

Preface

This book developed from some ten years of research of inter-organizational relationships (for a survey, see Nooteboom 1999a). I started that research on the basis of transaction cost economics. Like many others, I was intuitively opposed to the view, expounded by Oliver Williamson, that governance of inter-firm relations should be based on an assumption of opportunism and that in economic relationships there is no basis for trust beyond calculative self-interest (Williamson 1993). He claimed that if trust goes beyond calculative self-interest it would necessarily be blind, and blind trust is unwise and unlikely to survive in markets. This posed a challenge. It took me some time to find out and to specify clearly why Williamson is wrong. I aimed to show how trust could go beyond calculative self-interest without being blind in the sense of being unconditional. Having found what I considered a satisfactory answer, I went ahead with the job of studying inter-firm relations. However, more aspects of trust cropped up. Trust turned out to be a much more complex and slippery notion than I had first thought. Anyone studying trust soon finds that over the past 30 years an enormous literature on the subject has accumulated, in sociology and management. Reading that literature, one encounters a confusing complexity of partly similar and partly different notions and aspects of trust. I found that it was not enough to dedicate only a paragraph to trust in a wider treatise on inter-firm relations. I concluded that it might be worthwhile to dedicate a full book to a comprehensive and systematic treatise of trust, covering all its requisite complexity, while trying to achieve coherence and conceptual clarity. It seems to me that in spite of all that has been written on trust there is still a need for that.

Of course, I build on the work of countless scholars before me, and on discussions with a number of colleagues. Earlier authors will show up in the literature references. Here I want to thank a number of people for their collaboration in research on which this book is partly based, and for comments on an earlier version of this book: Niels Noorderhaven and Hans Berger for our collaboration in two projects of empirical research on buyer-supplier relations at the University of Groningen, funded by the Dutch research foundation NWO. Rosalinde Klein Woolthuis for our collaboration in her PhD research at the Technical University Twente, on the

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