



Managing time pacing in organizations transitioning to a project-based mode – 3 cases studies of two multinational companies

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Abstract

This paper aims to better understand how teams create new knowledge to adapt their work processes as they move from managing on-going and well-defined operations to a project mode. We particularly focus on major events affecting projects and demonstrate that temporality influences actors' willingness and ability to generate new knowledge within the team and to diffuse that knowledge at different levels in the organization. Results show that time is mostly not considered as linear but rather in its subjective dimension. Thus, subjective perceptions of time such as temporal compression or flow enhance the generation of tacit or explicit knowledge.

In this study, we study three projects by two multinationals to show the different reactions and perceptions of timing of team members. Our research brings new insights on organizations that moved from a mode based on on-going operations to a project-led mode as well as knowledge generation.

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1. Introduction

Organizations increasingly adopt project-based working practices to manage organizational changes (Leybourne, 2006). Processes associated with those practices can be contrasted to routine operation as project management processes need to be flexible, goal oriented and staged in contrast to routine operation management, where the processes need to be stable and continuous (Turner and Müller, 2003). The transition from 'routine' activities, which are based on the exploitation of the current knowledge base, planning, and a clear definition of future goals, to an 'innovative' project-based mode require the development of new knowledge at the team level (Davies and Brady, 2016). More particularly, teams need to develop specific knowledge to be able to plan their activities in real time and deal with unforeseeable conditions

(Chédotel and Journé, 2016). Teams involved in the transition from routine operations to project-based management need to acquire three main competencies:

- An ability to coordinate specialized skills and resources within the project-group to complete the project task within time (Cattani et al., 2011);
- The capability to synchronize communication with actors and entities external to the group.
- Competency in defining the work organization vis-à-vis the permanent surrounding organization (Packendorff, 1995).

This research focuses on the contextual factors, which enhance the development and deployment of the three types of knowledge previously described and more particularly on the impact of time on knowledge creation. Knowledge creation is a topic that has received a surge of interest since the pioneering works of Nonaka (1994). However, few works specifically

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focus on new knowledge development and time (Purser and Petranker, 2005), even though recent studies demonstrated that various dimensions of time bring different outcomes in terms of knowledge creation (Hautala and Jauhiainen, 2014). For example, Hautala and Jauhiainen (2014) showed that actors embedded in creative projects face different temporalities such as slow time, disruption or linear time and this leads to different processes of knowledge creation. Most researchers consider time as linear, having a past, present and future, but few studies “capture issues of temporality such as tempo, acceleration and deceleration, rhythm, or entertainment” (Bakker et al. 2016, p. 5).

Thus, the objective of this paper is to study the development of new knowledge as the perception of time changes throughout the projects. The authors carried out 3 case studies on different project teams in two multinationals, which had to transition from a ‘routine’ to a ‘project-based’ mode. Changes in time perception are triggered by external events that the team cannot control. Consequently, the authors analyses how major events affecting projects can alter actors’ perceptions of time within projects and entice them to change (or not) their knowledge.

Our article brings new insights into the literature on time and knowledge creation. In fact, changes can be conceived as coming from on-going local adjustments performed by individuals (Orlikowski, 1996); however, we still lack an understanding of the temporal dynamic that is responsible for these constant variations (Purser and Petranker, 2005). We bring new perspectives by identifying the impact of different types of events on the perception of time, which would affect actors’ ability and desire to change processes.

We conducted three case studies in the subsidiaries of two different multinationals. We focused on teams that were newly involved ‘in innovative project-based projects’.

The aim of this article is twofold:

- To understand how temporality can impact knowledge creation.
- To determine how individuals adapt knowledge processes as a reaction to events.

The following section examines the relationships among time, changes in knowledge processes and creation and events. Then, the methods and cases are described. In the result section, we compare the impact of 9 main events on the three projects, and we draw conclusions in the final section.

2. Literature review: temporality, events and changes in processes

2.1. The transition toward exploratory-oriented projects and knowledge creation

Several studies address the transformation of the organizational structure to conduct their activities in project mode (Midler, 1995; Maylor et al., 2006). Projects are perceived as particularly adequate to conduct new activities, which require experimentation and new combinations of expertise (Danneels, 2002; Brady and Davies, 2004). They are characterized by a temporary allocation of resources and personnel and a definite

time frame that make it possible to perform innovative activities (Cattani et al., 2011). A shift from on-going exploitative activities to an exploratory project mode requires the development of new knowledge at the team level and in the interface between the team and the whole organization as processes to carry out tasks are different (Brady and Davies, 2004).

On-going activities are associated with a focus on planning and rewarding team members for enforcing deadlines (Lenfle and Loch, 2010). Schedule and achievement of objectives are predictable, and the focus is on the refinement of existing practices. On the contrary, exploratory project-based activity involves experimentation, the recombination of knowledge from team members having different backgrounds and a focus on long-term benefits. It is characterized by an emphasis on learning events, which paces activities with an unpredictable timing. Thus, the first type of knowledge that the project teams, which are transitioning toward more exploration-oriented projects, must develop is their ability to coordinate specialized skills and resources within the project-group to complete the project task within a given time (Cattani et al., 2011). Then, team members also need to adapt processes to balance interactions with actors external to the team such as stakeholders. An organization is formed from different small worlds or groups of actors having specialized knowledge (Dougherty, 1992). Thus, project team members need to access specific information and knowledge from others team members (Ancona and Caldwell, 1992). They also need to connect knowledge generators to knowledge users (Sundquist, 1978) to ensure the usability of the solutions proposed. Finally, proposals from the team need to be embedded into the company’s strategy to get funding. Consequently, information on the management’s vision needs to be acquired by the team (Burgelman and Sayles, 1988). Thus, the second type of knowledge that needs to be developed concerns the capacity to synchronize communication with external actors. Finally, working space, relationships with support functions and the influence of the project group need to be negotiated in the new organization (Packendorff, 1995). We labeled this third type of knowledge, which is required, a competency to define the work organization vis-à-vis the permanent surrounding organization.

Works on knowledge have already highlighted the central role of time on its development. Thus, a major study by Nonaka and Konno (1998) specify that for knowledge creation to occur, actors need to interact at a specific time. However, few works specifically focus on the influence of temporality on knowledge creation (Hautala and Jauhiainen, 2014). Whereas temporality has been demonstrated to have an impact on the processes of knowledge creation (Hautala and Jauhiainen, 2014), we lack an understanding of the relationships between time and the type of knowledge generated. Actually, Polanyi (1966) differentiates between tacit knowledge, which is abstract and communicated through repeated interactions and explicit knowledge, which is codified and easily transmittable. The work of Nonaka (Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka et al., 2014) implies different temporalities for the generation of those two types of knowledge; the development of tacit knowledge relates to a long and suspended moment of time, whereas explicit knowledge would be enhanced as rhythms

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