



Lisbon School
of Economics
& Management
Universidade de Lisboa

MASTER MANAGEMENT & INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

MASTER'S FINAL WORK PROJECT

**THE IMPACT OF DIGITALIZATION IN THE PROCUREMENT PROCESS
OF A ONE TIME VENDOR**

IVAN ALEXANDER BISHOP ECHEVERS

JULY - 2025



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SUPERVISION:
PROFESSOR JOSÉ N. SANTOS

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*To all my fellow immigrant
students throughout the
world, making history for
their families and countries,
may you continue defeating
the odds and ignorance.*

GLOSSARY

OTV - One Time Vendor

CFT - Call for Tender

B2B - Business-to-Business

IoT - Internet of Things

PSM - Purchasing and Supply Management

AI - Artificial Intelligence

NGOs - Non-governmental Organizations

ESG - Environmental, Social, and Governance

SNA - Social Network Analysis

NPD - New Product Development

VC - Venture Capital

SET - Social Exchange Theory

GP - General Procurement

HMG - Harmonized Material Group

MFT - Multi Functional Team

IC - Internal Customer

ABSTRACT

This dissertation, "Understanding How Digitalization Affects Trust in Buyer-Supplier Relationships," explores the impact of the digitalization journey of the procurement process of the One Time Vendor (OTV) within a leading European aeronautical company. The OTV process was previously done through email and was hindered by inconsistent communication, inefficiency, and a lack of transparency, leading to a decline in overall stakeholder trust and satisfaction. This study investigates whether transitioning to a digitalized platform improves process agility, transparency, and internal stakeholder trust in the supplier and subsequently, the procurement process.

A qualitative research methodology was followed to examine the relationship between process digitalization and buyer trust, along with communication transparency and supply chain efficiency. Primary data was collected through interviews utilizing a semi-structured questionnaire, allowing for in-depth insights into the interviewees' experiences with the newly introduced platform.

The findings indicate an important positive shift in trust following the implementation of the platform, rooted in enhanced traceability and openness. Digitalization led to increased agility, seamlessness, and a reduction in errors, aligning with the principles of digital servitization. A substantial improvement in process visibility and information sharing was observed, validating the literature on digitalization's capacity to enhance supply chain transparency. While operational improvements fostered trust, the study highlights a need for improvement in interpersonal communication and full financial transparency to end suppliers. The research supports the relational view theory, where mutually advantageous cross-company relations lead to competitive advantages, but also reveals a power dynamic where the buyer often commands the relationship.

Keywords: Digitalization; Trust in business; Buyer-Supplier Relationships; Procurement; One Time Vendor; Supply Chain Transparency.

RESUMO

Esta dissertação, "Understanding How Digitalization Affects Trust in Buyer-Supplier Relationships" (Compreender Como a Digitalização Afeta a Confiança nas Relações Comprador-Fornecedor), explora o impacto do percurso de digitalização no processo do One Time Vendor (OTV) (Fornecedor de Oportunidade Única) numa empresa aeronáutica europeia líder. O processo OTV era anteriormente realizado por e-mail e era dificultado por comunicação inconsistente, ineficiência e falta de transparência, levando a um declínio na confiança e satisfação geral das partes interessadas. Este estudo investiga se a transição para uma plataforma digitalizada melhora a agilidade do processo, a transparência e a confiança das partes interessadas internas no fornecedor e, consequentemente, no processo de aprovisionamento.

Foi seguida uma metodologia de investigação qualitativa para examinar a relação entre a digitalização do processo e a confiança do comprador, juntamente com a transparência da comunicação e a eficiência da cadeia de abastecimento. Os dados primários foram recolhidos através de entrevistas, utilizando um questionário semiestruturado, permitindo assim obter informações aprofundadas sobre as experiências dos entrevistados com a plataforma recém-introduzida.

Os resultados indicam uma importante mudança positiva na confiança após a implementação da plataforma, enraizada numa maior rastreabilidade e abertura. A digitalização levou a um aumento da agilidade, fluidez e redução de erros, alinhando-se com os princípios da servitização digital. Observou-se uma melhoria substancial na visibilidade do processo e na partilha de informações, validando a literatura sobre a capacidade da digitalização para aumentar a transparência da cadeia de abastecimento. Embora as melhorias operacionais tenham fomentado a confiança, o estudo destaca a necessidade de melhorias na comunicação interpessoal e na total transparência financeira para os fornecedores finais. A investigação apoia a teoria da visão relacional, onde relações mutuamente vantajosas entre empresas conduzem a vantagens competitivas, mas também revela uma dinâmica de poder em que o comprador frequentemente comanda a relação.

Palavras-chave: Digitalização; Confiança nos Negócios; Relações Comprador-Fornecedor; Aprovisionamento; Fornecedor Pontual; Transparência da Cadeia de Abastecimento.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In today's business and corporate landscape, trends and processes evolve rapidly, forcing companies to adapt to not only survive, but also thrive in their endeavors. Often, digitalization is one of the stronger options when aiming to streamline processes, enhance efficiency, and promote greater trust amongst the involved stakeholders.

Given that the aeronautical sector has plenty of support from governments and other interested parties, it is paramount to ensure precision, reliability, and safety throughout the organization. In this great operation, General Procurement plays a key role in the operation's continuity as it supports most, if not all, manufacturing processes. In this line, the leading aeronautical company in Europe is implementing changes in the procurement process, such as adopting One Time Vendor (OTV). In this company, the OTV acts as an intermediary business partner, where the company reaches out to them with a need and the OTV supplier then provides a solution using a third-party supplier not tied to the company. However, the OTV process was previously characterized by broken and inconsistent communication and consequently flagged as a bridge to inefficiency, lack of proper transparency, and declining stakeholder trust.

Part of the new call for tender process (CFT) was done to overcome the previously stated challenges and with that came the need and request for digitalizing the process through the creation of a platform. Thus, this study identifies if the change towards a digitalized process through a platform aid in the seamlessness and transparency of the process as well as the trust that internal stakeholders have in relation to the supplier and the procurement process involved. Most questions intended to note this difference regarding the previous' supplier process and the current one will be comparative in nature and closed in their responses, meaning that the results will have a clear interpretation of the perception of affected stakeholders.

This study aims to explore the impact of digitalization in the procurement process of the One Time Vendor (OTV). Specifically, two research questions are addressed: (1) How does the digital transformation of the OTV Process affect the transparency and information flow in the process?, and (2) How does the change in process influence the perception of trust from the buyers towards the supplier?

This study is valuable for both academic and industry scopes as it will help to offer valuable insights into the transformative power of digitalization in procurement processes left behind by companies. The present study also aims to contribute to the ever-growing procurement body of knowledge as a subject who keeps its relevance through breakthroughs and innovation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review for this project will be separated into three different fields, the first focusing on Purchasing and Supply Chain Management, followed by the scope of Business-to-Business Embeddedness, and lastly delving into Trust in Business. The theoretical view proposed has the objective of portraying past success in other fields and relating it to what is believed to be the outcome of the analysed project.

2.1. Purchasing and Supply Chain Management

The analysis brought in this section aims to categorize knowledge obtained through diverse papers and tackle the needs and relevancies of the supply chain onto the realized procurement project. The nuances related to the supply chain within Procurement are endless, but the ones sensitive to the project will be exposed next. Understanding these nuances is key in light of the continuous shift towards digitalization in the current industrial cycle.

In the current industrial life cycle, we can tell that the prevalence of digitalization has been identified as a key driver of competitiveness, which will in turn promote value creation and revenue generation (Kamalaldin et al., 2020). To take advantage of these opportunities, businesses are transforming from transactional and product-centric models towards relational and service-oriented interactions. This process is known as digital servitization (Adrodegari & Sacconi, 2017; Ardolino et al., 2018; Rust & Huang, 2014, as cited in Kamalaldin et al., 2020). For this shift to happen, a deeper understanding of the developing dynamics between suppliers and customers is necessary, creating a move away from transactional interactions towards closer collaborations to yield longer-term commitment.

While the impact of digital servitization is widely recognized, the literature attached to its study focuses on the supplier's perspective. This neglects the relational aspect and how the customer participates and aids in the transformation (Sjödin et al., 2016; Raddats

et al., 2019). Additionally, there is a knowledge gap on how the supplier-customer relationship through digital servitization evolves (Lerch & Gotsch, 2015; Bharadwaj et al., 2013).

To act against these limitations, researchers Kamalaldin et al. (2020), have turned to the relational view theory, this explains that competitive advantage stems from mutually advantageous inter-company relations and the joint input of the stakeholders (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Lavie, 2006, as cited in Kamalaldin et al., 2020).

This concept of collaborative work is quite relevant for the success of digital servitization as its successful implementation of integrated products and services relies on how efficient the supplier-customer collaboration is (Tuli et al., 2007; Cenamor et al., 2017; Eloranta & Turunen, 2015, as cited in Kamalaldin et al., 2020) and the study by Kamalaldin et al. (2020) further highlights the main components that allow both suppliers and customers to benefit from this collaborative approach.

The results of the study by Kamalaldin et al. (2020) highlight four main components which allow both suppliers and customers to benefit from digital servitization. These are: complementary digitalization capabilities, relation-specific digital assets, digitally enabled knowledge-sharing routines, and partnership governance. We can determine the four resulting determinants represent a competitive advantage.

