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### **Collaborative improvement as a driver for excellence - findings from a systematic literature review**

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#### **Abstract:**

***Purpose of the paper:*** To explore how collaborative improvement can be a driver of excellence for organisations that work together.

***Methodology:*** This conference proceeding is based on a systematic literature review which provides an integrative picture of the research into continuous improvement initiatives in an interorganisational context; also referred to as *collaborative improvement*.

***Main findings:*** Continuous improvement is vital for every organisation that wants to achieve excellence. Very few organisations operate autonomously from others, which is why continuous improvement collaboration between organisations that are directly or indirectly dependent on each other increases both the individual organisation's ability to improve as well as that of the network as a whole. The findings from this review include factors present in successful collaborative improvement situations. These are shared goals, trust and the organisational structures, processes or systems that enable and support collaborative improvement.

***Practical implications:*** By bridging between the literature on interorganisational relationships and literature from the quality management field, the findings of our review provide greater understanding of how continuous improvement and similar initiatives can enhance the performance of organisations in a network. Specifically, in identifying the main gaps in the literature and providing future research directions, our critical and dynamic picture of the continuous improvement that occurs between organisations is intended to advance the debate on the importance of collaboration between organisations.

**Research limitations:** The findings from the literature review are based on peer-reviewed full-text articles written in English, published between January 2011 and May 2023.

**Originality/Value:** Collaborative improvement is a diverse field, requiring more research to fully understand which factors create value and ultimately create excellence.

**Type of paper:** *Systematic literature review*

**Keywords:** *Collaborative improvement, continuous improvement, interorganisational relationship, network organisations*

## **1. Introduction**

To both survive and prosper in an increasingly globalised and competitive marketplace, organisations today must build, maintain and rely on close relationships with customers, suppliers and other stakeholders (Dodgson 2018). This requires both the capability and willingness to improve and innovate together (Chesbrough et al., 2006; Chiu & Lin, 2022).

Traditionally, improvement and systematic quality management have been both studied and carried out within the confines of organisations' own boundaries and thus also with organisations having full control over priorities and resource allocation. As such, managers have been able to decide that on any given day or for a given period of time, everyone should work with continuous improvement, participate in a Kaizen event (Farris et al., 2008) or attend a company-wide innovation day, for example. These types of single-organisation improvement or innovation initiatives can be challenging in themselves, mainly because of the difficulty in engaging employees to take part in such activities (Jurburg et al., 2016). Initiating, motivating and driving improvement and innovation in a complex network across organisational boundaries, and with a diversity of individual organisations, can be an entirely different matter altogether though (Chesbrough et al., 2006).

One thing that is essential to much improvement and innovation work is the ability to work together in various forms of networks (Camisón & Villar López, 2010). This may include when a company involves not only its employees, but also suppliers and customers in its improvement efforts in order to bring in more and important perspectives on problem solving and development. Alternatively, it can be when employees from several different departments in an organisation work together to solve problems that span across processes involving several parts of the organisation. Whatever the scenario, the ability to collaborate to find new solutions to old problems and to improve together, is central to success. Alone is rarely strong, and this also applies to improvement and innovation (Tukker & De Bruijn, 2002). However, there is not as much practical knowledge or research about how improvement and innovation take place in networks that are loosely composed (Middel et al., 2006).

It is not uncommon that previously competing organisations need to combine their efforts and work together to create opportunities that are not possible without collaboration (Zacharia et al., 2019). Kuhl and Costa (2019) show that organisations that collaborate with suppliers, customers and competitors have a higher probability of successful innovation.

The purpose of this paper is to explore how collaborative improvement can be a driver of excellence for organisations that work together in interorganisational systems.

The following research questions (RQ) will be addressed:

RQ1: What factors are involved in successful collaborative improvement?

RQ2: Which organisational structures, processes or systems enable and support collaborative improvement?

The paper is organised as follows: first we provide a theoretical baseline regarding the specifics of continuous improvement and interorganisational relationships. The term *interorganisational* has several synonyms such as trans-organisational, multi-organisational and multi-stakeholder which throughout this paper are referred to as *interorganisational*, except when referencing the findings of specific researchers. This section is followed by a section in which we describe the theoretical base of *collaborative improvement*. We then explain the methodology used for our literature review, follow by findings, a discussion of the findings, conclusions and suggestions for future research.

## 2. Theory

### 2.1 *Continuous improvement*

The definition of continuous improvement has differed somewhat throughout history, and depending on the context in which it is used. Some factors that are common to all definitions are that continuous improvements are small, often involve the people directly affected by the process and rarely involve huge capital investments (Bhuiyan & Baghel, 2005).

