

## Editorial



## Project-based and temporary organizing: Reconnecting and rediscovering

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### Abstract

In recent years, the linkages between project management and organization theory have become stronger. In an attempt to address this development, this paper analyzes the research on temporary and project-based organizing. It especially discusses the development associated with the EGOS sub-themes on project organizing and the potential avenues for future research. The paper also summarizes the key findings from the included papers in the special issue on project-based and temporary organizing, which is based on papers from the EGOS conference in 2013. One key argument is that project organizing needs to develop along three lines: new empirical contexts, new theoretical/conceptual issues, and new research methodologies.

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This is a historic event. This is the first special issue from the EGOS (European Group for Organizational Studies) colloquium published in the International Journal of Project Management (IJPM). Given the increasing importance of project organizing for the study of organizations in general, we certainly hope that there will be more special issues coming out of this conference in the future – on all kinds of topics of relevance to organizational theorists as well as project management scholars. This seems especially important in times when project management and thus also the publications in IJPM are becoming more and more influenced by old as well as novel theories of organization, and that the new theorizations of organization to a greater extent build on the salient characteristics of projects, including temporariness, multi-disciplinary, time focus, autonomy, complexity, and integration. What we thus are trying to promote with arranging sub-themes addressing project organizing at EGOS and the publication of special issues with selected papers from the conference is to encourage the dialogue and debate between project organizing and the rest of organization studies. We believe this is an important task not only for mainstream project management researchers but also for organization theorists.

This special issue is also historic for another reason. It marks the tenth year anniversary of the Special Issue on “project-based organizations, embeddedness, and repositories of knowledge” that was published in *Organization Studies*. This special issue was based on papers presented at an EGOS sub-theme addressing project and knowledge organizing and edited by the conveners of that track: Professors Jörg Sydow, Lars Lindkvist and Robert

DeFillippi. This special issue contained several papers that have become classics in the field of project organizing. For instance, the paper by Brady and Davies on project capabilities and how firms learn from strategic projects, Engwall and Westling's (2004) paper on “project peripety” and what projects can do to escape lock-ins, and Grabher's (2004) paper on the nature of learning in “project ecologies” and how such formations may spur and foster creativity. Indeed, the special issue in *Organization Studies* was important and indeed still is important and many of the papers continue to receive citations from papers published today, but perhaps most, it was important to demonstrate that project organizing and its scholars could contribute to the general field of management and organization studies and get published in the general organization theory journals, and in more than one way make contributions to this field of research. It also demonstrated that project organizing had an important role to play within the EGOS community. For those of you who are not familiar with the EGOS community, it is a scholarly association with more than 2000 members. It aims to further the theoretical and/or empirical advancement of knowledge about organizations, organizing and the contexts in which organizations operate. EGOS has, as mentioned earlier, an associated journal – *Organization Studies* – and holds an annual conference (EGOS Colloquium) in July. Historically, project organizing has not had a prominent place at previous EGOS conferences. However, in recent years things have changed.

In Helsinki, Finland, in 2012, project organizing was one of the largest tracks at the EGOS colloquium considering both the number of papers submitted and in the number of papers

presented. Indeed, this was really the comeback for project organizing at EGOS. In 2013 in Montréal, the sub-theme on project-based and temporary organizing received almost fifty submissions and was with that figure one of the most popular sub-themes at the entire EGOS colloquium. Already now we know that there will be more sub-themes on project-related research in the 2015 conference and we are expecting even more scholars to try their luck with submitting proposals for arranging sub-themes with a project touch. We think it is needed for project scholars, but equally so – we think EGOS needs it.

