Rethinking the business school's value proposition: the coordination of learning networks

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Abstract: In this paper, we argue that a model of education based on learning networks centrally coordinated by business schools arises as a solution to develop the organisational learning of participant companies. Given the wide range of ways in which business schools create value, we see these institutions as viable candidates to proactively design and coordinate networks focused on learning. A research framework was proposed to analyse how a learning network coordinated by a business school influences organisational learning. We used this framework as a guide to our interviews and to help us organise data processing activities. To understand the relations between participants and their perceptions of learning in such contexts, we conducted a case study with a Brazilian business school. Data collection consisted of informal conversations and semi-structured interviews. The participants demonstrated to have successfully implemented new management practices in their organisations from knowledge gathered with participation in formal activities and from socialisation with members of other companies. The observed effectiveness of this program shows us that learning networks have potential as a path to achieving a paradigm shift in executive education. Thus, learning networks should be considered when designing business schools' models of value creation.

Keywords: business schools; value proposition; coordination; learning networks; organisational learning; executive education; management education.

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1   Business schools at a crossroads

How does a learning network coordinated by a business school influence organisational learning? This research question emerges in a challenging context: stakeholders have criticised business schools' contributions to the executive world and affirm that they need to rethink their role and educational solutions (Onzoño and Carmona, 2007; Gallos, 2008; Thomas and Cornuel, 2011; Lorange, 2012; Dlouhá et al., 2013). Apparently ignoring this criticism, it seems that business schools are not innovating their offerings or attempting to support, in a more effective manner, the development of individuals, organisations, and their communities (Pfeffer and Fong, 2002; Doh and Stumpf, 2007; Adler and Harzing, 2009; Noorda, 2011). An additional complexity is that little is known about the extent to which business schools influence the organisational learning of client companies, since much of the previous research has focused on open enrolment programs oriented to individual applicants (Rubin and Dierdorff, 2009; Schlegelmilch and Thomas, 2011). This makes the job of developing new and effective educational solutions even more challenging – for researchers and business schools managers alike.

Regarding organisational learning, we know that organisations learn by collaborating with other firms as well as by observing and importing their practices (Bapuji and Crossan, 2004; Dodgson, 1993). One way to foster learning through collaborating with others is by taking part in an interorganisational learning network (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Dyer and Nobeoka, 2000; Pahor et al., 2008). Although still an emerging field of study (Power et al., 2014), a learning network can be defined as a group of organisations that combine efforts in order to address a common learning need; they use the principle of shared learning to enable participants' development.

Based on that, we propose an alternative for business schools to overcome the criticism and to reassure their relevance to the executive education segment. We suggest that business schools proactively design and coordinate learning networks, as they have a wide range of solutions for creating value and should be capable of articulating the necessary competences for doing so. Doh and Stumpf (2007) explore these competences, identifying offerings in R&D, thought leadership, open enrolment, customised programs, and consulting. As advocated by Lorange (2012, p.424), "success criteria of business schools of the past should be revised" and "networked providers may now have an advantage". Therefore, learning networks are presented as a potential solution for the paradigm shift business schools must achieve in order to stay relevant in the executive education world.

The coordination of these learning networks is complex, as it is imperative to understand the process through which information is disseminated when designing an effective learning space (Spender and Grant, 1996; Kolb, 2014). But it is possible. A good example is the case of Nordvest Forum (NVF), a multiform regional network aimed at improving regional competitiveness by upgrading the management capacity of the associated companies (Hanssen-Bauer and Snow, 1996). An important part of the success of this network can be attributed to the design of practices and support structures focused on the different levels (individual, organisational, regional) at which learning takes place. However, this example is specific and embedded in the context of Norwegian business, and other experiences must be evaluated. As posed by the authors, "as learning networks begin to appear in other regions, their efficiency and effectiveness must be evaluated" (Hanssen-Bauer and Snow, 1996, p.425).

This paper aims to contribute to this discussion and previous literature by exploring the relevant aspects that compose a learning network coordinated by one of the top-ranked business schools in the world (FT Business Education, 2015), located in Brazil. We investigate this organisation and its relation to organisational learning to propose it as a new model of value creation for the future of business schools' offerings.