Continuous improvement is an ongoing effort to improve all elements of an organisation – processes, tools, products, services etc. Continuous improvements can be large, but they are most often small and involve only a small part of an organisation. Most importantly though, to be effective continuous improvements are frequent and are integral to how an organisation works (Robinson, 1991; Shingo, 1988). Continuous improvement has long been an important component of high-performing organisations (Yearout, 1996). Continuous improvement is considered by many researchers as essential to achieving business excellence (e.g., Al-Khawaldeh & Sloan, 2007; de Leede & Kees Looise, 1999). Customers' ever-increasing demand for higher quality and new technical solutions, combined with global market competition, puts pressure on companies to continuously adapt and improve their products and services (Bergman et al., 2022). Continuously working with improvements is an integral part of total quality management (TQM), whether it concerns large structural improvements involving an entire organisation or smaller ideas from employees which when combined can lead to substantial development (Robinson & Schroeder, 2004).

A number of methodologies have been developed that have continuous improvement at their core (Bhuiyan & Baghel, 2005). The most common of these are lean manufacturing, six sigma and the balanced scorecard. Such continuous improvement methodologies are often centred on a Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) or Define-Measure-Analyse-Improve-Control (DMAIC) tool, which facilitates the standardisation of the daily improvement work (ibid.).

PDSA can be explained as a rapid cycle of improvement or innovation that is systematic and iterative in nature (Bergman et al., 2022). It is repeated, often on a daily or weekly basis, to continuously improve processes, products and services.

Bessant et al. (1994) define continuous improvement as a “company-wide process of focused and continuous incremental innovation” (p. 18). Incremental innovation and continuous improvement are terms used simultaneously, often adhering to the same concept that divides innovation into either radical or incremental. The latter can be a naturally occurring phenomenon since people always adjust and improve (ibid.) but can be greatly accelerated by a systematic approach with an improvement system (Robinson, 1991).

### 2.2 *Interorganisational systems*

Aristotle coined the phrase “*holon para ta moria*”, which means the whole is something beyond the parts (Husain, 2001). This has been used within the field of interorganisational systems to explain what happens when participating organisations combine resources and expertise, and share learning and best practice to create something that is not possible for one organisation to achieve on its own (Mervyn et al., 2019). In discussing how to create a “whole that is larger than the sum of its parts”, Thomson and Perry (2006p. 23) explain what is beyond *coordination* and *cooperation* – mutual goals, moving towards *collaboration* where not only the achievement of individual goals matter, but an additional outcome is generated that is separate from the individual end point.

Cummings (1984), Ainsworth and Feyerherm (2016) and Kożuch and Sienkiewicz-Małyjurek (2016) view interorganisational systems as groups of organisations working together on a task or objective that is too large in scope or complexity for a single organisation to handle on its own. An interorganisational system can be indefinite or only for an agreed period of time (ibid).

Huxham and Vangen (2005) argue that interorganisational systems or partnerships can arise and exist without the involved organisations having an explicit purpose to cooperate, but important shifts happen when the collaboration becomes intentional.

Kożuch and Sienkiewicz-Małyjurek (2016) state that trust serves as an enabler for cooperation in an interorganisational system. The more trust between participants, the more successful the collaboration.

Another advantage of interorganisational systems is the access to additional resources as well as learning opportunities that can lead to improvements and reduced costs for all parties involved (Beekman & Robinson, 2004). An ecosystem that is built up from several businesses in relationship with one another creates valuable networks that provide benefits and improve competitive advantage for all parties involved (Sawhney & Zabin, 2002). For these networks to be successful, it is important that knowledge and best practices are shared between the organisations within the collaborative network (Basu, 2001).

To fully enjoy the benefits of interorganisational relationships, all organisations involved must benefit from the collaboration. Previous research on collaborative improvement has shown that businesses tend to look for collaboration with organisations that they trust, that offer a complementary contribution and that share fundamental values (Hoffmann & Schlosser, 2001).

### *2.3 Collaborative improvement*

Working towards a shared purpose or a joint commitment can be a powerful driver of organisational performance by providing both motivation and direction for members of an organisation (Adler & Heckscher, 2018). This shared effort is often called collaborative improvement.

