

# TENSIONS AND PARADOXES IN TEMPORARY ORGANIZING

# RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF ORGANIZATIONS

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# **TENSIONS AND PARADOXES IN TEMPORARY ORGANIZING**

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# INTRODUCTION

## TENSIONS AND PARADOXES IN TEMPORARY ORGANISING: MAPPING THE FIELD

Timo Braun and Joseph Lampel

### ABSTRACT

*Temporary organisations are time-limited organisations that are created with a deliberate termination point. Temporary organisations can increase flexibility, allow for innovative and transformative activities with less resource commitment, and reflect a 'Zeitgeist' of acceleration and time limitation in society. They also give rise to tensions and paradoxes that require new adaptive and coordinative practices. Research on temporary organisations has moved from primarily exploring the distinction between temporary and permanent organisations to using temporary organisations to study a range of phenomena such as temporality, acceleration, identity, and attachment–detachment dilemmas. This volume reflects this new orientation. We map empirical phenomena along the lines of events, projects and networks, and explore three conceptual themes that run through the nine chapters that comprise this volume: (1) temporality in temporary organisations; (2) the interaction between temporary and permanent organisations; and (3) the strategies and practices that temporary organisation develop in response to tensions and paradoxes.*

Temporary organisations are time-limited organisations that are created with a deliberate termination point. The 'built-in termination mechanism' (Lundin & Söderholm, 1995, p. 449) can be calendar based, for example a film festival

or a conference has a specified starting and end dates, whereas” termination can be defined by goal attainment, for instance an R&D project that is terminated once the new product is delivered. Lundin and Söderholm (1995) map a life-cycle between the beginning and end for projects that holds for temporary organisations more generally. According to this schema, temporary organisations start life as a concept, enter a development phase, proceed to implementation, and then end with termination. Structurally, temporary organisations may take various forms such as festivals, organisational and inter-organisational projects, emergency response organising, and networks of temporary organisations. Some forms are strongly institutionalised, others are more protean. For example, film festivals or conferences are institutionally circumscribed events that are not accepted as such by participants unless they possess certain standardised features. On the other hand, a ‘project’ is a label that is used by organisers to describe temporary organisations that can vary greatly in size and shape, from a mega project such as the Channel Tunnel, to the construction of a local clinic. Moreover, projects are temporary organisations that are used to perform tasks across industries that have little in common; not only traditional industries such as constructions or pharmaceuticals, but also creative industries such as filmmaking, theatre, or advertising, service industries such as consulting or software development as well as playing an increasingly prominent role in the public sector.

In spite of their ubiquity, temporary organisations attracted relatively little research interest from general management scholars until recently. This is changing as temporary organisations are increasingly being asked to achieve goals and perform tasks that previously were routinely assigned to permanent organisations. Some researchers argue that the process is now so widespread as to merit its own label, hence the term ‘projectification’ (Hodgson, Fred, Bailey, & Hall, 2019; Jensen, Thuesen, & Gerald, 2016; Midler, 1995). The shift to greater use of temporary organisations reflects the limitations of permanent organising, but also the inherent advantages of temporary organising. Competition and technological change challenge the capacity of permanent organisations to effectively manage key activities. Forms of temporary organising that increase flexibility and allow actors to implement innovative and transformative activities with less resource commitment are therefore becoming more pervasive.

In the new century, the increasing popularity of temporary organising is not only a response to economic and technological imperatives, but also reflects a ‘Zeitgeist’ of acceleration and time limitation in society (Jensen et al., 2016; Kenis, Janowicz-Panjaitan, & Cambré, 2009; Lundin et al., 2015). This has implications to our fundamental assumption about permanent organisations. The dichotomy between permanent organisations that are intended to exist indefinitely and temporary organisations that are intended to have a finite life span is increasingly being erased by economic, social, and technological developments (Anell & Wilson, 2002). The buying and selling of firms, the frequent restructuring of organisations, and technologies that allow activities to be outsourced, and emergence of the so called ‘boundaryless career’, create conditions in which the permanent can no longer be taken-for-granted by stakeholders, or by researchers. Activities and

practices that have long been emblematic of temporary organisations are increasingly to be found in what officially is still regarded as temporary organisations.

This volume seeks to advance research on the tensions and paradoxes that arise in and around temporary organisations. The introduction that opens this volume explores how temporality is shaping research on temporary organisations. In the second part of the introduction, we call for a nuanced approach to temporary organising, one which accepts diversity but also advocates thematic unity. In the third part, we summarise the contributions to this volume. We organised these contributions into three groups: temporary organising as events, temporary organising as projects, and temporary organising as networks of temporary organisations.

