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Organizational Context and Collaboration on International Projects: The Case of a Professional Service Firm

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Organizational Context and Collaboration on International Projects:
The Case of a Professional Service Firm

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Abstract

In project teams that are distributed across the international subsidiaries of a firm, collaboration can be a challenge. The organizational context of projects is not always conducive to international collaboration. Priorities and interests of sub-teams are likely to differ from those of the central team. In a grounded theory study of international client projects in a project-based organization, the impact of organizational context on collaboration is explored. It was found that the organizational context can provide important resources such as authority, policies, procedures and systems that can be appropriated to enable collaboration. However, this applies only when there are drivers for collaboration, consisting of interdependency and interest in the project's success. Even in a context not conducive to collaboration, the drivers encourage teams to constitute informal mechanisms, enabling some level of collaboration. A framework for the impact of organizational context on collaboration in international projects is presented.

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Keywords: Context, collaboration, international projects

1. Introduction

In multinational enterprises, projects are increasingly organized across borders (Adenfelt, 2010). Collaboration can be a particular challenge in cross-border projects, involving team members from various subsidiaries that might have priorities and interests that differ from the central team's (Sapsed and Salter, 2004). Behavioural problems observed include lower effort, free riding, evasiveness, non-response and non-participation (Sapsed and Salter, 2004). Collaboration as understood here requires an alignment between actors from various parts of the organization (Sapsed and Salter, 2004) so that they show co-operative behaviour (Bresnen and Marshall, 2002) and focus on achieving the project's goals (Leufkens and Noorderhaven, 2011). Apart from differing interests and priorities as impediments to collaboration, the organizational context into which projects are embedded varies in how conducive it is to international collaboration. This is particularly true for the traditional structure of Professional Service Firms (PSFs).

PSFs conduct a large number of client projects. They are said to epitomize the project-based organization (PBO) (Hobday, 2000; Sydow et al., 2004; Whitley, 2006). While PSFs, in particular accounting and law firms, have traditionally been organized as networks of independent national firms, some of the largest PSFs are currently integrating their member firms more closely (Segal-Horn and Dean, 2009, 2011) to enhance collaboration in international projects for global clients. The question is if and how this new organizational context actually improves cross-border collaboration. A case study was conducted in one PSF, which as a partnership is owned by partners who also manage the day-to-day operations of the firm (Malhotra and Morris, 2009), supported by managers who have not yet achieved partner status and typically each manage a team of associates. Initially, the Firm was a closely integrated network of national firms that retained considerable autonomy. There was limited global control of how work for multinational clients was executed locally. Since clients increasingly demanded quick globally coordinated reactions and an "'effortless experience' across borders" (Segal-Horn and Dean, 2009), The Firm decided to integrate national firms in Europe into a regional body (henceforth called "AREA"). The research question is: How has the organizational context pre and post integration impacted collaboration in international projects and what are the mechanisms of how context enables collaboration? Based on this case study, this paper will contribute a framework for the impact of organizational context on collaboration in international projects.

Recent research has increasingly highlighted the importance of the context into which projects are embedded (Engwall, 2003; Grabher, 2002, 2004; Lindkvist, 2004; Manning, 2008; Sydow et al., 2004). In the literature on collaboration on projects, however, the importance of organizational context has hardly been systematically recognized yet. No consistent framework for the impact of organizational context on international project collaboration has been developed yet. This paper and its framework will thereby also contribute to connecting the yet disconnected literature on project context on the one hand and the literature on collaboration in projects on the other.

The paper is structured as follows: It first outlines the research design. Then, it reviews the literature on the impact of context on projects as well as the literature on collaboration in distributed projects. It is then empirically investigates how the organizational context pre and post integration of the case study PSF impacted cross-border project collaboration and what mechanisms enabled collaboration, developing a framework for collaboration in international projects. Then, findings are discussed with respect to the project-based literature. In the conclusion, practical implications and suggestions for future research are outlined.

2. Research Design

A case study investigating collaboration on international projects under a changing organizational context was conducted at a transnational PSF1. To gain insights into the effects of international integration on collaboration in international projects, this study was interested in accounts of how partners and managers interpreted and acted upon newly established structures, systems, and work practices. Thus, the Grounded Theory approach (Corbin and Strauss, 2008), which as an open-ended research strategy is well suited to capturing the complexity of contexts as change unfolds and new forms of organization emerge (Bryman and Bell, 2003: 435), appeared most appropriate. It is regarded as "by far the most widely used framework for analyzing qualitative data" (Bryman and Bell, 2003: 427) and accordingly enjoys high credibility. It was decided on a single case study that allows investigating phenomena in depth (Bryman and Bell, 2003: 53-56).

2.1. Sampling and Data Collection

Following the Grounded Theory approach of theoretical sampling (Corbin and Strauss, 2008: 143-157), initial interviewees were selected along various dimensions such as regional locations, service lines, and rank to find variation in the data. The study investigated one

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[1] To protect the anonymity of the firm this paper refers to it as The Firm.

Western and one Eastern European member firm as "embedded units of analysis" (Yin, 2003: 42-45) within The Firm. In the Western European firm, interviewees came from six different offices of different sizes. Studying the phenomenon across the various service lines of The Firm provided additional opportunities for variation as was the case with interviewing both partners and managers. As the analysis generated concepts and these generated questions, further interviewees were selected who were deemed to be in the best position to provide more information on the concepts so they could be developed in their properties, dimensions and relationships (Corbin and Strauss, 2008: 143-157).