As far as we have found, collaborative improvement was first mentioned in research by (Plsek, 1997), describing how several stakeholders within the health care community pooled together

their resources in an effort to improve together more efficiently. Plsek (1997) found that the key concepts behind multiorganisational collaborative efforts include:

- Multiple organisations
- Quantified variability in process or outcome
- Open sharing
- Internal process characterisation
- Formal benchmarking visits
- Identification of "best practices"
- Replication efforts
- Measured improvement

Interest in collaborative improvement has grown exponentially since Plsek's article was published. It is a concept that is used primarily within health care (Ghandour et al., 2017; Lannon & Peterson, 2013; Share et al., 2011) and education (Eddy-Spicer, 2023; Russell et al., 2017), but has also become more prominent within business as well as governmental research (Robinson & Schroeder, 2017; von Malmborg, 2007).

Middel et al. (2005) found that improvement activities that occur in interorganisational settings are often ad-hoc rather than the result of a collaborative, structural and proactive improvement process. As a result, those authors suggest that organisations need to build collaborative capacity based on mutual trust, shared goals and visions, as well as a shared strategy for deploying continuous improvement.

Several research projects and operational projects focused on collaborative improvement in different contexts have emerged since the concept was first mentioned by Plsek in 1997.

One early initiative to develop collaborative improvement capabilities between European companies was the CO-IMPROVE project, a three-year, EU-funded project that commenced in 2001 (Coughlan et al., 2003). The project aimed to develop a tool to facilitate active collaboration between organisations to increase improvement capacity, not only for each individual organisation but also at an interorganisational level (Middel et al., 2007).

Another initiative that has provided knowledge about how organisations improve together is Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Networks (CoIIN). A CoIIN is an organised collaborative improvement framework in which participants learn, apply and share improvement ideas, and the framework is applied in several health care and school research settings (Ghandour et al., 2017; Hirai et al., 2018). A CoIIN brings together multidisciplinary teams in partnership with recognised experts to address complex challenges. A CoIIN endeavours to grow the ability of communities to work collaboratively on improvement efforts (Klassen et al., 2018).

### **3. Methodology**

A systematic literature review (SLR) was conducted to look into the area of “*collaborative improvements*”. SLR is a well-known and increasingly used review methodology to explore a phenomena (Kraus et al., 2020). SLR originated from the medical sciences but has been widely used in management and organisation sciences (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009; Tranfield et al., 2003). This SLR relies on a structured, transparent and reproducible method of selecting and assessing the scientific contributions to the area (Davis et al., 2014).

The SLR followed the stages adapted from (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009): question formulation through a CIMO (context-interventions-mechanisms-outcomes) approach, locating studies (keyword identification and database search), study selection and evaluation, analysis and synthesis, reporting and discussion.

In accordance with the CIMO logic (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009), the following framework was chosen: How can (M) continuous improvement (I) be a driver for excellence in an interorganisational context (C), improving the performance (O) of both the individual organisation as well as the network of organisations as a whole?

This CIMO logic resulted in the following two research questions:

RQ1: What factors are involved in successful collaborative improvement?

RQ2: Which organisational structures, processes or systems enable and support collaborative improvement?

The chosen databases for the SLR were Business Source Complete, Emerald, Scopus and Web of Science since these databases collectively offer a large volume of quality articles that are relevant to the field studied. See Table 1 for a list of search fields. Due to the difference in search mechanics in the different databases, a slight variation occurred in search field usage. Emerald uses a more advanced search syntax, which is why the search was done in “All fields” instead of only the abstract. This generated a longer list that needed more thorough screening to find relevant articles.

Table 1.

<b>Database</b>	<b>Search fields</b>
Business Source Complete	AB = Abstract or Author supplied Abstract
Emerald	All fields
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (Title, abstract, keywords)
Web of Science	TOPIC (Title, abstract, author keywords)

The inclusion criteria for the chosen articles were as follows:

1. Published between January 2011 and May 2023
2. Peer-reviewed articles
3. Available in full text
4. Written in English
5. Focused on continuous improvement in an interorganisational context and/or collaborative improvement

Excluding articles published prior to 2011 was a way to find current research in the field of collaborative improvement.

Furthermore, papers presenting other literature reviews were excluded since they are considered secondary literature and therefore not relevant (Edinger & Cohen, 2013). No other research designs were excluded.

The search was conducted in two tracks. The first track focuses solely on the concept of *collaborative improvement* and the second track combined search terms including various forms of *continuous improvement* and *interorganisation*. See Table 2 for a complete list of search terms used in tracks one and two. The two tracks were chosen to improve the probability of finding all articles pertaining to the topic of improvement activities taking place between organisations. For *continuous improvement*, some other search terms relating to very similar concepts were used. For example, *incremental innovation* and *idea system*, which are terms that are closely related to the concept (Audretsch et al., 2011; Leyer et al., 2021). Furthermore, the terms *systematic improvement*, *incremental improvement* and *continuous quality improvement* were also searched for in combination with a search term expressing “between many different organisations”. Search track one, *collaborative improvement*, consists of only one search term.

