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Information Systems Outsourcing Success: The Interaction Effect between Partnership and Asset Specificity[1)]

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Abstract

Empirical studies have found some evidence that the quality or extent of partnership between client firms and vendors is positively related to the successful implementation of IS outsourcing. This study is an attempt to add knowledge on the role of partnership in the implementation of IS outsourcing. The basic premise of this study is that the effect of partnership characteristics on IS outsourcing implementation might depend upon contingency factors, such as outsourcing task characteristics. Specifically, this study will focus on the interaction effect between asset specificity and partnership characteristics on the IS outsourcing performance.

A survey study of 207 IS outsourcing relationships of U.S. firms generally suggests that a strong formation of relational exchange attributes, as opposed to discrete exchange, is essential to successful implementation of IS outsourcing. To investigate the interaction effect, MRA and subgroup analysis were performed. The results showed significant interaction effects between asset specificity and some relational attributes. They were utilized to explain somewhat inconclusive findings observed in the previous studies.

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1. Introduction

As information systems (IS) outsourcing expands its scope of outsourcing areas and its portion in the total IS expenditures increases, IS outsourcing has become a fundamental issue in management of information systems. Previously, empirical studies in IS outsourcing has mainly focused on the determinants of IS outsourcing decisions. Recently, however, considerable efforts are under way to investigate the success factors influencing the implementation of IS outsourcing, reflecting the fact that actual implementation rather than decision to outsource become of more practical concern and research in the IS outsourcing area is moving toward more mature stage.

One of the basic premises of previous studies in both empirical and descriptive studies has been that partnerships between client firms and vendors play a critical role for the successful implementation of IS outsourcing. Some researchers [10,18] essentially view IS outsourcing as strategic alliances or partnerships and emphasize the importance of managing outsourcing relationships. Empirical studies [5,6,11,15] also have found some evidence that the quality or extent of partnership between client firms and vendors is positively related to the successful implementation of IS outsourcing.

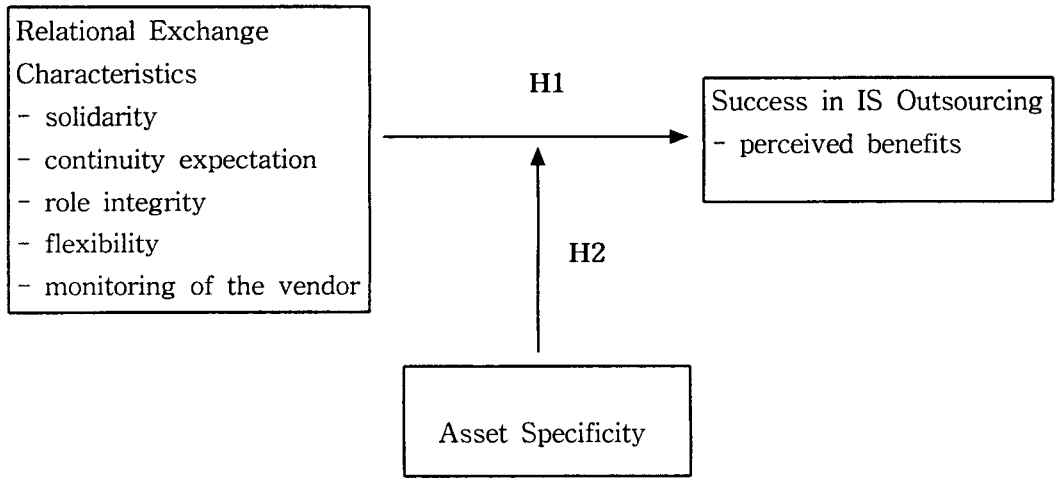
Overall, given the amount of evidence presented by empirical studies, partnership seems to have a positive impact on IS outsourcing implementation. However, one study's [6] evidence was somewhat plagued by inconclusive and often contradictory results. For instance, in his study, one of the partnership characteristics, the role integrity has a negative impact on the success of IS outsourcing. This study is an attempt to seek explanations for such equivocal results and to add knowledge on the role of partnership in the implementation of IS outsourcing.

