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A THEORY OF THE TEMPORARY ORGANIZATION

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Abstract — The idea of the firm as an eternal entity possibly came in with the era of industrialism. In any case, the practical consequences of this idea contrast sharply with many ideas about projects and temporary organizations. Mainstream organization theory is based upon the assumption that organizations are or should be permanent; theories on temporary organizational settings (e.g., projects) are much less prevalent. In this article, we address the need for a theory of temporary organizations, thus seeking to supplement traditional project management wisdom. We also suggest some components of such a theory by elaborating on certain ideas about projects. "Action", as opposed to "decision", is one such component which is central to a theory of the temporary organization. In some respects we are thus dealing with antipoles, in other respects with concepts similar to those in established mainstream organizational theory. The role of "time" in the firm is different as compared to its role in the temporary organization. The differences have several important implications and we are able to suggest a coherent outline of a theory which we believe could be useful and which also covers several important aspects of temporary organizations.

Key words: Temporary organization, project, action, sequencing, bracketing.

THE NEED FOR AN ACTION-BASED THEORY

Temporary organizations and projects represent a common and important part of economic and social life today. Efforts to renew businesses and to change existing operations in business firms are often organized as projects. Sometimes special task forces, program committees or action groups are formed, organized or appointed to handle a felt need for action, by addressing particular problems in order to "make things happen" within or among organizations. These are all variations on the temporary organization theme. In some industries, a project organization is the regular method of doing business. These examples indicate that time-bound efforts of this type play an important role in life for most of us.

Few aspects of temporary organizations are very well understood in theoretical terms. This is true of the internal operations of temporary organizations and of their external control. This article attempts to develop an outline for a theory of temporary organizations. One particular purpose is to account for mechanisms guiding the apparent action orientation in society today. Our perspective here is from "inside the temporary organization", and action is at the center of our argument. We also summarize some of the shortcomings of the normative, technical project models by stressing behavioral aspects rather than techniques.

Although it is not the purpose of this article to suggest a general, systematic and directly testable framework, we do propose some basic subsets of theories and concepts of temporary organizations, in the same vein as Cyert and March's (1963) discussion of the behavioral theory of the firm. Theories of the firm are often based upon the notion that decision-making is at the

core of the organization. However, we do not view decision-making as a predominant factor in "explaining" the nature of the temporary organization; and decision-making will not be our "guide" in approaching our various concepts or sub-theories. Instead, we will develop "a theory of the temporary organization" around the notion that *action* has a leading role. There are two reasons for adopting this view, one theoretical and one empirical or practical.

The theoretical reason is related to a general criticism of the rational assumptions underlying the decision-making perspective. Even though many scholars in the field do refer to bounded rationality (instead of pure economic rationality), they still appear to regard actions as an instrumental consequence of decisions. The implicit assumption that decisions "cause" action and that decisions occur before actions has been called in question, and it has been shown that actions may not in fact be a consequence of decisions (see, among others, Thompson, 1967, p. 170; Cohen, March and Olsen, 1972; March and Olsen, 1976; March, 1981; Kreiner, 1992; see also the epilogue to the second edition of *A behavioral theory of the firm*, Cyert and March, 1992, pp. 214–238). This means that decisions can be made after actions, and that they may be made to legitimize actions already taken. Furthermore, solutions may be implemented even without there being any problem attached to them (Jönsson and Lundin, 1976). There may not be any logical connection between decisions and actions. Surrounding conditions such as organizational culture, institutional norms and commitment may also influence action in ways that cannot be analyzed in a decision-making perspective (see e.g., Brunsson, 1985; Meyer and Scott, 1992). One fruitful alternative to a decision-making perspective is an action-orientated approach, that sees all kinds of organizational performance as different kinds of action (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1988). For example, formal decision-making, manufacturing or staff meetings are all different kinds of action that need to be understood if we want to explain developments in an organizational setting.

An empirical reason for adopting action as a primary concept in a theory of temporary organizations, is that temporary organizations are almost always motivated by a need to perform specific actions (Miles, 1964, p. 443; Goodman and Goodman, 1976, p. 494; Goodman, 1981, pp. 2–4) in order to achieve immediate goals (Palisi, 1970). If temporary organizations are being discussed as systems for implementation, action is also an important feature (Borum and Christiansen, 1993). The traditional literature on projects and project management emphasizes relevant action as being fundamental to the success of a project.

BASIC CONCEPTS IN A THEORY OF THE TEMPORARY ORGANIZATION

Demarcation for action — introducing some basic concepts

As indicated above, action will be used as a general concept to guide our proposed framework for a theory of the temporary organization. With this stress on action we need some sort of demarcation between the temporary organization and its environment and other kinds of organized settings. We have found four basic interrelated concepts that can help us to understand how the demarcation works. First, *time* is crucial. There must be some conceptions of the time horizons and time limits for the temporary organization, all of which have implications for action in many ways. For example, their very existence may be the best way of spreading a sense of urgency.

Furthermore, the *task* itself needs to be considered. A temporary organization is dependent on one, or a very limited number of, defined tasks (or focuses of attention). Task definitions then provide the *raison d'être* for the temporary organization. The task may be regarded as a once-in-a-lifetime affair but could equally well be of a more standardized character. The point is that the same task is not being attended to by someone else in the same way at the same time. Different

resources are also needed to define a temporary organization. In one sense both task and time are constituted by resource allocations, e.g. economic and material resources. Manpower resources are not naturally covered by task and time, however, and the *team* concept may therefore be a fruitful tool in further defining the temporary organization. The team forms around the task at hand and the time available, thus focusing on individuals both as resources and as bearers of such things as conceptions and attitudes. Temporary organizations are normally created, as we have noted, in order to fulfill a special purpose. This purpose also contains an element of change. Some change is needed, and the temporary organization is the means for achieving it. There is an expectation that there should be a qualitative difference in the temporary organization "before" and "after". Aspirations and accomplishments concerned with some sort of *transition* are of crucial importance to the temporary organization.

