Call for papers: Lifecycles, processes, and practices in strategic projects and programs

1. Introduction

Strategic projects and programs concern business-critical changes that renew the foundations on which organizations choose to operate in their dynamic contexts (Martinsuo et al., 2020, 2022). They may require innovations both of products, services, and processes and ways of operating in and between organizations. Strategic projects and programs do not necessarily deal with just one organization but may involve an interorganizational network pursuing either new business or even a broader societal or institutional transformation. They may also operate under varied modes of organizing, as chosen by the organizations involved (Geraldi et al., 2022). Further to the *International Journal of Project Management* special issue (Martinsuo et al., 2022), there is a need for us to determine how strategic projects and programs are initiated, designed, and managed, and how their outcomes are transferred to their parent organizations, to achieve the pursued strategic transformation. There are three pertinent justifications for this special issue.

Firstly, there is a need to explore *the lifecycles of strategic projects and programs more thoroughly, in different strategic projects and programs*. Strategic projects and programs are designed to achieve transformation within a broad system, such as a parent organization or institutional field, and their front end, implementation, and back end (operations) are all equally relevant and challenging. There are clear indications of dynamics in project and program lifecycles concerning organizational designs and value processes (Miterev et al., 2020), autonomy (Willems et al., 2020), and integration with the parent organization (BenMahmoud-Jouini & Charue-Duboc, 2022). Many other aspects of managing and organizing evolve dynamically in strategic projects and programs at the levels of individuals, groups, and organizations. There is a call for research attention directed toward the front end of strategic programs (Williams et al., 2019), as well as the dissolution of programs and the transfer of outcomes and ownership to the recipient organization (Martinsuo & Hoverfält, 2018). In particular, there is a need to explore strategic projects and programs that pursue broader institutional change in uncertain conditions and involve not just one organization but many.

Secondly, there is a need to understand *the complexity in the processes of strategic projects and programs, particularly how such complexity affects managers' work*. It is well-known that strategies are developed in a tension between deliberate and emergent processes (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985), but a similar tension applies to achieving strategic goals and carrying out strategic projects and programs, which requires further attention in the research field (Kopmann et al., 2017). Strategic projects and programs require new knowledge to be generated as they are characterized by interdependencies, change, uncertainty, and unpredictability (Martinsuo et al., 2020, 2022). For such contexts, complexity leadership theory (CLT) (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007) proposes taking an adaptive, dynamic, and emergent leadership approach. This is based on the conception of organizations as multi-scale, complex adaptive systems. Such a theoretical framing includes the possibilities of dynamic and temporary assignments of different agents to the roles of leader and follower, and no longer locating leadership functions exclusively with a predetermined leader or a corresponding body but instead giving way to emergent processes (Tourish, 2019). Beyond this, there is a need to explore alternative theoretical framings if we are to understand and mitigate complexity of the processes and practices that make up strategic projects and programs.

Thirdly, in parallel with the strategy literature, we need more knowledge on how strategic projects and programs emerge *as a coherent pattern of interlaced managerial actions* (Mintzberg, 1987, pp. 66–75) *embedded in a "dynamic, social, and fully contextualized" process* (Denis et al., 2007, p. 211). This practice-based perspective involves equal concern for the actions taken and the actors involved. Understanding the human agency of the actors who construct and enact strategic projects and programs requires a focus on their actions and interactions (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). Managers, in their in-between position between top managers and project teams, have the ability to make things happen (Doz, 1996). Portfolio, program, and project managers are the nexus of the parent organization's management; they interpret and give meaning to the parent organization's actions and provide context for the implementation of its projects, as well as control and manage the chaos of the projects' activities (Näsänen & Vanharanta, 2016; Vuorinen & Martinsuo, 2018). Yet, the agency of key actors becomes more challenging when multiple organizations are involved in the project-related ecosystem (Klessova et al., 2022; Malherbe, 2022; van Marrewijk & van den Ende, 2022). In such circumstances, there is a need to understand how managers mobilize knowledge through their everyday actions and interactions (Rouleau, 2013). Furthermore, there is a need to explore how their managerial action and dynamics of interaction with internal and external stakeholders affect the different processes that build the day-to-day of projects and programs and their expected outcomes. Furthermore, when projects and programs are embedded in the parent organization or broader ecosystem, it is important to understand how these managerial actions and interactions are enabled or constrained by the formal and informal practices (Mahura & Birollo, 2021) promoted by the context.