The basic premise of this study is that the effect of partnership characteristics on IS outsourcing implementation might depend upon contingency factors, such as outsourcing task characteristics. Contingency factors might help determine when, what kind of, and how much partnership building is appropriate. Specifically, this study will investigate the interaction

effect of asset specificity on the relationship between partnership characteristics and IS outsourcing performance. Partnership characteristics in this study is based on the relational exchange theory.

2. Research Model and Hypotheses

<Figure 1> Research Model



<Figure 1> presents the research framework employed in this study. The five independent variables of relational exchange characteristics represent attributes of partnership between client firms and vendors. Success in IS outsourcing implementation, the dependent variable, is measured by perceived benefits from a focal outsourcing relationship. One moderating variable, asset specificity, is in place to test the interaction effect between relational exchange characteristics and perceived benefits. The research model will test the direct relationships between the independent variables and the dependent variable as well.

2.1 Relational Exchange Characteristics

This study utilizes relational exchange characteristics to capture the attributes of partnership in IS outsourcing relationships since they represents a very systematic set of attributes to capture the extent and dimensions of partnerships in interorganizational relationships (IORs), such as IS outsourcing.

Relational exchange theory, as Macneil's [17] neoclassical contractual framework is often called, expanded Williamson's [26] initial description of market versus hierarchy of the interorganizational governance structure. The theory suggests that the governance structure can be arranged on a continuum of relationalism anchored by market (discrete exchange) and hierarchy (relational exchange) at the polar extremes [20]. The concept of interorganizational structure or relational structure presented in the relational exchange theory provides a significant opportunity to study hybrid forms of interorganizational cooperative arrangements, which are neither markets nor hierarchies.

Discrete exchange is relatively short-term, and the relationships between highly autonomous buyers and sellers are designed to facilitate economically efficient transfer of goods or services [22]. Communication between parties is very limited and the contents are very narrow. Since virtually no social exchange is engaged, the identity of parties can be completely ignored. Whereas, in relational exchange, each transaction must be viewed in terms of its history and its anticipated future. The participants are expected to derive complex, personal, non-economic satisfaction and engage in social exchange [9].

Researchers in relationship marketing and strategic alliances have used a variety of sets of dimensions to measure the relational structure based on the situational factors of the research settings. Among these dimensions, the present study utilizes solidarity, continuity expectation, role integrity, flexibility, and monitoring of the vendor as the characteristics of relational structure. The first four items, solidarity, continuity expectation, role integrity, and flexibility, are included since these items are among the most frequently utilized. The remaining item, monitoring of the vendor, is included since it is considered a very important success factor in an IS outsourcing relationship

by researchers.

The norm of solidarity refers to the extent to which an on-going relationship (as distinct from a series of discrete transactions) is created and sustained [14]. The norm of continuity expectation refers to the expectation of future exchange between parties [20]. Role integrity refers to the extent to which the parties maintain highly complex and multi-dimensional roles [14]. Flexibility refers to smooth alterations in practices and policies in the event of unexpected or changing conditions [3]. As the transaction becomes more relational, the terms of trade becomes more open-ended. Thus, planning and adjustment are essential to cope with uncertain environments.

Monitoring of the vendor involves the monitoring or supervisory actions that the client firm undertakes to secure satisfactory vendor performance in the execution of the agreement [20]. The monitoring activities in IS outsourcing include developing performance standards, measuring results, and then interpreting them continuously [18]. When the contract becomes more relational, active supervision by the client firm is necessary to ensure satisfactory performance.

