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## On temporary organizations: A review, synthesis and research agenda

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### Synopsis

Despite the ascendancy of temporary organizations to common practice in many industries, and their expansion as an area of academic inquiry, research evidence on their genesis, development and impact remains fragmented across diverse fields, many of which fail to engage with each other. Our purpose in this paper is to bring greater systematics to the scholarship on temporary organizations through documenting their evolution and assembling their bricolage. To this end, we develop an inductively derived framework for organizing the literature comprising individual/team attributes and interior processes, task attributes, tensions between the temporary organization and the permanent organization, networks and organizational fields and performance/outcomes of temporary organizations. We suggest how this nascent area of inquiry might advance through the identification of significant research opportunities and we highlight the consequences for broader management and organization theory development.

### Introduction and Background

Temporary organizations (TOs) are now commonplace in many industries with empirical examples evident in the literature from contexts

as diverse as crisis response teams, software development, inter-organizational strategic alliances and theatre productions. Seen by some as heralding a new "logic of organizing" (Powell, 1996:1), TOs challenge widespread assumptions of the antecedents of effective organization (Ibert, 2004), undercut the coherence and integrity of the firm (De Fillippi and Arthur, 1998; Grabher, 2002a) and "turn upside down the traditional notion of organizing" (Meyerson et al, 1996: 167).

To be truly considered a unique organizational form, there need to be elements exclusive to TOs which differentiate them from cognate forms. Although we see theoretical similarity between the TO dimensions of task novelty, multi-disciplinarity and interdependence and Mintzberg's (1979) 'adhocratic' organizational form, Mintzberg's adhocracy fails to capture the element exclusive to TOs, namely, their intentional temporal limitation.

### Methodology

Our protocol-driven methodology followed four steps; identification of relevant literature, analysis and mapping of the identified literature, synthesis of the literature across categories, and structuring of the categories around an organizing framework (Figure 1).

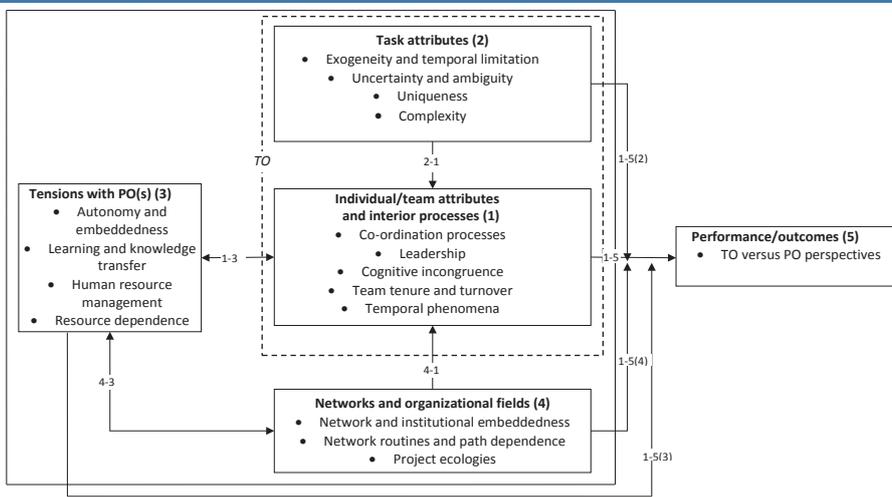
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**Figure 1: Organizing framework**  
Notes: TO = Temporary organization, PO = Permanent organization

## Issues and Questions Considered

We explicate five mechanisms governing the configuration and operation of TOs. Within the category of individual and group/team attributes and interior processes, the substantive themes identified comprise co-ordination processes, leadership, cognitive incongruence, team tenure and turnover and finally temporal phenomena within TOs. Substantive themes within the category relating to research on the TO task include its exogeneity and temporal limitation, and the fact that TO tasks are typically uncertain, complex and unique. Our third mechanism focuses on tensions between the TO and its permanent environment and establishes four salient features, namely, those relating to the autonomy versus the embeddedness of the TO, learning and knowledge transfer, human resource management and the resource dependence of TOs on their external environment. Our fourth building block focuses on three inter-related issues relating to the embeddedness of TOs within broader networks, the existence of network routines, along with path dependence and project ecologies. Finally, we focus on the performance question highlighting the significant measurement challenges with regard to outcomes which arise from conflicting perspectives on the interpretation of TO success.

## Future Research Agenda and Implications for Organization Theory

Arising from our systematic review landscaping the contours of this contemporary form of organizing, we propose an all-encompassing research agenda designed to open up new lines of enquiry and theoretically and empirically advance our understanding of TOs in a less fragmented and more holistic way than heretofore. It encompasses suppositions dedicated to exploring tensions between POs and TOs, team processes, goals and outcomes, along with underlying temporal dynamics. While the tenor of some research clearly suggests that TOs need to be understood in the wider context in which they are embedded, current theories rarely address the fundamental tensions and paradoxes inherent in this symbiotic interdependence. With respect to team

processes and dynamics, whether and how the composition of TO affects group processes and dynamics has been largely unexplored. In addition, we know little of the actual team formation processes in TO contexts. This is important because the cognitive incongruence apparent in TOs would seem to contradict more established theories on team cognitions which suggest that shared understandings among members enhance team performance and engender more accurate expectations of task execution (Cannon-Bowers et al 1993). With respect to the divergent perspectives on performance evident in the body of knowledge which are often juxtaposed as either an immediate production/task question (Lundin and Söderholm 1995; Saunders and Ahuja, 2006) or a longer-term strategic one (Shenhar et al., 2001), we suggest that future research dedicated to unearthing how TO outcomes might be linked with higher level indices of organizational effectiveness and how this linkage is institutionalized could prove fruitful. Our final proposed line of enquiry focuses on temporal dynamics and their impact on the functioning of TOs. Palisi's (1970: 202) observation that "planned temporariness has not been employed as an independent variable in analyses of organization structures" is now over four decades old, yet research focusing explicitly on transience and limited duration still remains sparse.

Our work has implications for broader theorizing in the field of management and organizing on a number of fronts. At a minimum, TOs challenge implicit assumptions regarding the role of time and temporal limitation which underlie dominant paradigms of management and organization theory which are largely atemporal. Indeed, in the context of Weick's (1979, p. 91) definition of organizing as "the resolving of equivocality in an enacted environment" [...] which "occurs through activities that are repetitive, reciprocal, contingent behaviors (interlocked) that develop and are maintained between two actors", if taken to its ultimate conclusion, where one or both actors in question is/are temporally bounded, these elemental building blocks no longer necessarily hold and, in part at least challenge what we have conventionally understood as 'organizing' and 'managing'.

**A full copy of the paper can be obtained at:**

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