



Managing inter-firm projects: A systematic review and directions for future research ☆

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Abstract

Although the management of inter-firm projects is increasingly being researched in a wide range of academic fields (project management, alliances and networks, organization studies), the findings of these studies rarely cross theoretical boundaries. In the present study, a systematic literature review of 219 contributions from 26 years of academic research on managing inter-firm projects identifies 22 key management issues underlying its contributions. Based on a two-dimensional framework (*project stage* and *analytical sphere*), a structured and integrative synthesis of relevant studies is outlined. Based on these findings, future investigations are proposed to focus on dynamic, contextual and structural aspects of the management of inter-firm projects.

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1. Introduction

Scholars have produced a vast amount of knowledge on different types of inter-organizational relationships, their adequate management approaches and related outcomes (Kale and Singh, 2009; Provan and Kenis, 2008; Sydow, 2010). However, a specific but seldom studied characteristic of business relationships is that they are intentionally formed for a limited period of time (Ahuja et al., 2012; Bakker and Knobens, 2015; Jones and Lichtenstein, 2008), which is proposed to have vital effects on the behavior and functioning of inter-firm collaboration (Bakker and Knobens, 2015; Leufkens and Noorderhaven, 2011; Levering et al., 2013). This type of cooperation, which may be termed as an *inter-firm project*, describes a structure in which two or more independent firms “work jointly on a shared activity for a limited period of time” (Jones and Lichtenstein, 2008).

Today, organizations use inter-firm projects for many different purposes. Typical examples include the planning of large events such as the *London Olympic Games* (Grabher and Thiel, 2014), large-scale construction projects (Sanderson, 2012) and medical research (Mishra et al., 2015). While the importance of inter-firm projects is increasing in many industries (Bakker et al., 2011; Jones and Lichtenstein, 2008), such projects are mainly employed in the construction, media and entertainment, event management, and consulting sectors (Bechky, 2006; Cacciatori et al., 2012).

Academic contributions on the management of inter-firm projects have increased dramatically over the last decade (Ahuja et al., 2012; Bakker and Knobens, 2015; Cattani et al., 2011). The most influential studies have investigated learning mechanisms (Cacciatori et al., 2012; Grabher, 2004; Lindner and Wald, 2011), project roles (Bechky, 2006), and innovation outcomes (Cassiman et al., 2009; Hobday, 2000; Sobrero and Roberts, 2001) in and across inter-firm projects. Recent studies have placed greater emphasis on the collaborative structures (Mishra et al., 2015; Tyssen et al., 2013) and the embeddedness of such projects (Bakker et al., 2016; Engwall, 2003; Mele, 2011; Sydow,

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2010). Despite the plethora of research on inter-firm projects, it has not yet established a great deal of common ground as a field of studies (Bakker and Knobens, 2015).

An in-depth examination of past contributions on inter-firm projects reveals a fundamental barrier that hinders necessary theoretical advancements. Contributions on the topic are embedded in several inter-related but disconnected fields of research, such as project management, network studies, and organization studies. Many of the insights appear to be complementary, since project management research is mainly concerned with issues of internal project organization (Tyssen et al., 2013), whereas network and organization studies often take an interest in a project's interactions and contexts (Bakker and Knobens, 2015; Jones and Lichtenstein, 2008), but lack mutual consideration. Although some scholars have recognized the significant opportunity to integrate the research strands (Brinkhoff, 2008; Söderlund, 2004), cross-citations between them remains limited to a few, outstanding contributions (Bakker and Knobens, 2015; Maurer, 2010).

