

Temporary Organizing – The End of Organizations as We Know Them?

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Abstract

Organizations make ample use not only of temporary employment and contract work but also of projects, perhaps the most popular form of temporary organizing. This trend will nevertheless not herald the end of organizations as we know them. In order to be effective, most forms of temporary organizing rely on complementary permanent organizational or interorganizational structures. The paper discusses this role of context not only for project-based and project-supported organizations but also for interorganizational projects and project networks.

Introduction to Temporary Organizing

Today's turbulent environment of firms is heralding an increasing need to organize in a flexible, ad-hoc manner that involves frequent adaptation to arising opportunities and required changes. This is true for big corporations like Apple or Siemens as it is for start-ups. Research has documented a concomitant rise of temporary organizing principles in and across firms—ranging from managing short-term projects and forming dedicated temporary organizations, through to navigating project networks, hiring temporary contract workers, orchestrating field-configuring events such as conferences, or maintaining temporary clusters like trade fairs. In their editorial to the recent special issue of *Organization Studies* Bakker et al. bundle, investigate, and expand the current frontiers of “temporary organizing” research and highlight, in particular, how temporary organizing interacts with more permanent structures including organizations as we know them.¹

The notion of temporary organizing captures the activities and practices associated with collectives of interdependent actors who pursue ex ante agreed upon tasks within a predetermined time frame. While other features

of temporary organizations (such as task complexity, singularity and innovativeness) are much debated in the project management literature, *institutionalized* termination is certainly a constitutive property of projects and other forms of temporary organizations.² Whereas in projects and events temporary structuring is the guiding principle, other forms of temporary organizing, such as hiring contract or agency workers as used by an increasing number of firms, are actor-centered and provide only temporary employment or – as in accelerators and incubators for instance – temporary organizational membership.

The verb “organizing”, by the way, has become increasingly popular since Karl Weick’s plea for using verbs rather than nouns in management and organization research and highlights the process itself, whereas the noun “organization” emphasizes results of this process, typically considered an outcome of either decisions or other forms of “reflexive structuration.”^{3, 4, 5}

Philosophical Underpinnings

While the traditional understanding of organizing and organization is anchored in a “being” philosophy which has dominated in social sciences for decades, more recent theorizing efforts in management and organization research point to the relevance of a “becoming” philosophy.^{6,7} This philosophy or, to be more precise, ontology highlights the necessity to explain stability rather than change, not least with regard to the flexible, some may even say fluid forms of temporary organization or temporary organizing. No matter which ontology is considered relevant,⁸ the temporality of these activities and practices is directly tied to the expectation that the collaboration either within or across organizational boundaries will terminate as agreed upon. This is even true when some temporary employees are offered permanent employment or when the reality of some “mega-projects”—from the famous Sydney Opera in Australia to the new Elbphilharmonie Concert Hall in Hamburg and the still unfinished international airport BER in Berlin, both in Germany—illustrates significant deviation from this idealized feature.⁹ Nevertheless, the *intended* completion of the task within an ex ante predetermined timeframe remains constitutive for forms of temporary organizations, having important effects not only for the managing but also for the working personnel, and hence for the actual course and duration of practices and projects.^{10, 11}

Unlimited Temporality?

For other reasons, too, than the failure to meet the ex ante agreed upon timeframes, some of these temporary organizations may actually become permanent, implying a respective change in organizational form. A well-

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known example for this is the Sematech consortium in the global semiconductor industry. This consortium was originally set up to compete with the Japanese and with the intention of terminating the project after a few years. However, as in some other cases, the termination plans were abandoned because all the project participants as well as outsiders discovered the benefits from, in this case, coordinating extremely cost-intensive research and development activities inter-organizationally on a permanent basis.¹²

