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.
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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

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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 mechanisms with the pursuit of the change goals. Therefore, understanding 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 management, 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-oriented (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-oriented (Pellegrinelli, 1997) and vision-led (OGC, 2007) and attempts to transform the parent organization and its