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# Entrepreneurs' interpersonal communication competence in networking

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## Abstract

Modern international business calls for competencies that enable entrepreneurs to be creative, innovative, effective and capable of networking. Competencies in forming and developing networks are particularly valuable for organizations and companies in countries with small economies, such as Finland, that are dependent on export and profitable international business. The aim of this research is to build understanding of what kind of interpersonal communication competence (ICC) entrepreneurs need in networking.

Since the classic work of Granovetter (1982) and others (see e.g. Håkansson, 1982; Håkansson & Snehota, 2000), network theory and network analysis have become popular when trying to understand the behavior of organizations as well as of individuals in multiple contexts. The importance of networking has been recognized in international business and entrepreneurship research (e.g. Newman et al., 2006; Rauch et al., 2015).

In the field of communication, there is a long tradition of studying interpersonal communication competence. Yet little attention has been given to entrepreneurs' interpersonal communication competence in networking. To date, networking has been mainly studied in the research field of network analysis. Thus, it makes sense to focus on previous research in these fields.

The data consist of thematic interviews (N = 14) carried out with entrepreneurs representing different companies from various industries. The data were analyzed with abductive logic by applying thematic

analysis. The results show that in networking entrepreneurs' ICC has four crucial dimensions: (1) behavioral communication competence (relational communication skills), (2) cognitive communication competence (knowledge on communication, meta-cognition), (3) affective dimension (motivation, attitude, ethical mindset), and (4) business-related competence and resources (business expertise, resources). We also discuss a way for other researchers to continue studying context-specific meanings related to interpersonal communication competence, and how the results can be applied when planning and executing entrepreneurs' communication training.

KEYWORDS: Interpersonal communication competence, entrepreneurship, networks

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## Introduction

Modern international business calls for competencies that enable entrepreneurs to be creative, innovative, effective and capable of networking. Competencies in forming and developing networks are particularly valuable for organizations and companies in countries with small economies that are dependent on export and profitable international business, such as Finland. For example, one of the participants in the study, Juhani, owns a business operating in the biochemistry field, which is his expertise. Yet, as he stated in the interview, there are only 5 million Finns that are possible users of his company's products. Because one of the company goals is sustainability, the demand will eventually drop as the products are built to last. The only way of creating and maintaining business is to network, find new markets and identify growth opportunities. For this, one needs competence, and just being a professional in the field is, as the interviewed entrepreneur pointed out, not enough.

In this study, we examine entrepreneurs' interpersonal communication competence in networking. We define an entrepreneur as "one

who owns, launches, manages, and assumes the risks of an economic venture" (Greve & Salaff, 2003, p. 1). The focus is on entrepreneurs who are responsible for running their own business, meaning the existence of their SMEs is dependent on their ability to network, form and maintain business relationships. We base our definition of interpersonal communication competence on Spitzberg (2013, p. 126), who states that ICC refers to "an impression of appropriateness and effectiveness, which is functionally related to individual motivation, knowledge, skills, and contextual facilitators and constraints."

The content of network relationships, governance, and structure (Hoang & Antoncic, 2003), as well as the benefit of vast social networks to firms and individuals alike have been extensively documented and discussed in the literature (e.g. Rauch et al., 2015; Stam et al., 2014). Network theory and network analysis have become popular when trying to understand the behavior of organizations as well as of individuals in a range of contexts. The network approach and network theory span a broad range of disciplines, including computer sciences and communication (see Newman et al., 2006).

It has been stated that social connections within entrepreneurial social networks are critical elements of the entrepreneurial role and a crucial part of innovation and learning (e.g. Faroque et al., 2017; Gielen et al., 2003), growing (Anderson et al., 2010) and managing uncertainty (Engel et al., 2017).

Despite the broad spectrum of studies conducted on social networks and prior understanding of entrepreneurs' social networks, empirical research on networking competencies seems to be rare. The requirements for building and maintaining extensive and effective networks in different contexts have gained some attention (e.g. Anderson & Li, 2014; Engel et al., 2017). Yet what kinds of interpersonal communication competence are required in entrepreneurs' networking has not been studied previously.