Table 2.

<b>Search track</b>	<b>Concept</b>	<b>Search terms</b>
<b>1</b>	Collaborative improvement	“Collaborative improvement”
<b>2</b>	Interorganisation	Transorganizat*, transorganisat*, "trans organisat*", "trans organizat*", "inter organi*", "interorgani*", interorgani*, multiorganizat*, multiorganisat*, "multi-organizat*", "Multi-organisat*", "multi organizat*" "multi organisat*", "multi stakeholder", "multi-stakeholder"



	Continuous improvement	"continuous improv*", "idea system*", "incremental innovation", "systematic improv", "incremental improv*", "continuous quality improv**"
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\* used to find other variants associated with the term

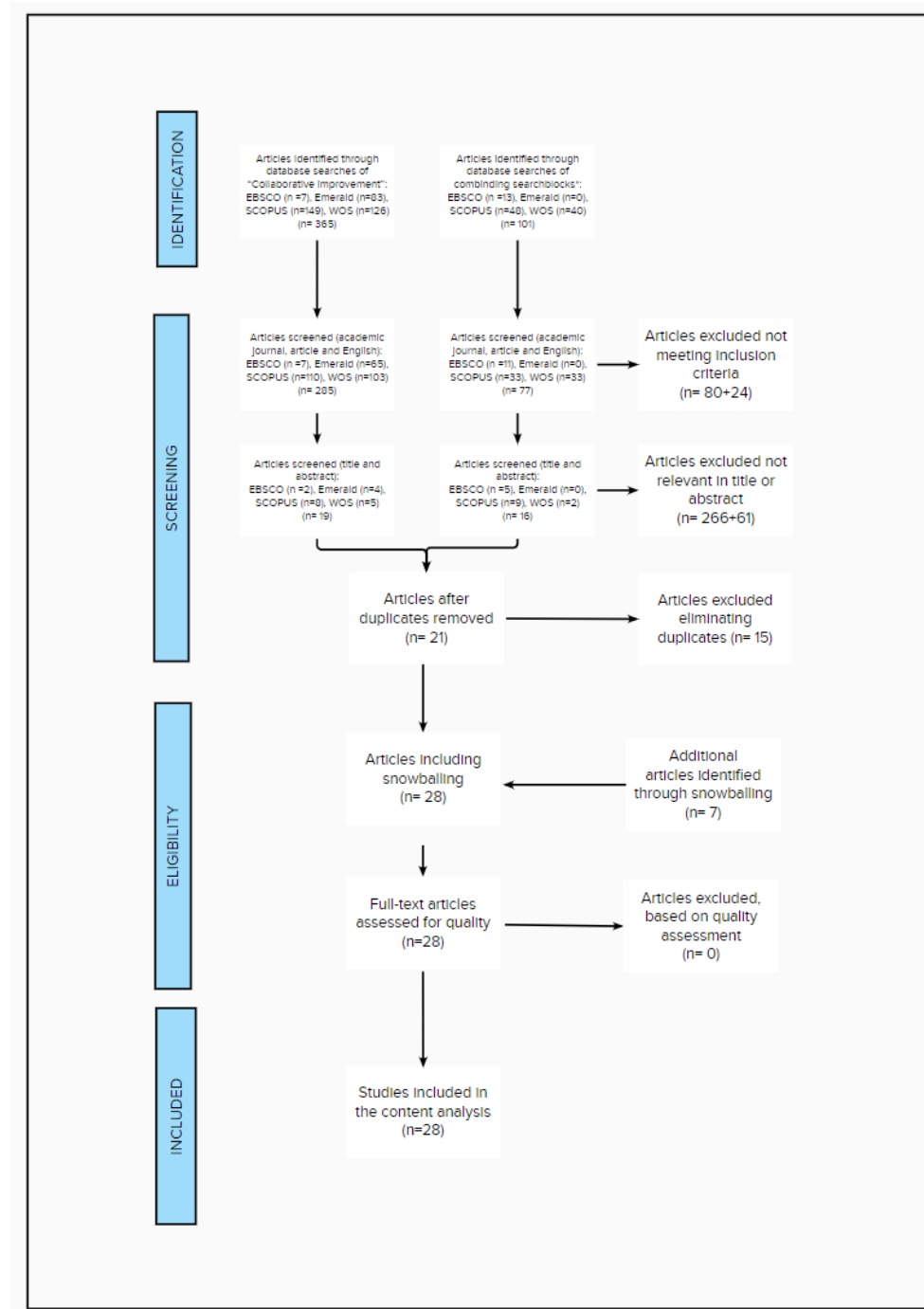
The Track one and Track two searches generated 365 and 101 articles respectively. The reason for choosing these two tracks was that although the review aimed to examine the concept of collaborative improvement, not all research on the topic uses this specific term. Relevant research can also be found using a combination of similar search terms.

