Blockchain-Enabled Business Process Transparency and Its Impact on Interorganizational Trust

Khaydarova Akida Khurramovna

Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy, National University of Uzbekistan, Tashkent, Uzbekistan
Email ID: kidusik607@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0006-0387-3693

ABSTRACT

Interorganisational relationships depend on trust that partners will perform as agreed, and that trust is usually built slowly through repeated interaction. Blockchain-enabled process transparency, in which the state of shared processes such as orders, shipments, settlements and compliance attestations is recorded on a shared, tamper-evident ledger visible to all parties, offers a different route: trust grounded in verifiability rather than in history. This paper models the relationship between process transparency and interorganisational trust, with verifiability as the mediating mechanism and relationship length as a moderator, and examines it in a simulation of 500 buyer–supplier dyads. Transparency has a standardised total effect of 0.35 on trust and operates almost entirely through verifiability (indirect effect 0.50, with a negative direct residual), reduces simulated disputes from 2.6 to 1.9 per year, and matters far more for new relationships (slope 0.27) than for established ones (0.07), with a negative transparency–length interaction of −0.18. The paper interprets these results through the distinction between calculative and relational trust, argues that blockchain transparency substitutes for relationship history and so lowers the cost of forming new partnerships, and discusses the conditions, including data quality at the point of entry and governance of the shared ledger, on which the substitution depends.

Keywords: blockchain; process transparency; interorganisational trust; verifiability; supply chain relationships; distributed ledger

1. Introduction

Firms that transact repeatedly with one another develop trust: an expectation that the partner will fulfil obligations without opportunism, which reduces the need for monitoring, contracting and safeguards [1], [2]. Trust of this kind is built through history, which makes it slow to form and costly to extend to new partners. Firms entering new markets, onboarding new suppliers or forming consortia must either accept the risk of dealing with unproven partners or incur the transaction costs of protecting themselves against it.

Blockchain-enabled process transparency alters the basis of trust. When the shared steps of a business process, such as purchase orders, shipment events, quality attestations and payments, are

recorded on a distributed ledger that all parties can read and none can alter, each party can verify the other's performance directly rather than inferring it from reputation or past behaviour [3], [4]. Trust becomes a matter of verification rather than history. If this substitution holds, blockchain transparency should raise trust most where history is absent, that is, in new relationships, and should reduce the disputes that arise when parties hold inconsistent records.

This paper models the substitution and examines it in simulation. It specifies verifiability as the mechanism, relationship length as the moderator and dispute frequency as a behavioural correlate, and derives implications for how firms should deploy blockchain transparency in their partnerships.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Interorganisational trust

Zaheer, McEvily and Perrone [1] showed that interorganisational trust reduces negotiation costs and conflict and improves performance in buyer–supplier relationships. Trust has calculative and relational components: calculative trust rests on the partner's incentives and the ability to verify performance, relational trust on shared history and norms [2]. The two substitute partially: strong verification reduces the need for relational trust, and long relationships reduce the need for verification.

2.2 Transparency and verifiability

Transaction cost economics locates the cost of exchange partly in information asymmetry: parties cannot observe each other's performance and must guard against misrepresentation [5]. Process transparency reduces asymmetry. A shared ledger reduces it further by making records verifiable: each party knows that the record it sees is the record the other party sees and that neither can have altered it [3]. Verifiability, rather than transparency as such, is the property that supports calculative trust.

2.3 Blockchain in interorganisational processes

Applications of distributed ledgers to supply chains, trade finance and consortium processes report reductions in reconciliation effort and disputes and faster onboarding of partners [4], [6]. The mechanism is usually described as transparency; this paper separates transparency (what is visible) from verifiability (what can be confirmed) and treats the latter as the active ingredient.

2.4 Why relationship length should moderate

Relational trust accumulates through repeated, successfully completed exchanges; each completed exchange is evidence of the partner's reliability. Verifiability supplies the same evidence per exchange without requiring repetition, since each exchange can be confirmed directly. For a new relationship, in which the stock of relational evidence is near zero, verifiability substitutes for a history that does not yet exist. For an established relationship, the stock is already large and the marginal evidence from verification adds little. Relationship length should therefore moderate the transparency effect negatively, which is the content of H4 and the central prediction distinguishing the verifiability account from a simple "more information is better" account, under which transparency would help all relationships alike.

