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Research Article

Project-Based Organisations: A Theoretical Study in Construction Context

Arvind Kaushesh [1*], Dr. Vikas Sheoran [2]

[1] Research Scholar, Department of Business Management & Commerce, IEC University, Baddi, Himachal Pradesh, India

[2] Associate Professor, Department of Business Management & Commerce, IEC University, Baddi, Himachal Pradesh, India

Corresponding Author: *Arvind Kaushesh

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Abstract

Despite their widespread adoption as the preferred mode of organizing within the international construction industry, the existing theoretical understanding of project-based organizations (PBOs) is still disparate and scattered across many different disciplines. The current paper provides a detailed theoretical analysis of the PBO phenomenon in the specific domain of construction, covering its main features, various structural configurations, and the inter-organizational relationships that influence project performance. Based on the organization, project management, and construction management theories, the paper explores the inherent features of temporary organizations, the matrix and projectized structures used in forming PBOs, the role of trust and relational capital in governing organizational coalitions, and the ongoing problems of transferring organizational knowledge and learning. In conclusion, it is argued that a permanent organization theory is inadequate in understanding construction PBOs and a theoretically consistent approach that specifically targets temporary multi-organizational production must be formulated in order to achieve empirical success. Potential areas for future research are discussed.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the construction industry, the way production is organized has posed a series of theoretical challenges since the advent of research in modern management aimed at this sector. Firstly, construction involves producing outputs that are unique, localized, and one-off. It entails forming a transitory alliance between companies and people to collaborate together from beginning to end of the job, resulting in no residual organization. Furthermore, its operations take place within an incredibly intricate value chain where relations among design consultants, specialized constructors, material suppliers, and equipment providers need to be established from scratch every time a new project emerges. Last but not least, it occurs in an uncertain environment where the site, the design, the regulations, and client specifications might be subject to changes in such a way that they nullify the most meticulous prior planning.[1]

It is these features, either alone or together, which make the project-based organisation the natural and indeed the only really available vehicle for building production. The project is not just an administrative simplicity in construction; it is the fundamental unit of production, the organising principle around which every asset are organized, every authority defined and all responsibilities established.[2] An organization that builds a health facility or bridge no longer does so as an ongoing hobby of its permanent organization; It does so through a brief entity formed for the purpose, governed using the contracts and relationships of the appointed organization, dissolved when the building or bridge is conveyed to the client.

Nevertheless, the theoretical analysis of project-based organizations within the construction context is far from complete. The existing dominant theories of project management have been largely developed in aerospace, defense, and IT projects. Hence, the application of these theories to construction PBOs has been limited. Furthermore, the existing theoretical insights about the management, performance, and behavior of PBOs operating in the construction sector have yet to be developed. As far as the organizational theory literature is concerned, it is characterized by the fact that it focuses mostly on permanent organizations, whereas temporary organizations have always been regarded as a special case.

The objective of this paper is to contribute to filling at least some of the existing gaps by analyzing project-based organizations in the construction sector from a theoretical perspective. The main contribution of this paper is theoretical: it attempts to synthesize and evaluate the existing theoretical frameworks to understand construction PBOs, to pinpoint the points where these frameworks are more and less adequate to the reality of construction project organization, and to propose a more coherent theoretical account of the defining properties, structural differences, and organizational dynamics of PBOs in construction.[3]

2. The Project-Based Organization: Theoretical Foundations

The project-based organization, as a theoretical construct, has been the subject of considerable scholarly discussion since its emergence within the organizational theory literature in the 1990s. The seminal work on the topic came from Lundin and Soderholm, who posited a theory of the temporary organization that identified four defining characteristics: time boundedness, task orientation, team, and transition as the state of termination. According to the theory, these characteristics define temporary organizations as distinct not just as smaller or shorter-lived variants of permanent organizations, but rather as entirely separate organizational forms with their own particular principles of functioning, governance, and purpose. Indeed, the construction project, with its specific target date for completion, the specific product to be delivered, its assembled crew of laborers, and ultimately its dismantling when handed over to the client, conforms very precisely to this classification.