Primary data was collected through face to face interviews with partners and managers[2] between March and November 2010. The first 12 interviews were unstructured and short (about 15 minutes each) and conducted to explore and assess the scope and focus of my study. Respondents were asked to list perceived key changes that the introduction of the AREA brought for them. The following 30 in-depth interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, 18 were conducted in the Western European member firm, 12 in the Eastern European one. 18 partners and 12 mangers were interviewed in this phase. In this main round most of the interviewees of the first round were interviewed again in more depth, complemented by many additional interviewees. They were semi structured, allowing the interviewee much space to describe events and issues from their point of view (Bryman and Bell, 2003: 343-356). The interviews focused on respondents' reflections on their experience with the AREA integration and the main changes it had brought for their practice. All interviews were tape-recorded for later full transcription. Secondary data sources included a full screening of all articles in the weekly internal AREA email newsletter of The Firm over the first two-and-a-half years following the announcement of the AREA and further company documents relevant to the AREA integration. The author had been exposed to The Firm over several years, affording an in-depth inside understanding of structures and terminology, which greatly facilitated interviews and allowed them to be very efficient and content-rich thanks to shared understandings of company-internal matters.

2.2. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Grounded Theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008), which in essence is an open-ended discovery of emerging themes. Coding produced more than 180 constructs. Emerging themes related to four classes of categories were identified: Organizational context, drivers for collaboration, mechanisms for collaboration and outcomes in terms of

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[1] Only one interview was conducted by telephone

collaboration effectiveness. Each of these categories was described with its properties and dimensions. All quotations for each code were analysed and compared to identify their characteristics. Next, axial coding involved investigating categories within their conditional context. This allowed to further develop and link categories. Third, selective coding allowed to integrate and refine categories. After the analysis, it appeared that certain concepts in the existing organization studies literature reflect findings of the present study. Consistent with grounded theory, these were therefore used to complement, extend and verify the findings (Corbin and Strauss, 2008: 39). This applies to the concepts of institutional uncertainty and trust (Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003), appropriation (Orlikowski, 1992) and informal underpinnings (Ferner, 2000). The key propositions of the grounded theory emerging from the linking of categories are numbered and highlighted in italics.

To enable the evaluation of the credibility of a grounded theory study, it is recommended to provide information that allows judgement about the research process (Corbin and Strauss, 2008: 307-309), as has been done above and in what follows. This includes information on the selection of samples, the major categories that emerged, linkages between them and variation (Ibid). To increase the credibility of this study, already during the interview process, statements of the interviewee were summarized by the interviewer to confirm the adequacy of understanding. Also, the findings section of this paper was sent to three interviewees (partners from different service lines) for review (Corbin and Strauss, 2008: 305 to ensure "fit"; Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 314-315). All three partners confirmed the accuracy of the account in both written form and subsequent verbal conversations.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Context and Internal Project Dynamics

Traditionally, PM research focused on largely decontextualized "lonely project[s]" (Engwall, 2003: 790). Newer research regards projects as highly embedded. Sydow et al. (2004) emphasized that temporary project organizations are nested in wider permanent organizations. Projects can draw on structures and resources of the permanent organization. Grabher (2004) and Manning (2008) provide frameworks of levels of context into which projects are embedded. According to Grabher, context provides resources, legitimation and authority to projects. Engwall (2003) has developed a model of projects in context. Besides other factors, institutionalized norms, values and routines influence the project.

There are different understandings of context in the organization literature. In the later stages of data analysis, it appeared that Orlikowski's (1992) approach is very consistent with

what was being discovered in the present study. Orlikowski draws on Giddens, who sees context as containing both material features and human artefacts (1984:118) and providing an "environment of interaction", which is however not "merely something 'in which' interaction occurs" (1984: 71), as aspects of context are regularly drawn upon (appropriated in the words of Orlikowski) by actors in constituting interaction . While interaction in organizations is shaped by context (Orlikowski, 1992: 411), it is only through the "appropriation" of an element of context by actors that it "plays a significant role and hence exerts influence" (Ibid: 409-410). The focus here is on the role of the organizational context of projects, which is understood here as properties of the organization into which the project is embedded that have an impact on internal project dynamics such as collaboration and which persist beyond the life span of an individual project. This includes in particular governance and structure, policies and procedures, systems as well as people (including competencies and networks) and organizational culture. The organizational context thereby provides pre-existing resources that project teams can appropriate to enable collaboration. Similar to Engwall's (2003) "Project Interior Process Dynamics", internal project dynamics are understood here as the actual interaction and communication – including collaboration - of project team members as they implement the project, including mechanisms at play in the project that team members constitute by appropriating relevant elements of the context to enable collaboration.

Limitations in the extant literature include the fact that it has not been well investigated how context exactly impacts on internal project dynamics, that is what mechanisms transmit context factors to enable internal project dynamics. Manning (2008) emphasizes that research needs to develop an understanding of how context factors relate to project organizing. Also Engwall (2003) stresses that it is important to study how the internal life of projects is affected by factors at the organizational level. Further, the effects of changes in context on internal project dynamics (including collaboration) have hardly been studied at all. This would however be important for the understanding of the actual impact of context as we observe context pre and post a change and the subsequent effect on collaboration.

3.2. Collaboration on Distributed Projects

Project teams dispersed across several locations have often been found to struggle with problems relating to collaboration (Sapsed and Salter, 2004). Bresnen & Marshall (2002), while relating to organizationally, rather than geographically distributed projects in partnering arrangements, discuss the merit of formal mechanisms for "engineering" collaboration versus informal social mechanisms. They maintain that much of the extant literature on partnering assumes collaboration is a technical-managerial problem that can be "engineered" and under-

estimates the complex social dynamics involved, which are at least equally important as the formal mechanisms. This is an important foundational insight that calls for further studies, also in different, intra-organizational contexts, of the actual formal and informal mechanisms involved in collaboration and their interplay.