Communication competence needed in work contexts and in different professions is studied to some extent. Studies have shed light on the communication competence of engineers (Darling & Dannels, 2003), teachers' (Daly & Vangelisti, 2003), leaders' (Rouhiainen-Neunhäuserer, 2009), politicians and medical doctors (Mönkkönen & Finstad, 2007), political leaders (Almonkari & Isotalus, 2010), researchers (Laajalahti, 2014), and lawyers (Boccaccini, Boothby & Brodsky, 2002). The focus has been on understanding communication competence as part of or as one element within professional competence (e.g. Kostiaainen, 2003).

Indeed, in many studies, the communication skills needed in contemporary working life are being listed. However, as Kostiaainen (2003, p. 111) points out, the challenge is that these listings result in seeing communication skills and competencies as superficial and fragmented requirements on top of, or in addition to, professional competence. To change this, Kostiaainen

(2003) suggests that instead of always listing new skills and requirements, communication research could focus on studying already established elements of competency, as well as the meaning of communication competence in various work-related contexts.

Regardless of what is being said about the established dimensions of communication competence (affective, cognitive, and metacognitive and behavioral dimensions; e.g. Kostiaainen (2003), we would like to challenge the established dimensions and the ICC as something external and separate from one's professional expertise. For example, Koponen, Julkinen and Asai (2019) investigated the ICC of salespeople in the context of international B2B solution sales, and suggested a new dimension of sales acumen to be a fundamental part of their ICC. According to their study, competent communication in the field of B2B solution sales requires strong professional competence and that the two are inseparable. Thus, according to Koponen et al. (2019), ICC in this context includes four dimensions: behavioral communication, affective communication competence, cognitive communication competence, and sales acumen.

Here we follow the idea that it is important to examine discipline-specific interpersonal communication competence because in each discipline people have different values, norms and expectations for effective and appropriate communication behavior (Dannels, 2001). We were not able to capture the essence of entrepreneurs' ICC in networking with quantitative measures, as existing scales or measures rely on a more general understanding of communication competence. Indeed, as Purhonen (2008; 2012) has suggested, in addition to studies trying to determine or explain factors influencing an individual's learning of networking competencies,

qualitative research that offers in-depth understanding on interpersonal communication competence in networking is still needed.

In this research, we apply a qualitative research approach in order to create in-depth understanding of the phenomena, and investigate whether there are possibly any discipline-specific elements to entrepreneurs' interpersonal communication competence. Our research question is as follows: What kind of interpersonal communication competence do entrepreneurs require for networking?

## Theoretical background

### Social networks as interpersonal relationships

Social networks can be seen as method, metaphor, and form (e.g. Knox et al., 2006) and the network approach, along with network theory, includes a broad range of disciplines (see Newman et al., 2006). Instead of focusing on firm-to-firm networking (company level), the focus in this research is on the individual and the relationship (person-to-person) level. From this micro-level approach, social networks are seen as "interconnected individuals who are linked by patterned communication flows" (Rogers & Kincaid, 1981, p. 82). This approach also stresses interaction and carries the underlying assumption that interpersonal communication relationships are initiated and maintained through reciprocal communication between individuals (Littlejohn, 2002).

In this research, interpersonal relationships refer to relations between individuals who are aware of the other person, and of the relationship (Wilmot, 1996). Interpersonal relationships are formed, maintained and developed over a period of time and meanings are cons-

tantly negotiated between partners in relation to their shared history, current status and anticipated future (Littlejohn, 2002). Given the interpersonal perspective selected for this study, networking is seen as initiating, maintaining and developing interpersonal relationships (Kokkonen & Almonkari, 2015).

### Entrepreneurs' social networks and networking

In the field of international business research, the industrial marketing and purchasing (IMP) group has long investigated inter-organizational networks and demonstrated the important roles networks have in international business (Håkansson & Snehota, 2000; Welsh & Wilkinson, 2004). Networks enable entrepreneurs to recognize business opportunities, enhance their credibility and possibly help them cooperate with strategic alliances (Anderson et al., 2010; Engel et al., 2017; Oviatt & McDougall, 2005). Entrepreneurs seem to understand that they cannot rely only on in-house resources and capabilities in their innovation processes (Anderson & Li, 2014; Bughin et al., 2008; del Vecchio et al., 2018), and learning (Gielen et al., 2003). Social networks are important, not only when businesses are growing, but also in different phases of growth, like when companies are becoming international (Musteen et al., 2014). Furthermore, entrepreneurs' social networks provide social support from other entrepreneurs along with new business opportunities and channels (Leskinen, 2011). Overall, networking is considered fundamental for entrepreneurs (e.g. Faroque et al., 2017), and it has even been stated that the "key to entrepreneurial success is the ability of the entrepreneur to exploit social networks" (Leyden et al., 2014, p. 1160).