Complementary resources and capabilities are the base to form a partnership as it enables the creation of relational capabilities that cannot be generated by either company in solitary (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Hess & Rothaermel, 2011; Milgrom & Roberts, 1995, as cited in Kamalaldin et al., 2020). In the contextual realm of digital servitization, this involves the mixing of the supplier's digital expertise and the customer's operational expertise to optimize resource utilization and improve efficiency (Lenka et al., 2017).

As for relation-specific assets, it can be summarized into aligned digital technologies and developed digital competence and they are essential for the digital servitization's partnerships to succeed (Kamalaldin et al., 2020). Such determinants can be seen through the building of digital systems, developing tailored digital platforms, and promoting digital competences through staff and joint teams (Sjödin et al., 2016; Bharadwaj et al., 2013).

Knowledge-sharing routines are defined as regular patterns of interaction that facilitate a knowledge trade. This is essential for creating and harnessing the key value in servitization (Grant, 1996; Dyer & Singh, 1998, as cited in Kamalaldin et al., 2020). Such involves enhancing transparency by the seamless collection, accumulating, and connecting of data from various sources and with this align goals and incentives to promote further data transparency and analysis (Kamalaldin et al., 2020). Also, it was concluded that through the development of processes for data utilization, dedicated discussions, consistent interactions, and establishment of teams is instrumental for continuous improvement and innovation.

Partnership governance encompasses both mechanisms, formal and informal, necessary for the alignment of transactions that have the structure to maximize the creation of value (Dyer & Singh, 1998, as cited in Kamalaldin et al., 2020). Within digital servitization the governance approach must develop gradually over time from contractually bonded in the infant stages to a more trust-based relation as the partnership matures (Sarker et al., 2012; Reim et al., 2018; Sjödin et al., 2019). We can also notice how prevalent the framework of adapting governance approach is to stimulate trust and enhance continuous improvement and innovation in digital servitization partnerships.

Taking a step back to the overall topic of Digitalization, in the last decade (2010 onwards) we have seen a move towards digitalization from most major companies, cementing the prevalence of digitalization and how it is revolutionizing overall business operations, especially in the field of servitization (Baines et al., 2017; Vendrell-Herrero & Wilson, 2017). Digital servitization is the integration of digital technologies as a service offering. This is changing the traditional product-centric business models into more service-focused ones (Adrodegari & Saccani, 2017; Ardolino et al., 2018; Rust & Huang, 2014, as cited in Kamalaldin et al., 2020). This creates the “Software as a Service” business model. This move requires a deeper understanding of the ever-evolving dynamics between suppliers and customers, who in turn are moving away from transactional interactions towards closer, value-adding, collaborations focused on co-creation and long-term commitment.

Due to digitalization implementation in recent years has grown so has its scholarly interest in the business models related to it, mostly in the business-to-business (B2B)

context (Coreynen, Matthyssens, & Van Bockhaven, 2017). This heightened scholarly interest, in the B2B context, has led investigators like Ritter and Pedersen (2020) to adopt a business model perspective in their study.

To address the gaps in previous investigations, the investigators Ritter and Pedersen (2020) adopt a business model perspective to their study, through this they examine how digitization capabilities interact the company's business model to allow for growth enabled by the obtained data, in this case digitalization. The investigators define digitalization as the transformation from analog to digital data transformation and digitalization as its application of how digital technologies can bring about change in business-to-business company relationships as well as business markets caused by the digitation process (Ritter and Pedersen, 2020). This study managed to pinpoint three key aspects of a company's digitization capacity: data and its generation, transmission, storage, and access; Permission and its legislation, contracts, and society; Analytics and its analysis, visualization, and reporting). These capabilities are considered critical antecedents to a firm's path towards digitalization.

While various industry leaders have gathered technologies such as big data analytics, the Internet of Things (IoT), cloud computing, and additive manufacturing for increased process optimization and reduction of costs, the generalized adoption of digital procurement practices remain in diapers (McGee, 2018; Pellengahr et al., 2016). The current research gap highlights the need for further understanding of organizational essential needs and other inter-organizational dynamics that promote successful implementation of digital procurement. To address this, the study by Kosmol, Reimann, & Kaufmann (2019) introduces the concept of digital procurement readiness.

The current existing Purchasing and supply management (PSM) literature focuses on the value creation of the potential of digital technologies (Richey et al., 2016; Srari and Lorentz, 2019), often ignoring the readiness of organizational factors that are necessary prior to their effective utilization. The study by Kosmol, Reimann, & Kaufmann (2019) addresses the gap by presenting the concept of "digital procurement readiness" as a dyadic construct, including embracing both the company and its suppliers. The approach is in harmony with the natural interconnectedness of procurement tasks, where digital readiness of both sides is key to maximize the potential of said digital technologies.

Existing literature is limited in its attention to the buying company as it often neglects the supplier's part in the digitalization process. Kosmol et al. (2019) vouch for their dyadic perspective on the basis that it considers the readiness of the digital technologies of both buyers and suppliers. This proposes that procurement is a function of a company that surpasses company boundaries and binds organizations. Lots of digital technologies connect systems of the buying part with the supplier's system, hence the need for both the parties' readiness requirement to complete the dyad and then, as a result, the use of technologies in their full potential becomes a possibility.

Cross-functional internal integrations of teams in the buying company were also identified as a requirement for effective external integration with suppliers (Horn et al., 2014; Zhao et al., 2011). This phenomenon has led to further research being conducted on ambidextrous PSM structures that manage to balance exploitation and exploration within the relationship (Gualandris et al., 2018; Lorentz et al., 2019). Beyond internal integration, the rise in the digitalization of the economy has also produced interest on its effects in the PSM scope.

The rise in digitalization of the economy has triggered interest in the potential impact it may have on the PSM realm (Srai and Lorentz, 2019). Advancement of digital technologies like AI (Artificial Intelligence), big data analytics, and the Internet of Things (IoT) are expected to bring about progress to PSM processes (Arvidsson et al., 2021; Srai and Lorentz, 2019). These technologies have the potential to support decision-making, supplier evaluation, negotiation and its tactics, and even the development of new products (Schulze-Horn et al., 2020). Digitalization is also expected to influence PSM skill requirements for users as knowledge of big data analytics becomes crucial (Bals et al., 2019).

2.2. Business-to-Business Embeddedness

This crucial part explores how relations, collaboration and subsequent actions stem from the ability of both supplier and customer to become part of one another, in so becoming business partners, where the success of the objective project becomes a show of the success of how well both partners integrated. This need for deep integration and shared success often necessitates a high degree of transparency throughout the supply chain.

In recent years businesses have experienced heightened pressures from important stakeholders as governments, consumers, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to further clear out the “smoke” and increase the transparency of their extended supply chain (Feng et al., 2024). This includes their suppliers and their practices and everything else that eventually ties back to them. Such criticism comes from the realization that businesses have the responsibility to ensure and safeguard supply chain performance and thus are responsible for its effects caused by the actions and events of their supply chain partners and associates (Hartmann and Moeller, 2014; Liu et al., 2021; Yawar and Seuring, 2017). Due to the mounting insistence, there has been a growing focus on ensuring supply chain transparency, especially concerning environmental, social, and governance (ESG) practices (Marshall et al., 2016). Considering such insistence and realization of the importance attached to supply chain transparency, particularly when exploring how supply chain relationships and structures influence commercial bonds, awareness has been raised on the lack of investigation on this field.

Despite recognizing the importance of supply chain transparency, empirical research investigating its backstory has been limited. Existing studies have focused on transparency at the individual company level, meaning that they do not dive deeper into their supply chain. Factors such as company size, environmental consciousness, resource availability, regulatory landscape, as well as media exposure are some of the ones explored (Jira and Toffel, 2013; Reverte, 2009; Sodhi and Tang, 2019; Montecchi et al., 2021). All the previous implies and shows that the influence of supply chain relationships and structures has been given a lesser role, hence not the same importance.

Following the prior, the impactfulness of digitalization in supply chain transparency has also been under-explored (Feng et al., 2024). While studies have duly recognized the potential of digital technologies and its capabilities to improve supply chain visibility and traceability (Hastig and Sodhi, 2020; Sodhi and Tang, 2019), the practical evidence supporting these theories and relationships is scarce.

The effect of relational embeddedness seen in the investigation covering first-tier and second-tier suppliers, and customers Feng et al. (2024), measured by supplier and customer concentration, on supply chain transparency, operationalized as the entire ESG disclosure of the extended supply chain is the focus of what is being investigated. This

study also explores the moderating role of the local firm's digitalization in this relationship, which is why it is featured in this thesis as a supporting document.

The researchers employed Social Network Analysis (SNA) as a theoretical philosophy. Feng et al. (2024) proposed that the relational embeddedness that is characteristic for a high supplier and customer concentration is positively correlated with supply chain transparency. It is argued that relational embeddedness promotes more frequent interaction, shared values, and interdependence among supply chain partners, facilitating information sharing, the establishment of standardized practices, and the ability to influence supplier as well as customer decisions about information disclosure (Feng et al., 2024). This relational embeddedness, which promotes information sharing and standardized industry practices, could also rely on digital technologies as a way to enhance communication.

Digital technologies have the capacity to enhance communication and interaction, providing a field for sharing information, and enables the implementation of inter-organizational information systems that further commits suppliers and customers together, all this promoting ESG disclosure.

