



Guest Editorial

Lifecycles, processes, and practices in strategic projects and programs

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1. Introduction

Organizations implement strategic projects and programs to renew the scope of their business, improve their value-creating processes, and achieve competitive advantage in a dynamic context (Martinsuo et al., 2020; 2022a). Strategic projects and programs may require innovations in products, services, and processes, as well as ways of operating both within organizations and within inter-organizational networks. This special issue builds on a prior special issue of International Journal of Project Management (Martinsuo et al., 2022a), with the intent of advancing the knowledge of strategic projects and programs in practice: how they take shape, proceed, and create benefits for their parent organizations by implementing a desired strategic transformation (Martinsuo et al., 2022b).

This special issue is topical, especially as organizations are facing increasing pressure to respond to and even anticipate broader movements and transformations in society. The crises and grand challenges of society require organizations to develop new solutions quickly, implement solutions in a resource efficient manner, and renew their own capabilities (Locatelli et al., 2023). Strategic projects and programs bring together people associated with different functions of a parent organization or even different organizations to develop and implement solutions for strategic problems. Although they can transform the way in which an organization or a network of organizations operates, the integration of strategic projects and programs with one or more parent organizations must be handled carefully (BenMahmoud-Jouini & Charue-Duboc, 2022; Klessova et al., 2022; Malherbe, 2022). Strategic projects and programs implement processes, routines, and practices for coordinating cross-functional and cross-organizational resource and knowledge use, and the call for the special issue expressed a need for increased understanding of these processes, routines, and practices in various contexts (Martinsuo et al., 2022b).

This special issue offers new knowledge on strategic projects and programs that represent various strategic transformations in and between organizations, either throughout their lifecycles or in a specific phase. We view these lifecycles broadly and acknowledge the iterative and fuzzy early phase, followed by intensive development and

implementation, continuing to the expected dissolution of the project or program when the results are taken into use by the parent or user organization. With the special issue call, we focus our attention on strategic projects and programs in their real-life contexts. These projects and programs operate under uncertainty and are integrated with parent organizations or networks of organizations that expect to benefit from them. We especially requested explorations of 1) the lifecycles of strategic projects and programs in various strategic projects and programs, 2) complexity in the processes of strategic projects and programs and in managers' work, and 3) the emergence and evolution of strategic projects and programs in managerial practice and various contexts.

2. Overview of the special issue papers

The call for papers (Martinsuo et al., 2022b) attracted about 20 paper proposals. After a careful first screening by the guest editors, nine author teams were invited to submit a full paper. We organized a paper development workshop with the authors to support the development of high-quality papers, encourage theoretical diversity, and ensure a good match between the papers and the special issue scope. The papers underwent a careful review and revision process, with two to four rounds of revisions, after the first proposal submission. The resulting seven papers represent a diversity of levels of analysis, focuses, theoretical lenses, and industry contexts, as summarized in Table 1.

All the accepted articles happen to be case studies, as were also many of the proposals that were not accepted for the special issue. Given our goal of understanding practice in its real-life context, the choice of a case study research design is well justified. By selecting these papers and supporting their development, we felt that this special issue would showcase case study research in project organizing, revealing its applicability regarding various levels, scopes, and contexts. As the table shows, the studies differ regarding whether they deal with a specific project, a program, multiple projects, or the connections between projects, as well as the level at which practices or processes are treated. Also, various industries are covered, indicating a broad spectrum of contexts for strategic projects and programs. Some of the projects and programs are investigated from an intra-organizational perspective

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(Eikelenboom & van Marrewijk, 2024; Wang et al., 2024), whereas most of the papers explore an inter-organizational setting (Daniel, 2024; Frederiksen et al., 2024; Hedborg et al., 2024; Valkokari et al., 2024; Vosman et al., 2024).