These four concepts — time, task, team and transition — can be used in the description or classification of any organization, but here they help to clarify the general demarcation of the temporary organization, and each one provides some insights into the way various types of boundaries between the temporary organization and its environment can be defined. The concepts also differ from the crucial concepts that define the permanent organization. Permanent organizations are more naturally defined by goals (rather than tasks), survival (rather than time), working organization (rather than team) and production processes and continual development (rather than transition).

Another requirement regarding a conceptual framework, namely that it should provide insights into the internal life of temporary organizations, is not fulfilled by time, task, team and transition. These concepts define the action arena, but do not explain the actions performed in that arena. However, time is of particular importance in this respect, since special conceptions regarding time in the temporary organization provide a natural view of its internal life in terms of start-to-finish phases. Action is assumed to be necessary to define and delimit the temporary organization, then to address the task set out, and finally to terminate the organization. The internal life of the temporary organization is sequential by nature, so the framework should highlight different stages or phases. Concepts used to define the internal life in terms of phases will be discussed later, under the label of *sequencing concepts*, in a theory of the temporary organization. For the time being we will concentrate on the basic concepts, i.e. time, task, team and transition, and elaborate upon them in an action perspective.

Time

Time is a concept frequently linked with temporary organizations by authors in the field, as a means for differentiating them from permanent organizations. Time is therefore fundamental to an understanding of the temporary organization. One obvious reason for this is that "temporary" implies something that exists for a limited time and, normally, this time aspect is well known from the beginning. For any organization, time is generally regarded as a scarce resource and is often alluded to in terms such as "time is money". For a temporary organization the handling of time is more complicated, since their time is literally limited: it ends. To look at the difference in the conception of time in temporary and permanent organizations in another way, we can envisage time as split into the past, the present and the future, and the passage of time can then be conceived as the present moving on by adding to the past and subtracting from the future (cf. Lundin and Söderholm, 1994). For firms whose future is perceived as eternal, the future will naturally continue to be seen as eternity: the result of subtracting any finite number from infinity always leaves infinity. For the temporary organization, on the other hand, time is always running out since it is finite from the start, limited for instance by contracts or other conditions.

However, time is a more general concept than all this implies, with many meanings in addition to temporality. Mainstream organization theory (i.e., of western origin) tends to think of time in linear and orderly terms (Burrell, 1992, p. 169). In other words, each new development has its roots in the immediate past, so that in one sense new forms of organization are superior to old ones, since they supposedly include old knowledge as well as new insights. New developments may be a consequence either of evolutionary learning or of revolutionary rupture. An alternative interpretation of time suggests that it is cyclical, in that phenomena are repeated, recurring time and time again just as the sun rises and sets every day (Burrell, 1992).

Both linear and cyclical time perspectives are external relative to individuals, like a rational "external clock" (see also Gherardi and Strati, 1988, pp. 153–155; Hassard, 1991, p. 116). In a social interpretation of time, social organizational processes adjust either to a linear or to a cyclical conception of time. Both perspectives provide a rationale for arranging social relations. But, as Burrell notes, neither of them takes into account such aspects of time as the indecidability of past, present and future, or the existence of plural chronological codes in which different conceptions of the stream of events compete and escape from time, e.g., by creating a "new" alternative reality or a "free area of activity" (Burrell, 1992, p. 177). Burrell then suggests, starting from the duality of linear and cyclical time, that a spiral would provide a better metaphor. A spiral indicates a cyclical movement that does not return twice to exactly the same place. A spiral is a way of analyzing the use of time with regard to the previously mentioned aspects of time; but it is not a valid metaphor for the way practitioners perceive time (see e.g., Clark, 1985; Bluedron and Denhardt, 1988; Gherardi and Strati, 1988 for further discussions on organization and time).

The combination of social and analytical time conceptions leads us to the use of time in temporary organizations. Time is used in such organizations in a linear form, to lead the way from a starting-point to termination. Temporary organizations could be seen as a way of making part of the spiral into a linear foreseeable sequence. In other words, temporary organizations provide a means for achieving "a free area of activities", that can be handled as independent of at least past indecidability. In order to explain action in temporary organizations, *time as a sequence or as phases* becomes important, together with other temporal elements of organizations such as synchronization or rate of activities (Moore, 1963; Lauer, 1980; Lewis and Weigart, 1981).

When it is known from the beginning that an organization is to be in existence for a limited period of time only, it is natural to think of this period in terms of consecutive phases, starting with the initiation and ending with evaluation. The different phases indicate the actions which are desirable just then. In the initial phase it may be particularly important to link the necessary resources to the temporary organization, and to clarify the task and the various conditions that may affect performance. Termination and evaluation criteria are also usually handled at the start. Thereafter it is expected that a sequence of actions or performances will ensue, to be followed by a period in which the temporary organization is terminated.

Crucial problems to be handled within sequences of time, according to Hassard (1991, p. 116), include uncertainty, conflict resolution and the allocation of scarce time resources, which in turn explain the need for time schedules, synchronization and the allocation of time (see Moore, 1963). Thus we can see that temporary organizations provide a highly organized way of dealing with time problems and of acting according to the perception of time as being scarce, linear and valuable.

Task

Task is the second basic concept in our framework. A task legitimizes a temporary organization and can be compared to a permanent organization's devotion to goals. While goals primar-

ily provide foci for decision-making, a task focuses on action. Task-related activities are of major importance in the development of temporary organizations. In most cases, in fact, the creation of a temporary organization is motivated by a task that must be accomplished. This is true of both temporary organizations within permanent structures (e.g. product development, organizational renewal) and organizations without any direct relationship with a single permanent (or parent) organization (e.g., societal task forces). It has also been shown that the task itself is more important to participants in temporary organizations than it is to members of permanent organizations (Katz, 1982; Weick and Roberts, 1993). This is not to say that the task is always completed (McCarthy, Schoorman and Cooper, 1993), but that it represents the main motivation for the creation and development of a temporary organization. An understanding of "task" is thus important to an understanding of temporary organizations.

