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### **„Improving the supplier-customer-interaction in business-to-business-markets“**

– How blueprints and cognitive scripts will make the interaction process in key account management more transparent –

Particularly in business-to-business-markets relationship marketing gained a lot of attention during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Even though customer care and customer satisfaction were mainly in key account management of increasing scientific interest, the customer's own internal processes were still accepted as a black box which often were not properly understood. Using the concepts of 'blueprint' and 'cognitive script' helps to create transparency in the customer's processes and to make the transaction more efficient and effective.

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# 1 Introduction

As a form of relationship marketing, key account management is characterized by a very intense supplier-customer-interaction. Even though key account management, which is often regarded as a supplier's marketing program, is focusing primarily on customer satisfaction and customer retention, *either party* – the supplier as well as the customer – hope to benefit from such an intense and cooperative interaction process (Berry 1983, p. 28; Jackson 1985; Gummesson 1987; Sheth/Parvatiyar 1995, p. 399; Grönroos 1997).

Particularly in business-to-business-markets, key account management is beginning to play a significant role because customers increasingly require customized solutions. At the same time the products themselves are rather complex compared to ordinary consumer markets. The more complex the desired products or services are, the more the supplier needs to integrate the customer into the production process. To make customer integration (Kleinaltenkamp 1996) and thus key account management truly successful, the supplier must understand the customer's needs and the customer's processes properly.

Process understanding from the supplier's perspective starts with analyzing his own processes. For this purpose a blueprint as a process analyzing tool seems to be particularly qualified. While portraying the transaction process including all the activities on the supplier's side, it shows the points of supplier-customer-interaction that are of high relevance for the customer integration. There is merely one decisive deficit: Up to now, blueprints were only used to portray the supplier's side of the process. Yet, in order to optimize the entire transaction and interaction, the customer's processes have to be taken into account, likewise. Thus, the idea is to apply the blueprinting concept not only to the supplier's but also to the customer's processes. The model structure that the customer's process, particularly the interaction process, is based on may be illustrated by the cognitive construct of 'scripts'.

Using the customer's script the supplier can conceive a more efficient and more effective interaction process with his key account. As the supplier includes the customer's processes and thus the customer's script in his process analysis, he creates a more transparent process. This way, he is able to find out if possible modifications concerning the design of his own processes can be made to align them better with the customer's processes. These modifications can also involve possible changes in the business transaction process or even in the value chain.

At first, our approach towards a more efficient supplier-customer-interaction will lay out the concepts of key account management against the background of relationship marketing

(chapter 2). In chapter 3 objectives and tasks of key account management will be presented. Thereupon, we will explain the concepts of blueprinting and scripts in the fourth chapter. Finally, chapter 5 will elucidate how these concepts can benefit key account management before we end the paper with a conclusion in the sixth chapter.

## **2 Relationship marketing and key account management**

In order to achieve a better understanding of key account management we will review the evolutions in relationship marketing and show that key account management can be seen as a part of relationship marketing.

### **2.1 Historical review of relationship marketing**

The history of relationship marketing in a retrospective shows that the relationship marketing paradigm is still a very young one. It evolves during the 1980s when researchers begin to realize the importance of long-term relationships between suppliers and customers (Berry 1983; Spekman/Johnston 1986; Gummesson 1987; Morgan/Hunt 1994) – even though researchers give first hints on the importance of long-term business relationships as early as in the 1960s (Alderson 1965).

Right from the beginning, relationship marketing is focusing on customer retention due to increasing competition in the markets (Berry 2002, p. 61). Particularly with regard to the service industries it becomes more and more evident that companies perform more efficient and effective than their competitors by implementing a relational marketing approach. Besides, they serve the increasingly individualized needs of their customers better (Plinke 1997, p. 5ff.).

The historical developments of the relationship marketing paradigm start from the selling concept when mass production, the division of labor and impersonal business relationships between supplier and customer dominate the business (Sheth/Parvatiyar 1995, p. 406ff.). The selling concept seems to be an appropriate marketing concept until the 1960s. At that time the marketing concept evolves and starts to highly influence marketing thinking. Due to saturated markets the customer starts to become the epicenter of business and thus forces most companies to change their marketing approach (Levitt 1985): The suppliers do no longer focus on their own companies and their products but instead on the markets and the customer's needs (Kotler 1997, p. 20ff.). Developments during the 1980s go much further,

though: Because most business relationships last for years, greater value can be created in a relationship if its focus moves from the transaction perspective towards a relational orientation. This is also proven by several studies which show that mutual cooperation and mutual interdependence describes reality much better than the transactional marketing perspective (Axelrod 1987, p. 11; Diller/Kusterer 1988, p. 217; Sheth/Parvatiyar 1995, p. 399; Gummesson 2002, p. 46). Therefore, relationship marketing can be seen as a business strategy paradigm that focuses on the systematic development of ongoing, collaborative business relationships as a key source of sustainable competitive advantage (Gruen 1997, p. 33; Berry 2002, p. 71).

## 2.2 Relationship buying and relationship selling

Even though it is previously found that companies are increasingly moving towards a relational understanding of transaction, it is unclear if relationship marketing is considered to be a one-sided approach of the supplier or if it implies a relational approach from the seller as well as from the buyer. Most relationship managers are not really aware of this problem (Jackson 1985, p. 121): They often try to implement a relationship marketing approach, whereas some customers are thinking in terms of transaction marketing. As a consequence, the seller applies a relationship selling approach, but the buyer does not practice relationship buying.

		Relationship Selling	
		yes	no
Relationship Buying	yes	<b><i>Relationship Marketing</i></b>	<i>Loss of Effectiveness</i>
	no	<i>Loss of Efficiency</i>	<b><i>Transaction Marketing</i></b>

Figure 3: Relationship buying and relationship selling (Plinke, 1997, p. 12)

Therefore, relationship marketing is only given if relationship selling as well as relationship buying is performed by the supplier and the customer respectively (Sheth/Parvatiyar 2002, p. 11). A loss of efficiency is given if the supplier is practicing relationship selling even though he knows that the buyer is not applying a relationship buying approach. If the supplier is transaction oriented and the customer is performing a relationship buying approach, effectiveness losses occur. If neither the supplier nor the customer is behaving relational,

transaction marketing is in existence (Jackson 1985, p. 121ff.). Thus, to be able to speak of true relationship marketing, both parties have to apply a relational approach; otherwise their behavior results in efficiency or effectiveness losses.

Nevertheless these efficiency losses initially seem acceptable when the concept of key account management enters business-to-consumer markets. In the early 1960s major players particularly in the business-to-consumer markets recognize the importance of key account management (e.g. Procter&Gamble, Unilever, etc.). Because business-to-consumer markets experience fierce competition much earlier than business-to-business markets, major suppliers in business-to-consumer markets start to apply a relational marketing approach to secure their market shares (Shapiro et al. 1987). However, the suppliers often implement a key account selling approach rather than the more sophisticated, value oriented relationship marketing approach (McDonald et al. 1997, p. 754).

Therefore, key account management in business-to-consumer markets and the relationship marketing paradigm seem to have undergone separate development paths: While key account management in business-to-consumer markets is primarily used to boost sales in highly competitive markets, the relationship marketing literature advocates for a more relational, two-sided marketing approach to create value.