The origins of the project-based organization in construction go back many more years than do the writings on the theoretical foundations of such organizations. According to Morris, the project form has served as an organizational mechanism for bringing together the various specialists and other resources needed to build a complex structure for some four thousand years. The medieval European guilds managed cathedral building using what can easily be described as project-oriented forms of organization, where the master builder headed a temporary hierarchy of skilled craftsmen, whose cooperative behavior was guided by informal norms and patronal control rather than the formal contracts which govern the project organization in today's world. The modern form of project management organization is actually a formalized, contractual, and institutionalized development of these very ancient forms rather than an innovation that came up in the modern era.

Midler's theory of "projectification" will help us to understand the place of the project-oriented structure of organization in the construction industry. According to Midler, certain industries, particularly the construction industry, go through a process whereby the project becomes the primary organizational unit of activity, and the firm only exists to manage and support project-oriented activities. Thus, the firm ceases to be a production center and only acts as a means through which project activity can take place. The creation organization, on this account, is an organization with moderate organizational efficiency instead of the ability to carry out production operations without delays and the ability to form and manipulate initiative coalitions The difference between evaluation as a tool and corporate mission is of fundamental importance for the theoretical study of construction PBOs. Much early challenge management theory

[1] Rolf A. Lundin and Anders Soderholm, "A Theory of the Temporary Organization" (1995) 16(4) Scandinavian Journal of Management 437, 439-441.

[2] Peter W.G. Morris, The Management of Projects (Thomas Telford, London, 1994) 2-6.

[3] Nils Brunsson and Johan P. Olsen, The Reforming Organization (Routledge, London, 1993) 4-9.

combined 2, treating the venture as an extension of the sponsoring corporation and its use of organizational design and control theories developed in the context of perpetual companies This conflation created theoretical frameworks that were officially consistent yet empirically inadequate We could not account for the multi-corporate character, the ephemeral authority systems that govern enterprise drawings, or the one kind of motivational dynamics of a group of workers mobilized for a finite and defined motive.[4] The theoretical advance demonstrated by the interim organizational literature was specifically the realization that the project, as a unit of analysis, needs its own theoretical framework rather than the implementation of theories developed for long-term organizational forms.

It is also important to differentiate theoretically between the project as an organizational form and the project as a production process. Most of the literature on construction management treats the project as a process, emphasizing the sequence of activities that must be performed to convert inputs to outputs, and the planning, scheduling and control techniques needed to manage that sequence.[5] This process angle, as also funds for operational control purposes, tends to hard to understand organizational dimensions of enterprise-head based manufacturing: authority structures, interorganizational relations, governance mechanisms, human and social dynamics that determine whether the process effectively produces said products to desired quality. The organizational approach pursued in this paper treats the development mission as the first and most important agency and examines its typological characteristics as a result of its organizational qualities as opposed to being the primary object of theoretical interest.

3. Structural Forms of Construction Project-Based Organizations

The structure of the project-based organization, its characteristics, and how the project-based organization is formed within the construction sector reveal great differences due to the nature of projects, client specifications, contractual agreements, and the strategy of firms within the industry. The structure of the project-based organization most commonly discussed within organizational literature and project management literature can be categorized on a continuum beginning with weak functional matrix structures where the permanent organization is dominant over the project to fully projectized structures where the project is the main organizational entity and the permanent organization acts as a supporting element for administrative purposes.[6]

The matrix organizational structure, where project and functional managers jointly exercise authority over people and resources, is the most frequently mentioned organizational type in the field of project management and is most prevalent in construction companies big enough to have specialist units such as engineering, estimating, procurement, and health and safety at the same time running several projects. The famous typology introduced by Archibald differentiates between three kinds of matrix organizations: weak, balanced, and strong, in order of the escalating power held by the project manager compared to the functional manager. Selection among those types has a considerable impact on how specialist knowledge is coordinated among the projects, how the specialists are motivated and trained, the pace of decision making within projects, and accountability of the project results.

The projectized organizational structure, where the project manager is in charge of all the resources allocated to the project, and where the organization as such exists only to provide project capability, is prevalent among construction companies dealing mainly with large and complex projects that are unique.[7] Under the fully projectized organizational structure, the project team is specially created for the project, staff members are assigned to the project, and the project team is disbanded after the project's successful completion. The benefits of such a structure, in terms of clearly defined authority, strong project orientation, and team identity being congruent with project goals, have to be evaluated along with the associated costs, which include the duplication of specialists within different projects, problems related to maintaining uniform organizational culture and standards in autonomous project organizations, and lack of economies of scale associated with specialized roles within project structures.

