Performance measurement and management in temporary organisations: An organisational control theory perspective

Amos P. Haniff (a.haniff@hw.ac.uk)
Heriot Watt University, Edinburgh.

Umit S. Bititci
Heriot Watt University, Edinburgh.

Reza Mohammadi
Heriot Watt University, Edinburgh.

Abstract

Despite developments in the performance management literature, performance measurement and management in temporary organisations have not been considered from an organisational control theory perspective. The aim of this paper is to explore how organisational control theories emerging from the performance management literature influences how performance of temporary organisations are measured and managed. Existing case studies presented by UK project professionals were analysed through an organisational control theory lens, considering both technical controls and social controls. The findings contribute to greater understanding of control mechanisms within projects and provide new theoretical and practical insights for performance measurement and project management fields.

Keywords: Performance Management, Temporary Organizations, Organizational Controls

Introduction

The performance measurement literature has emerged and developed from cybernetics and management control theories emerging from general systems theory (Von Bertalanffy 1968, Weiner 1948) and continues to be developed within the organisational context (Smith and Bititci 2017). A common theme is the recognition of two types of organisational control mechanisms; '*technical control*' and '*social controls*' that influence performance (Child 1973). Within the context of the permanent organisation, emphasis is on improving performance measurement systems and performance management practices to enhance employee's engagement levels, and ultimately, the long-term performance of the organisation (Bourne *et al.* 2013, Sorenson 2013).

In contrast, temporary organisations are characterized by their limited lifespan (Lundin and Soderholm 1995) and the awareness among actors that the project, for which the temporary organisation was formed, is limited by a deadline (Bakker *et al.* 2013). Termination of the project is imminent, at which point the temporary organisation will

disband (Baker and Faulkner 1991, Morley and Silver 1977, Saunders and Ahuja 2006). Consequently, the primary concern within the project management literature is how the temporary nature of the project impacts on the performance of the temporary organisation in delivery of the project (Turner and Muller 2003). Despite developments in the performance management literature, it would appear that performance measurement and management in temporary organisations have not been previously considered from an organisational control theory perspective. Instead, a project is evaluated in terms of *"the degree of goal fulfilment"* (Packendorff 1995) and measured against time, cost and quality objectives.

The aim of this paper is to explore how organisational control theories emerging from the performance management literature influences how performance of temporary organisations are measured and managed. This is analysed through an organisational control theory lens, which contributes to greater understanding of control mechanisms within projects. The paper begins with a review of the extant literature on organisational control theory before defining the idiosyncratic characteristics of temporary organisations. A description of the case study methodology employed to address the research aim is provided followed by a summary of the key findings. Finally, the discussion theorises the findings in the context of organisational control and project management literatures.

Performance measurement and management – An organisational control theory perspective

Organisational control and management control theories view an organisation as a dynamic entity operating in an environment constantly changing, thus necessitating the basic structure of any control system: measure, compare, analyse, correct and prevent (Melnyk *et al.* 2014, Tessier and Otley 2012). However, organisations are complex systems and theories that surround organisational control, managerial control and performance measurement have evolved from related but parallel fields. Research on organisational control dates back to the works of Cyert and March (1963) and Child (1973). Others have built on these works and defined distinct approaches to organisational control (Ouchi 1979). Recently authors such as Liu, Borman and Gao (2014) have continued to develop frameworks for organisational control. A common theme recognises two different types of organisational control, albeit using different terminologies to express these dimensions: technical control and social control mechanisms (Child 1973, Ouchi 1979). Technical control refers to rational, planned, bureaucratic and structural elements of the organisation. Whereas the social control focus on emergent, cultural and behavioural aspects of the organisation.

Management control theories, instead, have been evolving from management accounting literature Rotch (1993: 91) suggests *"control is the process of assuring that the organisation does what the management wants done"* and proposes a management control framework that comprises six key components (strategy, structure, performance measures, direction, motivation and incentives). Although he goes on to discuss the interrelationships between these components, he places particular importance on understanding the social aspects of its operation rather than focusing solely on rational aspects of its design. Simons (1994), in studying how managers use formal control systems for strategic change, identifies four levers of control: belief systems that provide momentum and guidance (purpose, values, direction); boundary systems that allow creativity within defined limits (rules, guidelines, codes of practice); diagnostic systems that ensure important organisational goals are achieved (feedback, monitoring, review);

and interactive systems that focus attention on strategic uncertainties (managerial decisions).