## RESEARCH ON TEMPORARY ORGANISATIONS: THE CONSEQUENCES OF TEMPORALITY

Research on temporary organising has gained momentum since the mid-1990s from early papers by [Lundin and Söderholm \(1995\)](#) and two special issues in *Organization Studies* (2004 and 2016). Despite of the increased scholarly interest in the field of organisation theory ([Bakker, 2010](#)), our understanding of temporary organising is at best partial. For example, the role of time and temporality in this type of organising is poorly understood ([Bakker, DeFillippi, Schwab, & Sydow, 2016](#)). Nor do we understand where the skills required to set up a temporary organisation come from: Temporary organising requires prior knowledge, but research suggests that temporary organisational forms suffer from ‘organizational amnesia’ ([Grabher, 2004](#), p. 1492). Once the temporary organisation comes to an end, the knowledge is ‘thereafter allowed to disperse’ ([Lampel, Scarbrough, & Macmillan, 2008](#), p. 10). When we look deeper into temporary organisations, we find that we have not fully explored the implications for the behaviour of individuals of working in the shadow of organisational dissolution ([Braun, Müller-Seitz, & Sydow, 2012](#)). Thus, while we acknowledge in general that organisational durability is a pre-requisite for planning and effective action, we do not factor into our theories the fact that a temporary organisation engenders a sense of instability, especially as it nears the end of its life.

Another aspect of temporary organisations that can benefit from more research is the relationship between temporary and permanent organisations. Temporary organisations more often than not are embedded in permanent organisations and long-standing institutions. The interaction between stability and change in temporary organisations is affected by the process of attaching or detaching these organisations from their embedded organisations and institutions over time ([Sydow, Lindkvist, & DeFillippi, 2004](#)). Attaching or detaching temporary organisations from their embedded organisations and institutions may cause attachment–detachment dilemmas that can be difficult for managers to navigate ([Sahlin-Andersson & Söderholm, 2002](#)). In the past, research has looked primarily at how temporary organisations deal with these dilemmas, presumably because the disparity in size and power between permanent and temporary organisations meant that the latter had to struggle with the problems associated

with attachment–detachment. More recently, we have come to realise that both permanent and temporary organisations have to deal with these issues.

Temporary organisations bring temporality in its different forms to the foreground much more than it is usually the case in permanent organisations. While activities and practices are temporally contingent in permanent as well as temporary organisations, temporality in permanent organisations is routinised into a set of activities that is governed by institutionalised expectations, and hence it loses much of its visibility. In contrast, activities and practices in temporary organisations are explicitly enacted with the knowledge that the organisation life span is finite. They are therefore far more visible than is the case in permanent organisations. Furthermore, compared to permanent organisations, temporal routines are more likely to be consciously disrupted or discarded as termination nears. Strategising temporary organisations therefore calls for greater awareness of temporal structures in general, and the temporal rhythms that pace behaviour – not to mention the temporal constraints that shape practices – in particular. Furthermore, coordination and collaboration in temporary organisations is subject to the forces of ‘isochronism’, whereby actors must subscribe to common timing norms if they are to accomplish the goals set for the temporary organisation (Dille & Söderlund, 2013).

The temporal structures that condition activities and practices in temporary organisations inevitably give rise to tensions, and paradoxes, defined by [Schad, Lewis, Raisch, and Smith \(2016, p. 10\)](#) as ‘persistent contradiction between interdependent elements’. At the macro-level, there is a tension between time economy and performance quality – a tension that can optimise in permanent organisations by tilting one way or the other. In temporary organisations, both must be addressed simultaneously, creating a paradox that requires new adaptive practices. At the micro level, different activities within temporary organisations have different temporal rhythms. Interdependence of activities creates tensions that are difficult to resolve – not only because temporal rhythms may delay completion of certain activities, but also because knowing that all activities will cease upon termination makes spending time and effort resolving these tensions seems pointless.

Managing these tensions call for new coordination practices. When tensions cannot be resolved by seeking trade-offs – for example, adjusting interdependent temporal speed of separate activities – the pressure to find solutions often gives rise to new practices, which are often incorporated into the organising repertoires of temporary organising. These organising repertoires are not confined within the boundaries of temporary organisations. The activities and practices of temporary organisations are intra-organisational and inter-organisational. Projects, for instance, are embedded in the history of organisations and prior projects successes or failures ([Stjerne & Svejenova, 2016](#)), while at the same time they have the potential for setting a future direction for the organisation and triggering larger transitions. Networks of temporary organisations are often used to address major challenges such as climate change, immigration, or humanitarian assistance. The formation of such networks may be a response to urgent social challenges. In reality, however, dispersed temporal orientations of temporary organisations in the same network may create tensions in settings, in which participants from different organisational settings collaborate in projects

such as in inter-organisational projects (Dille & Söderlund, 2013; Reinecke & Ansari, 2015; Sydow & Braun, 2018).