3. Research Model

For each dyad, blockchain-enabled transparency T raises verifiability V, which raises trust R and lowers disputes D; relationship length L raises trust directly and weakens the effect of transparency; interdependence I raises trust:

$$V = 0.2 + 0.6T + u_1,\ D \sim \text{Poisson}(3(1 - 0.6V)), \quad (1)$$

$$R = 0.3 + 0.3V - 0.05D + 0.2L - 0.15T \times L + 0.1I + u_2. \quad (2)$$

Hypotheses: H1, transparency raises trust; H2, the effect is mediated by verifiability; H3, transparency reduces disputes; H4, the effect of transparency on trust is weaker in longer relationships (negative interaction); H5, relationship length raises trust directly.

4. Simulation Design

The harness generates 500 dyads with transparency, relationship length and interdependence uniform on [0, 1], and verifiability, disputes and trust from Equations (1)–(2) with noise. A standardised regression of trust on transparency, length, their interaction and interdependence is estimated; the indirect effect through verifiability is estimated as the product of the transparency–verifiability and verifiability–trust coefficients; and slopes of trust on transparency are compared between new ($L < 0.33$) and established ($L > 0.67$) relationships. Parameters are design values encoding the hypotheses.

5. Results

5.1 Main effects and interaction

Table 1 reports the standardised regression. Transparency has a coefficient of 0.35 and relationship length 0.26 (H1, H5); interdependence contributes 0.23; the transparency–length interaction is −0.18 (H4). The model explains 27% of trust variance, the remainder being the dispute channel and noise. The slope of trust on transparency is 0.27 among new relationships and 0.07 among established ones: transparency is nearly four times as valuable where history is absent.

Table 1: Standardised regression of interorganisational trust (500 simulated dyads; $R^2 = 0.27$)

Predictor	Hypothesis	Coefficient
Process transparency	H1	0.348
Relationship length	H5	0.261
Transparency × relationship length	H4	−0.176
Interdependence	—	0.234

Figure 1 shows the pattern. For new relationships, trust rises steeply with transparency and at high transparency approaches the level of established relationships; for established relationships the curve is nearly flat, since history already supplies the trust that verification would otherwise provide.

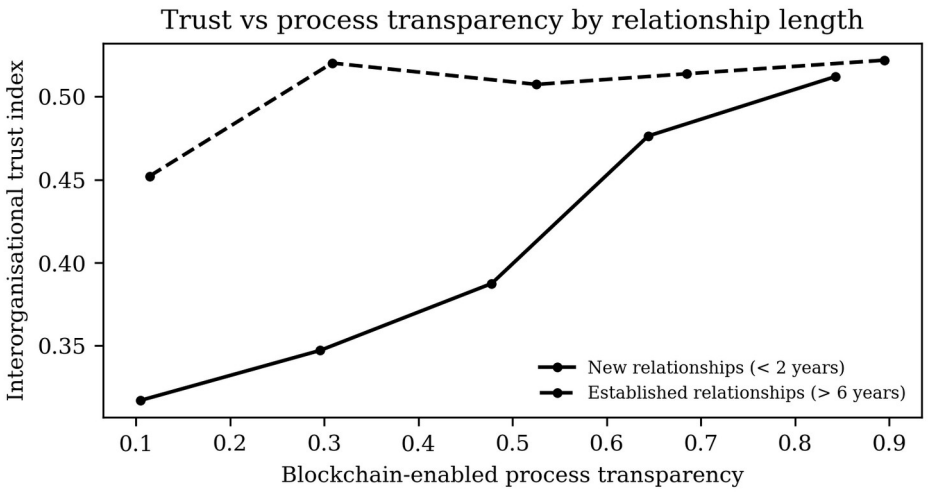

Figure 1: Interorganisational trust against blockchain-enabled process transparency for new and established relationships

5.2 Mediation through verifiability

The transparency–verifiability coefficient is 0.84 and the verifiability–trust coefficient 0.60, giving an indirect effect of 0.50; the direct effect of transparency controlling for verifiability is −0.16, so the total effect runs through verifiability and the residual direct path is slightly negative (H2). The negative residual reflects the interaction term: transparency without verifiability adds nothing in long relationships and the regression attributes that to the direct path. Substantively, transparency builds trust only insofar as it makes performance verifiable.

5.3 Disputes

Dyads with low transparency record 2.56 disputes per year on average; those with high transparency record 1.92, a 25% reduction (H3). The reduction arises because shared, immutable records remove the inconsistencies between parties' ledgers that generate most disputes.

