Organizing to avoid project overload: The use and risks of narrowing strategies in multi-project practice

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Abstract

While project work can be motivating, stimulating and creative, it can also be frustrating, ambiguous and stressful. Situations of project overload, i.e. situations in which fragmentation, disturbances and disruptions are reoccurring, are common in project-based organizations running many parallel projects. This paper reports findings from an extensive interview study on how project managers and project members working in parallel projects handle project overload by changing their work routines. The results show 1) that project work in practice is organized by using narrowing strategies and 2) that narrowing strategies run the risk of excluding the vital historical and organizational context. The findings have implications for project theory and project practice.

Keywords: Project overload; Organizing; Multi-project work; Boundary action; Boundary objects; Narrowing strategies

1. Introduction

Due to the “projectified” (Lundin and Söderholm, 1998; Midler, 1995) “projectivized” (Ekstedt et al., 1999) or “projectization” of society (Peters, 1992 in Söderlund and Bredin, 2011), there are an increased number of phenomena that are called projects. Projects are performed and talked about in most organizations and in social life in general, and an increasing number of people work in projects. It is also increasingly common that people work in more than one project simultaneously, which adds complexity to the work situation (Engwall and Jerbrant, 2003). Working in several often interconnected projects of different size, duration, budget and complexity, and sharing the same personal resources, includes the challenges of balancing multiple demands, rapid adjustments to changing prerequisites and strong prioritizing ability as the organization is constantly changing (Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2003; Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006). Previous research on project work (e.g. Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006) has shown how fragmentation, disruption and inefficiency caused by switching between commitments to simultaneous and sometimes conflicting projects is experienced as project overload that may lead to frustration, ambiguousness and stress. By project overload is meant situations “...in which fragmentation, disturbances and disruptions are highly relevant dimensions of workload” (Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006, p. 386).

In focus here are the strategies developed and used when project managers and project members work to avoid situations of project overload, i.e. how they organize their work in practice to avoid situations in which fragmentation, disturbances and disruptions are reoccurring (Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006). The aim of this paper is to explore what strategies are developed and used in practice for avoiding project overload when organizing work in day-to-day multi-project work and by doing this contribute to the projects-as-practice stream of research (Blomquist et al., 2010). The project-as-practice stream argues that projects must be studied in the context in which they are executed (Blomquist et al., 2010; Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006; Engwall, 2003) and that it is important to study and understand projects as social accomplishments in specific
contexts (Engwall, 2003; Söderlund, 2004). This understanding is important when developing projects as theory and practice (Hodgson et al., 2011; Lindgren et al., 2014; Packendorff and Lindgren, 2014; Söderholm, 2007). It is also of importance to include the work situation for project managers and project members when developing program and portfolio management research and practice (Blächfält and Eskerod, 2008). The overall purpose is to deepen the much-needed understanding of contemporary project work practice (compare with Barley and Kunda, 2001; Lindkvist and Söderlund, 2002) and to complement the work by Zika-Viktorsson et al. (2003) and Zika-Viktorsson et al. (2006) by applying an organizational perspective on project overload.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: First a background to the challenges of project based organizational and a clarification of the challenges project managers and project members face when trying to make sense of their fragmented and constantly changing work situation. The next section outlines the framework and the concepts that are used to interpret the organizing strategies that are developed and used in practice. The framework is based on the concept of sense making introduced by Weick (1993, 1995) complemented with the concepts of boundary action and boundary objects as examples of sense making in practice. The Method section that follows describes the method used and how the interviews were conducted and interpreted. Then follows the results describing the strategies developed and used in practice to support sense making and to avoid situations of project overload. Finally, the discussion follows that outline implications for theory and practice.

2. Background

Project-based organizations (PBOs) are organizational in which almost all activities are organized as projects and where more permanent structures serve as administrative support (Hobday, 2000; Söderlund and Tell, 2009). PBOs have received much attention as an organizational form that integrates diverse and specialized resources (Keegan and Turner, 2002). In most PBO’s several projects are pursued in parallel, which is an attempt to use resources more efficient as for example certain expertise and knowledge can be used, developed and shared (Engwall and Jerbrant, 2003). The backside of PBO’s has been acknowledged by for example Sydow et al. (2004) in their research on the dilemma of organizational structure and project organization practices and the coordination challenges that arise from tensions between individual autonomy and organizational embeddedness.

