staff attended Telco training courses in financial management	• Telco moved to more visible main sponsors of the festival's International Theatre Programme (ITP) • Increase in branding opportunities for Telco (logo on tickets, venue branding) • Content of sponsorship remained largely the same, but with decrease in Telco's free ticket allocation and offer of alternatives • In-kind supports continued and intensified	• Telco continue as main sponsor of ITP • ArtOrg successfully pitch for 50% increase in Telco's financial support/sponsorship • Telco received higher level of free tickets • ArtOrg organise Telco 'family day' and corporate night out • Telco suppled ArtOrg with state of the art telecoms system	• After lengthy discussions Telco become festival 'corporate partner' • New contract included explicit PR coverage requirements (at least one national news story etc), increased number of free tickets etc • Telco's financial support/sponsorship ArtOrg ceased in year 11; in-kind supports continued for 3–4 more years
Outcome	• Telco: increased visibility in locality, enhanced staff morale • ArtOrg: increase and widening of audience base • Sponsorship won national sponsorship award	• ArtOrg: increased efforts re audience projection techniques and audience development • ArtOrg increased efforts re financial management practices (e.g. use of BEP) and to control cost base	• ArtOrg became first festival in Ireland to have on-line sales capability • Evidence of impact of ongoing relationship with arts within Telco: emergence of amateur dramatics group • Following donation of system Teclo have more opportunity to discuss their products in media	• Continuation of the sponsorship during this period acted as 'life line' for Telco staff

also held with the General Manager and Artistic Director at ArtOrg. These had been the only two full-time members of staff at ArtOrg at the time, so a reasonable account of the relationship was ascertained. In October 2003, a further round of interviews was held with the key participants including the newly-appointed General Manager of the Festival. Interviews lasted between one and two hours and were recorded and transcribed in full.

Topics discussed included the chronological history of the community orientated sponsorship; the nature of exchange between the organisations; comparison of this relationship with other business partnerships; the effect of the relationship on artistic programming; the reasons for staff involvement; how the relationship was managed; the role of external recognition; and the nature of financial and in-kind support. Triggers for further discussion came from interrogation of the historical data made available in response to requests for further detail on particular events. When a number of contentious issues in the relationship were uncovered, each informant was asked to qualify the nature of interaction regarding resolution of the issues.

Historical data was also collected. This included annual sponsorship proposals (11) from ArtOrg to Telco for the period 1991–2001; annual joint submission to the Business 2 Arts[3] (11) 'Business Sponsors of the Year Award' from 1991 to 2001; numerous press cuttings kept on file by ArtOrg; a number of internal memos, reports and notes kept on file by ArtOrg (analysed on average 10 per year). This corresponds to over 120 documents (ranging from 2 page to 20 pages in length) and over 200 internal memos and items of internal correspondence between the two organisations and other 3rd parties, i.e. Telco's PR company.

3.1. Data analysis

The analytical frame used to interrogate data in the case was processual in nature, which involved searching for "multiple intersecting conditions which link features of context and process

[3] B2A are the Irish Business Council for the Arts (B2A).

to certain outcomes" (Pettigrew, 1997, p. 342). Key events were examined from the documentary evidence as well as from interview material in a process of triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). As part of the case analysis a 20,000-word case history was written by the lead researcher[4]; please see Table 2 for a summary of the case. Following a more general writing of the history of the partnership, a further coding (manual) of the data was undertaken with a view to identifying types of innovation evident. We therefore followed an abductive approach, that is, concepts from the extant literature on inter-organisational relationships were used deductively to develop an understanding of the case, followed by more inductive coding which uncovered emerging themes (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). From this process the notion of 'problem solving processes' emerged as well as the role of boundary spanners. Following this then, further literature reviews were undertaken to understand the boundary spanner role further. After this phase a final 'profiling' of boundary spanners and theorising as to their role was undertaken.

4. The case study

We will now introduce the key actors in the cross sector relationship and provide some history and context to the case.

4.1. The focal actors

ArtOrg is a nonprofit organisation, part funded by the Arts Council of Ireland. The Festival was established in 1977 and has experienced many changes over its lifetime. With its origins in theatre, ArtOrg became multi-disciplinary in 1993/4; its current list of art forms includes street art, spectacle, comedy, literature, music and theatre. The size of ArtOrg changes during the year, with temporary personnel joining around the time of the festival, including box office staff and a large number of local volunteers. Established in 1973, Telco operated in the telecommunications sector and was a subsidiary of a Canadian multinational. Initially offering basic telephony, over time it moved into web-hosting, broadband, multimedia communication servers, optical and wireless networks. Telco emphasised employee well-being and strong community relationships.

