



Practices, projects and portfolios: Current research trends and new directions

Stewart Clegg^{a,b}, Catherine P. Killen^{c,*}, Christopher Biesenthal^d, Shankar Sankaran^c

^a Faculty of Business, University of Technology Sydney, P O Box 123, Broadway, NSW 2007, Australia

^b Universidade Nova Faculty of Business and Economics, Lisboa, Portugal

^c Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building, University of Technology Sydney, P O Box 123, Broadway, NSW 2007, Australia

^d WHU - Otto Beisheim School of Management, Erkrather Str. 224a, D-40233 Düsseldorf, Germany

Received 15 September 2016; received in revised form 22 March 2018; accepted 22 March 2018

Available online xxxx

Abstract

Project portfolio management (PPM) bridges strategy and project management. Traditional research in PPM has primarily investigated the rational, top-down and structural aspects of strategizing. By doing so, it has failed to focus on the underlying practices that are triggered by the strategy and how these practices frame strategy implementation. Practice-based research provides a methodological lens to explore the reality of strategic enactment through the project portfolio. Practice-based perspectives are under-represented in PPM research; therefore the aim of this paper is to provide an agenda for further practice-based research in PPM. Central to this agenda is a concern with various aspects of practice, including its discursivity, representation, dynamic capabilities, leadership and materiality.

© 2018 Elsevier Ltd. APM and IPMA. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Practice-based research; Strategy-as-practice; Project portfolio management; Dynamic capability; Emergent strategy

1. Introduction

Traditionally framed by mechanistic and rationally linear assumptions, project management research is evolving to embrace more contextual practice-based perspectives. Focusing on what project managers do in practice addresses the gap between the abstract idealism of prescribed approaches and the practical heuristics of sensemaking as enacted project management, which helps understand how these abstract ideas are translated and used in practice. While practice-based research has gained some momentum in the project management context (Blomquist et al., 2010; Lalonde et al., 2010), PPM research is only beginning to adopt this new direction. We highlight some practice-based findings in PPM research, arguing that there is a need for PPM research to move

more definitively into “practice-based” approaches, and suggest an agenda with which to stimulate future research.

Our agenda builds on the convergence of strategic and practice-based perspectives in PPM research. Organizational strategy is increasingly delivered through the project portfolio, making PPM a core research theme in the general field of project management due to its focus on the oversight and holistic management of projects at a portfolio level. Research linking strategy and PPM has for some time been published in top management journals (Kwak and Anbari, 2009), and strategic theories and frameworks increasingly enhance research in project and portfolio management (Killen et al., 2012). “Strategy-as-practice” researchers (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Johnson et al., 2007; Regnér, 2008), together with an emergent “projects-as-practice” perspective (Blomquist et al., 2010; Lalonde et al., 2010, 2012), are shifting the gaze from strategy as it is conceived to how it is practiced in action. In this article we focus on PPM and related activities as means through which

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: stewart.clegg@uts.edu.au (S. Clegg), catherine.killen@uts.edu.au (C.P. Killen), christopher.biesenthal@whu.edu (C. Biesenthal), shankar.sankaran@uts.edu.au (S. Sankaran).

organizational strategy is translated, improvised and made sensible (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005).

The practice-based perspective seeks to make sense of and examine how strategy is translated into a portfolio of projects. Using a practice-based approach advances understanding of how strategizing – as a process of sensemaking, improvisation and translation – is accomplished in a project environment (Jerbrant and KARBOM Gustavsson, 2013; KARBOM Gustavsson, 2016). By attending to practice in situ, academic researchers aid practitioners by engaging with their performativity in integrating theory and practice in action (Konstantinou, 2015). Since practice-based research in PPM is still in its early stages, we believe it vital to “take stock” and depict what has already been done in that area to help advance the field as purposely as possible. Hence, this paper provides an overview of the literature on practice-based PPM research and propose avenues for further strengthening research in this area.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we provide a general review of the PPM literature and its relation to strategy. We then introduce our understanding of practice and the emergence of practice-based research approaches in PPM, with special attention to practice-based research relating to PPM and strategy. Building on this broad review of PPM research and our understanding of practice-based theories, we then propose an agenda to inspire and guide future research. Central to this agenda is a concern with various aspects of practice: its discursivity, intelligibility, dynamic capabilities, leadership and materiality.