Research on human resource management suggests that there are special characteristics of PBOs, for example the temporary nature of projects, dynamism, project portfolio resources and multirole demands (Heumann et al., 2007). Stress and coping strategies among project managers have also attracted research and it is suggested that project managers use more active and planning strategies when coping with stressful situations and that coping strategies are related to the maturity of the organization (Aitken and Crawford, 2007). Recent research has also addressed the emotional consequences of work in projects by describing projects as emotionally charged and potentially addictive and harmful spaces (Lindgren et al., 2014; Rehn and Lindahl, 2011; Rowlands and Handy, 2012).

Projects seldom run smoothly, especially in PBOs where projects often are interconnected. Linkage between projects, integrated parts and interdependencies make the project work situation hard to predict and plan (Engwall and Jerbrant, 2003). When working in PBOs, project managers and project members face the risk of losing control over ones own work due to conflicting demands from other projects, difficulties in obtaining an overview of the project portfolio, and from rather complicated planning (Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006).

When there is a high level of task complexity combined with a high level of organizational complexity, as it is in most PBO’s (compare with Engwall, 2003), it provides stimulating, varying and developing tasks and environments for project managers. However, these work settings can also be contributing to stress, loneliness, disrupted family lives and superficial work place relations (Aitken and Crawford, 2007; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2007; Packendorff, 2002). Working in projects with clear goals and deadlines is seen as motivating but when adapting to changes in the project work context there is a risk in loss of motivation, commitment and self-esteem (Gällstedt, 2003). Another risk with working in a multi-project work setting is decreased competence development as well as less improvement in work routines (Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006).

3. Sense making challenges in situations of project overload

When working with several projects simultaneously it is difficult to make sense of one’s own work as well as the achievements of co-workers. It is also challenging to make sense of the overall situation — the historical and organizational context (compare with Engwall, 2003). Because projects are constantly changing as organizing is constantly going on, it is difficult to evaluate, compare or comprehend what is happening (reference omitted for the sake of anonymity). Constantly changing project teams, which are common in PBO’s, also add complexity and difficulty of creating and maintaining control (Eskerod and Blächfelt, 2005). In such work situations there is an increased need for communication, collaboration and well functioning sense-making structures (Dainty et al., 2006; Lundin and Midler, 1998; Weick, 1993, 1995). Sense making is needed to avoid the risk of losing the overall perspective – the perspective which includes strategic and operative issues and which links the project to history and organizational context – and fall into the trap of viewing projects as isolated islands (compare with Engwall, 2003).

In their study on individual’s perception of project work, Zika-Viktorsson et al. (2006) applied a psychological perspective and developed the construct “project overload” (p. 386). The construct reflects overload specifically related to project work and it is argued that the construct in needed to reflect a situation in which fragmentation, disturbances and disruptions are highly relevant dimensions of workload. Zika-Viktorsson et al. (2006) suggest that project overload steam from working on
too many projects at the same time, which makes it more difficult for project managers and project members to focus on specific work items and it is argued that it makes them less able to work in an efficient manner (Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006). The proposed factors explaining project overload are: number of projects, routines, formalization, task resemblance, time resources and opportunities for recuperation, challenges, authority and feedback (Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006, p. 386). It is also suggested that project overload may partly be explained by commitment to too many projects at the same time, few opportunities to recuperate between project assignments, inadequate work procedures and high time pressure in the organization. Among these four significant factors, lack of recuperation opportunities is argued to be the single most potent predictor of project overload (Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006).

The factors that were found to be of importance to explain project overload in the study by Zika-Viktorsson et al. (2006) serve here as organizational prerequisites that make sense making difficult and challenging for project managers and project members. Thus, the focus here is not to explain project overload as such but to explore the strategies developed and used in practice by project managers and project members when trying to avoid situations of project overload. In the next section the framework is outlined including the concepts of sense making, boundary action and boundary objects.

4. Theoretical framework

Weick’s (1995) work on sensemaking has been increasingly popular since the mid-1990s. The literature on sensemaking has however become fragmented over the years and two streams have emerged: one that portrays sensemaking as a more individual, cognitive process and another that sees it as inherently social and discursive (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Here, sensemaking is interpreted as social and discursive in line with the following definition by Maitlis (2005: 21, in Maitlis and Christianson, 2014):

