

How to cope with emerging tensions in operational processes: the case of a SMA facing contemporary market challenges

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Abstract

Framing of the research. Marketing Agencies are a particular type of Professional Service Firms (PSFs) (Lone *et al.*, 2021) that play an essential role in the development and diffusion of marketing-related innovations, acting as valuable knowledge providers for firms operating in a wide variety of sectors (Moorman and Day, 2016; Lynch, 2019). PSFs - and Marketing Agencies - are typically characterized by high knowledge intensity, low capital intensity, and professionalized workers (von Nordenflycht, 2010; Vafeas and Hughes, 2020). The main resources of this type of business are intangible and substantiated in human capital, namely knowledge, relational skills, and reputation (Kaiser and Loscher, 2015)

Recent changes in the business context, such as increasing competition and emerging technologies, and dramatic events as the Covid-19 pandemic, are putting strong pressure on PSFs in terms of capabilities and organizational models (Empson, 2021; Kronblad and Pregmark, 2021), questioning established strategies and pushing towards the adoption new organizational structures and expansion of their offerings (Rubik, 2021). In such an evolving context, Marketing Agencies are called to be no more just technically competent, but also experts in digital and technical skills, data interpretation, customer engagement, and value-added processes (Cluley *et al.*, 2019). Studies have started to show how market changes are reflecting into the emergence of paradoxical tensions within PSFs (Manzoni and Volker, 2017; Gaim, 2018). Operational processes of such firms are challenged by the need to respond to increasingly volatile market requests in a more flexible, quick, and effective way. On the organizational standpoint, this implies revising a series of diffused routines, mechanisms, and practices, inevitably leading to hard-to-solve tensions (Loch and Sommer, 2019). This is particularly evident for Small Marketing Agencies (SMAs), characterized by limited size and resources, seem to be especially hindered by the emerging tensions brought by new market dynamics. For instance, the increasing wish to adopt mobile work practices is raising tensions about the already limited context of human resources (Raguseo *et al.*, 2015).

Notwithstanding the difficulties smaller companies face in the attempt to overcome organizational tensions, the topic seems to be still under-investigated. In particular, there is fragmented research on the typology of emerging organizational tensions faced by SMAs along their operational processes. Furthermore, even less attention has so far been paid to possible coping managerial practices that firms can implement to deal with such tensions.

Purpose of the paper. In light of these considerations, this paper aims to investigate the emerging tensions along operational processes that SMAs are called to face in contemporary markets, with the intent to understand if and how coping practices are helpful in solving them. To do this, the following research questions are addressed: *Which organizational tensions emerge when SMAs change their operational processes to face contemporary market needs? How can SMAs deal with such tensions?*

To achieve this goal, this paper discusses an explorative case study of a SMA located in central Italy, which has undergone organizational changes to sustain its growth in the market of marketing-related business services. The analysis relies on the Actors-Resources-Activities (ARA) framework (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995): for the three dimensions, emerging paradoxical tensions have been identified along with the organizational responses implemented to manage them.

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Theoretical background: adopting a paradox framework to understand emerging organizational tensions.

Paradoxes are defined as contradictory yet interdependent elements that cannot be easily resolved (Poole and van de Ven, 1989; Putnam *et al.*, 2016). Paradoxes define contradictions, conflicting demands, opposing perspectives (Lewis, 2000), which are an intrinsic characteristic of organizations and a manifestation of complexity (Berti *et al.*, 2021). Paradoxes describe the increasingly competing demands faced simultaneously (Gaim and Wåhlin, 2016) by firms which can derive from organizational tensions. Organizational tensions are, in turn, defined as “two phenomena in a dynamic relationship that involve both competition and complementarity” (Epstein *et al.*, 2015: 37). The paradoxical nature of organizational tensions stems from the contradiction yet interrelation that characterizes these elements (Lewis, 2000; Gaim, 2018). Indeed, paradoxical tensions “result from the perception of opposing, conflicting, and interrelated characteristics of paradoxes and are reflected, cognitively and emotionally, when one attends to both demands simultaneously” (Gaim and Wåhlin, 2016: 35). Understanding organizational tensions as having a paradoxical nature implies that the organization will not attempt to get rid of the tension, but rather to sustain it as competing demands (Smith and Lewis, 2011) through the adoption of a “both/and” perspective (Smith *et al.*, 2017).

