

# Three domains of project organising



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## Abstract

It has become axiomatic in research on project organising that projects are temporary organisations. Yet there are a number of challenges to this axiom: research on matrix organisation, the embeddedness of projects in project ecologies, and projectification all emphasise the relationship of the project to permanent organisations. Similarly, research on project-based firms and owner organisations which are relatively permanent challenges this axiom. This paper develops a conceptual framework which defines three domains of project organising: project-based firms; projects and programmes; and owners and operators as its principal theoretical contribution. This conceptual framework draws our attention to two important new areas for future research in project organising. The first is at the interfaces between the three domains of project organising: commercial, resourcing, and governance. The second is on project organising as temporary configurations of permanent organisations in coalitions to deliver particular outputs.

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## 1. Introduction

It has become axiomatic in the literature on project forms of organising that project organising is temporary. The aim of this paper is to challenge that axiom and to argue that most project organising is done by relatively permanent forms of organisation. We will further argue that the conflation of project organising with temporary organising has limited the development of research in the field. We develop our argument through a critical review of the literature, focusing on key contributions which have developed distinctive positions relevant to our argument rather than claiming to be comprehensive. First, we will review the literature on temporary organisation, showing how it has created an impressive intellectual momentum. We will then turn to a more recent body of literature which provides an important, but largely unnoticed, theoretical challenge to the literature on temporary organising—the literature on project-based firms. We next turn to an important gap left by these two literatures which has received relatively little attention both empirically and theoretically—the role in project organising of the owners and operators of the outputs created by the project.

On the basis of these three reviews we develop and present a conceptual framework for the project organising research field. Conceptual frameworks help to “organize empirical observations by using coherent and meaningful frameworks. Such frameworks allow scholars to make sense of the field and understand its boundaries, major findings, and challenges” (Shapira, 2011: 1314). They provide the basis for theory development and so the conceptual framework developed in this paper is its principal theoretical contribution. The field is here defined as the scope of the *International Journal of Project Management* with an emphasis on organisational aspects rather than tools and techniques. This conceptual framework also allows us to suggest that some of the most interesting research challenges in project organising lie at the interfaces between the three domains of project organising and reveals the importance of a newly emerging organisational form that sits at the interface of all three domains—programme partners. Implications for theory in project organising and suggestions for further research follow.

## 2. Project organising as temporary organising

The Project Management Institute in the 5th Edition of its Project Management Body of Knowledge provides an authoritative

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statement of the temporary organising axiom, defining a project as “a temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service or result”. This statement is supported by the organisational research literature over the past 50 years. Goodman and Goodman examined theatrical productions as examples of temporary organisations defined as a “set of diversely skilled people working together on a complex task over a limited period of time” (Goodman and Goodman, 1976: 494). In its focus on the execution by individuals of time-limited and complex tasks and the associated human resource issues, this pioneering research influenced a considerable body of later research in the entertainment sector, particularly film. Jones (1996) examined the ways in which careers developed in the context of multiple deployments in temporary film organisations, while DeFillippi and Arthur (1998) show how such temporary organisations raise important challenges to the dominant precepts of organisation theory.

More recent research has deepened the insights around the relationships between tasks, people and their development. Bechky (2006) developed on the basis of intensive ethnographic work in the film industry a more nuanced analysis, showing how particular deployments and inter-personal relationships were indeed temporary, but also how such relationships could only be negotiated on the basis of more long-lasting notions of role in the context of expectations of future interactions on other projects. Kellogg et al. (2006) turn their attention to the ways in which cross-boundary coordination is achieved in “heterarchic” organisations such as an internet start-up company, creating a “trading zone” which enables project coordination in fast-paced, temporary and volatile conditions.

A second contribution to the temporary organising axiom has been work on engineering and construction projects. Drawing on research on the Apollo programme, Wilemon and Gemmill (1971) and Wilemon (1973) focused on interpersonal conflict within temporary project organisations. Drawing on interviews with the NASA project and technical personnel, they argued that the temporary nature of project organisations placed particular demands on the project managers because they had to interface with multiple parties to ensure mission success, and that their ability to subtly deploy power was critical. Bryman et al. (1987) provided a thorough review of the literature to date and then applied the notion of temporary system to a construction project. They found themes that were already familiar from the literature such as the stress and interpersonal conflict inherent in temporary organisations and emphasised the importance of the time dimension in the management of such organisations.

Implicit in much of the early literature on engineering and construction projects is a notion of a distinctive project life-cycle as it progresses through time towards its predetermined end, although it is typically not the focus of the analysis offered. Morris (1994) and Turner (2009) present a variety of different life-cycles garnered from different sources, while Wheelwright and Clark (1992) present different types of “funnel” for new product development projects. In some sectors, such as defence acquisition, life-cycle models can attain the status of law. The majority of life-cycle models appear to focus on specifying key decision points, an approach that has now widely disseminated in the shape of stage-gate project process models (Cooper, 1993).

Despite a significant body of organisation and management research on temporary project organisations, it remained rather fragmented, and was certainly failing to meet Wilemon and Cicero’s (1970, 282) aspirations for a “general theory of project management”. Lundin and Söderholm (1995) drew generally on this research tradition to develop their “theory of the temporary organisation”. They argued for an action-based theory with the project process articulated in terms of basic concepts of task, team, time and transition sequencing through four sequencing concepts denoting phases of the project. They thereby combined the concepts of the project as temporary organising and the project life-cycle. Packendorff (1995) picked up this theme, arguing that conceiving of the project as a temporary organisation was the way to move beyond the concept of the project as a delivery tool which pervades the professionally orientated research on the topic. In contrast, Turner and Müller (2003) argued that defining the project as a temporary organisation is entirely consistent with viewing the project as a delivery tool—or production function in their terms—and showed its deep roots in the mainstream of professionally-orientated project management literature. Bakker (2010) provides a recent review of the literature on temporary organisational forms, showing how pervasive the association of project organising and temporary organising has become.

However, as the association of temporary organising with project organising steadily achieved axiomatic status, there were a number of other contributions that, in effect, challenged this association. The early work on engineering projects also identified the development of “matrix organisation” in which the temporary organisation was “superimposed upon the functional organization” (Wilemon and Cicero, 1970: 271), and therefore much attention was given to the boundary position of the project manager between the temporary and permanent organisations (Gaddis, 1959) and the conflict inherent in such a role. The theory of matrix organisation was developed by Galbraith (1970) in his work on Boeing and became part of the mainstream organisation theory on organisational coordination mechanisms (Winch, 1994; Mintzberg, 1979). While matrix organisations were often characterised as unstable (e.g. Greiner and Schein, 1981), this is not the same as characterising them as temporary organisations.

Within the media sector, research attention was also turning to the relationship between the temporary and the permanent. While the work on the film industry did note in passing the geographical clustering of film production, Grabher’s (2002) work fully articulated the theoretical implications and again focused on the interdependencies between temporary organisations and permanent organisations. In a study of the London advertising industry, he identified the importance of the “project ecology” of a deep pool of expertise with strong interpersonal connections which could be mobilised on particular projects for clients. Complementary work on the Munich software cluster (Ibert, 2004) showed how the linear notions of time in temporary project organisations are in tension with the more circular notions of time in permanent firms within the project ecology.

A third challenge to the dominance of the notion of temporary organisation came from the work on “projectification” as a process of change in permanent organisation. For instance, Midler

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