2   Learning networks: a road to the future

To assess the effectiveness of the solutions offered by business schools, we must first understand how they contribute to learning by organisations. Learning theories have frequently focused on the individual, and researchers have conducting research at the micro-level of analysis (Argote, 2011). But, theorists in organisational learning recognise that many groups of people are able to solve problems together and learn to organise work (Swart and Harcup, 2013; Russ-Eft, 2011). Hence, more recently, the focus of organisational learning studies has been advancing from the organisational level to the multi- and interorganisational levels (Crossan et al., 2011). To achieve broader understanding, it is essential to consider the interorganisational learning level, since organisations do not act alone and are always aware of those that surround them.

Within the organisation, learning refers to internal processes that allow organisations to acquire, process, and integrate knowledge across the firm (Dodgson, 1993; Templeton et al., 2002). Despite the fact that these phases are usually presented sequentially, the learning process is hardly linear. Each dimension is highly interrelated with the others and occurs continuously from the moment knowledge is acquired until it is integrated to

organisational memory. The knowledge acquired by the organisation is stored for future use in its "memory" (Burton and Orbel, 2004; Huber, 1991): although individuals may come and go, what they have learned as individuals or in groups does not necessarily leave with them. Some learning is embedded in the systems, structures, strategy, routines, prescribed practices of the organisation, and investments in information systems and infrastructure. The learning process results in organisational knowledge, which also makes up the basis for further learning (Petković et al., 2014).

Some scholars highlight the role of social participation in learning, based on studies that revealed the occurrence of learning in contexts in which no formal education was observed. The participation perspective moves learning from formal education settings to the everyday organisational life (Pahor et al., 2008, p.1986). To learn, individuals must explore and share their tacit knowledge with each other, as well as combine their explicit knowledge into new conceptualisations. Learning requires the establishment of structures that enables members to easily communicate and exchange experiences (Armstrong and Mahmud, 2008; Nonaka, 1994). Several mechanisms – mainly those involved in social integration (Zahra and George, 2002) – improve the process of sharing and making knowledge explicit for its eventual exploitation. The process of constructing collective meaning is enhanced when organisation members have the opportunity to jointly engage in problem-solving activities and have adequate access to others' experiences and backgrounds. Individuals learn more when they create, discuss, and collectively transform knowledge. For this to occur, participants share different types of skills, discuss possible solutions to conflicts, and provide explanations to the questions raised (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Power et al., 2014).

Companies often rely on each other to exchange knowledge from different knowledge domains, and they collaborate in order to achieve better results, especially in competitive environments. Collaboration occurs when individuals or groups work together and share learning across organisational boundaries to achieve their goals (Hibbert et al., 2016). Research has shown that greater benefits come from the collaboration through interfirm interactions (Gulati et al., 2012; Grandori and Soda, 1995).

Interorganisational relationships produce opportunities for value creation and skill development (Kale and Singh, 2009; Doz and Hamel, 2000), as well as for developing innovation capabilities (Ng and Law, 2015). Exposing a firm to knowledge originated from the surrounding environment affects its decision-making processes and, consequently, influences the development of internal capabilities (Zahra and George, 2002). In shared learning between organisations, there is the potential for challenge and structured critical reflection from different perspectives. Different perspectives can, in turn, bring in new concepts to the firm. As a result, collaboration is strictly related to organisational learning (Dodgson, 1993; Moller and Svahn, 2004).

Learning networks offer an effective space to foster learning through collaborating with others. As showed by previous research, networks create environments that provide organisations with supportive surroundings and adequate resources that allow them to learn from one another (Power et al., 2014). Unlike traditional learning systems, a learning network is a cooperative arrangement in which actors seek to meet their own demands while offering know-how to the other participants (Bessant et al., 2003). It consists of the various organised learning activities, carried out within a proper structure that allows knowledge to flow among its members (Dlouhá et al., 2013). Learning networks combine the strengths of different learning strategies in an environment that fosters knowledge sharing – where participants are able to articulate and act upon

different types of learning processes. At the same time, the structure of the network itself can contribute to the transfer of knowledge between organisations in a continuous manner (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001)

Effective learning spaces include socialisation into a wider community that often involves membership, mentorship, and experience in related activities. Indeed, as stated by Kolb and Kolb (2005), the enhancement of learning in higher education can be achieved through the creation of learning spaces that promote growth-producing experiences for learners. To do so effectively, practices that stimulate socialisation and networking aimed at knowledge sharing must be combined with practices focused on knowledge creation. Therefore, when focusing on the executive education segment, it is important to note that learning should extend beyond the traditional approach of the classroom. Although different kinds of networks offer many opportunities for learning to occur, the primary purpose of a learning network is to enable learning. Interfirm interactions do not always result in learning to the expected extent, which can happen due to opportunistic behaviour of the partners, lack of proper social integration and commitment and inadequate design of the inter-organisational context (Petković et al., 2014). Networks specifically developed to this end provide an environment which fosters shared learning that benefits the individuals involved as well as their respective organisations (Moller and Svahn, 2004).