The paradox perspective can be understood as a useful managerial lens to investigate firms’ organizational configurations and processes employed to manage the tensions they confront (Hargrave and van de Ven, 2017). What characterizes tensions is dynamicity, as they change over time, and tackling one of them can open other tensions (Berti *et al.*, 2021).

Previous studies on creative PSFs (Manzoni and Volker, 2017) have shown how their nature as well as external factors, including increased competition, demanding clients, and technological changes lead to emerging competing paradoxical tensions, whose features and management practices still remain largely unexplored.

Methodology. This paper adopts a qualitative single case study methodology (Eisenhardt, 1989). The case study concerns a digital marketing agency, Alpha. Alpha is a marketing agency of 35 employees, located in the center of Italy and specialized in digital marketing services and web platform management. Alpha was established in 2009 during a period of strong growth in the market of innovative digital marketing services. Its goal is to enhance its clients’ e-commerce performance and the main market segment is represented by small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The surge in demand for Alpha services has been caused by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and by the financing opportunities linked to national and regional programs on SMEs’ digitalization.

Recently, Alpha has become part of a business group that brings together different marketing agencies with complementary specializations and aimed to increase the range of marketing-related services to be offered to a wider market in geographical terms, thus achieving an adequate company scale to become a full-range provider in marketing services.

Currently, one of the main challenges is represented by the alignment of assigned roles, interdependencies, and homogeneity of internal and customer-related organizational processes.

Data collection is ongoing and relies thus far on three semi-structured interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009), conducted with the Project Manager (PM), the Digital Advertising and Analyst Specialist, and the Digital Advertising Junior. Secondary data has been collected through corporate presentations and the website. Additionally, researchers took part in a public, two-hours seminar held by the Project Manager (PM) focused on illustrating the operational processes of Alpha and the main challenges related to their management.

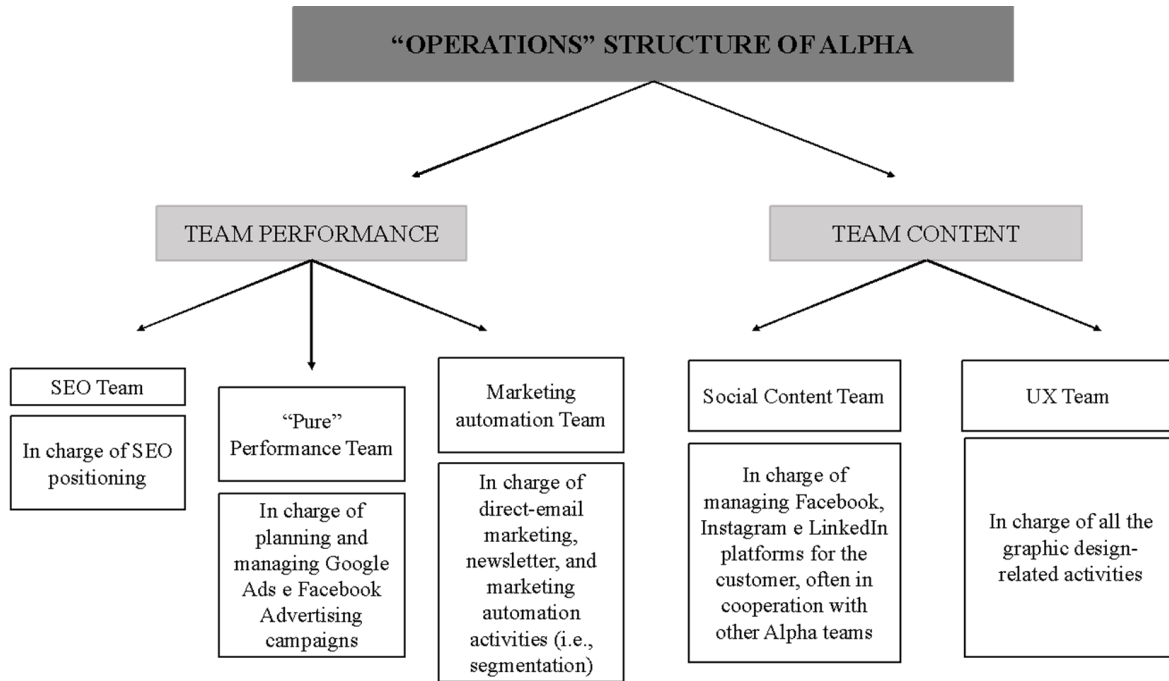
Primary and secondary data has been analyzed by adopting a systematic combining approach (Dubois and Gadde, 2002) to highlight the interplay between the research object, methodology and theory. The empirical analysis relies on the Business Network approach (Håkansson *et al.*, 2009) to explore organizational dynamics at the inter and intraorganizational levels. Data were coded and interpreted based on the ARA framework (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995), which describes the content of business interaction in three interrelated layers: actors’ bonds, resource ties, and activity links. Emerging paradoxical tensions have been identified along these three dimensions, along with managerial practices in place or to be implemented to manage them.

