

# Three domains of project organising

Graham M. Winch, International Journal of Project Management, 32 (2014) p. 721–731

## KEYWORDS

- Temporary organisation
- Project-based firm
- Owners and operators
- Project governance
- Commercial management

## Article Highlight:

This article challenges the belief that project organising is temporary. It argues that most project organising is done by (relatively) permanent forms of organisation. It also argues that the belief of its temporary nature has limited the development of research in this field.

## What does the paper cover?

This paper develops a conceptual framework, which defines three domains of project organising as its theoretical basis. It also identifies two important new areas for future research in project organising.

## Conceptual framework of the three domains of project organising

The framework shows the three main organisational types in the field of projects:

- the relatively permanent owner and operator;
- the temporary project or programme;
- the relatively permanent project-based firm as supplier.



## Methodology:

The arguments in this study were developed through a critical review of selected literature in three areas of project organising:

1. project organising as temporary organising;
2. more recent literature on project-based firms;
3. the gap in between the first two, that is, the role of the owners as investors in and operators of the outputs created by the project.

## Research findings:

A brief summary of the literature review is as follows.

**Project organising as temporary organising:** The literature review on projects as temporary organisations shows that the concept is deep-rooted in academic research and is defined as such in the Project Management Institute's Project Management Body of Knowledge. However, there are some studies that argue that the analysis should be extended to include attention to the interface of the project with its parent organisation. In this article, Graham Winch uses the term 'temporary' to mean 'determinate': the project will be terminated at a pre-agreed point, which is agreed early on in the project life cycle by the involved parties.

**Project owners and operators:** Permanent organisations may become owners and operators of projects when they want to expand or upgrade their ability to deliver services. The role of these permanent firms as owners and operators of infrastructure has important implications for project organising, but there has been little explicit attention paid to them in the literature. This paper reviews the research of suppliers to owners and operators of the resources needed for projects and programmes.

**Project suppliers:** Owners and operators typically hire suppliers of project-related services, which are usually organised as permanent project-based firms. These firms bring skilled people together to work on tasks for a variety of owners and purposes. Projects are their core business, and it is important to realise how these firms fit into the framework.

**Project organising as temporary configurations of permanent organisations:** This study shows how project organising is best seen as a configuration of permanent organisations coming together to form a temporary coalition to deliver an outcome. These interactions should form the basis of new and challenging research for project organising.

## Conclusions:

This theoretical research study develops a conceptual framework of project organising (see **page 1**) as a combination of temporary and permanent organisations. The framework provides the basis for further theory development and future research.

This paper also identifies that, because the focus has mainly been on projects as temporary organisations, this has limited the range of research in this field. More research is needed in two areas:

1. at the interface between the three domains of project organising: governance, commercial and resources; and
2. on project organising as temporary configurations of permanent organisations, in coalition, to deliver outputs.

## Significance of the research:

**For researchers:** The conceptual framework developed in this study makes sense of the research field of project organising, based on three organisational domains. The article also identifies areas at the interfaces of the three domains that need further research.

**For project professionals:** Future research will allow project professionals to define more effectively the organisation of a project and its interfaces with the permanent organisations that provide it with resources.

## Comments from author:

My inspiration for this critical review was frustration at the focus of research and practice on temporary/determinate organisations when the world of projects is populated with many organisations that aspire to be permanent. This frustration was generated by our experience over the last 10 years at Alliance Manchester Business School (AMBS) of running large project management capability development programmes for corporates like BP (an owner of energy infrastructure assets) and BAE Systems (a supplier of defence materiel).

Since publication, this paper has been widely cited and is shaping debates in areas such as organisational project management as well as infrastructure development. The three domains framework now underpins the teaching of project organising at MBA and MSc level at AMBS and the Bartlett School, University College London. The principal change to the 2014 model is that the trilateral interface in the centre is now dubbed 'leadership, teamworking and innovation', issues which are core to all three of the domains of project organising. A textbook is also in development.

Over the last three years, Heathrow Ltd has been funding further development of the owner project capability concept at AMBS. This work made a significant contribution to the Project 13 report published by the Institution of Civil Engineers in 2017, titled *From Transactions to Enterprises*.

## Complete article

The original version of this article was published in the *International Journal of Project Management*, Vol. number 32. Graham M. Winch (2014), p. 721–731. It can be accessed via: [sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0263786313001518](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0263786313001518).

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## Association for Project Management

Ibis House, Regent Park  
Summerleys Road,  
Princes Risborough  
Buckinghamshire,  
HP27 9LE

**Tel (UK)** 0845 458 1944  
**Tel (Int)** +44 1844 271 640  
**Email** [research@apm.org.uk](mailto:research@apm.org.uk)  
**Web** [apm.org.uk](http://apm.org.uk)

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## Glossary:

### Owners and operators:

Permanent organisations that own and operate a service, e.g. energy utilities. They might invest in a project if they want to expand or upgrade their ability to deliver services.

### Project-based firm:

A firm hired by an owner and operator, which supplies the capability to undertake a project.

### Temporary organisation:

In this study, the term 'temporary' is used to mean 'determinate'. That is, the project organisation will be terminated at a pre-agreed point, which is agreed early on in the project life cycle by the involved parties.

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