2. The PPM literature and strategy approaches

PPM acts as a bridge between strategy and projects. We take a broad view of PPM and define it as the overall organizational ability to manage the project portfolio strategically and holistically, the better to support the success of the organization (Killen and Hunt, 2010). Ensuring that projects are aligned with strategy and achieving portfolio balance are primary PPM goals in an ongoing process of prioritising, resourcing, and adjusting or terminating projects (Kester et al., 2011). PPM is constituted as a more strategic and higher-level function than project management, albeit that they are interdependent (Brady and Davies, 2004; Keegan and Turner, 2002; Larson, 2004). Strategically, their interdependence is often viewed as a constraint on lower level practices in an organization. In this sense PPM emerges out of quite conventional strategy perspectives. Portfolio approaches to projects form a major part of organizational strategy, leading to an increasing focus on PPM studies in the wider project management community.

The volume of literature on PPM and its strong strategic emphasis is well documented (e.g. Filippov et al., 2010; Kester et al., 2011; Kwak and Anbari, 2009; Killen et al., 2012). Urhahn and Spieth (2013) propose that ‘portfolio management governance’ affords devices that enable an extension of PPM, and governance from a PPM perspective is also receiving increased attention from a range of authors. Doherty et al. (2012) find benefits from governance structures that manage projects as a portfolio rather than individually in their interpretive multiple case study research. Too and Weaver (2014), Thiry and Deguire

(2007), and Jonas (2010) emphasise the strategic linkages in their conceptual models of governance in project portfolio environments, while Williams et al. (2010) analyse differences in the implementation of governance frameworks across four cases demonstrating differences in choices of strategies and the importance of tailoring governance to context. The strategic role played by portfolio managers and the importance of role clarity is highlighted in a range of empirical studies on governance in multi-project environments (Mosavi, 2014; Blomquist and Muller, 2006; Koh and Crawford, 2012).

An increasingly common topic for PPM research is the interactions between different organizational components, especially in regard to how strategy is formulated and translated via the project portfolio into individual projects and subsequent benefits (Breese, 2012; Terlizzi et al., 2017; Doherty et al., 2012). The stream of research on strategy formation usually uses a top-down perspective to make sense of the interactions between portfolios and projects. While this top-down perspective acknowledges and primarily focuses on rational mechanisms for their role in PPM, more recently researchers have called for an appropriate balance in the perspective, with more emphasis on structural, cultural, inter-personal and behavioural aspects (Jensen et al., 2016; Martinsuo et al., 2014; Stingl and Gherardi, 2017; Unger et al., 2014; Wynn et al., 2016). In addition, the bottom-up perspective of strategy formation provides an alternative view on “strategizing” in PPM research, with interest in emergent strategy now forming an influential theme.

Empirical research by Poskela et al. (2005) revealed that PPM processes are central to integrating strategic and operational activities in the front-end phase of innovation. Through 20 interviews with top managers, Poskela et al. found that a participative strategy formulation process that included top-down as well as bottom-up communication processes improved the integration of strategic and operative management, highlighting what is now a core feature of the practice-based perspective on strategy. This perspective is reflected in Thiry and Deguire’s (2007) conceptual model of multi-project governance. The model proposes a two-way relationship between strategy and projects, where the project management office plays a role in top-down strategy communication and oversight, and also in collating and analysing data from projects from the bottom-up in order to reformulate strategy. More recently, Kopmann et al. (2017) explored emergent strategy and the interplay of top-down and bottom-up strategizing through a multi-informant survey. The study demonstrates the role of PPM in formulating and implementing deliberate strategy as well as in recognising and supporting emergent strategy; in turbulent contexts the importance of PPM support for emergent strategies is amplified, while PPM’s role in delivering deliberately designed plans becomes less relevant as emergent strategy redefines how the project mission is being accomplished.

The nexus between PPM and strategy emphasises the importance of understanding emergent strategy processes in order best to manage the totality of realised strategy. Mirabeau and Maguire (2014) conducted a practice-based study of emergent strategy in a telecommunications firm that provides a deeper understanding of the relationship than could be obtained

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6748012>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6748012>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)