To prove their hypothesis, Feng et al. (2024) collected secondary data from sources such as the Bloomberg database, including supply chain relationship data, ESG data, and financial data. They constructed extended supply chains for a sample of local companies and measured supply chain transparency based on the average ESG disclosure score of the members in each extended supply chain.

The reports of the investigation by Feng et al. (2024) show that supplier concentration has a positive association with supply chain transparency, furthermore, supporting their hypothesis. The study furthermore confirmed the moderating role of the focal company's digitalization as an indicator of the positive effect of supplier concentration on supply chain transparency is stronger for companies with higher levels of digitalization.

The study also remarks the importance of considering supply chain transparency as a strategic initiative in the world of business and cements the role of digital technologies as key part in facilitating information sharing and its communication, as well as establishing collective actions among supply chain partners.

Whilst the previous topic delved on how digitalization can enhance supply chain transparency, another crucial topic that is gaining traction in the PSM realm is the embeddedness of companies leading towards New Product Development (NPD). It is the increasing relevance of bringing forward innovative products to the market, especially in competitive fields, has led to vast and lengthy research on how purchasing and supply management (PSM) impacts the development of new products (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1995; Gonzalez-Zapatero et al., 2016). Even though PSM was initially considered irrelevant to new product development (NPD), it was the increasing dependence on supplier contribution that shifted this view (Azadegan, 2011; Gonzalez-Zapatero et al., 2017; Schiele, 2006). The aeronautic industry is a clear example of this, as constraints in the supply chain and heavy reliance on limited suppliers hinder the ability to meet its ever-increasing demand.

Past research has shown the benefits of early supplier integration in NPD as it has proof of reducing time-to-market, improving product quality, and reduced project costs as the relationship helps to integrate product usage seamlessly (Johnsen, 2009; Luzzini et al., 2015).

A new concept has gained traction. It is known as “customer attractiveness” and comes from the supplier’s perspective. A high customer attractiveness may provide PSM with access to innovations and preferential treatment paired with increased interest from suppliers to undertake the customer’s projects (Hüttinger et al., 2012; Pulles et al., 2016; Schiele et al., 2011).

The authors Le Dain et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of early collaboration, cross-fertilization of knowledge and processes, and the use of socialization tactics as well as object boundaries for successful collaboration in new product development. Building on the importance of collaboration in new product development, the research by Ritter and Pedersen is introduced to further highlight the impact of digitization in various business models.

In research conducted by Ritter and Pedersen in 2020, they utilized Ritter’s (2014) alignment squared of a squared business model to show the impact of digitization and its effect on various business models. The mentioned method concluded on four main components: Capabilities, customers, value proposition, and value demonstration:

- Capabilities: Digitization can be significant for all other capabilities of a company when entering any process, in turn facilitating new value propositions and the uplifting of existing processes (Coreynen et al., 2017; Lai et al., 2008; Syam & Sharma, 2018).
- Customers: Digitization is said to improve customer understanding through the obtained data of customer patterns and preferences, and hence the influence of the supplier's business model because of the customer's digitalization process (Ritter and Pedersen, 2020).
- Value proposition: These can focus on the data by itself and how it promotes deeper insight, digital services, or digital products (Gandhi et al., 2018; Vendrell-Herrero et al., 2017).
- Value demonstration: This is achieved as digitization can impact sales and marketing activities as a whole and define new strategies such as value-based selling, value modeling, and the use of digital communication channels for targeted customers (Järvinen & Karjaluoto, 2015; Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016).

The investigation by Ritter and Pedersen (2020) highlights the early acceptance of data and analytics in marketing and sales practices and its benefits for companies. The authors do emphasize that even though many of the current problematics were raised over twenty years ago, the solutions have slowly been implemented (Plank et al., 1992).

2.3. Trust in Business

In this section dedicated to trust, there are two very different approaches to how trust is developed and shown in a business context. Affect-based and processual/asymmetric are the exposed arguments for how trust impacts business relationships. Despite their different natures, they both stand on their own in front of the project studied within this thesis.

In the competitive field of business-to-business (B2B) relationships there is one understated characteristic that plays a pivotal role in promoting successful collaboration as well as mutually beneficial outcomes: trust (Poppo et al., 2016; Ashnai et al., 2016). Even though previous research has largely explored the calculative and cognitive aspects of trust, the affect-based dimension, rooted in emotion and interpersonal connection has

not received as much attention from investigators (Doney and Cannon, 1997; Akrou et al., 2016; Franklin and Marshall, 2019 as cited in Rungsithong & Meyer, 2024). The present study delves into the affect-based pre-existing concepts of both interpersonal and interorganizational trust, further examining how trust in the supplier-buyer relationship shapes or affects interactions, based in the Thai manufacturing sector.

In order to investigate these affect-based dimensions of trust at both the interpersonal and interorganizational level, the study by Rungsithong and Meyer (2024) is based on the Social Exchange Theory (SET) and social psychology fields. In the interpersonal level, research suggests likability and similarity, as well as frequent social contact as key drivers of trust (McAllister, 1995; Williams, 2001; Akrou et al., 2016; Franklin and Marshall, 2019 as cited in Rungsithong & Meyer, 2024). The aforementioned factors contribute to the development of emotional bonds and positive feelings among the participating individuals. These give a sense of confidence and security in a relationship.

On the organizational level the study explores the affect-based dimensions of trust in a separate way: through the perspective of the supplier's willingness to customize the experience and the institutionalization of cooperation (Robson et al., 2008; Badawi and Battor, 2020). The supplier's willingness to customize refers to tailoring products or services to meet the buyer's needs, signals of goodwill, and concern for what is needed. The sense of predictability this creates as well as the reduced uncertainty that accompanies it ends up strengthening the interorganizational trust bond. Whilst interorganizational trust has shown to affect operational performance positively it must be remarked that it is interceded by interpersonal trust. This may suggest that personal connections and trust amongst individuals are important as they end up contributing to the fulfilment of interorganizational trust objectives through the constitution of the end goal.

Given the importance allocated to the affect-based dimensions of trust found in this study it has been recommended to have a more comprehensive approach to understanding and managing the buyer-supplier relationships as they may end up having a significant impact on the operation due to the heightened operational performance associated to a prominent level of trust within the relationship.

Beyond the affective aspects of trust, another critical dimension in B2B relationships is its evolution over time as relationships mature, and the stakeholders evolve in both autonomy and knowledge.

Trust is an instrumental element in business-to-business (B2B) relationships as it often leads to cooperation, risk mitigation, and contributing to the firms and entities involved (Akrouf & Diallo, 2017; Bottazzi et al., 2016; Champenois et al., 2016; Das & Teng, 1998, as cited in Rungsithong & Meyer, 2024). Despite previous research having established the relevance of trust in the B2B environment, the processual nature and evolution of trust over time in relationships remains an under-explored aspect (Panda et al., 2020).

The VC-entrepreneur relationship is a particular type of B2B relationship as it differs from the usual company-company pairing. VC-entrepreneur is characterized by high interdependence, high-value transactions, strategic importance, and reliance on reputation (Campbell et al., 2010; Gompers et al., 2019; Vaidyanathan et al., 2019; Zacharakis & Shepherd, 2001). In this context trust is one of the most important aspects due to inherent uncertainties and risks involved with the investment the VC makes in favour of the entrepreneur (Das & Teng, 1998 as cited in Rungsithong & Meyer, 2024). Moreover, the dynamics of trust in VC-entrepreneur relationships are complex and contingent on a diverse array of factors including the stage of the project's life cycle (Flynn & Forman, 2001). The existing research on trust in the B2B setting consistently shows results of symmetry and reciprocity. This neglects the potential for asymmetric trust dynamics in business relationships (Graebner, 2009). Alternatively, the oscillating nature of trust, how these connections can progress and consequently trust levels evolve over time, has not been appropriately studied. (Ekici, 2013; Huang & Wilkinson, 2013)

The findings of the study by Panda et al., 2020 reveal that in the initial stages of relationships are described by an asymmetric trust, where entrepreneurs trust the VCs more than the VCs trust the entrepreneurs. Said asymmetry impacts several aspects of the relationship, especially cooperation, access to funding and business networks, contract enforcement, feedback, mentorship, and knowledge sharing. (Panda et al., 2020)

As this relationship progresses forward over time, the asymmetric trust seen in the initial stages evolves from measured trust, based on cost-benefit analysis, to knowledge-

based trust. This is built on increased familiarity and understanding. As the relationships mature and we enter the later stages a difference ensues, now characterized by symmetric distrust, where both parties distrust each other. This can be manifested through an array of ways, including window dressing, contract enforcement, disagreements on decision-making, and pressure to exit. These findings end up defying the assumption that trust is both symmetrical and reciprocal through time by revealing the reality of how dynamics may evolve: asymmetric trust in the initial stages of the relationship with an evolution towards symmetric distrust when reaching the later stages of the relationship (Panda et al., 2020).

3. FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for this project revolves around the relational view theory which emphasizes the competitive advantages that come directly from the mutually beneficial inter-company relations and joint effort from all stakeholders (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Lavie, 2006, as cited in Kamalaldin et al., 2020) that come out as the result of an internal Call For Tender (CFT) process to secure the One Time Vendor service for the next three (3) years. This is particularly in the realm of digital servitization through the digitalization of the process, where the successful implementation of the service is only possible through exhaustive supplier-customer collaboration (Tuli et al., 2007; Cenamor et al., 2017; Eloranta & Turunen, 2015, as cited in Kamalaldin et al., 2020).