Leufkens and Noorderhaven (2011) argue that collaboration depends on how the people involved in projects define their interests. The emphasis on interests is an important contribution and starting point. However, their perspective does not acknowledge sufficiently the role of context. Sapsed and Salter (2004) also mention the role of interests alongside an important second driving factor relevant for collaboration - interdependence. This can be understood as a design of project tasks that requires cross-location collaboration to accomplish them (Sapsed and Salter, 2004: 1525). Dealing with collaboration on intra-organizational distributed projects, in their case study, local teams had no common interest and project tasks were not really interdependent. As a consequence, collaboration failed.

Sapsed & Salter (2004) also discuss an important factor that can be attributed to the organizational context – authority. They conclude the analysis of the failure of collaboration in their case study by stating that in the absence of unambiguous authority, tools ("boundary objects") like a Gantt chart will be ignored. Collaboration in dispersed teams benefits from ultimate control by a program manager holding legitimate authority. Maurer (2010) addresses another important factor for collaboration connected to context - trust. Grabher (2002), in a broader review of the topic of project context, connects the role of trust with networks: He sees it as a challenge that building trust normally takes time while projects are temporary. A solution has to be found, further according to Grabher, in the interrelationship between the project and the permanent organization and networks around it. This is an important insight as it is the only contribution that addresses an analytical integration of context and internal project dynamics to explain how collaboration on projects is possible. In this article, however, Grabher doesn't elaborate this further so it can serve as a call for future research.

A limitation in the literature on collaboration is that in the few papers explicitly dealing with collaboration, most focus on inter-organizational projects. The collaboration challenges of international project teams drawn from various subsidiaries of one organization, as are increasingly common today (Adenfelt, 2010), are largely ignored. It would need to be investigated further to what extent insights from inter-organizational projects are transferrable to an intra-organizational context. While inter-organizational projects may be embedded in a joint institutional field and sometimes in partnering agreements (Bresnen and Marshall, 2002)

or alliances, it is emphasized in other cases that they are composed of participants from "independent companies" (Leufkens and Noorderhaven, 2011: 433) and involve "outside project teams" from subcontractors (Maurer, 2010: 629). Hence they often don't share the organizational context of a single company that exists beyond the timeframe of the project that can provide longer-term resources that could enable collaboration. Further, while some authors concentrate mainly on agency and internal project dynamics factors like specific mechanisms for collaboration (Bresnen and Marshall, 2002), interest (Leufkens and Noorderhaven, 2011) and its alignment through interdependence (Sapsed and Salter, 2004), some address individual context factors such as authority (Sapsed and Salter, 2004) or networks and other context factors that generate trust (Grabher, 2002; Maurer, 2010). Yet no integrated framework that connects context factors and internal project dynamics systematically, including respective mechanisms, exists to explain collaboration on international projects.

The following case study generates an empirically-derived framework that shows how in international projects of a transnational PSF actors appropriated elements of the organizational context to enable collaboration. It thereby highlights that the yet disconnected two bodies of literature outlined above – "collaboration on distributed projects" and "context and internal project dynamics" – need to be connected. It contributes to establishing that connection and also to overcoming their respective limitations outlined above.

4. Findings

As a PSF, The Firm has a professionalized workforce (von Nordenflycht, 2010). It is organized along multiple dimensions such as geographic locations, lines of service, and industry sector specializations. It has operations in a large number of countries worldwide. At any given moment, it is conducting thousands of client projects from small ones at a local or national scale to large and complex ones involving member firms across a large range of countries. As all of its revenue-generating activities are conducted in a project format, it suites the organizational type of the project-based organization (PBO) (Sydow et al., 2004). As its decentralized structures were perceived as no longer adequate for serving its global clients, operations in Europe were integrated into a coherent body as outlined in the introduction.

The AREA integration brought considerable changes for the organizational context for international projects. First, specific factors will be characterized that were found to be drivers for collaboration. However, the organizational context was not always conducive to collaboration, particularly in the pre-integration situation. Therefore next, the most relevant organiza-

tional context factors will be characterized in their pre- and post-integration state. Then, their impact on collaboration via formal and informal mechanisms will be described.

4.1. Drivers for Collaboration

International projects in PSFs require collaboration for two purposes: Securing work (acquisition) and then delivering the work to clients (delivery) (see also Bayer and Gann, 2006). To secure work, typically firms need to provide a proposal to the prospective client, outlining the firm's competency, credentials, approach, team and pricing. In international projects, this requires collaboration to present the international team to the client. Fees and their distribution need to be agreed. Once the contract is won, collaboration is required to staff the international project team. This is not unproblematic as local partners may be reluctant to provide their best people to the project as they may have other uses for them on their local projects (Boussebaa, 2009). Once the project starts, local teams must provide deliverables according to the scope, consistent quality and timeline stipulated by the central team. These requirements provide one element of the drivers for collaboration (see figure 1) - interdependency. This is because collaboration is necessary to successfully win and complete international projects.

The second element is provided by the fact that at least the central team is motivated both intrinsically (sense of achievement) and extrinsically (performance evaluation) for the success of projects. In other words, teams are by and large interested in the success of the project:

"I have my annual goals and I am evaluated by it and when I don't meet them…" (partner, Western European firm)