Therefore, an effective learning network must be formally structured and purposefully designed in order to be effective, This implies that, to understand the organisation of a learning network and asses its effectiveness, we must understand how it is designed, how it is coordinated and which activities take place to make knowledge circulate among its participants and to avoid problems that hinder knowledge flows among its participants. Based on this assumption and on existing literature, we propose a framework with key elements to guide us in this analysis.

The framework is illustrated in Figure 1, and we discuss each of its dimensions next.

Figure 1   Research framework
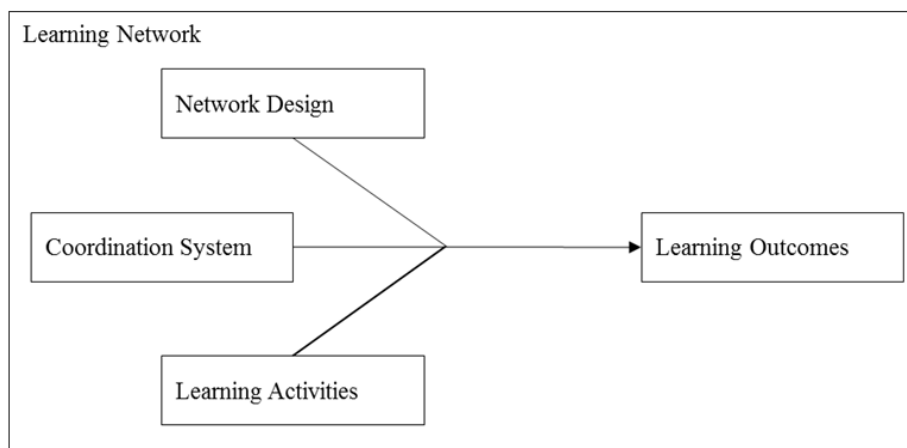
2.1   Network design

An effective learning network must be designed with a clear goal and a structure that allows knowledge to flow between organisations. As noted by Watkins and Marsick (1993, p.44), "the creation of a learning environment goes far beyond the design of learning itself. It involves the design of work, work environments, technology, reward systems, structures, and policies". Research shows that pedagogical models that guide the learner through complex tasks while requiring learning outcomes in terms of competencies, complex skills and knowledge sharing are more often associated with learning. The social structures involved in such models are designed in a way that allows the participants to develop a variety of modes of interaction (Dlouhá et al., 2013). The network design, thus, refers to the efforts made to establish systems to capture and share learning. After all, "learning takes place within a framework of (social) participation, not in the individual mind" (Elkjaer, 1999, p.81).

Knight (2002) noted that learning networks are networks whose purpose is to learn, or which are regarded as effective at learning. Making an analogy with Pedler et al.'s (1991) definition of a learning organisation, a learning network can be seen as a network that stimulates the learning of its members and continuously transforms itself in order to meet its goals. Having clear objectives and goals helps the network and its members focus on learning outcomes and allows the definition of results measurements (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001).

2.2   Coordination system

As noted by Kolb and Kolb (2005), creating and maintaining an effective learning space is not easy. A learning space requires a climate of support so the learner can be confident of "maintaining" themselves over time, especially in an interorganisational context. The success of interfirm alliances rests on how a firm manages the bond after it was formed, in terms of task coordination, information sharing and conflict resolution (Schreiner et al., 2009). When different perspectives are brought together in collaborative contexts, the differences and tensions that arise may limit learning, and make the network ineffective in reaching its goals (Hibbert et al., 2016). Thus, a central support and *coordination system* is required to assure the occurrence of the learning process (Bessant et al., 2012). Cohesion around relationships can ease knowledge transfer by decreasing the competitive and motivational impediments that arise (Reagans and McEvily, 2003), which can be overcome with an adequate coordination system. Moreover, external frameworks, such as those established by a central coordination system, provide a structure for the processes that occur within the network and help develop strategic consensus between the participants. Strategic consensus, in turn, allows the participants to develop a shared definition of the means by which they will seek to accomplish their goals (Kumar, 2014), and thus, ensure the effectiveness of the network in achieving its objectives.

