Disruption and Agility Dynamics in Project Management Processes: An Institutional Theory Approach

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Abstract

This study aims to contribute to the critical discourse on project management processes within the vein of institutional theory. Specifically, the study will focus on the dynamics between disruptive elements and agility which lead to process and organisational change. This empirical research will focus on how project professionals have had to adapt and adopt new organisational routines, particularly following Covid-19. The global coronavirus pandemic has had a profound and dramatic impact on working practices, especially in professional occupations who rapidly shifted to home-based working. Individuals, industries, and organisations of all sizes have had to re-evaluate their management processes and project priorities as a result of the disruptive impact of the pandemic crisis.

Keywords: Project Management, Institutional Theory, Organisational Routines, Agile, Dynamics, Covid-19.

Citation

Introduction

In order to limit the devastating effects of the virus amongst its population, national governments effectively confined large elements of its active workforce to remote working from home (Office for National Statistics, 2020). In turn, the pandemic has stimulated the development of 'intermediate' normative solutions, resulting in a substantial repositioning of policy and legal frameworks, across a formation of short-term institutional continuity (Sonjit et al., 2021), in contrast to the development of long-term alternatives (Kurdin, 2020). In addressing these challenges during the crisis, project organisations and practitioners have sought to imbue greater inter-cooperation, develop sufficient foresight, incorporate stronger team solidarity, and optimise resources underpinned by clear leadership with effective communication platforms (Cho et al., 2021). As such, greater adaptation of organisational structure and strategies have been associated with a disruptive business environment.

Institutional influences, such as previous experiences, politics, and institutional rules, values, and routines (Dacre et al., 2014), shape projects in particular (Barber et al., 2021; Morris & Geraldi, 2011). The environmental pressure, or external forces, leads to the adaptation in organisational routines since they tend to reconstruct their routines in order to produce conformity with the institutional context (Feldman & P, 2003). In this context, the Covid-19 global pandemic has significantly disrupted historically established project processes (Müller & Klein, 2020; Sonjit et al., 2021). Once the institutional environment has temporarily changed

due to the Covid-19 crisis, the organisation must adapt itself by changing the structure of project management processes, and the organisational routines to comply with the institutional factors.

Within the specific confines of project management processes, institutional practices are concerned with creating an acceptable institutional framework for projects and programs, in order to ensure their success and effectiveness (Dong et al., 2021; Eggleton et al., 2020; Morris & Geraldi, 2011). Although the organisational structure has been pre-defined to guarantee project success, the institutional environment still has a mediating effect on it, but equally, projects themselves also have an impact on creating and modifying the institutional framework (Uriarte et al., 2019). Thus, it is crucial to consider how the institutional setting impacts projects, and how they generate or change an institutional framework (Dong et al., 2021).

This research therefore aims to contribute to the critical discourse on project management processes within the vein of institutional theory. Specifically, the study will focus on the dynamics between disruptive elements and agility which lead to process and organisational change. This empirical study will focus on how project professionals have had to adapt and adopt new organisational routines, particularly following Covid-19 (Müller & Klein, 2020). The global coronavirus pandemic has had a profound and dramatic impact on working practices, especially in professional occupations who rapidly shifted to home-based working (Moretti et al., 2020). Individuals, industries, and organisations of all sizes have had to re-evaluate their management processes and project priorities as a result of the disruptive impact of the pandemic crisis.

Agile Methods

In the context of Covid-19 causing change to project management processes (Müller & Klein, 2020), an important emerging trend is the use of Agile methods (Dong et al., 2021). Traditionally, waterfall or stage-gate project management frameworks are common in large-scale organisations (Addyman et al., 2020). These frameworks are commonly applied in medium to large complex projects to ensure their delivery and to mitigate project uncertainty. This in turn, provides stability for the structure to accomplish key project milestones that may be challenging to plan and

decompose the tasks among actors which need to be cooperated and coordinated across different goals and incentive structures (Söderlund & Sydow, 2019).

