Project Transitions: Navigating Across Strategy, Delivery, Use, and Decommissioning

SPECIAL ISSUE EDITORS

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According to A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide) – Sixth Edition (Project Management Institute, 2017), all projects can be mapped to a generic life cycle structure: Starting the project, organizing and preparing, carrying out the work, and closing the project. These project phases are, however, a limited part of the story. Indeed something must happen before the start of a project life cycle, and something must happen after the project completes. For instance, a utility company might recognize the need to increment generating capacity, which leads to the start of the project termed “addition of a new power plant,” which upon completion operates until outdated or unsafe when the facility is decommissioned through yet another project. Similarly, a software company might identify a niche for a new software product; launch a project to develop the new product, after which the software company will sell the product, maintain and upgrade the product, and manage the relationship with the customer until the software becomes outdated and must be abandoned or replaced. When initiating a project to change an organization, there is a strategic decision triggering the change. So, calling the deliverable of a project a system, we recognize multiple phases that impact the conduct of the project. The aim of this special issue is to seek to better understand the various transitional issues of projects, either through the examination of transition points or the unfolding of new frameworks.

One might represent the system life cycle with four phases: (1) strategic planning (including feasibility study), which generically includes everything happening prior to the project and leads to the project; (2) construction and delivery as the traditional project life cycle leading to the completion of the deliverable; (3) operations and use of the deliverable to include maintenance and upgrades; and (4) the eventual end of life for a system, potentially requiring decommissioning or replacement. In this light, the key goal of project management is to facilitate the creation of highest value (e.g., Artto, Ahola, & Vartiainen, 2016). To illustrate this idea, we can take the infrastructure sector, where planning, construction, and decommissioning are phases with well-studied stakeholders, risks, and issues associated with the budget, scope, and time performance (Brookes, Sage, Dainty, Locatelli, & Whyte, 2017; Matinheikki, Artto, Peltokorpi, & Rajali, 2016). But while a great deal of research focuses on the specifics of various phases, there are a number of technical, organizational, economic, and managerial challenges relating to the transitions between the phases and across the life of the system, or even the blurring of distinct phases. Surprisingly, exploring transition-related phenomena, or indeed problematizing the phase-based perspective, remains remarkably scarce.

Our initial model for the purposes of introduction perspective begins with the sequential perspective from Thompson’s (1967) seminal task interdependency theory, which distinguishes (1) pooled, (2) sequential, and (3) reciprocal interdependency, recently discussed in terms of uncertainty interdependency (Jensen, Johansson, & Löfström, 2006). The transition points in the sequential model (represented as stars in Figure 1) are important for several reasons—one example being the project network(s) of development (Ruuksa, Artto, Aaltonen, & Lehtonen, 2009; von Danwitz, 2018) that needs to hand over data and know-how to the network in charge of operations (Whyte et al., 2012). Although projects in their own right can be understood as transient organizations (Bakker, DeFillippi, Schwab, & Sydow, 2016; Lundin & Söderholm, 2013), the sequential model requires an understanding of the particular elements of project transition as outlined in Figure 1.
We take three particular transition points that determine alignment and integration as illustrations. The first key transition (point A in Figure 1) is at the strategic front-end of projects, where important decisions about the strategic planning and resources are made (Artto, Kujala, Dietrich, & Martinsuo, 2008; Edkins, Geraldi, Morris, & Smith, 2013). This link between projects and their strategic counterpart emphasizes the role of projects as strategy execution vehicles and draws upon the firm dynamic and project capabilities (Davies & Brady, 2016; Winch & Leiringer, 2016). As projects go through the journey from planning, to design, and further into implementation, examples of the main challenges include (1) the wrong projects get sanctioned, (2) the designs never get built, and (3) the projects end up delivering less functionality than originally envisioned.

