

THE GLOOMY SIDE OF PROJECTS: WHEN WORKING ON A PROJECT JEOPARDIZES INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS

In writings on management, projects represent the myth of fortune smiling... Invest in your job! Find self-fulfillment through involvement in the project! But does a project not also destroy meaning, destabilize personnel and convey the germs of new pathologies?

In companies, projects are machines for making requirements and judging people. No doubt, there is a gloomy side to projects, as shown by this analysis of verbatim accounts from participants in projects and a review of the scant managerial writings on this topic. For working conditions to worsen in direct proportion to an increase in the stimulation to outdo oneself through involvement in a company project, something must have gone awry in the realm of human resources – at the very heart of capitalism.

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This article explores the gloomy side of projects not to deny their worth to a company but to convince firms to pay closer attention to the effects on individuals and groups. In particular, we would like to urge human resource departments to monitor these effects.

Project-related practices have spread so widely that Luc BOLTANSKI and Eve CHIAPELLO (1999) consider projects to be the core ideology of modern capitalism. This holds in law, education, psychology, politics, management... in line with Jean-Pierre BOUTINET's

(1990) view of projects as a general metaphor for life in contemporary society. The instructions to become involved and the promises of self-fulfillment, conveyed in certain writings on management, create the myth of fortune smiling through the project. The very vocabulary used in project management has

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connotations: surpassing oneself overcomes stress; counseling or coaching takes the place of authority; steering a project replaces control functions. A project turns wage-earners into “actors”, a word connoting an autonomy with which individuals are supposedly endowed and that enables them to join in and make the project a success.

This “managerially correct” language raises questions. It fits into a process of idealization, as described in Boutinet’s preface to the new edition of his *Anthropologie du projet*. When reading verbatim accounts collected from persons involved in projects, we come to see the collateral damage to human resources.

Suffering

Concern about the stress related to projects can be seen in the growing body of professional and academic literature, sometimes relayed in the media, about “suffering at the workplace” (ASKENAZY 2005, DEJOURS 1998; HIRIGOYEN 1998; NEVEU 1999). According to it, firms have upped the ante on organizational innovations without taking individuals into account.

“The nature of work has changed, becoming more fluid, flexible and reactive, and surely more interesting for many wage-earners. However this has brought along something new: pressure. Various indicators show that working conditions are dangerously deteriorating due to mounting pressure: the worrisome rise in absenteeism, mental pathologies, occupational illnesses, work-related accidents, even suicides and, to an extent, on-the-job alcoholism and drug-abuse” (ASKENAZY in IMPÉRIALI 2005).

Projects are not exempt from these devastating effects, quite to the contrary! As concentrated work, a project exacerbates problems that exist under normal conditions (GAREL *et al.* 2004). In addition, it generates problems of its own, such as the “grief” felt when an assignment ends (DUBOULOY in ASQUIN *et al.* 2005).

Gathering information outside the occupational context

Teaching training courses on project management provided us with the opportunity to glimpse the gap between the talk in firms and what people in these intercompany training programs had to say. We met persons at a time when they were able to stand back from their participation in a project and talk about their experiences. The gathering of these verbatim accounts outside the workplace or any assignment commissioned by higher-ups turned out to be a

worthwhile procedure for reducing the inhibition stemming from the firm’s idealization of projects. Benefitting from the atmosphere of acceptance or picking up on discussions in which they might not have dared to become involved had they been interviewed, these persons made strong, firsthand comments about the unexpected consequences of their participation in a project. The intensity of what they had to say came as a surprise. We wondered about the meaning of what they revealed through their words in this setting.

Our intention was to seize this opportunity to inquire into the suffering experienced during projects. As trainers, we arranged a series of exchanges for sharing experiences about the effects of projects on participants so as to detect the difficulties and risks encountered by them. Thanks to this exercise (repeated several times a day in groups of approximately thirty persons), we gathered more than two hundred verbatim accounts over a period of more than two years. Middle-level staff from various firms took part in these training programs. All of them had taken part in a project, either as project manager or team member. We decided to circulate these accounts in academic circles even if the message ran counter to the prevailing opinion.

Detecting categories of risks

Qualitative procedures adapted to the exploratory nature of our research were used, without any *a priori*, to analyze these verbatim accounts. The educational method gradually implemented during this exercise (individual reflections, work in small groups, voluntary reports) had the objective of controlling the sincerity of statements, since we had no prior knowledge of the experiences recounted. Efforts to create a setting of security and trust were conducive to sincerity in the talk about actual experiences. Participants sometimes voiced strong emotions. Of course, the requirement of the internal coherence of the data gathered in this manner has as a counterpart their accuracy and reliability (ALLARD-POESI *et al.* 1999).