Previous studies have investigated networking competence on a macro level, and defined the skills, characteristics or talents that entrepreneurs and their firms need for networking (Thornton et al., 2013; Ritter & Gemünden, 2003). Some studies (Anderson et al., 2010; Leskinen, 2011) have looked into entrepreneurial networking from the individual's perspective by outlining important factors that may affect the success or failure of the networking process. These studies provide a broad understanding of entrepreneurs' social networks and networking. However, what remains unclear to, for example, Juhani, a new business owner, is what kind of communication competence is expected and required from him as he sets out to initiate and manage his social networks.

### **Interpersonal communication competence**

The field of communication contains a wide body of research on ICC (Kostiainen, 2003; Laajalahti, 2014; Rubin, 1990; Spitzberg, 2000, 2013; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984, 2002; Wilson & Sabee, 2003). According to Spitzberg (2013, p. 126), ICC refers to “an impression of appropriateness and effectiveness, which is functionally related to individual motivation, knowledge, skills, and contextual facilitators and constraints.” ICC is often defined as a construction with cognitive, behavioral and affective dimensions, relying on the foundation by Spitzberg and Cupach (1984). In addition, researchers see meta-cognition as an important part of ICC (Koponen, 2012; Laajalahti, 2014).

Here three widely accepted criteria for ICC apply (see Dearnorff, 2006; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009): appropriateness, meaning a perceived fitness or the legitimacy of an interaction partner's behavior in a given social context and relationship (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002); effec-

tiveness, referring to how interaction partners are able to achieve preferred or desired outcomes of social interaction (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002); and ethicality, meaning the communicator's ability and willingness to take moral responsibility and behave in a way which does not insult others or create distrust (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002; Wilson & Sabee, 2003). More precise definitions of the key dimensions of ICC are presented in Table 1.

Despite numerous studies exploring ICC (see reviews from Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Wilson & Sabee, 2003), researchers have defined the concepts in different ways. For example, in this study the behavioral dimension (skills) is seen as one dimension of ICC, but interpersonal communication skills, skilled behavior or skilled interpersonal communication have been used in parallel with ICC (Hargie, 2010; Purhonen, 2012). Furthermore, ICC has been defined as a synonym to communication competence, communicative competence, and relational competence (Purhonen, 2012). Therefore, it is important to note that in this study, the core dimensions of ICC shown in Table 1 are interrelated, and the basic assumption is that all these dimensions are required in order to communicate in a competent manner.

Purhonen (2008) as well as Purhonen and Valkonen (2013) have looked at ICC in collaboration with an SME during an internationalization process. Based on the literature, Purhonen (2008) lists management of diversity, information sharing, the ability to adjust and adapt, and integrative negotiation as well as the ability to create and manage relationships as focal areas of communication competence within the given context. Broadly, these findings could be considered to be relational communication skills (see also Hardy et al., 2003; Hargie & Tourish, 1997).

As Laajalahti (2007, p. 335) concludes, there have been many attempts to “define the interpersonal communication competence needed in current working life or in specific professions, but many of these result in fragmented lists of requirements.” Yet other studies investigating ICC in professional settings have shown that ICC is much more than just interpersonal communication skills or a list of requirements (see Knight & Yorke, 2003; Koponen et al., 2019; Purhonen, 2012). For example, in recruitment settings, employability is more than just skills, and communication skills as well as subject-specific understanding and skills are needed (Knight & Yorke, 2003). Overall, there is an extensive body of literature on the communication competence needed in different

contexts, and there is broad understanding of entrepreneurs’ social networks. However, Kokkonen and Almonkari (2015), who looked at social networks from an interpersonal perspective, concluded that we are still missing empirical evidence on what kind of ICC is needed in specific fields or among certain occupations. Indeed, there is a need for more empirical research on the ICC entrepreneurs require for networking, which is the question we attempt to answer in this study.