"I don't need someone else to push me to do it [acquire and successfully deliver projects]" (partner, Western European firm)
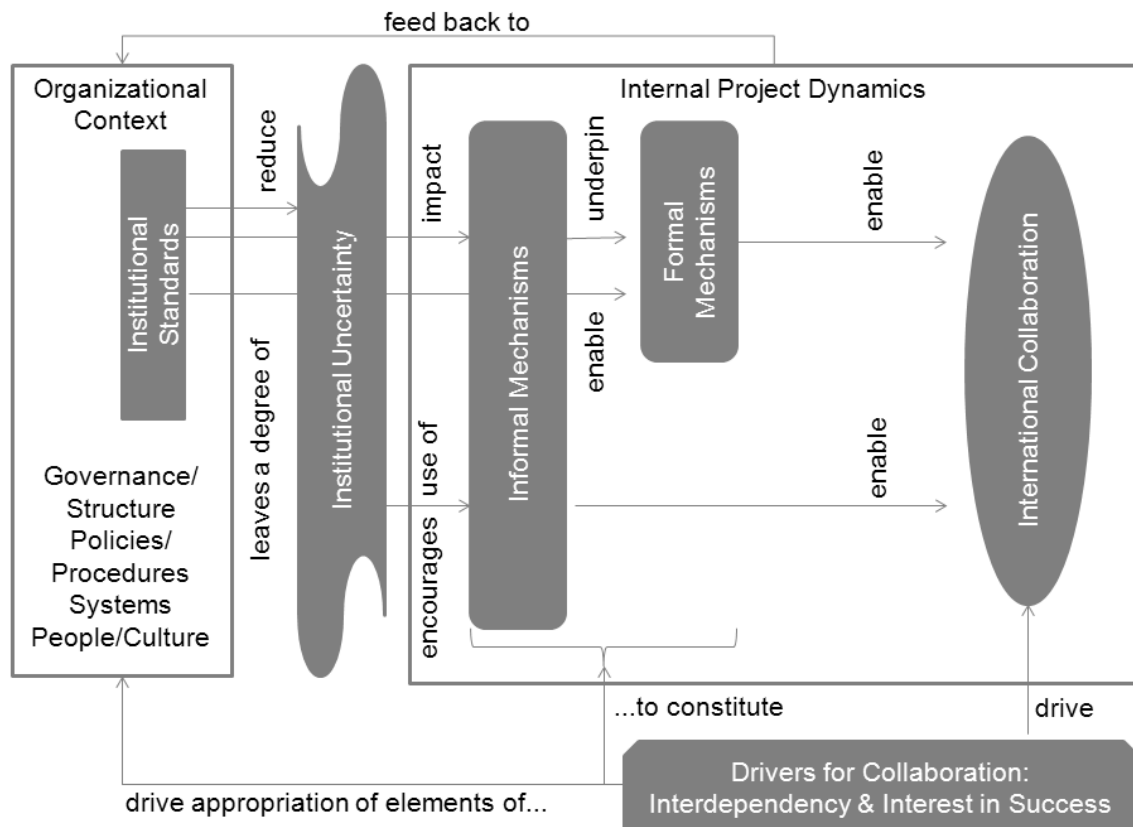
Figure 1. Organizational Context and Collaboration on International Projects

However, the organizational context before the integration was not particularly conducive to collaboration. Accordingly, some respondents reported that collaboration to meet the above requirements has in some instances encountered challenges. The most relevant organizational context factors will now be characterized in their pre- and post-integration state. These factors, highlighted as section headings, constitute higher-level concepts or categories (Corbin and Strauss, 2008: 159) derived from the grounded theory analysis. Table 1 summarizes context factors in the pre- and post-integration state.

Context Factors	Pre-Integration	Post-Integration	
Governance/Structure	National partnerships	Integrated European partnership	
	Weak role authority	Strengthened role authority	
Policies/Procedures	Often ad hoc	Formalized	
	Often inconsistent	Consistent	
Systems	Several applications not integrated: staffing, financial project administration, performance management	Applications integrated	Institutional Standards
People/Culture	Networks	Networks strengthened	
	Culture of collaboration	Culture of collaboration strengthened	
	Competencies: - Charismatic leadership - Ability for swift decision taking & agreement	- All remains in place -	

Table 1. Changing Organizational Context

4.2. Organizational Context Factors pre and post Integration

4.2.1. Governance/Structure

Before the integration each member firm had a separate partnership where partners collectively owned and managed their respective national firms. Member firms operated under a joint brand and many organizational dimensions had been integrated and coordinated. However, there was no cross-border ownership. The role authority of the central project leaders (here called "Engagement Partners") in an international client project (here called "engagement") was relatively weak. They had only limited direct control over sub-teams in other countries.

With the AREA integration partnerships in Europe have been integrated. A European body was set up that obtained control over the member firms that joined the AREA, creating an integrated international partnership. Central Engagement Partners obtained stronger control authority over international team members, allowing them to enforce compliance of local teams where necessary. This was reinforced through the increased control authority of the Global Client Service Partner and the AREA Service Line Leader.

4.2.2. Policies/Procedures

International projects in PSFs require policies and procedures enabling collaboration (Boussebaa, 2009; Segal-Horn and Dean, 2009). At The Firm this includes agreements on

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fees and scope of services, roles and responsibilities, financial project administration, templates for contracts ("Engagement Letters") with clients and CVs. Pre-integration, in many cases these items had to be agreed ad hoc at the project setup.

With integration, policies and procedures have been formalized (e.g. procedures for setting up an engagement and determining fees) and made more consistent (e.g. templates for CVs and engagement letters).

4.2.3. Systems

The general IT infrastructure had been integrated internationally for a long time. However, as far as individual applications are concerned, some applications had been integrated, while others were still national. In particular, systems for the staffing of projects and partner performance management systems were still operating nationally. Systems for financial project administration not yet enabled centralized charge codes for international projects. Partners' royalties were based on the national firm's profits.

In the AREA, relevant IT systems for international projects have been integrated. The integration of the staffing system allows Engagement Managers to see availability of competent staff in other AREA countries and reserve them for their projects. The financial administration system now affords the Engagement Manager real-time visibility of times charged to the project by local teams. The performance management system for partners has been integrated. A percentage of a partner's royalties is now based on the success of the entire AREA.

4.2.4. People/Culture

Prior to integration, Engagement Partners had built networks with partners in other countries. Where previous collaboration established experience-based trust (Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003), ties were further cultivated for future opportunities. Competencies played a role in two ways. Partners from service lines that regularly conduct projects requiring a swift set up of an international team reported that these service lines regularly attract people that have an ability to take decisions and reach agreements swiftly. Some international service line leaders were reported to be charismatic in a way that enabled them to convince reluctant partners to collaborate. A culture or spirit of collaboration existed already pre-integration. There was a level of international firm identity along with a norm of responding positively to requests for help from colleagues abroad.