The authors have offered comprehensive case accounts and, thereby, ensured methodological versatility and triangulation (Martinsuo & Huemann, 2021). Most of the papers use rich data derived from interviews with people involved in the projects and their parent organizations, which gives voice to the actual actors who perform the everyday practices (Gioia et al., 2013; Mantere, 2008). Some of the studies include various kinds of observations (participant observation, non-participant observation, and field visits) and even field ethnography, showing the importance of the proximity of the researchers to the phenomena they investigate. Documents and media sources are used in various ways, either to support and triangulate the other data or even as the primary data.

As requested in the call for papers (Martinsuo et al., 2022b), most of the papers shed light on the individual level of project management, focusing on the agency of individuals. In particular, they demonstrate the importance of interactions among individuals at various levels of an organization (Eikelenboom & Van Marrewijk, 2024; Wang et al., 2024) and among individuals working for different organizations (Daniel, 2024; Frederiksen et al., 2024; Hedborg et al., 2024; Valkokari et al., 2024; Vosman et al., 2024), thereby showing the importance of interfaces between levels and organizations for the development of strategic projects and programs. The table reveals the theoretical diversity of the selected papers. Each paper brings forth a unique theoretical framing for the issues experienced in strategic programs, including institutional logics, organizational routines, integration, purposeful systems, knowledge transfer, strategizing, boundary work, and governance and contracting. We next introduce the articles, which are divided into those that concern a process and lifecycle view and those that concern practices in strategic projects and programs.

3. Process and lifecycle view of strategic projects and programs

Three papers adopt a processual and lifecycle view of the investigated strategic project or program. They all report single case studies and clearly portray the change that occurs in the project or program over time. They all reveal the connection between actions at the individual level and transformation at a higher level in the organizational or institutional context, but they theorize about these connections in very different ways.

Wang et al. (2024) draw our attention to the institutional logic underlying the way in which an organization operates and suggest that institutionalized routines may prevent change from being achieved. They study changes in institutional logics during organizational change projects, combining institutional theory with knowledge of

organizational change projects. They investigate the case of a state-owned heavy machinery company that has undergone a dramatic organizational change, having been transformed from a plan-oriented to market-oriented logic over a five-year timeline. The findings reveal the mechanisms underlying organizational deinstitutionalization, institution building, and re-institutionalization, linking the individual- and organization-level logics with organizational change. Consequently, they propose a model of institutional logic change that connects individual-level actions to break free from the institutionalized routines with the organization-level emergence of new routines. The authors advocate the projectification of organizational change and see it as a mechanism for transforming institutional logics to overcome employees' resistance to change. The paper offers helpful viewpoints on organizational change for project managers by emphasizing the organizational contextuality of these kinds of strategic change projects.

Frederiksen et al. (2024) investigate the dynamics of routine creation and transfer in strategic programs that operate in the context of more than one parent organization. They ask how a strategic program facilitates the creation and transfer of routines and, thereby, promotes the parent organization's strategic transformation. Their theoretical framing combines organizational routines and their creation with program management. The case study concerns a strategic partnership program in the construction industry with a public sector client organization and a private sector construction contractor consortium as the two parent organizations. As key results, they report that the entrenchment of inter-organizational routines in the program fostered inter-organizational collaboration, the parent organizations' efforts to dis-embed the developed routines from the program enhanced transferability, and changes made in the parent organizations re-embedded the routines. The key contributions offer new knowledge on inter-organizational programs' routine creation, which spans organizational boundaries, as well as the dynamics and transfer of routines between the program and parent organizations, which represent different industries and cultures. The study highlights the embeddedness of strategic programs in the worlds of multiple stakeholders and the need for program managers' skilled coordination of routines and their transfer across organizational boundaries.