Results.

1. Key actors: emerging organizational tensions and organizational responses

Alpha has an articulated organizational structure composed of highly interdependent positions and units/functions. A key role is played by the team of Account New Business, which manages the first contact with customers. Once the contract is signed, the Account Team takes charge of managing relationships with the customer under both the strategic and operational sides, along the project/campaign. Services and projects are implemented by the Alpha teams, which compose the “Operations” structure. Figure 1 shows the main areas in which Alpha teams are divided.

Fig. 1: The operations structure of Alpha



Source: Authors' elaboration

In addition to internal teams, the agency uses partnerships with freelance marketing professionals to carry out specific activities. Freelancers can have the full responsibility of managing relationships with assigned customers in a wide range of marketing activities or collaborate on ad hoc projects. Their involvement depends on the level of demand for customer-related services and on the need to gain the required expertise.

Recently, due to an increasing market demand, Alpha expanded its human resource base. In particular, to further support the various teams and each team member, new organizational positions have been introduced: Project Manager (PM), Service Developer, and Human Resource (HR) Manager. The PM position – which is not common in marketing agencies – has been introduced and integrated to facilitate the planning of activities and resources and coordinating them daily and weekly. The Service Developer has the aim to coordinate innovative processes concerning digital tools and procedures. Lastly, an internal HR Manager has been put in charge of supporting the PM in planning, managing HRs involved in internal teams or as freelance collaborators, and of HR administration, including HR selection and training. This expansion was aimed at improving internal coordination of activities and therefore allowing for greater flexibility and efficiency in answering customers' requests.

However, it has led to the emergence of a relevant organizational tension related to the increased involvement of team members in various activities and the fragmented supervision role played by managers in different positions – Account Manager, PM, Service Developer, and HR Manager. The diffusion of “control” tasks is generating a lack of clear hierarchical relationships in the perception of team members and frictions among managers while planning their own activities. Alpha is facing this by fostering horizontal communication among managers and vertical communication with team members, to promote further organizational alignment among the various activities played by teams and by single team members.

In such a context, a further change in the organizational routines of Alpha has been introduced: the opportunity to work remotely. This change witnesses a quick reaction of Alpha to two emerging market needs: on the one side, the Covid-19 Pandemic, which hampered physical interactions; on the other side, the growing expectations from employees to be supported by their employers in balancing work and personal commitment, as declared by 87% of interviewees in the Global Workplace Report (Gallup, 2022). Nevertheless, this change triggered an organizational tension about the need to maintain physical interaction to promote knowledge exchange and organizational alignment while implementing remote work. This challenge is being faced by experimenting with hybrid work solutions, strengthening team communication, and adopting digital tools for real-time coordination.

2. Key activities: emerging organizational tensions and organizational responses

The activities implemented in Alpha depend on the content of services provided – mainly e-commerce-related – and on their timing. The main distinction is between spot services, which are planned ad-hoc with a fixed starting and ending, and ongoing ones, implemented regularly for one year and renewable upon the customer's request. In recent times, an increase in the customer base, as well as in the technical skills required to deliver digital services, led to additional complexity in the management of service operations, also because of the interdependencies of the various services.