Empirical studies [5,6,11,15] found that the quality or extent of partnership between client firms and vendors is positively related to the successful implementation of IS outsourcing. Empirical studies in other IORs have also shown that a higher level of relational exchange characteristics has a positive effect on both polity performance (trust and satisfaction) and economic performance in interorganizational arrangements [2,23]. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed regarding the direct relationship between relational exchange characteristics and success in IS outsourcing:

H1: Success of an IS outsourcing relationship is positively associated with the degree of:

A. solidarity
B. continuity expectation
C. role integrity
D. flexibility
E. monitoring of the vendor

2.2 Asset Specificity

Asset specificity refers the degree to which the transaction utilizes specialized assets that cannot be transferred to any other transaction. Unlike assets that can be used to serve a variety of situations, assets with high asset specificity have primary value only in the particular relationship between the client firm and the vendor. Loh [16] identified three sources of asset specificity in the IS outsourcing context -- technical resource specificity, human resource specificity, and technical procedure specificity.

Transaction cost analysis (TCA) postulates that high asset specificity will cause high transaction costs and that high potential transaction costs will eventually lead to decreased performance in IORs. In order to manage the detrimental effect of asset specificity, Heide and Stump [12] suggest that relational exchange attributes be increased proportionally with asset specificity. They actually found evidence of interaction effect between asset specificity and relational structure on relationship performance in buyer-supplier relationships in industrial markets. Introduction of more relational exchange characteristics are expected to improve relationship performance since the parties need more communication and commitment to accomplish highly asset specific or unique tasks more effectively. Also solidarity and continuity expectation present in the relational structure can serve as safeguards against opportunism inherent in the relationship of high asset specificity. However, the effect of relational exchange characteristics are expected to be relatively low in case of low asset specificity where the task environment is more predictable. Regarding the interaction effect between asset specificity and relational structure characteristics on IS outsourcing performance, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: The greater the asset specificity, the greater the relationship between success in IS outsourcing and

A. solidarity
B. continuity expectation
C. role integrity
D. flexibility
E. monitoring of the vendor

2.3 Perceived Benefits

This study utilizes perceived benefits as success measures of implementation of IS outsourcing. Perceived benefits are a client firm's perception of benefits gained from a specific outsourcing relationship [11]. Since benefits of IS outsourcing are also underlying reasons for or expectations from outsourcing arrangements, perceived benefits measure the degree of accomplishment of expectations from the client firm's perspective. Hence, they are accepted as good measures of IS outsourcing success. Three major types of benefits identified in the literature are strategic, economic, and technological benefits [4].

3. Research Methods

This study involved a cross-sectional field study via a questionnaire-based mail survey. The unit of analysis in this study is the relationship between a client firm and one of its vendors. The sampling frame for this research consisted of the large U.S. firms listed in the *Directory of Top Computer Executives* (West Edition; Spring 1996 Version) published by Applied Computer Research, Inc. Of the 2,200 questionnaires mailed, 368 were returned. Upon further evaluation, thirteen incomplete questionnaires were determined unusable. Thus, 355 responses was usable, resulting in a usable response rate of 16.1%. Of the 355 responses of the survey, a total of 207 outsourcing relationships were utilized for hypothesis testing after removing non-outsourcing firms.

Whenever possible, measures that have been utilized and validated are adopted for this study. All the variables were measured with multiple-item scales. Each item were measured according to a seven-point Likert-type scale. The measures of relational exchange characteristics were adopted from the relationship marketing literature. The measures of asset specificity were adopted from Nam [19]. Perceived benefits were measured by nine items based on Cheon [4] and Collins and Millen [7]. Each item of perceived benefits was measured by a seven-point Likert-type scale, anchored from "much worse" to "much better" in comparison to the client firm's expectation.

This type of measurement approach represents the concept of "outcomes given comparison level (Outcomes\CL)" proposed by Thibaut and Kelley [25] from the perspective of social exchange theory. The comparison level in the present context can be defined as a standard representing the quality of outcomes the client firm has come to expect from a given type of relationship, based upon present and past experience with similar relationships, and knowledge of other IS outsourcing relationships [1]. Thus, perceived benefits in this study are conceptualized as outcomes obtained from a relationship, against the comparison level defined above. The comparison level is introduced as an anchor for assessing perceived benefits to control different expectations by different IS activities outsourced.