Tessier and Otley (2012) review Simons' (1994) levers of control model and propose a revised framework which places the technical and social dimensions of control as central concepts. Performance measurement literature displays a similar path. According to Bititci *et al.* (2012) and Melnyk *et al.* (2014), it has evolved through performance measurement (what to measure) to performance management (how to use the measures to manage organisations' performance). In this context, performance measurement is defined as the process (or processes) of setting goals, developing a set of performance measures, collecting, analysing, reporting, interpreting, reviewing and acting on performance data (Melnyk *et al.* 2014, Neely, Gregory and Platts 1995). From an organisational control perspective, this definition aligns with the rational/technical dimension of organisational controls. On the other hand, performance management is defined as the cultural and behavioural routines that define how we use the performance measurement system to manage the performance of the organisation (Bititci 2015). This definition aligns with the cultural/social controls dimension of organisational control.

Actually, the performance measurement literature recognises that the performance management process must reinforce organisational learning (Davenport 2006, Mcadam, Hazlett and Galbraith 2014) and that the role of behavioural and cultural factors are key to successful use of performance measurement systems (Franco-Santos and Bourne 2003, Garengo and Bititci 2007, Neely and Bourne 2000). Indeed Bourne *et al.* (2013) explicitly recognise the linkages between performance measurement, behaviours and engagement. Smith and Bititci (2017) conceptualise technical (performance measurement) and social (performance management) controls as two separate but interdependent dimensions of organisational control to investigate the interaction between performance measurement, performance management, employee engagement and overall performance. Their work enables theoretical explanation of phenomenon that previously known but not theoretically explained.

It is clear that most of the work in performance measurement and management as well as organisational control has been conducted in the context of permeant organisations. The extent literature contains little or no attempt at understanding organisational control in general, performance measurement and management in particular in the context of temporary organisations, which demonstrate distinct characteristics and challenges in comparison to permanent organisations.

Characteristics of temporary organisations

The earliest published research on the topic of temporary organisational forms is accredited to that of Miles (1964, 1977), who recognised the difficulties 'permanent' systems face when implementing change within the context of educational innovations. Concerned with rapid societal changes within the United States at the height of the Cold War, Bennis (1965) foretold an increase in the use of '*temporary systems*' to implement change within the wider society. Drawing on the distinction between organisational types proposed by Burns and Stalker (1961), Bennis and Slater (1968) argues that temporary systems are more likely to be organised within an organic structure, where the arrangements are more fluid, rather than the mechanistic model, in which the structure is more ridged. Palisi (1970: 200) also proposes that a consequence of their relatively flat hierarchical structure and specific goal focus, *"transitory organisations"* are likely be less bureaucratic than permanent organisations. Thus, there is less reliance on authoritarianism and hierarchical power in the decision making-process (Miles 1964, Palisi 1970).

It was Goodman and Goodman (1976) who were the first to present the characteristics of the temporary system within the organisational context. In recognising the use of *ad hoc* groups to produce theatre projects, they define a temporary system (or organisation) as *"a diverse set of skilled people working together on a complex task over a limited period of time"* (Goodman and Goodman 1976: 494). They identify four challenges that set temporary organisations apart. *First*, temporary systems are created in response to concurrent problems organisations face in the accomplishment of specific tasks (Goodman and Goodman 1976). The challenge arises when the task is of such complexity that it requires an integrated effort of organisational members to complete it. *Second* challenge concerns unique tasks that do not fit with regular processes and procedures of the permanent organisation. *Third*, when the tasks are of critical or significant importance to the organisation a new structure needs to be created to manage them. *Fourth*, the task is defined in terms of specific goals and time limits so the permanent organisation will know when it is complete.

In recognising Goodman and Goodman's (1976) motivations for a temporary organisation, within project management, Lundin and Soderholm (1995 present a theory of temporary organisations demarcating between permanent and temporary organisational behaviour. Developed as an opposing model to Cyert and March's (1963) behavioural theory of the firm, Lundin and Soderholm (1995) identify four concepts that determine the characteristics of a temporary organisation in comparison to a permanent structures.

- *Time*: The temporal nature is considered the distinguishing feature of the temporary organisation. In comparison to the permanent organisational setting, temporary organisations have an ex ante built-in termination mechanism (Lundin and Soderholm 1995). Not only does this create a pressure of urgency in delivering the desired outcomes within the specific timescales (Turner and Muller 2003), but also has consequences on both, the behaviour and the social integration of actors in the temporary organisation (Lindkvist 2005, Saunders and Ahuja 2006).