Exploring one of the largest recent challenges for societies all over the world, Daniel (2024) studies the events and dynamic processes at and between the program, project, and operational levels during the vaccination campaign in France in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Daniel's research interest in this multi-level systems view concerns the mechanisms that drive inter-level interactions and overall alignment in terms of implementing the program. Drawing on the chronology of events as reported in public documents and the media and applying the purposeful systems theory as a research framework, he identifies two inter-level mechanisms, a macro-to-micro systems integration mechanism and a meso-to-micro systems integration

Table 1
Overview of some characteristics of the papers in this special issue

Paper	Level of analysis	Focus	Theoretical lenses	Methodology and data	Industry context
Daniel, 2024	Meso, macro	Campaign (as a program)	Purposeful systems, integration	Single case study: documents, media accounts	Healthcare
Eikelenboom & Van Marrewijk, 2024	Micro	Between projects	Practices, knowledge transfer	Single case study: interviews, meeting observations, reflection sessions, documents	Construction
Frederiksen et al., 2024	Micro	Program	Routines	Ethnographic single case study: participant observation, interviews	Construction
Hedborg et al., 2024	Micro	Project	Practices, strategizing	Single case study: interviews, meeting observations, documents	Infrastructure
Valkokari et al., 2024	Meso	Projects	Governance, contracting	Multiple case study (10): interviews, documents	Innovation
Vosman et al., 2024	Micro	Programs	Boundary work	Multiple case study (2): interviews, documents, observation	Infrastructure
Wang et al., 2024	Micro, meso	Project	Institutional logics	Single case study: interviews, documents, observations	Heavy machinery manufacturing

mechanism. Together, these enable adaptation to new circumstances while remaining focused on overall goal achievement. Based on these two mechanisms, he proposes a general model of multi-level program integration dynamics that combines an operational destabilization dynamic initiated at the macro (program) level and an operational adaptation dynamic aligned with the meso (here: operations) and micro (here: projects) levels. The study propagates the systems view of strategic programs and projects and indicates major feedback loops and interactions in multi-level integration dynamics.

4. Practice-based view of strategic projects and programs

Four papers explore the practices within and across strategic projects and programs in their contexts, predominantly at the micro level of strategic projects and programs. They draw attention to both the boundaries between functions and organizations and the necessity to the exchange of knowledge across those boundaries. They also identify the need to pay attention to actions on both sides of these boundaries, not merely the actions of project personnel but also those of the parent organization and other participating organizations. The parent organization's formal and official mechanisms, such as contracts, may frame micro-level actions, but individual agency still prevails.

Diving into the intraorganizational relationships between the parent organization and its strategic projects, [Eikelenboom and van Marrewijk \(2024\)](#) study how the informal practices of the members of the parent organization influence knowledge transfer across strategic projects. They explore the ways in which internal experts, top and middle managers in the parent organization shape cross-project knowledge sharing by enacting their autonomy, motivation, and agency. Theoretically, they draw on the literature of knowledge transfer and project-based organizations. They explore this bidirectional dynamic (projects versus parent organization) using a single case study of a public organization's strategic project that was intended to accelerate the transition to circular construction. They find that knowledge transfer across projects is certainly shaped by the members of the parent organization via them enacting informal practices that enable or disable knowledge sharing. They contribute to the discussion of knowledge transfer by showing that these actors influence the motivation and ability of the members of the project teams to use organizational knowledge. Furthermore, they argue that these actors act in diverse ways; while middle managers are more inclined to keep the knowledge inside their department's boundaries, experts actively share the knowledge learned across projects. They argue that experts, top managers, and middle managers are crucial agents in terms of facilitating the bidirectional relationship between strategic projects and the parent organization and that this agency is important for the success of the organization.