Cases reported in the literature (e.g., Dyer and Nobeoka, 2000; Dyer and Hatch, 2006; Hanssen-Bauer and Snow, 1996) stress the importance of having a centralised point of support and coordination as a means of motivating participants to take part in the network and keep it running, to ensure effectiveness of the proposed learning practices, and to provide support for organisational learning processes. Without a proper

coordination, the network risks of becoming unbalanced, favouring a small number of companies that possess higher levels of personal connectivity (Ng and Law, 2015).

On-site assistance by external advisors has played a fundamental role in transferring knowledge between organisations and improving performance (Dyer and Hatch, 2006). Williams (2006) stated that technical support provided by business schools helps minimise conflicts and disturbances in the executive education learning experience.

2.3 Learning activities

Where learning takes place, it is essentially a by-product of activities within the network (Bessant et al., 2003; Takeuchi and Nonaka, 2004). To learn, individuals must explore and share their tacit knowledge with each other, as well as combine their explicit knowledge into new conceptualisations. Although people learn as individuals and initiate change based on their learning, there must be ways to support and capture knowledge in order to allow learning at the organisational level (Yang et al., 2004). Thus, social interaction is fundamental to the creation of unique value (Lane and Lubatkin, 1998; Van Wijk et al., 2008), as are other traditional learning means that allow knowledge inflow.

Individuals need opportunities for learning to occur. Therefore, to promote learning, one should nurture the different contexts and possibilities for individuals and organisation to interact and learn from each other (Pahor et al., 2008). It is imperative, then, to design activities to address different knowledge types and learning processes that will present the organisation with a wide and comprehensive array of learning outcomes (London and Sessa, 2007).

2.4 Learning outcomes

Finally, we must analyse the network's learning outcomes, i.e., to what extent the network is capable of reaching previously established goals related to organisational learning. Learning occurs when knowledge is obtained, processed, and stored for future use (Huber, 1991). Outcomes are patterns of learning that are codified, become part of the entity's mental model, and may be transmitted to other entities through observation and social interaction (London and Sessa, 2007).

Van Wijk et al. (2008) note that the transmission of knowledge between organisations contributes to the development of organisational capabilities and to the exploitation of current competences, so it has important effects on learning. Organisational learning may be evidenced by outcomes such as: (1) instituting changes in group tasks in response to feedback; (2) incorporating new skills and new knowledge into group practices; and, more easily perceived, (3) introducing new behaviours and outcomes into daily work (London and Sessa, 2007).

The framework described above was used as a guide for our data collection and analysis, from which we were able to draw the conclusions presented in this paper.

## 3 Research design, data collection, and analysis

In order to provide a finer-grained understanding of the relevant aspects of a learning network organised by a business school and to assess its influence on participant

companies' organisational learning, we focus on a learning network operated since 1992 by a Brazilian business school, one of the top-ranked business schools in the world (FT Business Education, 2015).

The proposed methodology aims to develop the managerial capacity of participant companies. It brings together medium-sized companies that seek to implement a management model to improve results and increase competitiveness. Groups are comprised of up to ten companies from the same region, preferably noncompeting firms. As of 2014, there were more than 600 participating firms from Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Portugal.

The range of activities covered by the network is supported by three main pillars of action (Figure 2): (1) knowledge and skills development; (2) in-company coaching and assessment; and (3) networking. The activities developed under each pillar are described in Table 1.