We did not conduct interviews. Instead, we gave a form to exchanges between trainees. Since these exchanges varied in length and form, we adopted an open coding procedure (STRAUSS and CORBIN 1990). The objective was to discover, through a grounded theory approach (an inductive method developed in the 1960s in the United States), the types of effects that projects have on individuals and groups. In other words, the findings presented herein do not come from a research carried out following a pre-established plan. This article formulates hypotheses with a degree of relevance and coherence in line, at the very least, with what the trainees thought.

We detected three major risks, each presented in a section herein: individual risks related to excessive involvement in a project; the risks of destabilizing occupational identities; and the risks related to the pursuit of a career in the firm. Each of these three sections opens with a testimony that conveys the basic meaning of verbatim accounts about the risk in question. Each situation is then explained with excerpts from other accounts. This has led us to formulate proposals for future research to investigate.

THE RISKS TO INDIVIDUALS OF EXCESSIVE INVOLVEMENT

The requirements and pressure imposed by a project on individuals have clearly been underestimated. The accounts we collected suggest that individuals experience forms of violence for which they, paradoxically, might feel partly responsible. This diminishes their ability to withstand pressure and sets off a potentially destructive process of isolation.

Daniel's testimony: a project leads to burnout

What usually stands out in the verbatim accounts collected from persons who talked about their participation in a project (especially a big, successful one) is how much energy they invested. This focus on energy enters into the construction, after the project, of a lofty discourse about the experience. It evinces the literal surpassing of oneself under pressures of time, resources and specifications. The discourse thus constructed minimizes the heavy pressures experienced and, above all, denies the personal effects. The prevailing "project-oriented culture" inhibits the mentioning of difficulties – yet another reason why the information we collected outside the firm or any project-related context is so valuable.

• *A lofty sense of excitement*

Daniel, a 35-year-old engineer at a components manufacturer for aircraft, seized the opportunity to take part in a major company project. In his words, it came at the right time:

"This project was a kind of opportunity for me to take front stage. I was initially recruited to the project for about two days a week. I continued working the rest of the time for my department. It wasn't easy, because the two days were somewhat theoretical. It was necessary, after a snag for example, to free myself for a meeting on quality or to deal with a subject in an emergency during the time when I was supposed to be working on an assignment from my superior."

During this initial phase, Daniel admitted, he went along with a feeling of excitement:

"Knowing that your advice is expected, that you are needed, is downright gratifying; and the project head used that to keep pushing me to do a little more."

• *Torn between two worlds*

Daniel had to cope with two worlds that ignored each other. The first was his department, where the driving force was well-defined occupations with mid-run career prospects. This world was a part of his identity that he did not want to deny. For eleven years, he had developed a technical know-how now coveted by the project, the second world. After having worked on the project for (but) a few weeks, Daniel had the impression of developing relationships of a sort that he had never had with colleagues in his department. He had to provide spurts of energy, sort things out by himself, show he could manage on his own. As he was aware, all that fit into a short-term perspective. This hyperactivity did him good but also exhausted him:

"At the end of this period, after five months on the project, I started feeling tired, worn out. The initial excitement, which had enabled me to absorb a rather large amount of work, was followed by a phase of doubt. Given the project's demands, I was wondering what the limits would be...!"