The analysis and study will show its relevance through some Key Theoretical Constructs such as:

- Trust: Trust is instrumental in the business-to-business relationships as it leads to parties fostering cooperation, working together in risk mitigation, and seeking mutual benefits (Akrouf & Diallo, 2017; Bottazzi et al., 2016; Champenois et al., 2016; Das & Teng, 1998 as cited in Rungsithong & Meyer, 2024). In the context of this project of the One-Time Vendor for the General Procurement (GP) division of an Aeronautical company trust becomes a crucial due to the intrinsic uncertainties of the project, its scope, and the change towards the digitalization of the process, along with the risks of the long-term commitment and overall value of the operation (Campbell et al., 2010; Gompers et al., 2019; Vaidyanathan et al., 2019; Zacharakis &

Shepherd, 2001). The framework encompasses the dynamics throughout the tender process to the service commissioning.

- **Increased efficiency:** The greatest driver here is digitalization, as a main and growing factor in modern business operations (Baines et al., 2017; Vendrell-Herrero & Wilson, 2017). The framework will investigate how the implementation of a digital platform, with increased transparency can optimize the OTV process, reduce costs associated to opportunity, and reduce time lost in communication (Batra et al., 2017; Pellengahr et al., 2016).
- **Customer-Supplier Relations:** The previously mentioned relational view theory shows that competitive advantage will arise from mutually beneficial customer-supplier relationships (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Lavie, 2006, as cited in Kamalaldin et al., 2020). This is a key factor to the investigation as the framework will analyse how dynamics change from one supplier to another towards the customers (The company). Diverse factors like long-term commitment, knowledge sharing, and compliance will be part of the focus.
- **Digitalization Capability:** A company's ability to leverage digital technologies is crucial and key to obtaining the competitive advantages linked to them. The framework will explore the digitalization capabilities of Aeronautical Company GP department in the context of the OTV Call for Tender process, examining how the company generates, transmits, stores and accesses data; how it navigates legal and contractual aspects of data usage; and how data is analysed in pro of decision making (Ritter and Pedersen, 2020).
- **Digital Procurement Readiness:** This section refers to the preparedness of both the buying company and the supplier to effectively utilize and integrate digital technologies in the procurement operation (Kosmol et al., 2019). The framework will analyse the readiness as a dyadic construct, which will emphasize the importance of both parties' readiness for the total integration of the systems.

Through the integration of these theoretical constructs, the framework will provide a comprehensive understanding of the Company's OTV call for tender process, operation, and management which will in turn highlight the dynamic play between trust, efficiency, customer-supplier relations, and digitalization capability. After understanding these key

aspects, we will be able to provide recommendations for the optimization of a future process and enhance competitiveness for future similar endeavors.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study aims to understand how digitalization affects the procurement process of the One Time Vendor (OTV) service. According to its purpose, this study can be classified as explanatory (Saunders et al., 2023, p.181). This means that the study becomes a narrative inquiry (Saunders et al., 2023, p.203) due to the accounts of the interviewees' experiences with the supplier and the service that is introduced as the variable of this study. This is determined as the interviewees pull judgment from their experiences and then retell them in a story that develops on a per-request basis. The time horizon is cross sectional (Saunders et al., 2023, p.212) as even though the interviewees evaluated and recollected various requests through time, they are still based on specific moments considered as "snapshots" of the observed phenomena.

This thesis has a qualitative research methodology to examine the relationship between the digitalization of a process and how much more trustful the buyers are to its results. Other aspects to be studied include communication transparency and supply chain efficiency. Qualitative research is well-suited for this topic as it allows for the collection and analysis of data, which will be used to later identify patterns and relationships between variables (Creswell, 2014). This approach aligns with the investigation's focus to measure and quantify the impact of digitalization on various aspects.

Sampling for this study is a hybrid of purposive sampling (Saunders et al., 2023, p.324) as the initial group of people was selected based on criteria developed by the researcher's judgement in order to find the most accurate recollection of answers and self-selection sampling (Saunders et al., 2023, p.324) because after the initial segregation of the sample the potential participants were contacted in order for them to participate voluntarily in our study. For this study, interviewees were selected due to their amount interactions with the new process and supplier (more than 2) and also their involvement in various levels of company roles.

With the main goal of collecting as much information as possible, while being reliable and relevant to the study object, interviews were the method used to collect primary data. As per Sauders et al. (2012), the use of interviews can assist in gathering reliable data that

is significant to the research question and the objectives of the study. To efficiently support the research, a semi-structured questionnaire was implemented to allow interviewees to openly discuss and, hence, gain deeper insight into how they see and feel the process has been impactful (Appendix A). In them being able to openly discuss it is also intended to see how they unconsciously see the object of the questions. Five questionnaires were conducted to try and discover patterns that can be useful in the construction of a proper answer to this research objective. Due to a confidentiality agreement signed to publish and investigate this Master thesis all names, people and/or companies are fictitious. Exemplary citations from the interviews, according to the dimensions of the literature review, can be found in Appendix B.

TABLE 1. INTERVIEW CHARACTERIZATION

Name (Given in document)	Position	Interview Platform	Elapsed Interview Time
Laetitia C.	Corporate Assistant	Google Gmeet	49:39
Christine L.	Corporate Assistant	Google Gmeet	37:10
Sebastien M.	Tool Development Engineer	Google Gmeet	42:30
Marianne P.	Project Resource Manager	Google Gmeet	34:47
Ludovic C.	Project Manager	Google Gmeet	28:30
<i>Source: Own Elaboration</i>			

5. CASE STUDY

5.1. Organization's Overview

This project is born from an underlying problem of the company not attended to, or more so, created due to the inattention of the General Procurement lead, but get me, it is

difficult to maintain control when over 500 stakeholders are coming at you with their all apparent urgent and valid needs. Let's start from the beginning.

The company's General Procurement (GP from now on) is the division of the Global Procurement operation that focuses on sourcing anything and everything that does not fly. It most certainly supports all operations and the items procured by this division most certainly have their part building, retrofitting, moving, painting and many other actions on parts that do fly. GP services a wide range of company divisions ranging from helicopters, passing to commercial aircraft, and finishing all the way to satellites. Having the need to cater to all of the above products and their respective sites, factories, and assembly lines it is worth noting that there is at least 1 representative of the GP community in every country that the company operates in, with the majority of the presence focused on the core countries France, Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom, presence is also note-worthy in the United States, Canada, and Dubai. You may understand that the needs of all these different departments bring to the company very heterogeneous needs, this without considering the unsurmountable number of operative employees tied to them.

GP has a standard downstream structure featuring 6 different buying commodities (departments) and 2 additional procedural and quality focused departments that aim to keep the company processes in check along with the quality of the overall commodity's operation.

These commodities were created in order to fill the categories of the most recurrent needs presented by the stakeholders on the ground, be it from product programmes or specifically for other needs.

These commodities are divided as follows:

- GPC - Corporate Services
- GPE - Engineering for Design, Manufacturing, and Customer Service
- GPL - Procurement Regional (Local) Operations
- GPI - Information and Digitalisation Information
- GPM - Manufacturing Technologies Products and Services
- GPR - Real Estate and Facility Management
- GPS - Supply Chain & Quality

- GPY - Strategy and Performance

The GP division is driven through these 8 commodities, each one carefully in charge of its particularities on the field and exist ready to cooperate and collaborate with each other in case of needs that cross their category borders. A notable characteristic can be attributed to GPL, a commodity that despite being its own it also acts transversely with GPM and GPR to aid in their more local projects on a country-to-country basis.

It is also worth mentioning that each commodity has its own set of Harmonized Material Groups (HMG) which are alphanumerical codes corresponding to agreed-upon product and service categories with its defined guidelines and limits.

The company has external spend exceeding 55 billion euros in both direct and indirect procurement, distributed across a supplier base exceeding 18,000 entities, some of which are critical for business ranging to those with minimum annual order and value volume. Becoming one of the company's trusted suppliers involves a rigorous and often bureaucratic authorization process but is key to being able to comply with the company's top procurement objectives, which are delivery on time, and on cost.

The road to becoming a supplier for the firm offers numerous advantages. To become an authorized supplier for the company they need to go through a screening process of their finances, affiliates (due to sanctions and embargoes), processes, and even certifications when applicable. As part of the funds that the company spends are tied to public money there is a high level of compliance levels to be achieved.

Depending on the type of services and commodities that the suppliers cater to it may be location restrictive for some and not for others, also the type of involvement with the commodities may warrant direct support from the company in exchange for close collaboration in the development of company-only products, though this is mostly reserved and seen in the procurement of flying components. While attractive for companies, it requires significant company involvement and constant audits to monitor fund management.

In the past year 2024 Procurement was faced with significant challenges to its functions since the financial results of the company were impacted by the industry-tied complications of the Global Supply Chain and due to this constraint, the company was unable to attain the projected market performance, leading to a reduction in revenue,

eventually impacting the profitability of the business. Consequently, Management launched a strict plan through all divisions to reduce any non-essential expenses. A firmer outlook was taken when looking to take up projects, and the only ones to be performed were those deemed business critical.