Figure 2   The learning network's pillars of action
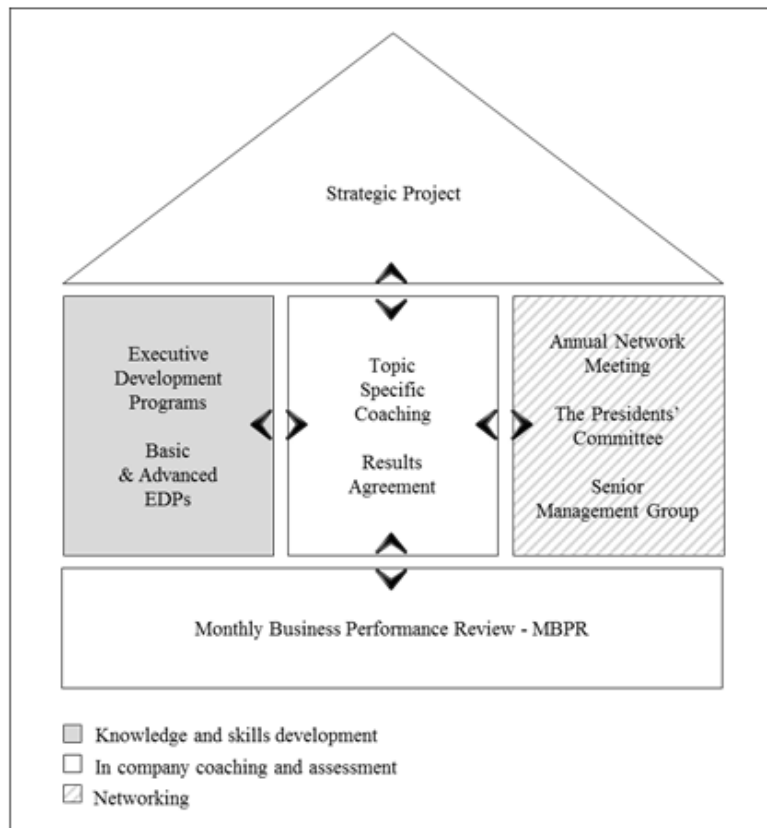
"In-company coaching and assessment" comprises four main activities. Based on the outcomes of the Strategic Project and Monthly Business Performance Reviews (the core of the network's methodology), topic-specific practices in the fields of finance, marketing, processes, people, projects, and operations and logistics that meld academic knowledge to the businesses' day-to-day practices are implemented at each of the

partnering companies. This aims to ensure that they will achieve the desired results (as stated in their Results Agreement) in an integrated and systemic manner.

Periodically, executives from the organisations take part in Development Programs that very much resemble classroom courses that focus on relevant management topics. The school offers its partners an internet portal that supports the classroom activities carried out – from publicising events to organising learning material – and also allows experiences to be exchanged through a variety of sharing tools.

Exchanges among the network's partnering companies are also encouraged through employee presence at meetings, such as the Annual Network Meeting, the Presidents' Committee, and the Senior Management Group, each of which differs slightly in terms of scope and the professionals targeted. These meetings differ from conventional networking practices (which are focused on expanding one's social network), as these meetings focus on specific topics and experience sharing.

Table 1   The network's activities

Pillar	Activity	Description
In-company coaching and assessment	Strategic Project	Jointly developing the company's vision of the future. Preparing and implementing a strategic plan together with the company by individually reassessing its business.
	Results Contract	Reviewed annually, with a three-year perspective. The Results Contract stems from the Strategic Project.
	Monthly Business Performance Review (MBPR)	Focused on controlling goals and following up on the results and action plans to improve deviating indicators.
	Coaching	A moment when professionals from the business school and the company work together to apply the knowledge that has been gained by the company. It consists of customised monitoring, and the various methodologies available are implemented according to each company's needs.
Knowledge and skills development	Executive Development Program (EDP)	Every year, three executives from each company take part in a 96-hour development program made up of six modules focused on strategy, marketing, finance, people, processes, and projects.
	Advanced Executive Development Program (EDP Advanced)	Forum for the main executive (or for whomever has already attended the EDP) to discuss emerging management themes.
Networking	Annual Network Meeting	Participating presidents and senior executives meet to discuss the results achieved during the year, thus giving rise to an opportunity to carry out exchanges with other companies, sectors, countries, and cultures.
	The Presidents' Committee	A small group made up of the main leader of each organisation discusses current themes and issues while promoting integration among the executives.
	Senior Management Group	Professionals meet and exchange experiences while coming into contact with new management practices.

We used a qualitative method to collect insights about the participants' experiences in the program in order to examine how the coordination of the learning network occurs and how it influences organisational learning. Although our research is qualitative given its context, it is situated between deductive and inductive studies. This means that it constitutes a contribution to the construction of theory through the dialectical interaction between existing fields of study and existing theories (Gebauer et al., 2012; Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

A methodology based on a case study is particularly appropriate in situations where we want to explore the complexity of relationships and to capture the meanings behind the actors and routines that occur within the network (Merriam, 1998). In our case, this approach allowed us to identify how the network's structures is perceived by its participants, the benefits related to its existence, as well as how the practices were incorporated in their daily routines.