“Sensemaking occurs in organizations when members confront events, issues, and actions that are somehow surprising or confusing (Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Weick, 1993, 1995). As Weick argued, ‘The basic idea of sensemaking is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs’ (1993: 635). Thus, sensemaking is a process of social construction (Berger and Luckmann, 1967) in which individuals attempt to interpret and explain sets of cues from their environments. This happens through the production of ‘accounts’—discursive constructions of reality that interpret or explain (Antaki, 1994)—or through the ‘activation’ of existing accounts (Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Volkema et al., 1996). In either case, sensemaking allows people to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity by creating rational accounts of the world that enable action. Sensemaking thus both precedes decision making and follows it: sensemaking provides the ‘clear questions and clear answers’ (Weick, 1993: 636) that feed decision making, and decision making often stimulates the

surprises and confusion that create occasions for sensemaking. Organizational sensemaking is a fundamentally social process: organization members interpret their environment in and through interactions with others, constructing accounts that allow them to comprehend the world and act collectively (Isabella, 1990; Sackmann, 1991; Sandelands and Stablein, 1987; Starbuck and Milliken, 1988; Weick and Roberts, 1993).”

In combination with sense making the theoretical framework also includes the concepts of boundary action and boundary objects. Boundaries as organizational phenomena can be considered to be both enabling and a constraining structures (Hernes, 2003) and should be explored as emerging social processes (compare with Kerosuo, 2006). Boundaries are also interesting temporally and spatially emerging locations of development, learning and change in work practices (Kerosuo, 2006). On a practice level, project managers and project members mark the boundaries in their actions and their collective work practices.

While boundary action can be understood as actions pursued in project practice to support sense making in turbulent and constantly changing organizations, boundary objects are “...objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of several parties among them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. They are weakly structures in common use, and become strongly structures in local use. These objects may be abstract or concrete. They have different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognizable, a means of translation.” (Star and Greisemer, 1989, p. 393).

Boundary objects can thus be understood as sense making frameworks that are dynamic enough to act as a mediator between different disciplines, knowledge, interest groups or individuals, and yet robust enough to maintain a common identity among them (compare with Keshkamat et al., 2012). Boundary objects “are simultaneously concrete and abstract, specific and general, conventionalized and customized” (Star and Greisemer, 1989, p. 408).

5. Method

The study is qualitative and interpretative and builds on 43 interviews with individuals in three PBOs (Table 1). All three organizations are engineering intensive and they are focusing on product development where organization A is a governmental agency, organization B operates within the automotive industry and organization C operates in the manufacturing industry. The

| Table 1 |
| List of organizations and number of respondents. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
<th>Number of parallel projects of each respondent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2–10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2–150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2–5</td>
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product development work in the three organizations is project based, i.e. the work has a temporary character, demands different competences, and several different departments are involved in the development process.

The day-to-day work situation differed somewhat between the three organizations, for example in terms of the number of parallel projects that each project manager and/or project member was involved in. At organization A the interviewees worked in 2–10 parallel projects. At organization B they worked in 2–150 parallel projects and in organization C they worked in 2–5 parallel projects (Table 1). It is important to add that the projects in organization B were often much smaller in terms of budget and scope in comparison to projects in organizations A and C. Also minor changes were defined as projects in organization B.

The sample of respondents was not randomly constructed but was based on the emphasis to include those in the three organizations who worked in at least two parallel projects and whom a contact person at each organization believed had high workload. Also, it was suggested that the respondents should work in different parts of the organization in order to facilitate inter organizational comparisons.

The interviews were based on a semi structured interview guide, containing open-ended questions. The first group of question focused on background (e.g. name, role, how long she/he had worked at the workplace, previous experiences and family situation). The second group of questions focused on general perception of the work situation (e.g. work description, number of projects, role and tasks of each project, decision making and priorities, organization and collaboration, feedback and control). The third and final group of questions focused on overload (e.g. interruptions, alternations, support and critical incidents).

All interviews were held at the respondent’s work place with duration of 60–120 min. All interviews were recorded and notes were taken during the interviews. Field notes were written down directly after each interview. All interviews were also transcribed and analyzed. The analysis followed an interpretative and exploring process, rather than confirming (compare with Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007), in search for emerging patterns and themes (Hanson, 1958; Weick, 1995), i.e. social constructs (Silverman, 2001), in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the collaborative process. Interviews can provide insightful information and can be focused on the research topics (Yin, 2008). In particular, face-to-face interviews provide a rich form of interaction where multiple cues such as facial expressions and tone of voice facilitate the dialogue (Daft and Lengel, 1986).