Having this in mind, it was up to GP to undertake the responsibility of achieving savings beyond initial projections. Along with this outlook it was imperative to be more aware of the purpose of the projects and how they serve the company and its employees. This shift in the operational philosophy was critical to achieve acceptable financial results the company had through the effective filtering of non-essential and essential projects and having a savings first mentality on those undertaken.

As of today, GP is operating with a renewed budget, but the critical methodology has remained when looking to undertake any type of project. Despite the challenges 2024 presented in current times, GP is going through a phase of strategic optimization, looking to optimize value extraction from suppliers through collaboration and partnerships. Each commodity within General Procurement has its own specialized expertise towards the markets and with each group comes a different set of knowledge that offers a potential competitive advantage to the company in the marketplace due to shared experiences and insights.

After all this information, it is time to dive into the more nuanced part of the problem, the solution. One-Time-Vendor (OTV) is a term commonly used in Procurement landscapes to refer to a supplier that will be used once or not recurrently, but this is not always the case. Different companies use it in a variety of ways. For some it is merely a system override to manually input the data for a new supplier that is known to not be a recurrent one for the company, so you avoid having to create an entity in your system, this happens to be the most common associated function to the term. For this company it is not the case, in this case the OTV is a concept used to refer to an actual registered supplier for the company that then acts as a middle-man to then reach thousands upon thousands of new and niche suppliers that can and will supply needed equipment, but not as high in value or recurrence to warrant getting added to the company's supplier base. A simple way of seeing it is as the company being the brain, the OTV the spine and the suppliers everything else, this is an oversimplified analogy for better understanding.

The solution was aimed to have a significant impact on the company's tail spend focusing on bringing tangible cost savings. Tails spend refers to the Pareto principle consisting of 20% of the spending is allocated to the bottom 80% of suppliers. One of the strategies behind the usage of the OTV is the recurring analysis of suppliers performed by the company to then start rationing existing suppliers and gradually out-phasing them, thus creating savings for the company. The justification of the solution comes from a critical internal analysis of the cost of hardware and software cost of servers needed in order to gatekeep all the information pertaining to suppliers and it was stated that each supplier approximately costs €3,000 to the company per year. Meaning any random supplier can cost the company about €15,000 in the span of 5 years. This figure substantially exceeds the total transactional value realized with the supplier within the same timeframe. The present situation portrays the economic inefficiency of managing multiple infrequent vendors. The theory of the solution brings many savings and efficiency benefits, use an intermediary for the small needs and then phase out suppliers under a yearly spend threshold, consequently lowering and dealing with the tail spend problem.

Around the years of 2015 there was the birth of what now is the One Time Vendor project we are analyzing within the company as multiple suppliers with similar profiles (Procurement Centrals) were onboarded onto the company in an attempt to provide different options for the same purpose of intermediating with the smaller and more niche suppliers. This initial attempt comes from the identified issue of the previously mentioned Tail Spend within GP. Anecdotally, it was well received by the stakeholders GP had and was deemed useful, however, despite this initial positive response as the project went on it was deemed to be chaotic due to the multiple sources, their different processes outside of the Standard Operating Procedure of GP, and their variable situations in country-to-country delivery. Due to this it was later identified that a process had to be carried out internally to try and standardize the communications and dealings with these types of suppliers. A form and work instructions were introduced in order to bring such standardization of both documentation and way of working. After this happened some control was established when processing the requests internally to catch buy requests that could include the likes of Export Controlled and POA/DOA items which were not allowed to be purchased through these means. POA/DOA refers to crucial organizational approvals related to design and production of aircraft which must be in line with standards

and regulations established by the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA). This way of working was kept until the year 2019 when things changed.

Later, in 2019 there was a CFT conducted to define an established set of suppliers that would undertake the role of the OTV, and it was deemed each core country's responsibility to select the best proposal and best adapted to their markets. This process led to the creation of an MFT, a Multi-Functional Team, including buyers, managers, General Procurement Local Representatives, and Supply Chain Quality Managers. This was replicated by all countries in an attempt to solidify the OTV functionality one country at a time. In this CFT there was one OTV selected for each country based on their proposal and the country's specificities, but in the end the German, French and Spanish operations chose the same supplier at the time, which we'll refer to as EB. Years went by with EB being one of the prominent suppliers for GP due to its strategic involvement for the developing of several programs through the accessibility it gave to niche parts and the speed with which they delivered, but this had its hiccups with missed orders, somewhat constant miscommunications and lack of good customer service. The previous compiled with subsequent billing and payment issues along with the expiration of their contract (and of the other OTV supplier for England) there was a second wave of OTV CFTs put in place to start in 2023 to start operations in mid 2024.

For the most recent iteration of the OTV project, CFT things changed from the strategy of how this would be approached. In a change of concept, Management chose to pursue a single OTV supplier in order to keep tighter control on both supplier and internal customers who, at instances, used the service to skip GP's buying process.

This new idea in concept came from the fact that the supplier EB had previously managed all countries at once successfully but was also aware of their past mistakes and areas for improvement. This new round, referred to as OTV2024 came as the scope had increased in order to accommodate new countries with GP operation such as Canada, Portugal and the United States of America.

After the first round of the CFT, where more than 10 potential suppliers were reached, it became clear that this approach of a global supplier was an utopia as no supplier could even cover the whole of the European landscape due to several constraints where language, tax regimes, and organizational distance were the main culprits.

With this in mind, the management of the MFT decided it was best to turn to the previous concept of one supplier for each of the countries participating in the OTV2024 project, but synergies were encouraged in this way. In the end, there were 4 companies selected for the 7 participating countries. EB for The United States and Canada, A4 for England, LT for Spain, Portugal and Spain, and lastly PG for Germany.

Regarding the many suppliers impacted by the project, we can denote two perspectives, from the company to the small suppliers and from them to the company. The company has an interest in these suppliers as they have the ability to supply experimental items as well as with exceptional speed which will then lead programs to be more reactive in the procurement of solutions for their constraints and the exploration for new solutions. Taking this into account the role of these smaller suppliers becomes increasingly important, but it must pass by the agility of the One Time Vendor supplier as then they become the bottleneck for the benefits that the niche suppliers can provide. In turn, the smaller suppliers will always want to engage with the company as due to the size of its projects, if one of their pieces becomes instrumental for the success of such a project then they would be able to perceive major financial benefits for themselves.

In this way we can suggest the OTV project becomes a symbiotic relation between the niche suppliers and the company as they both can perceive major benefits, but for this to be realized the intermediate supplier (OTV) must be efficient and agile.

Overall contracts for the OTV2024 project are very similar, especially for countries where synergies were put in place and are standardized to comply with company's regulations, all of them include KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) that are function specific for this project and have some country-to-country specificities depending on the different regulations that exist. The mentioned synergies mean that the following countries share supervision but, the ones formed were the ones mentioned before, the United States with Canada and France with Spain, and Portugal. The company's legal advisors for the procurement department carefully reviewed and approved all of these contracts.

All the contracts were negotiated and agreed by the country's responsible buyers and each of the OTV supplier companies; all spend thresholds are well defined by ranges of amounts per order.

Some of the projected benefits surrounding the OTV project for the enterprise is the efficient handling of General Procurement's tail spend, gaining the ability to properly take action on the phase out of the least used vendors and the inclusion of unidentified niche suppliers that could offer significant strategic advantages to the company's strategic goals. Beyond the previously mentioned there is the potential for savings through two ways: the phase out of the existing suppliers and the associated cost no longer paid by the company and the avoidance of registering new suppliers through not having to have them included in the company's database. Another benefit that may arrive through the use of the OTV is the reduction of workload for GP specialists as the Internal Customer is encouraged to handle the request process independently and the focal point only being involved in the approval process after a swift check of the requirements compliance in accordance with the established guidelines.

All of these benefits come with their own set of challenges, difficulties, and limitations. As context for this part, it must be noted that the OTV has a set of rules for its usage by the ICs (Internal Customer) which include it not being a recurrent necessity, under 500,000.00€, not related to POA/DOA, nor export control restrictions, among others.

These rules set by the MFT working in the project were set in order to protect the company from liabilities that may arise due to the suppliers the OTV contacts not being screened and therefore jeopardizing the operation with an uncontrolled item or in the case of externals having to enter the facilities, avoiding any accidents and them not being covered by any of the company protections for employees.

Due to this, one of the main issues with the project arises which is its unavailability of some categories of items or services in order to maintain compliance and limit liabilities in operation. Also, the benefit to the GP specialists may also be seen as a challenge due to the inexperience of internal stakeholders and this being a point where the process could diverge as the process might deviate as the internal stakeholders do not familiarize themselves enough with the guidelines before using the service and this may hinder the flow of the process.

Finally, many challenges may not be seen until the project's rollout, but there's one that has been identified as one of the most impactful to the success of the project. These

are the actions needed to be taken once it is running. Once data is collected and given to management for action regarding the phase out and inclusion of new suppliers then comes the moment for action in the strategic scope of GP as if there is no action then many of the potential benefits are lost due to not having savings, nor avoiding costs and keeping suppliers that further cement the tail spend issues.