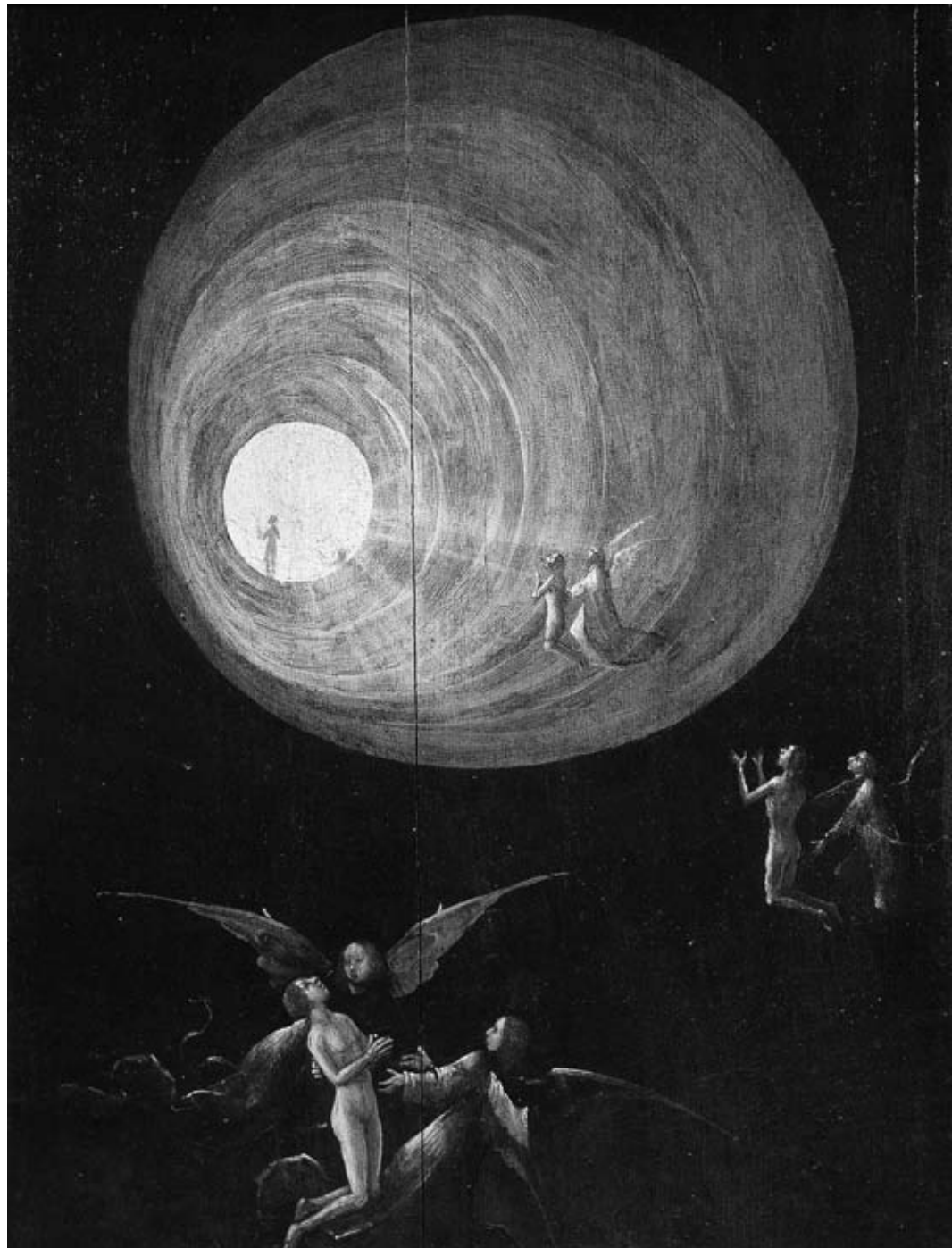
• *Burnout*

As Daniel admitted, he could not stand it any longer. Besides the overload, there was stress, even anxiety. He had chosen to take part in the project because he had understood that it was a springboard for careers, since the firm wanted to identify staff members with potential. However the mounting difficulties risked making this exposure counterproductive. He reacted by doing even more lest others say that he had not done everything possible to accomplish his work:

"The pressure was enormous. The project head made me understand we were all in this together – we were collectively responsible for anything that might happen, anything positive and, too, any difficulties. That was the point where I dropped out. The pressure I had taken on myself, from my department for those long months, from the project head, and then from team members... it was too much. I was exhausted, drained, unable to spring back."

From excitement to the pressure trap

Daniel's story clearly illustrates the gradual, pernicious slipping from strong motivations to occupational burnout. As is recognized, projects demand strong commitments given their intrinsic characteristics: the challenge – in a break with routine activities – to mobilize energy for a limited time to work as part of



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“Knowing that your advice is expected, that you are needed, is downright gratifying; and the project head used that to keep pushing me to do a little more.” (*L'Ascension vers l'Empirée*, Jérôme Bosch, around 1500)

a team in pursuit of a clear objective. Individuals feel “involved” intellectually (Their ideas contribute directly to the project), socially (They are part of a team) and, too, emotionally (Spending energy reinforces ties with the project and its team). When pressure mounts, this involvement and creation of meaning generate risks for participants. In the verbatim accounts, we detected three subcategories of pathologies related to project management: cornered participants, work-related risks and psychological suffering.