2. Aims and scope

This special issue attempts to develop new knowledge on the emergence, evolution, and ownership transfer of strategic projects and programs in their pursuit of a specific strategic transformation. The lifecycles of strategic projects and programs are viewed broadly: there may be a long and uncertain early phase of ideation and planning followed by an intense phase of development and implementation,

continuing to the transfer of responsibility and ownership to the parent or user organization. Strategic projects and programs cannot necessarily be planned comprehensively in advance, but their direction and content may emerge in an evolving manner throughout their lifecycles. The projects and programs may be viewed holistically or as portfolios of multiple tasks or projects, and they can either be assessed cross-sectionally or longitudinally. Regardless, we consider that strategic projects and programs are very specific to their contexts, occur in more or less uncertain environments, and are inherently tied to the parent or user organization that has initiated them. There is a need to advance knowledge in this domain, both to develop theories on strategic projects and programs and to offer practical guidance for managers and personnel involved in them.

This IJPM special issue invites contributions that explore and explain the emergence, implementation, and ownership transfer of strategic projects and programs. We are interested in various types of strategic projects and programs: radical innovations in products, services, or product–service systems, an organization's strategic change, technological or social innovation in an industry or business network, or a societal or institutional transformation pursued in a project ecology. We invite authors to consider strategic projects and programs in their context in an interplay with the stakeholder network or institutional field, or in their unique circumstances internally at the level of practices and routines. We hope to see rigorous studies that are deeply rooted in selected management, organization, and inter-organizational theories and that can offer inspiration and support for the skilled management of strategic projects and programs. We hope to cover multiple theoretical perspectives, both at organizational and inter-organizational levels, and concerning operational practice on the behavioral level. We invite authors to submit empirical studies that build on and feed into selected theoretical discourses and offer managerial guidance to persons involved in strategic projects and programs. In particular, process studies on selected strategic projects and programs will be highly welcome (e.g., Brunet et al., 2021). Plus, conceptual studies or reviews might be possible if they present sufficient rigor and insight.

3. Potential topics

We encourage authors to consider one or more of the following topic domains as well as any topics at their intersections.

The *lifecycle* view draws attention to what happens within a project/program, beginning from its early idea, continuing over the implementation process, and lasting until it is dissolved and the results are being used by the recipient organization(s). The lifecycle is not just about actions of persons involved but also events that occur in the near context of the project/program, in particular, central strategic activities take place at the early and late phases of the lifecycle, when the responsibility for the project/program may be dispersed throughout the organizations involved. While previous literature already acknowledges the embeddedness of projects/programs in the parent organization (Martinsuo & Hoverfält, 2018) and context (Martinsuo & Geraldi, 2020), here, we encourage authors to consider such embeddedness more broadly in society or among the stakeholders involved (Klessova et al., 2022; Malherbe, 2022; van Marrewijk & van den Ende, 2022). Plus, we hope authors will uncover the dynamic aspects of lifecycles. Research questions related to *managing strategic projects and programs in uncertain conditions during extended project lifecycles* may include:

- What are the successful approaches to defining goals and benefit expectations in different types of projects/programs? How do project/program types differ in managing the front-end?
- How do organizations initially prepare for receiving and using the results delivered by the strategic project/program? How are the outcome expectations coordinated and managed, especially in interorganizational projects/programs?