As noted earlier, temporary organisations often interact with permanent organisations, either within permanent organisations or associated with permanent organisations in inter-organisational networks, for instance. The interaction creates paradoxes that are specific to the tensions between the temporal norms of permanent organisations and the temporal rhythms of temporary organisations. Practices that are legitimate in permanent organisations often stand in the way of meeting the pre-set objectives of temporary organisations. Adopting practices that support the temporal rhythms of the temporary organisation incurs illegitimacy risk. To moderate this risk, temporary organisations must develop practices that serve their needs while conforming in some respects to norms embraced by permanent organisations.

## **A NUANCED APPROACH TO TEMPORARY ORGANISING: BETWEEN FRAGMENTATION AND INTEGRATION**

The evolution of research on temporary organisations has moved from primarily exploring the distinction between temporary and permanent organisations – this involved examining temporary organisations as a distinct type – to using temporary organisations to study a range of phenomena such as temporality, acceleration, identity, and attachment–detachment dilemmas. Broadly speaking, we can say that if early work on temporary organisations sought to make general statements about temporary organisations, subsequent research is more nuanced; seeing the unique effects that temporary organisations create as an opportunity to study issues that are relevant to organising more generally. This has led to a realisation that we are not likely to get a unified theory of temporary organisations, and an acceptance that research on temporary organisations is diverse theoretically (Söderlund, 2011). In spite of these diverse theoretical approaches, there is recognition that we should maintain conceptual unity, avoid dividing our scholarly community into separate groups that are defined by the empirical objects that are being studied. One can see this trend in recent years in the work of scholars in the field of project management who have recently delineated their domain as ‘project studies’ (Gerald & Söderlund, 2018), and others who have focussed on the phenomenon of ‘field-configuring events’ (e.g. Hardy & Maguire, 2010; Lampel & Meyer, 2008; Schüssler, Rüling, & Wittneben, 2014).

This slide towards fragmentation, which to some extent is a reflection of the maturity of research on temporary organisations, can be countered by empirical and thematic mapping of current research. When we examine the collection of papers that constitute this volume as well as wider literature on temporary organisations, we find that empirically the papers seem to focus on events, projects, or networks. Conceptually, whether we are looking at research on events, projects, or networks, we find three main themes: (1) temporality in temporary organisations; (2) the interaction between temporary and permanent organisations; and (3) the

**Table 1.** Volume Overview along the Lines of Investigated Phenomena, Fields of Theorisation, and Major Research Foci.

Field of Theorisation		Nature of Temporality	Interaction between Temporary and Permanent Organisations	Strategies and Practices in Response to Tensions and Paradoxes
Phenomenological Category				
<i>Events</i>	Ch 1	Paradoxical tensions	Belonging paradox, place identity	
	Ch 2	New temporary forms, legitimacy	Diffusion of new temporary forms	
	Ch 3	Temporalities of organising	Memory as a bridge between temporary and enduring	
<i>Projects</i>	Ch 4		Ambition versus realism; patience versus urgency; clock versus event time	Strategy work to create, reinforce, and transform temporal tensions
	Ch 5	On the nature of acceleration	Plurality of conflicting temporal structures	Sequencing, freezing, and merging
	Ch 6	(Re)creation and response to temporal institutional complexity		Innovating, partial decoupling, and avoiding strategies
<i>Networks</i>	Ch 7		Distance, difference, identity, learning, temporal and performance paradoxes	Collective goal setting, adaptive monitoring, and re-negotiation of aspiration levels as coping mechanisms
	Ch 8	Emergent and deliberate temporary organising deliberate	Temporal co-dependence and time lags at the inter-organisational level	
	Ch 9	Maturity of relationships in temporary organisations	Portfolio ambidexterity (projects with new and recurrent partners)	

strategies and practices that temporary organisation develop in response to tensions and paradoxes. In total, we are looking at nine chapters (see [Table 1](#)) that are briefly introduced in the following.

**PART I: ORGANISING EVENTS**

*The Belonging Paradox and Identities in Festivals*

The opening chapter by Robert DeFillippi and Yesim Tonga Uriarte looks at Lucca Comics & Games, one of the biggest comic-cons festivals in the world. Festivals are



events that are created as temporary organisations, but unlike projects that are set up to perform a particular task (Lundin & Söderholm, 1995), festivals are temporary structures that are set up by diverse stakeholders that pursue different goals. The multiplicity of stakeholders, and the divergent goals they are seeking to accomplish, give rise to competing identities: each group enacts its artistic, professional, and commercial identity within the confines of the festival. Each group of stakeholders accepts the temporal rhythm of the festival and each makes use of the agglomeration advantages it offers. At the same time, each group struggles to shape the festival in its image. The paradox that DeFillippi and Tonga Uriarte explore is how do festivals maintain cohesion, and even attain great success, in spite of competing identities. The answer they argue, reside in ‘place identity’: A strong association between the image of the place where the festival is held and the stakeholders’ own identity.