**Table 1. Defining the dimensions of ICC**

Dimension of ICC	Definition
Behavioral	This refers to interpersonal communication skills (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). Having good interpersonal communication skills refers to the person’s ability to show appropriate and effective verbal and nonverbal communication behavior in a certain context (Rubin, 1990; Valkonen, 2003). Hargie (2010) sees that communication skills are processes that can be observed in behavior. However, skills are also related to cognitive and affective processes (Hargie, 2010).
Affective	This refers to the motivation to engage in interpersonal interaction. Moreover, it refers to a person’s feelings and attitudes towards communication and interaction with other people (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002; Valkonen, 2003). Motivation is a crucial part of ICC (Valkonen, 2003), since even a highly skillful person might not be an effective communicator if he/she is not willing to participate in interaction.
Cognitive	This dimension is associated with knowledge and understanding of effective and appropriate interpersonal communication (Rubin, 1990; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). Spitzberg and Cupach (2002) state that interactants need to know and understand the nature, rules, and norms of different communication situations and relationships between people (content knowledge). Furthermore, interactants need knowledge of different processes, such as knowledge of problem-solving procedures (procedural knowledge).  Meta-cognitive communication skills (Koponen, 2012; Laajalahti, 2014, Valkonen, 2003) refer to an individual’s knowledge of his/her own cognitive and emotional processes. This may refer to a person’s ability to evaluate his/her own communication behavior (Valkonen, 2003).

## Methodology

### Data Collection

Due to limited prior knowledge on what type of interpersonal communication competence Finnish entrepreneurs need in order to be effective in networking, we apply a qualitative approach in this study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Thematic interviews were used to question experts in the field who have the best knowledge of the topic (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015). Data collection was continued until effective saturation of categories was achieved (Morse et al., 2002).

The respondents were from a Finnish business context, all having domestic and international experience of networking. The interviews are a part of a larger longitudinal research project on social networks and networking. For this article, interview data consisted of 14 people, of which four were interviewed more than once. The second interviews were conducted to clarify and gain some additional information on topics covered in the original interviews. The thematic interviews were carried out between 2011 and 2019.

Participants were selected using snowball sampling, which is considered particularly re-

**Table 2. Participants**

Interview number	Pseudonym	Gender	Age group	Line of business
1	Kimmo	male	30–40	Information technology
2	Matti	male	60–70	Consulting / Exports
3	Jouni	male	20–30	Wellbeing / Sports
4	Emma	female	30–40	Communications
6	Petra	female	40–50	Training / Education
7	Kalle	male	30–40	Wellbeing / Sports
8	Anthony	male	50–60	Communications
9	Timo	male	40–50	Consulting
10	Pekka	male	40–50	Financing
11	Juhani	male	40–50	Biochemistry
12	Silvia	female	60–70	Wellbeing / Sports
13	Petteri	male	40–50	Consulting
14	Natalie	female	40–50	Training / Education

levant to interview data (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015). This means that the sampling grows by participants suggesting new interviewees to the study. Interviews were expert interviews (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015) and therefore specific criteria for final participant selection was established. Participants were selected so that they would (1) have domestic and international experience, 2) have at least three years experience of being an entrepreneur, and 3) that they would represent various industries. Five of the participants were women and nine were men. Entrepreneurs represented various fields of business including education, consulting, wellbeing and sports, communication, IT, engineering, housing and real estate, and biochemistry.

Participants' firms were in different development phases, from start-up ventures to well established international businesses. The interviews lasted between 45 and 118 minutes. In order to gain in-depth understanding from the perspective of the participants, semi-structured and open-ended questions were used during the thematic interviews (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015).

### Analysis

The analysis represents an abductive approach (Dubois & Gabbe, 2002). A tight but evolving theoretical framework was based on a previous conceptualization of ICC (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; 2002) later evolved through empirical observations (Dubois & Gabbe, 2002). By relying on the theoretical dimensions of ICC, the transcribed interview data were analyzed to see if the existing dimensions could be expanded. First, a thematic analysis was conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and then initial codes were generated from the data along with a theoretical

framework (cognitive, metacognitive, behavioral, and affective dimensions of ICC). Next, all relevant data were connected to each code. Thereafter, potential themes were searched for and codes were gathered into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The four main themes (cognitive, metacognitive, behavioral, and affective dimensions of ICC) were similar to the selected theoretical framework, and two more themes (business-related competence and resources as well as ethical mindset) were derived through observations from the data. The ethical mindset was later included as part of the affective dimension of ICC.