After integration, relevant competencies remained unchanged. The collaborative culture still exists and has been strengthened further by integration. This is due to two factors: a) Factual existence and experience of the AREA as the new unit within which business is con-

ducted. Colleagues abroad are now much more perceived as part of the same firm. b) Integration brought a stream of corporate communications on the AREA and respondents reported that this did have the effect of strengthening the idea of being one firm. International networks were strengthened and expanded as the AREA integration brought more opportunities for international networking.

4.2.5. From high to low level of institutional uncertainty

The initial organizational context for collaboration on international projects generated a high level of uncertainty due to a lack of trust that would be created by formal international institutional standards:

"In the past, collaboration depended on the coincidence of whether you work with 'the right people'. You continued to work with the same people to avoid disappointments. Now you have a formal context where it must or should work. You are now more open as you don't say 'it has to be this person as he is the only one I trust'. You know they now have more interest in success. And if it doesn't work you have sanction mechanisms. […] Interests are more aligned today." (partner, Western European firm)

This aligns well with Glückler and Armbrüster (2003) who define institutional trust as "a general institutional framework that coordinates actors' expectations and thus reduces uncertainty in interactions independent of individual sympathy or specific personal experience" (Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003: 271). The AREA integration provided international institutional standards relating to governance/structure, policies/procedures and systems (see table 1), thereby enhancing institutional trust and reducing institutional uncertainty. These varying degrees of institutional uncertainty, together with the institutional context that generates them, constitute the left part of the model displayed in figure 1, impacting internal project dynamics as outlined in the following sections.

4.3. Internal Project Dynamics – Informal Mechanisms Enabling Collaboration Pre-Integration

Because the original organizational context, largely devoid of formal standards, was not very conducive to collaboration, project teams on international projects had to rely largely on informal mechanisms to enable collaboration (see figure 1). Therefore, project teams resorted to self-organization and appropriated informal (Orlikowski, 1992) elements of the organizational context to constitute mechanisms that enable successful collaboration. This is not to say that these elements of the context are part of the internal project dynamics. They predate and outlast individual projects and are available as resources for all projects in the organ-

ization and are therefore logically part of the context, but when appropriated, they become significant and exert influence on the project as actors constitute mechanisms for collaboration that draw on these context factors. These mechanisms are described in the two following sections.

First, respondents reported that already pre-integration a certain spirit of cooperation had developed in the organizational context. Project teams appropriated this spirit of cooperation, constituting it as a mechanism enabling collaboration on international projects. That is, they actively used it and enacted respective behaviours. These have been characterized as

"pragmatic, practical cooperation - whenever there is an opportunity, or whenever there is a project, and we really need to cooperate with different countries" (partner, Eastern European firm).

This is seen to enable flexible, responsive reactions to client requests and generally as very important:

"I believe, you know, if that disappears, you can close the shop, because this is the most important thing - whatever management structure you have around it" (partner, Eastern European firm).

Second, appropriating the context factor "networks", a key mechanism mentioned by many respondents is capitalizing on personal networks of colleagues in other countries and thereby trust. When Engagement Partners needed help for an upcoming international project, they selectively appropriated their network as a mechanism for collaboration:

"This international network has existed already before and will probably always remain a personal network. You just like to work with people whom you know and of whom you know that collaboration works" (partner, Western European firm)

This has two aspects. Either, people with whom one has already worked are the right contacts for the job, so people draw on experience-based trust (Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003). If a team member with the right skill set is not available in the direct personal network, people draw on the networked reputation (Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003) of someone recommended by someone they trust:

"What I would do is: I know that I know someone in this country. I would pick up the phone and say 'Whom can I talk to, can you help me?' - I need someone whom I know and with whom I have a trusting relationship and who opens the door for me" (partner, Western European firm)

Third, people appropriated competencies existing in the organizational context as mechanisms to enable collaboration. The first aspect is the charismatic leadership of AREA service line leaders to whom people would turn to bring a non-cooperative local partner back in line:

"Just in [Service Line] we have with [Name AREA Service Line Leader] someone in [AREA] who doesn't tend to say 'you do it now', but he talks with you nicely in a British manner and when you put down the phone you notice he has achieved just what he wanted and given you the feeling that you have requested it yourself" (Manager, Western European firm)

As a second aspect, people in service lines that require a swift set up of an international team appropriated the respective competencies prevalent in the organization:

"Agreements in our business were easier because there are different people working who are able to decide flexibly and quickly. It has since the beginning worked better [than in some other service lines]" (partner, Western European firm)

Proposition #1: Even in a situation of institutional uncertainty created by a context largely devoid of institutional standards that can be appropriated to constitute formal mechanisms for collaboration, international collaboration can be successful when there are drivers for collaboration so that people resort to self-organization, constituting informal mechanisms for collaboration by appropriating informal elements of the organizational context.

However, there have been limitations in collaboration prior to the AREA integration. Having to rely largely on personal networks for the identification of reliable international team members limited choice. Where partners in other countries outside of the personal network were contacted for help, responsiveness was not always as expected. The limited integration of IT systems for staffing and financial administration reduced transparency and control. Separate performance management systems provided little incentive for international collaboration. Having to negotiate roles and responsibilities, procedures and fees for every project took time.

4.4. Internal Project Dynamics – Formal Mechanisms Enabling Collaboration Post-Integration

The new organizational context that was created by the AREA integration provided institutional standards in the area of governance/structure, policies/procedures and systems that are appropriated by teams to constitute formal mechanisms for collaboration (see figure 1).