- *Team*: The unique characteristic of the temporary organisational form is that it typically consists of individuals with diverse skills set. The main area of concern within the concept of teams is the inadequate time available for development and integration and time to engage in the usual forms of confidence building activities that contribute to the development and maintenance of trust found in the more traditional, enduring forms of organisation (Meyerson, Weick and Kramer 1996).

- *Task*: According to Lundin and Soderholm (1995: 438), it is the task that provide the *'raison d'être'* for the temporary organisation. Tasks performed by the temporary organisation are considered to more of complex and unique than those addressed by a permanent organisation (Meyerson, Weick and Kramer 1996). As such, they require a new and separate structure to deal with them.

- *Transition*: The fourth concept refers to the actual transformation as a result of the work itself, in terms of distinctive change between "before" and "after" the project, but also the possible (or desirable) perceptions of the transformation or change among the project participants. According to Lundin and Soderholm (1995), this latter meaning of transition is more important to the inner functioning of the project as it focuses on perceptions of casual relationships; ideas about how to proceed to the final outcome; and the conclusion of the project.

It is these distinct differences between permanent and temporary organisational settings that has an impact how performance measurement and management can be operationalised in the context of temporary organisations. It appears that there has been little or no attempt at developing a theoretical understanding of the interplay between the

technical controls (performance measurement) and social controls (performance management) and how this may influence how we measure and manage performance of temporary organisations.

Theoretical Lens

In this paper, our aim is to develop a better theoretical understanding of the interplay between the technical controls (performance measurement) and social controls (performance management) and how this may influence how we measure and manage performance of temporary organisations.

In order to achieve this we have borrowed Smith and Bititci's (2017) organisational control framework and augmented it with Simons' (1994)levers of control. According to Simons' (1994): **Belief systems** provide momentum and guidance through providing purpose, values and direction; **Interactive systems** focus attention on strategic uncertainties through participation and involvement in decision-making (i.e. Social Controls); **Diagnostic systems** ensure important organisational goals are achieved through performance measures, targets, feedback, monitoring and review; **Boundary systems** allow creativity within defined limits such as policies, procedures, codes of practice (i.e. Technical Controls). Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical lens we have developed in order to explore the interplay between organisational controls and temporary organisations.
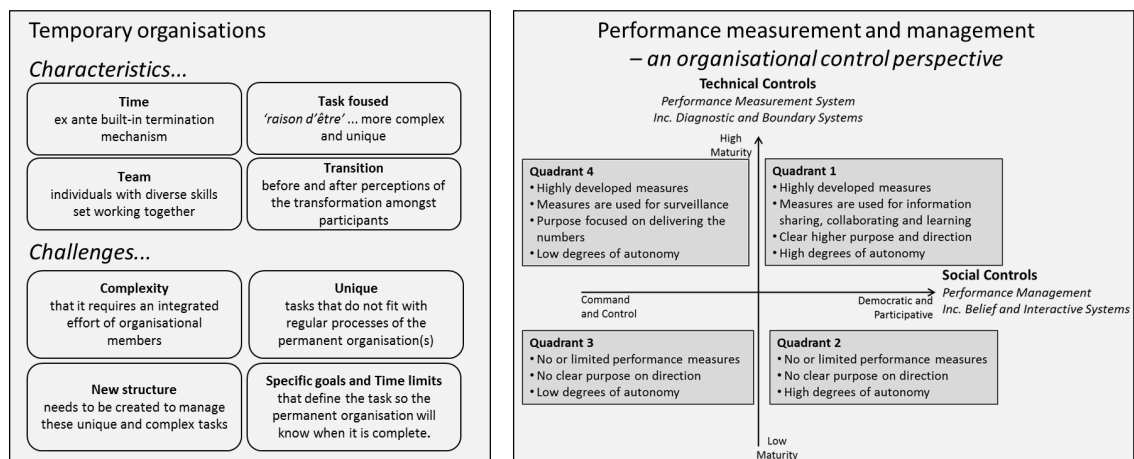

Figure 1. The theoretical lens for exploring organisational controls in the context of temporary organisations

Methodology

In the absence of sufficient knowledge to develop a testable theoretical framework we contend that an exploratory theory building approach would provide an in-depth, fine-grained insight explore the interplay between organisational controls in the context of temporary organisations (Barratt, Choi and Li 2011). Our research adopts Critical Realism as its philosophical framework where we position key concepts such as temporary organisations, projects, performance measures and management practices as socially contracted realities (Lopez and Potter 2005), and the knowledge of organisational controls in the context of temporary organisations as mechanisms that could be explained through observations of multiple case studies. In this context, case studies are considered an appropriate strategy when investigating contemporary phenomena and asking 'how' and 'why' questions (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007).