One researcher analyzed the data and the second researcher verified the analysis by checking the codes and the themes. Reliability was achieved through careful data collection and by having the interviewees review the transcribed data (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015). Interviews were conducted in Finnish and the quotes were translated by a language expert. Participants had an opportunity to comment on the translations and interpretations made of their interviews. In addition, when clarification was needed, a few follow-up questions were asked via email to increase the reliability and validity of the research. Relevant excerpts from the data were selected to demonstrate the themes. In the excerpts, pseudonyms are used to ensure the anonymity of the participants.

## Findings

### Interpersonal communication competence required in networking

Table 3 presents the main themes and their subcategories. The four main themes are behavioral communication dimension (including relational communication skills), cognitive communication dimension (knowledge

**Table 3. The main themes, subcategories and meanings in the data**

Theme	Subcategory	Meaning in the data
Behavioral communication dimension	Relational communication skills	Ability to establish contact and rapport
		Ability to show interest
		Ability to initiate and engage in interaction
		Ability to keep the discussion alive
		Ability to reduce tension and small talk skills
		Ability to create trust
		Active listening skills
		Argumentation skills
		Ability to manage uncertainty
		Language skills
		Ability to be flexible and adaptive
		Ability to manage social networks
		Ability to terminate/end unwanted relationships
		Ability to distinguish personal and professional relationships / networks
Cognitive communication dimension	Knowledge on communication	Knowledge about relational development
		Knowledge of how to create and maintain trust
		Knowledge about different cultural contexts
	Meta-cognition	Thinking and reflecting on one's networking behavior / relationship
Affective communication dimension	Motivation	Positive attitude towards people
		Motivation to interact with different people
		Intrinsic motivation to learn from or with others
		Being aware of the benefits of networking
	Attitude	Respect for differences and diversity
		Openness and positive attitude and curiosity toward others and other cultures
	Ethical mindset	Reciprocity
		Integrity
Business-related competence and resources	Business expertise	Understanding field-specific knowledge / expertise
		Ability to find relevant, industry-specific knowledge
		Strong knowhow from one's own field
		Good reputation
	Resources	Resources (time, money, existing relationships) to establish and maintain relationships

on communication, meta-cognition), affective communication dimension (motivation, attitudes, ethical mindset), and business-related competence and resources (business expertise, resources). When reviewing the results, one should keep in mind that the behavioral, cognitive and affective communication dimensions as well as business competence and an ethical mindset are all part of effective and appropriate networking, intertwined and affecting each other. The following quote from one of the interviewees illustrates this interconnectedness:

I do see [networking] as a skill. But, then it is also important how you are motivated to network and what is your approach towards networking. I mean there are people who would have the skills, but who see it [networking] as something very negative and who hate networking. (Emma)

### Behavioral communication dimension

As Table 3 shows, the communication skills needed in networking include the ability to show interest, initiate and engage in interaction, and skills to keep the discussion alive. One particular skill that was associated with all of the abilities mentioned above was active listening, as the following example from Emma's interview illustrates. To a question about what one should do to engage a contact and initiate a relationship, Emma replied: "After a meeting, you should remember the other person. This to me is being present, being able to say in your own words what that person has said. Active listening!"

The results show that one needs to be able to show interest in a reciprocal relationship, and this is often considered to be possible through active listening. Furthermore, listening skills, or more specifically the lack of listening skills, was seen to discourage people from engaging

in interactions, as one of the participants stated: "If you just talk about yourself, you will end up boring people." Another participant pointed out the following: "The best way to make others interested in you is to ask them to talk about themselves. There is nothing people love more than talking about themselves." This is also linked to an ability to show interest in possible partners.

Another aspect mentioned in several interviews was the ability to maintain a discussion with a complete stranger (also known as small talk skills). In addition to small talk, participants discussed the ability to tolerate or manage uncertainty when meeting new people. Managing uncertainty was thought to be important, especially at the beginning of one's career, because then it is vital to be able to "just go out there, and get to know people." Jouni, another participant said: "If you are constantly within your own comfort zone, you cannot learn and develop, nor achieve any of your dreams. So you have to have the courage to jump into some scary things."