4.2. Overview of the partnership

Telco regarded the sponsorship of the festival as a potentially valuable mechanism to build profile with the local community and employees. The arrangement was typical of a sponsorship, involving a payment from Telco in return for publicity (recognition and advertising space in a range of festival brochures); media coverage (assurances of local and national media coverage); and venue branding (Meenaghan, 1998). However, as a result of the degree of interaction and involvement by Telco personnel in the arts events, the relationship was more embedded than a typical sponsorship arrangement. From the very first year, Telco was given a ticket allocation and thus participated as part of the audience as well as sponsor. Additionally, senior management at Telco encouraged employees to volunteer at events, creating opportunities for interaction at several levels. Further in-kind support came in the form of financial advice including how to computerise accounts, manage cash flow, project budgets and write funding applications. This support had important implications for ArtOrg's ability to achieve and even expand its organisational goals. In this case we will highlight the role played by key protagonists in the Telco-ArtOrg relationship; including Liam (Telco Financial Controller, and main contact from Telco side) and Fergal (Managing Director of ArtOrg and main contact from ArtOrg side).

From the outset Liam had a clear vision of how the relationship should be and this vision was not unacceptable to ArtOrg; "*[Liam] would have been both anxious, adamant or enthusiastic, I am not sure which is the word, to ensure that it wasn't just a cheque being handed over, that he wanted to get the staff involved" Fergal.* The involvement of Telco personnel from the outset contributed to the potential for informal interaction and the potential for a flattening of hierarchies (Kolk et al., 2010). However, as this case demonstrates, relationship development was not unproblematic, and required the attention and efforts of key boundary spanners to exchange knowledge (Holmes & Smart 2009) and, to realise the potential of the relationship.

4.3. Boundary spanning and innovation in ArtOrg, Telco and the relationship

Due to the longitudinal nature of our data, it is possible to track and therefore trace how both parties, in response to specific triggers and events, develop new capacities to act, within the relationship. To elucidate on this we will firstly focus on one such case of learning in the relationship. The focus here is the events and activities that followed two crises in the partnership. Both crises were caused by financial difficulties faced by ArtOrg; they occurred in year 4 and year 7 of our study.

While ArtOrg consistently experienced financial pressure (as common for such organisations) in year 4 of the relationship due to some particular contextual factors they faced a critical financial deficit following the year 4 festival and ArtOrg turned to Telco, and Liam in particular, for extra support in order to survive. However, at the same time Telco (worldwide) changed their policy regarding the level of discretion local plants had in relation to high value sponsorship arrangements, requiring all local decisions to be signed of at HQ level. This changed the Telco/Artorg dynamic by potentially invoking Telco HQ in the relationship. However, rather than adhering to this new policy Telco's financial controller (Liam) communicated the situation openly with Artorg and made suggestions as to how the potential negative impact of this development could be minimised. The idea being to keep the direct monetary value of the sponsorship steady, while continuing to develop in kind supports i.e. expertise, equipment, technology share etc. This gives some indication of the relationship Telco (Galway) were willing to have with Telco (Headquarters). Furthermore, the reaction of both parties to this financial crisis transformed the nature of interaction between them. This is evidenced by increased intensity of interaction (meetings, e-mails etc), and also by the informal, and supportive manner in which the key boundary spanners were able to deal with the issues.

> It was an accountant's view [i.e. the financial controller] that our difficulties weren't at all insurmountable, they just needed to be addressed in the immediate term... and then in the long term [that] we needed to see beyond the immediate crisis. That was just financial expertise (Fergal).

For example, Liam proposed that ArtOrg be more articulate about what they needed, and explicitly ask Telco for their assistance. ArtOrg took this on board as Fergal outlines below:

> "We went to Telco in the autumn of 1994 and briefed GK (Telco MD) . . . of our difficulty and in doing so, at the same time, we wanted to retain his confidence in our assets so we went to him with (i) we had difficulty, (ii) looking for ideas where they might help us an (iii) at the same time retain their confidence in us" (Fergal)

[4] A copy of this is available from the corresponding author on request.