- How do the organizations participating in strategic projects/programs negotiate and decide on the processes of implementation?
- How do organizations negotiate and decide on the responsibility for and transfer of ownership near the end of a project/program?
- What kinds of lifecycle management issues do organizations face in interorganizational strategic projects and programs? How do they collaboratively steer the project/program over the lifecycle?

In a second topic domain, the need to consider managerial work and leadership roles in the *processes* of strategic projects and programs applies both to interorganizational and interorganizational projects. Interorganizational collaboration in strategic projects is particularly influential among small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), for example, in their product and service innovation. Such SME networks are characterized by a variety of autonomously acting participants with different goals, cultures, and work contexts. To make such a dynamic network successful calls for new competencies in the leadership and self-organization of the participating actors, to coordinate and control the activities within the collaboration (Matheis, 2015). There is a need to study the expectations, involvement, and contribution of different types of firms, including SMEs, in interorganizational strategic projects and programs. Research questions related to *interorganizational dynamics, interaction, and cooperation in collaborative settings* may include:

- How do organizations prepare for and decide on involving stakeholders in strategic projects and programs?
- How can SMEs participate in or initiate and implement strategic projects and programs; what kinds of capabilities do they need; and what good practices are there for succeeding with SME strategic projects and programs?
- How do strategic projects and programs access and utilize resources and capabilities, both in the parent organization and from stakeholders?
- How do strategic projects and programs share knowledge interorganizationally, and how do project actors learn from one another?
- How can complexity theories (such as complex adaptive systems, complexity leadership theory) guide the processes and evolution of strategic projects and programs in interorganizational settings?

Finally, to provide a third topic domain, managerial action, embodied in portfolio, program, and project managers' day-to-day work, is at the heart of the development of projects and programs. This managerial action is embedded in a context of organizational *practices* established and promoted by the parent organization, which can easily constrain their action. Moreover, they must interact with a wide range of internal and external stakeholders with divergent demands, which they must reconcile to move their project forward. Against that background, there is a need to better understand how these managers, in their day-to-day work, act and interact inside their organization, at the interface with other organizations (such as their client or the beneficiary of their project), or with different stakeholders that affect or may be affected by the project's outcomes. Possible research questions on *managerial action, interaction dynamics, and organizational practices* can include but are not limited to:

- How do managers of strategic projects and programs manage the constraints imposed on them by the parent organization (or broader ecosystem)? How, in their day-to-day work, do they contribute to the establishment of organizational practices that may improve the development of the parent organization's future projects?
- How do managers reconcile the divergent demands of the parent organization and their customers (or broader ecosystem)?
- How are managers' dynamic interactions with external stakeholders built, and for what reasons?
- How do managers prepare for and handle the ownership transfer of their project/program in or between organizations? Which processes

are involved in this transfer? How do managers build up and handle the dynamics in these crucial intra/interorganizational interactions?

- How do managers include the inputs of the stakeholders that are impacted by the outcomes of their projects? How do the dynamics of these interactions influence managers' day-to-day work? How do the dynamics of these interactions influence the project processes and lifecycle?

4. Process and key dates

Authors should first submit a max 1000-word proposal (including key references) to get feedback about the suitability of the topic for the specific issue. Please submit proposals directly to Miia Martinsuo (miia.martinsuo@tuni.fi).

Upon proposal acceptance, full papers must be submitted online at https://www.journals.elsevier.com/international-journal-of-project-management/→ "Submit your paper" carefully following the Guide for Authors and indicating the publication category special issue "Lifecycles, processes, practices" (available in the spring 2023). Submitted papers will be subject to the ordinary IJPM double-blind review process with multiple reviewers. For questions, please contact the guest editors.

- Proposal submission deadline (directly to miia.martinsuo@tuni.fi): 31 Jan 2023
- Selected proposals invited for full paper submission: Feb 2023
- Paper development workshop for invited authors: May/June 2023
- Full paper submission deadline: 31 Aug 2023
- Notifications to authors after review: Oct 2023
- Revisions and final acceptance decisions: early 2024
- Expected publication: 2024.

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