

# Relating, reflecting and routinizing: Developing project competence in cooperation with others

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## Abstract

In a world where projects represent an increasingly important organizational and economic unit, the capability of generating and executing projects becomes critical for company performance and sustainability of firm-level competitiveness. Despite recent contributions to the area of project-capability building, many of the challenges remain largely unexplored areas of research. The aim of this paper is to increase our understanding of how firms develop competence in a focal project. To accomplish this, we use an in-depth study of a complex development and implementation project. Applying a ‘process approach’ to the study of project competence, we identify three separate learning mechanisms: relating, reflecting and routinizing. We show how these mechanisms contribute mutually to the expansion and utilization of the resource base of the project.

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## 1. Co-creating project competence

Project management research has shown increased attention to the processes of how to facilitate learning and competence development in project environments. Previous research has looked at the criticality of inter-project learning and cross-project learning (e.g. [25,6]), and how projects may stimulate learning and thereby function as arenas for learning [20]. Given the ongoing ‘projectification’ of a number of industries and sectors, we would assume that the firm-level development of the ability to generate and execute projects is a determining factor for competitiveness and firm-level performance in the future. In other words, projects not only represent unique instances for generating new knowledge and communal

learning, but they also provide firms with the possibility of using and re-using existent knowledge. However, the dual challenge of using what is already known and coming up with novel solutions seems to be particularly demanding in a project context. Although we will not give a complete answer to the exploration–exploitation dilemma facing project-intensive firms in this paper, we will offer a new and complementary way of analyzing the development of project competence.

In line with Hedlund [11], we believe that studies of knowledge development and capability building, in general, should pay closer attention to the temporary project and its inter-organizational aspects. Such studies would not only improve the understanding of the practice of project management and learning in projects, but also improve the knowledge of the difficulties of establishing firm-level project competence and project capabilities (see e.g., [5,28,29]). The latter is important in gaining an understanding of the qualities of individual learning in an increasingly important work setting and for identifying important characteristics of ‘project-based learning’ [7].

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We argue that mainstream analyses of project competence tend to neglect the interrelatedness of the competence developed at the project-level and the competence developed at the organizational level. Building on an in-depth case study of the GSM-R project at the Norwegian Rail Administration, we highlight the ‘co-creational’ character of competence development at the project and firm-level and between the project and its environment. The project under study posed several challenges and forced the members of the project management team to seek new knowledge, and to establish new routines and a new way of working with stakeholders. The project entailed both exploitation of what was already known within the project management team and in the rest of the base organization, and exploration activities and development of new knowledge.

In our version, project competence cannot merely be seen as a firm-level, organizational capability. Additionally, competence should be investigated at the project level, observed in the actions of the project management team, and developed through the hurdles and challenges facing the team throughout the project [33]. We describe and analyze how project-level competence develops over time and identify important learning mechanisms of such a development. We argue for the value of a detailed analysis of the combination of relating, reflecting and routinizing within the project. Moreover, we point out how analyses of project-level learning mechanisms may contribute to the knowledge of organizational capability in a particular type of project-based context.

We first review the literature on project capabilities and project competence. Second, a discussion follows about our approach to project competence and a presentation of the aim and research questions addressed in the paper. Third, we outline the case study methodology and a few key issues of the study reported here. We thereafter continue with presenting the case study and the major events observed in the project, describing the case project in a chronological fashion. Finally, we end with an analysis of the project and conclusions, and a few avenues for future research.

## 2. Project organizing and project competence

Research and writing about project management and project organization have developed rapidly in the past few decades. From being largely dominated by a planning-oriented approach, the area of project research today shows quite an impressive degree of plurality. One emerging set of studies, coming from strategy research, has argued for the need of studies of individual projects – i.e., detailed analyses of project-level activities to understand the development of new organizational capabilities and corporate renewal. For instance, the work of Bowen et al. [1] explained corporate renewal by focusing on single projects. Our paper follows a similar development trait in the way that we seek to illustrate the importance of looking at individual project activities to understand capability

development. Relying on previous work within this area, most notably the work of Davies and Brady [5] and Brady and Davies [2], we offer an alternative model of capability development in project contexts.

Recent research has documented the widespread value of ‘dynamic capabilities’ [31] and the importance of these capabilities to create, extend and modify the ways firms operate. Here, dynamic capabilities refer to “the firm’s ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address rapidly changing environments” [31, p.516]. In this paper, we draw on the idea of dynamic capabilities; however, we particularly center on how such development processes are to be understood at the project level. Relying on the definition of Helfat et al. [12], we take interest in the processes of how a project/temporary organization increases and improves its “capacity...to purposefully create, extend, or modify its resource base”. The focus here is then on the single project and the acts of the project management team. Such a general approach may not only contribute to the overall understanding of dynamic capabilities, but perhaps equally importantly, to the role and practice of project management teams – an area of research that is largely unexplored [27]. We also believe that a study of how competence and capabilities are developed within a project might add to the understanding of critical capabilities in a project-based or project-led organization [15]. Our analysis of competence building acknowledges that projects are processes of knowledge development and learning. In our version of competence building, we also acknowledge projects as carried out in a complex web of relationships between project members with formal affiliation to the project team and other stakeholders, including project owners and subcontractors.

The idea of dynamic capabilities in project-based firms is not new. Drawing on the classic research on organizational capabilities, Davies and Brady [5] and Brady and Davies [2] have contributed to the understanding of how processes of capability building are to be understood within project contexts. The authors launch the concept of ‘project capabilities’ as those capabilities required for firms to move technology and market base. In their view, projects represent important mechanisms for experimentation, and equally, that learning must be transferred to coming projects to allow for the economization of past experience. In other words, economies of repetition are fundamental in the building of firm-level project capabilities. In the type of project examined in this paper, we particularly analyze what happens at the project-level. Accordingly, project-capability building then seems very much to be a matter of both repeating and concurrently exploring new knowledge areas. Managers of projects struggle with new challenges almost on a daily basis – competence development is therefore to be seen as a continuous process tightly integrated into everyday managerial and organizational action.

To help us understand project competence development, we suggest a ‘process approach’ in the manner that it has

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