

Title of your paper - New forms of regional networking for small business in Italy: flexible practices of social capital for innovation and competitiveness.

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[Insert abstract maximum 800 words]

The impact of globalization is apparently producing the final crisis of old organizational models of networking among enterprises, like the Italian *industrial districts* or the so called *diversified quality production* in some German Länder, that used to be successful in the overcoming of traditional mass production.

The economic and social process of restructuring is essential deriving by *the changing nature of the firm*, pointing out a new question of cooperation, networking and clustering for small business. The current so called *non-standard* firms are becoming more and more interested by vertical disintegration or, better, by horizontal processes. The role of local (sub-national) stakeholders is, at least potentially, the most important ongoing innovation in this process of economic change.

As far as the Italian SMEs, based on simplified models of governance and low presence of managerial style, the higher level of global competitiveness and the consequences of economic recession are requiring more attitudes to governing through networking, in order to be more innovative and competitive. The Italian 2009 Law on “Networking Pacts” or “*Contratti di Rete*” (*CdR*), implementing the EU Small Business Act, has been approved in order to stimulate these attitudes among SMEs, financing the constitution of a new form of networking, very different from both the traditional industrial districts and other kinds of cooperation among firms, as consortia or similar institutionalized collaborations. The Italian *CdR* are indeed characterized by pragmatism, flexibility and autonomy of the partners. Thanks to this, the growth of the *CdR* has been steady and consistent in each year, even now at the end of the financing period.

The main aim of the paper is to present the first and original results of an empirical research on this new form of business networking, analyzing the diffusion of the “*Contratti di Rete*” in Italy and in some Italian regions (Piedmont, Lombardy, Veneto, and Emilia Romagna), pointing out the diversified models of regional business networking and the concrete process of implementation through some significant case studies.

At the core of the paper, there are the distinctive features of an innovative tool for enterprises interested in structuring their relationship. After a brief description of the recent evolution in the Italian industrial structure, in order to contextualize our arguments, we describe the “*Contratto di Rete*” as a tool to create and consolidate relations between companies, and present some data about its spread and about the characteristics of the firms involved. We will then discuss the implication of these cooperation in terms of social capital and for public policies at the European, national and regional levels.

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