Focusing on the projects as the unit of analysis, 10 project professionals from UK public and private sector organisations engaged in the study. Drawing on existing case studies, participants were provided with a detailed explanation of how *technical* and *social* organisational controls interact in differing permanent organisations. The participants were then asked to reflect, in some detail, about their experiences and to identify specific projects to explain the dynamics. Table 1 below provides summary details of the participants.

Table 1- Summary of Interview Participant

Case	Participant	Organisation	Case Study Project
1	Project Manager	International aid	International development
2	Project team member	Higher Education	IT
3	Head of PMO	Higher Education	Internal project
4	Business Improvement Manager	Court Services	Quality systems
5	Project Manager	Health Service	IT
6	Project Manager	Financial Services	Improvement process
7	Project Manager	Local Authority	Improvement process
8	Project Manager	Health Service	IT
9	Programme Manager	Financial Services	Transformation
10	Programme Manager	Fire Service	Integration

Using story telling as the method of data collection, the participants recounted their personal experiences of particular projects they were involved in. Stories were presented at a one-day workshop specifically designed to elicit the data, which was captured through recording and hand-drawn illustrations and diagrams by each participant. The research team were then able to ask specific questions about each case and further explore the role and impact of social and technical controls throughout the project life-cycle. Data was analysed by studying each case study in isolation and then by conducting cross-case analysis.

Findings

From our cross case analysis our key findings are summarised as follows:

- Projects are characterised by competition with day-job. As performance of people and teams are measured in relation to their day-job in the permanent organisation, project related performance measures (technical controls) becomes secondary.
- The parent organisation policies, procedures, performance measures (technical controls) and how performance measures are used to manage the performance of the organisations (social controls) do not automatically translate to projects. In many cases projects develop their own controls (technical and social) either at the outset or sometime through the project (see below),
- Projects have more than one stakeholder often with different objectives, agenda, priorities and ideas about the project outcomes. This causes ambiguities as to what is more or less important about the project.
- The conflicts between various stakeholder perspectives are magnified in larger projects comprising of smaller sub-projects (i.e. programmes).
- Project organisations, at the outset have more than one social controls often dictated by the individual social controls of participating organisations. As the projects

progress, a project specific social control appears to emerge, largely shaped by the culture of the project manager or the project managing organisation.

- All projects seem to have high degrees of uncertainty and unknowns at the start of the project, for two separate reasons. *First*, task uncertainty due to uniqueness of the task, i.e. the task of the project is unique to the team. *Second*, interpersonal uncertainty due to the team is working with each other for the first time.
- Many projects are faced with unknowns and uncertainties at the outset and a control-vacuum is created until someone steps in and start putting some controls in place and gets things going using a more command and control approach.
- Many projects seem to start life at with low technical controls and very loose social controls unless they are highly regulated and parent organisation's technical controls translate to the project (e.g. in financial services) where the projects appear to start in the high technical controls and tight social controls quadrant.
- More generally projects seem to progress from low technical/loose social control quadrant (Q2) to low technical controls/tight social controls quadrant (Q3) when professional project management structures are introduced. This is mainly because the rest of the organisation interprets this intervention as loss of autonomy.
- As project controls and more meaningful measures are introduced, mainly as a result of organisational learning, the project organisation moves in to the high technical controls and tight social controls quadrant (Q4) and potentially remains there unless purposeful effort is made to move the social controls in to the loose controls (Q1)

Discussion

The organisational control and performance measurement theories define performance measurement as the *assessment the efficiency and/or effectiveness of an action* (Neely, Gregory and Platts 1995) and the Performance Measurement System (PMS) as *the process of setting goals, developing a set of performance measures, collecting, analysing, reporting, interpreting, reviewing and acting on performance data* (Bititci 2015, Melnyk *et al.* 2014). Through this closed-loop control system organisational objectives are deployed throughout the organisation to achieve alignment, ensuring that the whole organisation works towards common objectives. The control system also includes *feedback* and *feedforward* controls concerned with goal attainment and goal setting respectively (Bititci 2015). In contrast, within the project management literature, alignment is achieved by setting strategic objectives set at the corporate level of a parent organisation and cascading down through strategic and operational levels to be implemented as projects (Archibald 1988, Kerzner 2004, Turner 1999). Consequently, realisation of the project objectives become the responsibility of a project manger that has had little, or no, involvement in the strategy formation process (Haniff and Fernie 2008).