In response, Liam, offered an accountant for a month to computerise Artorg accounts; logistics support running up to the festival; and the loan of office equipment. The financial controller also played an important mediating role between the formal senior management of Telco and ArtOrg:

> As we were advancing then to secure their support on a long term [basis] . . . Liam would have just guided us or advised us or warned us that we would have to come up with a fairly detailed proposal that would turn them on, and retain their support and renew their confidence in us to make sure that they would be excited by continuing to deal with us (Fergal).

This *mediating* role was critical (Holmes & Smart 2009; Jamali et al., 2011), as it created a safe space for ArtOrg to reflect on their situation and respond creatively to the requests made by the Telco MD, some of which were contentious in nature. Moreover, when Telco called on ArtOrg to act in quite specific ways to rescue the relationship, Fergal acted to *manage* the boundary (Williams, 2002). For example, when the MD looked for an explicit response for his idea on a community winter program, Fergal pointed out in their year 5 proposal that the festival was already highly community orientated, thus subverting this explicit request. This response both acknowledges Telco's request and asserts ArtOrg's identity.

What is important to note is that the 'solving' of ArtOrg's financial management challenges was not a once off issue, but required ongoing efforts on the part of Liam and Fergal. Part of this was the internalising of financial management processes, which reached a pivot point in year 7 when, using funding from the Arts Council and Telco, ArtOrg commissioned the services of an external firm to audit the festival. This review then highlighted a potentially problematic issue within the relationship regarding the allocation of free and also discounted tickets for Telco employees. While Telco volunteer programme and allocation of free tickets, were an innovative feature of the partnership from day one, it was the ongoing coordination of these that became more of a challenge than had been initially conceived. For instance, free tickets offered to staff were a key part of the sponsorship, however, evidence from the data suggests that discrepancies formed between demand and supply. Eventually as ArtOrg searched for ways to re-position itself in the relationship the managing director learned to equate value of free tickets to value of cash given by Telco as part of the sponsorship deal. Following this the value of the free ticket allocation was recognised, and resulted in ArtOrg initiating strict parameters aimed to "*avoid administrative/control difficulties at [their] busiest time*" (email from Fergal to Liam 30.5.00).

In this example then we can trace how free tickets moved from a something donated, whose value was not calculated to an something exchanged as part of the sponsorship deal, whose value was precisely calculated; evidencing a clear innovation in the partnership. This, in turn, enabled ArtOrg to internalise new thinking and develop the necessary management structures to extract value from these:

> "They [Deloitte & Touche] put in place structures and procedures that could cope with the scale of the turnover, [which] brought about a stability [in the] programming. It is not that there is finance on one hand, and an artistic programme on the other, the two are closely linked. The artistic director works hand in glove with the general manager and the financial controller. As the programme is being planned, it is being costed, it is being factored [in] and the cumulative affect is being assessed as we proceed from day one." (Fergal).

An important outcome, therefore, of this review process was the development in Artorg's capacity to act more strategically, in a manner that did not negatively affect their innovative artistic programming. However, this was something that required careful treatment by Fergal in order to balance the artistic vision of the festival;

> "[The new systems do not] undermine the [artistic] programme, it strengthens the programme, because at any point in time we know what we have to spend, what we have remaining to spend"(Fergal).
>
> because we are a small team, we totally work together, I mean, I would always, no matter what was going on, communicate all the time—between me and Fergal . . . we don't work in isolation." (Rose Artistic Director ArtOrg)

ArtOrg experienced another financial crisis in year seven. However, due to growing understanding of financial management systems and general level of confidence, Fergal was able to identify the problems, develop a strategy and go to Telco with a clear and detailed request for support. Here we see how ArtOrg was internalising learning from the relationship and using it to better manage the relationship with Telco and to concomitantly improve management of the festival. At this time, Telco had a new MD, and, again, Liam's role as boundary spanner was crucial in managing the transition:

> "It was down to key individuals like Liam convincing the new MD that he wanted to do something dramatic, but required some capacity from us to achieve what they were asking." (Fergal).

Liam was clearly heavily invested in the ArtOrg/Telco relationship (Ryan & Blois, 2010) and, importantly, had both the legitimacy and locus of control (Holmes & Moir, 2007) within Telco to influence how the relationship would develop under each new MD. By the year 7 financial crisis, as soon as Fergal became aware of problems, he asked Liam for use of an accountant for 2/3 days coming up to the festival. Liam provided more than was asked by organising a team of financial information mangers to work closely with ArtOrg to integrate their accounting procedures. Moreover, ArtOrg took the year seven crisis as an opportunity to engage both parties in 'a state of the relationship' review; following the crisis they began to take control over key areas of the sponsorship. For example, in years ten/eleven ArtOrg internalised control of Telco staff working as stewards, integrating them with the other festival volunteers.

