



# Change program management: Toward a capability for managing value-oriented, integrated multi-project change in its context

Miia Martinsuo <sup>a,\*</sup>, Päivi Hoverfält <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Tampere University of Technology, Laboratory of Industrial and Information Management, Finland

<sup>b</sup> City of Espoo, Finland

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## Abstract

Program management has taken its position in project management research and in public and private organizations as a successful method for managing complex, uncertain, and large-scale changes. During the past 25 years, research has evolved from programs as the conceptual extension of projects to a rich field of empirical studies reflecting the special natures and contexts of change programs and their management, with unique theoretical foundations. To take stock of this recent history, in this article we analyze the patterns of previous empirical studies on change program management and their theoretical foundations. The goal is to identify and summarize proposals to guide forthcoming program management research. The results reveal three main themes of ongoing research: managing over the change program lifecycle, managing programs in their context, and program managers' capabilities. The roots of change program management in organization theories are apparent; structural contingency theory and information processing theories have dominated in previous empirical research, but are clearly being extended to agency, stakeholder, and actor-network theories. New research ideas are proposed for the use of programs in various types of changes, value creation and delivery through change programs, the profiles and capabilities of different actors in program management, the coexistence and interplay of multiple programs, and the complex stakeholder networks involved with change programs. When change becomes more prevalent in the organizations' dynamic contexts, there is an increasing need to develop program management toward an organizational capability for managing value-oriented, integrated, and multi-project change in complex stakeholder contexts.

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## 1. Introduction

During the past 25 years, programs have evolved from fuzzy and unmanaged entities or extensions of projects into mechanisms of coordinating and integrating various strategic change activities toward business benefits. Even standards and guidelines have been developed, differentiating programs clearly from projects and portfolios (Office of Government Commerce, 2007; Project Management Institute, 2013). A lively stream of empirical research focuses on the program as the unit of analysis, acknowledges the complex multi-project

nature of programs, and reveals the close links of the program and its parent organization or business environment, when initiating, implementing, and diffusing changes. The time is ripe for analyzing the program management research field holistically and highlighting its key accomplishments and future directions.

The purpose of this study is to review the empirical research on programs and program management, to identify repetitive patterns in research domains and underlying theories, and to reveal avenues for further research. Our objective is to identify the distinctive and topical character of program management as a form for multi-project organizing, and through the analysis, provide relevant and feasible proposals for the future program management research agenda. The focus is on organizational

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [miia.martinsuo@tut.fi](mailto:miia.martinsuo@tut.fi) (M. Martinsuo).

change programs, in line with the dominant previous research and due to their significance for the strategic renewal of firms. The primary research questions are the following: (1) What are the key aspects of change program management, dominating in recent empirical research? (2) What do previous empirical studies on change program management recommend for future research?

Program management can be considered one form of multi-project organizing, in addition to project portfolio management, lineage management, and project-based firms. [Project Management Institute \(2013\)](#) observes that projects, programs, and portfolios are different forms of organizational project management, each with unique profiles regarding scope, change, planning, management, success, and monitoring. Although program management may have a clear resemblance to managing large projects in terms of a unifying overall goal or mission ([Eweje et al., 2012](#)), program management may also have similarities with project portfolio management in terms of implementing and controlling multiple projects in parallel ([Martinsuo, 2013](#)), lineage management in terms of emergent knowledge and feature transfer between consecutive projects ([Midler, 2013](#)), and project-based firms or organizations in terms of structuring the organization to manage different kinds of projects. Program management deserves unique attention particularly as programs are usually established to achieve certain strategic benefits through organizing and managing a change in the organization.

We follow the common definition of a program as “a group of projects that contribute to a common, higher order objective” ([Turner, 2009](#)). [Lycett et al. \(2004\)](#) emphasize that the projects in a program are related, and the intent of achieving benefits would not be realized if the projects were managed independently. Our focus is on organizational change that typically has the objective of implementing a selected strategy ([Thiry, 2002, 2004](#)), such as creating a new business for the organization, growing the business, changing the focus of the business, and establishing new relationships or ways of collaboration, or operating more efficiently than before the transformation (e.g., [Levene and Braganza, 1996](#)). Today, change increasingly involves information technology resources and support (but not always). Organizational change programs are increasingly used for the strategic renewal of firms, and they are significant investments that need appropriate management approaches for the type of change ([Boppel et al., 2013](#)). Due to the nature of change programs as demanding, uncertain investments into the firm’s strategic renewal, their management is highly important and at the same time challenging, in order for the program to deliver the expected results.

The differentiation of programs from ordinary projects comes from the scope, lack of clarity regarding goals in the beginning, complexity, and uncertainty. Programs can be large and complex ([Dietrich, 2006](#)), offering an organizing frame for different projects ([Pellegri-nelli, 1997](#)). The goals can be rough and tentative in the beginning ([Thiry, 2002, 2004](#)), and the projects may begin and evolve throughout the program to respond to environmental uncertainty ([Levene and Braganza, 1996; Pellegri-nelli, 1997; Vereecke et al., 2003](#)). [Lycett et al.](#)

(2004) emphasized that programs cannot be treated as scale-ups of projects and that programs need to be treated as contextual, multi-level, and evolutionary entities. [Arto et al. \(2009\)](#) emphasize that the historical research roots of programs and program management are clearly different from those of projects.

The guidelines for program management acknowledge that various practices and processes of strategic alignment, benefits management, stakeholder management, governance, and lifecycle management are needed, to drive the success of programs ([Office of Government Commerce, 2007; Project Management Institute, 2013](#)). The [Office of Government Commerce \(2007\)](#) has specified aspects of these dimensions into more detailed governance themes for programs, suggesting that governance creates the control framework for delivering the programs’ change objectives and making benefit delivery visible to the organization’s control. These themes differentiate the programs’ management requirements clearly from those of projects and indicate maturation of the program management knowledge base.

There is an evident agreement that programs exist in very different forms and different programs need to be managed differently ([Boppel et al., 2013; Pellegri-nelli, 1997; Vereecke et al., 2003](#)). Even if the assumption is very often that programs consist of multiple projects, the definition and boundaries between projects may not always be quite clear, and projects may emerge and dissolve at different phases of the program lifecycle. Principles of project portfolio management may, therefore, be only partly applicable to multi-project programs, and the principles do not necessarily guarantee the shared goal orientation, uncertainty mitigation, and parent organizational connection required from change programs. Therefore, program management research can be clearly distinguished from project management and project portfolio management ([Arto et al., 2009; Pellegri-nelli et al., 2015; Project Management Institute, 2013](#)).

Contemporary organizations are characterized by change, and programs are a means of large-scale organizational change and business transformation. As single projects and traditional project management approaches may not measure up to large-scale transformations, complex multi-project change programs have become increasingly common. The literature on organizational change has suggested various models and successful practices for managing change in organizations ([Beer et al., 1990; Kotter, 1995](#)), but researchers have not traditionally paid much attention to the program (or multi-project) nature of the change endeavors.

## 2. Method and overview

The study is based on a review of previous published empirical research on the practice of program management, and new empirical evidence is not reported. This review was conducted as follows. We first explored the project management journals (*International Journal of Project Management* [IJPM], *Project Management Journal* [PMJ], *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business* [IJMPB]) using the

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