First, the consistent policies and procedures are now appropriated as mechanisms for collaboration and reduce institutional uncertainty. Project teams actively choose to put relevant new standards to good use to facilitate international collaboration:

"There is a multitude of things that would have required agreements at the individual level in the past […] where now with the new structure and respective consistent procedures for many things there are no discussions anymore" (partner, Western European firm)

Second, teams appropriate and leverage the control authority that central Engagement Partners and other key players possess in the new context as mechanisms for collaboration. Several partners reported that Engagement Partners actively used the formal authority conferred to them to reduce situations where local partners might have been reluctant to implement requests of the central team in the past. This authority is reinforced as the central team actively and selectively choses to appropriate the strengthened AREA service line leader's authority:

" In [country] for example, if something doesn't happen as we or [client] would like, you can escalate it to the [AREA] level and [AREA service line leader] has got the power to enforce the views of the coordinating office" (manager, Western European firm)

Third, the new joint IT systems were appropriated, constituting a mechanisms to further enable international collaboration. Engagement Managers use the joint financial administration system to directly control in real time the work of the local teams. The joint staffing system is appropriated by central Engagement Managers to swiftly respond to client requests as they see the availability of consultants requested by a client and reserve them for their project. The joint performance management system that includes an element of international profit sharing is appropriated as an incentive for international collaboration:

"Before [AREA] integration, there was no incentive. Now there is a much bigger incentive […] because there is a certain financial pool that is being built at the [AREA] level" (partner, Western European firm)

However, the financial administration system has not been appropriated consistently on all projects. A few partners reported cases where local Engagement Partners in other countries claimed the system was not available or fully functional in their country. This enabled them to avoid the transparency provided by the system and to retain authority over locally generated revenues. This is consistent with the concept of appropriation used here and Orlikowski's (1992) related explanation that for a technology to be successful in an organiza-

tion, actors must decide to actively embrace it, embedding it in their work life and determining how to use it in practice, which implies the possibility of rejecting it.

Proposition #2: The organizational context of the permanent organization into which projects are embedded provides important resources such as authority, policies, procedures and systems that can be appropriated to constitute mechanisms for collaboration on international projects and thereby enable project success

4.5. Internal Project Dynamics – Informal Mechanisms Enabling Collaboration Post-Integration

While the new organizational context provided new institutional standards that were appropriated to constitute formal mechanisms enabling international collaboration, the existing informal mechanisms continued to be important. In several cases, they support the formal mechanisms by providing the informal underpinning (Ferner, 2000) that enables the local effectiveness of the formal mechanisms. Conversely, some of the informal mechanisms have been strengthened by the new institutional standards (see figure 1).

First, the spirit of cooperation on projects remains important as an informal mechanism and has been reinforced through the awareness of the factual existence of the AREA and corporate communications:

"I think all that communication about we are [AREA], we are in this together, we are making that image of one company across all the countries, actually works with the people, and they start behaving like one. You can see the change - it's much easier to pick up the phone and talk to people" (partner, Eastern European firm)

Second, the capitalizing on personal networks of Engagement Partners continued. While the new formal structures are appropriated to facilitate the identification and staffing of local team members, several respondents continue to prefer working with contacts they obtain via their network:

"But it's not that just because we have this structure now we can suddenly implement it. The factor of personal networking is still extremely, extremely important. […] To call someone in [country] and say 'you [AREA], I Global Client Service Partner: jump' – would be nice, but he says 'I'll jump, but only in three weeks'. He will only do it when you can say 'we know each other'" (partner, Western European firm)

However, the AREA integration has provided new opportunities for networking that were appropriated to extend networks and new contacts are capitalized on to enable international collaboration:

"Networking is very important. Therefore I appreciate the fact – an advantage of the new structure – […] that we conduct many more training courses and meetings at an international level so that people get to know as many people as possible" (partner, Western European firm)

Third, capitalizing on institutional trust (Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003) has been constituted as a new informal mechanism for collaboration, appropriating the formal standards and the institutional trust generated by them. Drawing on the formal control and sanctioning mechanisms now in place, lead partners also choose to contact partners abroad as potential local Engagement Partners with whom no former contact existed, thereby overcoming the limitations of personal networks. Partners are now more open to work with people outside of their network:

"You don't necessarily go via people you know, but you ask – in case of [country], not necessarily in [capital city] if you look for someone in [city], but you are more open to ask directly in [city] and ask for a contact person […] I think you are more open when you know that in case it doesn't work, there are sanction mechanisms" (partner, Western European firm)

While the two above-mentioned mechanisms may seem contradictory, both apply: The integration did enable institutional trust so that many partners are now more open to work with partners outside of their network. At the same time, many continue to prefer to work with people they have either worked with directly (experience-based trust) or that have been recommended by someone they trust (networked reputation).

Fourth, the charismatic persuasion of service line leaders has been complemented by more formal power. However, it remains important as leaders avoid using formal power in the first instance and continue to rely on persuasion. Only when this should not lead to the desired effect, they resort to more hierarchical means, appropriating the new formal authority in a situational manner:

"[…] and if then, there are still problems, then I would think about hitting with the governance club" (partner, Western European firm)

The non-conflictive coexistence of both types of mechanisms can be understood by their consistent role of enabling collaboration where some informal mechanisms (e.g. spirit of collaboration, charismatic persuasion) "underpin" more formal ones, the preference of actors of some of the informal mechanisms (networks, charismatic persuasion) as long as they are sufficiently effective and the strengthening of some informal mechanisms (networks, spirit of collaboration) by the new institutional standards.

