A contingency analysis of precarious organizational temporariness

Abstract

This paper extends our current understanding of organizational temporariness. The life of a temporary British trade union branch established to recruit Eastern European migrant workers reveals 'precarious temporariness', which is less predictable than the 'planned temporariness' typically portrayed in the literature. This different type of temporariness was associated with four key contingencies affecting the branch: dispersed governance, bottom-up initiatives, uncertain resourcing, and an effectuation logic. Analysis of the case extends our existing understanding of organizational temporariness and points to an extension of existing theorizing by highlighting the contingent nature of temporariness. The broader managerial implication of the findings is that for projects facing contingencies of the kind studied, the conventional linear approach of target setting and performance management will be less effective than an ongoing process of communication and consultation.

Keywords

Temporary organization, precarious temporariness, project management, membership-based organization, contingency analysis

Introduction

Well-defined goals and tasks and a flat structure, combined with flexibility and teamwork, are often identified as desirable characteristics of contemporary organizations operating in an information-intensive, rapidly-changing, competitive world (e.g. McGrath, 2013). March (1995, p.434) foresaw an increase in 'disposable (throw-away) organizations', which have considerable short-run efficiency in 'exploiting and refining current capabilities'. Yet, temporary organization [TO], a form of organization that embodies many of these features has so far attracted limited interest among researchers.

Temporary organizations [TOs] are often said to be appropriate for experimental initiatives and/or introducing new controversial solutions into existing structures (Bakker and Janowicz-Panjaitan, 2009). They are seen to help overcome traditional barriers to change at the personal as well as organizational level. Because of their limited period of existence, such organizations also tend to entail lower fixed costs and generally less irreversible investments of resources. In case of failure, they can be terminated relatively quickly with little disturbance to the organizational sponsor and individuals involved, thereby allowing more risky, innovative experiments (DeFillippi, 2002; Sydow, Lindhvist & DeFillippi, 2004).

Meeting the differentiated needs of customers can be another reason for establishing TOs. With an increasingly changing and 'liquid world' (Bauman, 2011), contemporary organizations often struggle to meet the rapidly changing and increasingly customized demands of their clients. TOs can potentially help in this regard by enabling clients to better influence the design of products and services (Girard & Stark, 2002; Hobday, 1998; Bryde, 2005; Ivory, Alderman, Thwaites, McLoughlin & Vaughan, 2007; Schwab & Miner, 2008).

Projects provide the most prominent examples of TOs. They have been studied across a number of industries including film-making (Bechky 2006; DeFillippi & Arthur, 1998; Sorenson & Waguespack, 2006), construction (Eccles 1981; Gann & Salter 2000), IT (Lindkvist, Soderlund & Tell, 1998; Orlikowski & Yates, 2002), and others such as biotechnology, consulting, emergency response and theatre (Bakker, 2010). However, even in such contexts, variations in the nature of organizational temporariness have so far attracted less attention from scholars (Bakker, 2010; Bakker, Boros, Kenis & Oerlemans, 2013; Kozlowski & Bell, 2003).

Although there is little agreement among scholars as to the exact meaning of the term 'temporary organization', the following definition offered as a result of a comprehensive literature review reflects how the term is normally understood: 'A temporary organization (TO) forms for the purpose of accomplishing an *ex ante*-determined task that has a predetermined termination point. It can be intraorganizational, occurring within an existing, non-temporary organization, or interorganizational, a joint collaboration among a number of organizations.' (Janowicz-Panjaitan, Cambre & Kenis, 2009a, p.2). Bakker and Janowicz-Panjaitan (2009, p.122) identify temporariness as the unique characteristic of TOs and define it 'as the finite time limit on the existence of temporary organizations (for instance in the form of a deadline), which has been defined at, or prior to, the TO's formation'. Consistent with this definition, the most common characteristics of TOs found in the literature include set deadlines and clear tasks established at the beginning of the life of the project that are realized in a planned manner during its lifespan (Packendorf, 1995; Janowicz-Panjaitan et al, 2009a). Bakker & Knoben (2015, p.272) take this view further saying that 'defining "temporariness" to mean whether a time limit is established ex ante, in which case specific expectations and formulations about the venture's end are set a priori, would constitute a clearer

demarcation that is less arbitrary in its empirical manifestations'. They suggest that the term 'temporary organization' applies only to 'those instances where time boundaries are established ex ante to limit the temporal scope of organizational processes'. While few organizations are likely to exist for ever, studies of organizational temporariness have a much more focused character.

In their review of how temporariness has been understood, Janowicz-Panjaitan et al (2009b, p.77) identified two approaches: 'short duration', where the main feature of TO is seen to be its short-lived duration and, more common in the literature, the 'limited duration' approach where 'TOs are characterized as being bound by a deadline'. The authors emphasize the importance of the awareness of impending termination as having high impact on the individual and collective behavior of TO members. Although time has been recognized as a crucial aspect of organizational life (Clark, 1985; Hassard, 1991), its implications for the functioning of TOs, their performance and relationships with the wider context merit further study (Bakker & Janowicz-Panjaitan, 2009; Janowicz-Panjaitan et al, 2009b).

In particular, we know relatively little about possible variations in the nature of organizational temporariness and whether these are shaped by contextual contingencies (Donaldson, 2001). The aim of the present paper is to address this gap in our knowledge. A case of organizational temporariness is investigated, where the termination deadline was constantly changed as the organization experienced revisions of its tasks and funding. The case we investigate was established with a clear and stated intention of future termination, with the deadline of the project being bound by its goal and tasks. However, its tasks, budgets and timeframe developed organically, with progressively new deadlines associated with sub-projects initiated within the organization. At no point, however, was the organization intended to become permanent. Through analysis of the

case, this paper enhances our present understanding of organizational temporariness and points to an extension of existing theorizing by highlighting the contingent nature of temporariness. We conclude that the outcome and lifespan of a TO can be less determined and less predictable than in the cases that have commonly been studied. In contrast to 'planned temporariness', the case to hand exhibits what may be called 'precarious temporariness' in the sense that an ex ante termination point is vulnerable to change.