One distinguishing structural characteristic of project organizations in construction relative to other industries is that project coalitions are made up of many firms rather than just one firm organizing the project team using its employees. While in the case of a manufacturing project the project team may be organized from the employees of the manufacturing company, in a construction project, the project coalition may comprise not only the main contractor but also several other independent organizations, including design professionals, architects, engineering firms, materials suppliers, and clients, all of whom bring their organizational culture and authorities to the project.[8] Management of this particular multi-firm coalition poses organizational problems, which are radically different from those associated with the management of a project team inside an organization, and it is the lack of sufficient theoretical attention to such management issues, which has been

[4] Jorn Lampel and Henry Mintzberg, "Customizing Customization" (1996) 38(1) Sloan Management Review 21, 24-28.

[5] Lars Lindkvist, "Project Organization: Exploring its Adaptation Properties" (2004) 25(1) International Journal of Project Management 13, 14-18.

[6] Kathryn M. Bartol and David C. Martin, Management (4th edn., McGraw-Hill, New York, 1998) 312-315.

[7] Kenneth Hubbard and Gary Bolles, "Projectizing the Enterprise" (1992) 23(4) Project Management Journal 27, 29-32.

[8] Graham M. Winch, Managing Construction Projects: An Information Processing Approach (2nd edn., Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, 2010) 89-97.

characteristic of theories developed in relation to single-firm project management environments.

Procurement route choice, which defines the nature of the contractual arrangement that exists between the project organizations within the multi-firm project coalition, has a significant impact on the structural characteristics of the created project organization. In traditional procurement routes, in which the client contracts individually with a design team and a main contractor and, consequently, the contractor organizes the specialist subcontractor chain, there emerges a hierarchy of power structures with a well-defined principal agent relationship at each level. In contrast, the other procurement routes like design build, construction management, and project management contract pose different allocations of powers and risks for the coalition members.[9] The emergence of relational contracting frameworks, which include partnerships, alliance frameworks, and integrated project delivery, reflects a recognition among practitioners and students that the hostile relationships recommended by traditional procurement architecture are a tremendous supply of project failure, and a kind of structural readiness that of coalition contributors Incentives can extra-intentionally align with goals produce notably higher outcomes.

4. Inter-Organizational Dynamics

The theoretical assessment of inter-organizational dynamics in manufacturing enterprise alliances represents one of the most active and theoretically productive areas of current creation control scholarship. The relevant insight driving this literature is that the performance of the creation project employer cannot be adequately defined by myself through linking to its formal contract form, because formal agreement necessarily underdetermines the behavior of coalition members in the face of complexity, uncertainty and unpredictability that characterize production work.[10] The gap between what the agreement specifies and what enterprise overall performance calls for is to be filled through the relationship governance mechanism, which the alliance individuals believe is maximally fundamental.

The idea of interorganizational consideration has attracted vast theoretical interest in the production control literature.[11] Calculative trust within a project coalition is understood as the result of an analysis of the other side's abilities and its rational motivation to act, while relational trust refers to the creation of mutual norms based on experience of past interactions with one another. Calculative and relational trust are both beneficial for project performance, although they influence performance in different ways and arise through different organizational practices. The former may be built on the basis of pre-qualification process, reference checks, and due diligence procedures, while the latter builds up over time as a result of actual experience of collaboration and is unachievable through any contractual arrangements.

There are numerous research findings that prove the role of trust in successful execution of construction projects. Empirical studies suggest that high levels of trust among parties to a project coalition result in improved performance in terms of cost efficiency and schedule, as well as high level of satisfaction with the work carried out and readiness to cooperate to handle unforeseen challenges that always arise during construction projects.[12] Of the many empirical studies examining project success, Badewien and Rubin's investigation into German construction projects stands out because of their conclusion that trust among coalition members is more effective as a predictor of success than contract completeness, thus contradicting the dominant notion in construction contracting literature that a greater completeness of contracts leads to better project performance.