### **2.3 Key account management as a part of relationship marketing**

If key account management wants to be seen as a part of relationship marketing, it is therefore of high importance that especially the supplier's key account management program is approved by the customer. Without such a positive and cooperative attitude of the customer, key account management won't be able to design the interactive and transactional processes efficient and effective (Jackson 1985, p. 122). Thus, the customer necessarily needs to apply a relationship buying approach.

From this point of view, the relational behavior of the customer seems to be a precondition of the key account management implementation. But, a closer look from theory to practice unveils that key account management does not necessarily need relationship buying right from the beginning. In the first place, the supplier frequently starts with a relational approach. The usefulness of relationship buying can be proven to the customer over time (Prado 1997, p. 24). In the long run, key account management can only succeed if it is complemented by a relational buying approach from the customer's side (Jackson 1985, p. 127; Cannon/Narayandas 2000, p. 411).

An important precondition for the establishment of a key account management is the existence of a long and stable business relationship between the customer and his supplier (Berry 2002, p. 62). Therefore, new customers have to be assessed in terms of their future value before implementing key account management.

Apart from key account management, there are several other possibilities to realize transactions in business-to-business-markets. An approach for establishing a business typology where key account management can be fitted into uses the following two dimensions (Plinke 1997, p. 19ff.): One dimension comprises the supplier's business focus or, so to speak, the target market. The supplier's focus differentiates between the mass market and the single customer. The second dimension is concerned with the supplier's behavioral program. This deals with the question if the supplier is applying a transaction marketing approach or a relationship marketing approach. Depending on the behavioral program and the target market, one can distinguish between "market segment management", "project management", "customer relationship management" and "key account management".

		The Supplier's Business Focus	
		Market (Segment)	Single Customer
Supplier's Behavioral Programm	Transaction Marketing	<b><i>Market (Segment) Management</i></b>	<b><i>Project Management</i></b>
	Relationship Marketing	<b><i>Customer Relationship Management</i></b>	<b><i>Key Account Management</i></b>

Figure 4: Typology of businesses in business-to-business-markets (Plinke 1997, p. 19)

As a part of relationship marketing, key account management focuses on a single customer. Thus, key account management can be viewed as the embodiment and implementation of the relationship paradigm for large business customers (Cannon/Narayandas 2000, p. 408).

Up to now, the subsumption of key account management in relationship marketing has been on a very abstract level. Consequently, the concept of key account management will be described in detail by discussing the objectives and tasks of key account management in the company.

### **3 Objectives and tasks of key account management**

The demand for successful key account management is extremely challenging because of its twofold character: Key account management is not only relational and therefore long-term oriented, but also has to integrate the customer and his needs properly into the production process, which requires considerable investments into the business relationship and in its own production systems (Shapiro/Mortiaty 1984, p. 17; Diller/Kusterer 1988; Plinke 1989b, p. 13). In order to avoid any unnecessary investment losses, a clear perception of the key account management concept, particularly its objectives and tasks, might be helpful.

#### **3.1 Objectives of key account management**

Even though it has been stated that relationship marketing and therefore key account management is a two sided approach, many business relationships evolve gradually and need sufficient time to develop. Taking this into account the following four objectives of key account management can be identified (Berry 1983, Shapiro et al. 1987, Cannon/Narayandas 2000):

- increase of customer satisfaction,
- reduction of total costs,
- management of uncertainty and dependence and
- establishment of relationship controlling.

Increasing customer satisfaction in the relationship can be seen as the most important aspect of relationship marketing (Berry 2002, p. 71) and, thus, of key account management. Customer satisfaction will not only make further purchases more likely, but will also improve the company's image and therefore its reputation in the market. Customer satisfaction also creates customer loyalty (Reichheld 1993; Reichheld/Markey/Hopton 2000) and might help the company to retain its customers. Especially during the last years, when competition has increased intensely, many companies have realized that customer retention is much cheaper and more effective than the permanent acquisition of new customers (Gruen 1997, p. 37; Berry 2002, p. 60).

As soon as key account management is established, it is supposed to reduce costs almost automatically (Cannon/Narayandas 2000, p. 408). But, key account management requires a very specialized organization, new people and a higher degree of interaction between supplier and customer. Therefore, key account management has to be seen as an investment into a long-term business relationship (Plinke 1989a, p. 320; Cannon/Narayandas 2000, p. 412). And for cost savings the companies have to work very hard. Nevertheless, a lot of

opportunities for the reduction of transaction costs and process costs will be given – if an adequate key account management will be established (Levitt 1985, p. 21ff.; Jackson 1985, p. 128): Low hierarchies, extensive information exchange, clearly assigned responsibilities as well as decision competencies and a proper organizational design can be seen as important elements of an adequate management process (Kleinaltenkamp/Rieker 1997; McDonald et al. 1997, p. 754).

Especially in business-to-business-markets superior communication and interaction channels are needed because most suppliers in business-to-business-markets are confronted with very individual and more complex customer problems. Neither the customer nor the supplier is able to solve these problems without the help of the other party and considerable investments. This situation causes uncertainty on both sides: Before the transaction is realized, the customer has to deal with uncertainty if the supplier is able to present an adequate product-service-offering to the customer at all (Fließ 2001a, p. 73). On the other hand, the supplier must deal with behavioral uncertainty and ‘hold-up’-problems because contracts are always incomplete (Williamson 1985, p. 20, p.66; Fließ 2001a, p. 323). To manage these uncertainties properly, the crucial information needs to be shared between the supplier and the customer – to create the necessary trust and commitment (Morgan/Hunt 1994, p. 25).

Nevertheless, every investment also needs a form of controlling (Fließ 2001b). Key account management is particularly predestined for such a relationship controlling because almost all costs and benefits can be directly assigned to its customers. The realization of an individualized customer’s profit-and-loss-calculation and thus a proper key account controlling seems possible.

Even though the most important objectives of key account management have been explained in detail, it has been neglected so far that key account management is characterized by an internal and an external dimension. Both dimensions include different requirements and tasks for key account management.

### **3.2 Tasks of key account management**

Like relationship management, key account management has to deal with two different perspectives: an internal and an external one (Plinke 1997, p. 54). Especially the external perspective is well accepted: Most companies implement key account management to bring their own company closer to the customer and, thus, the customer closer to the supplier (Cannon/Narayandas 2000, p. 410). Yet often, key account managers are solely considered as sales persons – specialized in a specific customer (Shapiro et al. 1987). Therefore, it is

essential to have a closer look at the external and internal functions and tasks of key account management:

From the internal perspective, the key account management's most important task is to integrate the customer as well as possible into the company's own processes. This can only be realized effectively if the key account management team takes over the customer's role inside the company. It has to represent the customer in all fields of interest. Apart from that, the key account management must coordinate the internal interfaces in the production process (Kleinaltenkamp/Rieker 1997, p. 167ff.). Especially, all necessary information has to flow at the right time to the right people. As a representative of the customer, key account management needs to take over the role of the coordinator of the communication process in order to ensure an efficient development of customized solutions (Plinke 1997, p. 55).