Some authors have noted the static nature of much current research on TOs and suggested a more dynamic approach in order to fill 'the current literature gap concerning the lack of understanding of how TOs evolve and change over time and what drives such change' (Kenis, Janowicz-Panjaitan & Cambre, 2009, p.266). A dynamic perspective requires longitudinal data permitting a more realistic and comprehensive understanding of organizational temporariness (Bakker, Cambre & Provan, 2009). This conceptual and methodological approach would respond to calls to incorporate temporal features into organization theory (George & Jones, 2000; Kenis et al, 2009). Our study further responds to this call by offering a longitudinal investigation of a single case study.

The study is of a new branch created by a British trade union to recruit Eastern European migrant workers. It was noticed during preliminary investigation that the branch exhibited many characteristics of a TO. It was set up as a temporary experiment with a clear intention to terminate it in the near future, when its goal of attracting Polish workers to join the Union was achieved. This intention was mentioned during the interviews conducted as well as stated in documents. As a temporary project, the branch was not embedded into the general operational processes of the sponsoring organization (the trade union) and at no stage were efforts made to incorporate it into the union's framework. In the event, the branch evolved in an organic manner, with its tasks,

structures and resources flexibly changing over time. It exhibited different characteristics to the TOs portrayed in the literature, and conformed more to Sapsed, Gann, Marshall & Salter's (2005, p.832) view that 'it is not so much the temporary character of projects *per se* that is the most important feature distinguishing them from more permanent systems, but rather the recognition and anticipation of transience'.

The paper divides into the following sections. The first provides a review of the characteristics of organizational temporariness identified in the literature. The next section describes the methodology of the empirical study. The third section describes the features of the temporary union branch and changes during its lifetime, which are identified as sources of a 'precarious' form of temporariness. The Discussion analyses the temporariness of the case in terms of certain distinctive contingent features, which argue for extensions to current theory. It also considers the contextual specificity of these contingencies. The Conclusion outlines practical implications and avenues of further research suggested by the study.

Characteristics of organizational temporariness identified in the literature

Temporariness influences organizational life in variety of ways. Inspired by Bakker's dimensional analysis of the existing literature, the following review draws particular attention to four aspects: goals and tasks, resourcing, contextual embeddedness and decision making within a temporal pattern.

A singularity of goals and outputs, as well as the ad hoc and transitory definition of work roles and task organization, differentiate temporary forms of organizations from their more permanent counterparts (Whitley, 2006). A focus on specific task(s) can occur at the expense of human relations (Grabher, 2004; Saunders & Ahuja, 2006) and

result in problems for the sponsoring organization intending to capture and retain knowledge created within a project (Grabher, 2002; Sydow et al. 2004). Distinct aspects of people's roles within project teams are often negotiated only after the start of the project (Baker & Faulkner, 1991; Bechky, 2006); members interrelate with each other as they seek to meet targets within tight deadlines (Goodman & Goodman, 1976).

TOs heavily rely on resources allocated to them by the sponsoring organization(s), having little or no control over them. With resources being allocated at the planning phase of the project, these organizations have very limited flexibility in terms of resourcing (Gover, 1983; Bakker et al. 2009). Projects are resourced through budgets, which also inject a time discipline. They exhibit high external dependence, with a very limited capacity to acquire resources from alternative sources (Bakker at al. 2009).

Members also commonly do not have the time that more permanent organizational forms offer for building trust (Bakker, 2010; Meyerson, Weick & Kramer, 1996; Woodward & Woodward, 2001). Meyerson et al. (1996) suggested that members of teams in such organizations are bound by 'swift trust' as opposed to confidence that is built slowly out of mutual experiences. However such 'swift trust' may not be fully attributed to individual relationships, but rather reflect institutional trust, embedded in the collective experience (Bakker, 2010; Jones & Lichtenstein, 2008). Problems with building long-term relationships constitute barriers for the generation of the trust necessary for successful learning and innovation. (Grabher, 2002; Manning, 2008; Soderlund & Andersson, 1998). These features account for the observation that TOs are characterized by the problematic combination of high interdependence and high uncertainty (Bakker, 2010; Jones & Lichtenstein, 2008).

The immediate context of TOs is the sponsoring organization(s), but can also extend beyond this (Ekstedt, Lundin, Soderholm & Wirdenius, 1999; Sydow et al. 2004;

Barrett & Sexton, 2006). As Grabher (2004, p. 1492) has pointed out, TOs should be regarded 'as inextricably interwoven with an organizational and social context which provides key resources of expertise, reputation, and legitimization'. One of the important strands of analysis of TOs concerns relationships between the inner life of the venture and factors in the wider context (Engwall, 2003; Gann & Salter 2000).

Various authors point to the conception of time as the main difference between the temporary form of organization and an ongoing firm (Bakker, 2010). 'For a firm a cyclical time conception is applied, whereas the project follows a linear time conception' (Ibert, 2004, p. 1530). Time represents in this context a particularly scarce and valuable resource (Lundin & Soderholm, 1995). The time limits of a TO can influence the nature of decision-making and decision choices in them. For example, in a TO decision-making tends to be focused on responding to emerging events rather than adopting a longer-term perspective aimed at achieving sustainable development. Members of TOs tend to focus more on the present (rather than on the past or future) when they are compared to members of more permanent organizations (Bakker et al, 2009). Improvisation is often at the heart of a project (Ratcheva & Simpson, 2011). It is usual for project deadlines and milestones to prompt a change in risk-taking behavior. Instead of constantly evaluating possible options and trying to invest as little as possible of individual assets (time and effort) in order to obtain a return − a characteristic of more permanent organizational structures − time constraint changes individuals' calculations (Lindkvist et al. 1998). 'In contrast to more conventional goal-setting, specifying *'upper limits'*, i.e. what could be done, a deadline frames behaviour by expressing *'lower limits'*, i.e. what must be done' (Lindkvist et al. 1998, p. 947).