As a consequence, a new organizational tension has emerged: on the one hand, each team is highly specialized in one single activity, taking full responsibility for it, while, on the other hand, there is an increasing need to foster integration between activities, as they might be concerned with the same customer and have technical complementarities. The same challenge concerns free-lance professionals, who might be in charge of one specific activity or of providing full services for a single customer. This organizational tension is being coped with fostering stronger coordination in service operations, mainly thanks to the PM's effort in terms of "resource planning". During the pandemic, this has been combined with management activities related to hybrid work planning. Another adopted mechanism is the introduction of coordination procedures and tools, which, however, have not yet fully solved difficulties related to interaction among Alpha teams, particularly with the UX staff, whose professional culture and technical knowledge have a more creative nature and substantially differ from those of the other teams. In addition to the setup of new procedures, the internal staff uses a variety of digital tools to exchange knowledge and data to foster coordination among teams. Notably, an ERP is used to manage knowledge flows between Sales, Administration, and Project Management, while a planning tool is adopted for coordination of activities.

Finally, another emerging organizational tension is the simultaneous pursuit of customization and standardization of services. Indeed, if it is true that customers look for ad hoc solutions and co-created, tailor-made services, they also more and more require short delivery times and restrained costs. On the one hand, the company is trying to provide a customized service offering combined with flexible management of interactions with the customer. On the other hand, these activities should be implemented to guarantee efficiency in the use of time and resources. This organizational tension is faced by the company promoting stronger interaction among Sales and Account managers and among the Heads of Service Teams and the PM. Moreover, providing customers with tailor-made solutions becomes more and more complex over time. One way this complexity manifest itself is through the incremental adoption of digital technologies: indeed, frequently, customers adopt one type of digital solution at the time, adding new ones incrementally. While, on the one hand, this approach allows Alpha to continuously reinvest in the relationship with customers by reinforcing trust and providing additional value, on the other hand, it also challenges the management of operational processes. Alpha, indeed, is called to iteratively revise the number of activities dedicated to each customer, as well as the necessary competences and resources to sustain them. A Project Management style is of tremendous support in such a volatile and complex scenario.

3. Key resources: emerging organizational tensions and organizational responses

Over the years Alpha personnel has developed specialized expertise in e-commerce-related digital marketing, with SMEs as market targets about the management of digital projects with SMEs having a different degree of knowledge and experience in digital marketing. The variety in customer SMEs' profiles and capabilities required Alpha to develop adaptation and flexibility in the service offering and in the management of the interaction with customers. The growth in the size of the company and of the various operational teams has been possible also thanks to the involvement of young graduates from universities located in the region.

This pattern has led to one emerging organizational tension: the pursuit of incremental involvement of new hires in team activities during the onboarding phase and the need for each team member to guarantee autonomy and homogeneity in service provision. This organizational tension is being managed by the company thanks to the advanced digital marketing training for new hires – mainly through the close supervision by the Head of Service Team - and the active role played by the PM, whose main concern is to organize internal and external human resources to be involved in activities, also in a hybrid work setting. The PM is involved in frequent "alignment meetings" with every collaborator to discuss any relevant issue emerging from daily work practice, such as difficulties in implementing activities, training opportunities and personal problems affecting the workplace.

Providing innovative services in an efficient manner implies promoting innovation in terms of new procedures and digital tools. This implies that organizational tensions emerge in the pursuit of exploration of innovative solutions and exploitation of the existing knowledge base in the provision of the service offering. This organizational tension is being addressed by introducing the Service Development Manager and allowing each team member to devote time to developing new organizational procedures to guarantee higher efficiency and homogeneity within their team and to assess and learn new digital marketing technologies and tools. In addition, the company recently started launching a more structured internal data analysis related to the main organizational processes, to gain a more detailed picture of performance levels and to strengthen reporting activities.

Table I summarizes the main emerging organizational tensions and responses for each layer of the ARA framework.

Tab. 1: Summary of emerging organizational tensions and responses along the three dimensions of the ARA framework

Layer	Emerging organizational tensions	Organizational responses and impact on operational processes
Actors	Integrated vs diffused supervisory role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promotion of organizational alignment through horizontal communication among managers and vertical communication with team members
	Fostering interaction among employees vs pursuing a hybrid work configuration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduction of hybrid work solutions Promotion of team communication Adoption of digital tools for real-time coordination