Turning to the external perspective will show the other side of key account management (Barrett 1986, p. 64ff.): First of all, key account management acts as a representative for the entire company towards the customer. This role is fundamentally different to the internal perspective, where towards the company's other departments key account management acts as a representative of the customer. It also secures the communication and information flow between supplier and customer to obtain the necessary information and to integrate the external resources (Fließ 2001a, p. 14).

Since key account management has to integrate the internal perspective as well as the external perspective, it adopts the role of Janus. The Janus head who has two faces, one for the internal processes and one for the external processes, perfectly symbolizes the future of the key account management processes: Key account management has to govern the internal processes and the external processes and combines both processes and perspectives in one 'head'.

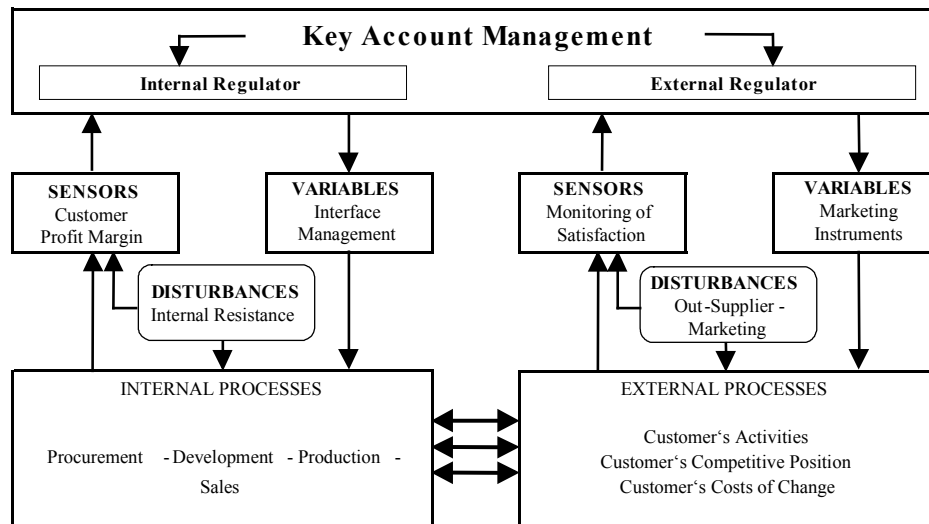


Figure 5: The Janus head of key account management (according to Plinke 1997, p. 54)

The internal processes and the customer's processes are affected by some disturbances (like internal resistance or out-supplier-marketing). To handle these problems properly, key account management is able to manipulate some variables in these processes by using several marketing instruments or changing the interface management of internal processes. In the end, the success of key account management can be controlled by the profits realized per customer or by measuring customer satisfaction (Plinke 1997, p. 54).

The picture of the Janus head grasps the tasks of key account management rather well. Nevertheless, the internal and external organizational complexity presents new challenges (Kleinaltenkamp/Rieker 1997). Besides the increasing complexity through the implementation of key account management in their own internal organization (Prado 1997, p. 25; Cannon/Narayandas 2000), the key account managers have to be aware of the existence of buying-centers in the key account's organization (Webster/Wind 1972). As key accounts ask for highly individualized and complex solutions, several people are involved in the negotiation and the decision process because these purchases are mostly accompanied with considerable investments. Thus, special treatment and further management tasks are necessary to satisfy the different roles and individuals of these buying-centers. Therefore, in the following chapters we will abstract from the individual level and just look at the organization of the key account as a whole which has to be integrated in the supplier's processes.

### **3.3 Integrating the customer by applying key account management**

Especially the increasing individualization of the customer's wants and needs demands more flexibility from the supplier's production processes and forces him to get closer to the customer. But interacting with the customer more often is not sufficient. Instead, suppliers have to understand their customers' problems and processes better, which could be seen as the prime task of key account management (Levitt 1985, p. 17; McDonald et al. 1997, p. 752).

Although in many business relationships the importance of customer satisfaction and customer retention is acknowledged, many suppliers just do not understand their customer's problems properly. Often these companies are still too product-oriented and fail to integrate their customers into their product development and production processes. Gradually, these companies are losing contact to the market and their customers. Thus, suppliers are losing their competitive advantage of superior customer knowledge (Porter/Millar 1985, p. 152; Kleinaltenkamp/Dahlke 2001, p. 207; Kleinaltenkamp/Frauendorf 2003, p. 375).

Another source of unsatisfactory supply can be found in the customer's inability to explain his problems properly. Even though such a scenario would be rather unlikely, misunderstandings could especially arise if the customer is not fully aware of his own problems respectively again his customer's problems (Fließ 2001a, p. 66ff.). Therefore, the supplier's most important task is to fully understand his customers, the problems of the customer's customer and their markets.

Particularly in business-to-business markets, the multiple stages in the market structure raise a big problem for many suppliers: They do not only have to care for their direct customers but also for their indirect customers (Kleinaltenkamp/Rudolph 2002, p. 287). Thus, it has to be of the supplier's prime concern to solve his customer's problems not only in the customer's own interest but also in the interest of the following market stages. It should also be in the supplier's interest to help their customers and their customer's customers to stay competitive in the long run – because they are the supplier's precious base for his own future.

In order to tackle those problems presented above, the supplier's as well as the customer's processes have to be reorganized to enable customer integration. The importance of such reorganization and streamlining of internal and external processes becomes particularly evident recalling the fact that many companies realize 80% of their profit with 20% of their customers (Plinke, 1989b, p. 8). This implies an adjustment of internal resources and capabilities with the needs of the company's most important customers (Jackson 1985, p. 128; Levitt 1985, p.21; Kleinaltenkamp/Rieker 1997, p. 163).

Therefore, to harmonize the supplier's and the customer's processes and to design key account management properly, an in-depth process analysis has to be conducted. Since every business relationship is influenced by different situational factors, the entire transaction process has to be analyzed and evaluated, as will be shown in the following chapter.

## **4 Process analysis in key account management**

In order to define and analyze a process, it seems sensible to differ between three process levels, starting from the entire firm level as a value chain to the transaction process culminating in the interaction process.

### **4.1 The units of analysis in key account management processes**

The overarching process on the first level represents the entire firm as an aggregation of processes. Here, several functional areas and duties of the firm are partitioned into value activities. Different processes can then be analyzed by Porter's value chain representing the entire process structure of the firm (Plinke 1995, p. 74f.).

The single transaction process of a business transaction is found on the second level. It comprises those activities whose chronological order defines the business process sequence and which are necessary for the product or service delivery. Such process illustration is realized, for instance, on the basis of Role Activity Diagrams or other process engineering tools mostly used in information systems (Scheer et al. 2003). Likewise, the blueprinting concept, a method mostly used in service management research, can be used for the same purpose.

On the third level, the interaction process is taking place. From the supplier's perspective this process constitutes the link to the customer respectively the customer's processes. Particularly in key account management relationships, this interaction process between the supplier and his key account has to be managed very carefully, since it presents the quintessence of key account management. Due to "real" customer contacts most information about the customer can be drawn from the single transaction and in particular from the interaction process. This information, referred to as *process knowledge*, can be transformed into knowledge that can be used for further transactions with the same key account or may even be transferable to other transactions with different key accounts. This kind of knowledge is called *potential knowledge* (Kleinaltenkamp 1997, p. 95). The design of the interaction process is therefore responsible for how much information the supplier can acquire from his customer to build up

a business relationship. For this reason, the supplier should take a great interest in planning and managing the interaction process with the key account.