An important strand in the analysis of TOs concerns the relationship between the progress of a venture and factors determined at the organizational level (Engwall, 2003;

Gann & Salter, 2000). Here deadlines and milestones have particular significance, and attaining them is one of the main responsibilities of the leader (Wenger & Snyder 2000). They reduce the risk of members developing overly localized orientations (Lindkvist et al. 1998), while at the same time helping to preserve some autonomy for them (Hartmann, Ashrafi & Jergaes, 1998).

There is wide agreement in the existing literature that a key feature of TOs is a finite time limit to their life, which is defined in advance in terms of attaining a clear goal. However, the possibility that goals as well as time limit can evolve during a TO's life has not been yet investigated and contingent conditions that might have a bearing on such variation are consequently candidates for inquiry.

Research setting and methodology

Preliminary exploration

Since the end of the 1970s, trade union membership in Britain has declined substantially in both absolute and percentage terms. At the same time, the proportion of the population that is foreign born has been rising due to inward migration, including from the so-called A8 countries of the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Poland which joined the European Union in 2004 (Salt & Millar, 2006; House of Lords, 2008). This combination of developments has led to a widespread recognition within the union movement of a need to increase recruitment and organization among migrants. Consequently, recent years have seen numerous initiatives undertaken in pursuit of this objective. Many of these have focussed on engaging with potential members outside of the workplace because of the contingent nature of their employment or their location in unorganised workplaces,

and linked to a growing interest in the notion of 'community unionism' (Holgate, 2015; Martinez Lucio & Perrett, 2009).

The present case study arose out of a wider project examining how British unions had been seeking to recruit and organise East European migrant workers. This study drew on several sources of data. Trade union websites were searched and analysed to learn about recent projects. Relevant union meetings were attended during which we took observational notes and conducted short interviews with some attendees. We also conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with officials and project workers responsible for initiatives aimed at the recruitment of migrant workers from a number of Britain's largest unions: Community, GMB, Royal College of Nursing, Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians (UCATT), UNISON, UNITE–Amicus, UNITE-Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU), as well as six migrant workers union activists involved in particular initiatives. These interviews lasted from one to two hours, and all were recorded, subsequently transcribed and translated into English where necessary.

Analysis of these materials confirmed the generally temporary nature of initiatives aimed at migrant workers. They also drew our attention to the contrasts between such projects and those described in the literature. These contrasts suggested themes that deserved further investigation. We expected that the contrasts might result from a different organizational setting, high uncertainty of the project environment (i.e. union officials frequently reported that their initiatives had exploratory character and that they did not know what attitudes or behaviors to expect from Eastern European migrant workers). This preliminary stage of investigation also identified a suitable case study for a more in-depth investigation.

Data collection and analysis

We then undertook an in-depth longitudinal investigation of a new branch established within a trade union, from its initiation through to its close. This particular project was chosen because, following the preliminary investigation, we already had some descriptive understanding of its unusual temporal pattern, which included an explicitly-stated temporary character, fragmented leadership stemming from an uncertain organizational status, dynamically developing tasks and frequently changing bottom-up pressures. We expected that such features of the project might allow a new insight into the concept of organizational temporariness. Consequently, our objective was to explore more precisely the nature of temporariness in this project, and to examine the processes bearing on that temporariness. An in-depth case study was deemed to be appropriate to achieve this objective (Yin, 1989).

The branch concerned was established by a British general union located in a southern English city.[1] The union concerned agreed to co-operate with the research and provided full access to members, officials, meetings, and relevant documents. Our analysis of the detailed case draws on both primary and secondary sources.

The study commenced in August 2007 and continued until the branch ceased to exist in 2012. Data were also collected retrospectively on the branch's foundation in October 2006 and the intervening period. Information was gathered from documents, interviews and observation. Documentary sources included relevant academic and press articles, union leaflets advertising the branch and its work, as well as the learning centre linked to the branch, and more than 20 internal reports. They also included minutes

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[1] The identities of the union and of the city are not revealed in order to preserve confidentiality.

relating to a number of project workers' and migrant workers' strategy meetings plus 21 branch meetings held over the period from January 2007 to October 2009.

Semi-structured interviews (some repeated) were conducted with 14 main stakeholders of the initiative, including the regional education official responsible for setting up the branch, officers supporting the branch members, a regional organizer, a branch chair, the regional learning co-ordinator, two union officials related to the branch, and three Polish project workers, one of whom served for a period as branch secretary. The interviews carried out lasted between one and two and half hours. All were recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

In addition, two branch meetings were observed, along with a range of sessions at which project workers provided advice and guidance to individual members. A branch planning meeting and three large recruitment events organized in conjunction with local community organizations were also attended. Extensive observational notes were taken during all the events.

The analytical dimensions inherent in the literature constituted the initial framework of analysis, with refinements then emerging from the data. These sub-categories include: the project's goals and tasks, resourcing, contextual embeddedness, and temporal pattern. The process of coding data into a framework began following the first interviews. To aid this process, and informed by Miles and Huberman's approach (1994, p. 67), 'marginal remarks' were frequently used to highlight, clarify, reflect, and question various pieces of data. This led to revisions to the original codes, while also aiding the identification of linked sub-themes. Subsequently, some 'rudimentary connections' (Baptiste, 2001) between the categories identified were established, and later refined. The coding process resulted in a stronger focus on the nature of the temporariness observed in the case study organization.

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The data analysis process involved iterations between the empirical material and existing theory while being open to, and indeed searching for, unexplored and unexpected insights. Analysis was interactive, involving the categorization of transcripts, notes and documents, generating themes and then cross-checking these between the authors. The analysis of three interviews was conducted independently between two of the researchers in order to check reliability. Information obtained from individual interviews was cross-checked for validity with that provided in other interviews and by reference to the other sources mentioned above. Where disparities were identified as a result of this cross-checking, an attempt was made to resolve them in subsequent interviews or via ad hoc phone calls. More widely, the results of the analysis of the interview data were triangulated with the findings arising from the examination of the previously mentioned documentary materials and the various observations undertaken.

Given the study's exploratory nature, its findings are not claimed to be representative of TOs in trade unions or other organizations. Rather, the analysis of the case study is intended to broaden our understanding of organizational temporariness and its contingent conditions.