> "This year [ten-eleven] became more sophisticated in how we managed it. Traditionally a Telco employee took responsibility for coordinating all the volunteers from their side. This year at our request we put in place the scenario where our volunteer coordinator would have direct access to those people, so at the start of the year the production manager and the festival manager went to meet anyone interested in volunteering from Telco" (Fergal)
>
> "So you are trying to find ways of bringing the costs down, or finding ways or find a suitable sponsor to attach to a particular project. And its quite sensitive, because you don't want like sponsors banners, all over an artistic production, you know what I mean, so it is quite sensitive and you need a sponsor that is, I don't know... but who would be sensitive to the artistic content of the thing, or what ever. I mean you wouldn't just take anyone as a sponsor" (Rose AD ArtOrg)

Through engagement with Telco, ArtOrg transformed into a more professional organisation. However, this created further tensions for Fergal, in particular, in terms of his ability to manage other external relationships, particularly those with the Arts Council and with other, local, sponsors:

> "I am sure that support from a blue-chip co, like Telco, [and] invitations to Telco launches in Dublin etc, to key arts council members and staff seeing the type of shows and the promotion

of shows using Telco resources... I am sure they would have impressed the arts council. [However] we fear that our ability to draw in people like Telco, might leave us open to council and others saying they are 'ok', 'sure they we'll get it somewhere else'." (Fergal).

Fergal was also sensitive to the possible impact of the increased level of sophistication with other more local supports of the festival.

"There is however research to show that charitable organisation which we are, or arts organisations, that there is a very thin line between being slick in your marketing and being perceived as being too slick, too efficient. Too many people think that we waste our resources. The bad news is they think you're getting slick . . . So it's just that you have to be cautious when you are dealing with perceptions and marketing" (Fergal)

The managing of the boundaries between the artistic legitimacy of the festival and maintaining the strong relationship with Telco was a feature of Fergal's role throughout the relationship. Therefore, not withstanding the level of trust and clear levels of commitment, adaptations and learning on both sides Fergal finds himself balancing these two dimensions even after ten years since the initiation of the relationship. The following quote refers to a particular decision during the year 10/11 negotiations that took place as part of Telco coming on board as corporate partners.

"For the Telco logo to appear on our letterhead was a huge psychological barrier for us and when we came up with the idea Telco were very interested in it and we went in with sample letters and that and their expectation as that the logo would be far bigger but we countered that request by saying that the fact that it was there at all was hugely significant and it was major break through. I think they eventually realised what it was, it was a huge development" (Fergal).

It is worth noting here that Fergal conceived of the relationship as one that required ongoing 're-invention', in order to maintain Telco's interest:

"The corporate partnership came about, I suppose you could say it was inevitable development of the relationship between the two companies, but it was also a response to the need to innovate and develop and advance the relationship. If we didn't do that it could become susceptible to becoming flat or whatever" (Fergal).

Given the discussion so far, it might appear that most, if not all, of the learning occurred in ArtOrg. This perception occurs because of the focus on the micro issues that emerged at times of crisis through problem solving and innovation. However, this alone would misrepresent the case, so it is important to highlight some of the impacts the relationship also had on Telco. For example, Telco staff became more engaged in the arts as a result of their participation in the relationship highlighting a potential social benefit of the relationship:

"You are getting people to go to plays that wouldn't normally have gone to, there are now regular play goers and would never have before because they would have considered it too arty, it wasn't something for them. It's made the arts more approachable" (Liam).

Such was their engagement, that Telco decided to create their own, on-site arts events. However, their first production demonstrated that they lacked the necessary skills to successfully stage such an event:

"There were hiccups in the logistics in the production of it but I put that down to (i) inexperience on the part of the Telco employees involved, (ii) the structure on the Telco side, there was probably a committee of several individuals but no one person seemed to have the over riding responsibility for driving the thing" (Fergal)

The extent to which social capital developed within the relationship became tangible when Telco faced its own crisis in the end of year 10/11, which culminated in the eventual closing of the Telco plant in Galway. Fergal understood that the nature of the partnership had to change. In particular, the amount of cash sponsorship rapidly declined. Despite this, ArtOrg were grateful that they retained some level of involvement with the festival:

"Well they didn't pull out, I mean they were loosing staff all over the place, they couldn't be putting money into the likes of us, and literally lose staff at the same time" (Rose, Artistic Director, ArtOrg)

Indeed, despite the tension that Liam was experiencing as Financial Controller within Telco, he remained intrinsically involved with ArtOrg offering support and help whenever he could.