Jerry Davis may well be correct with his diagnosis that, in face of the rise of outsourcing and offshoring and the spread of self-employment and startups, the big corporation loses relevance;¹³ a trend that contributes significantly to economic inequality and social instability. This, however, does not mean that permanent organizations such as Apple or Siemens are outdated and more or less substituted by allegedly more flexible, ad-hoc forms of temporary organizing. Rather, many forms of temporary organizing are for very good reasons embedded in permanent organizational or inter-organizational structures. Take for instance, the “project-based organization” or PBO for short which, like general contractors in the construction or machine tool industry or production firms in the film and television industry, conducts most of its business via projects.¹⁴ Even traditional organizations like car manufacturers are increasingly “projectified,” adopting the form of a “project-supported organization” or PSO.^{15,16} Apart von PBOs and PSOs providing an organizational structure for temporary organizing efforts, “project networks” (PNWs) deliver a more than a temporary frame in the inter-organizational realm.^{17,18} Such PNWs in a more narrow sense take into account that many projects are initiated and conducted not only within an organization but also among organizations, i.e. as “inter-organizational projects” (IOPs).¹⁹ These IOPs usually have a history of as well as a future for collaboration, highlighted by their temporal embeddedness in networks of relationships.²⁰ More often than not, all of these to a large extent complementary permanent structures make temporary forms of organizing possible, for instance because they allow for cross-project learning and knowledge storing. Hence, “projectification” does not herald the end of organizations as we know them.

As already indicated, projects may only be the most prominent and obvious form of temporary organizing, gaining importance in a “project society” that, to some extent at least, questions the effectiveness of institutions left over from an industrial era.²¹ Other prominent forms of temporary organizing or, more precisely, semi-permanent organizations (see Table 1) combine temporary employment with permanent structures. As already indicated examples are accelerators and incubators in which

individual or collective actors such as entrepreneurs or firms respectively are engaged; or agency or contract work when individual actors such as temps or freelancers are employed. These very types of work almost certainly lead to multi-employer work arrangements,²² also in firms like Apple and Siemens but again do not make permanent organizations redundant. On the contrary, together with the semi-temporary organizations (PBO, PSO and PNW), they seem to contribute to the flexibility needed in turbulent times.

Managerial Implications

It is only under extreme circumstances that an organization may be of a truly temporary nature. Examples are “ephemeral organizations” that emerge in the face of a disaster and disappear once the disaster has been overcome;²³ or the “disposable organization” that is set up for a particular, mostly efficiency-oriented purpose and shut down after this purpose has been fulfilled or shifted, as it lacks adaptability.²⁴ In these—in a narrow sense—temporary organizations (see (1) in Table 1) management can concentrate entirely on their temporary nature of task and employment, like management in a classical formal or bureaucratic organization (4) which focuses on the permanence of both.

Table 1. A Typology of Temporary Organizing as a Form

Actor Structure	Temporary	Permanent
Temporary	(1) Temporary, ephemeral or disposable organization	(2) Semi-Temporary organization (PSO, PBO, PNW)
Permanent	(3) Semi-Permanent organization with temporary employment	(4) <i>Permanent organization</i>

Source: Bakker, R.M., DeFillippi, R., Schwab, A., & Sydow, J. (2016). Temporary organizing: Promises, processes, problems. *Organization Studies*, 37(12), 1706. Table reprinted with the permission of Sage.

Given this variety of temporal forms of organizing in a strict sense (1) as well as in a broader sense (2-3), managerial implications are quite diverse. It is particularly obvious that there is only no need to manage the interface between the temporary and the permanent in the case of ephemeral or disposable organizations. In the other two cases, managing the temporary-

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permanent interface is or at least should be of major concern not only for management practice but also for research.²⁵

To give one final example: Extra-role behavior can, as in case (1), only result from the project, its task and management. This is different in the other two cases (2-4) allowing “project citizenship behavior” to be fed not only by the temporary, but also by the permanent organization or network of organizations.²⁶ With regard to such behavior, again the management of the interface between the temporary and the permanent nature is of outstanding importance, leaving us—despite changes towards the more temporary structures exhibited in PBOs and PSOs or IOPs and PNWs—with organizations as we know them.

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Endnotes

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