



# Learning in a programme context: An exploratory investigation of drivers and constraints

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## Abstract

There is little guidance in the literature on programme-based learning and knowledge transfer. We framed our research question as ‘What are the mechanisms for, drivers of, and barriers to programme-based learning?’ and investigated both within- and cross-programme learning at multiple levels. Our exploratory qualitative investigation of senior managers (primarily at the Programme Director/Delivery Director level) in a large UK-based telecommunications and network services provider revealed a number of interesting and important insights. Participants interviewed tended to call upon their own tacit knowledge and experience to understand their programmes in the first instance. Knowledge acquisition and sharing was largely through social contacts and peer-to-peer connections rather than the formal processes. Explicit organisational knowledge in this instance served mainly for reference but could be ‘signposted’ by trusted colleagues. Learning effects varied over the lifecycle of the programme and, in the case organisation, the enterprise programme office was not viewed as being conducive to effective learning. The findings have practical implications for understanding within- and cross-programme learning.

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## 1. Introduction

There has been significant research into the difficulties of project-based learning, much of which is focused on intra- and inter-project transfer of knowledge such as lessons-learned and refinement of operating processes. However, there is as yet little research on programme-based learning. Whereas a project is a “unique, transient endeavour undertaken to achieve planned objectives” (APM, 2012:241), programmes are “a group of related projects and change management activities that together achieve beneficial change for an organisation” (APM, 2012:241). Programmes tend to be mission rather than output specific, may last several years (TSO, 2011), tend to have less well defined scope, and often include related business-as-usual activities (see, for example, Lycett et al., 2004; Maylor et al., 2006;

Pellegrinelli, 2011; Thiry, 2002). Learning within such a context covers multiple aspects, including within and between projects within a programme, and also between programmes, yet there is little within the literature regarding these challenges for managers working at the programme level.

This paper describes an investigation within a large global telecommunications provider looking at the issues of learning at the programme rather than the project level. Our research question was ‘What are the mechanisms for, drivers of, and barriers to programme-based learning?’ thereby covering learning both within and between programmes. Our interviews with twelve experienced, senior managers operating at the programme level revealed learning at this level to be complex and largely social in nature. Informed by the literature and the data from our study, we present a programme-based learning framework for future validation.

## 2. Learning in projects and programmes

There is considerable scholarly literature on organisational learning and knowledge. The imperative to become a learning

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organisation has been stressed for many years (Argyris, 1993; Cangelosi and Dill, 1965; De Geus, 1988; Fiol and Lyles, 1985; Garvin, 1993; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Prahalad and Hamel, 1990; Senge, 1990; Stata, 1989; Sugarman, 2001). However, despite the rapid growth in the popularity of ‘organisational learning’ as a subject (Bapuji and Crossan, 2004), there has been little agreement amongst scholars on the definition of terms or mechanisms (Crossan et al., 1999; Friedman et al., 2005; Huber, 1991). There has been much debate over the nature of organisational learning, what it is, what it means, and where it is situated (Crossan et al., 1999; Easterby-Smith et al., 2000). For reviews of the literature, see, for example, Bapuji and Crossan (2004), Easterby-Smith (1997), Easterby-Smith and Lyles (2003), Shipton (2006), Taylor et al. (2010).

It is also important that the concept of knowledge is understood. For this paper we refer to the definition by Davenport and Prusak (1998:5) which highlights its complex and multifaceted nature:

“Knowledge is a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. It originates and is applied in the mind of knowers. In organisations, it often becomes embedded not only in documents or repositories, but also in organisational routines, practices, processes and norms.”

The broad body of literature on organisational learning shows the difficulty of achieving this in practice. It is of significant interest to both researchers and to practitioners. Organisations find it difficult to learn to improve, and this challenge is exacerbated if the organisation is temporary in nature. This is shown by the extensive work that has been undertaken on the subject of project learning (e.g. Ayas and Zeniuk, 2001; Carrillo et al., 2013; Keegan and Turner, 2001; Newell et al., 2006; Sapsed et al., 2005; Sense, 2007; Turner et al., 2000). The evidence for effective project-based ‘learning organisations’ is still low (Love et al., 2005). While the concept of capturing lessons-learned is widespread and appreciated by organisations, it is often still performed poorly due to time, resource and incentive constraints (e.g. Williams, 2008).