The following chapters will deal with the blueprinting concept as an analyzing method for transaction processes and the script concept as a supporting method to analyze the interaction process. It will be shown that the blueprinting concept can be partly extended by the script concept in order to provide an efficient customer integration process.

## **4.2 The supplier's process: The blueprinting concept**

As the term "key account" reveals, this customer is of great importance for the supplier's success. Hence, the supplier is very keen to optimize the transaction process in an efficient way and to his customer's complete satisfaction. Relevant requirements for increased efficiency are an undisturbed procedure minimizing any delays, redundant activities or misunderstandings between the supplier and his key account. Higher effectiveness on the other hand might even imply more complex process structures and additional activities (Kleinaltenkamp 1999, p.37). Optimization, however, can only be achieved if the process structure is sort of concrete, i.e. it needs to be visualized. A very helpful tool to do so is the blueprinting concept which enables the supplier to analyze his process and to emphasize the points of interaction with the key account. Although Blueprinting was originally used to document typical service processes, it can also be applied to business-to-business markets and especially key account transactions because those transactions always involve a rather good deal of service activities. Moreover, transactions here are quite complex signifying that they, just as service transactions, require a high customer participation that can be pinpointed by dint of a blueprint.

### **4.2.1 The blueprinting concept and its structure**

Zeithaml and Bitner offer a concise definition of a blueprint as "a picture or map that accurately portrays the service system so that the different people involved in providing it can understand and deal with it objectively regardless of their roles or their individual points of view" (Zeithaml/Bitner 1996, p. 277). Although the blueprinting concept was originally positioned in a more technical field, it has passed through several stages of development up to now (Zeithaml/Bitner 1996, p. 277f). It represents the activities of a service process in a chronological order along the horizontal dimension. Initially introduced by Shostack, a blueprint consisted of merely two levels, the upper level describing those activities that are perceivable or visible to the customer and the lower level portraying the intra-firm activities

that are not visible to the customer. The two levels were separated by the “line of visibility” (Shostack 1984, p. 258). After further development stages of the blueprinting concept, amongst them for example Kingman-Brundage, it can nowadays be considered as a common structuring approach by which all activities of a service company can be analyzed and designed systematically (Fließ/Kleinaltenkamp 2003).

The ServiceBlueprint™ is based on five lines separating six levels from each other (see Figure 6). The first line from the top, the so-called “line of interaction”, separates the customer’s from the supplier’s activities and thus demonstrates the direct interaction among the two companies. Between the line of interaction and the line of visibility the onstage activities are located, i.e. those activities visible to the customer. The backstage activities are positioned below the line of visibility and above the line of internal interaction. Those activities are fulfilled by the employees or machines of the supplier’s company but invisible to the customer. Below the line of internal interaction support activities can be found; they are mostly carried out by employees of different internal departments and turn the customer’s information into real output (Fließ/Kleinaltenkamp 2003).

Following the concept of Kingman-Brundage so far, the latest blueprint version of Kleinaltenkamp and Fließ introduces a new line: the line of order penetration. Here, the novel aspect is the production-theoretic foundation (see thereto Kleinaltenkamp/Haase 1999): The line of order penetration differentiates between potential activities and process activities or, as it were, customer induced and customer independent activities. The customer contributions are regarded as external production resources comprising physical objects, human resources like employees and rights or licenses as well as nominal goods and information of the key account’s company. The integration of the external resources into the supplier’s production process is realized by the process activities, i.e. above the line of order penetration, while on the contrary the potential activities are taking care of the pre-combination of the supplier’s own assets and commodity factors (Fließ/Kleinaltenkamp 2003, p. 4f.). The *potential activities*, once again divided into preparation and facility activities by the line of implementation, can be planned and carried out *autonomously* by the supplier; whereas the *process activities* - including onstage, backstage, and support activities as described earlier - are *influenced by the customer’s activities* and the integration of his resources into the supplier’s production process (Kleinaltenkamp 2000, p.10f; Kingman-Brundage 1989).

The fundamental idea of the blueprinting concept is therefore to organize the process activities according to the degree that customer integration is required. But as signalized earlier, a blueprint does not only make for process documentation, it also serves as a helpful

tool for process analysis, planning and design. Such a process analysis can result in the elimination of redundant process activities or plainly the simplification of the process each with increasing efficiency. Furthermore in the sense of planning and design, process activities can as well be shifted between the various blueprint levels. If, for instance, activities are shifted beyond the line of interaction into the customer's direction, then those are no longer onstage activities but customer activities; i.e. those activities are carried out by the customer (Kleinaltenkamp 1999, p. 35ff).

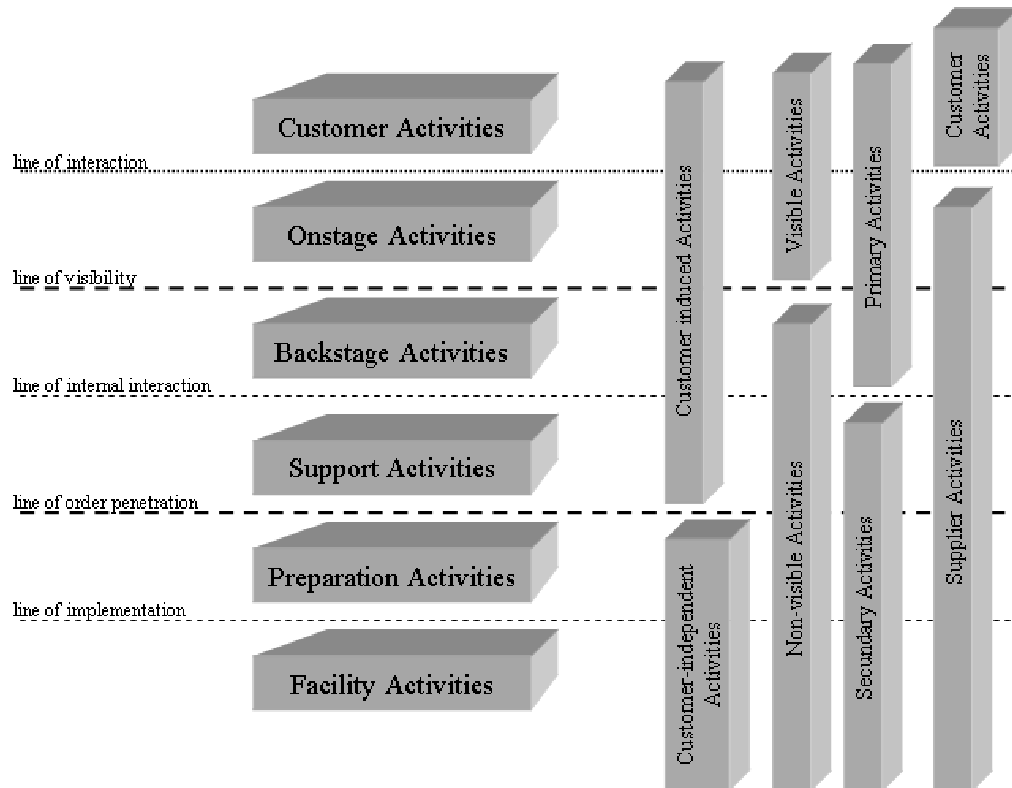


Figure 6: ServiceBlueprint™ (Fließ/Kleinaltenkamp 2003)

#### 4.2.2 The 'extended' blueprint

Particularly in key account management, there will be a high level of interaction between the supplier and his customer. The blueprinting concept helps the supplier not only to portray his own internal processes but first of all indicates where and how the interaction with the customer has to take place or, so to speak, which activities and contributions are needed from the customer during the transaction process.