Each set of multiple-item scales was initially subjected to an examination of item-to-total correlations to identify items that did not belong to the specific scale. An item with low item-to-total correlation indicates that the item is not drawn from the same domain and should be deleted to reduce error and unreliability. Items were deleted if their item-to-total correlation was below 0.35. In order to assess unidimensionality, principal components factor analysis was conducted on subsets of variables. Varimax was the rotation method for all analysis. Factor loadings of less than .50 are dropped from further analysis. <Table 1> lists summary scale statistics.

All items except two cases cleanly loaded to the intended construct. First, for the relational exchange characteristics, all items of solidarity and continuity expectation were merged into one factor. The new factor was subsequently labeled as "solidarity and continuity expectation". It is not uncommon that items from different scales are combined into one factor in relational exchange scales. Second, for perceived benefits, two factors emerged from nine items. The split of perceived benefits into two factor was not intended, but it is not unexpected since the items represent a diverse set of benefits including strategic, technological, and economic dimensions. Upon an inspection of the items, the two factors were termed as "perceived non-economic benefits" and "perceived economic benefits" respectively. Similar division in perceived benefits was also found in [5]. The items of non-economic benefits generally reflect strategic and technological benefits. As a result, two dependent variables will be utilized for hypothesis testing.

<Table 1> Reliabilities of Final Scales

Construct	Number of Items	Item-to-Total Correlation		Alpha
		Min.	Max.	
Solidarity & Continuity Expectation	6	.37	.72	.84
Role Integrity	3	.63	.77	.82
Flexibility	3	.42	.67	.74
Monitoring	4	.48	.70	.79
Asset specificity	3	.31	.40	.54
Perceived non-economic benefits	5	.59	.74	.85
Perceived economic benefits	3	.72	.78	.87

<Table 1> also lists the result of the reliability test. All Cronbach's alphas except that of asset specificity exceeded the generally accepted minimum value of 0.70, demonstrating satisfactory evidence of internal consistency. The Cronbach's alpha for asset specificity was 0.54. Nunnally [21] suggested that a coefficient value of between 0.5 and 0.6 is sufficient for early basic research. Considering the exploratory nature of this study, the researcher decided to retain the measures of asset specificity for further analysis.

<Table 2> Descriptive statistics of outsourcing relationships with the referent vendor

Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
IS Activity		
Application develop./maintenance	96	46.4
Data center operation/facility mgmt.	34	16.4
Telecommunications/network	26	12.6
Systems integration	24	11.6
End user support/help desk	15	7.2
Training/education	4	1.9
Others	8	3.9
Length of contract (yrs.)		
Less than 1	35	17.1
1 - less than 2	62	30.0
2 - less than 4	56	27.1
4 - less than 6	32	15.5
Over 6	18	8.7
Unknown	2	1.0
Average	2.70	
Contract Amount		
< $50,000	24	11.6
$50,000 to < $100,000	24	11.6
$100,000 to < $1 mil.	69	33.3
$1 mil. to < $ 10 mil.	50	24.2
$10 mil. to < $100 mil.	15	7.2
Over $100 mil.	8	3.9
Unknown	17	8.2

4. Results

A total of 207 outsourcing relationships were utilized for hypothesis testing. The descriptive statistics of outsourcing relationships are summarized in <Table 2>.

Simple linear regression is used to test the proposed direct relationship between relational exchange characteristics and dependent variables. For testing the interaction effect, the identification of the presence of moderator variable is necessary. Two basic methods have been used for the identification of moderators, subgroup analysis [13] and moderated regression analysis (MRA) [24]. In order to avoid the loss of information from the artificial transformation of a continuous variable into a qualitative one in subgroup analysis, this study utilizes MRA for testing moderator effect. In applying MRA for a single independent variable, it is necessary to examine three regression equations for equality of regression equations.