6. Result

All 43 respondents were working in at least two projects in parallel. A general opinion among them was that their organization was currently running too many different projects and that they were expected to handle too many different projects and tasks at the same time. They all said that they experienced project overload, i.e. situations when fragmentation, disturbances and disruptions are highly relevant dimensions of workload. Most of the respondents experienced project overload always, however some only experienced it occasionally. The respondents also found it difficult and sometimes impossible to limit or reduce the number of projects and tasks they were assigned to. Instead, it was appreciated, and often promoted, to take on yet another project and/or task. The vast number of often interconnected projects and tasks made it difficult for the respondents to get a comprehensive overview of the current situation and it was difficult to create a feeling of control, both of the own work situation and of the colleagues work situation. The lack of overview and control were experienced as problematic and frustrating, adding anxiety and stress to the work situation.

“It is easy to get too many projects. The overview is hard to get. I have difficulties to get that overview, and I was close to quit this job some years ago. It is too much sometimes.”

6.1. Project practice

The project work on a day-to-day basis was experienced by the respondents as continuously changing and thus fragmented. There were several projects of different size, complexity, client and importance going on at the same time and when unexpected things happened continuous alternating between projects and tasks became an inevitable fact. These alternations were often the result of unexpected and unplanned (often also unwanted) disruptions for example by questions over the phone or by someone coming by the workplace asking a question.

“The project time plan will hold as long as no one is calling me.”

Alternating as such was not experienced as problematic when initiated by the respondent her/himself. This was however only occasionally the case. Most often there were unplanned and sudden interruptions that forced fast alternating between projects and tasks. In these situations, there was no possibility and no time to end the on-going work in any careful or reflected way. This, in turn, made the restart of the work more complicated and time demanding. The time spent on alternating and restarting was difficult to measure, plan for, avoid and report and it occupied much of the workdays resulting in experiences of frustration and lack of efficiency.

“It takes a very long time to shift and restart! Yes, it takes a long time to adjust and remind me were I was.”

Disruptions were not always sudden or unplanned. The respondents also experienced planned meetings as disruptions. This was especially the case when frequent meetings had the same or a similar agenda and the same people present. The experience of the project time plans was that they were not realistic and that there was lack of knowledge among the project members involved when it came to estimating time for tasks and projects.
“The project time plan that is sent to us from the project office is almost always shorter than ours. The normal procedure is that we respond that we will not make this.”

The day-to-day work practice was experienced as problem action based and filled with reoccurring “fire fighting activities” and “emergency crises”. No workdays were the same and work was mainly focused on short-term planning and short-term actions, making little or no room for strategic and long term planning, structured reflections or actions.

“All days are different. We have tried to identify a normal level. We haven’t found one. There are many emergency crises to take care of.”

Respondents also expressed that they found it difficult to actually do all the work that had to be done. Skilled people with key competence were often assigned to too many projects at the same time. A general scenario was that the respondents had to be satisfied with doing their work ‘good enough’. It was experienced as frustrating to always have too little time, too many projects, too much information and no possibility to do ones best at all times.

“An experienced guy with core competence is spread out on all projects and still he has to be the driving force in the critical project.”

A frequently expressed practical issue among the respondents was how to know what to do next. The process of making decisions and to prioritize between projects and tasks were described as challenging, unclear and vague. The respondents expressed that they felt uncomfortable and that it was risky to always prioritize based on individual initiatives.

“It is not clear what we are supposed to do, there is a risk that things fall between.”

Working in several projects in parallel without clear formal prioritizing support puts multiple and sometimes conflicting demands on the individual. There was a formal structure for prioritizing between projects developed in all three organizations but only a few of the respondents related their own work to that structure. Instead most of the respondents expressed that they did their own individual and subjective prioritizing.

“Prioritizing is a major weakness in the organisation. It includes both the coordination between projects as well as within them. There is none! There is no prioritizing between the projects from the projects. And the coordination between the projects is non-existent.”

6.2. Developed strategies

How then was the prioritizing – balancing – between multiple demands done in day-to-day organizational practice according to the respondents? Which organizing strategies were developed and used?

The respondents had to prioritize between different projects and tasks based on their own understanding. The formal prioritizing strategies, which were provided by the organization, were not perceived as helpful. The respondents expressed that they often based their decisions on the next upcoming deadline (“next tollgate”) or on what projects had most effect on the production (“next start of production”) or if there were vital customers (“core clients”). One respondent said: “Based on importance!” while another respondent said: “What is most urgent”.