Based on the fact that a blueprint is used to structure, analyze and finally optimize the transaction process with the key account, there is merely one decisive deficit: Up to now, blueprints were only used to portray the supplier's side of the process. But if the entire

transaction is to be optimized, the customer's processes have to be taken into account, likewise. Thus, the idea is to apply the blueprinting concept not only to the supplier's but also to the customer's processes.

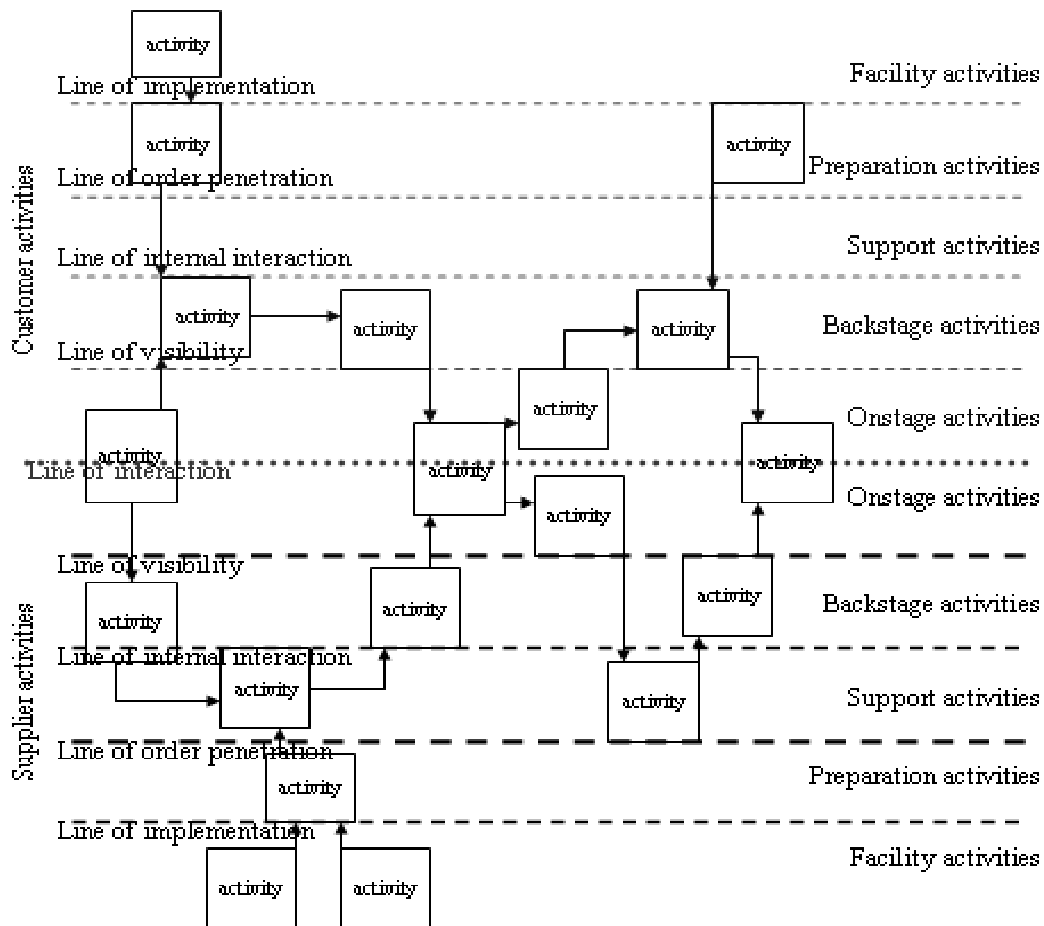


Figure 7: 'Extended' blueprint

So far, the customer's processes in a blueprint are reduced to the activities on the line of interaction. There is a need to go beyond that line and extend the blueprint by the additional dimension of the customer's process activities (Fließ 2001a, p. 45f). If the supplier includes the customer side into "his" process analysis, he will be able to align his own internal processes better to the customer's ones and to improve the customer integration process for his key account.

### **4.3 The customer's process: The script concept**

Given the fact that there must be some kind of process structure on the key account's side, i.e. beyond the line of interaction, analogous to the supplier's blueprint, the supplier does not know if his customer is even aware of it. Whereas the blueprinting concept is an explicit and encoded form of documented knowledge on the process structure, there obviously exists an implicit version of a standard operating procedure (Noteboom 1999, p. 139). This implicit model structure that the customer's processes are based on may be illustrated by the cognitive construct of a 'script' (Fließ 2001a, p. 310).

#### **4.3.1 Introduction to the script concept**

A script describes "a coherent sequence of events expected by the individual, involving him either as a participant or as an observer" (Abelson 1976, p. 33). It can be subordinated in the category of schemas. Those cognitive structures consist of a memory representation on stereotypical contexts. Whereas schemas themselves in their original meaning only apply to objects, scripts are a specific subgroup of schemas, considered as event schemas. A script is characterized by the learned experiences of the individual and by the degree of social interaction, the number of incidents, as well as the length of time (Schank/Abelson 1977, p. 37ff; Funke et al. 1996). Cognitive scripts contain information not only about the sequence of episodes and the role of the individual, but also about the main characters, the setting and the background actors of the script situation (Smith/Houston 1983, p.60). They are based on structural aspects on the one hand and procedural aspects on the other hand; structural is understood as what belongs to a script and the procedural aspect can be described by how the script is used (Uyl/Oostendorp 1980, p. 291ff).

The script as a kind of procedural knowledge or procedural schema is offering a pattern of orientation or action to the individual; it can be used as a "manual" guiding the individual in a number of similar situations. A certain sequence of episodes is stored in memory and encoded as a categorical pattern. When the individual finds himself in a similar situation, the pattern is being identified and the script is recalled. Thus, a script activating event is initiating the rest of the action sequence. Likewise, if in a new situation the individual tries to recall a similar script so that he can keep up the action sequence and does not feel lost in the new situation. (Mandl et al. 1988, p. 133; Reid et al. 2000, p. 1054; Nerdinger 1994, pp. 109ff; Schank/Abelson 1977, pp. 46ff). Depending on the complexity of the situation and therefore the script structure scripts are frequently nested, i.e. a superscript comprises a number of

subscripts. Hence, scripts are commonly embedded in hierarchical structures (Uyl/Oostendorp 1980, pp. 291f).