(1) $y = a + b1X$

(2) $y = a + b1X + b2M$

(3) $y = a + b1X + b2M + b3XM$

where, y = dependent variable, X = independent variable, M= moderator variable, and XM = cross product of X and M.

According to the MRA method, if equations 1 and 2 are not significantly different (i.e., $b3=0$; $b2\neq0$), then M is not a moderator variable but simply an independent predictor variable. For M to be a pure moderator variable, equations 1 and 2 should not be different but should be different from equations 3 (i.e., $b2=0$; $b3\neq0$). For M to be classified as a quasi moderator, equations 1, 2, and 3 should be different from each other (i.e., $b2\neq b3\neq0$).

In order to avoid the risk of multicollinearity problems due to the use of cross-product terms, all independent variables were "centered" as suggested by Cronbach [8]. The results of the MRA are shown in <Table 3>.

<Table 3> MRA results

Hypo #	DV	IV	b1	b2	b3	Result
H1A&B	non-economic benefits	solidarity & continuity expectation	.421***			Support
H2A&B			.423***	.054		Reject
			.422***	.049	.031	
H1C		role integrity	.295***			Support
H2C			.301***	-.027		Reject
			.301***	-.027	.005	(independent predictor)
H1D		flexibility	.441***			Support
H2D			.441***	.004		Support
			.471***	-.005	.158*	(pure moderator)
H1E		monitoring of the vendor	.303***			Support
H2E			.307***	-.022		Reject
			.299***	-.022	.096	(independent predictor)
H1A&B	economic benefits	solidarity & continuity expectation	.259***			Support
H2A&B			.255***	-.128		Reject
			.256***	-.125	-.020	(independent predictor)
H1C		role integrity	.081			Reject
H2C			.117	-.163*		Support
			.107	-.154*	-.143*	(quasi moderator)
H1D		flexibility	.220**			Support
H2D			.233**	-.156*		Reject
			.247***	-.160*	.077	(independent predictor)
H1E		monitoring of the vendor	.262***			Support
H2E			.302***	-.198**		Support
			.290***	-.198**	.151*	(quasi moderator)

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$ in two-tailed F-tests.

For each set of hypotheses for one independent variable (e.g., H1C & H2C), three regressions were run for each dependent variables as prescribed by the MRA technique. The proposed direct positive relationship between relational exchange characteristics and success in IS outsourcing (H1) was well supported except the relationship between role integrity and economic benefits (H1C). For H2, the results were pretty weak and mixed. Only three interaction effects were found significant among eight MRA runs. Asset specificity was found to be a pure moderator in case of flexibility (H2D) and a quasi moderator in case of role integrity(H2C) and monitoring of the vendor (H2E). However, none of these identified moderating effects were present simultaneously in both dependent variables.

As an additional analysis, subgroup analysis procedure was conducted to determine the exact nature of interaction effect between asset specificity and relational exchange characteristics. In order to capture overall effect of the moderator variable, the procedure was performed on not only cases with significant interaction effect found but also those with significant interaction not found. <Table 4> presents the results of these analyses. For "solidarity and continuity expectation" as an independent variable, the low and high groups of asset specificity behave in a very similar manner. For role integrity, the low and high groups behave in a significantly different manner, but the results are quite contrary to the expectation. The low asset specificity group shows significantly greater relationships between role integrity and success measures. For flexibility, surprisingly, no significant difference between the low and high group is found despite the significant interaction in MRA. For monitoring of the vendor, the high group shows significantly greater relationships between monitoring of the vendor and success measures as predicted.

<Table 4> Slope coefficients split by asset specificity: Relational exchange characteristics on dependent variables

Relational Exchange Characteristics (IV)	Asset Specificity	Dependent Variables	
		non-economic Bene.	Economic Benefits
Solidarity & Continuity Expectation	Low	.438***	.249*
	High	.422***	.259**
Role Integrity	Low	.426***	.300**
	High	.229*	-.0400
Flexibility	Low	.471***	.214*
	High	.446***	.252**
Monitoring of the vendor	Low	.264**	.140
	High	.347***	.438***

† Sample was split into high (above the median) and low (below the median) group based on the median of asset specificity.