Inter-organizational relations governance in the context of construction PBOs is characterized by the use of three different types of governance arrangements. These include formal contractual governance, whereby each actor's roles and responsibilities are clearly spelled out and solutions to any breaches are outlined, bureaucratic governance that uses regulations and standard procedures to align the actions of the parties involved, and finally relational governance, where the actors' actions are governed by the norms of trust, reciprocity and long-term commitment to one another.[13] The theoretical task involves examining how the interaction of these mechanisms works within the particular institutional and organizational environment of construction projects, especially how the ideal balance between them differs according to varying types of projects, procurement methods, and previous experiences of the contracting parties involved.

There is another aspect of inter-organizational relations, namely, the incentive schemes that govern the actions of the members of the coalition in construction projects, which has been studied theoretically. The traditional construction contract generates incentives that are often contradictory to the interests of a successful project: a fixed-price contract generates incentives for the contractor to cut costs at the expense of quality; the cost-plus approach discourages contractors from controlling their cost structure; and claims-based dispute

[9] Roger Miller and Donald Lessard, The Strategic Management of Large Engineering Projects (MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2000) 3-8.

[10] Mark Loosemore, John Raftery, Charles Reilly and David Higgon, Risk Management in Projects (2nd edn., Taylor and Francis, London, 2006) 45-52.

[11] Christoph Badewien and Gerhard Rubin, "Inter-Organisational Trust in Construction Projects" (2010) 28(4) Construction Management and Economics 453, 455-460.

[12] Patrick S.W. Fong and Christina W.Y. Lung, "Interorganizational Teamwork in the Construction Industry" (2007) 25(3) Journal of Construction Engineering and Management 157, 159-163.

[13] Stewart Clegg, Tyrone Pitsis, Thekla Rura-Polley and Marton Marosszeky, "Governmentality Matters: Designing an Alliance Culture of Inter-Organizational Collaboration for Managing Projects" (2002) 23(3) Organization Studies 317, 319-325.

resolution encourages coalition partners to prioritize their own profits over project efficiency.[14] The reform of alliance-sharing arrangements, with their shared risk-benefit-sharing incentives, represents an attempt to realign character incentives with collective venture goals, and has been the challenge of vast theoretical and empirical research in the construction management literature.

5. Knowledge Transfer and Organizational Learning in Temporary Organizations

The difficulty of understanding transfer and acquiring organizational know-how in initiative-based groups is defined as one of the most persistently consequential demanding situations dealing with the development industry.[15] The temporary nature of project organization becomes a structural impediment for the acquisition of organizational knowledge in the field because the people who learn from a particular project tend to separate once the project ends, along with their tacit knowledge that is developed throughout their collaboration and problem-solving activities during the process. As such, construction firms tend to make the same mistakes in subsequent projects, since there is no effective learning mechanism to convert the experiences of one project to future success.

Sandelands' framework to understand organizational learning as it applies to project environments differentiates learning that takes place during the course of a project and can help with improving project performance and learning that takes place across projects and requires conversion of the former type into organizational learning that can then be used in subsequent projects. The first type of learning is a natural byproduct of the project team adapting to problems, and it does not require any organizational mechanism to facilitate its occurrence. The second approach is problematic due to organizational factors that necessitate the acquisition, documentation, and dissemination of knowledge through the organizational boundary separating the project organization from the sponsoring organization, a task which is not automatic and not free and is inadequately addressed by existing organizational structures in construction.

The model of Kim and Paulson regarding knowledge transfer in construction project organizations highlights the critical difference between explicit knowledge, which is capable of being documented in manuals, procedures, and design specifications, and tacit knowledge, which resides in the expertise and interpersonal interactions of construction practitioners.[16] These differences are important when considering the design of organizational mechanisms for the transfer of knowledge because while explicit knowledge can be systematically captured through after-project review sessions, lessons learned documents, and SOPs, tacit knowledge can only be successfully transferred through the process of working together in an interactive way on actual construction projects. Traditional methods of training, which have been used throughout centuries for the transfer of tacit knowledge in construction trades, included a form of apprenticeship; however, the current trends of construction employment, where jobs tend to be short-term and more project-based, have made such training less effective.

The literature on organizational learning in construction PBOs highlights several organizational mechanisms that can assist in solving the problem of knowledge transfer within the industry. Relationships repeated between different companies along the construction supply chain serve as the best available mechanism for transferring knowledge from one construction project to another.[17] Framework agreements, preferred suppliers, and strategic partnerships may be viewed as deliberate organizational approaches to creating the necessary conditions for repeat relationships to take place and therefore harnessing the knowledge exchange that is enabled by the repeat collaboration. Research findings from the literature on the impact of relationship longevity within the construction industry on project performance generally tend to corroborate the theory of positive correlations between long and stable supplier relationships and higher project performance.