- *Cornering participants*

F. JULLIEN (2005:32), a philosopher and sinologist who has worked on efficiency and strategies, has described how Chinese generals “cornered” their troops into being brave enough to win battles. In a famous example, Hernando Cortez made the wager that burning his vessels so that a return could not be imagined would force his troops to conquer the New World for the Spanish crown. With respect to project management, TAKEUCHI and NONAKA (1986) have invoked

the image of assigning a team to the basement: senior management then takes away the ladder and forces the team to find on its own – under pressure from time, cost and quality – a way to climb back up. A general, like a project manager, does not ask whether his “teams” are brave or cowardly. What counts is not the characteristics of individuals but the conditions to be set up for cornering the team into working hard. Michael described his involvement in a computer project in a bank:

“You sometimes have the impression you don’t have any choice. There’s no other solution. Slog on, go forward, whatever the cost. A sort of accelerating spiral you can’t break out of.”

Pressure comes not only from superiors but also from deadlines, technical specifications, resource limitations and forms of organization. Lila, who took part in an in-house reorganization project said,

“You’re going to spend the night if you have to, but you can’t fall behind or else the others are going to do the same when you need them.”

In pursuit of its objective, a project increases pressure because it multiplies contacts between individuals and augments the requirement to be an achiever. Subtle games of cooperation-vengeance can be observed that generate a pressure all the more intense and pernicious because it comes directly from team members.

• *Work-related risks*

Projects are pertinacious machines for making requirements and judging people. Persons who used to work without knowing each other in a sequential organization are brought together in a joint project where they are exposed to the view of others. As the social pressure on individuals mounts, its effects are all the more violent insofar as it is exercised by colleagues and team members. During the many project-related meetings, members have to make reports, analyze their mistakes, justify their choices and expectations. According to Marie, who took part in an industrial project in agribusiness,

“You’re constantly being watched. You always have the feeling of being evaluated. It sometimes pushes you to go a little too far, especially in making promises.”

The active involvement of clients or a prime contractor’s representatives in a project intensifies pressure. The same holds for the presence of partners who also work with competitors. Stephen had this to say about an engineering project:

“When the client asks you a question, it’s hard to say you don’t know. This pushes you to make commitments without being sure you’ll be able to keep promises.”

Participants are also exposed to personal risks. Jean-Pierre about his experience in an advertising project: “Usually, in a company, when people aren’t happy, they complain, they gripe [...] In a project, when you don’t agree, the question other team members ask you right away is: what do you propose?”

The individual’s ability to contribute to the project, to make proposals and suggest new ideas is at stake. The prevailing trend, supported by human resource offices, toward “individualizing” bonuses and sanctions (SEGRESTIN 2004; RETOUR 1998) bolsters this tendency. Participants are summoned to get in (contribute)... or get out (leave the project)!

• *Psycho-affective risks*

A project increases the anxiety related to “performance” and thus exacerbates the spirit of competition among colleagues. Very few studies have been made of the psycho-affective aspects of projects in terms of stress, burnout or even drug consumption (SOMMERVILLE and LANGFORD 1994; GÄLLSTEDT 2003). However projects represent a fertile field for analyzing the “right” amount of stress to be dissolved through action (DUBREIL 1993). Project management spawns several forms of stress (FLANNES and LEVIN 2001, 286):

- the stress arising from tensions and questions about “belonging”;
- the stress due to solving problems in a pressurized situation;
- the stress caused by variations in the project’s pace (bifurcations, shifts from the front line to fallback positions, from time for thought to the time of action, etc.);
- the stress of being directly watched by colleagues, of one’s contributions being constantly evaluated.

Not everyone can bear up under the pressure brought to bear by project management. Some do, but others break down without any care or counseling being provided. It is hard to imagine retreating, or backing down, during a project. Daniel suffered from this sort of physical and psychological exhaustion.

THE RISKS OF DESTABILIZING OCCUPATIONAL IDENTITIES

In pursuit of cooperation across traditional organizational boundaries, a project blurs ordinary reference marks for occupational identities and disturbs the usual know-how. The effort to move beyond the “silo logics” of vertical integration (necessary in the quest for “systemic performance”) should not make us overlook the need to “repair” identities at the end of a project so that wage-earners continue acquiring the expertise that the firm will surely require from them... during a new project.

Agnes’s testimony: a project undermines the expert

Accepting to take part in a project is risky for the person’s sense of identity. The more a sense of expertise is

fundamental to wage-earners' occupational identities, the more a project risks destabilizing them. During a project, the individual does not communicate primarily with persons who have the same know-how, methods, habits and jargon. On the contrary, the specialist has to come to grips with his expertise and risk having it brought under question by people who do not have the same system of references.