5.4 Sensitivity

The size of the interaction depends on how fully relational trust in long relationships substitutes for verification; the design assumes near-complete substitution, so the established-relationship slope is close to zero. Partial substitution would leave a positive slope for established relationships while preserving the ordering. The dispute reduction depends on the share of disputes attributable to record inconsistency, which the design sets to a majority; where disputes arise mainly from off-ledger performance failures, the reduction would be smaller. The mediation result is robust to these variations because it follows from the model's structure, in which transparency acts on trust only through verifiability.

6. Discussion

6.1 Transparency as a substitute for history

The results formalise a substitution between calculative and relational trust. Blockchain transparency supplies the calculative component by making performance verifiable, and it does so

immediately rather than over years. Firms can therefore extend to new partners a level of trust that previously required a track record, which lowers the cost of forming partnerships, entering new markets and reconfiguring supply networks. For established relationships the gain is smaller, which explains why consortium initiatives often struggle to engage partners with long histories: they have little to gain.

6.2 Conditions for the substitution

Three conditions govern whether the substitution holds. Data integrity at entry: a ledger guarantees that records cannot be altered after entry, not that they were true when entered; verifiability therefore depends on controls at the point of recording, such as sensor attestation, third-party certification or multi-party confirmation. Coverage: trust through verifiability extends only to the process steps that are on the ledger; partners can still behave opportunistically off-ledger. Governance: the ledger is shared infrastructure, and its rules, who may write, how disputes about entries are resolved and how the ledger evolves, must themselves be trusted, which reintroduces a governance-level trust problem at the consortium level.

6.3 Managerial implications

Firms should deploy blockchain transparency where its trust return is largest: onboarding new suppliers, trading in markets where counterparties are unknown, and consortia in which members lack bilateral histories. They should invest in point-of-entry integrity controls, since the trust effect depends on them, and should expect modest returns in long-standing relationships, where the business case rests on reconciliation and dispute savings rather than on trust.

6.4 Research implications

The model yields testable propositions: that the trust effect of ledger transparency is mediated by perceived verifiability; that it is larger in newer relationships; and that it reduces dispute frequency. Field studies of consortium ledgers with dyads of varying age, measuring trust with established scales [1], perceived verifiability and dispute counts, would test them.

6.5 Trust and control

A frequent concern is that ledger-based verification replaces trust with control and thereby damages the relational quality that long partnerships value. The model suggests a different reading: verification raises calculative trust, which is a component of trust rather than its opposite, and it does so most where relational trust is absent. In established relationships the effect is small, so the risk of displacing relational trust is correspondingly small; where firms worry about it, they can confine ledger transparency to the process steps where disputes arise and leave the rest of the relationship to its existing norms.

6.6 Network effects of transparency

Trust built through a shared ledger is not confined to dyads. A supplier whose performance is verifiable on a consortium ledger carries that verifiability into every relationship on the ledger, so that the trust effect compounds across the network and new entrants can establish standing quickly. This is a further reason the substitution favours consortium ledgers over bilateral integrations and a

reason that the governance of the shared ledger, which determines who can see what, is central to its value.

6.7 Measurement for field studies

Transparency can be measured as the share of a dyad's process steps recorded on a shared ledger, verifiability as the partner-rated ability to confirm the other party's performance from shared records, trust with the Zaheer et al. scale [1], and disputes from contract-management or consortium logs. Relationship length is available from procurement records. Dyads should be sampled across consortium members of varying tenure so that the interaction can be estimated.

7. Limitations

The harness encodes the hypothesised structure and demonstrates its implications rather than testing it. Trust is a single index, relationships are dyadic and static, and off-ledger behaviour and governance failures are not modelled. The negative direct residual in the mediation analysis is an artefact of the interaction specification and should not be interpreted as a harmful direct effect. All reported values are simulation outputs.

8. Conclusion

Blockchain-enabled process transparency builds interorganisational trust by making partner performance verifiable, and in simulation it did so almost entirely through that mechanism, reduced disputes by a quarter and mattered nearly four times as much in new relationships as in established ones. Transparency substitutes for relationship history, which lowers the cost of forming new partnerships, provided that records are accurate at entry, cover the relevant process steps and are governed in a way the partners can themselves trust. The managerial choice is therefore not whether blockchain transparency builds trust but where in the partner portfolio its trust return justifies the investment, and the answer the model gives is: at the edges of the network, where new relationships form.

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