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Organizing to avoid project overload: The use and risks of narrowing strategies in multi-project practice

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Abstract

While project work can be motivating, stimulating and creative, it can also be frustrating, ambiguous and stressful. Situations of project overload, i.e. situations in which fragmentation, disturbances and disruptions are reoccurring, are common in project-based organizations running many parallel projects. This paper reports findings from an extensive interview study on how project managers and project members working in parallel projects handle project overload by changing their work routines. The results show 1) that project work in practice is organized by using narrowing strategies and 2) that narrowing strategies run the risk of excluding the vital historical and organizational context. The findings have implications for project theory and project practice.
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1. Introduction

Due to the "projectified" (Lundin and Söderholm, 1998; Midler, 1995) "projectivized" (Ekstedt et al., 1999) or "projectizaition" of society (Peters, 1992 in Söderlund and Bredin, 2011), there are an increased number of phenomena that are called projects. Projects are performed and talked about in most organizations and in social life in general, and an increasing number of people work in projects. It is also increasingly common that people work in more than one project simultaneously, which adds complexity to the work situation (Engwall and Jerbrant, 2003). Working in several often interconnected projects of different size, duration, budget and complexity, and sharing the same personal resources, includes the challenges of balancing multiple demands, rapid adjustments to changing prerequisites and strong prioritizing ability as the organization is constantly changing (Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2003; Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006). Previous research on project work (e.g. Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006) has shown how

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fragmentation, disruption and inefficiency caused by switching between commitments to simultaneous and sometimes conflicting projects is experienced as project overload that may lead to frustration, ambiguousness and stress. By project overload is meant situations "…in which fragmentation, disturbances and disruptions are highly relevant dimensions of workload" (Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006, p. 386).

In focus here are the strategies developed and used when project managers and project members work to avoid situations of project overload, i.e. how they organize their work in practice to avoid situations in which fragmentation, disturbances and disruptions are reoccurring (Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006). The aim of this paper is to explore what strategies are developed and used in practice for avoiding project overload when organizing work in day-to-day multi-project work and by doing this contribute to the projects-as-practice stream of research (Blomquist et al., 2010). The project-as-practice stream argues that projects must be studied in the context in which they are executed (Blomquist et al., 2010; Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006; Engwall, 2003) and that it is important to study and understand projects as social accomplishments in specific

contexts (Engwall, 2003; Söderlund, 2004). This understanding is important when developing projects as theory and practice (Hodgson et al., 2011; Lindgren et al., 2014; Packendorff and Lindgren, 2014; Söderholm, 2007). It is also of importance to include the work situation for project managers and project members when developing program and portfolio management research and practice (Blichfeldt and Eskerod, 2008). The overall purpose is to deepen the much-needed understanding of contemporary project work practice (compare with Barley and Kunda, 2001; Lindkvist and Söderlund, 2002) and to complement the work by Zika-Viktorsson et al. (2003) and Zika-Viktorsson et al. (2006) by applying an organizational perspective on project overload.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: First a background to the challenges of project based organizing and a clarification of the challenges project managers and project members face when trying to make sense of their fragmented and constantly changing work situation. The next section outlines the framework and the concepts that are used to interpret the organizing strategies that are developed and used in practice. The framework is based on the concept of sense making introduced by Weick (1993, 1995) complemented with the concepts of boundary action and boundary objects as examples of sense making in practice. The Method section that follows describes the method used and how the interviews were conducted and interpreted. Then follows the results describing the strategies developed and used in practice to support sense making and to avoid situations of project overload. Finally, the discussion follows that outline implications for theory and practice.

2. Background

Project-based organizations (PBOs) are organizational in which almost all activities are organized as projects and where more permanent structures serve as administrative support (Hobday, 2000; Söderlund and Tell, 2009). PBOs have received much attention as an organizational form that integrates diverse and specialized resources (Keegan and Turner, 2002). In most PBOs several projects are pursued in parallel, which is an attempt to use resources more efficient as for example certain expertise and knowledge can be used, developed and shared (Engwall and Jerbrant, 2003). The backside of PBOs has been acknowledged by for example Sydow et al. (2004) in their research on the dilemma of organizational structure and project organization practices and the coordination challenges that arise from tensions between individual autonomy and organizational embeddedness.

Research on human resource management suggests that there are special characteristics of PBOs, for example the temporary nature of projects, dynamism, project portfolio resources and multirole demands (Heumann et al., 2007). Stress and coping strategies among project managers have also attracted research and it is suggested that project managers use more active and planning strategies when coping with stressful situations and that coping strategies are related to the maturity of the organization (Aitken and Crawford, 2007). Recent research has also addressed the emotional consequences of work in projects by describing projects as emotionally charged and potentially addictive and harmful spaces (Lindgren et al., 2014; Rehn and Lindahl, 2011; Rowlands and Handy, 2012).

Projects seldom run smoothly, especially in PBOs where projects often are interconnected. Linkage between projects, integrated parts and interdependencies make the project work situation hard to predict and plan (Engwall and Jerbrant, 2003). When working in PBOs, project managers and project members face the risk of loosing control over ones own work due to conflicting demands from other projects, difficulties in obtaining an overview of the project portfolio, and from rather complicated planning (Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006).

When there is a high level of task complexity combined with a high level of organizational complexity, as it is in most PBO's (compare with Engwall, 2003), it provides stimulating, varying and developing tasks and environments for project managers. However, these work settings can also be contributing to stress, loneliness, disrupted family lives and superficial work place relations (Aitken and Crawford, 2007; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2007; Packendorff, 2002). Working in projects with clear goals and deadlines is seen as motivating but when adapting to changes in the project work context there is a risk in loss of motivation, commitment and self-esteem (Gällstedt, 2003). Another risk with working in a multi-project work setting is decreased competence development as well as less improvement in work routines (Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006).

3. Sense making challenges in situations of project overload

When working with several projects simultaneously it is difficult to make sense of one's own work as well as the achievements of co-workers. It is also challenging to make sense of the overall situation — the historical and organizational context (compare with Engwall, 2003). Because projects are constantly changing as organizing is constantly going on, it is difficult to evaluate, compare or comprehend what is happening (reference omitted for the sake of anonymity). Constantly changing project teams, which are common in PBO's, also add complexity and difficulty of creating and maintaining control (Eskerod and Blichfelt, 2005). In such work situations there is an increased need for communication, collaboration and well functioning sense-making structures (Dainty et al., 2006; Lundin and Midler, 1998; Weick, 1993, 1995). Sense making is needed to avoid the risk of loosing the overall perspective – the perspective which includes strategic and operative issues and which links the project to history and organizational context – and fall into the trap of viewing projects as isolated islands (compare with Engwall, 2003).

In their study on individual's perception of project work, Zika-Viktorsson et al. (2006) applied a psychological perspective and developed the construct "project overload" (p. 386). The construct reflects overload specifically related to project work and it is argued that the construct in needed to reflect a situation in which fragmentation, disturbances and disruptions are highly relevant dimensions of workload. Zika-Viktorsson et al. (2006) suggest that project overload steam from working on