The Migrant Workers' Branch

A brief history of the branch and its organization is presented here to provide the context for the subsequent analysis and discussion of our findings. In the text, reference is made to the interview and documentary materials set out in Table 1. These serve to indicate the views held by various categories of actor involved with the branch. Each empirical reference is clearly numerated to correspond to the listing in the Table.

Establishment of the branch

The migrant workers' branch was established following the observation of the union's regional educational officer early in 2006 that there had been a large influx of Polish people into the city. It was estimated that 30,000 Poles were living in the city, representing about 10% of its total population. Against this background, he organized a number of meetings with members of the Polish community about the issues facing them. In August 2006 a public meeting for the Polish community was organized in conjunction with the leaders of various community organizations. Around 120 Polish workers attended. It prompted the decision to set up a separate branch for migrants. The inaugural meeting of the branch was held on 6 October 2006 and attended by about 70 migrant members. Shortly after the establishment of the Migrant Workers' Branch, a Learning Centre was created with support from the local City Council and the government financed Union Learning Fund. The main aim of setting up the centre was to respond to the specific needs of the migrant community.

The decision to create a separate branch reflected a concern, echoed in the literature on the relationship between unions and minority groups (Greene & Kirton, 2003), that the alternative approach of incorporating migrants immediately into an existing 'indigenous' branch in the city might be problematic given language and cultural differences, and the constraints these could pose in terms of participating in meetings and decision making process [Quotations 1-3].

Table 1 here

The branch was initiated as a temporary arrangement with a stated intention that eventually its members would be assimilated into existing union structures. The decision to set up the branch was a controversial one not only because of differing views among indigenous members as to the rationality of supporting migrant workers, but also because of ethical concerns about creating separate 'ghettos' for migrants instead of integrating

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them within existing 'general branches' [Quotations 4-7]. The branch was set up as a largely bottom-up response to the needs of the migrant community, which were considerably different from those of indigenous members [Quotation 8]. The character of these needs was, however, not clear at that time, hence the branch's experimental nature [Quotation 9]. Indeed, most of these needs were changing over time and themselves had a temporary character. There was also a more general recognition that it was necessary to introduce changes into traditional union settings [Quotations 10-12].

Operation of the branch

These developments occurred against the backdrop of several problems affecting the operation of the branch. From the outset, the branch experienced difficulties in engendering activism among the newly recruited migrant members, particularly in terms of finding members who would take on branch positions. These difficulties existed alongside a perception on the part of at least one of the project officers that members tended to only be interested in the provision of short-term help and rarely 'bought into the ideology of unions and/or wanted to be part of the community'.

As a result the running of the branch fell to a large extent on the shoulders of the various project workers by virtue of their acting as branch secretary. This situation was therefore inconsistent with the union's policy of promoting and supporting self-organizing among members rather than membership relations based on their servicing by full-time union officials [Quotations 13-14].

Project workers from the migrant community were employed to facilitate access to potential members, help to breach cultural and language barriers, organize projects and activities. They were young union activists recruited from low-skilled and paid jobs in nearby workplaces. These project workers were employed on short-term contracts

supported by time-limited externally funded projects. This resulted in their roles and responsibilities constantly changing with little sense of long-term direction [Quotations 15-16].

The union officer who had been largely responsible for the creation of the branch stopped managing the project in September 2009. Until then, this officer had provided inspiration and step-by-step leadership to the project. With his departure, project workers were left on their own, circling around previously-floated ideas. Formally, another officer took responsibility, but with less personal engagement and understanding of what the branch was to achieve. Polish project workers were now to a large extent in day-to-day charge of the project's initiatives; as one of them said 'we have an influence on what we do and represent'.

Funding

The migrant workers branch project was mainly funded from external sources. In addition to their normal duties, project workers were expected to write applications for further funding to sustain the project as well as their own jobs. Some of these applications were successful, but this funding structure resulted in continuously changing goals and roles, which needed to be adjusted to the requirements of each funder. These sub-projects were funded among others by the local authority, the Learning and Skills Council, the Union Modernisation Fund, and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). This situation resulted in high job uncertainty among the project workers [Quotation 17].

The nature of the branch's membership also created operational difficulties. It mainly consisted of members working in non-union environments and encompassed people living and/or working across a large geographical area. The first of these features

inevitably meant that most work-related problems raised by members could only be pursued through individual, difficult and labour intensive casework involving engagement with non-union employers.

The branch evolved erratically [Quotation 18]. After the initial period of enthusiasm the fragmentation of goals among the main stakeholders disrupted the continuity of the project. The union's intention was to use the new branch to enhance membership among a new category of worker. As this intention became realized, union officers were seen less and less in the premises. One of them said: 'That [meeting] was well attended, I managed to stay for half an hour to say hi to everybody.' (Union regional organizer). Also, as the needs of the migrant workers were satisfied, they became less interested in the branch and less inclined to engage actively with it. Because union officers were rarely present, most enquiries were dealt with by project workers, although their working hours were reduced following lower demands from members and staffing problems. This, however, was not a steady trend; the Learning Centre would occasionally become crowded if the members encountered a problem in their workplace. In addition, new initiatives aimed at expansion of the branch brought additional externally funded projects followed by periodically increased administrative activity. Because of its reliance on patchy external funding, the project worker role could not be sustained, which meant that the administration of both the branch and the learning centre suffered periods of disruption [Quotation 19].

The offering of new services based on external funding meant in turn that the life of the project was extended and its temporariness was not 'clean cut'. Its multiple goals and sources of funding added complexity to this lack of clarity.

The awareness of impending termination together with lack of a sustainable deadline, budget, or even tasks, resulted in fragmentation of the project. Rather than

developing along planned trajectories, the experimental venture meandered along various routes, in order to establish its tasks and create the best way of achieving them within constantly changing internal pressures and external environment. The non-commercial nature of the venture enabled access to external funding, but this access to various funding sources contributed to the process of fragmentation. The staff was continuously focused on finding funding to support their employment, hence creating tasks that could be appealing to the potential funders. Rather than developing and experimenting with the tasks that could support the overall goal of recruitment and organizing among Polish migrant workers, new sub-projects were scoped in a way that would secure further short-term financing. While the progression of many projects, especially within business organizations, tends to be linear despite possible punctuations (Engwall & Westling, 2004), in this project there were forces at work leading to a non-linear trajectory.