Another skill mentioned in the interviews was the ability to be flexible and adaptive, as the next example from Pekka illustrates: "It is important that you can be flexible and discuss things. You should always talk about things first and seek alternative views. You cannot make the best solutions by yourself. Instead, you should be able to seek second opinions."

The results indicate that managing one's networks also include skills such as being able to terminate negative relationships. The interviewees suggested that limiting one's network is just as important as expanding it. Many participants also stated that it is important to be able to distinguish between one's personal and professional networks. This view was shared by

most of the participants regardless of how much their own personal and professional networks actually overlapped.

It is a skill to distinguish between personal relationships and work-related relationships. It is also a skill to get a rid of a person who does not deliver at work even if he or she is your friend in private life. It is also a skill to terminate those relationships that are difficult or counterproductive. (Juhani)

One aspect of managing social networks was related to the quality of relationships. As one participant mentioned, “quantity does not equal quality,” meaning that one should not only aim at extending one’s social network in sheer numbers, but also think about the quality of the relationships.

All of the participants had international experience of networking and all of them stressed the importance of language skills. To what extent one should know other languages varied according to the industry and the length of international experience. Many pointed out that knowing English is not enough, and that one should know, at least, the language of one’s target country. Anthony pointed out the following: “If you want to be involved in politics or in any other activity, and if you wish to establish an extensive social network in [your target country], you need to be able to speak the language of that country.”

Many of the behavioral elements were linked to the ability to create trust and argumentation skills. Especially later in relationships it is, according to the interviewees, important to “not only leave a good impression at first, but really create trust in the long run.” Argumentation skills were seen to be important in situations where negotiations and innovation were required to maintain interpersonal relationships.

In regards to the behavioral communication dimension as a whole, the participants focused mostly on relational aspects of communication when thinking about their ICC needs in networking. This finding confirms our previous understanding of what networking is. In essence, networking is initiating, forming, developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships between business partners (see Kokkonen & Almonkari, 2015).

### Cognitive communication dimension

The kind of knowledge needed in appropriate and effective networking included knowledge of intercultural communication and different cultures, along with knowledge of interpersonal relationships, their development and maintenance, as the next examples from the data show.

In international business one needs to have the information of how people behave in a given target culture. For example, in Brazil people do not expect you to hang out with them after working hours. Instead, privacy is highly respected and appreciated. (Matti)

Kalle, another participant, also pointed out the following: “You need to be able to build trust between people. Yet that is not enough, as you also have to have information and knowledge about how to maintain that trust. That is important.”

One should also master metacognitive elements of communication to be effective and appropriate in networking. Being able to reflect and analyze one’s relationships and social networks is, according to the participants, a requirement for developing and managing one’s social networks and relationships. As Silvia, a female participant stated, “You have to be aware of the negative relationships in order to get rid of them.”

### Affective communication dimension

Affective communication dimension, that is, the elements of motivation and attitudes, were seen as a fundamental part of the ICC needed in networking. In many cases, it was considered the most important dimension. Regarding motivation, many participants stated that one needs to be interested in meeting new people in order to be effective in networking. To be motivated often results from seeing the benefits of relationships and networks:

I am motivated [to network] by the efficiency. [---] One goal of a network is to be able to react and do certain things. And, on the other hand [the idea is to have] the most extensive know-how for the given tasks. (Simo)

Especially intercultural contexts demand entrepreneurs to be open and have a positive attitude toward different people and cultural contexts. Moreover, respect of differences and diversity in general was emphasized.

Many participants noted that regardless of being highly motivated to develop and maintain relationships, it is sometime also hard work. For example, building networks through social media was not something that came naturally to all of the interviewees. Establishing contacts through social media or the telephone can be demanding and requires persistence, as Jouni points out: "I know that one should be on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook and all the other social media. But I just don't have the energy for it all." Kimmo also discussed the same phenomena: "These new connections have been hard work. I called about thirty times to this one guy before I got hold of him."

The data also included references to the different approaches to building and maintaining social networks. Many participants saw network-

ing as an enjoyable and rewarding activity with its own intrinsic value. These individuals often stated that they enjoy meeting new people, and do not necessarily think of doing so as a means to enhancing their own social networks per se. Some participants considered networking part of their work, but did not seem to place any special value or emotional attachment on this activity. There were also some participants who in the interviews described networking as a required activity that was unpleasant to engage in. The negative outlook on networking was in some cases associated with unethical utilization of human relationships. The attitudes toward networking varied from statements such as "I only do this because I have to" to "I just love meeting new people."