Informal communication between colleagues and networking strategies within the organizations were also used. The respondents mentioned strategies such as internal lobbying and who shouted the loudest in the organization. These strategies are discursive and seem to play a role when prioritizing between projects and tasks. The individual’s own personal interests were also a factor for how to prioritize.

“The priorities are several, one is the human, the bad conscience. The one who telephones most often gets the work done.”

There were strategies developed and used by the respondents in their day-to-day work to handle the situations of constant adjustments. A way to avoid being interrupted all the time with questions and to make room for planned, focused and structured work was a “support phone”. It was a phone number initiated by a project team for questions from outside the project team. This strategy directed all disturbances and adjustments to one person in the team at the time, a person that was prepared for being interrupted by questions. The team had also developed a structured scheme alternating who was going to be responsible for answering the phone and when. This was a way of making room for the rest of the team members to work focused without interruptions and necessary adjustments.

Another way of insuring more focused work and avoiding long interruptions was to minimize time in meetings by initiating “a slot time-scheme”. The scheme was arranged so that each individual was only present at the project meetings when she/he had direct influence on the meeting and/or the outcome (i.e. had to give information to others or was receiving information from others). This resulted in project meetings where the only one present the whole time – and thus the only one having an overview and an understanding of the whole meeting – was the project manager, while the others could come and go in accordance with the scheme.

A third example of a strategy for avoiding project overload was the personal and individual “task-lists” or to-do-lists. Most of the respondents had their own individual task-list and they related their prioritizing directly to this list and the projects and tasks that at the moment were on the top of their individual list. When planning their work the individuals checked what was on the top of their task-list and later, when having finished the task, the task was easily ticked off from the list.
“I have given up my project time plan, it never holds anyway. That is why I have a task-list instead.”

7. Discussion

Working with more than one hundred projects in parallel is of course a special case — an exception. Nevertheless, it was the day-to-day practice for some of the respondents in this study (respondents from organization B) even if most of the respondents (respondents from organizations A and C) were working with fewer projects and tasks in parallel. Increased number of parallel projects and tasks meant more disruptions and the need for more alternations, less possibility for focused work and increased need for sense making. Increased numbers of parallel projects also meant increased numbers of deadlines, milestones and tollgates, i.e. deliveries, and increased numbers of project participants and contextual factors to keep track and make sense of (compare with Weick, 1995). When several deadlines were due at the same time there was a need for fast decision making on informal and subjective basis.

The amount of information was extensive in all three organizations. Much information could be expected to be something positive in a project work setting (compare with Aitken and Crawford, 2007). This was however not the case in this study. There was a constant flow of e-mails and updates on the Intranet and daily, weekly and monthly information updates, many project reports and many project meetings to make sense of. This major amount of information, in a rather unstructured manner, in combination with difficulties in finding time to read, reflect and discuss the information, were complicating the sense making process. Information was often experienced as not much help for the individual when trying to make sense of the situation and create a comprehensive understanding of the overview. Rather, the major amount of information contributed to a more difficult and stressful situation — to information overload (compare with Caniels et al., 2012). Meetings were also often perceived as a waste of time, rather than a meaningful arena for sense making, collaborative action and knowledge creation.

Project time plans, which have potential of being boundary objects (Star and Greisemer, 1989) providing helpful support in the sense making process and in the creation of an overview of the interconnected projects and tasks, were perceived as of no or little help for overcoming project overload. Due to the constant changes in the projects, frequent adjustments and updates of time planes were needed. However, it was hard to find time for updates, which made the respondents question the use and relevance of the time plans. Instead they used task-lists as boundary objects to support sense making and the creation of what they perceived as a necessary overview in order to more easily make fast priorities between projects and tasks and to gain control over their own work.

Task-lists are thus also examples of boundary objects to support overview (Karrbom Gustavsson and Jerbrant, 2012). However, task-lists are narrowing rather than expanding the historical and contextual awareness and knowledge, and there is a major risk for losing vital historical and contextual knowledge (compare with Engwall, 2003). Also, there is the risk of parallel and contradicting priorities being made in the same project if everyone makes their own priorities randomly, or based in their own task lists. Task-lists are not holistic, visual and inclusive for all, and they do not include historical, operational and strategic plans. This limitation, which could be interpreted as a narrowing, or cocooning, strategy, also increases the risk of promoting knowledge exploitation (March, 1991) by focusing on short term, repetitive and easy projects and tasks since they are easy to perform and tick off the list. More challenging and innovative projects and tasks, those that require focused time and knowledge exploration (March, 1991) will most likely end up at the bottom of the list (Karrbom Gustavsson and Jerbrant, 2012).

