*PM World **Journal***
Vol. VI, Issue III – March 2017
www.pmworldjournal.net

Project Networks – More than Managing Projects
by Jörg Sydow and
Series Article
Rolf A. Lundin

Managing and Working in Project Society[1]

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Jörg Sydow and Rolf A. Lundin

The emerging Project Society comprises a wide variety of projects and other forms of temporary organizations as illustrated and exemplified in the book "Managing and Working in Project Society" (Lundin et al., 2015). Projects are used for research and development efforts, marketing and advertising campaigns, content production for television and the Internet, designing and constructing building as well as machinery and defense. In the book mentioned, the point is made that it is more appropriate and useful to discuss the contexts of projects rather than restricting oneself to define what a project is and to recommend project management techniques and practices in any generic way. For, there is an urgent need to adapt managing a project in situ to make it in line with the social, spatial and temporal contexts since the circumstances (often changing at the same time) are crucial for the management outcome. Three groups of contexts are depicted in that book: Project-Based Organizations (PBOs), Project-Supported Organizations (PSOs) and Project Networks (PNWs).

One might think of project management in a PBO context as fairly stable in the sense that a formal order with a hierarchy has been established and routines been developed making projects in that context (look) more efficient. One more recent example illustrating the organizational focus on developing and diffusing project knowledge and routines is the project management office (PMO). But seen over a long time, the different projects, even within an organization, either a PBO or a PSO, change. Hence, it comes as no surprise that an important task of a PMO is to organize learning across projects in organizations. To take construction projects as an example, there is now a need for construction companies, typically conceived as PBOs, to attend to the multitude of new construction materials, noise reduction, energy saving measures and the like and at the same time to adopt organizing practices developed in other fields of practice (e.g. IT services). And obviously that multitude of changes has effects on how to manage not only the organization but the project in the contexts of a PBO or PSO.

The immediate contexts of PBOs and PSOs, i.e, organizations, are quite well understood with regard to managerial implications for project management (e.g. handling schedules and resources for each project, setting up a PMO, designing career systems for project managers,

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[1]*This series of articles is based on the concepts in the book Managing and Working in Project Society by Rolf A. Lundin, Niklas Arvidsson, Tim Brady, Eskil Ekstedt, Christophe Midler and Jörg Sydow, published by Cambridge University Press in 2015. The book won the PMI David I. Cleland Project Management Literature Award in 2016.*

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etc.). These contexts are traditional and have been well known for a very long time in line with the historical development of the project management field (cf. Wenell et al., 2017). However, this is much less the case for PNWs which are more dynamic, changing and diverse. What is more, managing PNWs can only to a limited extent rely on organizational contexts and techniques and practices known from organizations. Not only for that reason, managing projects in interorganizational networks requires understanding the context beyond the boundaries of a single organization. Hence, managing PNWs asks for managerial attention, capabilities and knowledge regarding interorganizational collaborations, how to initiate, maintain, deepen or end them around and with the help of projects (Lundin et al., 2015; Sydow et al., 2016).

What is more, PNWs may include not only collaborating organizations but also individuals (self-employed or self-activated) making them often more ephemeral than collaboration within organizations. In consequence, managing PNWs usually needs institutional support from the wider field. For instance, PNWs in the film and television industry, which is even more than the construction industry characterized by many self-employed or micro businesses, rely for their functioning on institutionalized events and specialized service providers, many of them PBOs themselves. Examples for the former are film festivals and award ceremonies; examples for the latter film studios and hirer of technical equipment. These brokering institutions – field events as well as service providers – are in the case of the film and television industry quite intentionally used to create, maintain or deepen relationships; relationships which are essential in PNW not only for advertising unused capacities and acquiring new projects but also for nurturing the pool of (potential) collaborators – organizations as well as self-employed entrepreneurs – and to exchange and store professional knowledge, not least about technological changes or regarding the management of PNWs.

In this particular respect, managing the PNW goes significantly beyond managing the projects, not only single projects but also portfolios of projects, and explicitly targets the network as context. Lundin et al. (2015: 65-79) in their book on "Managing and Working in Project Society" provide not only a historical account of the development of PNWs but elaborate this example in more detail, also discussing the possible relevance of regional clusters. Furthermore, they show that managing PNWs requires not only to attend to and address the network as an immediate context of the project(s) (Lundin et al., 2015: 118-127) but to consider ramifications of this context for managing the project(s); potentially even with regard to the choice of tools and practices to be used. In addition, they point to the three key management dilemmas in PNWs: (1) making things happen in this particular form, (2) the alleged flexibility of this form in need for some stability, and (3) the particular challenges of talent management.

(1) Making things happen in PNWs is particularly challenging as this organizational form, very much like projects or portfolio of projects, is rather fluid. What is more, as networks they cannot rely on hierarchical authority. Cooperation and coordination does not even occur in the shadow of such an authority. In consequence, more than PBOs and PSOs, this organizational form relies on motivated project managers and project workers, ideally even

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prepared to exhibit "project citizenship behavior" (Braun et al., 2012), that is showing an extra effort for the project not required by the role and formally rewarded.

(2) PNWs are indeed assumed to be flexible, if not fluid. This is one reason, why they are so widely spread. However, studies in the television industry, reported by Lundin et al. (2015) show that sometimes their development may underlie organizational path dependencies, making them more rigid than some may wish. These dependencies are in particular to be expected within those actor constellations that are stable across projects.

(3) Quite like projects carried out by PBOs and PSOs, PWNs need talent, not only project management talent but also professionals in a diversity of other areas. In stark contrast to PBOs and PSOs, however, PNWs do usually offer neither a fixed income nor clear career prospects. This makes hiring talent for PNWs particular difficult, especially if they cannot rely on a stable pool of project workers who are again and again recruited for, also in these respects, promising projects.

Related to PNWs is also the prevalence of something that might be called project makers or project brokers: individuals or organizations who take on the role to create new projects in an existing or a potential network. This type of brokering activity or more precisely "nexus work" (Long Lingo and O'Mahoney, 2010) has an entrepreneurial dimension to it. The efficacy of that activity is at least partly based on the common understanding that the current world is not only changing but even in a state of fluidity with very few if any fix points to rely on as stable even in the short run. To provide at least some fix points projects are rather seldom isolated but related to each other in either PBOs, PSOs or PNWs. Fluidity within organizations and even with interorganizational networks is connected to its tension in relation to the main ideas on which such systems rest – a certain degree of stability. Fluidity introduces tensions in established organizations and interorganizational networks. Phenomena like intrapreneurship where individuals or groups of individuals take on to take entrepreneurial action within an established bureaucracy might be considered as one aspect of fluidity in the organizational context; entrepreneurial nexus workers in interorganizational networks may those balancing most fluidity and stability in in such systems.

This means that the general fluidity in society opens up for these specific types of project makers or project brokers able to find opportunities of various kinds in the societal context and in the ongoing development at times with a basis in a host organization or with a base in a created network. Some in the new role types work at times also at the private/public interface. This is particularly true in Europe where the European Union in order to support projects often require a base where several separate organizations are involved in order to guarantee the outcome, private as well as public (Godenhjelm et al., 2015).

Finally, moving towards a project society, as outlined in the book "Managing and Working in Project Society" (Lundin et al., 2015) in some detail, is connected with a transformation or transition of established institutions such as educational systems or systems of interest representation. Newly formed institutions emerge and are at time at odds with the traditional institutions from the industrial era. The set of institutions are not in line with each other but still they are regarded as prescribers of rules and roles in parallel if inconsistencies are not made evident.

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