The results show that an ethical mindset is also an important part of entrepreneurs' ICC. As Table 2 shows, reciprocity and integrity were both mentioned in several interviews as a fundamental element in relationships that constitute social networks. Relationships that offer reward and that are reciprocal will persist and develop. Yet the concept and idea of social exchange (see Stafford, 2008) as an element in relationships and networking brings about ethical discussions of networking and social relationships in general, as the next quotation from Emma reveals: "Those who do not have a good reputation are those who are known for not being authentic. They are often people who only approach you because they want something from you and their adulation is so visible." Kalle, another participant also discussed how "some might feel that networking is something very manipulative and calculated. This is why they do not even want to talk about networking." As these excerpts show, participants were concerned that networking, as a term, had a negative, almost exploitative connotation toward interpersonal relationships.

## Business related competence and resources

As Table 2 illustrates, building networks seems to require business-related competence and resources. Such competence is seen to be a core element in networking: decisions about future partners are made through the interpretations and experiences based on one's expertise and professionalism, as the next quotation from Kimmo shows: "You also have to have professional competence. You have to know what you are talking about. That is also earning trust."

Business-related competence seems to be relevant both when planning networking, but also when establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships. What was evident from the interviews was to network with relevant partners one really needs field-specific knowledge, as the following excerpt illustrates:

You learn where the experts in your field are located. And then you learn to make a map in your mind. For example, there is exceptionally good research on international law in the Netherlands. So, I will turn my eyes to the Netherlands. The kind of field-specific skills and knowledge that helps you to retrieve information on possible partners. (Petra)

Furthermore, in order to create trust and maintain relationships, content-specific competence is required, as one of the interviewees pointed out:

If you do not master the field-specific language, vocabulary, and content, it is almost impossible to network among other professionals in the field. You have to have the high-quality product and the expertise that goes with it. People will not network with you just because you are a nice person. You need that hard core content to convince them. (Petteri)

Participants also noted the importance of building networks at the initial phase to acquire knowledge of possible partners, competitors and markets. Even though many participants stressed the non-strategic approach to building and maintaining networks, many still pointed out that one needs skills to find the industry and market-specific relevant information:

Usually when I plan to connect with someone, I first do a five-day investigation on the possible partner. Then I make a strategic plan to travel and carefully meet targeted individuals. And you have to prepare for expenses, you can't just run around since travelling is expensive. [...] For example, in Turkey, we made 50 visits all together. (Matti)

Networking takes time and other resources. Especially when SMEs are planning to go international, the resources are essential, as Matti's excerpt above illustrated. In the words of a highly experienced entrepreneur, "One element of being a professional is to understand that you need to allocate resources for building networks."

## Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this study was to investigate what ICC entrepreneurs need in networking. The results contribute to the existing literature on entrepreneurs' networking competence (Ritter & Gemünden, 2003; Thornton et al., 2013) because our focus was on the individual instead of on the company level. This study provides a new theoretical understanding on what dimensions of entrepreneurs' interpersonal communication competence are essential in networking. Our findings indicate that, in networking, entrepreneurs' ICC has four dimensions: (1) behavioral communication (relational communication skills), (2) cognitive communication (knowledge on communication, metacognition), (3) af-

fective dimension (motivation, attitude, ethical mindset), and (4) business-related competence and resources (business expertise, resources).

The study increases existing understanding in the field of interpersonal communication studies, as we propose a new conceptualization of the ICC entrepreneurs need in networking. Previous studies on ICC have usually included three to four dimensions (Rubin, 1990; Spitzberg, 2000; 2013; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; 2002; Wilson & Sabee, 2003), all of which have focused on communication only. However, already Kostainen (2003) and Hyvärinen (2011) investigated the connections between communication competence and vocational competence. In addition, Koponen et al. (2019) found that ICC is a crucial part of a person's professional competence, and so they included sales acumen as a new, context-specific dimension for ICC in sales. As our new conceptualization of ICC in networking shows, the dimensions related to communication are not enough to fully understand the phenomena. Entrepreneurs also require business-related competence for successful and appropriate networking.