*The Temporal-enduring Paradox: The Case of Umea Capital of Culture 2014*

The chapter by Stewart Clegg, Miguel Pina e Cunha, Medhanie Gaim, and Nils Wählin starts with the observation that we cannot expect any organisations to last forever. In this sense, permanence is a useful illusion. Permanent organisations endure, but they are not permanent. The binary distinction between temporary and permanent organisations is likewise overstated: While formally temporary organisations have finite life, their existence continues in other ways, specifically in the memory of the actors directly and indirectly involved in the temporary organisation. Clegg et al. argue that once we replace the distinction between temporary and permanent with a distinction between temporary and enduring organisations, a temporality-enduring paradox becomes apparent. This chapter explores this paradox in several ways. First, they explore the tensions, contradictions, and synergies that emerge at the interface between temporary and enduring organisations. Next, they use the concept of memory to investigate the process of preserving and reproducing memories of people and events as a bridge between the temporalities of organising that is past and was never intended to endure, and those that are still ongoing. Finally, Clegg et al. explore the temporality-enduring paradox empirically, using a case study of the European Capital of Culture initiative. Using this case, they show how organisations always have a memory that affords continuity: hence they endure in memory. Since they can show that endurance is in the temporary and temporariness in endurance the authors are able to communicate the paradoxical essence of organising.

*By the People, for the People: Emergence and Spread of the  
‘Unconference’ as New Temporary Organisational Form*

Joseph Lampel, Aneesh Banerjee, and Ajay Bhalla examine ‘unconferences’: participant driven meetings that reject the traditional conference format. Lampel et al. suggest that unconferences are temporary organisations that present a legitimacy problem. Unlike projects whose legitimacy depends on task performance, the legitimacy of events such as conferences, and by implication,

unconferences, depends on participants' familiarity with this form. In the case of projects, when deciding on the project form organisers will assess whether the task they have in mind aligns with the form. This point of reference is absent in events such as unconferences. Knowing that participants come to events with different priorities and expectations in mind, organisers have to use the audiences' taken-for-granted assumptions about the event form. This creates a paradox: If attracting audiences depends on the legitimacy of a familiar event form, how do you overcome the absence of familiarity and attract audiences to a radically different event form? The answer, argue Lampel et al., is to use the novelty of the new type of temporary organisations as a form of legitimisation. More specifically, Lampel et al. argue that the context where the new temporary organisation first emerged can be used as a legitimacy claim by other organisers of this new form. Unconferences first emerged in Silicon Valley as part of the 'Web 2.0' movement, which argued that the internet allowed people to self-organise, without the mediating power of traditional hierarchies. Unconferences reflect this philosophy. They are self-organising conferences that eschew the hierarchical selection of content and the temporal management of traditional conferences. Lampel et al. examine the spread of unconferences, but they also show that for many organisers the legitimacy of the Web 2.0 is not enough: they must modify the unconference format to attract audiences.

## PART II: ORGANISING PROJECTS

### *Acting in Time: Temporal Work Enacting Tensions at the Interface between Temporary and Permanent Organisations*

The chapter by Joana Geraldi, Iben Stjerne, and Josef Oehmen examines strategic initiatives – temporary organisations that aim to implement strategic change in permanent organisations. Their question, 'how senior managers at the corporate-level enact temporal tensions at the interface between temporary and permanent organisations' addresses a fundamental paradox of strategic change in permanent organisations: How do you create change when routines and temporal rhythms are oriented towards stability and continuity? Senior managers, suggest Gerladi et al., use strategic initiatives to tackle this paradox. But once set up, strategic initiatives create tensions between the temporary and permanent, between strategic initiatives as temporary organisations and the permanent organisation to which they are joined and yet must be temporarily separate. Using interviews with corporate-level senior managers who were involved in strategic initiatives, Geraldi et al. suggest that some managers dealt with paradox by choosing realistic or ambitious time horizons, while others embraced both, creating what they call 'ambitious realism'. Similarly, managers confronted a choice between clock time and event time, but often enacted a pace that combined both. Another tension that emerged is between maintaining a sense of urgency and exercising patience. Again, managers practiced both, thereby adapting effectively to the tension between cyclical and event time.