- *The status of expert, a protective shell*

Agnes, a young architect, was asked to participate in a bold urban project in connection with a public transit system. The department of architecture selected her for her technical skills. She was to assist as closely as possible a project manager who was not specialized in this field. She said,

“At the start of our relationship, I appreciated our direct exchanges. The team was small. It was the very first weeks of the project. The project head was quite attentive to my proposals and warnings.”

Agnes intervened as an expert, and was recognized for her know-how. The client recognized her as a guarantee of the quality of services and eagerly listened to her comments.

- *Dealing with nonprofessionals*

“The trouble started when the project head allowed persons with no connection to our specific preoccupations to attend our meetings. He asked for advice from an urbanist, whose concerns were far from the technical problems we had to settle, and from persons who use public transportation or who lived near the construction site. It's always a good policy to ask for opinions, but he made too much of their proposals.” For Agnes, this phase was complicated, since she was facing persons who, although they had no legitimate power in the project, were going to make her modify complex technical arrangements based on her expertise and on the know-how of her department of origin. She began worrying as the project was “popularized”.

“The project had to be a little daring. We were far below what we could do technically. I don't believe nonprofessionals are the ones who can really influence this type of project... Isn't that just courting popularity?”

- *Coping with the group*

The project's scope was growing, and the phase of execution had started. Agnes was still on the project but now as a team member and not just as an advisor to the project manager. This immersion in a larger group caused other difficulties, as she pointed out:

“I had the feeling my work was being watered down in this group. It was hard for me to clearly show my department what I had done, since proposals were reworked, modified. Even though I was the one who had to validate them ultimately, they were no longer fully mine.”

Agnes was losing her exclusive, privileged relationship with the project manager, who was enlarging his circle of contacts.

Destabilizing individual and collective identities

Agnes came out of this experience deeply destabilized. She had started out with confidence in her skills and qualifications, and had been introduced as an architect with a reputation. She left the project with doubts. What had she achieved to be proud of? Some decisions made during the project were not in line with her conception of architecture, nor her department's. She would have to justify these decisions, which she found hard to accept, in discussions with departmental colleagues.

The persons involved in a project might undergo periods of doubt or apprehension, owing to their immersion in an unknown world. During a project, the recourse to superiors is not clear; the boundaries between specialties blur; and forms of coordination and cooperation often change. This causes anxiety.

We have detected three subcategories of pathologies related to the operation of projects: tensions among experts, the difficulties of experts understanding each other, and roving occupational identities.

- *Experts in their shells*

Various sorts of technical know-how do not spontaneously converge during a project. The know-how of the people involved does not automatically add up to a collective result: “There are too many cases where organizations know less than their members” (ARGYRIS and SCHÖN 1978:9). According to Jean-Jacques, who took part in an automobile industry project:

“People too often believe it suffices to assemble experts for them to work together. In jobs in the car industry, where occupations are traditionally strongly defined, that took years.”

As the verbatim accounts, along with Agnes's testimony, suggest, experts will have trouble expressing their views and cooperating if the firm's human resource department does not handle problems related to occupational identities. Any “discomfort” experienced during previous projects is recalled, and the experts involved in the current project tense up and fall back on their specialties.

Several problems should be pointed out that worsen when experts are destabilized in their specialties.

First of all, the experts involved in a project have to learn to become teachers capable of explaining in simple terms to nonprofessionals the requirements related to their specialties. This calls for maturity, self-confidence and the right control over one's position in relation to others. Sylvia, who took part in a project for setting up a new public service:



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These accounts [...] bring to light the often cruel experiences of persons who took part in projects – in contrast with the enthusiastic talk and promising prospects that led them to become involved (*L'Enfer, dans Le Jardin des délices, Jérôme Bosch, around 1500*).

“When a computer scientist talks, it’s usually to explain that technical requirements, incomprehensible to you, are the reason your idea isn’t feasible. It’s also a way to cut off the discussion.”

Destabilized experts withdraw from cooperating into their shells.

Secondly, experts have a hard time expressing their know-how in an assured, definitive way in a new

setting. Michael said this about his participation in a logistics project in agribusiness:

“How do you want me to anticipate safety measures if I’m not familiar with the final product’s precise characteristics?”

Experts might not produce what is expected because their know-how is taken to be an absolute. Their way of expressing reservations seriously diminishes the relevance of what they say.

Finally, know-how emerges during the project from doing, from practice; but it might be fuzzy, poorly defined and hard to formulate. Given these difficulties, destabilized experts might say nothing, like Matthew during a project in pharmaceuticals:

“I preferred not giving an opinion rather than backing solutions I’m not sure of.”