Although scripts originate from cognitive science and only apply to individuals, some approaches tend to apply the script concept on the firm level. In this context, scripts do not only include behavioral pattern for service transactions on an individual level but they are meant to form the basis for an organizational routine. Such an organizational script would comprise a multitude of individual scripts and describe the use of technologies, as well as the organizational structure. Furthermore, that organizational script would include the coordination of the individual scripts. Implying that the organizational script describes to some extent organizational knowledge results into the question where the organizational script starts and where traditional constructs like corporate knowledge, corporate culture and corporate structure end (Noteboom 1999, pp. 135f.).

The establishment of scripts is configured on the basis of three levels. At first, single experiences which are also called “vignettes” are being stored. Vignettes are understood as the coarse components of remembered episodes in the individual’s experience, as for instance the single roles of the main characters involved in the situation. Only a coherently linked chain of those vignettes will build a script. By all means, this first level is considered as an “episodic representation”. On the second level a “categorical representation” can be constructed, implying that the repeated experience of similar episodes results in generalizations for the interaction process. Finally the last level is called “hypothetical representation”; a multitude of interactions produces a complex causal process structure with a lot of branch points and a number of subscripts. These three script levels develop from a rather concrete to a more abstract stage (Abelson 1976, p. 34f). The hypothetical script can appear as follows:

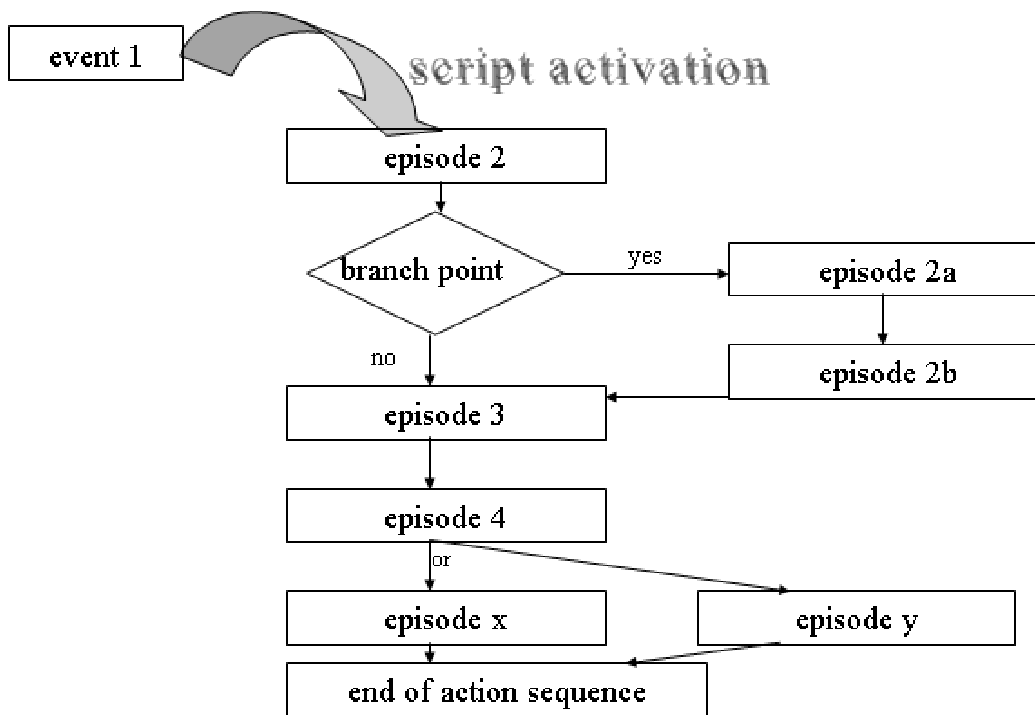


Figure 8: Exemplary hypothetical script

### 4.3.2 Script types and functions

A hypothetical script acts as a “metascript”, i.e. those scripts serve as a guideline for the behavior of a group of situations which might be abstract but still shows similarities. The wider the wealth of experience of an individual, the more extensive, generalized and coordinated the scripts are. The level of script guided behavior increases with a higher rate of repetitive and standardized activities.

Nevertheless, scripts are as well generated for less standardized episodes. Merely the period of time, necessary for the development of more extensive scripts, will be longer because the situations are not as much alike and recur less (Walgenbach 2000, p. 110). Another special form of a script is named a “protoscript” appropriate for the accomplishment of similar process sequences. Differences between situations result in several potential variations within the action sequence of a protoscript that are called “tracks”. When the individual is facing a situation, he or she starts searching for a familiar situation from his wealth of script experience that matches the actual situation (Abelson 1981, p. 723f.; Schank/Abelson 1977, p. 67). Since no situations are commonly identical, scripts comprise slots, i.e. abstract categories to which certain values or variables are allocated (Walgenbach 2000, p.111). This way, scripts

can be transferred and applied to similar but rather new situations. At the same time, new experience can be integrated in the existing script which possibly results in new script tracks (Mandl et al. 1988, p. 128ff; Walgenbach 2000, p. 110ff).

Although it may seem like automated behavior in the first place, script guided action occurs in fact more or less automatically. But individuals are able to differentiate between situations and reflect their own sequences of action (Gioia/Poole 1984, p. 452ff.). Out of a multitude of script functions, four functions shall be pointed out in the following because of their relevance in terms of the supplier-customer-interaction:

- routine and governance,
- establishment of analogies,
- economizing capacities and costs, and
- standards as an evaluation basis.

Scripts facilitate the governance of activities by means of structure and routine of action sequences. Compared to the explicit control of activities by a blueprint, scripts provide an implicit kind of control. Since they refer to rather stable sequences of episodes, they offer guidelines for the individual's behavior. At the same time, they enable the individual to anticipate the behavior of the interacting person(s). Therefore it can be assumed that up to a certain extent, scripts can adopt the same steering function as institutions (see thereto Fließ 2001a, p. 299). Another important aspect is the use of scripts to establish analogies. This way, scripts facilitate action in new situations which is important for the supplier, as he offers new or modifies his transaction process.

Scripts also make the coordination of actions between interdependent actors easier if their scripts are harmonized with each other. That means, additional transaction costs, caused for instance by additional coordination activities, can be cut down. But it is not only the financial cost that is reduced. Since scripts are activated and accomplished by routine, cognitive capacities of the individual can be economized as well (Ashforth/Fried 1988, p. 307ff.). In particular, this coordinating function of scripts is highly challenged by the complex situation given in key account transactions. Key account transactions mostly imply the involvement of several persons, as for instance a buying- and a selling-center. For that reason, their scripts and particularly the coordination of their scripts is even more complicated than that between only one supplier-agent and one customer-agent. Interaction with a key account proves to be more intricate and therefore requires a higher degree of coordination.

Referring to the fourth function listed above, scripts result in the development of normative standards. Therefore, they offer an evaluation basis for process sequences and can be used as a quality assessment tool (Smith/Houston 1983, p. 60). It will be shown in the next chapter how these functions can be drawn on to improve customer integration.