‡ Shaded areas represent cases with significant interaction effects.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

5. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

Except for role integrity with the dependent variable of economic benefits, all dimensions of relational exchange were positively and significantly related to both success measures. These findings generally suggest that a strong formation of relational exchange attributes, as opposed to discrete exchange, is essential to successfully implement IS outsourcing. That is, a traditional discrete governance structure, characterized by adversarial arm's-length relationships, should be supplanted by cooperative relational exchange relationships.

The insignificant finding of direct relationship in role integrity may be

explained by the seemingly contradictory, but significant interaction effect found with asset specificity. When asset specificity is high, the greater level of role integrity may generate high expectations from the client firm, but the vendor may not fulfill the expectations due to its inability to handle the client firm's specific environment. Whereas, when asset specificity is low, the vendor may adequately fulfill the high expectations generated from high role integrity since it can adequately handle low asset-specific or standard environment of the client firm.

For monitoring of the vendor, the significant interaction effect implies that the greater the level of asset specificity, the greater the level of monitoring activities be placed to ensure successful implementation of IS outsourcing. For flexibility, the unexpected insignificant difference between the low and high asset specificity group needs further investigation. Since a significant interaction effect was found with the MRA, it is possible that the interaction effect may actually present, but not in a dichotomous manner.

Efforts should continue to further refine the research framework. The research framework in this study does not address other potentially important contingency factors, such as system complexity, industry, contract size, and relationship duration. The findings of this study relied on information form the client firm's perspective. A perceptual difference with the vendor could exist. The possible perceptual gap offers an avenue for future research in a dyadic setting, in which perspectives from both the client firm and the vendor are addressed.

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정보시스템 아웃소싱의 성공요인 분석: 파트너십과 자산특이성의 상호효과

정 영 수

요 약

실증적인 연구들에 의하면 고객회사(client firms)와 서비스 제공업자(vendor) 간의 파트너십의 질과 범위가 정보시스템 아웃소싱의 성공적인 구현에 결정적인 역할을 하는 것으로 알려졌다. 본 연구는 이러한 정보시스템 아웃소싱 구현에 있어서 파트너십의 역할을 좀 더 심층적으로 분석하려는 노력의 일환이다. 본 연구에서의 기본 명제는 파트너십 특성들의 아웃소싱 구현에의 효과는 아웃소싱 업무의 특성(task characteristics)과 같은 상황적 요인에 의해 영향을 받을 수 있다는 것이다. 구체적으로 본 연구에서는 자산특이성(asset specificity)과 파트너십 특성간의 상호효과(interaction effect)에 중점을 두고 조사를 하게되는데, 파트너십은 관계적거래 특성(relational exchange characteristics)에 의해 구체화되었다.

207개의 미국 회사의 아웃소싱 관계를 대상으로 한 설문조사를 기반으로 한 결과에 의하면, 전반적으로 비관계적거래(discrete exchange)보다 관계적거래에 기반을 두고 아웃소싱 관계를 운영하는 것이 아웃소싱의 성공적 구현을 위하여 필수적인 것으로 보인다. 한편 상호효과를 조사하기 위해서는 MRA와 하위그룹분석(subgroup analysis)을 시행하였는데, 자산특이성과 일부 관계적거래 특성들간에 상호효과가 유의성이 있음을 발견하였다. 발견된 상호효과를 근거로 상황 변수를 고려하지 않은 연구 결과 중 확실하지 않은 결과(inconclusive results)에 대한 해석을 시도하였다.

◆ 저자소개 ◆

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연세대학교 경제학과를 졸업하고, Texas A&M 대학교에서 경영정보학석사를, Nebraska 대학교에서 경영학박사를 취득하였다. 주요 관심분야는 정보시스템 아웃소싱, 전자상거래 등이다.