5.2. One-Time-Vendor Process

1. The Digital Shift: A Leap Towards Efficiency and Traceability through Digitalization

The transition from an entirely email based procurement process with the previous supplier (EB) to a digital platform with Supplier LT came a change marked specifically by efficiency and speed, which was agreed individually upon by all respondents as a significant advancement. The digitalization initiative comes as a response to the progress of the significance of the process to the company's General Procurement (GP) division and also to the settlement of digitalization as a powerful weapon in modern supply chain management. Participants, including Ludovic C., observed a process that is now "faster, more seamless, and with less clicks and less opportunity for errors," while Christine L. noted that Supplier LT "takes less time" and is "more secure." When comparing the current provider to the previous one. This advancement in efficiency is further highlighted by the improved user experience reported by respondents Laetitia C. and Marianne P. due to the ease of use of a platform that allows for communication and requesting actions in the same place. Even given these improvements Sebastien M. remarked that the core way of working hadn't changed for internal customers, but the process of checking status of open requests became significantly easier, reducing the need for "chasing specialists" which inevitably took time off their daily activities. The ability to automatically create a shopping cart ready for approval directly in the platform with the quotation is a feature greatly appreciated by Sebastien M. and Christine L. is one of the types of evidence of the upgraded digital capabilities added to the process.

The change was not without its initial challenges which were expected given the learning curve of using a new digital tool. Laetitia C. noted persistent difficulties with contacting the supplier by phone, her preferred method of follow up, and frequent changes in Points of Contact which can be attributed to the suppliers specialists also adjusting to

the company's way of working, along with being frustrated due to shopping cart building (later fixed) and delays for orders coming from outside the European Union (due to customs constraints). Despite the previous the consensus remained that even though there were a few bumps faced in the initial months, the digital revolution enabled a more streamlined and traceable environment with further possibilities of accountability, essentially addressing the inconsistencies deriving from the previous email based way of working, which Sebastien M. described as allowing "too many chances for inconsistencies in both communication and operation and treatment of requests."

2. Transparency: Illuminating the Procurement Journey

One of the main pillars for OTV digitalization was the promise of enhanced transparency and efficiency, a promise that appears to have been fulfilled according to the interviewees. All participants confirmed a noticeable increase in process visibility, especially in the status and progression of requests and orders aspects. Christine L. particularly valued the immediate assignment of a request number within the platform, making every request easily traceable whilst allowing progress checks in real time. In similar fashion, Ludovic C. highlighted the efficacy of "automatic emails" signaling process progression in the fulfillment of a request.

Even when the general perception is generally positive, some respondents highlighted areas of improvement that could be added functionalities to the platform, such as end supplier payment check, allowing the user to see if the third-party supplier has been paid for their products pr services. Specifically, Christine L., Sebastien M., and Marianne P. all denoted a need for full transparency on payment to supplier dates and milestones, thus revealing a critical area where current transparency falls short of the expected. Christine L.'s statement about "No visibility on the payments by Supplier LT" further highlights this gap. Furthermore, Laetitia C. emphasized the need for clear "notification of the resolution process on orders with issues" and detailed requirements for non-EU orders in order to reduce the issued and constraints faced in her experience, this indicates a demand for clearer operational situations beyond just order status. In his own right, Ludovic C. was an outlier by not declaring gaps with the Supplier LT's current transparency noting the "Current aspects of Supplier LT transparent enough to not notice any flaws,"

suggesting a higher baseline of satisfaction or fewer issues reported by the suppliers tied to his operation compared to his peers.

With the increased transparency of the process and supplier, there has come a generalized increase in the service level expectations reported by all respondents. Laetitia C., expressed that the update has "increased expectations of service and there is some expectation of eventual improvement along with it," maintaining that incremental improvement is expected, but as well highlighting there is a new normal surrounding this previously chaotic service.

3. Trust: Rebuilding Confidence in the Supplier Relationship

The previous supplier relationship was reported by respondents to exist with a significant lack of trust. Christine L. attributed this to "lack of traceability and lack of good experiences," while Laetitia C. cited reports coming from the involved third-party suppliers saying they "complained of non-payment, bad service, and a general lack of communication." Sebastien M. described his trust in the previous supplier (EB) as "average," never fully solid due to "communication inconsistencies," a noteworthy improvement with the current provider.

Contrary to the previously mentioned, the digital transformation of the process has produced a new era of trust with Supplier LT. This recent confidence is predominantly caused by the enhanced traceability, transparency, and the perceived stability of the new process. Christine L. mentioned she now trusts the supplier due to "traceability and openness," a statement replicated by Marianne P. who noted a "positive change in trust due to transparency and request traceability," especially given that the "previous process allowed supplier to 'hide'," this comes to meet previous statement by Sebastien M. regarding having to 'chase specialists'. Finally, Ludovic C.'s trust stems from the "stable" process, "good response time, and timeliness."

However, this increased trust is neither total nor absolute, in part due to the supplier's recency. This greatly reflects the nuanced and evolving nature of B2B relationships. Sebastien M. offered a "Yes and No" response, acknowledging that while "increased visibility and traceability helps a lot," occasional "inconsistencies with responses and communication arise slight concerns" highlighting the possible impossibility of the supplier to provide a consistent service." This indicates that while the operational aspects

have improved, the relational dimension still presents areas for development, mainly in the communication scope. Similarly, Laetitia C., while demonstrating more trust due to the showed efficiency, observed that "Progress on know-how has been a bit slow," denoting a learning curve where trust still has ways to improve. These details highlight the ever-evolving journey towards fully embedded trust which given the B2B landscape may never be achieved but still opens way for an open exchange towards operational improvements.

4. Relational Embeddedness / Cross Collaboration

The shift to the digital platform has proven to have improved the overall relationship with the current supplier, fostering collaboration and a sense of shared progress through a successful period of operations, a perception shared by the respondents as well as by the multifunctional team tied to the project. Most interviewees noted an increase in collaborative efforts despite some initial "growing pains," and a reduction in issues related to payments when compared to the previous supplier, but the current supplier has proven that there are obstacles yet to overcome regarding this matter. This positive evolution in the relationship has been catalogued as an "astounding betterment" according to Christine L. and may be an example of increased relational embeddedness as both companies have worked together based on the needs to cater the solution to what is needed and expected. Furthermore, there was a strong perception that General Procurement (GP) had actively sought to improve the previous situation, with the digitalization of the process highlighted as a key driver of this improvement. A prevalent belief among respondents was that the enterprise "commands" the relationship between customer and supplier, contrary to it being an equal partnership, indicating that the power dynamic leans towards the company. Laetitia C. mentioned in her answer the presence of "a feeling of commandment from the company to Supplier LT, but sometimes the end user needs to be 'reminded' of this", intending on the company reminding the internal customers that they have rights and duties in front of the service. While Marianne P. acknowledged the general improvement in the relationship she mentioned having "No clear view of this aspect" regarding the company commanding the relationship, a different sentiment from the consensus, likely showing that the "command" is not visible. Ludovic C. agreed that the company commands the relationship but also highlighted that in his view there were "no clear actions from Supplier LT" demonstrating such command.

5. Familiarity and the Developing Relationship

The relationship with Supplier LT is broadly considered better than with the previous one by all respondents, signaling a positive trajectory in the developing relationship being built by both parties. Christine L. described it as "Strong yes. Better all around," when asked about the suppliers' personnel dedication contrasting it with past "frustration regarding traceability and accountability." This improvement is attributed to increased collaboration shown by the supplier internally to reduce issues and increase the sense of safety. Laetitia C. felt Supplier LT was "more organized and gives a feeling of safety in their operation," partly due to "less issues with payments to third-party suppliers," when looking back to previous supplier EB.

While the supplier's personnel are seen as professional and dedicated to fulfilling needs, performing "their job" as Sebastien M. put it means there are different perceptions of the specialists' "dedication" to the operation. Laetitia C. appreciated their quick responses and proactivity, while Marianne P. found their dedication to be "Not any more than the professional amount," in this way agreeing with Sebastien M.'s previous response and suggesting a standard level of professionalism rather than an "extra mile." Indeed, some recurring issues persist, particularly around payments and responsiveness, as reported by Christine L. and Sebastien M. noting a key area of improvement for the multifunctional team to target. Laetitia C. also noted "order duplication" which was later fixed and deemed a technological error. Conversely, Ludovic C. reported "No particular issues from their experience."

Regarding the evolution of the operation since its inception, most acknowledge positive changes and improvements, as expected with the supplier adjusting to the company's procedure. The ease of using digital tools over time was a common observation by Marianne P. However, the increase in volumes has introduced new challenges, with Christine L. noting that "payments have become an issue," especially when volume ramped up. Laetitia C. highlighted a decrease in proactivity from the supplier over time. Ludovic C., through his experiences along time, experienced little change, finding the process consistently "good enough."

6. The Strategic Role of Digital Tools and Information Support

The digital tools as the OTV has transformed into, are recognized for their potential to provide strategic insights, primarily concerning supplier and tail spend management, both company strategic targets. Most respondents, specifically Laetitia C., Sebastien M., and Marianne P., believe the OTV can offer useful information for developing company strategies, especially for identifying and monitoring frequently used or niche suppliers to then be included into the company's supplier database and dealing directly with them. Sebastien M. suggested "monitoring most used suppliers and then contact with commodities to try and adjust their supplier strategy," this suggestion is in line with the intention of the monitoring of the multifunctional team. Ludovic C. saw potential in integrating recurrent OTV suppliers to "mitigate any errors from Supplier LT," and developing strategies directly with the suppliers and not being contingent on the use of the intermediary.

