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Managing creative projects: An empirical synthesis of activities

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Abstract

This paper proposes a radical empirical look on the concrete activities of project managers involved in creative projects, with a specific focus on "non-administrative" issues. Through four case studies in the video-game industry, multimedia, advertising and a circus, we propose an integrated synthesis of what creative project managers actually do. Beyond analytical, cognitive, psychological, symbolic and discursive activities, we identify four sets of activities carefully coined to acknowledge the everyday work of project manager involved in creative projects. We suggest that this project manager acts as a *sense-maker*, a *web-weaver*, a *game-master* and a *flow-balancer*. This empirical "picture" raises questions on the technical and theoretical focus of research in project management where creativity is an utmost strategic issue.
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1. The creative imperative

In the first issue of this journal, Blankevoort suggested that "tools should be developed for the management of creativity to make project management complete as a recognized profession" [1]. Researchers and practitioners as well provided numerous answers to this call, in the form of general management approaches [2,3], creativity-inducing methods [4,5] and techniques [6]. Yet, little has been said on what project managers actually do to lead creative teams.

As our business world is shifting from a knowledge-based to a conception/design-based economy [7], creative projects are becoming a strategic necessity [8]. Managers and leaders are getting more concerned about the management of creative endeavours [9]. In this regard, it has been suggested that construction and product-development projects ask for different work processes, especially from the psychosocial point of view [10]. In "Design-Oriented Organizations" [11], the mobilisation of collective knowledge

through projects is essential. In projects where ambiguity increases and goals are only broadly/partially defined, collective creativity has to be fostered, channelled and managed. Beyond the interesting practical and theoretical issues on creativity skills and methods [12–18], the managerial [19,20] or structural approaches to foster creativity in individuals and groups [21–24] and the literature on creative leadership [2,25] or best practices in the management of creativity for innovation [6,26–28], less has been empirically done to assess how project managers concretely handle individual and collective creativity in projects.

In this regard, this paper aims at introducing the activities of project managers involved in creative projects in a non-abstract, non-theoretical way, with a strong focus on describing what they actually do. After a short theoretical introduction and some brief methodological considerations, the core of the paper presents an empirical "picture" based on field data from various creative industries. It is argued that the project manager engages in sets of activities coined as *sense-maker*, *web-weaver*, *game-master* and *flow-balancer* (see Fig. 1). Those activities and categories are discussed with further reflections on the management of creativity in projects.

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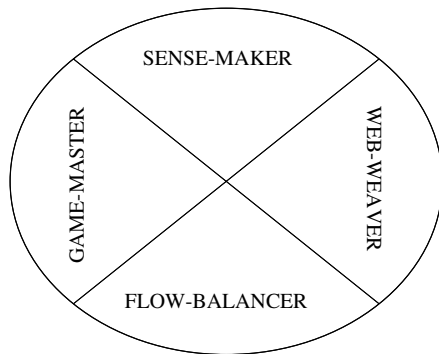 *E-mail address:* laurent.simon@hec.ca.

Fig. 1. The activities of the creative project manager: an overview.

2. What do creative project managers do?

As reviewed by Woodman et al. [29], creativity has been a subject of various researches with different focus mainly since the 1950s. After considering individual creativity through the life-story of creators, creativity-inducing techniques at the individual level, business creativity from the entrepreneurial point of view and as a strategic imperative, research focused on creativity as an organizational issue to be managed through specific contexts and leadership [2,25]. Organizational creativity and the management of creative teams as part of the "normal" day-to-day business activities are more recent concerns. Recent synthetic works assessed for the complexity of the phenomenon of organizational creativity and proposed to integrate its multiple dimensions through a multilevel perspective [25,29,30]. Without anticipating too much on the possibility to establish a "grand theory" of organizational creativity, this still leaves open a wide array of subjects to explore and theorize on, from the global strategic positioning of companies on the macro level, organizational structures and culture on the medium level, and to manager's roles, interpersonal relationships and individual attributes on the micro-level. From the leadership point of view alone, researchers' focus has been mainly on the skills, styles, and behaviours of leaders; their ability to set creative climates, to coach, to motivate and to reward their creative employees [31,32]. Interesting debates emerge and recent management and organizational theories are thoroughly mobilized to address the many issues that have arisen from the literature on creativity management. For instance, what are the effects of transactional versus transformational leadership [33] and what is the importance of emotional intelligence in leading creative people [34]. Promising perspectives occur, adopting a fresh look on traditional managerial metaphor [35] or exploring unusual subjects like the leader's relationship to time and rhythm in creative projects [36]. Yet, due to the variety of stimulating challenges for theorization, most recent papers on the management of creativity and on leadership for creativity do not put much emphasis on the first level of understanding of any management ventures: managers' actual practices and actions.

Acknowledging the need for micro-studies in the field of creativity management [25], this paper proposes an original empirical synthesis of the actual "activities"[1] of project managers involved in projects in creative and "techno-creative" organizations [40]. It is based on qualitative empirical inductive studies in creative industries, with a strong descriptive focus. A first ethnographic study in the field of video-games development provided the insight that the creative project manager had a strong influence on the team as a manager of context more than as an administrative manager [41]. Furthermore, it appeared that a creative project team could be described as a "playful community" with a strong work ethic organized around three main activities: never-ending learning, collective knowledge sharing and mutual challenging [42]. In this regard, the present research empirically suggests that specific "activities" are at the core of the creative project manager's work and performance. As little empirical descriptive literature was available on the managers' concrete activities in creative projects, case studies were conducted from 2002 to 2004 in order to explore this subject further. We will now review the research method and briefly introduce the projects considered. It will then report the main findings as four sets of detailed "activities" and finally reflect on some theoretical and practical insights.

3. Research method

This is a cases study based research which derives from an exploratory ethnographic field study on the video-game industry in the tradition of grounded theory [43,44] and qualitative research on emergent phenomena [45–47]. Set in the second most important development studio in the world,[2] it described and analyzed the specific management activities and work ethic in this industry. Among other conclusive insights, it appears that project managers (PMs) play a central role in the company, yet their major talents lie not in planning or controlling, rather in dealing with people in and around the project. Specific activities lie at the heart of their work, in parallel with more traditional administrative activities. Drawing on this insight, further research was implemented in creativity-focused industries in Montreal, Canada: multimedia software for the TV industry, general advertising, and a circus company (field observation and semi-structured interviews with project managers and team-members) (see Table 1). Departing from most recent experimental settings for creativity research (see for instance: [48,49]), we chose a "real-world/

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[1] We voluntarily use this neutral word, "activity", to depart from usual categories like roles, skills, behaviours, attributes and the like. It aims at focusing on the concrete actions of managers as they have been observed through fieldwork. We partly follow Mintzberg's work on "roles" [37] and "mindsets" [38], yet we prefer to refer here to the PMs' work inductively as "practices", in the legacy of Schön's "reflective practitioner" [39] or again, simply "activities".

[2] Fourteen months of field presence, observations, conversations and questioning validated by in depth interviews.