By the end of 2007 the branch membership had reached over 500, much exceeding the initial target of 100. From the middle of 2007 to early 2008 attendance at the meetings often represented around five per cent of the branch's membership. Thereafter attendance fell significantly, with meetings frequently cancelled because of non-attendance. After October 2009, the branch ceased holding meetings at all and became de facto defunct. It ceased to operate in 2012.

Discussion

Contingent sources of precarious temporariness

The migrant workers union branch displays some variation from the norm of organizational temporariness. The case extends our understanding of organizational temporariness with respect to aspects identified in the literature: goals and tasks, resourcing, contextual embeddedness, and decision-making within the temporal

pattern. The temporariness of the union branch project was not simply determined by the functional accomplishment of a goal that had been allocated to it and supported by assured resourcing. Rather, a number of factors in the situation generated uncertainty over the project's anticipated life-span and trajectory, which rendered its temporariness precarious. They led to the project exhibiting two somewhat contradictory characteristics. On one hand, all the project stakeholders were well aware of its temporary nature and inevitable end. At the same time, the project developed organically in terms of its tasks, people and resources. The case indicates the possibility that some TOs have deadlines, which are regularly compromised as a result of fluid tasks and budgets.

Although it could be argued that the specific temporal pattern of the union branch arose from strategic failures on the part of the parent (union) organization, we suggest that it stemmed more fundamentally from four contingent factors present in the project: dispersed governance, bottom-up initiatives, uncertain resourcing, and an effectuation logic. Analysis of these contingencies suggests an extension of existing theorizing on organizational temporariness in the form of new propositions. We then consider the context from which the contingencies arose and whether or not this context is specific to membership organizations of the type studied.

Dispersed governance

There was considerable ambiguity around the leadership of the migrant workers branch project. The governance of the project was dispersed between the educational officer, who initiated the project, union leaders, project officers, members of the branch, and external funders of the sub-projects. The project lacked clearly stated and consistently sustained goals. This led to the branch undertaking multiple and sometimes contradictory

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tasks. There was little collective negotiation and integration of the tasks performed. The regional education officer who set up the branch wished to use its provision of educational opportunities as a basis for recruiting and organizing new members, for strengthening the worker collectivism in his area, and as a source of external funding. The members expected support with their everyday problems related to living and working in a foreign country as well as representation in the case of trouble at work. The union leaders' interests focused on increasing the union's membership and raising its profile. There was low goal congruence, and it was not clear who was responsible for delivering these diversified results. Moreover, the lack of consensus among key stakeholders on the project's goals weakened its legitimacy. Although officially intended to have a limited life, the project's plurality of goals and tasks resulted in its progressive attenuation rather than a clear point of termination defined by goal and task fulfillment. The project limped, rather than progressed, to its demise. This suggests:

Proposition 1: Whatever the intention when a TO is established, dispersion in its governance reduces the likelihood of a sustainable point of termination.

Bottom-up initiatives

It is commonly assumed that TOs are tightly embedded in 'an organizational and social context which provides key resources of expertise, reputation, and legitimization' Grabher (2004, p. 1492). Projects are seen normally to have a specific goal that is informed by a broader strategy and to operate within tight timeframes. Both of these characteristics reflect a top-down dependency on a sponsoring organization or locus of authority. In other words, the contextual embeddedness of the typical project is fundamentally characterized by hierarchical dependence. The union project, by contrast, was to a large degree a bottom-up initiative. Local project workers had the authority to

undertake various kinds of initiative. They were motivated to do so in the hope of extending their terms of employment, especially in the absence of career paths into the main union structure.

There was some ambiguity as to how far the migrant branch project was informed by a wider union strategy because there was fundamental disagreement at the higher organizational level about the appropriateness of the initiative to establish the branch. The recruitment and organizing of migrant workers was a strategic opportunity for trade unions at a time of membership decline. On the other hand, it represented a departure from the workplace-based organization that the union was seeking to establish. Against this background, the bottom-up initiatives we have noted represented low-risk experiments, encouraged by external funding available for their development. The limited commitment of union resources and interest, however, led to a detachment of the projects from the union's main structure and, to some extent, the loss of an overview of the tasks and resources of the project. These features suggest:

Proposition 2: When a TO is lodged within a system of bottom-up authority, its members will seek to renegotiate or prolong its length of life, especially if they do not have clear paths of re-entry into a parent or sponsoring organization.

Uncertain resourcing

The project did not have a single source of funding clearly linked to one overriding goal. The resourcing, and hence staffing, of the migrant branch project was not secure. Project workers were continuously involved in writing grant applications to fund new sub-projects. One reason why new initiatives were developed to extend the life of the branch was to keep project officers in employment. Impending completion of the original project, after which the branch members would likely be absorbed into the regular union

structure, presented a threat to staff because most of them had no guarantee of employment thereafter. This extension of the branch's original task is somewhat comparable to the well-known case of the mission change made by the US National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis to maintain its existence once it had fulfilled its original formal purpose of eradicating polio (Baghdady & Maddock, 2008). Each of the new initiatives was prepared as a response to a specific funding opportunity and involved creating new goals and tasks for the overall project as well as new timeframes.

Hence:

Proposition 3: When the funding of a TO is not established at the start of the project, and is acquired from multiple sources, it will be more difficult for the project to have a single primary goal and hence agreement as to when its task is accomplished.