Two fundamentally different types of task can be identified: *unique* and *repetitive*. Each of these encompass a specific set of conceptions about how to act and why. The unique temporary organization is created for one single and specific situation that will not occur again, while the repetitive temporary organization is devoted to a task that will be repeated in the future. Some basic differences between unique and repetitive tasks can be summarized as in Table 1 (see also Boos and Doujak, 1990; Briner and Geddes, 1990; Ekstedt *et al.*, 1993).

Action comes about in quite different ways in relation to different tasks. When a temporary organization is assigned a repetitive task, the actors know what to do, and why and by whom it should be done. Their experiences are similar and they share a common interpretation of the situation. However, when the task is unique, nobody has immediate knowledge about how to act. Visionary, flexible, and creative actions are consequently needed in addition to a more deliberate search for experiences from other areas.

The formulation of tasks and a definition of their properties (including judging whether they are repetitive or unique) and their limits, is a social process which involves those who are participating in the temporary organization as well as knowledge gathered from "outside" and/or general experience in the field. The social process of task-making will be discussed further in the section of sequencing concepts.

Team

Any temporary organization needs to be designed by and around people. Temporary organizations are naturally also dependent on the will, commitment and ability of individuals for their creation, development and termination. The team is therefore our third basic concept. In connection with the team, handbooks on project management, for example, often take up such questions as how to motivate, communicate and build commitment, as it is obvious that the individual's beliefs, attitudes and expectations will influence teamwork. In much the same way organizational

Table 1. Unique and repetitive tasks

	Repetitive tasks	Unique tasks
Goals	Immediate, specified	Visionary, abstract
Experience	Own or codified by professions	Others' or none
Competence	In codes and tacit knowledge	Diverse or unknown, requires flexibility and creativity
Leadership/ owner of temporary org'n	Low or middle managers	Top management
Development process	Reversible	Irreversible
Evaluation	Result orientated	Utility orientated
Learning	Refinement	Renewal

culture theory, for example, takes up various factors that may influence relations between individuals and permanent organizations. There are some conditions in this respect, however, that do differ between permanent and temporary organizations. First, the team in a temporary organization is always formed around the task or around some aspect of it. A team in any other organization may be just any group of people. Second, participation in the team is normally predefined as being time-limited, thus creating a specific set of expectations at the individual level. Third, temporary assignments normally mean that individuals have other "homes" before, during and after being involved in a temporary organization, which means that the team is dependent on other organized contexts besides the current temporary organization.

Essentially there are two different aspects of the team concept that emerge from these observations. First, the relation between the individual and the team and, second, that between the team and the team environment. In the first of these we can say that individuals carry their own set of expectations and experiences with them into the team. These may resemble the expectations and experiences of other team members to a greater or lesser extent. Teams may for instance be organized to mirror different sets of experiences and possibly even conflicting expectations. The very fact that the temporary organization is to be terminated, may be a condition for the acceptance of conflicting interest in the team. Every member knows that there will be an end to the interaction in the team within a specified time. Individuals may also enter or exit the team at different times (see e.g. Miles, 1964), so the "rules of the game" may change as new expectations or new experiences are introduced. However, generally speaking, the expectations and experiences gathered together in the team provide the basis for commitment within the team, and thus also a basis for motivation, communication and leadership.

The second relation mentioned above, that between the team and the team's environment, focuses essentially on legitimization issues. Team members are brought together for example by a common interest in a specific task, by force or by coincidence. The point is that a team also needs to relate to outside organizational contexts. In may cases this is not a problem; perhaps there is a parent organization responsible for the creation of the temporary organization. But in other cases there may be competing teams or competing organizational structures; there may even be enemies outside, or the "environment" is simply uninterested in the temporary unit. The need for legitimization and support, however, does affect team interaction. It may become necessary to manage or control contacts between the temporary organization and the world outside. Team members may even be isolated "inside" the temporary organization (see e.g., Katz, 1982), creating norms of their own. When the time for termination is reached, interaction with the environment changes and comes to include an element of evaluation, but legitimization may still serve as a key concept in the team–environment relationship.

We have thus briefly discussed the team concept from two angles: (1) the relation between individual(s) and the team and (2) the relation between the team and its environment. In the first case we found that commitment-building was of central interest, while in the second, legitimization proved to be a key element. This is illustrated in Fig. 1.

Transition

Transition is the fourth basic concept in the framework, and its inclusion is justified by the temporary organization's concern with progression and achievement or accomplishment. An action orientation implies that something has to be transformed or changed as a consequence of the existence of the temporary organization, and that these changes are to be achieved before the organization is terminated. As we saw in Table 1, projects (or tasks) may be unique, or they may be repetitive so that the action taken may be "more of the same" rather than a one-off event lead-

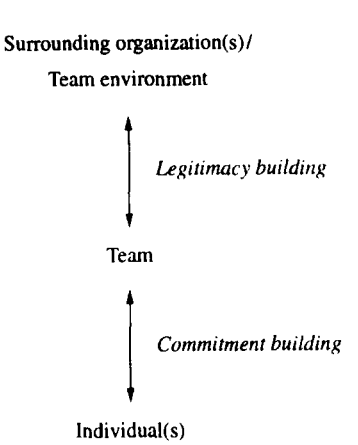


Fig. 1. Relation between individual, team and team environment.

ing to unique change. At any rate we can say that participants in temporary organizations see actions that lead to transformation as something necessary and desirable. Thus, by emphasizing transition, temporary organizations can represent one way of overcoming the inertia normally found in permanent organizations. By creating a "new" setting for action, transition may be seen as something that is important and relatively easy to achieve.