Experts should be helped to build up their know-how through participation in a project. They should not experience a project as a situation for making compromises without any possibility for enhancing their expertise. Human resources should consider adopting the dialogic principle of “differentiating in order to manage better”.

- *The difficulties of understanding each other*

Besides the difficulties related to any act of creation by an individual, problems of intercomprehension arise during the process of group creation. A lack of comprehension, or even of expression, between parties is significant when it occurs while a solution to a problem is being collectively designed. Experts might remain shut up inside their own shells to the detriment of the collective project. Only by becoming aware of this will they be brought to reinvest energy in the project. According to Hector, who was part of a mechanical engineering project:

“It took me six months to understand why the technical solution I was proposing for the machines caused enormous problems of installation in the shops. I had to make a proposal for a gradual, less efficient approach that met the physical requirements for installing the machines.”

Besides the difficulties of understanding each other in the project team, there are problems of mutual understanding with colleagues in one’s department. This might lead to a questioning of occupational identities. According to Valerie, who was involved in a marketing project in pharmaceuticals:

“We found, on the project, a formula that placed me in an awkward position in relation to our usual practices. I was criticized for not following procedures, which would have been much too complicated and too long for the project. I was almost considered a traitor by my colleagues in the laboratory.”

- *Roving occupational identities*

Some people, when torn between a project and their original occupation or profession, make a clear-cut

choice in favor of the project and gradually leave behind the “right” practices developed in their specialty. In this case, the groups built upon occupations and specialties will no longer recognize the individual as a reliable spokesman. In turn, the individual no longer finds a place in relation to the rules and regulation of his occupation or specialty, which he now deems too rigid and discrepant with the project’s (contingent) requirements. As the number of work groups cutting across traditional boundaries increases, occupational identities splinter; and individuals lose their bearings. Thierry, who was involved in a computer project in telecommunications, had this to say:

“After five consecutive projects, I feel less and less like a telecommunications engineer but more and more like someone who designs made-to-measure solutions.”

When projects tail each other, feelings of belonging become temporary, unstable and contingent (MARTIN 1992). Occupational identities develop in a fluctuating, fragmented context, which might be contentious and heavily dependent on special conditions or opportunities (KILDUFF and MEHRA 1997). Anne-Marie, who took part in a project in a hypermarket retail chain, pointed out:

“Some go back to their job as an expert after the project, and have to find their bearings and habits. Others have the chance to go on to other projects... and their original ties come undone.”

Traditional solidarity based on belonging to an occupational group is replaced with a sense of solidarity that, based on a network, is opportunistic and intermittent. Depending on his behavior and qualifications, the individual might, or might not, benefit from belonging to such a network. In the words of Jean-Paul, about his experience in a construction engineering project:

“The international project in a hostile land left marks. We lived through so much together! Some clearly said they never wanted to go through that again. But others, like me, still have close contacts. We’re ready to leave again at the first chance.”

ROCKIER CAREER PATHWAYS INSIDE THE FIRM

Work on a project risks jeopardizing the development of skills and qualifications, and impairing careers.

Alberto’s testimony: A project breeds vulnerability

Companies often try to boost participation in projects by presenting them as springboards for careers. However these intense efforts to sell a project seldom have any after-sales followup.

- *The project, a fixed-term contract with the firm*

This question of an after-sales followup in terms of career management is illustrated with the case of Alberto, who, for several years, passed from project to project in software development and between assignments with clients. After a downturn in the computer industry, the number of worthwhile projects dropped, and competition between colleagues rose. Everyone wanted to be in on the same projects. "The project heads ended up benefitting from this scarcity of projects. They were able to choose their team members. Being on a project was reassuring for everyone during this period of uncertainty. The question of what we would do next was left hanging. Our decision did not correspond to career plans. The intention was to preserve the basics: our jobs. Some employees chained projects like temporary employment contracts."

Alberto was referring in veiled terms to the internal labor market.

- *Prospects after the project affect solidarity during the project*

"I knew a project where the main topic of discussion at lunchtime, six months before its expiration, was to know who would go on to which future project. Among programmers, I saw the mounting animosity between persons who were working together but had applied for the same position in the flagship project about to be started."

Alberto witnessed opportunistic behaviors:

"Ultimately, those who played the game were the losers. Bonuses were individualized; and once that started, it was contagious."

- *Solidarity beyond the project*

"I might now be in jeopardy if I had not had the chance to be on a few prominent projects. However good I might've been as a program analyst, what counted above all else was the projects I took part in and the contacts I made."