#### **4.4 Cognitive scripts as a basis for improved customer integration**

Customer Integration does not only represent the basis for every business relationship but also focuses on the central idea of business relationships: the supplier-customer-interaction (Dahlke/Kehrgaßner 1996, p. 179). The question of interest is what and how can cognitive scripts contribute to better customer integration. A few script functions, stated right beforehand in chapter 4.2, make the relevance of scripts concerning customer integration obvious:

Given the fact that scripts refer to quite stable sequences of episodes and therewith offer guidelines for the individual's behavior makes it easier for the key account to fulfill his role as a co-producer. Once he has developed a script of the production process, he knows where and how to integrate himself or his resources, above all his information into the production process. The only matter, that the supplier has to take care of, is to manage the process at an early stage of the business relationship, i.e. during the first transactions with his customer, by providing process apparentness as will be shown in the following chapter. This way, his key account will develop a clearly structured script of the sequence which ensures a continuous improvement of customer integration. The same consequences apply to the accomplishment of scripts as routines. It is rather convenient for the key account to act according to a routine. As long as he knows what is needed from him in terms of integrating his resources into the supplier's processes, he has to invest less time and effort in the transaction process.

Another aspect is the development of normative standards out of scripts. The establishment of standards is a useful premise for unobstructed customer integration, as it reduces uncertainty about how the process will be accomplished and what the key account can commonly expect from it. As any standard, the script provides the key account with a certain structure that he can use in follow-up business transactions. Hence, it helps to build up a stronger relationship between the supplier and his key account and sustains the key account's loyalty.

It is stated that in a business relationship experience simplifies future transactions with the same transaction partner and at the same time allows for standardization opportunities. The very standardization can be extremely helpful in order to simplify the supplier-customer-coordination (Dahlke/Kehrgaßner 1996, p. 188). The term "experience" is better particularized

by the more specified concept of scripts, as they also facilitate the coordination of actions between the agent of the supplier and the agent of the key account's company. If their scripts regarding the transaction process are harmonized, efficient customer integration is provided. The procedure of customer integration demands a minimum level of "customer integration competence", a term first used by Gouthier and Schmid (2001, p. 234) that is formally composed of "governance competence", "process scheme competence" and "communication competence". Each of these sub-competences again depends on the available resources, the employee qualification and the task performance. Now, cognitive scripts can be used in the context of governance competence resources on the one hand and task performance of communication competence on the other hand. Governance competence resources include process documentation. Scripts, for instance, can serve as an appropriate basis or an auxiliary for process documentation. Similarly, the use of scripts can offer a way to create process transparency with regard to the task performance of communication competence (for further details to the construct of "customer integration competence": see Jacob 2003, p. 88ff.). Scripts and accordingly the analysis and integration of scripts therefore could turn out to be very useful to enhance customer integration competence. As a consequence of well-performed customer integration, the supplier will find stronger customer loyalty and thereby better access to his customer's processes. Besides, additional transaction costs, caused for instance by additional coordination activities at the transaction process, can be cut down.

## **5 Implications**

So far, the concepts of key account management, blueprint, and scripts were discussed, particularly with regard to their contribution to customer integration. This chapter combines these three concepts and reveals the benefits of cognitive scripts in key account management. Analyzing the key account's script does not only enhance process apparentness and lead to process modifications, but at the same time improves relationship controlling and therewith reduces activity-based costs.

### **5.1 Process apparentness**

Key account management requires the business processes of the two companies to be integrated in terms of a partnership. Therefore it is not only important that every party achieves process excellence for itself. The biggest challenge here is how these processes can be harmonized with each other and how they can be designed in a more efficient and effective

way (Mc Donald et al. 1997, p.752, 754). Both, supplier and customer must participate in the transaction process but they need to know how and when, i.e. who has to integrate what resources during which process activity. This knowledge is called “process apparentness” (Fließ 1996, p. 92ff).

Process apparentness can be attributed to problem-, integration- and resource- apparentness. Each of these constructs comprises a dimension of awareness and of transparency, i.e. an in-depth process understanding, and can be found on either side, that is on the supplier’s as well as on the key account’s side. Problem apparentness can be understood as a situation when – instancing the key account’s side – the customer does not realize that he actually has a problem or the customer is not able to specify his problem. Apart from problem apparentness integration apparentness can occur which includes the customer’s willingness to participate or as well the customer’s knowledge about the importance of his participation regarding the quality of the output. Integration apparentness can also mean that the customer is unsure how to participate and which commitment is expected regarding his participation in the process. The third aspect of process apparentness is represented by resource apparentness. It comprises the situations that the customer either does not know which resources to integrate into the process or how he can integrate them (Fließ 2001a, p. 66ff.; Engelhardt/Schwab 1982, p. 506f.). As stated above, the lack of process apparentness can also apply to the supplier’s side, i.e. for instance, the supplier can be unsure about which resources he has to demand from the customer, when he has to demand them and how these resources have to be integrated in the process to achieve the best performance (Fließ 1996, p. 93).

First of all, it is the supplier’s job to provide process apparentness for himself. On the other hand he must create process apparentness for his key account in order to have the customer well integrated in the process and to ensure an effective, as well as an efficient transaction. The blueprinting concept, used so far to provide process apparentness, seems to be insufficient because it merely documents the supplier’s process. The customer highly affects effectiveness and efficiency of the production process, i.e. the customer’s degree of participation has an impact on the quality of the output as well as on the supplier’s cost increase (Kleinaltenkamp 1999, p.33). It is therefore the customer’s script that has to be included into the blueprinting analysis in order to provide process apparentness spanning the entire customer integration. Mainly the construct of integration transparency may involve the analysis and the coordination of scripts. The lack of integration transparency is frequently attributed to the different scripts of supplier and customer. Either party, or better the agents of

either party, then possesses unequal ideas and expectations regarding the participation of the customer (Fließ 2001a, p. 67f).

In order to harmonize these scripts with one another, the supplier needs to be aware of the customer's script contents. It is therefore reasonable to take a look at Schank and Abelson's idea of scripts suggesting that scripts are composed of three categories: situational scripts, personal scripts and instrumental scripts (Banyard/Hayes 1995, p. 137). Situational scripts refer to certain social situations and therefore also apply to service situations, supplier-customer-interaction or business transaction situations. Here, the supplier needs to know the kind of process that the customer has memorized of the transaction situation. Expectations, specified behavior pattern and manners are part of personal scripts. Thus, the supplier must find out what kind of behavior the customer expects from the service encounter and what the key account manager's manners are that fit into the customer's script. Instrumental scripts involve the actor's purpose or certain intentions. Applied to the supplier-customer-interaction, the supplier needs to realize that the key account entering the business transaction has certain goals and objectives in mind which influence his script structure.

Being aware of the different categories of scripts, with which the customer enters the transaction situation, enables the supplier to provide better process transparency. Thus it will give him a better understanding of the customer's process so that he can design his own process according to the customer's script.

## **5.2 Consequences for the process structure**

As the supplier gains a higher level of process transparency and thus an improved understanding of his customer's processes, it will influence the supplier's process structure. Referring to the different process levels described in chapter 4.1 , at first the analysis of scripts may have an effect on the supplier's business process design and in the long run even on the structure of the value chain.