Although traditional project management processes, such as stage-gate process, have previously demonstrated number of advantages in terms of project stability, as previously eluded, this lacks flexibility and agility to manipulate unintended challenges such as those arising due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Sonjit et al., 2021). Thus, they might fail to manage the dynamic and volatile nature of practices in projects (Addyman et al., 2020).

In order to efficiently respond to radical disruptions emergent throughout the pandemic, the decision and action process for addressing Covid-19 related priorities (Barber et al., 2021) require a high degree of agility in order to provide greater levels of resilience amongst all actors across the projects. For example, this underpins solving issues through a systematic and rigorous approach (Weck et al., 2020).

Since agile methods tend to rely on a higher rate of adaptability (Dong et al., 2021), in order to address and when it is possible to capitalise from uncertainty in projects, project teams tend to adopt and apply such processes in order to efficiently and appropriately respond to highly novel priorities. Thus, the organisations may need to disrupt their traditional project management process from stage-gate process towards greater agility. However, considering established organisational routines (Dacre et al., 2014), it may be challenging for organisations that apply stage-gate processes since this may be a source of conflict at the organisational level. For this reason, organisations may need to consider these dynamic adaptations through disruptive activities across their process routines at the institutional level.

Disruptive Influences

Routines in the workplace are well-known for causing inertia, inflexibility, and disengagement (Feldman and Brian, 2003). Stagnation usually occurs when routines are deep-rooted in the organisations. Therefore, inertia is likely to counteract dynamic change in the organisational process. However, there is a possibility to generate flexibility and change even

where routines are well established (Feldman and Brian, 2003). For example, where external forces, overwhelm the process structure, it can undergo drastic disruption. In order to change routine processes, it is usually provoked by a crisis or an external disturbance (Barber et al., 2021; Feldman, 2000). This research therefore applies the context of the Covid-19 pandemic as an external influence at organisational level that has and continuously is disrupting existing organisational practices (Sonjit et al., 2021).

Extant research suggests that project organising is an essential element to manipulate the exogenous change in complex institutional fields (Winch & Maytorena-Sanchez, 2020). Therefore, the surrounding institutional context may define what is considered legitimate and what is not (Bresnen, 2016). However, existing institutional practices are also underpinned through the daily activities and passive internalisation of current practices by actors in the field (ibid).

Project Processes

Currently, organisations have been struggling to manage complex project management processes under the volatile conditions caused by the uncertainty of the Covid-19 situation (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020; Müller & Klein, 2020; Sonjit et al., 2021). Once the spread of coronavirus generates an immediate shift of work and social norms, it could shape a new paradigm across novel organisational behaviours in order to achieve project success (Eggleton et al., 2020).

Moreover, this may eventually lead to disrupted institutional pillars of the project-based organisations as they may see a novel opportunity to work in a new systematic procedure (Feldman, 2000). Similarly, when activities cannot generate the desired outcome or produce an unintended and unwanted result, participants may react by restoring previously established routines to ensure that desired outcomes are achieved (Dacre et al., 2014; Feldman, 2000). Thus, individual actions by notable individuals are critical to encouraging change or, conversely, help preserve existing institutional practices; however, routine individual action by those across the field of practice is often critical in reproducing or sometimes challenging norms,

standards, and practices (Bresnen, 2016). Although, institutional maintenance necessitates a significant amount of effort and can take the form of change in the organisation or its surroundings (Uriarte et al., 2019).

Research in Progress

This research argues that organisations need to re-evaluate and adapt their institutional practices in order to adjust to new dynamic environments through the implementation of greater agility (Dong et al., 2021), this study aims to examine how the Covid-19 global pandemic disrupts the structure of project management processes (Barber et al., 2021; Müller & Klein, 2020; Sonjit et al., 2021) through the lens of institutional theory (Biesenthal et al., 2018; Dong et al., 2021; Winch & Maytorena-Sanchez, 2020). More specifically, we intend to explore how project-based organisations adapt to the challenges that emerged during the pandemic, and propose to examine how affect stakeholders at the institutional level.

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