[Hedborg et al. \(2024\)](#) shed light on the changes and challenges that evolve due to the use of strategic projects in interorganizational settings. They adopt a strategy-as-practice perspective and focus on the roles and responsibilities of middle managers in strategic projects. The authors use a single case study of the first stages of a strategic project in which a public infrastructure client wants to test new practices, specifically collaborative contracting, in their road maintenance contracts. The authors' goals are to better understand how roles and responsibilities change in response to shifting strategies and how the project actors navigate the complex landscape, with its variety of goals. Their findings point to crucial issues in strategic projects in public client organizations when initiating and managing strategic projects in an interorganizational context. During the formation phase, the initial goals and scope were downsized. Then, repeated changes by the parent organization induced uncertainty in either one or the other of the involved organizations and led to the increased isolation of the strategic project. This resulted in a multiplicity of actors whose responsibilities had not been clarified and who developed new roles; for example, actors without formal mandates evolved into positions of strategizing between the project and the parent organization. The authors reveal that strategizing

can originate from both the parent organization's top management and the strategic project. In addition, the authors point to the difficulties associated with limited timeframes for such projects. They call for thorough, upfront reflection on a strategic project's goals and the consistent definition of related roles and responsibilities.

[Vosman et al. \(2024\)](#) explore a project-based organization's ways of addressing various boundaries during strategic change when work is organized into interorganizational programs. Their study acknowledges boundaries at various levels: between the parent organization and program, between the parent organization and projects, and between projects. They tie the strategic management of change in programs with theorizing about boundary work. Their case study in the construction sector addresses two public client organizations that have integrated interorganizational collaboration into change programs. The results reveal the connectedness of boundary work across the three types of boundaries, from creating and filling the project pipeline to embedding and adjusting project practices, enabling continuity in terms of learning across projects. The cases differ in how programs are connected with the parent organizations, and this difference in integration appears to cause differences in the required boundary work in the programs. The authors introduce the flows of projects, processes, and learning across the various levels of boundaries as potential factors explaining change program success. Their key contributions provide evidence for multi-level boundary settings in complex change programs, practices relevant to generating a productive flow across levels, and the interdependences between the boundaries as a source of or obstacle to program progress. They also draw attention to the dependence of partner organizations on the capability of the client organization leading a strategic change program.

[Valkokari et al. \(2024\)](#) analyze the governance practices that frame project-based interorganizational collaboration for innovation. They argue that these governance practices should address various issues, such as the conflict between self-interest and collaboration among the organizations, knowledge sharing, the dynamics of multi-project settings, and encounters with unintended outcomes. Placing formal contracts and relational governance at the center of their analysis, they explore these governance practices using a multi-case study of interorganizational innovation projects. They find that these governance issues are resolved or worsened by the interplay of a series of relational governance practices and formal-contract-related governance practices. They revealed that formal documents are mainly used at the beginning of the collaboration, supporting the development of informal governance practices, and cast aside during the remaining collaboration, only being viewed if disputes arise. This legal perspective is interesting and, sometimes, neglected by the managerial analysis of collaboration in project studies. The authors claim that legal contracts and explicit relational governance documents are not prepared to manage inter-organizational consortia but, rather, single bilateral collaborations. The paper encourages the development of governance practices for complex interorganizational collaboration and following the evolution of governance practices over the lifecycle of such collaborations.

5. Conclusions and future research

This special issue offers four contributions to project management research, specifically that concerning the management of strategic projects and programs. First, the articles clearly introduce strategic projects and programs as both *intra-organizational* and *inter-organizational endeavors*. The call for papers initially highlighted the projects' and programs' embeddedness in the parent organization's operations and also invited inter-organizational considerations ([Martinsuo et al., 2022b](#)). As an outcome, the majority of the articles demonstrate the strategic projects' and programs' connectedness to multiple organizations. The inter-organizational aspects of the projects and programs do not indicate the mere involvement of various stakeholders in a project or program but, rather, the projects' and programs'

temporary and purposive embeddedness in multiple parent organizations. The papers in the special issue add new and theoretically different examples to the strand of research on inter-organizational strategic and innovation projects and programs (Klessova et al., 2022; Malherbe, 2022; van Marrewijk & van den Ende, 2022).