Transition can then have two distinct meanings, both of which seem to be relevant to the project work itself and to its outcome. Either transition can refer to the actual transformation in terms of the distinctive change between "before" and "after", or it can refer to possible (or desirable) perceptions of the transformation or change among project participants, including the project manager, and their ideas about the way the project task could be brought to completion. The first of these meanings is closely related to the task and the very *raison d'être* of the project, since the task can be conceived as the project's equivalent to an ordinary firm's goal structure (which is presumably its *raison d'être*). The task, and the transition that embodies the task and depicts the situation before and after the change, could in one sense be conceived as a signal or advertisement for the project, which can be useful both externally and within the project team. What the signal says is: action can be expected.

The second meaning of transition is more important to the inner functioning of project work. It focuses on perceptions of causal relationships, ideas about how to proceed from the present state to the final outcome and conclusion of the project. This is where the notions about how to run a project come into the picture as well as ideas about the cause–effect relationships that obtain in the field of the particular project. These perceptions or cognitions are multifaceted, since the views of several project participants are involved. This makes transition especially interesting, since it can be regarded as a set of diverse concepts, deriving from different orientations in the "organizational change literature". We can distinguish between transition ambitions concerned with changing instrumental behavior, and others concerned with changes in meaning, culture or ideology (see e.g., Berg, 1985). In other words, the focus for transition may be on either individual and/or group behavior ("hard" aspects) or on individual and/or group values ("soft" aspects). Subsequent actions will differ depending on the main focus of the transition, but any transition will have elements of both the instrumental and the symbolic. Any change has some cultural or symbolic implications, even if the change itself may be concerned solely with technological issues (see e.g., Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992 and 1993).

Transition ambitions can also be geared to change of greatly varying magnitude, ranging from fine-tuning, via incremental adjustments and modular transformations, to a complete turnaround (see e.g., Stace and Dunphy, 1992). If the aim is fine-tuning, then subsequent actions will be very different from what is required for a total turnaround. The need for strict time limits also differ, depending on the kind of transition desired. These perspectives on transition could serve as a basis for exploring the aspirations that are bound up with transition in temporary organizations, and as a starting-point for further discussion on the kind of actions that are normally expected, or conceived as natural, in different situations.

In discussing the four basic concepts used in our framework for a theory of the temporary organization, our main argument has been that the focus on action in these organizations necessitates various demarcations. Four basic concepts — time, task, team and transition — provide a suitable foundation for a theory of the temporary organization as well as a framework for identifying these demarcations and for studying the relevant action. We can now turn to an analysis of the kinds of action that are focused in our theory.

SEQUENCING CONCEPTS IN A THEORY OF THE TEMPORARY ORGANIZATION

Phases in temporary organizations — an introduction to sequencing concepts

We have already observed that all temporary organizations have some features in common. We have noted that time is a key variable which is important to our understanding of action and the temporary organization. Further, time usually appears to be conceived in linear form, which means that, by definition, a temporary organization has a beginning, a middle and an end. This is not the same as saying that time *is* linear; rather that it is perceived as being linear by practitioners in the field. This special conception of time thus has important implications for our understanding of temporary organizations. We will refer to this "theory-in-use" as we continue our discussion of sequencing concepts.

In the same way that auditors, lawyers and physicians have their professional codes of ethics and behavior, so does the field of temporary organizations (see e.g., PMBOK, referred to below for their documented codes). Codes or norms may be explicit, as many of those used by lawyers are, or implicit, like many of the codes used in daily life (see e.g., Jepperson, 1991). In the second case the codes may be communicated solely through training, or orally by more senior persons. Codes influence what is considered to be normal behavior in a specific field, and are influenced by it; they also identify the appropriate behavior to adopt when certain types of problem arise (see e.g., Powell and DiMaggio, 1991).

In the world of the temporary organization it is not possible for a single profession to codify the whole field. Project managers represent a subgroup, and it is our experience that the codes and properties which they assign to projects are widely applied in other types of temporary organizations as well. Project managers, especially in the US, have sought to codify their profession in a variety of prescriptive books and educational material. This sort of material is interesting, in the context of the present article, because it indicates the general and specific conceptions used by people in the field.

One of the more influential associations is the Project Management Institute (PMI), which is open to project managers around the world although it is primarily a North American association. In Europe the International Project Management Association (IPMA) works in a similar way. Both these organizations arrange conferences, symposia and courses in the field of project management. The PMI has a Standard Committee which has developed the "Project Management

Body of Knowledge" (PMBOK) to certify members as "Project Management Professionals" or PMPs (PMI, 1987). PMBOK reveals the association's ambition to define the profession, project management and the role of the project manager by way of educational programs. However, it also gives an idea of the main concepts used by project managers themselves in describing and mapping their "profession". Projects are said to exhibit a life cycle pattern starting from concept and followed by development, implementation (execution) and termination (finish). The PMBOK version of a project life cycle is shown in Fig. 2.

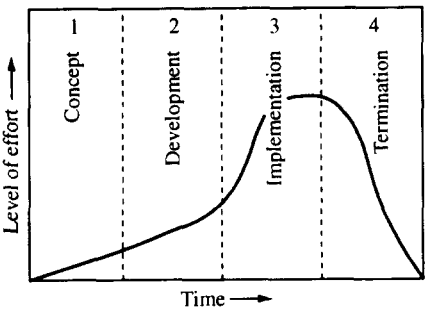


Fig. 2. The four basic phases of a project's life cycle (Source: PMI, 1987, pp. 1–4).

