

Sara Bonesso · Anna Comacchio
Claudio Pizzi *Editors*

Project-Based Knowledge in Organizing Open Innovation

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Foreword

The discourse about projects, and project-based organizing, has gone a long way since its beginnings in the project management literature. It has generated vast attention and attracted considerable research efforts. Originally, project management developed out of the need to systematize activities undertaken to achieve specific goals, within a limited time period. The professionalization of project management activities, from the 1950s onwards, led to the development of a number of tools and techniques to plan, design, monitor, and implement tasks in such a way as to optimize along the axis of the dreaded “iron triangle” of costs, time, and quality. Most of the work done along these lines emphasized the uniqueness of project work, its distinctiveness from mass production, the difficulties of comparing contents and tasks across projects. Certainly, this discussion contributed greatly to the rise of the project manager as a new professional figure, with great status and legitimacy.

Over time though, scholars and practitioners have moved away from the analysis of specific projects. For example, Gann and Salter (2000) discussed the problem of exploring how project-level processes and objectives are related to business-level projects and objectives. Their departure from the traditional discussion of project management was grounded in the analysis of innovative projects in a variety of industries related to the so-called Complex Products and Systems area (e.g. complex civil engineering structures). In these industries, few projects are implemented, but each has a major and direct impact on a firm's performance. Hence, the need to understand how project-level decisions affects broader definitions of performance. In relation to this, a discussion has emerged about how firms which operate in a project-based environment can actually learn, over and above what is learnt within a project team. How do they transfer knowledge across projects? How do they build on lessons learnt without reinventing the wheel every time? What is the role of individuals in this process? And what instead can be codified via digital or physical means?

The discussion about organizational learning, memory, and knowledge codification merged with the literature on project-based activities. For example, Prencipe and Tell (2001) looked at different learning strategies deployed by firms in various industries; Cacciatori (2008) analyzed the role of knowledge codification in the form of objects and artifacts; Criscuolo et al. (2007) discussed the role

of expert yellow pages' to codify and make visible the skills experts acquire while working on different projects.

Most of these papers build upon evidence collected in sectors which traditionally are organized by projects, like the construction industry or, more recently, the movie industry (see also Cattani et al. (2011) for a comprehensive review of issues and empirics). However, project-based organizing is also common in sectors that have normally been analyzed looking at the firm- or team-level. In fact, a remarkable gap in the vast literature on project-based organizing is the link with the wealth of research originating from the New Product Development (NPD) area, historically one of the earliest fields to grasp the analytical importance and empirical relevance of the project as a unit of analysis.

This book's first contribution is closing this important loop toward NPD research. The chapters touch upon issues related to NPD in a variety of sectors, some of which are not normally studied through the lens of project-based organizing, e.g., machine-tools and pharmaceuticals. In so doing, this book already delivers a first important evidence.

Second, this book is not only about closing loops, it is also about opening up toward new avenues of research. Great emphasis is given to the specificities of innovation processes which are increasingly open and distributed in nature, and the project-based nature of the environments in which they happen. How can a focus on projects advance the discussion in this direction? This book engages the audience by identifying a series of interconnected questions that, taken together, provide an interesting, comprehensive, and progressive view of how organizations in a variety of industries can strategize by leveraging the peculiarities of project-based organizing, rather than organizing in order to overcome its limitations. In a way, the chapters collected in this book turn the story upside down. It is not that organizations persist despite the intermittent nature of their projects, which present them with challenges that need to be overcome through knowledge management, memory tools, yellow pages, etc.; rather, it is the opposite: projects become the tools through which organizations adapt, adjust and respond to changing environmental circumstances.

How can projects be leveraged as strategic tools to engage external and internal stakeholders? How can organizations become selectively open and closed? How can they optimize internal and external sourcing strategies? How can they reconcile the traditional tradeoff between exploitation and exploration? How do project-based activities interact with firm-level strategies, such as R&D alliances? This is but a sample of the tremendously important questions raised in this book, which will soon become a must read for the scholarly community interested in project-based activities.

Zurich, October 2013

Stefano Brusoni

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