Beyond strategic insights it may provide, the OTV generally supports operations by enabling access to niche or lesser used suppliers as per Laetitia C., Sebastien M., Ludovic C.) and helping to "avoid some company bureaucracy" as highlighted by Sebastien M. and Ludovic C. as it avoids the suppliers having to be onboarded and screened. However, Laetitia C. provided a critical opinion, noting that while it expands the supplier's scope, it "limits the ability to develop commercial strategies directly with suppliers."

On the broader topic of further digitalization, there exists a consensus that most of the company processes have already been digitalized; further advancements would be beneficial. Ludovic C. provided a concrete suggestion: "Catalogs for smaller entities or supplier clusters," highlighting areas where digital tools be utilized to take advantage of various partner scopes. Christine L. and Marianne P. also agreed that "other programs could be digitalized," focusing on how the company should continue its way forward towards greater digital and technological maturity.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1. Digitalization, Efficiency, and Supply Chain Management

The change from an email-based dynamic to a digital platform reported by the interviewees proved to align directly with the literature on digitalization being a key driver for competitiveness and value creation (Kamalaldin et al., 2020). The observed increase in agility, seamlessness, and reduction in errors mark the presence of the bases

of digital servitization, which emphasizes transforming product-centric models into more relational and service-oriented interactions through digital means (Adrodegari & Saccani, 2017; Ardolino et al., 2018; Rust & Huang, 2014, as cited in Kamalaldin et al., 2020). Sebastien M.'s positive remark about automated shopping cart creation directly shows the efficiency gains promised by taking advantage of the company's digital procurement readiness (Kosmol, Reimann, & Kaufmann, 2019). This highlights that when both the buying company through its customers and the supplier through the platform embrace digital tools, the "dyadic construct" of digital procurement readiness ends up maximizing the potential of digital technologies, as proposed by Kosmol et al. (2019).

Despite the previously mentioned, the initial challenges presented by Laetitia C. regarding difficulties with phone contact and issues with non-EU orders, highlight the learning curve that comes with adopting new digital tools. This aligns with the understanding that while digital technologies offer immense potential, its adoption and seamless integration are not immediate and require addressing organizational and inter-organizational dynamics (McGee, 2018; Pellengahr et al., 2016). The fact of order duplication being identified and fixed, mentioned by Laetitia C., demonstrates how digital transformation depends on the continuous improvement cycles highlighted by Kamalaldin et al. (2020) through digitally enabled knowledge-sharing routines and partnership governance.

6.2. Transparency and Business-to-Business Embeddedness

The significant increase in process visibility especially in request status and progression reported by interviewees, corroborates the literature's emphasis on digitalization's capacity to improve supply chain transparency (Feng et al., 2024; Hastig & Sodhi, 2020; Sodhi & Tang, 2019). Christine L.'s remark of receiving request references and real-time progress, and Ludovic C.'s acknowledgement of automatic emails to signal progress illustrate how digital technologies promotes information sharing, thereby promoting transparency (Feng et al., 2024). This empirical evidence from the OTV case study provides practical support for the theoretical claims previously mentioned that were limited in empirical backing (Feng et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, the consistent demand for full transparency on end-supplier payment dates and milestones voiced by respondents reveals a critical gap. This suggests that while

digitalization has improved operational transparency, there are still areas where the extended supply chain remains blurry, particularly regarding financial flows to third-party suppliers. This finding highlights the need for further academic investigation into which mechanisms or digital functionalities are needed to achieve complete financial transparency in complex, multi-tiered supply chains. This comes to meet the request for increased supply chain transparency from stakeholders suggested by Feng et al. (2024) and Marshall et al. (2016). Separately, the increased service expectations reported by respondents, following enhanced transparency, also suggests a shifting baseline in what customers deem acceptable, pushing the supplier towards continuous improvement.

6.3. Trust in a Digitalized Business Environment

One of the most significant findings is the profound shift in trust from the previous supplier EB to the current digitalized process with Supplier LT. The sustained lack of trust in EB was rooted on its lack of traceability and lack of good experiences as reported by Christine L. and communication inconsistencies reported by Sebastien M., aligns with the notion that trust in B2B relationships is cultivated through predictable and reliable interactions (Robson et al., 2008; Badawi & Battor, 2020). On the other hand, the new era of trust with Supplier LT, driven by traceability and openness and a stable process, strongly supports the literature's focus on transparency and consistent operational performance as foundational elements of trust (Poppo et al., 2016; Ashnai et al., 2016).

But there were nuanced responses, particularly Sebastien M.'s "Yes and No" regarding absolute trust, and Laetitia C.'s remark of "slow progress on know-how," these show that while operational improvements foster trust, the relationship requires development. This aligns with the "processual nature and evolution of trust over time" (Panda et al., 2020). The initial asymmetric trust where the buyer might initially trust the digitalized process more than the supplier fully trusts the buyer's adaptation could be a parallel to what is seen in the VC- entrepreneur relationship (Panda et al., 2020). The ongoing "inconsistencies with responses and communication" mentioned by Sebastien M. suggest that while the structural elements of platform and traceability have improved, the interpersonal and communication aspects, which are crucial for affect-based trust (Runsithong & Meyer, 2024), need improvement. The dedication of supplier personnel perceived as professional but not always extra mile highlighted by Marianne P. cements

this notion. This indicates that while digital tools lay a strong foundation, the human elements of likability and similarity (McAllister, 1995; Williams, 2001; Akrouit et al., 2016; Franklin & Marshall, 2019 as cited in Rungsithong & Meyer, 2024) remain vital for fully embedded trust. Issues such as payment fails, despite overall improvement, also prevent trust from becoming absolute, reflecting the ongoing nature of the trust journey.

6.4. Relational Embeddedness and Power Dynamics

The general improvement provided by the relationship with Supplier LT, characterized by "astounding betterment" as per Christine L. and an encouragement for collaboration aligns with the relational view theory, which says that competitive advantage stems from mutually advantageous inter-company relations and joint stakeholder input (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Lavie, 2006, as cited in Kamalaldin et al., 2020). The perception that GP sought to improve the situation of the process through digitalization shows this proactive approach to reach better relational capabilities.

The sustained belief among respondents that the company "commands" the relationship with Supplier LT instead of it being an equal partnership, reveals an interesting power dynamic in this specific B2B embeddedness. While the literature for relational embeddedness suggests "frequent interaction, shared values, and interdependence" (Feng et al., 2024), the case study suggests that in this context, the buyer or internal customer has a dominant position. This contrasts with the ideal of fully balanced collaborative work emphasized in digital servitization literature (Tuli et al., 2007; Cenamor et al., 2017; Eloranta & Turunen, 2015, as cited in Kamalaldin et al., 2020). Laetitia C.'s remark about needing to "remind" internal customers of the company's "commandment" further highlights this hierarchical perception. While this power imbalance may aim to ensure compliance and adherence to GP's requirements, it could also potentially hinder the co-creation and joint innovation that are often seen as hallmarks of highly embedded, collaborative digital servitization partnerships (Kamalaldin et al., 2020). Despite this prevalent notion, Ludovic C.'s observation of "no clear actions from Supplier LT" demonstrates that the perception of command in this power dynamic is subtle and inherent in the company's size and strategic importance.

6.5. Strategic Role of Digital Tools and Future Digitalization

The recognition of the OTV's strategic potential as a tool to manage tail spend and identifying niche suppliers aligns with the strategic importance of digitalization in PSM, especially in the optimization of costs and identifying new value sources (Srai & Lorentz, 2019). Sebastien M.'s suggestion to "monitor most used suppliers" to then be included in commodity lists directly reflects the analytical and reporting capabilities crucial for leveraging data through digitalization (Ritter & Pedersen, 2020). This shows the benefits of the "Value demonstration" aspect of digitalization, where data impacts sales and marketing activities and defines new strategies, the latter prevalent for the company's context. (Järvinen & Karjaluo, 2015).

The consensus among respondents for further digitalization, including Ludovic C.'s suggestion for "Catalogues for smaller entities or supplier clusters," indicates an ongoing trend towards greater digital maturity within the company. This reinforces the idea that digitalization is not a one-time event but a continuous process of evolution and optimization within the purchasing and supply chain management realm (Baines et al., 2017; Vendrell-Herrero & Wilson, 2017).

7. CONCLUSION

This research started as a way to explore the journey of transformative impact of digitalization on trust in buyer-supplier relationships, specifically within the context of the OneTime Vendor (OTV) procurement process at a leading aeronautical company. Through a qualitative case study, proofing insights from internal stakeholders well in touch with the service, this research provides empirical evidence with nuanced understanding of how a shift from traditional, email-based communication to a digital platform influences efficiency, transparency, and, critically, trust in a B2B environment.

The findings demonstrate digitalization to be a great catalyst for enhancing operational efficiency and process transparency. The digital platform introduced as a result of the call for tender for the OTV process significantly streamlined workflows, reduced errors in processing, and provided real-time visibility into request statuses, and in doing so reduced previous inconsistencies and miscommunications. This outcome directly validates the theoretical propositions on digital servitization (Adrodegari & Saccani, 2017, as cited in Kamalaldin et al., 2020) and digital procurement readiness (Kosmol, Reimann, & Kaufmann, 2019), illustrating how integrated digital capabilities

between buyer and supplier organizations promote a more agile and reliable procurement ecosystem.