Second, the studies powerfully communicate the complex and dynamic nature of *collaboration between public and private sector actors* in strategic projects and programs. Most of the papers in this special issue, in fact, include public sector actors as either the focus of attention or the partner of a strategic project or program. Private sector actors, similarly, were introduced as focal firms or contractors involved in a strategic project or program. While we did not anticipate this emphasis on public sector involvement in the call for papers, the contributions of the papers reveal the multi-sector reality of strategic projects and programs. The papers offer important information about the challenges that may emerge due to inter-organizational boundaries, various operating logics and cultures, and requirement of knowledge transfer when private sector firms and public sector agencies and clients work together toward strategic change. Similarly, the papers reveal mechanisms that may be helpful as governance practices, integration mechanisms, informal communication channels, and boundary crossing in such collaboration. While public-private partnerships are often studied from the perspective of major infrastructure projects (Cui et al., 2018), this special issue draws attention to public-private collaboration for strategic change.

Third, the articles provide evidence of the *multi-phase and multi-level* nature of strategic change projects and programs. Adopting the lifecycle view and treating practices at various levels were encouraged in the call for papers (Martinsuo et al., 2022b), and the articles cover both of these areas. Portraying the lifecycle view, the articles show that practices emerge and evolve over time, some practices become routines, and these routines are transferred between teams and organizations and between projects or programs. The routinized practices may ultimately define the institutional logic of project-based organizing, which may either fit or clash with the logic of the organizations involved. Concerning the multi-level view, many of the articles reveal the need to understand different practices simultaneously at different levels. For example, what happens in a specific strategic project or program is experienced in various ways among individuals, in a team, in the parent organization, and in partner organizations. The sensemaking and interpretation taking place at the various levels may create boundaries between the levels, and communication, negotiation, and purposive knowledge transfer may help overcome these. Together, these findings offer some input for processual explorations of strategic projects and programs (Brunet et al., 2021) and encourage multi-level theorizing (Klein et al., 1999) about project and program management research generally.

Fourth, in connection with all the above themes, the articles offer a rich and versatile illustration of the *micro-foundations of implementing change* through strategic projects and programs. The practices and processes studied reveal the routines and capabilities that project participants use and also their dynamics, like research on micro-foundations in organization studies generally (Felin et al., 2012). The theoretical plurality represented by the articles and the exploratory case-based research settings indicate that theorizing about temporary strategic projects and programs will require additional research.

Case studies in these domains offer qualitative evidence in a limited context, which implies a need to continue research in the same domains in other contexts, with other cases, in broader samples, and in longitudinal settings. We believe that all the above topics deserve further research attention to strengthen knowledge on the everyday reality of strategic projects and programs and the dynamics taking place over their lifecycles and across multiple levels. In addition to public-private settings, there will also be a need to investigate the micro-foundations of change in purely private sector projects and programs, as well as in projects and programs delivered to a specific customer or using various theoretical perspectives on practices, routines, institutional logics, and boundary work. As the papers in this special issue did not touch on

purely commercial actors' interactions in strategic projects and programs, there are further possibilities in terms of studying strategic projects and programs in other kinds of dyadic settings, for example, private sector clients collaborating with consulting firms, information technology suppliers, or startups. Furthermore, we continue to encourage research concerning small and medium-sized firms' involvement in strategic projects and programs, as this was a topic suggested in the call for papers (Martinsuo et al., 2022b) but not covered explicitly in the papers.

Furthermore, the special issue articles propose several potential avenues for forthcoming research concerning the management of strategic projects and programs, including the following:

- Project management issues on multiple levels and across levels (i.e., individual, team, organization, network, and industry; Wang et al., 2024; Eikelenboom & van Marrewijk, 2024)
- Systems and related dynamics in project-based organizing (Daniel, 2024; Frederiksen et al., 2024)
- Power, routines, and related dynamics (Eikelenboom & van Marrewijk, 2024; Vosman et al., 2024)
- Mechanisms for designing contracts and agreements that acknowledge governance for innovation (Valkokari et al., 2024)
- Actions and practices of middle managers who work between projects, as well as top managers (Hedborg et al., 2024)

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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