<i>Activities</i>	Pursuing separation vs stronger integration of service provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource planning activities implemented by the PM • Introduction of management activities for hybrid work planning • Adoption and coordination of procedures/tools • Use of an ERP to manage knowledge flows
	Customization vs standardization of service provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion of interaction among Sales and Account managers and between the Head of the service teams and the PM
<i>Resources</i>	Incremental involvement of newly hired employees vs HR's autonomy and homogeneity in service implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advanced digital marketing training for the new hires • Supervision and active role of the PM through alignment meetings
	Exploration vs exploitation of innovative solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction of the Service Department Manager position • Development of new organizational procedures from teams for efficiency and learning • Adoption of structured internal data analysis related to the main organizational processes

Source: Authors' elaboration

Preliminary discussions, conclusions and limitations of the research. This study explores changes in SMAs' organizational configurations and operational processes implemented to meet the evolving market challenges through the analysis of the explorative case study of Alpha and the use of the paradox perspective along the three dimensions of Actors, Resources, and Activities, based on the Business Network analytical framework (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). Findings confirm that SMAs represent a typology of PSFs under strong pressure for changes in the market and technological contexts (Lynch, 2019), with various emerging organizational tensions and related organizational responses having an impact on operational processes. The preliminary empirical analysis provides key insights, filtered through the three dimensions of the ARA framework.

With regard to the actor dimension, organizational tensions emerge due to the growing complexity of processes leading to the involvement of various actors in supervision and control. This pattern is further pushed by the need to balance physical interaction and remote working (Summerfield, 2022). These two organizational tensions have been addressed by fostering alignment and communication among key managerial positions and within operational teams and through more careful planning of hybrid work configurations (Whillans *et al.*, 2021).

With regard to the activities dimension, organizational tensions concern the balance between separation and integration of activities performed by different teams and the pursuit of standardization and customization in the service provision (Bettiol *et al.*, 2015; Kohtamäki *et al.*, 2020). The complexity in managing activities is largely due to the higher levels of interdependence (Lynch, 2019), requiring specific and innovative organizational solutions. Alpha has been dealing with such tensions by strengthening the planning of activities through the PM and by introducing more effective coordination mechanisms through new procedures and digital tools.

Regarding the "assembly" and development of resources (Ciabuschi *et al.*, 2012), two main organizational tensions emerge concerning the effective involvement and training of new hires in the service provision processes and the need to combine the pursuit of exploration and exploitation of solutions (Jensen *et al.*, 2010; Hargrave and van de Ven, 2017). These tensions have been coped with strengthening key positions (Service Development Manager, PM), introducing specific procedures, and fostering knowledge transfer and exchange.

This preliminary research suggests that SMAs are currently facing various organizational tensions and adopting coping organizational mechanisms, which require rethinking and reconfiguring existing operational processes. This is a "game" thus far played mainly by large PSFs. The case of Alpha shows that also SMAs can undertake more structured organizational solutions, such as new positions and specific procedures allowing for the use of "time" as a resource to pursue more effective coordination and knowledge exchange. Future research could provide a more extensive view of the current organizational challenges and configuration of SMAs, which represent key actors in market-related innovation, considering the conflicting challenges of pursuing efficiency and innovation and the interrelated phenomena of human resources retention and activation of remote working configurations.

Managerial implications. At the managerial level, the analysis of organizational tensions is helpful to support small companies struggling with the extreme dynamism of contemporary markets. Becoming aware of the potential organizational tensions is the first step for managers in understanding how to recognize them and promptly react when they occur. In general terms, key tools in the efficient management of operational processes seem to be a tight coordination of activities and priorities, implemented through a Project Management approach, a cooperative-based working style among teams, and the exploitation of digital tools to optimize information flows.

Originality of the paper. Though this research is still at its infancy, some preliminary contributions can be drawn based on the empirical findings. In terms of literature the study attempts at enriching knowledge on how the operational processes of SMAs are transforming due to the recent changes in contemporary markets, ranging from the great push toward digitalization to the challenges imposed by Covid-19. On the one side, the case of Alpha reinforces what suggested by Rubik (2021) or Kronblad and Pregmark (2021) about the increasing complexity to manage intricately

operational processes faced by SMAs, especially in terms of generating additional value for customers within such processes (Cluley *et al.*, 2019). On the other side, the adopted paradox theory lens (Smith and Lewis, 2011) allows to highlight a series of original tensions and copying strategies.

Keywords: *small marketing agency, tensions, operations*

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