In order to address this research problem, I conducted a systematic literature review on the current state of research on the management of inter-firm projects. So far, no review has explicitly analyzed and integrated the variety of contributions on managing inter-firm projects. Whereas two past literature reviews covered constructs related to inter-firm projects (Bakker, 2010; Söderlund, 2004), this review specifically focuses on the key management aspects of collaborative activities in inter-firm projects. In particular, empirical contributions, often based on case studies, may offer essential insights into the functioning and management of inter-firm projects, but often remain insufficiently related to existing theoretical models (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995). An integrative synthesis of both conceptual and empirical contributions would enable the field to advance towards a joint understanding of inter-firm projects, which has been called for repeatedly in recent years (Bakker, 2010; Söderlund et al., 2014; Söderlund and Maylor, 2012). Therefore, the following literature review strives to answer the three following research questions:

1. *What are the key management issues that have been addressed in academic contributions on inter-firm projects?*
2. *What findings can be synthesized for the key management issues and how do the fundamental stages and levels of analysis of inter-firm projects interrelate?*
3. *Which emerging trends, research gaps and promising future research opportunities may be derived from such analysis?*

2. Defining inter-firm projects

Inter-firm projects are a phenomenon in which two or more independent firms work jointly on a shared activity for a limited period of time (Jones and Lichtenstein, 2008). Although the term *inter-firm project* describes a relatively simple construct, it is used synonymously with many other terminologies. Although stated definitions demonstrate that the basic object of inquiry is understood in a very similar manner, relevant scholars have used terminologies that range from *inter-firm projects* (Dahlgren and Söderlund, 2001; Söderlund, 2004; Weck, 2005), *inter-organizational projects* (Jones and Lichtenstein, 2008; Maurer,

2010), and *multi-partner projects* (Dietrich et al., 2010; Mishra et al., 2015), to *time-bound/-specific alliances* (Bakker and Knobens, 2015; Das, 2006; Reuer and Ariño, 2007) and (*inter-organizational*) *project ventures* (Bakker et al., 2011; Schwab and Miner, 2008), all of which impedes the creation of a joint basis for discussion.

An analysis of definitions of synonymous terms to inter-firm projects revealed three basic, common characteristics. First, each inter-firm project is comprised of a set of legally autonomous, organizational actors (Jones and Lichtenstein, 2008). The literature provides no distinction regarding the number of firms; both bilateral and multilateral collaborations are within the scope. Second, the activities carried out in such projects are inherently temporary in nature, either defined by a fixed date or the accomplishment of a pre-defined goal (Grabher, 2002; Kenis et al., 2009). Third, any inter-firm project pursues a set of joint objectives for which they collaborate (Bakker et al., 2013); that is, inter-firm projects are goal-directed and created for a specific purpose.

An important distinction is that some of the definitions provided in relevant contributions on inter-firm projects expand their unit of analysis to organizations in general.¹ However, the present review is deliberately restricted to project collaboration among corporations in order to rigorously focus on approaches relevant for profit-oriented inter-firm project relationships. Such relationships are both the dominant arrangement in research and practice and are also subject to specific conditions and incentives specific to these relationships (Lowe and Leiringer, 2008).

3. Review methodology

Systematic literature reviews enable researchers to collect, analyze, and integrate academic contributions on a certain research topic in a reproducible and transparent manner. The method provides scholars with specific tools to reveal central themes, approaches, and results of a given field of research, and to identify gaps and prospective research questions (Jones and Gatrell, 2014; Petticrew and Roberts, 2006; Rousseau et al., 2008). The literature review process utilized for this analysis is based on a deductive, convergent approach comprised of four activity phases: scoping, collection, reduction, and analysis (adapted from Petticrew and Roberts, 2006; Tranfield et al., 2003).

The *scoping* phase involved identifying of key contributions to the field and deriving fundamental commonalities and differences among the understandings of inter-firm projects. An important observation was the diversity of terminology in academic literature utilized for the phenomena of interest. While there was a high degree of overlap in terms of characteristics of inter-firm projects, the actual construct has been labeled with a variety of related terms.

During the *collection* phase, bibliographic information was gathered from two electronic, academic databases (*ProQuest* –

¹ For example, including political institutions, government agencies and NGOs.

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