In the first stage, 104 articles that did not meet the inclusion criteria 1-4 were removed. Next, all remaining articles were screened by the first author based on the title and abstract. Articles that did not meet inclusion criteria 5, focusing on continuous improvement in an interorganisational context and/or collaborative improvement, were removed. This resulted in 36 articles. Fifteen of these were duplicates and subsequently removed, leaving 21 articles to be studied. A snowball search (Gough et al., 2012) in the reference lists added seven articles of interest. A grand total of 28 articles were finally included in the SLR.

We conducted an analysis and synthesis of the 28 articles following (Tranfield et al., 2003) searching for factors driving collaborative improvement as well as the organisational structures, processes or systems that enable and support collaborative improvement. The findings were coded, clustered and summarised. This paper presents the initial results from the analysis covering four of the factors that are involved in successful collaborative improvement, and analysing the organisational structures, processes or systems that enable and support collaborative improvement. The factors chosen for inclusion in this initial analysis were shared goals, a shared vision, shared interests and trust. See Table 3 for results. The factors were chosen based on knowledge of what works regarding continuous improvement within an organisation (e.g., Al-Khawaldeh & Sloan, 2007; Audretsch et al., 2011; Robinson, 1991; Shingo, 1988) and to explore whether these factors might also be valid as drivers in collaborative improvement situations. The findings are initial and further research covering a larger number of factors is necessary to depict what drives excellence in interorganisational relations.

Figure

Search process for the articles included in the review.



Table

Structured categorisation matrix of the main findings

Author	Year published	Title	Shared goals	Shared vision	Shared interest	Trust	Structure
Harris et al.	2011	Strategic relationships in a small business context: The impact of information quality and continuous quality improvement	x			x	
Share et al.	2011	How A Regional Collaborative Of Hospitals And Physicians In Michigan Cut Costs And Improved The Quality Of Care					x
Nembhard	2012	All teach, all learn, all improve? The role of interorganizational learning in quality improvement collaboratives					x
Parida et al.	2012	Inbound Open Innovation Activities in High-Tech SMEs: The Impact on Innovation Performance					
Ciancy et al.	2013	Collaborative networks for both improvement and research	x				x
Lannon and Peterson	2013	Pediatric Collaborative Networks for Quality Improvement and Research					x
Miles et al.	2013	Physician Professionalism and Accountability: The Role of Collaborative Improvement Networks	x				x
Lee et al.	2014	Implementation Methods for Delivery Room Management: A Quality Improvement Comparison Study			x		x
Pattinson and Preece	2014	Communities of practice, knowledge acquisition and innovation: A case study of science-based SMEs	x			x	x
Sumo et al.	2014	Effects of Performance-Based Contracts on Innovation in Inter-Organizational Relationships					
Sumo et al.	2016	Fostering incremental and radical innovation through performance-based contracting in buyer-supplier relationships				x	
Ghandour et al.	2017	Applying Collaborative Learning and Quality Improvement to Public Health: Lessons from the Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network (CoIIN) to Reduce Infant Mortality	x	x	x		x
Robinson and Schroeder	2017	Solving the unsolvable: How to address complex politically-charged transorganizational problems				x	x
Russell et al.	2017	A framework for the initiation of networked improvement communities	x	x			x
Delgado-Márquez et al.	2018	A network view of innovation performance for multinational corporation subsidiaries	x				
Buckley et al.	2019	Pursuing sustainability through multi-stakeholder collaboration: A description of the governance, actions, and perceived impacts of the roundtables for sustainable beef	x	x	x		x
Kuhl and Casta	2019	IMPLEMENTATION OF INTERORGANIZATIONAL COLLABORATION ON THE					
Mervyn et al.	2019	Challenges and insights in inter-organizational collaborative healthcare networks	x	x			x
Tomás-Miquel et al.	2019	Loving Outside the Neighborhood: The Conflicting Effects of External Linkages on Incremental Innovation in Clusters	x	x		x	
Ystrom et al.	2019	The Role of a Learning Approach in Building an Interorganizational Network Aiming for Collaborative Innovation	x			x	
Huang et al.	2021	Collaborative improvement in Scottish GP clusters after the Quality and Outcomes Framework: A qualitative study		x			x
Page and Hale	2021	The Power of How					x
Lou et al.	2022	Supplier selection, control mechanisms, and firm innovation: Configuration analysis based on fsQCA				x	x
Ninan et al.	2022	Narrative shapes innovation: a study on multiple innovations in the UK construction industry		x			
Williams et al.	2022	Evaluating a quality improvement collaborative: a hybrid approach					x
Worley et al.	2022	Building Trust Through Action Learning in An Uncertain Transorganizational Context	x	x		x	x
Anderson et al.	2023	Exploring barriers to collaborative innovation in supply chains – a study of a supplier and two of its industrial customers	x	x		x	x
Eddy-Spicer	2023	Interweaving resilience: leadership of continuous improvement partnerships and Many Parker Follett's theory of relational process	x	x			
TOTAL			14	10	3	9	18