"I would have met Liam, still, more that I have met any other sponsor... he's very keen to keep up the contact and his advice is very good as well, and he has contacts. There's no sense of 'I am fighting for my life here, go away'. I mean he phones me to meet for lunch saying 'have you thought about this, have you thought about that"' (John, MD ArtOrg from year 11 onward)

Perhaps more importantly, the extent to which ArtOrg empathised with the plight of Telco workers facing redundancies is most telling of the degree to which the organisations had become embedded:

"They were like our own staff then . . . just all together mucking in . . . It's terrible because we knew them all really well, we had become friends with the staff over the time, 'coz [sig] they did volunteer work with the festival as well. It was awful sad to see it, people losing their jobs" (Rose, AD ArtOrg)

In the ten year period we discuss, the relationship evolved from a simple sponsorship agreement towards what ArtOrg refer to as a corporate partnership. This was not predictable at the outset (Jamali & Keshishian, 2009), but rather evolved organically in response to changing needs within the relationship and more prosaically, as a result of ongoing efforts to solve problems and issues as they emerged.

5. Discussion

Holmes and Smart (2009) identified two boundary spanning roles which were seen to play a significant role in the bringing about of innovation within cross-sector arrangements, that of formal management of innovation, usually by senior management, and a more informal role framed as a conduit that facilitates search and exploration and the location of opportunities through idea exchange. From our data we concur that the more informal boundary spanner role best describes our key protagonists. However, the term conduit, with its connotations of enabling flow of knowledge and learning does not capture the varied roles played by boundary spanners. Building on Williams (2002) we can now offer three distinct roles that Boundary Spanners were seen to play in the realising of relational level innovation, brought about through their problem solving processes. These are: boundary spanner as network builder, boundary spanner as entrepreneur, and boundary spanner as mediator. These roles are apparent throughout the relationship's history and are not confined to any particular phase of the relationship. What we do see however, is an intensification of boundary work during times of crises or marked changes in the relationship context.

5.1. Boundary spanner as network builder

An effective boundary spanner cultivates inter-personal relationships while also appreciating the context of the problems they wish to solve and how these might be interconnected with other issues or past events. For example, in order to legitimately maintain his role as managing director, it was vital for Fergal to understand and respect the role of artistic director. Over time he carefully worked to internalise processes and systems that would enable the organisation to financially sustain, while not jeopardising the artistic vision; in fact it had the opposite effect. He also had to painstakingly work to develop Artorg's professionalism (in marketing, accounting etc), while maintaining a positive relationship with the Arts Council and other 3rd party funders. This evidences a gradual appropriation of new knowledge and conversion into new forms (Jamali et al., 2011). Fergal too understood the pressure that Liam was under, and endeavoured to bring about solutions that would serve his interests as well as the interests of Art Org. Liam too had to appreciate the needs of not only Telco HQ, but of the multiple MDs that came to the Galway plant over the years, developing a relationship with each one, and continuing to advocate for the relationship with ArtOrg. Therefore, a key aspect of boundary spanner's problem solving skills lies in their ability to bridge interests within their organisation and across inter-organisational partners. This requires a sense of otherness and an empathic understanding of how others define the problem and what they might value in a solution (Hosking & Morley, 1991 as cited by Williams, 2002).

5.2. Boundary spanner as facilitator and mediator

The role of the boundary spanner in enabling information flows and mediating between varying 'interests' within the organisation and across organisation is well understood (Holmes & Smart 2009; Jamali et al., 2011). However, in this case the relational quality of this role is further emphasised. For instance, in sharing important information with Fergal, Liam effectively created a 'backstage' between the formal interests of both Telco and ArtOrg, where he could, with Liam's support, develop solutions to problems faced. Solutions were clearly co-created through the sharing of information, which was further enabled by the social bonds developed between boundary spanners (Marchington & Vincent, 2004), and Liam's own identification with the festival (see Ryan & Blois, 2010).