Data collection consisted of informal conversations and semi-structured interviews about the activities' perceived value, the business school's role within the network, interactions with other members, existing communication channels, and learning fostered by the program. We were able to talk to 23 key informants. The interviews lasted 42 minutes on average, and they were carried out during the year of 2013. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim across 253 pages.

Qualitative analysis focused on content (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The analysis consisted of three steps. First, raw data was organised according to themes related to each dimension of our theoretical framework. This framework not only guided our interviews, but also helped organise data processing activities. In each interview, we identified references that linked them to the main topics of the research's theoretical background. From this procedure, it was possible to match the situation and experiences reported by the respondents, ascertaining their thoughts about them. The second step consisted of coding the data in accordance with new subthemes and ideas that arose. We used QSR NVivo 10 software to do the categorisation. The selective coding involved breaking down the detailed descriptions into single ideas and sorting each one into categories. The third step involved associating the new categories to the dimensions of our theoretical framework. These relationships are summarised in Table 2. In the following paragraphs, we show and discuss our findings and practical implications.

4   The organisation of the learning network and its contributions to organisational learning

We applied our research framework to analyse how the program is organised as a learning network. Each of the main dimensions of the research framework is presented below. A synthesis can be seen in Table 2.

4.1   Network design

When designing the network, the main concern, as put by the business school's representatives, was to create situations to stimulate knowledge building and experiences exchanges between the participants from different companies, as well as to provide them with opportunities to get in touch with new knowledge. Therefore, a methodology

based on the aforementioned pillars of action was created. Mid-sized organisations that already had a relationship history with the business school were firstly invited to join. With time, other joined as well, through referrals or invitations made by the professionals involved.

Table 2 The organisation of the learning network

Dimension	Category	Description
Network design	Highlights of the program	Features of the program considered most important for the organisations
	Antecedents	Factors that influenced the company to take part in the network
	Perceived value in the relationship with other companies	Value attributed to the relationships with other organisations promoted by the network
	Knowledge sharing with other companies	Factors that contribute to knowledge sharing between organisations and its importance to organisational learning
Coordination system	Role of the external advisor	Main contributions of this professional to the learning of the organisations
	Role of the business school	Perceptions about the relevance of the business school's work in the network
Learning activities	*Perceived value of the activities*	*Value attributed to the program activities and involved professionals*
Learning outcomes	Organisation development in the program	Main contributions of the program activities to the development of the organisations and impacts on their performance
	Organisational learning in the program	Main contributions of the program activities to organisational learning
	Embodied practices	References to practices adopted and improved after the association with the program
	Factors influencing business performance	Main features and activities related to business performance improvement

Through the methodology, the participants discuss their business models and put management and strategic tools into practice. They are assisted by the business school's professors throughout. Such an environment leads to long-term results by realigning each company's strategy and by carrying out monthly meetings to follow up on results.

The participants have similar learning needs and share a common goal by taking part on the network: they want to revisit their strategic management models. As one of our interviewees said, "the firms are generally mid-sized and most of them are unaware of most strategic management tools. There are, though, large companies. These, however, have no strategic management culture, for whom the network still remains relevant" (Interviewee 2).

The participants are motivated by the need to reach new levels of performance, but also by the possibility of working with a business school, especially because medium-sized companies rarely have sufficient resources available to do so.

As another respondent noted, his company joined the program because of its need for a more strategic approach to management: "We joined the program because of our concern at having few eyes looking forward, only concerned with our day-to-day operations" (Interviewee 4). Another interviewee wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to acquire and develop knowledge: "When the employees are better prepared, the quality of work is much better because you do not have to waste time discussing the basics" (Interviewee 1).

As the network grew, subgroups were created in different regions. Such division into regional groups makes it easier for the participants to access activities. The effectiveness of the learning process through networks is related to matching the proposed activities to the specific needs of the region and to the stages of development and management complexity of the organisations. Homogeneous groups permit gradual development of the participants, without problems faced in other cases where a more developed company would not get substantial returns or where companies would not have any contributions to make to the group. Moreover, the organisations in each group are preferably noncompeting firms, which allows them to share proprietary information more freely and enriches the learning process as a whole.

4.2   Learning activities

Since the network combines different educational approaches under its pillars of action and a variety of bilateral and multilateral interaction processes, which allow the combination of experience sharing, structured reflection, introduction of new concepts and shared experimentation, it acts in the different dimensions of organisational learning and at its different levels. In offering these activities, the program allows both tacit and explicit knowledge to flow through bilateral and multilateral ties within and outside the organisation.