Involvement in projects helped develop personal networks and careers. The autonomy granted by a project made individuals responsible for their own future: "Don't count on support from other analysts. Everyone for himself on his project! Fortunately, I kept up good contacts with those who had directed previous projects. They appreciated me and, I hope, will continue thinking of me in the future."

Dual pathways for developing skills and qualifications

The example of how Alberto managed the period after a project raises broader questions about the acquisition of skills and qualifications, the value at-

ached to them and career management. A project is normally seen as providing leverage for the development of new skills and qualifications of a relational, methodological or managerial sort. However the description of what actually happens presents a picture with contrasts. The accounts we collected point out the difficulty of proving, once people return to their normal jobs, that the qualifications acquired during a project are valuable. They also indicate how hard it is to synchronize a career with a succession of projects. A final point, companies are apparently not interested in handling the problems of "incompetence" in relation to a project.

- *The value of qualifications gained through a project*

A project provides an opportunity for experimenting and acquiring managerial skills and qualifications that, cutting across traditional job boundaries, are complementary to those related to one's specialty. Given these positive prospects, how to grant recognition to the persons for what they have learned once they come back from the project to their ordinary jobs? There are at least three reasons for these recurrent problems.

First of all, "soft" know-how very seldom fits squarely into the grid of job skills and classifications, as Claude's experience in a high-tech R&D project made him realize:

"Our specifications of skills, centered around specialties, did not allow for taking into account all the know-how I acquired on the project."

Secondly, individuals do not always have an easy time putting into words what they have learned on a project. When there is no methodology for personnel assessment and a followup by human resources, the person will have difficulty formalizing the new know-how, as Valerie testified about her experience after a multimedia communications project:

"I've become aware that I now know how to work in a team, evaluate risks and participate in group decisions, but that seems trite. And I don't know how to convince my boss I'm better in these areas."

Finally, new skills might simply not be deemed useful, and thus not valued in job specifications. Philip, who had taken part in a project for managing complicated insurance transactions, stated:

"Here, we provide expert legal advice. The fact that I know how to talk about a client's needs or raise a problem in different terms is not useful, and might even be dangerous. On the contrary, I'm criticized for not being up on the last piece of legislation. I have to catch up as fast as possible."

- *Synchronizing projects and a career*

The question of acquiring new skills and having them recognized brings up the broader problem of career management. In many firms, unfortunately, participation in a project is not sufficiently taken into

account when designing mid-run occupational itineraries. As a consequence, people pursue their personal interests and strategies, which might be harmful for the project and create social tensions with major consequences. Projects adds onto classical possibilities for a purely vertical advancement: “horizontal” career prospects open, as people move from one project to the next, or alternate between a project and their regular jobs. However this is not without risks, as Pierre, a human resource director in an international trading firm, told us:

“You can’t replace ten years of experience in a specialty with ten experiences, each lasting a year, in projects. In terms of career management, a ‘nook’ as project head can soon become a ‘jail’.”

The risk is to pass from one project to the next, depending on the opportunities, but without ever fitting into the occupational grid recognized in the firm.

- *Project-related “incompetence”*

A project generates a new dynamics of socialization and exclusion. According to Marie, who worked in banking:

“It’s always the same ones in our company who are on projects. Others never step forward.”

New social stratifications separate those who are often asked to be on a project and those who are gradually excluded. As Bertrand NICOLAS (2000) has pointed out, when projects are valued in managerial talk and in the firm’s practices, what is left unsaid is that less value will be attached to those who do not take part, as Anne, in the educational sector, confirmed:

“Me too, I’d like to be on a project. But the same ones are always chosen. I’ve ended up feeling I’ll not have any more opportunities. But I know it’s hard, and I’m not sure I’m capable of taking part!”

Rumors insidiously shape the reputations of “champions” or “dead weights”. Anne added:

“Even though it’s not written down anywhere, you clearly know who’s indispensable and who you’d better avoid lugging along on a team.”

Informal recruitment networks and parallel systems of management arise out of the processes whereby persons choose each other for a project. Of course, rumors circulate outside any formalized system of evaluation, beyond the scope of the department of human resources. This is, we might think, a healthy, natural way to manage personnel, since the least competent are eliminated and the best are promoted. The operation of a project breaks traditional forms of solidarity and individualizes behavior patterns. What happens to those who are not, or no longer, competent (although they used to be) or who need time to become competent? Pierre, who took part in a communications project:

“It’s always hard to say you don’t know how to do something. You slug it out, muddle issues, try to hide your problems in the group. In short, you got to

protect yourself, since leaving a project is not good for career prospects inside the firm.”