The notion of linearity is obvious in Fig. 2, and so is the idea of a set of certain key activities that have to be handled in the different phases of a project. A conception of time as a sequence of linearly ordered phases from "birth" to "death" is also one of the most evident differences between permanent and temporary organizations. The concepts we will describe in this section are thus designed according to this conception of time as different phases, and the different actions most commonly connected with each phase. Our aim is not prescriptive, saying what actions should be undertaken in each phase; rather it is to discuss why and how certain actions are undertaken at certain stages in the "life cycle" of a temporary organization. Our framework depicts a sequence of four phases in that life cycle, which taken together form the heart of our theory. We suggest that the following four sequencing concepts are of central importance: *action-based entrepreneurialism, fragmentation for commitment-building, planned isolation* and *institutionalized termination*. We will now consider them separately.

Action-based entrepreneurialism

The first of the sequencing concepts concerns the entrepreneurial stage. The need for an entrepreneur to initiate and provide the impetus for the creation of a temporary organization is obvious. However, the entrepreneurial role in this environment is by no means unequivocal. When dealing with repetitive tasks (cf. Table 1), such as those in the construction industry, functional entrepreneurship and the procedures for initiation are institutionalized. The entire process is very similar to the standard operating procedure among lower-echelon members of the parent organization, and the entrepreneurial role is easily carried out in this context. Unique tasks, however, require entrepreneurialism of a more "genuine" type. Sometimes the entrepreneurs involved are referred to as "souls of fire" (Philips, 1988). Typically, such entrepreneurialism also implies costs for the entrepreneur. The risk of rejection and the possible gain to the individual are both high. Since there are no agreed behavioral roles for the entrepreneur here, the undertaking resembles a gamble, and its rhetorical presentation is a powerful instrument for the aspiring entrepreneur. "Action" is a prominent component in the rhetoric to be used, and so is "time". The need for effi-

cient action is taken for granted in the case of repetitive tasks; unique tasks require extensive rhetorical outbursts if the initiative is to reach the appropriate audience and acquire the necessary impetus.

Mapping by rhetoric is the basic mode of initiating temporary organizations. Generally speaking, rhetoric is a means for mapping relevant experiences and environments (Smircich and Stubbart, 1985). It is a framework of, it is hoped, convincing arguments in favor of the task and the ensuing temporary organization. Mapping by rhetoric is thus the way in which a particular situation is made to appear real, tangible, and less ambiguous to the "listeners". For anyone taking part in the specific undertaking, it is very difficult to have an opposing view or to ignore a successfully presented rhetorical framework. Details can be negotiated, but the general rhetoric is not to be opposed, and, if it is, it means that the existence of the temporary organization itself is being called in question. The ability to handle the temporary organization's rhetoric is thus of prime importance for anyone trying to influence or govern it. Many renewal projects or programs are launched this way, i.e., by referring to effectiveness and efficiency problems that must be tackled urgently. Another example consists of the arguments presented by environmental groups at the time of their formation, with reference to the severity of pollution, the necessity of acting immediately, and so on.

Rhetoric can enhance the meaning of the "talk" which helps to create an arena for the temporary organization (see also, Czarniawska-Joerges, 1993, pp. 84–92). Failure to exploit rhetoric in this way may cause the temporary organization to lose legitimacy and the support of its own participants and/or of others who might influence its development. Rhetoric, in other words, is the "carrier" of action-based entrepreneurialism.

Fragmentation for commitment-building

In the second phase, when the temporary organization is to be developed beyond rhetoric, it is obviously necessary to specify a time bracket and an approximate task, which indicates the start of the project. Normally this phase also includes developing criteria for termination,or at least some suggestions as to how the conclusion of the temporary organization should be defined. Fragmentation has two functions. On the one hand, it delimits the scope, simplifies the task, and provides a time horizon to facilitate the handling of the task. On the other hand, it works as a mechanism for securing commitment among potential members of the temporary organization. This second element is fairly weak in the case of tasks defined as repetitive, where roles can be more or less repeated over consecutive "projects". But the element is much stronger in the case of unique tasks, when the definition of the organization is open, and is part of an organizing procedure in which fragmentation and commitment are both needed. Fragmentation for commitment-building will be discussed further below, in the sections on time bracketing and task partitioning.

Decoupling by bracketing. Temporary organizations need to be fixed in time by a fairly clear starting-point, so that everyone knows this is the start. This is a special case of boundary setting or spanning (see e.g., Scott, 1992, Chapter 8) in time, and the purpose is to decouple the temporary organization from its general surroundings and then in due course, to reattach it when its termination point is reached (termination will be further discussed later). Time bracketing means that a temporary organization is decoupled from other past, contemporary, or even future sequences of activities. The temporary organization is given a place in history and its own identity. The decoupling may be the result of an explicit decision made at a certain time (e.g., in construction projects or inter-organizational development programs), or it can arise from an implicit

step-by-step process without any obvious initiator (e.g., in incrementally created renewal programs, spontaneous environmental groups or "mobs") (Packendorff, 1993, p. 78).

Task definition by partitioning. The task presented for any temporary organization has to be defined in some way. A temporary organization will be able to handle only a few problems, or in the extreme case, only one. The task must be spelled out and delimited in such a way that success, according to some narrow definition at least, will be guaranteed. For the repetitive task this definition is part of the repetitiveness. The procedure fostered by repetitiveness becomes institutionalized and carries with it a task specification mechanism. We need only think of the way that construction projects are handled: the general task of erecting a building creates a framework for the procedure.

In more general terms we can say that partitioning is a process of inclusion and exclusion, and it is influenced by a variety of factors. Norms expressed in professional codifications or traditional knowledge in the field both give participants taken-for-granted principles to use for organizing purposes, e.g., in architectural work or computer consultancy. Such principles can be used to define a task or to organize processes. Norms also disqualify certain issues or working procedures while endorsing others. Principles can have a more general thrust indicating the type of activities that should be on the agenda and the legitimate aspiration levels. In these cases, institutional and non-individual conceptions can be seen as norms guiding inclusion and exclusion (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991).