When done continuously, Strategic Project, Results Contract, and MBPR allow firm managers to reflect on past behaviour and make corrections in the organisation's course; in other words, they learn from experience. By having contact with EDP professionals who possess knowledge related to management practices and methodologies and working with them to apply the knowledge to their own organisations' contexts, firm leaders are grafting new knowledge.

Networking activities favour face-to-face interactions, which foster the transmission of complex information and help participants understand the more tacit components of knowledge. When observing practices of other organisations in the network, it is possible to learn vicariously from their experience. Therefore, participants learn from many different sources and are encouraged to take advantage of each other's experiences and knowledge bases.

Of the proposed activities, those considered most valuable were the EDPs. Interviewee 11 said, "I've seen an improvement in reviews regarding the EDPs; it's a highly rated activity". Value has also been attributed to coaching, as "it offers tools regarding sales, process management, project management, and so on, which are applied according to the company's needs, so they can be used to get better results" (Interviewee 2).

Although considered important, networking activities were valued the least, especially among organisations that had been participating for two years or more: "The program needs to employ more networking for companies that are already more advanced in certain models" (Interviewee 21).

4.3　Coordination system

Acting as a facilitator of learning for the associates, the business school helps overcome obstacles in implementing the learning activities, increasing the effectiveness of the network. Having an independent entity as the mediator of the network helps legitimise it as a space for sharing knowledge, avoiding opportunistic behaviour and the presence of freeloaders. Moreover, the external advisor constitutes an important link between the school and the firms. It is the advisor's responsibility to articulate the work of the other professionals and guide their actions, channelling the demands of the organisation and tightening the bonds with firm leadership.

The role of the external advisor is seen as a fundamental one. As stated by one of the respondents: "The external advisor is primarily responsible for implementing a results-oriented culture, making sure they understand the need for a new management system" (Interviewee 2). Another interviewee commented on the advisor's practices, which focus on ensuring effective learning by the organisation: "They are concerned about transferring the methodology know-how, to keep the knowledge inside" (Interviewee 11).

Likewise, having an institution such as the business school as a facilitator of the network is essential to ensure effective involvement in the learning process: "It gives us some reassurance because it's a great institution – a business school – focused on dissemination of knowledge" (Interviewee 6).

4.4　Learning outcomes

Evidence from the interviews shows that the program's activities are related to organisational learning. This became evident by the way the interviewees described the development of the organisation during the time they participated in the network and through their accounts of changes within the firms that took place after joining the program. The fact that new managerial practices were implemented and became routines allows us to infer that information was acquired and, at some level, stored in the memory of the organisation. As Dess and Robinson (1984) note, previous research shows that perceived measures of performance can be used as reasonable substitutes for more objective measures, as the former usually present significant correlation with the latter.

Quotes from our interviews illustrate how the program was received within the companies. One interviewee saw positive results in terms of individual development: "I think the program was very well received by all; we noted professional growth in everyone" (Interviewee 20). Another respondent highlighted changes in management routines: "Today our company has a strategic planning meeting every week. So participating in the network completely changed the scenario" (Interviewee 7). A third participant felt the program helped provide a solid base for company growth: "Opening our eyes to management; imagine being the size we are today without looking at it as a whole" (Interviewee 16).

5   Discussion

Our research results provide evidence that the analysed program achieved its goals. Results show that a learning network organised by a business school can effectively contribute to organisational learning. In developing it as a learning network, the business school applied a learning design that considers different pillars of action, a comprehensive coordination and support structure, and a variety of activities that cover an array of different learning processes in order to ensure a holistic and effective learning space. Such space, namely the learning network, is treated as an integral part of the process – something that is crucial to its success, not something that is secondary. Being the central node of the network, the school is able to motivate members to participate and contribute knowledge to the collective good. The program aims to promote a shared network identity by developing network-level knowledge acquisition and distribution processes, through a variety of activities and practices purposely implemented to maximise knowledge flows.

An effective learning network is designed to include activities that develop different learning strategies so as to combine their strengths and mitigate their weaknesses. For instance, although important, the events of the networking pillar occur less frequently than those of the other pillars. However, organisational learning is a process that requires continuous effort and commitment within the context of the group (Salner, 1999). When combining networking with the more frequent activities of in-company knowledge and assessment, it is possible to stimulate knowledge exchange while simultaneously giving support to the interpretation of such information. Information interpretation is important to translate events and develop shared understandings; this allows the acquired knowledge to be stored within the organisation's memory later on (Daft and Weick, 1984). Similarly, activities of knowledge and skill development were perceived as fundamentally related to individual development. Although it is the individuals who do the learning, the acquired knowledge is shared through group activities; hence, networking activities are crucial for learning in the group and at the organisational levels (Buckley and Monks, 2008).