As expected initially, the study revealed a firm increase in trust towards the new digitalized process and the current supplier. This shift in trust was majorly attributed to the improved traceability and openness provided by the platform, hence contrasting with the "lack of trust" experienced with the previous process and supplier. While operational improvements formed the base of this enhanced trust, the findings also highlight the complex and evolving nature of trust in B2B relationships. The current presence of minor communication inconsistencies and the perception of the company "commanding" the relationship suggest that fully embedded trust, at both cognitive and affect-based dimensions, remains characterized as a journey that transcends the technological realm and its implementation and necessitates continuous relational development (Panda et al., 2020; Runsithong & Meyer, 2024).

This research contributes to the existing literature by providing empirical insights into the relational aspects of digital servitization from the customer's perspective, an area previously under-explored (Sjödín et al., 2016). All whilst increasing the understanding of how digitalization practically mediates transparency and trust especially in complex supply chain settings, offering a practical case study that connects the theoretical gap between the potential of digital technologies and their real-life impact on inter-organizational dynamics. Furthermore, the findings highlight the potential strategic importance of digital tools in tail spend management and supplier identification when following the correct strategy, aligning with broader trends in Purchasing and Supply Management (Srai & Lorentz, 2019).

From a practical standpoint, this study offers valuable implications for other organizations aiming for similar digital transformations in their procurement processes. It emphasizes the importance of a well-designed digital platform for efficiency and transparency, which then lays a strong foundation for trust between enterprises. However, it also serves as a reminder that technological solutions alone are insufficient if not followed up properly; ongoing attention to communication, agile issue resolution, and genuine collaborative relationships remains at the top for cultivating strong and sustainable B2B trust, beyond the transactional aspect. Insights regarding areas for further

transparency such as end-supplier payments can guide strategic planning for continuous improvement by the internal Multi-Functional Team and as a lesson learned for other companies.

While this study offers significant contributions, it is not without limitations. The findings are derived from a single-company case study, which may limit generalizability to other industries or organizational contexts. The reliance on self-reported data introduces potential for positive biases in recency of the service, despite efforts to mitigate them through rigorous research design. Future research could expand upon these findings by conducting comparative studies across multiple organizations or industries to enhance generalizability. Longitudinal studies could further illustrate the evolution of trust and its perception along with the sustainability of the provided service level. Additionally, quantitative research employing larger sample sizes could provide statistical validation along with deeper insight for the observed relationships between digitalization, transparency, and the various dimensions of trust. Exploring the impact of digitalization from the supplier's perceived trust towards the buyer could be a way to complete the dyadic view.

Finally, the digitalization of the OTV process at the aeronautical company stands as a testament to the capacity to drive efficiency and transparency, all whilst rebuilding and reshaping buyer- supplier trust. This study affirms digitalization as a key strategic requirement for modern procurement, while simultaneously highlighting the human nature and relational dimensions essential for truly embedded, trustful and resilient B2B partnerships.

No study or investigation is perfect, especially the ones relying on external sources. Some of the limitations for this study foreseen are limited generalizability, potential positive biases, and dependency on self-reported data. All the previously mentioned, as well as others that may arise in the development of this thesis, will be carefully addressed and mitigated through rigorous research design, transparent methodology, and thorough data analysis. Furthermore, while acknowledging the inherent limitations, proactive measures will be taken to minimize their impact and strengthen the credibility of the study.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Interview Script

Intro

Hello, [Participant's Name], thank you for joining us today. My name is Ivan Bishop, and I'm conducting this interview as part of a research project on the effect of the digitalization of the OTV process on the customer's trust. Your insights are invaluable, and I appreciate your time.

Consent and informing everything is confidential and anonymous.

To start, please state your: Name, your position and band, and your path in the company.

Now, we'll move to some questions by topic:

Digitalization

Can you please compare the differences of the process with the previous supplier (email) vs the current process through the platform?

Has your way of working changed due to this change? How?

Transparency

With the change have you noticed more transparency? If so, in which cases?

What factors do you believe should be totally transparent?

Have these factors seen any improvement?

Has this increased transparency helped your expectations of service?

Trust

Do you have any suppliers that you trust? Why?

Given how the service operates, did you trust the previous supplier?

With this change, do you trust the current supplier and its process than the previous? Why?

Cross collaboration / Relational embeddedness

In these few months of operation, do you believe the relationship with this supplier is better than with the previous one?

Do you believe efforts have been made from GP to improve the service?

Do you believe that your company “commands” this relationship or they are equal?

Familiarity and development of relationship

Have you noticed dedication from the supplier’s personnel to fulfill your needs?

Can you provide an example of any recurring issues with the supplier? Have they been fixed?

Have you seen any change from the start of the operation up to today? Improvements?

Use of digital tools and available information for operation support

Do you feel the OTV can bring useful information, so the company develops strategies based on it?

How do you think the OTV supports the operation?

Do you think other programs or features should be digitalized?

Appendix B – Case Study Findings

Section	Responder	Shared Experiences	Individual Highlights
Digitalization	Christine L.	All respondents mentioned improvements across the board on efficiency and speed provided by the system. However, the supplier still needs the support of customer "champions" to ensure the system is used to its full potential. Enhanced transparency and transparency of the process due to the possibility of being able to follow the status of the request and identify the person responsible for the request. Despite the way of working not having fundamentally changed there is an improvement in user experience due to the platform.	The platform made things easier and faster, the ability of creating a basket automatically is useful. A new concern is the lack of visibility of payment to suppliers.
	Sebastien M.		No change in way of working, but appreciate ease of use, the ability of creating a basket automatically is useful, needed process with previous supplier affected too many inconsistencies.
	Marianne P.		The platform made things easier and faster.
	Laelia C.		No change in way of working, but appreciate ease of use, has difficulties contacting the supplier by phone. An issue has been identified with products from outside the EU.
	Ludovic C.		The platform made things easier and faster, the introduction of automatic emails when requests change status is a good progress.
Transparency	Christine L.	All respondents agree on the new platform bringing an increase to transparency, especially on the progression of both requests and orders. There was an overall agreement that payment transparency towards suppliers needed to be improved. When asked about the factors that "insure" be totally transparent they mentioned that supplier LT was doing a better job with comparing compared to previous supplier EB. Given the increased transparency has positively impacted their expectations of service, in a way expecting more and better given the change.	Upon request creation the LT supplier quote number is made available
	Sebastien M.		Particular clear cut transparency when showing two options on Sourcing requests. More clarity is expected regarding the reception date of the requests for more accurate prediction of return of request.
	Marianne P.		Payment is the most crucial aspect to be transparent.
	Laelia C.		Transparency is high, but shows some inconsistencies depending on Point Of Contact. There has been some issues with the requirements to complete EU reports.
	Ludovic C.		-
Trust	Christine L.	After establishing that all respondents had identified transparency and recurrent suppliers they reflected on the reason for that trust, noticing a trend. Time and reliable results, along with communication and collaboration. Lack of trust in the previous supplier (EB) was established by all, even Ludovic C. through hearing others' experience. Lack of transparency, payment lateness, and communication inconsistencies were amongst the flaws. All respondents were acute to mention their increased trust with the current supplier, with the exception of Sebastien who still remained "on the fence". Notable aspects were transparency, openness, timeliness and efficient operation.	-
	Sebastien M.		Has doubts still with the supplier due to some inconsistencies with responses and general communication.
	Marianne P.		Mentioned previous process allowed supplier to hide.
	Laelia C.		While trust is present the learning curve developed slowly.
	Ludovic C.		-
Cross Collaboration / Relational Embeddedness	Christine L.	Ascending belief in this regard. Most have denoted an increase in collaboration despite the "growing pains", less issues with payments have been. Respondents also mentioned a positive notion of General Procurement to improve on the previous situation and highlight the digitalization of the process as a key aspect. There is high perception of The Company commanding the relationship between customer and supplier.	-
	Sebastien M.		-
	Marianne P.		-
	Laelia C.		-
	Ludovic C.		-
Familiarity and Relationship Development	Christine L.	Most respondents have noted that the supplier does the needed, while professional limits without any noticeable effort beyond the expected. Some of the mentioned recurring issues for the supplier are the third party payments and lack of communication towards the third party suppliers. Respondents have perceived some differences regarding the overall service and payments as time passed and requests increase.	Challenges for payment as volumes has increased.
	Sebastien M.		-
	Marianne P.		The ease of use of the tool has demonstrated to improve with experience as expected.
	Laelia C.		Did notice an "extra mile" mentality from the supplier, but as time progressed this proactivity seemed to decrease.
	Ludovic C.		Did notice an "extra mile" mentality from the supplier.
Use of digital tools and available information for operation support	Christine L.	Respondents replied positively that the OTV can support the company's objectives as its use can shine light onto the recurrent suppliers that could then be onboarded onto the company's supplier database. The interviewees did respond in line of the supplier's intended objective of reaching smaller suppliers that are able to provide niche and agile solutions that are not recurrent in the company's day-to-day operation. Most respondents recognized that most of the company's processes have been digitalized where possible, and that the few remaining could use this transformation.	-
	Sebastien M.		-
	Marianne P.		-
	Laelia C.		It was mentioned that despite the good solution that the OTV is, it hinders the development of commercial strategies with such suppliers.
	Ludovic C.		Suggested the implementation of catalogization of supplier clusters for specific needs.