However, partitioning does not end once an initial task definition has been launched; rather it is a formation process in which inclusion and exclusion principles may both be subject to change. Initial definitions provide a general path which may be difficult to leave later. Vigorous criticism of the path is likely to result in the abandonment of the temporary organization or a vociferous defense of the chosen task and its demarcations.

A basic assumption in our discussion of partitioning is that a task can be partitioned in different ways (see e.g., Dutton and Ashford, 1993). For example, if a task is defined as a major renewal effort, something has also been said about the necessary knowledge and the kind of actors needed. Likewise, defining a task as (yet another) construction project, implies the type of competencies required. The build-up of a temporary organization around particular knowledge segments and/or actors, immediately limits the type of problems (or solutions) that can be discovered or sought. Even though individuals may possess other competencies than those required for their participation in the temporary organization, the composition of knowledge segments and actors makes it possible to disregard these for a moment, in order to facilitate work in the temporary organization. It becomes natural to concentrate one's attention to certain areas.

Planned isolation

Planned isolation, the third of our concepts, focuses on the execution phase in the life of the temporary organization. This is the phase when predetermined action according to plans is supposed to be executed in order to complete the task. The minimization of any disturbance to plans or other threats to the action imperative, is achieved by deliberately isolating the organization. Two general ways of achieving isolation will be discussed further: *planning* and *guarding*.

Planning. Temporary organizations move from relative openness to relative closedness. Using our previous terminology, we can say that bracketing and partitioning are irreversible activities. Once a temporary organization enters the execution phase in its life cycle, it must be managed, according to popular opinion, in accordance with its action plans. Feedback loops to renewed

planning can never originate from the action phase unless very strong signals are received from the environment of the temporary organization (as this has been defined). Once the plan has been agreed upon, the whole operation should proceed like a train moving at high speed towards the end station without any unwanted stops. All emergency brakes are made virtually defunct in order to ensure that the mission is accomplished. Plans make it possible to act without needing the repeated approval of senior managers or partners, thus also creating scope for independent action. Plans also become "common knowledge" among the participants and are thus available for them to make use of; they also provide information on evaluation and control procedures for those who are actually responsible for execution.

However, it is not necessary to fulfill plans in every detail; sometimes plans just provide a general "carte blanche" (Sapolsky, 1972), legitimating execution without interference from outside. Plans may be poor descriptions of actions that are actually carried out, but they are nevertheless important as providing "space" for action. Plans thus carry a symbolic meaning (Christensen and Kreiner, 1991), in addition to any instrumental functions they may have. Well-elaborated and elegant plans show that the planners are competent and efficient and can be trusted with responsibility for the temporary organization. This also explains the great efforts that are put into the creation, computerization and use of planning models, such as Work Breakdown Structure (WBS), Gantt-schedules, Critical Path Method (CPM) and Program Evaluation and Review Technique (PERT), as well as more recently invented tools such as Activity-Based Management (ABM) and Activity-Based Costing (ABC) (see also PMI, 1987, Chapter C).

As this discussion shows, plans are important as action generators, but not primarily in an instrumental way. Symbolic connotations are as important as the instrumental ones. Plans thus support rationality which, at least in western societies, is one of the most valued attributes of successful managers. Plans make the world easier to handle, since their very existence reduces uncertainty. In this perspective plans can be seen as necessary facilitators of action.

Guarding. As we have seen, the original formulation of the organization results in some sort of plan or program that outlines what is to be done, why and how. Once people agree that implementation is to start, these plans become the rhetorical arguments needed to secure action and a guard against any upset. Planned isolation thus means that certain guarding mechanisms come into force, further restricting the temporary organization's contact with other organizations or people. This is not to say that temporary organizations exist in a vacuum. However, contact with others is governed by a general "implementation plan", and other influences are seen as "disturbances" that need to be eliminated. Guarding, in this framework, is a mechanism that participants use to improve their chances of acting according to the plans and initial intentions. The challenge is to secure the path outlined by the plans, and to keep control over any changes that have to be made.

Guarding is not of course always called for: there may be disturbances that must be attended to, and perhaps changes have to be made, but these are normally seen as further arguments in favor of guarding rather than as arguments for a more open relationship with the environment. Guarding can be a concern for managers of temporary organizations or for outsiders such as managers of the parent organization, but it can also be affected through the joint efforts of various participants acting in a similar manner to protect the core of the temporary organization.

In temporary organizations built up around a repetitive task, as in the construction industry, implementation without rethinking and readjustment is inherent in the work culture: disruptions are simply not tolerated in the work group for economic reasons. The "stick to the plans" imperative becomes institutionalized in such settings.

Institutionalized termination

Institutionalized termination, the fourth of our sequencing concepts, concerns the dissolution of the temporary organization. By definition a temporary organization has a built-in termination mechanism. Setting the correct time bracket is a required activity for any truly temporary organization. Time bracketing is an institutionalized activity for repetitive tasks. Taking the example of the construction industry once more: it is impossible to envisage a construction project whose termination date is not a regulated part of the contract. Failure to terminate in time is regarded as just as disastrous as a bankruptcy would be in an ordinary firm. Furthermore, failure has detrimental consequences for the actors involved. Unique tasks are different in the sense that their very uniqueness fosters uncertainty, and makes people's behavior less predictable. However, there is evidence that the termination requirement also appears in the unique case.

There are some similarities with the initial creation of a temporary organization, since their start and their end can both be discussed in terms of *bracketing*. But termination includes another key component, namely *bridging*, whereby experiences gained during the lifetime of the temporary organization are transferred to other temporary or permanent settings.

Recoupling by bracketing. As temporary organizations are initially decoupled, they become recoupled when they cease to exist. This is the "right-bracket" of a temporary organization. Miles (1964, pp. 440–441) presents different ways in which termination of system membership can be achieved: chronological or time-linked termination which explicitly states a fixed time when membership ends (the course ends at five p.m. on December 22), event-linked termination which means that membership terminates when a specified event occurs (this game ends when someone reaches 100 points), and, finally, state- or condition-linked termination which connects termination with the time when some "general state of affairs" is achieved (the force will end its operations when industry pollution is no longer harmful).