We were unable to locate much direct research on programme-based learning organisations. To illustrate this, systematic searches for peer-reviewed literature in the Proquest database using the search terms “Program\* management” AND “Organi\* learning” (to cover the spellings of program/me and organisational/organizational) in January 2014 yielded only five papers. (In contrast, replacing “program\*” with “project” yielded 191 results). Of these five, only three abstracts appeared pertinent. Lycett et al. (2004) argue that knowledge-sharing between projects should be a cornerstone of effective programme management, but that it has largely been neglected within the discipline. Gareis (2010), though, focuses primarily on organisational change, and Carayannis (1998) emphasises the role of technology, although does highlight the importance of a learning culture. Other search term permutations produced similarly sparse results. Hence, because of the paucity of research, the domain for our review was the project management literature.

Programmes in the study organisation’s context (introduced shortly) have two learning challenges. The first is intra-programme, the knowledge generation requirement for any new piece of work, together with the sharing of knowledge effectively between the programme’s sub-projects. The second is inter-programme, where findings from one may be useful on another. All of the case organisation’s work relies on IT and telecoms (e.g. large technology roll-outs; implementing major public sector IT systems), so these similarities provide a strong rationale to share expertise. As a ‘supply’ organisation, customers rely on this knowledge and competence. Although each contract is unique, the degree of technology application can vary considerably, including specific ‘one-offs’ (Grabher, 2004a) to similar, recurring, offerings able to benefit from “economies of repetition” (Davies and Brady, 2000:932). The projects within each programme face multiple forms of complexity (Gerald et al., 2011; Maylor et al., 2013), requiring a balance between access to previously-developed, successful, solutions, and in-situ problem-solving. There is therefore a necessity to both exploit existing knowledge and explore new solutions (March, 1991). The programmes and their sub-projects are resourced by teams and functional groups which form and disband as and when needed (Bresnen et al., 2005), supporting the growth of individual social networks through the renewal process. This is a key source of knowledge transfer, as well as codified knowledge readily available to programme participants.

Here it is important to differentiate between tacit knowledge (personal, rooted in action and hard to share, such as that gained through management experience) and explicit knowledge (codifiable, relatively easy to share, such as key documents) (Polanyi, 1967). It is hard to pinpoint where organisational knowledge resides. It can be understood as being within the minds of individuals, embedded in the relationships between individuals and teams, and in the formal and informal processes and routines of the organisation (Swart, 2006; Turner and Lee-Kelley, 2013).

The idea that prescriptive solutions are the answer to project learning is not well supported. The lessons-learned process, although common practice and often prescribed in an organisation’s formal procedures, is not generally as effective as desired (Williams, 2008). The socially constructed and tacit nature of some important types of knowledge is a factor in the effectiveness in the lessons-learned process (Koners and Goffin, 2007). Learning in this instance tends to be captured within groups and individuals (Enberg et al., 2010; Swan et al., 2010). While reflective actors (Cicmil, 2005; Scarbrough et al., 2004) are important in knowledge-based, problem-solving work, trust is a precursor for effective sharing (Bartsch et al., 2013; Bresnen et al., 2005; Grabher, 2004a; Keegan and Turner, 2001; Lindkvist, 2005; Newell and Huang, 2005; Park and Lee, 2014; Williams, 2008). Learning, in its broadest sense, is thus a ‘social’ issue as well as one of ‘capture’, as much of the literature in this field has identified. This is highlighted in the work of Prencipe and Tell (2001), who show that there is no ‘one-best-way’ for organisations to learn, as the benefits and appropriate mechanisms are firm- and situation-dependent. They recognise three ‘learning landscapes’ characterised by the predominance of individual, group or organisational learning

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