An effectuation logic

The time frame of the migrant branch project remained uncertain throughout its life because it was determined primarily by the availability of resourcing. Two key categories of resource were crucial here: first, funding largely from various external sources and, second, goodwill from project leaders which also depended partly on continued funding to support them. Neither category of resource could be taken for granted. Rather than temporariness being linked to a linear conception of time with milestones on the way to a target end-point, in the union project temporariness took on a 'chaotic' quality in the sense of exhibiting temporal disorder. The contrast here in temporal pattern and underlying factors is comparable to the distinction between 'causation' and 'effectuation' which has been applied to entrepreneurial decision-making (Sarasvathy, 2001; 2008). Causation is a decision mode directed by a goal or identifiable outcomes. It assumes that there is goal consensus and that the means to reach the goal are available. It is consistent

with an ex ante planned and rational approach. By contrast, effectuation starts with reference to the resources available and then works, sometimes in an ad hoc manner, toward the outcome that can be created with those means. The life of the union branch was characterized by an effectuation logic. This suggests:

Proposition 4: The prevalence of an effectuation logic ("what can be done") rather than a causation logic ("what must be done") will encourage the adoption of fluid time limits to the life of a TO.

The picture of organizational temporariness offered by the case of the migrant workers union branch clearly differs from that predominating in the literature. It is equally apparent that the various contingencies in this picture were inter-linked. The presence of differing goals and tasks led to, and was reinforced by, a reliance on several different channels of resourcing. Ambiguity concerning goals and tasks and resourcing meant that the temporal pattern of the unit's life was somewhat precarious. Much of the ambiguity and fragmentation affecting the union branch was associated with tensions in its relationship to its higher organization. These contingencies combined to form a syndrome of temporariness that has not been yet portrayed in the literature. The configuration of the union branch was considerably more fragmented and this created dysfunctionalities regarding the achievement of goals and tasks, the clarity of time frame, the conditions of resourcing, and the relations with the sponsoring organization.

If the precarious temporariness exhibited by the union branch has certain special features, can these be ascribed to distinctive contextual factors? In particular, did they arise because the project was set up within a trade union, which is differently constituted and funded to the more frequently researched business organization and therefore has a different dynamic with regard to its internal and external relationships? If so, do the

findings of the study have some relevance to a wider range of organizations? The following section considers these questions.

Role of context

Inherent tensions in the internal structuring of trade unions undoubtedly contribute to explaining the distinctive features of the union branch as a TO. On the one hand, trade unions possess bureaucratic characteristics similar to those of business firms, employing administrative staff with specialized functions, and relying on complex communicative and coordination networks (Kelly & Heery, 2009; Moore, 1957). At the same time, their systems of governance are marked to a greater or lesser extent by a separation of powers that provides for democratic processes of policy-making and hence executive accountability (Salamon, 2000; Voss & Sherman, 2000). As a result, the operation of unions is characterized by a combination of an administrative rationale, representing a logic of operational goal-implementation and a representative rationale informed by a democratic logic of goal-formation and policy-deliberation (Child, Loveridge & Warner, 1973; Fairbrother, 2000; Willman, Morris & Ashton, 1993).

The second of these rationales may provide substantial scope for local initiatives (Donaldson & Warner, 1974). However, the combination of administrative and representative logics can generate substantial degrees of goal conflict (Upchurch, Croucher & Flynn, 2012). Consequently, such initiatives can fall foul of inherent tensions between local and higher organizational levels in terms respectively of responding to member needs and maintaining centralized direction (Carter, 2000; Child et al., 1973; Simms, Holgate & Heery, 2013; Voss & Sherman, 2000).

The normal context of temporary organizing is that management has the authority to initiate new projects. This, together with commercial exigencies, enables the project to have a clear goal and organizational legitimacy. While the project may be resourced partly from external funds, its clear goal facilitates the budgeting of financial and staff resources at the beginning of the project according to a set time-line, mile-stones and target(s). Given this managerial control and clear time-line, projects can be terminated by management on a planned basis.

By contrast, the characteristics of organizational temporariness in the case studied arose fundamentally from the fact that it functioned within an organization established on the principle of accountability and responsiveness to their members (clients). In such organizations, new units or initiatives are likely to reflect the special needs of specific membership categories – such as Eastern European migrant workers – who are in part customers. In organizations exhibiting characteristics similar to the case study, projects are often initiated by actors at a lower level in the organizational hierarchy including members. This reflects the more distributed nature of power and authority in such organizations. As a result of this distributed authority, various actors are empowered to establish a number of specific initiatives (sub-projects) during the life of the main project. The legitimacy for these sub-projects may therefore derive from different constituencies. Each sub-project has its own goals and tasks which contribute, albeit not always fully, to achieving the goal of the overall project. Every sub-project also requires resourcing to achieve its own goals and tasks. Should this be internal resourcing, approval will be required from senior officials. However, some of these sub-projects can be funded externally, in which case their goals and tasks will have to be aligned with the aims of external organizations. These conditions are liable to make budgeting for the overall project tenuous and subject to amendment as sub-projects come and go. Just as

the life span of the project is made uncertain by these conditions, so is its termination. Termination of the overall project will depend on the achievement of the goals of its sub-projects, which are not necessarily aligned in terms of their timing. The life of the project may be prolonged, even at a low level, by continuation of a sub-project and the associated enthusiasm of a project leader(s) or just project team members. Project termination cannot therefore be determined on a planned basis.

The association of precarious temporariness with these two potentially contradictory logics (top-down and bottom-up) is actually not confined to membership organizations such as unions, professional associations and political parties. It can be increasingly found in some types of organization within the commercial field, in particular knowledge intensive firms. Striving for innovativeness, these firms create experimental projects and rely on the initiative of staff possessing high levels of knowledge. Their initiatives sometimes include securing external funding. Such staff are likely to demand that the policy implications and ethical connotations of such knowledge be respected by those in formal authority. This may result increasingly in forms of temporariness similar to those we have studied, which are associated with multiple goals, flexible and flat structures, less defined hierarchies and employees being treated as internal customers (Alvesson, 2004). In these characteristics, the union branch superficially resembles many new commercial ventures, but there is a key difference in that such new ventures are normally intended to evolve into self-supporting sustainability and to have a continuing existence unless their aim is termination through a favourable buy-out. The case studied seems to be more relevant to creative ad-hoc teams working within larger knowledge-based organizations.