Proposition #3: In an organizational context where low institutional uncertainty has been created with the introduction of institutional standards that are appropriated as formal mechanisms for collaboration on international projects, informal mechanisms continue to remain important, are in some cases strengthened and support the formal mechanisms as informal "underpinnings"

Finally, in the model depicted in figure 1 there is also an arrow pointing back from the internal project dynamics to the organizational context. While not the focus of this study, the internal project dynamics do feed back to the organizational context, consistent with the tenets of structuration theory (Giddens, 1984). New and strengthened contacts on projects contribute to the networks that endure beyond single projects as part of the organizational context. The widespread enactment of the spirit of cooperation and the respective behaviors in project teams as a mechanism for collaboration reinforces and reproduces the organizational spirit of cooperation as part of the organizational context. The application of competencies strengthens them and reproduces their prevalence in the organization.

5. Discussion

In this section the significance of the propositions outlined in section 4 is explored in the light of the extant literature on projects. This is grouped into three sections dealing with the issue of collaboration, the role of organizational context and the role of informal mechanisms.

5.1. The Problem of International Intra-organizational Collaboration on Projects

It was found in this study that international collaboration on projects cannot be taken for granted, even within one organization, in particular where the organizational context creates high institutional uncertainty. However, most of the few papers that explicitly address collaboration relate to inter-organizational projects (Bresnen and Marshall, 2002; Leufkens and Noorderhaven, 2011; Maurer, 2010). It would need to be investigated to what extent these insights are applicable to intra-organizational international collaboration. In intra-organizational projects the organizational context of the company provides important resources. In inter-organizational projects, while there are longer-term alliances, in many other cases teams don't share an organizational context comparable to a single company that exists beyond the timeframe of the project. As at The Firm, there can be factors developed over a longer term in a joint organizational context that can be appropriated to facilitate collaboration. However, having stated that, the projects literature by being largely silent on collaboration issues on intra-organizational projects implicitly underestimates similarities in challeng-

es: Leufkens and Noorderhaven (2011) argue that in inter-organizational projects each party has their own goals and interests. As in this present case study, this can equally apply to teams from various subsidiaries in one organization. Sapsed and Salter (2004) recognize problems of collaboration in distributed project teams within one organization. Their findings will be discussed in the light of findings of this study in section 5.3.

5.2. The Enabling Role of the Organizational Context for International Projects

Manning (2008) argues that parent organizations hold resources for projects but that there is lack of understanding of how they relate to project organizing. Similarly, in a recent review article, Bakker (2010) claims that future research should continue to investigate the relationship between context and projects. This paper suggests an integrated framework that shows how the mechanisms outlined connect the organizational context and the project's internal dynamics. Drawing on the concept of "appropriation" (Orlikowski, 1992), it was shown how the combination of context factors that are conducive to collaboration and interested and interdependent project teams allows the constitution of mechanisms that enable collaboration.

While several authors have investigated the embeddedness of projects in context (Engwall, 2003; Grabher, 2002, 2004; Jensen et al., 2006; Whitley, 2006), they don't explicitly discuss the impact of change in context on internal project dynamics. Engwall (2003) does mention the dimension of time. However, similar to Maaninen-Olsson and Müllern (2009), time in his model refers to events that happen prior to, in parallel to and after a project. It does not refer to a change in the organizational context in the sense of the parent organization's structure or similar. Lindkvist (2004) is an exception, demonstrating in a case study how a structural change impacted projects, however not specifically collaboration. Thereby, the literature is missing empirical evidence for the actual impact of context on collaboration that would become clear when observing context pre and post structural change and the respective change in collaboration. This study is a contribution towards this aim.

By looking at context pre and post integration and its impact on collaboration, this study was also able to investigate how the formal vs. informal mechanisms play out and are interrelated when context changes such that reduces institutional uncertainty. In particular, it allowed seeing what happens to informal mechanisms for collaboration in this situation. This is the topic of the next section.

5.3. Informal Mechanisms for Collaboration on International Projects

This paper stated that even in a situation of institutional uncertainty created by a context largely devoid of institutional standards, international collaboration can be successful

when there are drivers for collaboration and people constitute informal mechanisms for collaboration by appropriating informal elements of the context. Sapsed and Salter (2004) discuss the concept of the "boundary object" as a possible mechanism enabling collaboration in distributed projects and found that the role of power has been neglected in the boundary object literature. In their case study, boundary objects have not been successful in the absence of an "unambiguous locus of legitimate authority". In this paper's model this would be the organizational context factor "role authority" enabling a formal mechanism for collaboration. The present case provides differentiated evidence on this topic. On the one hand, one of the key changes with the AREA integration was exactly to provide that unambiguous locus of legitimate authority by vesting the central Engagement Partners with this authority over local teams. However, this case study has shown that already pre integration where authority on international projects was more ambiguous collaboration worked quite well. This is because there was a necessity to collaborate (interdependence) and an interest to do so to win work and deliver that work to clients. So team members resorted to self-organization and appropriated informal elements of the organizational context (e.g. charismatic persuasion competencies) to enable collaboration.

A key difference between the two cases is that the Sapsed and Salter case was a contested internal project whereas the projects in this case study were client projects that constitute the way in which revenue for the firm and the partners involved was generated. They were part of the taken for granted raison d'être of the firm. In the Sapsed and Salter case "none of the participating communities is dependent on it [the project] for the maintenance or growth of their core task environment" (Sapsed and Salter, 2004: 1529). Therefore, in terms of this paper's model, in the Sapsed and Salter case already the drivers (interdependency and interest in the project's success) for collaboration were weak whereas they were strong in The Firm and triggered self-organization to enable collaboration. This highlights that the literature on projects has not paid attention to the type of project investigated in a case study sufficiently. The literature contains both internal and client projects that have very different dynamics. Internal projects are often contested as they typically change the status quo and impinge on the vested interests of groups in the organization (Nadler, 1988). Client projects are comparatively less contested as – in the case of PSFs - winning and smoothly delivering work for clients is the mechanism for the firm's success (Bayer and Gann, 2006) and conducting another client project usually provides less controversial direct changes for the organization internally. When making generalizations from case studies the nature of the project investigated should be discussed more explicitly.