## 4. Main findings

Based on the first research question: *What factors are involved in successful collaborative improvement?*, four factors of particular interest were selected. The factors were *shared goals*, *a shared vision*, *shared interests* and *interorganisational trust*, and these are addressed in points 4.1 – 4.4. The second research question: *Which organisational structures, processes or systems enable and support collaborative improvement?*, is addressed in point 4.5.

### 4.1 Shared goals

Since the term *shared goals* can also be discussed using the singular form, the search started searching the phrase *shared goal* and *shared goals*, which resulted in fourteen articles for deeper analysis. The exact term *shared goals* was identified in ten of these but did not always address *shared goal/s* using the exact phrase, and instead discussed the matter of goals and collaborative improvement using similar wording. The articles addressed *shared goals* as working with a common goal to “share ideas” (Ghandour et al., 2017), to create “shared goals” in a collaborative system (Worley et al., 2022), to develop “collaborative capabilities” (Buckley et al., 2019), to solve a specific problem (Russell et al., 2017), to “reduce costs” (Tomás-Miquel et al., 2019), to work in an interorganisational network (Delgado-Márquez et al., 2018), to incentivise improvements (Miles et al., 2013) and most commonly working towards a mutual goal to find “innovative solutions” (Anderson et al., 2023; Pattinson & Preece, 2014; Ystrom et al., 2019).

### 4.2 Shared vision

The term *shared vision* was discussed in nine articles and referred, for example, to a shared vision for the incremental innovation process (Tomás-Miquel et al., 2019), a narrative vision to stimulate innovation (Ninan et al., 2022), interorganisational partnerships as a vision of interorganisational resilience (Eddy-Spicer, 2023), and a vision to become the best in the world (Anderson et al., 2023). Developing a shared vision requires leadership and quality improvement experience (Huang et al., 2021). A network design is a new context and requires a new vision (Mervyn et al., 2019) and building out the organisational implications of a new vision statement in relation to a new joint venture (Worley et al., 2022). The articles referred to the development of a collective vision to collaborate on a common goal by sharing ideas, information and work (Ghandour et al., 2017) and just developing a shared vision (Russell et al., 2017).

None of the articles identified argued for a *shared vision* that was created jointly in a collaborative improvement context where the vision was created together between more than one participating organisation.

### 4.3 Shared interests

An explicit mention of the concept of shared interests was found in three articles, of which only two are relevant to this context. Ghandour et al. (2017) state that shared interests are important, but participating organisations were at different stages with respect to those interests.

Buckley et al. (2019) found that participating members [in a collaborative initiative to improve sustainable beef production] seem to have more to gain by participating than not, and seem to have started to develop shared understandings and interests through participating in collaborative initiatives.

#### 4.4 Shared trust

Shared trust was found in nine articles and was valid for the purpose of this article in eight of those. Dialogue between parties created an environment of trust which inspired further interaction (Anderson et al., 2023). Reciprocity was created, for example through the offering of free advice, and was a factor in the trust-building process (Pattinson & Preece, 2014). Furthermore, trust was a factor in building social capital between organisations (ibid.). Trust between parties facilitates the sharing of knowledge (Tomás-Miquel et al., 2019; Ystrom et al., 2019). Trust was found to build gradually, providing an opportunity for innovative solutions to emerge (Anderson et al., 2023).

Trust enables the creation of contextual knowledge, which is a precursor to innovation (Tomás-Miquel et al., 2019). Worley et al. (2022) found that trust was a prerequisite for action learning, which in turn can facilitate the co-creation of new solutions. Furthermore, Sumo et al. (2016) found that trust is involved in knowledge creation that may result in innovation. The same study (ibid.) found that the trust correlation is stronger with incremental innovation than with radical innovation. The connection between trust and the creation of continuous improvement and/or incremental innovation was further found in Anderson et al. (2023); Lou et al. (2022); Tomás-Miquel et al. (2019).