However, our findings suggest that there may be conflict between the parent organisations' priorities and project priorities particularly, i.e. "*the project competes with the day job*". This appears to be particularly significant when the project partners are working part-time on the project and they also have a "day-job" to do. Here we are observing a conflict between the performance objectives and measurement systems of the permanent organisations and the temporary organisation. Also, it appears that the parent organisations controls (technical and social) do not automatically translate to project/temporary organisation. Again, this phenomenon is particularly exacerbated when the project is a collaborative effort between a number of collaborating organisations. This conflict, although recognised in the project management practice and literature (Sydow and Braun 2018), has not been previously theorised in the organisational control

literature. Projects involve multiple with differing expectations and different opinions on what constitutes success and will, therefore, make assessment on varied success criteria (Davis 2014).

It is clear that this differences in perspective creates ambiguities in the technical controls of the project. Often resulting a "*control vacuum*" where people/partners are not really clear on project objectives and priorities as they receive conflicting signals from different stakeholders. It seems that these "*control vacuum*" become more significant as the complexity and the number of partners participating in the project increases. This phenomenon partially explains why may projects, unless tightly controlled (Quadrant 3) from the outset, begin their life at Quadrants 1 or 2 of the organisational control model with ambiguous technical controls, in the form of boundary and diagnostic systems (Simons 1994, Tessier and Otley 2012). Based on the characteristics and challenges of temporary organisations (i.e. specific goals and time limits, transitionary, complexity of multiple stakeholders, uncertainties associated with unique nature of the project) we would theorise that, unless tightly controlled from the outset, most temporary organisations would find themselves in quadrants 1 or 2, even if they appear to have well developed technical controls (performance measures) because of the confused rhetoric around purpose and priorities of the project.

In terms of social controls, the literature on organisational controls and performance measurement classifies the purpose and use of performance measurement systems (i.e. technical controls) as monitoring, surveillance, legitimising, creating focus, learning and improvement. However, there is an increasing belief that in the contemporary knowledge-work focused work place where people are problem solvers and innovators, rather than just manual workers, performance measures should be used for facilitating learning and collaboration rather than monitoring and surveillance (Davenport 2006, Ghoshal 2005, Hamel 2009). There is now growing evidence that organisations that operate in Quadrant 1 of the organisational control model perform better in the long term (Johnson and Broms 2000). In the context of temporary organisations, our findings represent a stark contrast to this view as most successful projects after starting in Quadrants 2 or 3 ended up in Quadrant 4 where they were tightly controlled and all that mattered was delivering the numbers. Although, in many cases the interviewees expressed the desire to move in to Quadrant 4 out of the ten case studies no project was placed at this quadrant. It appears that most successful project are placed at Quadrant 3 of the organisational control model where the technical controls (performance measures) are being used for monitoring and surveillance purposes and the overall purpose of the project appears to be to make the numbers, rather than collaborating, experience sharing and collective learning, which are outcomes of highly developed belief and interactive systems (Simons 1994, Tessier and Otley 2012). Considering the characteristics of temporary organisations, i.e. time-critical, task-focused; complex; unique; new structure and relationships, we would further theorise that this is the nature of temporary organisations and it is highly unlikely that temporary organisations would find themselves in the 1st quadrant of the organisational control model.

Based on the above discussion we would further theorise that the 1st quadrant of the organisational control model is perhaps exclusive to permanent organisations because the inherent characteristics of temporary organisations prevent them from maturing to this quadrant. We would go further that, even in permanent organisations, organisations journey between these quadrants as they develop, learn and grow in maturity. Indeed, according to Ghoshal (2005), Hamel (2009) and Bititci (2015), many permanent organisations would not make it in to this quadrant.

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to contribute to operations management body of knowledge by exploring how organisational control theories emerging from the performance management literature are reflected in temporary organisations. Our findings provide new theoretical and practical insights for performance measurement and project management fields. In terms of theoretical contributions, we would suggest that the organisational control theory lens provides an explanatory framework for better understanding control of temporary/project organisations, particularly in relation to how the characteristics of temporary organisations impact and shape the organisational controls where the time to develop, learn and mature does not exist. From a practical perspective, our findings together with the use of organisational control model provides a useful frame of reference for practitioners responsible for managing temporary organisations. In that, by considering the technical and social controls as separate but interrelated control mechanisms, they will be better design their project control systems and more effectively manage projects in the future.

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