It is important to note that recoupling does not need to be fixed in time; termination may occur gradually, as the temporary organization loses its participants, its task or its legitimacy. Further, individual members may enter or exit temporary organizations at different times, which means that bracketing on the individual level is something other than the bracketing of the temporary organization as such (Miles, 1964).

It is obvious that a temporary organization has to be dissolved at some point. If this does not happen, the organization has ceased to be a temporary organization and becomes institutionalized, to continue in a more permanent form. Another possibility is that the temporary organization might become increasingly obsolete and isolated as its existence is supported by a diminishing number of actors. In this case, the temporary organization has probably experienced obvious and severe failures relative to plans pursued, or its operations may have drifted too far away from its rhetoric.

Bridging. Termination also calls for some transmission of experiences, i.e., from a product development team to a production organization, from renewal task forces to line managers, from one construction site to another, etc. Evaluation provides one way of transmitting experiences, through either continuous or one-off evaluations.

Comparisons between expectations, execution and outcomes may generate new insights about how to deal with particular problems. Where conceptions about how to organize temporary efforts are very definite, there seems to be less chance of learning from experience (Ekstedt, Lundin and Wirdenius, 1992), but the termination period does provide an opportunity for the participants to summarize their experiences and to learn for the future. Individual learning is thus a

"bridge" to future temporary organizations and learning, it is the glue in a world full of many temporary organizations and people moving around from one temporary or permanent setting to another.

A THEORY OF THE TEMPORARY ORGANIZATION — THE BARE OUTLINES

The discussion in this article has been guided by the ambition to present a framework for understanding and analyzing temporary organizations "from the inside". Our proposed theory is developed around two sets of concepts: basic concepts and sequencing concepts. The basic concepts are almost axiomatic and provide a foundation upon which any discussion of temporary organizations has to rest. The sequencing concepts, on the other hand, provide a conceptualization of how temporary organizations are developed from their initial creation to their termination. In this section we make some suggestions for relating the different concepts to each other by summarizing the "bare outlines" of our proposed framework.

The basic concepts — time, task, team and transition — are thus the foundation for our understanding of temporary organizations. *Time* in temporary organizations can be envisaged as a linear section of a continuous time-flow that is cut out and thus made predictable and plannable. Time in permanent organizations has an eternal (linear) character, and a general objective is survival in the long run. The presence of a *task*, something that calls for attention, is the main reason for creating a temporary organization. The emphasis on task can be compared to the emphasis on goals and recurrent goal revisions in permanent organizations. *Team* focuses on interpersonal relations, on how teams can be made to function through commitment-building, and how they interrelate with the surrounding environment through processes of legitimization. *Transition* is a basic aim of temporary organizations; something has to be achieved in terms of transition (or turnaround or transformation), before success can be proclaimed. The focus in permanent organizations is on production rather than transition. When transition becomes necessary within a permanent organization, temporary organizations are often created to deal with it.

The time, task, team and transition aspects of the temporary organization are related to each other. This is of course obvious: the definition of a task may put limits to time; likewise, time limits may disqualify certain tasks. Task definition also implies aspirations about transition, and some of these may also select or define the task. Team members may be selected in light of how the task is defined. If the team is organized before the task has been finally defined, then team members and their competencies will influence what task or transition aspirations may be proposed. Time limits are dependent on the transition aspiration connected with the temporary organization, but at the same time it is possible that the time limit defines the type of transition that is feasible. These general connections between the basic concepts are illustrated in Fig. 3. Time is in the middle of Fig. 3, to emphasize its role as the most important of the basic concepts.

One of the ideas underlying the arguments in this article was that the search for a theory of temporary organizations needs to focus on action. Action is the essence of temporary organizations; consequently, a theory of temporary organizations must encompass action. The sequencing concepts have been outlined to achieve this goal; each one of them tells us something about how actions are organized in different phases. However, the sequencing concepts also overlap, in a way that has not been fully recognized in our previous discussion. The idea of Action-Based Entrepreneurialism continues to influence action even after the initial phase, although its importance declines as the temporary organization develops. This is illustrated in Fig. 4.

The crucial point is that these four sequencing concepts are the main and most central mech-

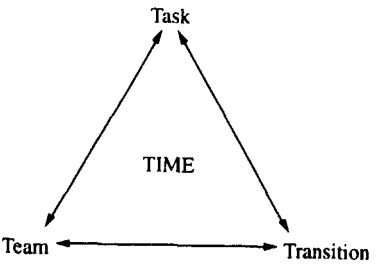


Fig. 3. Interrelatedness of the basic concepts in the theory of temporary organizations.

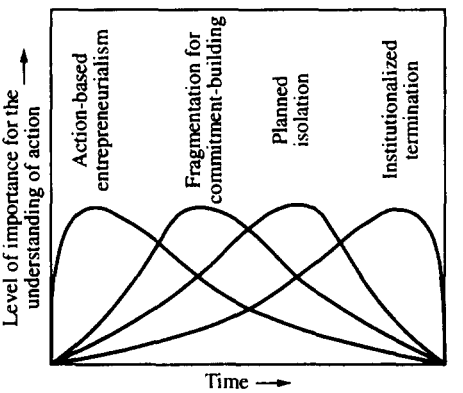


Fig. 4. Sequencing concepts in the theory of temporary organizations.

anisms to recognize, if we want to understand action in temporary organizations, and that each one dominates in a different phase. Certain empirical instances may of course exhibit different patterns: the hostile action of "outsiders" might interrupt the sequence, for instance, or make it restart along another path. But this does not invalidate the concepts. On the contrary, the framework provides a possible approach to the understanding of such deviations. Let us now return to a comparison between mainstream organization theory and project management theory.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Theories of the firm are generally incremental (see e.g., Cyert and March, 1963). Changes in organizations are seen as gradual, and no such things as dramatic renewal or major reorientation are included in the theory. Furthermore, it is the continuously repeated decisions within a "going concern" that are in focus, rather than temporary delimited issues or projects.

