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# Teams in transition: An integrative review and synthesis of research on team task transitions and propositions for future research<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Scholars have long sought to understand the factors that influence team functioning and effectiveness. However, we know relatively little about the performance ramifications of transitions between tasks, especially when the transitions are punctuated and brief and the tasks are highly varied. To address this gap in our understanding, we review and integrate several streams of research in the literature on small groups and teams that have implications to team task transitions. From our synthesis, we offer a broad framework and propositions regarding the nature and effects of team task transitions. We conclude with a brief discussion of implications to research and practice.

## 1. Introduction

Much of the work in organizations today is accomplished by teams, which are defined as work structures consisting of two or more individuals who interact and work interdependently to accomplish tasks related to common, organizationally relevant goals (Kozlowski & Bell, 2003; Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006). Accordingly, scholars in applied psychology and organizational behavior have conducted a great deal of research on teams, with much of this research focused on factors that influence their functioning and effectiveness (e.g., Ilgen, 1999; Ilgen, Hollenbeck, Johnson, & Jundt, 2005; Levine & Moreland, 1990; Mathieu, Maynard, Rapp, & Gilson, 2008; McGrath, 1997; McGrath, Arrow, & Berdahl, 2000). This research has produced many important insights that have bolstered our theoretical understanding, advanced our scientific knowledge, and produced great practical value.

Unfortunately, our understanding of the implications of the work that confronts contemporary teams remains incomplete. Teams in organizations are often required to accomplish a series of distinct tasks over time, which together contribute to the accomplishment of the team's overarching goals and objectives. However, little is known about the role of transitions that occur between tasks, or the implications of these transitions to subsequent team outcomes. In other words, we do not fully understand the nature of *team task transitions*, or how features of these transitions influence the functioning and effectiveness of teams in their subsequent tasks. Given that organizations continue to place great emphasis on team-based work structures (Kozlowski & Bell, 2003; Lawler, Mohrman, & Ledford, 1995), a richer understanding of team task transitions is needed to illuminate the different characteristics of these transitions and their implications for important team outcomes. Furthermore, with greater understanding of this topic, we gain insight into how the functioning and effectiveness of teams in dynamic environments can improve.

This is not to say that researchers have completely ignored transitions in teams. Most notably, Marks, Mathieu, and Zaccaro

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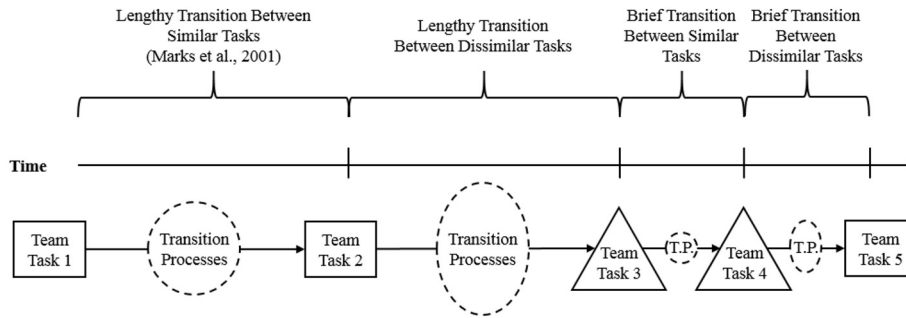


Fig. 1. The temporal nature of team task transitions.

(2001) proposed an episodic team process framework and taxonomy that explicitly describes specific transition activities, such as strategy formulation, planning, and goal specification, which occur during transitions to or between periods of task-focused work. In this paper we extend the Marks et al. framework by incorporating two elements. First, we account for differences in the length of time available for transitioning between tasks. Whereas some transitions allow sufficient time for teams to engage in strategizing, planning, and setting goals, transitions that are punctuated and brief may preclude such activities. Second, we recognize variability in the level of similarity in the tasks that bracket the transition. Whereas some transitions occur between the same or highly similar tasks, other transitions occur between tasks that are fundamentally different and consequently require much different repertoires of activity and interaction. Together, and as illustrated in Fig. 1, these elements can be combined to describe four different types of transitions. Moving from left to right, a team may encounter lengthy transitions between highly similar tasks, lengthy transitions between dissimilar tasks, brief transitions between similar tasks, and brief transitions between dissimilar tasks. We recognize that time between transitions and similarity of tasks are continuous. However, for the sake of exposition, these elements are depicted as being more discrete.

The purpose of this article is to review and integrate the literature on small groups and teams to develop propositions regarding the nature and functioning of the expanded set of team task transitions. First, we consider research that has accounted for the episodic nature of teamwork and related research (e.g. Marks et al., 2001) to develop our expanded view of team task transitions and to identify the fundamental implications that follow from this perspective. Second, we draw from research on team effectiveness heuristics (e.g. Gladstein, 1984; Hackman, 1987; Ilgen et al., 2005; McGrath, 1984) to delineate the positioning of team task transitions in the context of other important variables in the literature on small groups and teams. Third, we examine the literature on emergent states (e.g., Marks et al., 2001) to understand the implications of persistence of cognitive and affective states through transitions to new tasks. Finally, we examine the literature on team adaptability (e.g., LePine, 2005; Pulakos, Arad, Donovan, & Plamondon, 2000), time (e.g., McGrath, 1991; Waller, 1999) and team development (e.g., Beer, 1976; Kozlowski, Gully, Nason, & Smith, 1999; Tuckman, 1965) to identify antecedents of team task transition processes. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our framework to research and practice.

## 2. Episodic approach to teamwork

Our conceptualization of team task transitions is grounded in the general assumption that activity in teams is “episodic.” That is, team activity consists of “distinguishable periods of time over which performance accrues and feedback is available” (Marks et al., 2001, p. 359), and where each period is marked by action, transition, and subsequent action (Marks et al., 2001; Mathieu & Button, 1992; Weingart, 1997; Zaheer, Albert, & Zaheer, 1999). This episodic view of team processes provides the foundation for the ideas in this paper, and we specifically recognize that the activities in which teams engage can be separated into action and transition episodes. We also acknowledge that the specific activities that occur during transition episodes are distinct from task-focused action processes, but are nevertheless important to overall team effectiveness. In previous work on this topic, transitions have been conceptualized as defined time periods which may involve evaluation and planning activities that promote learning and performance improvement in subsequent tasks (e.g., Marks et al., 2001). We build on this previous work by highlighting two features of transitions that may have important implications to our theoretical and practical understanding. Specifically, we recognize that there are (a) differences in the length of time available for transitioning between tasks, and (b) variability in level of similarity of the tasks that come before and after the transition.

### 2.1. The role of time in team task transitions

Our expanded view of team task transitions considers how characteristics of the transition may vary and influence team functioning and effectiveness in subsequent tasks. Perhaps the most striking way in which transitions may vary concerns the amount of time that teams have available to transition, and following from this, the amount of time available for activities that could conceivably occur during the transition. As highlighted by Marks et al. (2001), some transitions afford teams time to engage in a dedicated set of transition-specific activities. For example, an assembly team might meet for one hour between product runs to review production data in an effort to identify changes in procedures that might enhance the quality of team outcomes. In this regard, team

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