Program integration in multi-project change programs: agency in integration practice

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Abstract

Multi-project change programs pursue challenging goals and may suffer from uncertainty and conflicting interests. To achieve their goals, such programs need integration both with the parent organization and between projects. There is a need for knowledge on how program actors implement integration. This study pursues new knowledge on program actors’ agency in program integration in the context of multi-project change programs. Two case programs in different contexts were explored, to map their integration mechanisms and program actors’ integration activities during the program lifecycle. The results reveal five integration tasks, the program-specific use of integration mechanisms, differences in the integration approach between the two programs, and the parent organization’s input at the program front end in defining the program’s requisite autonomy. The organization’s maturity in project-based organizing, the program and project managers’ competence, and the autonomy enabled at the program front end are shown to define the programs’ integration practice.

Keywords: Change program; Integration; Program management

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Through the widespread usage of projects, organizations face a need to manage entities consisting of multiple projects — i.e., programs — efficiently. Programs are designed to pursue common higher-order objectives (Turner and Müller, 2003), they may consist of multiple projects that are related to each other, and reaching the objectives of a program would not be possible by managing the projects independently (Lycett et al., 2004). Program management is needed to coordinate the program’s projects as well as other change-oriented activities to deliver the strategic change for the organization (APM, 2012; Pellegrinelli, 2011).

A central characteristic of permanent organizations is the division of work between several units (subsystems) (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967). In multi-project programs, a similar division of work occurs at three interfaces: 1) between a parent organization and a program, 2) between the projects within a program, and 3) within the projects of a program. To ensure that these subsystems work as a coherent, aligned unit, program integration (or program coordination Dietrich, 2006) is needed. Program integration is defined here as the process of achieving unity of effort between the projects of a program and ensuring alignment between the program and the needs of the parent organization. This study focuses on program integration in multi-project change programs.

To core idea of organizational integration is the utilization of different integration mechanisms to create unity of effort in the organization. Integration mechanisms are the practical — formal
or informal — ways, in which integration is carried out. Whilst
the literature on integration in permanent organizations dates
back to the 1960s and project integration management — i.e.,
integration within projects — is a basic component of project
management (e.g., APM, 2012; PMI, 2013), only a few empirical
studies cover integration in multi-project programs. These studies
have focused on either project-to-project integration (Dietrich,
2006), integration with the parent organization (Lehtonen and
Martinsuo, 2009), or both (Turkulainen et al., 2015). The studies
have followed different analytical perspectives to integration,
such as boundary management (Lehtonen and Martinsuo, 2009)
and information processing (Turkulainen et al., 2015), and
focused on different types of programs, such as change programs
(Dietrich, 2006; Lehtonen and Martinsuo, 2009) and a global
operations expansion program (Turkulainen et al., 2015). This
study is designed to complement this limited empirical research
by focusing on both program-to-parent organization and
project-to-project integration (following Turkulainen et al.,
2015) and by applying the perspective of agency to integration.

Some research indicates that the pursuit of program goals
requires not just integration mechanisms but also ways for the
program actors to influence and “negotiate” their context
(Näsänen and Vanharanta, 2016; Pellegrinelli, 2002) or negotiate
the scope of their activities (Crawford et al., 2008). This stream of
research implicitly suggests that program actors exercise agency
for the parent organization, when carrying out the strategic
change (Crawford et al., 2008; Näsänen and Vanharanta, 2016).
Agency refers here to the purposeful actions of individuals, who
reflect on the conditions of their activities and are able to
transform those conditions (Näsänen and Vanharanta, 2016).
Where earlier program management research has covered, for
example, program manager competences (Miterev et al., 2016;
Pellegrinelli, 2002), there is more generally a need to understand
program actors as agents whose interests, needs and actions shape
the way in which the program integration takes place and how the
program performs its change task for the parent organization.

1.2. Research objective and scope

The objective of this study is to develop new knowledge on
program actors’ agency in program integration in the context of
multi-project change programs. We seek understanding on
program actors’ interests and actions as part of program
integration at two levels: program-to-parent organization and
project-to-project integration. As earlier research has largely
focused on the program integration mechanisms — what they are
and how they appear in use — in different programs, we argue
that program actors can use them differently and for different
purposes in the different integration interfaces. Agency in the use
of integration mechanisms, thereby, ties the integration mecha-
nisms with the pursuit of the change goals. Therefore, under-
standing the agency perspective in using integration mechanisms
will contribute by suggesting how a certain integration approach
emerges and becomes (or sometimes fails to become) accepted as
the way to guide the change toward its goals. The research
focuses on two research questions:

1. What kind of integration mechanisms do program actors use
in program-to-parent organization integration and
project-to-project integration in organizational change
programs?
2. How do program actors exercise their agency in program
integration?

In this paper, we focus on change programs that intend to
transform the parent organization and its processes and
activities. We delimit the attention to organizational change
programs which are also the dominating focus in previous
program management research (Martinsuo and Hoverfält,
2018), even if program management can be applied in other
contexts and program types as well. Change programs may
feature subcontractors and partners, but our research is
delimited to intra-organizational program integration, not the
broader networks. The focus is on the agent’s view, where
program actors include program managers, project managers,
project team members and steering group members. Our
findings represent the perspective of the program actors; the
direct experiences of the principal are left for further study,
including the parent organization’s sponsorship of the change,
and the experiences of the employees affected by the change
program. Our focus is on program-to-parent organization
integration and project-to-project integration. Intra-project
integration (i.e., project integration management) is purposely
excluded.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. After
this introduction, literature on programs and program manage-
ment, integration in programs and agency in program
integration is discussed. Then the design of the empirical
study is described and the results of the empirical study are
introduced. Finally, the results are discussed with respect to the
existing literature on program management and program
integration in particular.

2. Literature review

2.1. Multi-project change programs and program management

Projects are widely used to carry out organizational change
and development efforts. The widespread use of projects has
generated a need to organize projects in a more coherent way
(Pellegrinelli, 1997). Programs can be considered as temporary
organizations that group projects together and manage those
projects as an entity, to reach specific benefits (OGC, 2007).
Compared to projects, programs are often considered more
uncertain (Pellegrinelli, 1997), ambiguous (Thiry, 2002) and
benefit-orientated (Maylor et al., 2006). Program management
refers to “the application of knowledge, skills, and principles to
a program to achieve the program objectives and to obtain
benefits and control not available by managing program
components individually” (PMI, 2013).

In this study, the focus is on change programs. While there
are different types of programs, a change program is mainly
goal-orientated (Pellegrinelli, 1997) and vision-led (OGC, 2007)
and attempts to transform the parent organization and its
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