Leveraging networks and the concomitant trust generated is a key informal mechanism for collaboration. In the extent literature, some authors discuss the role of networks, in particular Grabher (2002, 2004) and Manning and Sydow (2011), with the latter describing, consistent with Grabher (2002), how "project entrepreneurs" build and maintain networks of project relationships with people with whom they collaborate repeatedly. In this context, Glückler and Armbrüster (2003), though not developed relating to projects, provide a theory that is well suited to explain the phenomenon observed at The Firm. Formal institutions can provide institutional trust that exists independent of a particular person. If these institutions are missing, informal social institutions are required to create certainty for economic transactions. In these conditions, people use experience-based trust, where they work with people they trust. However, it can reach only a small number of people and they are not always the people required for the job. Therefore, people resort to networked reputation, drawing on recommendations from trusted persons to extend the number of trustworthy collaborators. In the present case, the latter represents the pre-integration situation at The Firm and this study has shown, by observing the effects of the integration, how the creation of institutional standards led indeed to more use of formal mechanisms for identifying project team members, relying on institutional trust. Contributing a new facet to the project literature on networks, this paper shows conditions where actors feel confident to use more formal mechanisms that overcome the limitations of networks.

In the extant literature, there is a tendency to construe informal and formal organization for projects as dichotomous. In the Sapsed & Salter (2004) case study, the authors decry the fact that "informal influence tended to rule […] at the expense of [formal] program management tools" (2004: 1531). Lindkvist (2004) argues that in his case study informal "rules of the game" in the studied firm "represent almost an antithesis to the 'instructional rules' typically associated with the bureaucracy" (2004: 17) and further claim that "we have to move beyond such bureaucratic […] ruling" (2004: 19). In this study however, it was found that in an organizational context where the introduction of institutional standards enables formal mechanisms for collaboration, informal mechanisms continue to remain important, are in some cases strengthened and support the formal mechanisms as informal underpinnings. One aspect of this is acknowledged parenthetically by Lindkvist who reports from his case study that "the context set up to both enable and constrain market-like [i.e. informal] processes involved classic structural [i.e. formal] means" (2004: 20) such as structure, reward system and role expectations. This pertains to the part of the formal-informal interdependency that in some cases informal mechanisms can be strengthened by formal means. In a different context,

this was indicated as a possibility ("it may well be the case that [informal] mechanisms of social control themselves depend on the supporting skeleton of formal systems") by Ferner (2000: 538). A case in point in this study is the strengthening of networks through the formal AREA integration that increased opportunities for international networking. Like Ferner, also Lindkvist (2004) mentioned this direction of the formal-informal relationship only parenthetically, whereas this study makes it a main point of investigation and shows cases where it applies and how it plays out in practice.

Ferner's (2000) main point, though, relates to the other direction of the formal-informal relationship: Informal mechanisms that operate at the local level provide important "underpinnings" for formal corporate mechanisms and actually enable them to work locally. While Ferner's case and argument is somewhat different, this study provides evidence that is consistent with Ferner's concept and applying it to a project-based case study has proven helpful. It contributes to this paper's framework that takes us some steps further from Bresnen and Marshalls' (2002) acknowledgement of a "potentially complex and dynamic interplay" of formal and informal mechanisms for collaboration.

6. Conclusion

An integrated framework for the effect of organizational context on collaboration in international projects has been developed that shows the interplay of context and agency in the constitution of mechanisms that enable collaboration. The study shows that on the one hand, institutional standards provided by the permanent organization can be successful in fostering collaboration by enabling their appropriation to constitute formal mechanisms for collaboration, by reducing institutional uncertainty and strengthening some informal mechanisms for collaboration. On the other hand, this applies only when there are drivers for collaboration, consisting of interdependency and interest in the project's success. Also, formal mechanisms are often more effective with an underpinning of informal ones. Even in the absence of institutional standards, the drivers can foster self-organization to appropriate informal context factors and constitute informal mechanisms, enabling some level of collaboration under institutional uncertainty. Figure 1 depicts the entire model.

This is largely consistent with Bresnen and Marshall's (2002) statement that while there is no one template for engineering collaboration with formal tools, one should not rely on collaboration just to grow out of social - informal - interaction either. In terms of practical implications, one could add in the light of this paper's conclusions that firms should ensure that for their international projects there are drivers for collaboration in place and that the de-

velopment of informal mechanisms that play a role in all contexts is facilitated. Formal standards can be used not just to generate institutional trust, but also to strengthen informal mechanisms such as by structural integration that provides more opportunities for networking.

A framework based on a single case study was proposed which may beg the question of generalization. Following Grounded Theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008: 319-320), the purpose of qualitative research is to gain understanding of a phenomenon. Much can be learned about a phenomenon from the study of one organization. However, further research in other organizations is needed to elaborate on the concepts developed. By specifying the set of conditions for the phenomenon in this study (intra-organizational collaboration across subsidiaries in a transnational PSF where context changed to become more conducive to collaboration), it can stated why collaboration developed as it did here. If similar conditions exist in other organizations, then much of what we learned about context and collaboration may help to understand what is happening in those organizations. Due to the importance of a joint organizational context in this paper's model, the findings apply mostly to intra-organizational international projects. Their applicability to inter-organizational projects would need to be established by future research. The framework contains several variables such as organizational context and drivers for collaboration. Further research could investigate cases where these variables have different qualities. While changes in the organizational context in the present case were consistently conducive to collaboration, future research could investigate cases of adverse organizational context change. Aspects of the internal project dynamics that feed back to the organizational context were mentioned only briefly. Future research could elaborate this feedback loop further. This case study deals with revenue-generating client projects. Due to the important impact the character of a project (internal vs. client project) has on internal project dynamics, it is suggested for future research to investigate the character of the project(s) in their case study more explicitly as an explanatory factor.

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