The discussion of learning networks is still incipient, but, as we have previously argued, might be critical to the future of business schools. Dlouhá et al. (2013) note the benefits of such systems in supporting the development of competences that are useful in lifelong learning in organisational contexts, given its potential to promote audience involvement through "emphasis on the social aspects of the learning process, the necessity of active participation and communication about the shared goals" (p.98). Educators must understand the need to extend learning beyond the usual practices, typically restricted to grafting, with localised effects. In order to ensure the connection between the learning activities and everyday life and to incorporate the learned practices into daily routines, it is imperative to design mutually reinforcing activities focused on a broader range of learning processes.

The effectiveness of the program can corroborate the potential of a learning network as a path to achieve a paradigm shift in what business schools offer – an imperative requirement given the contemporary demands of the executive education segment (Lorange, 2012). To survive in challenging economic environments, organisations must learn from each other. Hence, shared learning processes must be promoted and prioritised (Power et al., 2014). The program presented here represents an innovation for business schools because it integrates networking activities into their traditional offerings. In this

sense, learning is not limited to professors or the business school's professionals; such activities also contribute to building a sense of community between participants.

Much of what the network already offers is mentioned in the literature (Haskins and Shaffer, 2013) as possible ways of overcoming barriers to effective organisational learning through these institutions. Instead of trying to position themselves along the array of offerings of the executive education segment, as posed by Doh and Stumpf (2007), business schools, through the organisation of a learning network, should seek to act transversely on the articulation of the interfaces between each of the different fields. By doing so, it would contribute more effectively to the organisational learning value chain throughout. This is the basis of our main proposition, as illustrated by Figure 3.

Figure 3 Possibilities for business schools along the organisational learning value chain
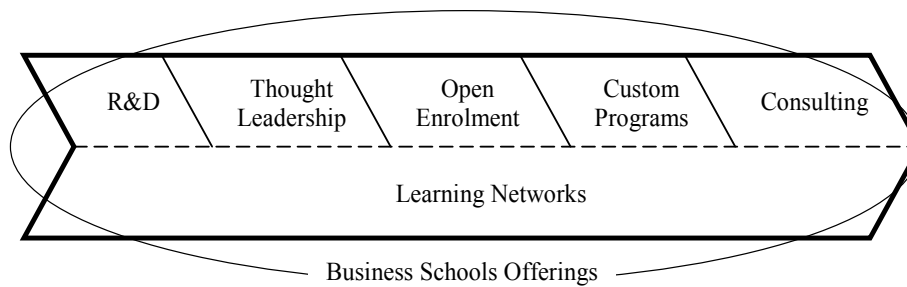
Source: Adapted from Doh and Stumpf (2007)

The creation of this new segment, however, creates challenges – especially related to client companies' perceptions of value. The idea of learning as an episodic process, such as in a classroom setting, still prevails over that of a continuous one. This may hinder the use of network resources that transcend the established activities, e.g., the exchange of experiences and multilateral interactions that take place apart from scheduled meetings. Because it offers the possibility for these to occur, the value of a learning network should be greater than the sum of its individual activities. Therefore, business schools should not only focus their attention on how to organise learning networks, but also on finding ways to reinforce their contributions to organisational learning.

6 Final remarks

Through this research, we describe a learning network organised by a business school and provide supporting evidence of its effectiveness in contributing to the organisational learning of its participants. While learning networks as a new form of learning may require cultural and structural transformations within business schools and in participants' mind-sets, once the change is made, the advantages are numerous.

Nonetheless, it is important to extend this research by gathering more empirical evidence and strengthening the relation between the learning network and organisational learning. Results proved useful in rethinking the program's proposed activities in order to make the program more valuable in supporting learning processes. It might be interesting, for instance, to increase the frequency of the meetings under the networking pillar so as to better exploit their potential in promoting effective learning.

The description of other cases can help further underpin our propositions. It will also help establish which of the network's pillars is most related to which learning dimensions and support the design of more effective activities. It is imperative to improve the learning network model to overcome the identified obstacles and help shape the future of business schools as legitimised agents of executive education.

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