Conclusion

The research we have reported suggests that the outcome and lifespan of a TO can be less predictable than in many of the projects that have been studied so far. In organizations exhibiting the characteristics of our case study, projects appear likely to be less planned and formalized than it is normally portrayed in the literature. In contrast to 'planned temporariness', they exhibit what may aptly be called 'precarious temporariness'. The precariousness is associated with ambiguity and tensions over goals and tasks arising from contingencies of governance, authority, and resourcing. The case contributes to the concept of organizational temporariness by showing empirically that in certain circumstances it assumes characteristics that diverge from those already presented in the literature. Through the four propositions offered, we have identified some of the concomitants of precarious temporariness as well as the contexts in which these are likely to be present. This analysis represents a theoretical advance which further investigation into different types of organizational temporariness and influencing factors can empirically test and elaborate.

There has in fact been little investigation of projects initiated within organizations which, unlike most firms, are accountable to diverse stakeholder groups and therefore have multiple lines of upward responsibility (or reference groups to whom they have to justify projects). A trade union is one example of this broad category of organization, which also includes other membership organizations, political parties, social enterprises, as well as some business organizations that encourage high levels of staff autonomy. On this basis, the characteristics of temporariness evident in our case study, including certain dysfunctionalities, could be quite widespread and deserve further investigation. One of the obvious limitations of the present study is that it is confined to a single case. Future research on temporariness needs to be extended to other membership organizations as

well as those in which employees or partners enjoy considerable powers of initiative. Another limitation of this single case is that it concerned a project that was very non-routine for the wider sponsoring organization. Comparison of the trajectories of TOs established to work within routine parameters with those set up to pursue experimental non-routine paths could also be enlightening.

Managing under conditions of precarious temporariness presents a practical challenge, which also deserves future attention. The managerial implication of our findings is that a strongly linear approach of target setting and performance management is unlikely to be an effective and appropriate way for parent organizations to manage the development and operation of temporary projects of the type studied. Rather, in a context of stakeholder diversity and multiple lines of accountability, constructive and ongoing processes of communication and consultation of an organic nature would appear necessary to enable suitable operational compromises to be struck in a way that does not undermine the parent organization's ultimate authority. Insofar as this is correct, it would also appear that the management of relations between parent and TOs in such contexts requires the presence of managers who possess good political and inter-personal skills and who are sufficiently empowered to operate effectively in this way.

The reconciliation of top-down and bottom-up pressures has been identified as a salient aspect of managing the ambidexterity that has come to be seen as an essential capability for contemporary organizations (Turner, Swart & Maylor, 2013). Successful management under conditions of precarious temporariness would seem to require this capacity. At the same time, our case study indicated the difficulties that can arise in reconciling potentially divergent streams of creativity in different sub-projects while also establishing the coordination needed to accomplish a common purpose. There are similarities between a situation of precarious temporariness and that of operating 'on the

edge of chaos' (Pascale, Millemann & Gioja, 2001). Insofar as 'surfing' the latter is said to optimize organizational agility and innovation, lessons may be learned from further research into how precarious temporariness is managed. The present study suggests that precariousness in organizational temporariness arises from factors which are, in part, open to managerial control. These initial conclusions, however, require confirmation and refinement through further research undertaken in a more diverse range of settings.

From the perspective of leadership in membership organizations, such as unions, our study implies that it is necessary to recognize the plurality of interests inherent in their structures when setting the goals of projects. This plurality needs to be accommodated in order to avoid goal ambiguity. Otherwise what are intended to be defined termination points for temporary units are liable to be subject to renegotiation and drift. In the case of organizing for migrant workers, unions might be well advised to separate out those workers' on-going need for workplace representation from more transient needs such as assimilation for which TO may be best suited.

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APPENDIX: Key interview themes and indicative questions

1. *Respondent's involvement in the project.*

   What is your job role?

   To what extent (and how) were you involved in the development of the branch?

   How has this involvement evolved over the life of the branch?

   What are the main activities that you have been engaged with in relation to the branch?

2. *How the branch was set up (goals, resourcing, process, time-frame).*

   How did the idea of a separate migrant workers' branch come about?

   What were the formal processes involved in the establishment of the branch?

   Was there a clear idea at the start as to how long the branch would exist?

   Why was the decision taken to make the branch a temporary one?

   Was the branch established in the same way as other branches in terms of its resourcing and administration?

   Please explain funding of the branch.

   Was the intention from the outset that the branch would seek external funding to support its operation and activities (including those involving the learning centre)?

3. *Evolution and operation of the branch over time.*

How many members did the branch have when it was established?

How have the activities of the branch developed over time?

How has member recruitment and retention developed since the branch was formed?

What do you feel have been the main factors prompting people to join the union?

What proportion of recruits came from unionized workplaces?

How would you describe member participation in the branch, such as in terms of attendance at meetings and willingness to take on branch positions.

Has such participation increased or decreased over time?

How far has the union sought to address the work-related concerns of members through seeking to (a) provide workplace representation and (b) secure employer recognition?

4. *Activities of related projects (e.g. learning centre) over time.*

How did the operation of the branch link to the wider union's policy of workplace and self-sustaining organizing?

How have the activities of the learning centre developed over time, both with regard to their nature and the numbers attending them?

What role has the centre played in terms of supporting the development and operation of the branch?

What have been the main sources of external funding obtained by the branch/learning centre?

How has the ongoing need to seek external funding affected the operation of the branch/learning centre?

5. *Roles and relationships of the project's stakeholders.*

How was the idea of setting up a branch for migrants received by senior office holders, full-time officials and other members/branches?

To what extent have these views affected the way in which the branch was established and its subsequent operation?

How have full-time officials balanced the demands of the branch against those coming from elsewhere with regard to member representation and organising?

6. *Management and leadership of the project*
What has been the nature of relationship between those directly responsible for the leadership of the branch and learning centre, and the wider union?
Who has been leading the project and how this worked?
How has the reliance placed administratively on short-term project workers impacted on the operation of the branch and learning centre?

7. *Challenges faced by the branch.*
What have been the main challenges confronting the establishment and operation of the branch/learning centre?
To what extent have these challenges acted to hinder the development and operation of the branch/learning centre?

8. *Achievements and failures of the project.*
What would you say have been the main successes of the branch/learning centre?
What would you say have been the main disappointments associated with their operation?