According to EHRENBURG (2000), the principle of obeying rules and regulations has been replaced with constant references to individual initiatives, autonomy and the entrepreneur as a model. Accordingly, many wage-earners feel that they are “not up to it” on a project in comparison with situations outside a project where they only have to comply with regulations and follow routines.

CONCLUSION

This article presents the findings from an exploratory research that collected, with discretion in a setting outside the firm where they worked, testimonies from persons that would contain enough detail to ensure their veracity. The group dynamics in these “ad hoc communities of expression” freed tongues in a way that might not have occurred had the research been based on interviews and commissioned by a firm.

These accounts and our analysis of them bring to light the often cruel experiences of persons who took part in projects – in contrast with the enthusiastic talk and promising prospects that led them to become involved. Our intent has been to take the social effects and difficulties of project management as seriously as the project’s actual activities, which capitalism values so highly. Given the variety of the projects, situations and positions, any generalization is open to discussion. Personal or occupational risks and opportunities crop up differently depending on whether the person heads a big strategic project or is a part-time member of a project for making local improvements.

Besides the proposals already formulated, the risks detected in this research should lead researchers and human resource practitioners to give thought to four subjects:

- *The isolation of individuals.* Jean-Daniel’s efforts to rebuild his life, Agnes’s doubts or Alberto’s attempt to plan a career are all evidence of isolation. They were alone, left to themselves with no one to help them find their bearings and take stock of their experience. In this sense, the project was not a learning experience for them. They came out of their project feeling weaker or even guilty.

- *The loss to the organisation.* Beyond individuals, the whole organization is weakened. The isolation of individuals, when generalized, risks degrading the organization’s potential. Jean-Daniel’s project might have been a success, but the company lost a collaborator or, at least, his involvement and performance. In Agnes’s case, the feeling of a lack of understanding – or even of an opposition between job and project – was reinforced. For Alberto, the firm as a whole will not progress if there is no sup-

port for individuals and if their career development is not taken into account.

– *Projects are double-edged.* Is a project a tool for the development of individuals, groups and organizations or, instead, a new form of exploitation and domination? The wielding of “soft” power and supple domination (COURPASSON 2000) combines with the positive, progressive aspects of a project to spur individuals to take part. However attention should be drawn to the fact that a project also bears risks for individuals, social groups and occupational identities.

– *The management of human resources.* By cutting across normal job boundaries, project management raises questions for the firm’s human resource department, questions relating to its very existence (ZANNAD 1998). The normal assignments of human resource departments have developed within the framework of “occupations”. The tools normally used are poorly adapted to a temporary population in operations that cut across traditional job boundaries. For example, how to define the duties of a project manager who does not have “duties” in the usual sense of the word but, instead, a general objective to reach? What becomes of job classifications when activities converge? Given that human resource practices are not adapted to project management, deeper questions crop up about the difficulties that human resource systems have in taking into account the increasing differentiation and segmentation of populations, situations and forms of organization. The trend toward “dual” organizations, which combine “projects” and “occupations”, is a potential source of collective enrichment under condition that the transfers between these two poles be thought out and organized. Otherwise, contradictions might emerge, for example out of the overinvolvement or overexposure of those who participate in projects or owing to the exclusion and loss of esteem of those who do not take part.

The management of human resources in question

Becoming more competitive thanks to projects has a price tag: the organization must evolve to apprehend the new rationales that cut across traditional boundaries; and both “permanent” and temporary systems, such as classical departments and projects, must co-exist. As X. BARON (1999) stated, “Human resource management is questioned as to its capacity to give up a uniform managerial model for a variety of forms of management, adapted and evolving as a function of structures and issues.” For example, the capacity for an organization to operate across normal boundaries depends on its human resources system’s ability to follow up on, stimulate and value the personnel who

take part in projects and have careers that deviate from the usual patterns.

Given these issues, can human resources remain a centralized function that handles contradictory demands from regular jobs and project-related activities? On the contrary, should it be decentralized, for example, by setting up human resource project managers? Changes in the human resource function bring us back to questions about the evolution of occupational identities as project management advances. A division of labor could be designed between a department of occupational human resources, which would try to preserve skills in recognized jobs and manage such careers, and a department of project human resources attached to project directors, which would have the task of managing the personnel involved in projects. In this way, the problem of occupational identities and of the solitude of participation in a project would be directly handled. The human resource function could adapt to the trend toward project management by “dissolving” itself in the processes related to a project and constructing a global multi-project coherence (GAREL 1998). In brief, casting light on the gloomy side of projects should lead human resources to inquire into its assignments and reinvent itself. ■

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