5.3. Boundary spanner as entrepreneur

The entrepreneurial qualities of boundary spanners resides in their recognised capacity for visionary or lateral thinking (Leadbeater & Goss, 1998) and in their ability to bring together problems and solutions in novel ways. Throughout the case we have examples of both Fergal and Liam 'seizing the day' in order to drive the relationship forward. Critically here though we see clearly that the boundary spanner role is not an isolated one. Fergal and Liam acted as a kind of boundary spanning team, identifying opportunities, supporting each others work, and working not only to come up with new ideas or solutions, but working hard to bring these about in a way appropriate to their organisational contexts. This role is certainly underpinned by a high level of locus of control in their organisations (Holmes & Moir, 2007), but also the degree of respect each had developed through careful relationship building.

Further we emphasise that permeating this role is a key capability displayed by boundary spanners, that is, to both build bridges across organisational and inter-organisational dimensions, while at the same time be capable of creating a (temporary) wall between organisations if required. Therefore, a key feature is that they must act on (at least) two, sometimes opposing sides and therefore must be adept at breaking down boundaries between themselves and the partner organisation, to listen more empathetically and build trust but they also need to enforce boundaries to protect themselves from enmeshment with the other's problems (Williams, 2002). This then requires careful judgement and skill. But further to this we wish to highlight how the actions played by their counterpart can enable and facilitate the boundary spanner. As such while we are focused on the individual, we recognise that the role not only shapes interaction, but is shaped by it, and is ultimately relational in character.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to highlight the role that boundary spanners play in the realising of innovation within cross sector partnerships as they go about their day to day problem solving activities. In doing so we also draw further attention to what it takes to realise the potential of any cross sector partnerships. From these findings we can say, that rather than an *ex ante* phenomena, the 'strategic fit' between the two organisations (for example of this research see Becker-Olsen & Hill, 2006) may be better conceived as an outcome of successful cross-sector partnerships as the two organisations learn and adapt within the partnership. The focus on the everyday problems solving enabled empirical investigation of emergent innovation enacted by a willingness to respond to the changing aims and expectations of the developing engagement (Waddock, 1988), and an ability to learn from the relationship and experiment with the findings (Holmes & Moir, 2007). Giving attention to individual managers in the relationship has therefore been fruitful in understanding how the relationship developed as it did. Focusing on those individuals with boundary spanning roles has enabled us to elaborate on the interdependent nature of relational level innovation, where solutions are co-created in response to ongoing or emergent issues. While the current literature on boundary spanners draws attention to the organisational and inter-organisational dimensions of their work, in this paper we have been able to elucidate upon the relational nature of boundary spanning, where, boundary spanners from both organisations can form a kind of 'back-stage' between both organisations where problems are discussed and solutions identified and tested. In this regard we have addressed the recent call for more research to understand the role individuals in relational value creation (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012).

Areas for future research

Much research on cross sector partnerships foregrounds their importance in delivering innovative solutions to social problems (Seitanidi, 2008; Selsky & Parker, 2005; Austin 2010a; Murphy et al., 2012). This is achieved by the bringing together of the resources, and competences, of both parties to bear on a problem, where the outcome of which is considered more effective, sustainable, or just than existing solutions (Le Ber & Branzei, 2010). While there is an assumption that that beneficiaries of social innovation should be at the societal level (Le Ber & Branzei, 2010), improved relations between business and nonprofits in itself has a societal benefit by "increasing greater empathy and understanding across sectors, which in turn can contribute to more harmonious communities with greater capacity for collective problem-solving" (Austin, 2010a, p. 15). Thus, effective cross sector relationships may represent a necessary while insufficient condition for more societal level innovation. Indeed, we have seen how ongoing innovations brought about through boundary spanner problem solving created the conditions for organisational learning and innovation. This learning in turn enabled the nonprofit organisation to be more financial sustainable, and thus better positioned to

deliver social good. We suggest that further research is therefore required to understand the interaction between innovation at the level of the relationship and value creation at the societal level.

Managerial implications

In this paper we have drawn attention to the roles that boundary spanners play in bringing about innovation in cross sector partnerships by considering the boundary spanner as network builder as facilitator/enabler and as entrepreneur. We demonstrate the importance of building personal relationships, developing empathy and understanding. These are of course well known. However we also see the importance creative 'seizing the day' type problem solving processes, and also the developing of a kind of 'backstage' between boundary spanners to give room to develop and test solutions. However, what is also acknowledged here is the balancing act of boundary spanners in meeting the needs of (a) their organisation, (b) their counterpart in the partner organisation and (c) other stakeholders or society more generally. This skill, to operate betwixt and between (after Turner, 1987) is the heart of the boundary spanning role, and should be supported by management if the potential of cross-partnerships is to be realised.

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