9. *Evaluation of the project and any further comments.*
Overall, would you say that the initiatives pursued within the project were worth the time and energy devoted to them?
If similar initiatives were to be pursued in the future, what would you recommend be done differently?
What lessons can be drawn from the initiatives with regard to the future recruitment and organizing of migrants, as well as other groups of under-represented and vulnerable categories of workers?

Table 1. Quotations from interviews and other sources representing the views of various actors in the project.

Quotation
Comments in favour of establishing a separate branch for migrant workers: (1) 'Establishing a migrant branch in the existing union structure was aimed at giving migrants possibilities for participation. Try to imagine a group of migrant workers joining the regular branch meeting to find out about problems at work and to share their problems......, who have huge language problems. So they come to meetings and they don't understand anything....' (Polish project worker) (2) 'I think people see a trade union in a traditional British manner are maybe not a place for themselves, because they would see it as maybe male orientated, specifically English. So, what we are trying to do is to offer an alternative within the branch. So that we have a section that they could immediately become part of.' (Union regional organizer) (3) 'Concern has been expressed in the union that establishing a special branch for migrant workers keeps them separate from other union members. [But] the strategy is to build their confidence, skills and knowledge in order for them to integrate into mainstream democratic processes of the union.' (Project leader and Union official) *Criticism of establishing a separate branch for migrant workers:* (4) 'There was some opposition to it not just in the region but nationally, because they wondered whether it was the right way to go, you know you don't have a separate branch for the Welsh' (Union official) (5) 'A lot of officers would say to us "what you are doing is not core business, it's just an add-on"'. (Union official) (6) 'Migrant workers can again play a central role in reinvigorating our movement, but we must do this with our eyes open to the potential pitfalls, the difficulties and the requirements for change that it necessitates. If we fail to do this or if we see this as just another "sexy issue" we are bound to fail.' (Senior Union official) *More general critical comment concerning the relationship between the Union and migrant workers:* (7) 'There are Polish community groups that blame us for the fact that [name of the union] protests with slogans like "British work for British workers.' (Polish project worker)
Temporary and experimental nature of the project: (8) 'The group of Poles that is already here has different needs, different ideas for life, they need help and support in different situations.' (Polish project worker) (9) 'I know that it has always been in his [Regional Secretary] head to break the thing up, basically, and to put people where it is more convenient. It may be that it has served its purpose initially by allowing people to come in and feel safe in that environment; and that was part of the process. I would say that the experiment, if you like, and I will use the word experiment, to get them to do their own affairs with officers attached, etc., didn't really work.' (Union official) (10) 'It [our strategy of organizing migrant workers] has to generally reflect changes within a flexible and deregulated labour market, where employers are exploiting both indigenous workers and migrant workers, in the process creating and exploiting divisions between these two groups of workers.' (Union website) (11) 'It was revolutionary to organize this branch. It has helped to change some systems in the organization itself, it was necessary to break through some barriers, to destroy existing stability and build something from scratch. But in long term, organizationally, this phenomenon doesn't work very efficiently' (Polish project worker) (12) 'Unions need to change. The branch organization doesn't work. The bureaucracy of the Union is travelling all the way down. There is a need for new ways and new structures, among others flexible modules like the Migrant Workers Branch.' (Union organizer, initiator of the project)

Problems affecting the operation of the branch and the commitment of its members:
(13) Changing interest in the branch's activities over time (M48 [name of the Union] Migrant Workers Branch minutes):
20/04/2007 'Election of representatives: President, Secretary, for Culture, for children and youngsters, for education, for sport, for internet communication, for social equality
15/05/2007 'Gary wants to organize a demonstration which would support situation in Winchester. We have to take part in this demonstration to show that migrants can also get together to fight for workers rights.'
1/12/2007 'Issues of creating a football team.'
4/04/2008 'Problems of attendance at branch meetings'
4/07/2008 'The meeting has been cancelled as no members came, who would not be employed in the branch'
3/10/2008 'New formula of the meetings; not only formal part, but also some nibbles and time for chatting with each other. Meetings will take place each 2 months'
3/06/2009 and 4/08/2009 'Did not take place, because of holidays time and low attendance'

(14) '… she was a secretary of that branch for quite long time, more by necessity than by desire. I don't want to say that she didn't want to help, but there was nobody who came forward to say you can put my head on the block, I will run this branch…'. (Union official)

(15) 'There is an issue of the authority of an officer who helps with various matters. I am just a link. I can often help and advice, but I don't have formal competencies of an officer so what I say is not treated seriously.' (Polish project worker)

(16)'There were social events to put the community together. But there was no activism. People would come and meet, but there were no union meetings or discussions. Maybe the community expected more from us that we as project workers should organise it all, but there was no initiative from members who would come with the initiative, ideas and generally with what they need.' (Polish project worker)

Persistent short-termism and insecurity of the project:
 (17) 'We have ensured funding for at least one more year, but with a hope for two years. We have a contract until 2012, but it is revised each year. Under the current climate, there might be a decision that the funding would not be available any more, depending in which way the money will be cut by the new Government. If the project were to finish in 2012 we would just finish what we are to do. Each project is prepared with new objectives, and these have to be accomplished. However, if we were to finish earlier, we don't have a declaration from the Union that they would like to continue it or support financially. So honestly saying, I don't know. There are no plans with this regard.' (Polish project worker)

 (18) 'There is this sense of short-termism all the time without determining a proper strategy and seeing it through. This results in a sense of insecurity throughout the organization for anyone concerned with dealing with these matters.' (Project officer)

 (19) 'The Office has been closed for a long time, so this has changed. It has been quite a dramatic change. M… is still the Branch secretary, but her work contract with [the union] has terminated as it was a fixed term contract. I suppose that it is more difficult for her to now to cope with the responsibilities of the Branch Secretary as she is not employed. The Migrant Workers Branch is still there, Educational Centre is changing location. For the last half a year, I have been coping with organizational matters, related to the move and organizing the new place, but I wasn't there like before. I was receiving post and messages on my phone.' (Polish project worker)