The sub-theme in Montréal on project organizing was held exactly ten years after the first project organizing sub-theme at EGOS organized by Sydow, Lindkvist and DeFillippi, and one year after the conference in Finland. It was organized to trigger the sharing and discussing of insights into the world of projects, to welcome even more scholars to the world of project organizing and to build on what was done ten years ago and to strengthen the path that was rediscovered one year ago. The ambition was to make project organizing an integral part of the life of EGOS and ensure that there will be more project organizing sub-themes in the years to come. We certainly hope so.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the current position of project organizing research and to reflect on the progress made so far. In particular, we use the special issue published ten years ago as a reference point for a number of reasons. First, we believe this issue has offered so many insights over the years that many of the papers are already modern classics. Second, we believe that the papers presented here share an interesting intellectual spirit and continue on the lines developed and called for by Sydow et al. Third, we believe that the papers here also advance project organizing research beyond the special issue presented ten years ago. In that respect, we argue that a closer investigation may also tell us about what we have learned from project organizing research in the last decade and that this could help us better understand where we are going and the future questions that lay ahead.

## 1. Learning from the past, creating a new future

In recent years, project management scholars have emphasized the importance of revisiting the past to create a better and more creative future (see for instance [Söderlund and Lenfle, 2013](#); [Söderlund and Geraldi, 2012](#)). With a longer time period of the past, we would then also be more creative and be able to envision a longer time period for the times to come. This is very much in the spirit of [March \(1999\)](#) and his ideas that exploration requires not only a long-term perspective but also a long historical view on development. In our case, we will only go back ten years, and perhaps for the broader scholarship this is far from sufficient, but, for the EGOS tradition and for what was laid out in the first sub-theme on project organizing, we believe this is sufficient to make a few essential points about the progress of project management thinking.

Reading the editorial by [Sydow et al. \(2004\)](#), a few things are quite striking. The first thing is that their ideas are still very fresh.

Another is that recent years of project organizing research have actually addressed and responded to their call for improvements in project organizing research. The authors, as we read them, have a couple of important points and we will try to summarize them here. First, the authors demonstrate the significance of analyzing the nested levels of projects of engaging in a multiple-level analysis where projects are not always the most important one. This could be the individual, team, multi-team, project, organization, firm, industry, or even the organizational field. The authors therefore point out the importance of addressing and acknowledging “the embeddedness of projects”. Another thing is that the authors point out the structuration process inherent in the construction of project practice; that these levels of analysis mutually constitute one another and mutually influence each other.

Although not one of the specific papers explicitly draws on the editorial paper by Sydow et al., there is a strong intellectual overlap with the papers presented in the Organization Studies special issue and the papers included in this volume. For instance, [Brady and Davies' \(2004\)](#) paper is used by two of the papers to emphasize the importance of multiple-level analysis. [Florice et al.'s](#) paper in this special issue makes use of the paper by [Bresnen et al. \(2004\)](#) to discuss how new project practices cause challenges to ongoing projects. [Neukirch et al.](#) draw on [Engwall and Westling \(2004\)](#) to investigate empirically how and why renewal and change in projects occur. They also engage in a discussion based on [Scarborough et al. \(2004\)](#) on the criticality of looking into the interactions and communication patterns among people participating in projects to uncover how new ideas emerge and old ideas are abolished.

To some extent there are also a number of intellectual similarities between the papers in the two special issues. Most notably, the papers have an inclination for qualitative research. They draw mostly on single case studies, in-depth qualitative analysis, ethnographies and similar kinds of investigations. This was typical for the papers in the Organization Studies issue such as with the processual study presented by [Engwall and Westling \(2004\)](#) and the drama that faced a complex development project in the telecom industry. It was also seen in the paper by [Bresnen et al.](#) and their study of the implementation of a new project management system. It is likewise seen in the papers presented here. In the paper by [Missonier and Loufrani-Fedida \(this issue\)](#), they document a series of controversies among the stakeholders participating in the project and the ensuing emergence of the project network. It is even more so seen in the focused study of a two-day intense study of critical decision making in a mountaineering expedition in Patagonia. Some papers are not single case studies or studies of critical events in particular studies, but instead report on a comparative study of multiple cases. This is true for two of the papers in the present special issue – papers that engage in an analysis of either specific events (such as transition rituals) or the accumulation of events over time and across projects (such as the case with lineage management).

Another common trait is the papers' interest in project practice. Either they document practice – what really happens, the emergence of project practice and the dynamics of projects, or

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