Worley et al. (2022) found that trust between two parties could spread throughout an ecosystem and enable co-creation of new solutions between many more parties.

Lack of trust between many parties involved in improvement initiatives blocks progress (Robinson & Schroeder, 2017).

#### 4.5 Organisational structures, processes and/or systems that support collaboration

The last factor we examined, which was expressed in RQ2, concerned identifying the organisational structures, processes or systems that enable and support collaborative improvement. This factor is broader and offers a more fragmented result than the previous four findings.

Several of the articles reviewed (Buckley et al., 2019; Lannon & Peterson, 2013; Lou et al., 2022; Miles et al., 2013; Page & Hale, 2021; Russell et al., 2017) state that a framework or a structured approach is necessary to create and sustain improvements.

Russell et al. (2017) describe a framework for how a network improvement community (NIC) can be organised. At the centre of the framework there is a problem of practice. This is then surrounded by three interrelated phenomena which specify what is necessary to succeed with an NIC. These are developing a theory of practice improvement, building a measurement and analytics infrastructure, and learning and using improvement research methods. Processes that lead, organise and operate the network encircle these three phenomena. Finally, an outer layer contains leadership that fosters the emergence of culture, norms and identity that are consistent with the aims of the network. This model emphasises that while culture, norms and identity are important factors for successful collaborative improvement, it is vital that there is a team that takes action to encourage their development.

Buckley et al. (2019) and Share et al. (2011) found that the approach to how a collaborative network was set up differed depending on the geographical location of the networks.

Managerial and administrative support was found to be important (Huang et al., 2021) for collaborative efforts to be successful.

Miles et al. (2013) saw that measuring performance and reporting back results increased the incentive to participate in improvement activities and thus improved the performance of collaborative efforts.

Nembhard (2012) and Ghandour et al. (2017) both found that remote solutions to collaboration were a contributing factor for creating improvement. Ghandour et al. (2017) saw that a remote approach was a necessity to facilitate contacts within the network, and also found that a shift in team-member composition affects the performance of the network, both negatively and positively. Nembhard (2012) lists face-to-face meetings as well as list-serv discussions as contributing to improvement creation, suggesting that both synchronous and asynchronous contact are relevant to relationship building. On the contrary, Mervyn et al. (2019) found that place-based networks are more suitable for creating both efficiency and innovation, and can therefore bring about deep collaborative forms of engagement.

Worley et al. (2022), Mervyn et al. (2019) and Huang et al. (2021) all see the necessity for a facilitator to coordinate collaborative improvement efforts. Mervyn et al. (2019) take this a step further and state that a coordinating centre for improvement activities needs to not only coordinate but also work with realising the suggested improvements.

Time and resources (Pattinson & Preece, 2014) and tools for improvement (Robinson & Schroeder, 2017; Williams et al., 2022) were identified as factors that contribute to results.

Fewer restrictions speeded up decision making (Williams et al., 2022) and in the same regard, Mervyn et al. (2019) found that it was beneficial for self-managed teams to investigate areas of innovation and improvement and to prototype solutions.

Anderson et al. (2023) looked at the barriers to collaborative innovation and found that collaborative efforts were hindered by rules and organisational policies as well as, for example, safety regulations that were perceived as unnecessary.

## 5. Discussion

This discussion section aims to provide an in-depth analysis and interpretation of the main findings of this systematic literature review. In this section, the two research questions are addressed, RQ1: What factors are involved in successful collaborative improvement? and RQ2: Which organisational structures, processes, or systems enable and support collaborative improvement?

When starting the SLR, the authors intended to find clear evidence of the factors, organisational structures, processes or systems that enable and support the creation of successful collaborative improvement. The intention was to find out what drives excellence and creates truly successful organisations. When analysing what works for continuous improvement and interorganisational relationships respectively, the aspiration was to translate these factors and review whether they are also present in collaborative improvement situations. However, determining what the drivers were was found to be difficult since the evidence for collaborative improvement was diverse and weak.

Evidence that goals are important was searched for in the articles included, but only weak evidence was found. There was even weaker evidence found for the second factor, shared vision. In this regard, the articles discussed a shared vision, but only in a single-site context and not in a context when two or more organisations could benefit from sharing a vision to align their collaborative improvement work.