The slot-time-scheme, which can be interpreted as another boundary object, was used for minimizing (or optimizing according to some of the respondents) time spent in meetings. However, the slot-time-scheme faces similar risks as the task-lists in terms of narrowing the historical and organizational context awareness and limited knowledge creation. When individuals deliberately limit their communication and social interaction — when they limit their boundary actions and boundary action arenas — they also limit the possibility of learning from each other by reflecting on problems and solutions together. They face the risk of becoming isolated islands within the project-based organizations.

The support phone was perceived as a valuable strategy for minimizing disruptions and making room for much needed focused work within the project team and still supports the rest of the organization when having questions. This meant, however, that the project team was never complete when working together formulating problems and developing solutions limiting the collaborative work. Thus, the support phone also limited the boundary actions and boundary action arenas, and consequently limited the possibilities of social interaction, mutual reflections and learning.

The common denominator of what were perceived as supporting sense making processes and avoidance of project overload in this study were the narrowing strategy. The narrowing actions and objects served as support to make sense of the situation to be able to act. It also meant to actively avoid or escape the multiple demands, the information overload and the time spent in meetings. The narrowing strategies could be interpreted as going back to the isolated island-perspective (compare with Engwall, 2003) with all the associated risks of losing history, context and the overall perspective and instead focusing on one single project (or task) at the time.

8. Conclusion

A fragmented and constantly changing work situation can be stimulating and developing, always demanding alertness and flexibility. Fast changes and flexibility are also examples of what is supposed to be the great advantage of PBOs. Changing project teams can also support knowledge sharing between participants, departments and projects. However, when there
are constant changes, and when there is little or no balance between demand on one hand and the support and resources available on the other, it can also be a source for feelings of frustration, irritation and stress — and in the long run less quality, efficiency and knowledge creation (compare with Gällstedt, 2003; Aitken and Crawford, 2007).

Based on the findings, it is shown that multi-project work is more characterized by constant changes and handling of emergency crises than planned and structured work. The findings also show that experiences of situations of project overload are a result of too many parallel tasks and too many parallel and interconnected projects in combination with constant disruptions and frequent alternating between projects and tasks. In addition, much time spent in meetings, too much information, not updated project time planes, unclear responsibility and prioritizing structure and too little time for mutual and individual reflections are other aspects that contribute to the development and use of narrowing strategies such as support-phone, slot-time-scheme and task-lists.

It is a rather dark picture of multi-project work that is described here. Is it really this bad? One important aspect to add – and that may contribute to explain why project work is attractive — is that most of the respondents also experienced their work as exiting, stimulating, developing and inspiring.

This study indicates that one of the challenging tasks for project managers and project members in PBOs is to make sure that their specific projects or tasks are on the top of the various project members’ task-lists, i.e. that project managers and project members prioritize their projects in favor of many other simultaneous projects. These situations, and the development of discursive strategies, call for further research. Consequently, further studies on project managers as internal lobbyists are needed to explore informal communication and networking among project managers and project members in project-based organizations. One other aspect that may contribute to situations of project overload is the lack of competence or a mismatch of competences. Competence has however not been included in this study but deserves attention in future studies.

Despite its limitations, this study develops an increased understanding of day-to-day project work and the organizing strategies developed and used to avoid situations of project overload and change work routines. The trend is that project work is becoming increasingly common and thus, situations of project overload may also become increasingly common. Research efforts on program and portfolio management have developed knowledge on how to improve overview and support in multi-project contexts (for example Muller et al., 2008) and research has acknowledged the problems and challenges of resource struggles, ambiguity and stress in multi-project settings (Blichfeldt and Eskerod, 2008). Still, situations of project overload are still often prevalent in day-to-day multi-project work with associated risks on individual, project and PBO levels. Firstly, the theoretical implication of this study is the application of an organizational perspective on project overload, as a complement to the previous psychological. Also, the three developed narrowing strategies are of theoretical importance. This increased the knowledge and understanding of projects-as-practice and what project managers and project members do when they strive to avoid situations of project overload is also an important implication. Secondly, the practical implications are to acknowledge the need for limiting the amount of interconnected projects and tasks and to develop and use boundary action arenas and boundary objects where the historical and organizational context can be included in the social process of managing and/or working in a project.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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