The phase that follows is the delivery when project outputs undergo development and construction, from conceptual and detailed design implementation to testing and commissioning before a handover to operations. As the project progresses from delivery into operations and use, the second key transition point is reached (point B in Figure 1). As evidenced by examples across a variety of project sectors, project management practitioners understand that the assumption that ‘getting the project over the line will make it’ is not good enough. For example, in software development, the deliverable suffers from poor user acceptance (Hong, Thong, Chasalow, & Dhillon, 2011). Similarly, in organizational change initiatives, organizations struggle with the operational commencement of completed projects. Organizations initiate projects with anticipated benefits that fail to accrue if the product does not reach operational goals (Seddon, Calvert, & Yang, 2010). Without a successful transition from the project to operations, the resources spent on construction or development will be wasted or increased (Pufall, Fransoo, & de Kok, 2007).

Lastly, we include decommissioning or replacement as a transition point (point C in Figure 1), a topic less discussed in the conventional project management literature (Invernizzi, Locatelli, & Brookes, 2018; Invernizzi, Locatelli, & Brookes, 2017b). These issues refer to the end-of-life of a facility or system and to the process of withdrawing it from service, taking it apart, deconstructing it, or migrating to a replacement (Kaiser & Liu, 2018). Decommissioning voids the conventional business case for a project: decommissioning projects do not generate revenues, landmark assets, or continuing employment opportunities (Ars & Rios, 2017; Invernizzi, Locatelli, & Brookes, 2017a; Parshall, 2011). The other distinguishing feature of decommissioning projects is that they entail a transition from operations back to projects.

In summary, project transition issues are critical throughout the different phases of the system life cycle for different stakeholders and at different organizational levels. Addressing the transitional issues of projects is important not only for creating projects that deliver value to their respective organizations, users, and operators but also to maintain a more effective delivery and realization of value.
POSSIBLE TOPICS

We solicit conceptual and empirical contributions on any project topic pertaining to transitions. One may consider the sequential model and examine transition across phases in the system life cycle as the main conceptual framework or propose frameworks that merge, pool, or otherwise complete the required phases. We welcome contributions from all sectors, explaining the key transitional issues. In particular, we would like to encourage conceptual and theoretical contributions that significantly challenge the established thinking and ideas about transitional issues in projects, including the phase-based model of projects and systems. The above subjects broadly characterize the scope of the special issue themes and should be used to stimulate more specific ideas, which might include variations on:

- Transition models that blur or eliminate distinct lines between phases. For example, in the software industry organizations manage development, deployment, and maintenance as a single phase with initial limitations to a product and upgrades following in subsequent releases.

- Social aspects of transitions, such as personnel transition concerns (retraining part of the workforce, the development of compensation and reward strategies, reassignment of duties and workers, the creation of alternative employment, and restructuring). Consideration of the public acceptance barriers that raise fear and lower public participation due to perceived risks is crucial to many transitions.

- In large infrastructure, ad hoc project companies are set up to facilitate the transitions between project phases. These organizations are the special purpose vehicles/entities (SPVs/SPEs) frequently used for project finance and public–private partnerships (Sainati, Brookes, & Locatelli, 2017). Relationships with and the evolution of these organizations warrant study.

- Dealing with poor knowledge and information management throughout the entire life cycle contributes to increasing project uncertainty related to an unknown status or unusual characteristics.

- Funding and contract issues impact any transition, including partnerships between disparate entities.

- Coping with institutional challenges. Projects must comply with both international and national laws and regulations, norms, and cultures. Global systems going into production face local privacy and accounting concerns. Regional regulations hinder transitions, adding complexity, unplanned changes, and unexpected costs.

SUBMISSIONS

Full papers must be submitted by 31 January 2019 via the journal submission site (https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/pmj). General submission guidelines are found at https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/project-management-journal/journal203528#submission-guidelines. Papers accepted for publication but not included in the special issue will be published in a regular issue of the journal. If you have any additional questions, please consult any of the special issue editors.

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