When working with continuous improvements within an organisation, knowing where the organisation is going, what the goals and objectives are and ultimately what the organisation's vision is, is essential to employees' understanding of the improvements that are needed to move forward. An organisation which is aligned with its goals and its vision has a higher probability (e.g., Jacobs & Ugwueke, 2018; Pritchard, 2010) of also finding relevant improvements that lead to value creation and ultimately excellence. This is true for a single-site organisation and this SLR searched for evidence that this assumption would also be true in interorganisational contexts.

The findings from the SLR show that short-term goals are more present in collaborative improvement contexts than long-term goals and visions. This might imply that collaborative improvement initiatives are a short-term phenomena, not set up for longer-term partnerships that could benefit from sharing a vision.

Evidence for shared interests being important was searched for in the articles included but only two articles included any specific mention of shared interests being a contributing factor in collaborative improvement.

One article, Ghandour et al. (2017), found that when selecting priority areas for collaborative improvement efforts, areas representing both shared challenges as well as common interests were chosen. This shows the importance of having shared interests and also for the participating organisations to find challenges that are both relevant and motivational.

Shared interests may be a relevant factor that contributes to collaborative improvement, but the articles included in this SLR present scarce findings on shared interests in their studies.

Trust plays an important role when two or more parties collaborate in an interorganisational system. Several articles mentioned trust as a precursor to knowledge creation which in turn is a precursor to improvements and innovation. Trust was found to build up gradually, creating an opportunity for innovative solutions between organisations to emerge. On the other hand, a lack of trust was found to inhibit the creation of new improvements and innovations.

Several articles express the need for a framework to organise the collaborative improvement context (e.g., Buckley et al., 2019; Russell et al., 2017), but few deliver a clear picture of how this framework should look. This SLR has provided some suggestions on the factors that may be important elements of the equation for creating successful collaborative improvement situations. There is evidence that one important factor is knowledge sharing. Having a facilitator who can coordinate different participants in the network, for example making sure that knowledge is shared and that improvements can flow through the system, can also be a contributing factor. Further, several articles argue that restrictions and regulations can hinder improvements, while well-prepared policies can create opportunities for improvements to happen. Another important factor is time and resources. There is also some proof that measuring performance can support collaborative improvement, suggesting that what is measured gets done.

Established quality improvement tools were hardly mentioned at all. Only Robinson and Schroeder (2017) explicitly mention two quality tools, SIPOC and the A3 method. This needs to be researched further to identify whether improvement tools applied in collaborative contexts enable the creation of improvement and innovation.

## **6. Conclusions and limitations**

This SLR has shown that shared goals and trust can be important factors when organisations collaborating in interorganisational systems strive to continuously improve. However, the evidence is not strong and its quality is weak. Whether this is due to the factors not being important or to studies not emphasising them in their results is yet to be examined. Two further factors were analysed, shared vision and shared interests, and the selected studies did not show



that these factors had any considerable impact. This does not rule out that shared interests is important, it merely means that we have not yet found enough evidence of how important it may be. Having a shared vision, on the other hand, is not applied at all in the sense of creating a vision that is shared together in a collaborative improvement context.

This SLR has also shown which organisational structures, processes or systems enable and support collaborative improvement in different interorganisational contexts. In this regard, the evidence on what works and what does not work is both weak and diverse. Several of the reviewed articles proposed a process or framework for organisations that work together, but few were comprehensive enough to provide evidence regarding which parts of that framework work and which do not.

Face-to-face interactions seem to be important, as are well-planned, remote solutions for communication between individuals and organisations in interorganisational systems.

A potential limitation of this study is the failure to find and analyse relevant studies. By relying on broad search terms and limiting our searches to a few large databases, we attempted to find the most relevant literature on the topic. We cannot rule out that we have missed studies that are applicable to the review. Furthermore, we have chosen a limited number of factors for the analysis thus omitting several factors of relevance. These factors will be subject to further research.

## **7. Practical implications**

By bridging between the literature on interorganisational relationships and the literature from the quality management field, our findings provide a broader understanding of how continuous improvement and similar initiatives can enhance the performance of organisations in a network context. Specifically, in identifying the main gaps in the literature and providing future research directions, our critical and dynamic picture of the continuous improvement that occurs between organisations is intended to advance the debate on the importance of collaboration between organisations.

## **8. Future research**

Many more collaborative improvement factors than these four initial factors need to be addressed and require more detailed analysis and development. Future research should therefore address more factors such as *relationships*, *physical* and/or *digital meeting places*, *willingness to participate*, *absence of hierarchy* and *the importance of supportive leadership*. Future research in the Kamprad “Develop and improve and together” project will address these topics through a three-year research project that is building theory on collaborative improvement, and identifying fields of application and the benefits of collaborative improvements in practice through interactions in organisations that are part of interorganisational systems.

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