

Advances in Project Management Series¹

There is nothing so permanent as temporary: Some thoughts on adapting project structures

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Last month's article and editorial invoked the ever-present tension between projects as temporary endeavours, and the organisation that surrounds them, especially when delivering through projects is part of business as usual. This month we return to that conversation to explore the different ways of organising for project work.

Traditional management systems emphasise a rational kind of thinking patterns that ignore people and their interactions. The underlying models view organisations as machines that move from one state to another, with projects as the means of facilitating that transformation. In that view, project management is a tool for bringing about the agreed objectives. Turning attention to the project itself allows one to focus on the uniqueness of the undertaking, and demarcate a unique start and end points that delimit the project. Using the notion of a project as the unit of interest dedicated to a particular objective discounts the importance of the individuals and stakeholders surrounding the project. Indeed, when projects become tools, motives, politics and expectations are overshadowed by the focus on the intended purpose and the method of delivery.

The sixth edition of the APM Body of Knowledge defines a project as "a unique, transient endeavour, undertaken to achieve planned objectives". The fifth edition of the PMI's Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge, similarly describes a project as a "temporary endeavour that is undertaken to create a unique product, service or a result". The Guide further elaborates that the temporary nature indicates that the project has a definite beginning and end.

The transient character identified in the APM definition is a crucial feature of projects. This common timeframe perspective binds the organisation to a specific temporal progression represented through the project itself. It also enables researchers to talk about the idea of viewing projects as temporary organisations existing for limited durations. Johann Packendorff makes a strong case for an alternative metaphor for project discourse centred on the notion of a temporary organisation, an aggregation of individuals temporarily enacting a common cause.

¹The *Advances in Project Management series* includes articles by authors of program and project management books published by Gower in the UK. Each month an introduction to the current monthly article is provided by series editor **Prof Darren Dalcher**, who is also the editor of the Gower *Advances in Project Management series* of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. For more on Gower project management, visit <http://www.gowerpublishing.com/default.aspx?page=2063>. See Darren's background summary at the end of this article.

A temporary organisation (Packendorff, 1995; p. 327):

- Is an organised course of action aimed at evoking a non-routine process or completing a non-routine product
- Has a predetermined point in time when the organisation is collectively expected to cease to exist
- Has some kind of a performance evaluation criteria
- Is complex enough in terms of roles to require a conscious organising effort (as opposed to spontaneous self-organising)

Temporary organisations exclude mobs and accidental assemblages of agents or participants. They imply a conscious attempt to bring participants together (in a temporary setting of limited duration). In contrast with the 'traditional' metaphor, which emphasises the delivery of the stated objectives to the owner, temporary organisations can be viewed from multiple perspectives emphasising different features related to project work.

Viewing projects as temporary organisations prompts thinking about each project as a whole organisation, thereby relating to the wider influences of organising and planning for intensive bouts of action. Relationships and interactions become emphasised and are studied in terms of impacts and empowerment.

The stark contrast between permanent structures and mechanisms, and the temporary set-up required for executing and delivering projects, focuses attention on the need to consider resources, assets, development and the knowledge implications of temporal assignments. Short project assignments rely on organisational resources and require consideration of capturing pertinent knowledge and benefitting from recorded insights obtained from earlier projects. However, longer-term consideration is less evident when viewing projects as temporary organisations. Issues related to discipline, promotion, development of skills and acquisition of resources to support project work require a longer timeframe within organisations. Consequently, project-based organisations need to consider an alternative perspective that accounts for the learning and developmental aspects of project build-up activities.

Traditional organisational theory often measures the success and efficiency of organisations as a function of their longevity. Yet, projects are defined by their temporal and narrow existence and would be closed as soon as the required functionality or assets were realised. Viewing projects as temporary organisations requires recognition of the distinction raised by structures and organisations attempting to make sense of short and long-term arrangements. Indeed, projects are optimised for short-term delivery, while organisations imply growth and development over an extended time horizon.

Structure clearly plays a key part in how we organise and prepare to carry out work and how we engage with wider challenges in both the short term and over a wider strategic horizon that allows for development, growth and adaptation.

In considering the act of balancing short and longer term considerations, project management often relies on alternative perspectives and paradigms that originate in other domains and disciplines. This month's contribution by Jonathan Whelan invokes the idea of business architecture as an added perspective for engaging with change and projects. *Managing Change in Complex Environments* draws on the ideas covered in the book *Business Architecture: A Practical Guide* by Jonathan Whelan and Graham Meaden published by Gower.

Recognising the social makeup of organisations, business architecture enables the development of a more holistic representation of an organisation in a manner that supports growth and adaptation. It also allows for an enterprise perspective of action, assets and activities across the wider organisation, extending beyond any temporal undertaking.

The book advocates a sustainable and pragmatic business architecture that focuses on long-term value as well as short-term delivery. Moreover it acknowledges that the delivery of a static architecture offers little value in its own right as it provides a simple snapshot in time.

Canadian businessman Craig Bruce noted that temporary solutions often become permanent problems. Business architecture can therefore be viewed not as a solution but as a tool that can offer strategic value to organisations seeking to adapt and accommodate change.

Business architecture can play a key part in defining the ecosystem within which the corporation exists and suggest what it might comprise and how the different parts can be best arranged. It is not a solution or a permanent structuring, but an arrangement that can support further development.

The study of organisations has often utilised the notion of systems for analysis and interpretation. Systems provide a good starting point, but they need not be confined to static models and simplifications. Excursions into dynamic modelling and complex systems theories enable more responsive and adaptive notions of organising that rise beyond the original criticisms levelled at the traditional models. Contemporary discourse is increasingly capable of balancing multiple views and perspectives and embedding holistic long-term considerations with temporal and more immediate concerns and can be brought to bear on issues related to projects in temporary, as well as on-going organisations.

Reflecting from a business enterprise perspective might offer new ways of rethinking and repositioning projects. From an enterprise perspective, projects may also be viewed as solutions intent on delivering local benefits related to an issue or concern. The overlap and interaction between solutions architects, who might be better labelled as project architects, and business architects addressing enterprise concerns, offers an interesting terrain for further exploration and negotiation.

Embedding projects in a wider enterprise necessitates a conversation about the structures and architecture required to embed capability and assets and enable effective responses to initiatives and projects. As project management increasingly looks to other disciplines such as business analysis, system engineering and systems management, enhancing our gaze to encompass business architecture can lead to new conversations, models and insights about balancing the temporary with the permanent. If handled correctly, it can ensure that the temporary underpins and relates to the permanent in new ways that enhance and sustain both aspects.

References:

Packendorff, J. (1995) Inquiring into the Temporary Organization: New Directions for Project Management Research, *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 11, 4, pp. 319-333

Editor's note: Darren Dalcher is the editor of the series of books on Advances in Project Management published by Gower in the UK. Information about the Gower series can be found at <http://www.gowerpublishing.com/advancesinprojectmanagement>. The above article is an introduction to the invited paper this month by another Gower author. You can find previously published articles by Prof Dalcher and Gower authors at www.pmworldlibrary.net.

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