Theories based on other main assumptions are rare. In fact, the "going concern" assumption is used in most theories of organization. Approaches that consider temporal aspects of organizations are mostly concerned with project management or project planning. Project, rather than temporary organization, is then the key word. Instrumental and normative theories concerning various planning techniques (e.g., Gantt, PERT and CPM) can also be mentioned (Cleland and

King, 1983; Frame, 1987; Packendorff, 1993). However, there are also other studies which adopt exploratory approaches and aim at comprehensiveness. Here the project concept is used as an empirical focus for the study of other organizational concepts such as organizational culture, design or decisions, or for studies seeking to question the rational assumptions proposed in project planning theories (Christensen and Kreiner, 1991).

A prominent argument in normative theories on project management and planning is that planning is both possible and desirable. Success in project management is said to be achieved by way of extensive planning and forecasting, e.g., by the use of a variety of techniques. Techniques are also widely used by project managers as a tool in planning and managing projects, mostly in areas such as traditional construction projects. However, these theories have a major disadvantage: they tend to think of projects as mainly repetitive. Hence renewal and uncertainty are not important in these theoretical approaches, which see projects as essentially a way of organizing a "going concern". Looked at in this perspective, projects have opportunities for cumulative learning and economies of scale similar to those usually associated with the ongoing firm.

Theories or studies that consider projects as an illustration of, for example, organizational culture or design, have another and less normative way of approaching the phenomenon. Rather than suggesting ways of planning a repeated project situation, they view projects as an arena for acting out certain cultural values or organizational decisions. They are not interested in developing a framework for understanding temporary organizations as such, but in contributing to other areas such as decision theory, leadership, or theories on culture (e.g., Sahlin-Andersson, 1986, 1992; Archibald, 1992).

Studies that discuss and question the rational assumptions underlying normative project planning theories, contribute in yet another way. They provide valuable insights into the difficulties involved in viewing the project as an independent "tool", which can readibly be used to achieve given ends. These approaches have taught us that "the project" is not a single homogeneous concept; rather it embraces a range of possible varieties, differing along lines such as complexity, relation to "parent-organization", leadership, motivation, methods-in-use, basic assumptions or the roles of project members and project management (see e.g., Miles, 1964, p. 441; Briner and Geddes, 1990, p. 319; Jessen, 1992; Lundin, 1990; Engwall, 1992; Packendorff, 1993, p. 78; Turner and Cochrane, 1993, p. 95). It becomes clear that not even repeated project situations are simple or easy to plan (see e.g., Morris and Hough, 1987; Christensen and Kreiner, 1991). Any project, regardless of the general conditions, is subject to negotiation and is perceived as being uncertain and equivocal.

Some authors in this more organizational theory-orientated tradition introduce concepts that emphasize the temporal aspect of organizing activities, such as temporary systems or organizations (Miles, 1964; Goodman, 1981; Bryman *et al.*, 1987), transitory organizations (Palisi, 1970), temporary networks or inter-organizational projects (Hadjikhani, 1984; Hellgren and Stjernberg, 1987; Sahlin-Andersson, 1992) and different kinds of typologies for differentiating between projects or temporary situations (Miles, 1964, p. 441; Briner and Geddes, 1990, p. 319; Ekstedt *et al.*, 1993; Packendorff, 1993, p. 78; Turner and Cochrane, 1993, p. 95; see also Kreiner, 1992).

Our ambition in this article has been to contribute to this last part of the theoretical field of projects and temporary organizations, by proposing a framework for understanding action and the internal character of temporary organizations. We have aspired to stress consistency and logics. Now, finally, we must say a few words on the usefulness of the proposed framework.

The emphasis on action in the project management literature has spurred us also to focus on action in seeking a theory of the temporary organization. One reason for this is that project management thinking, as embodied in PMBOK, has had a profound effect on managerial think-

ing not only in the western world but also across the globe. A summary of the possible merits of our framework should certainly include the following list:

— the framework refers to the body of knowledge incorporated in PMBOK, and represents an attempt to combine that way of thinking with developments in organization theory;
— the framework makes explicit references to the distinctive features of the temporary organization or project, and provides a structure for analyzing such organizations and efforts;
— the framework aspires to embrace the temporary organization phenomenon in its entirety. It does not consist of fragments of a theory, but refers to a totality;
— the framework has face validity for us, and we have been able to apply it in our studies of empirical cases of temporary organizations.

The last point is not the least important, since the framework should be open to exploration and usable in research. We have saved a few comments on that aspect for this last section.

We have argued that action is at the heart of a theory of the temporary organization. Action, as opposed to talk, is conceived as the most important and distinctive feature of a project. However, the theory that we have introduced is also a theory of inaction (or inertia, one might say), in that it indicates the mechanisms for action and, implicitly, also the mechanisms for fostering inaction. It gives hints to anyone who wants to stop or stall a project, by highlighting various ways in which things can be prevented from happening. We have previously argued that the creation of a project involves the introduction of boundaries, e.g., boundaries in time and in space, boundaries in terms of task, boundaries regarding who is to be involved, and so on. Thus the fundamental mechanisms for preventing projects from being completed center on boundary-opening activities, or in other words on attacking boundary-setting activities when these occur.

Research on temporary organizations can thus assume two completely different forms. One concerns successful temporary organizations — successful in the sense that the temporary organization passes through a sequence of stages as described in the theory introduced above. The second form concerns cases when inertia rather than action is invoked as a result of an effort to create and carry a project through, and when the attacks on the project itself have been successful. Asking why things happened and asking why things did not happen, are both equally justifiable. In other words, the proposed theory lends itself to empirical research.

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