Particularly due to the additional knowledge derived from the script analysis, the supplier is now able to focus on the entire process of the business transaction including the customer's side, i.e. extending the supplier's view on the transaction process. Hence, he cannot only optimize his own processes in terms of efficiency but can even identify weaknesses and potential for improvement in reference to the process as a whole. This could also cause a reorganization of business transaction processes. As illustrated in chapter 4.2.1 a blueprint serves as a tool for process designing and planning and can therefore result in a shift of

activities in order to improve process efficiency. Such shifting, particularly across the line of interaction, may involve a reallocation of *process activities* between customer and supplier. By including the customer's side, it is elucidated where an activity should be actually shifted to with respect to the *entire* process.

Often, the supplier is forced to move further on than merely redesigning the process. The additional knowledge acquired by the script and business transaction analysis can not only result in a shift of *process activities*, but may even have further implications for the design of the supplier's *potential activities*. Likewise the transformation of the supplier's *process knowledge* into *potential knowledge* (chapter 4.1), the results of the script analysis may also be used for the design of the transaction process and the formation of the supplier's potential. If the supplier's potential is modified, for instance due to the development of new offerings, it can eventually affect the entire value chain or at least parts of the value chain's structure. Thus, the script analysis does not only result in an improvement of business processes, but in a reallocation of resources in terms of a modified potential formation or even a modified value chain structure.

Nevertheless, the development of new products or services does not necessarily implicate changes in business processes or the value chain. Particularly in this context the supplier can profit from one of the script functions, the establishment of analogies (see thereto Chapter 4.3.2) which shows high relevance for the design of new customer solutions, primarily services. Once the supplier knows the customer's script model of an existing business process, he can design a novel solution offering based on that script. By designing product-service-offerings according to the script that the customer has already internalized from previous transaction processes, the supplier will make it easier for the customer to integrate himself into the new transaction process.

As the discussion has pointed out, applying the "extended" blueprint can foster process redesign, the design of new processes or even modifications in the value chain. This way, it does not only help to improve the efficiency in existing business transactions but can also increase effectiveness by creating new product-service-offerings for the key account.

### **5.3 Improving key account controlling and reducing activity-based costs**

Customer integration and particularly key account management does not automatically result in a successful business relationship because it often implicates high cost. In order to avoid excessive costs, the supplier needs to account for the underlying costs of each activity that is performed during the customer integration process.

Blueprints and cognitive scripts help to document all existing processes of the supplier as well as of the customer. This well documented map of processes is especially useful to determine the points of interaction and those relevant resources that both parties have to provide for the transaction process. This makes it possible to define the underlying costs of each activity. Thus, activity-based costing can be introduced which is understood as a system that is “attributing factory overhead, corporate overhead, and other organizational resources first to activities and then to the products that create demand for these indirect resources” (Cooper/Kaplan 1988, p. 100).

Activity-based costing is not a new concept to companies. Since the underlying cost structure is continuously shifting from direct costs to indirect costs (Miller/Vollmann 1985), activity-based costing is increasingly applied in practice (Schweikart 1997, p. 171). Compared to volume-based costing, activity-based costing offers at least four advantages (Cooper/Kaplan 1988; Schweikart 1997, p. 183):

- increasing the transparency of processes, structure and interdependencies of indirect expenses,
- obtaining a more differentiated allocation of indirect costs due to the principle of causality,
- uncovering and considering the cost effects of customized solutions with different complexity, and
- pursuing a more strategic point of view than in other accounting systems.

Empirical studies have shown that management decisions based on activity-based costing seem to be better than decisions based on simple cost-accounting (Dearman/Shields 2001; Kennedy/Affleck-Graves 2001). Particularly in the context of key account management the supplier-customer-relationship is increasingly cooperative and both parties are starting to align their transaction processes. Since processes here are straight, structured and repetitive and cost can be easily obtained and ascribed to the supplier’s processes as well as to the key accounts, it seems sensible to use activity-based costing. Even the costs for implementing an activity-based accounting system will be compensated for two reasons: the supplier will be enabled to realize an improved relationship controlling and to redesign the customer integration processes more focused which will finally result in reduced activity-based costs.

Due to increased competition in business-to-business markets relationship controlling matters even more. Because of insufficient accounting systems companies often have problems ascribing the relevant costs caused by a key account relationship. Introducing an activity-

based accounting system facilitates this cost determination much better. Although activity-based costing is extremely useful, it can merely be seen as one tool for key account controlling (Fließ 2001b, p. 476ff.). Taking advantage of an activity-based accounting system, the supplier and the customer are able to streamline and design the customer integration process more efficient and effective – based on hard numbers (Salman 2002; Bogajewskaja et al.1998).

Like the concept of scripts was already outlined, scripts are complementing a blueprint as a tool for analyzing business transaction processes. By integrating the customer's side, the supplier cannot only move beyond a reengineering of his own business processes which provides cost advantages for him. But because of an improved process analysis including both sides, i.e. the supplier's side by applying the blueprinting concept and the customer's side by using scripts, both parties benefit. Based on this information, key account management can be designed more efficient and effective.

The knowledge of the supplier-customer-interaction process as a whole makes it possible to identify cost rates for each sub-process. As a benefit, the activity-based costing will improve the controlling of business relationships. Thus, profitability of every single supplier-customer-relationship, as well as efficiency throughout the entire process will be increased.

## **6 Conclusion**

Applying process analysis tools like blueprints and scripts to key account management can be seen as a fairly useful approach towards adequate customer integration. Due to the importance of each customer, the long-term business relationship and its resulting learning effects out of every single transaction, the supplier should foster customer integration to ensure the profitability of key account management relationships. In order to achieve such process excellence it is necessary for the supplier to structure, analyze and then optimize the whole process. Therefore, he needs to convey to the key accounts when and how to deploy their resources during the customer integration process. A blueprint, as a tool for process documentation, basically qualifies but reduces the entire process to the supplier's activities which has to be seen as a major deficit considering the increasing customer orientation. But, this deficit can be compensated by the use of scripts.

As the findings of this paper have shown, the combination of key account management and process analysis tools like blueprints and cognitive scripts provides new insights for the

analysis and improvement of the supplier-customer-interaction. First of all, by increasing the process apparentness scripts help to facilitate customer integration on the customer's, as well as on the supplier's side. Another important benefit is a more efficient and effective design of the interaction and transaction process. Drawing on the superior knowledge of the customer's needs and process structure, which is made possible by the use of scripts, the supplier's own process structure can be realigned. In some cases, even a modification of his value chain seems to be necessary. Last but not least, applying the 'extended' blueprint version complemented with the script model can result in an improved relationship controlling and yield reduced activity-based costs. Hence, applying blueprints and scripts will result in a higher degree of customer integration which, in turn, results in an improved level of key account management.

Within this paper, a profound theoretical basis was not discussed. But as the approach has shown, it offers enough possibilities to explore linkages to several economic theories. In this context, the authors particularly want to point out the relevance of New Institutional Economics as a helpful approach for the theoretical foundation of key account management, customer integration and the blueprinting concept. Furthermore, in this context the theory of path dependency could be considered because it offers useful explanations for the existence and the development of cognitive scripts.

This paper's train of thoughts should entail follow-up research concerning key account management and cognitive scripts. With regard to cognitive scripts for instance, further research could be done how cognitive scripts can be reproduced or simulated in a way that they are useful for the modeling of business processes. The assumptions gathered from the discussion also leave much work to be done in empirical testing.

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