



# Projects as temporary organizations: An agenda for further theorizing the interorganizational dimension ☆

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## Abstract

Existing conceptualizations of projects as temporary organizations capture their interorganizational facets only implicitly. We present theoretical ideas on how to further conceptualize the interorganizational dimension in line with recent developments in the field of managing interorganizational relations. Towards this end, we will recapitulate the present state of theorizing projects as temporary organizations. Then we will highlight the increasing importance of what is called “interorganizational projects” (IOPs). After having described the phenomenon and spread of IOPs, we will discuss how the interorganizational dimension may be theorized. We conclude this article by introducing three facets of analyzing IOPs that help to advance the theory of the temporary organization – namely the multi-level perspective, the processual understanding of relationships, and modes of interorganizational governance. © 2017 Elsevier Ltd, APM and IPMA. All rights reserved.

## Executive summary

Since the 1990s, project management has developed from a practitioner-driven domain to a proper academic discipline. One issue that has struck scholars for more than two decades is the theoretical foundation of project management. Some argue in favor of theoretical pluralism, others call for a stronger integration. Working towards a coherent theoretic framework for projects as temporary organizations, two important milestones have been reached by the work of Lundin and Söderholm (1995) and Turner and Müller (2003). In this paper, we compare both approaches systematically. Both frameworks have their distinctive strengths. Lundin and Söderholm’s approach is universal and captures the main features and processes of a temporary organization, whereas Turner and Müller point to closer linkages between project management research and organizational theory. Despite their complementary strengths, both frameworks rarely take into account the fact that many projects are nowadays

interorganizational in character. There are various examples in almost any industry, in traditional ones such as the construction and consulting industries, but in particular also in science-based ones such as the biotech or robotics. Moreover, the production of most cultural artifacts such as events, films and music rely on interorganizational projects (IOPs), in which value is created jointly by collaborating organizations. While research on interorganizational relationships has for some time been acknowledged as an important field in its own right, project management research lags behind in conceptualizing the interorganizational facets of projects. Based on a literature review, four distinct features of IOPs are set forth:

- bridging singularities via latent and activated ties
- disordering hierarchies by forming interorganizational teams
- blurring organizational boundaries
- reframing the behavior of individuals.

Against this background, we derive research questions alongside, with three cues for further theorizing IOPs. Specifically, project management research needs to...

- ... account for multiple levels in theory and research methods (in particular project, organization, project network and field)

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- ... adopt a dynamic perspective based on mechanisms, processes, practices and routines
- ... consider modes of interorganizational governance (i.e. lead organization, shared governance, network administrative organization).

## 1. Introduction

Since the 1990s there has been ongoing discussion about the theoretical foundations of project management. Previously, project management was by and large conceived as a domain of handy tools and normative concepts which were predominantly developed and used by engineers. Scholars from the field of organization and management studies first ignored and then started to argue that project management may either be seen as a theoretical domain on its own, or just another field of application for established theories (Packendorff, 1995). For a long time, project management theory therefore remained underdeveloped.

This was the case, despite the fact that the notion of temporary systems pointing towards a more nuanced understanding of projects as an organizational form had already been brought up by Goodman and Goodman (1972, 1976), who studied theater as a time-bound organizational phenomenon. Later, with their influential article, Lundin and Söderholm (1995) were first to conceptualize projects as a temporary organizational form, before Turner and Müller (2003) integrated elements of the classic project management view with the perspective of projects as temporary organizations. More recently, scholars argue in favor of a more pluralistic approach, which makes use of the broad variety of organization theories and accounts for the interdisciplinary nature of project management (Lundin, 2011; Söderlund, 2011). No matter whether it is considered as a distinct theoretical domain or a field to which established theories of organization and management can and should be applied: the need for a theoretical foundation of project management is now beyond all question, and significant advancements can be noted, most recently with regard to institutional and practice theory (cf. Lundin et al. 2015: 225–230).

Even though not every single project is interorganizational, an increasingly important aspect of most projects is certainly their embeddedness in interorganizational settings. Examples are to be found in almost any industry, in traditional industries like construction and consulting, but in particular in science-based industries like biotech, smart materials, or robotics. Also, the production of most cultural artifacts such as films, music and news rely on projects in which more than one organization is involved. An illustrative example is the study by Sgourev (2013) who demonstrates convincingly that Picasso's turn to cubism would not have been possible without the support of leading galleries in Paris. Thus, in many cases value is created jointly by collaborating organizations (Bakker et al., 2011). Nevertheless, the interorganizational facets have remained largely undertheorized. This is all the more surprising as research on interorganizational relationships has for some time been acknowledged as an important field in its own right. Evidence is provided not only by the continuously high number of articles on this topic in almost all leading management journals, but also by the publication of *The Oxford*

*Handbook of Inter-Organizational Relations* (Cropper et al., 2008) and several textbooks dedicated to this topic (e.g. Child et al., 2005; Sydow et al., 2016). In this article we will not only argue that this aspect of project management should always be considered, but also show how to conceptualize it in line with recent theoretical developments in the field of managing interorganizational relations. First, however, we will recapitulate the present state of theorizing projects as temporary organizations. Then we will highlight the increasing importance of what is called “interorganizational projects” (interestingly, the above-mentioned *Oxford Handbook* devotes a much cited chapter to this phenomenon; cf. Jones and Lichtenstein, 2008). After describing the phenomenon and the spread of interorganizational projects, we will show how the interorganizational dimension can be theorized. We conclude this article by introducing three facets of analyzing interorganizational projects that help to advance the theory of the temporary organization – namely the multi-level perspective, the processual understanding of relationships, and modes of interorganizational governance.

## 2. Theoretical foundation of projects as temporary organizations

In their seminal work on the field of organizational project management, Lundin and Söderholm (1995) developed the so called 4T-framework of time, team, task and transition to characterize the features of the temporary organization:

- Quite obviously, the *time* dimension is most critical for projects, as already suggested in the term itself and in the respective literature on temporary organizations and temporary systems (cf. Kenis et al., 2009). Precisely, projects differ from permanent organizational settings due to their ex ante built-in termination mechanism (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995). The time-boundedness, however, faces limitations not only in the case of serial projects, but also with regard to projects which are tightly embedded in ongoing interorganizational partnerships and additionally in the case of never-ending projects where, as in the case of the Sematech consortium often for good reasons, the termination is postponed over and over again (Müller-Seitz and Sydow, 2011).
- Temporary organizations regularly rely on *team* structures, meaning interdependent sets of people working together (Goodman and Goodman, 1976). Empirical studies often analyze project teams as groups of individuals rather than organizational entities (Bakker, 2010). As for interorganizational settings, these individuals often start as a group with very diverse backgrounds, experiences and expectations regarding the project objectives. They represent different (permanent) organizations with different priorities and preconditions. Getting a coherent team together is thus not self-evident. Moreover, project teams with a short time-frame focus tend to focus more on the immediate present: they concentrate on the tasks at hand. This leads to information processing that is heuristic rather than systematic (Bakker et al., 2013).

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