This study showed that professional competence is needed not only when planning and initiating interpersonal relationships that are part of entrepreneurs' social networks, but also to create trust and maintain the relationships. Along the same lines, Airila et al. (2018) have pointed out that cooperation between possible partners often fail because actors do not have a clear understanding of whom they should or could build cooperation with.

Since interaction, as well as interpersonal communication competence, always takes place in a certain culture, time, relationship, situation and function, it is therefore understood as a

contextual phenomenon (Laajalahti, 2014). For example, the behavioral dimension (interpersonal communication skills) is evaluated differently in different contexts (Spitzberg, 2013). Moreover, the participants' and observers' perception of the context determines the expectations for ICC (Spitzberg, 2000; 2013). We hope that results from this study are scientifically relevant and useful (Corley & Gioia, 2011), as they suggest further paths for other researchers to continue studying context-specific meanings related to ICC. With the results, the study confirms that the requirements for entrepreneurs' ICC in networking are different than, for example, the requirements for sales people's and sales managers' ICC in an international sales context (see Koponen et al., 2019).

The findings of this study can be used in entrepreneurs' communication competence training. Hyvärinen (2011) has already suggested that discipline-specific communication education should consider the elements of communication competence to be interwoven with professional competencies (Hyvärinen, 2011, p. 40). This study shows that business-related competence and resources are inseparable elements in entrepreneurs' ICC in networking. Thus, training should be designed in ways that enable participants to develop their competence as a whole. In practice, this could mean teamwork with communication experts and professionals in the field. Furthermore, as Kokkonen and Almonkari (2015, 45) have pointed out, "the focus of teaching and learning interpersonal communication has shifted from situation-specific behaviour and skills to broader dimensions. In particular, the importance of knowledge has increased." Therefore, when planning and carrying out entrepreneurs' communication skills training, the content of the training should include an exploration of the behavioral, cognitive and affective dimensions of communication

including the ethical mindset, as well as looking at entrepreneurs' business-related competence and resources.

### Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study has a number of limitations. A qualitative approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the ICC that entrepreneurs need in networking. The sample size was small (14 interviewees), so the results cannot be generalized. Moreover, the study focuses only on Finnish entrepreneurs. Future research could focus on collecting more cross-cultural data in order to make cultural comparisons. The interviews conducted were with entrepreneurs, meaning ICC was considered from their perspective only. In addition, observations of actual interaction between different partners would highlight a more relational approach to ICC (Purhonen, 2012). A deeper understanding of how different communication is interpreted as being competent or not, for example from authentic communication situations or at least data collected from the relational partners, would enhance the existing understanding of interpersonal communication taking place within the framework of networking.

Taking into consideration the situational and contextual nature of ICC, it would be reasonable for other researchers to investigate context-specific meanings related to ICC in different professional disciplines (see e.g. Dannels, 2001; Koponen et al., 2019) and contexts (see e.g. Rauch et al., 2015). Furthermore, in the field of international business and entrepreneurship, researchers could continue investigating entrepreneurs' ICC in different phases of a company's internationalization and growth (Musteen et al., 2014). For example, it could be studied how entrepreneurs' ICC can facilitate SME internationalization and whether some

dimensions of the entrepreneurs' ICC are more crucial in different stages of the internationalization process.

Moreover, our findings highlighted the relational aspects of the behavioral dimension and showed how an ethical mindset is important part of entrepreneurs' ICC in networking. The findings indicated, that some entrepreneurs were concerned that networking, as a term, had a negative, almost exploitative connotation toward interpersonal relationships. Yet, at the same time networking and building social relationships is crucial for entrepreneurs' in order to survive in competitive markets. Therefore, it can be seen that entrepreneurs need to consider ethical aspects in networking and in forming and maintaining social relationships. Networking has both negative and positive connotations for entrepreneurs and therefore future research could further investigate relational tensions (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) in entrepreneurs' network relationships.

To advance our understanding of entrepreneurs' competencies in the future, it would be highly interesting to look at how a growth mindset (Burnette et al., 2020) or resilience (Ayala & Manzano, 2014) are connected with entrepreneurs' ICC and eventually with entrepreneurial success. Furthermore, our current understanding of networking is challenged due to changes in how people interact during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the vast majority of communication occurring online. Thus, it would be relevant to study how digitalization influences networking and shapes further requirements and needs in entrepreneurs' ICC. In effect, further research on this may expand the ICC conceptualization presented in this article.

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