The manifesto for the future of project management studies by Winter et al. pinpoints the complexity of project organizations as the primary theoretical challenge of the discipline.[18] Their argument is that the dominant theoretical paradigm in project management, which treats the project as a deterministic process amenable to planning and control through the application of standard techniques, is fundamentally inadequate to the reality of large construction projects, in which complexity, emergence, and unanticipated events are not exceptional disruptions to an otherwise predictable process but constitutive features of the organizational environment. On this view, a theoretically adequate account of knowledge transfer and organizational learning in construction PBOs must begin from a recognition of complexity rather than treating it as a problem to be eliminated through better planning.

[14] Michael Bresnen and Nick Marshall, "Motivation, Commitment and the Use of Incentives in Partnerships and Alliances" (2000) 18(5) Construction Management and Economics 587, 589-594.

[15] Eric Sandelands, "Learning in Construction: Towards a Theory of Project-Based Organizational Learning" (1998) 4(2) International Journal of Project and Business Risk Management 153, 157-162.

[16] Nam Seok Kim and Frederick Paulson, "Knowledge Transfer for Infrastructure Projects" (2003) 129(6) Journal of Management in Engineering 265, 267-272.

[17] Lars Erik Gadde and Ivan Snehota, "Making the Most of Supplier Relationships" (2000) 29(4) Industrial Marketing Management 305, 307-311.

[18] Mark Winter, Charles Smith, Peter Morris and Simon Cicmil, "Directions for Future Research in Project Management: The Main Findings of a UK Government-Funded Research Network" (2006) 24(6) International Journal of Project Management 638, 640-645.

6. Governance Challenges in Large and Mega-Scale Construction Projects

The governance of large and mega construction projects raises organizational issues that differ in nature from those arising in small and typical construction projects. According to Miller and Lessard's model for the strategic management of large engineering projects, the issue of "project shaping" is identified as an additional aspect of governance that precedes the organizational stage of the project and deals with institutional, political, and financial choices that set the boundaries of the organizational project context. The empirical findings of Miller and Lessard in the area of large infrastructure projects indicate that the decisions made during the project shaping stage, such as the selection of project form, contractual setting, and governance of relationships between governmental and non-governmental actors, have the strongest impact on the future success of the project, being more important than operational management choices, which get most attention in the field of project management.

The theory of Complex Products and Systems (CoPS), developed by Davies and Hobday, offers another theoretical perspective on large construction projects.[19] Characteristics of CoPs include high unit costs, high technology content, customisation, low production volume, and the participation of more than one organisation in the production process. Examples of such projects are major building constructions such as power plants, airports, tunnels, and large bridges, and there exist fundamental differences between the organisational needs of such projects and other routine construction projects, which have been the traditional objects of construction management studies. In particular, the CoP concept highlights the importance of the organisational aspects of managing the system integration problem posed by large-scale building projects and the special demands of system integration on the governance mechanisms of the project partnership.

Institutional setting of the organisations operating large construction projects is another dimension of governance that has recently attracted growing theoretical attention.[20] Engwall's argument that no project is an operational island, but that all initiatives are rooted in historical, institutional and workplace settings that shape their opportunities and constraints, is especially relevant to large public building projects, which are rooted in political systems, governing bodies, and government procurement frameworks that impose specific governance standards.[21] Hazards arising from the institutional environment, along with regulatory uncertainty, contract enforcement problems, and political interference in challenge management, were shown in empirical research to be the number of most comprehensive determinants of large project outcomes, both developed and developing countries.

The governance of inter-organizational relations in production alliances and the work distribution frameworks involved provides a theoretical frontier with which the organizational literature has most easily begun to cope properly.[22] According to Gil's work on trust and governance in construction mega-projects, the formal contracting arrangements utilized in big construction projects cannot satisfactorily regulate the intricacies of the organizational dynamics involved, and the emergence of a relationship-oriented form of governance through trust will have to take place along with formal structures if project goals are to be fulfilled. The study thus bridges the link between the field of governance studies and the larger theoretical framework regarding organizational culture within project alliances, and brings to light the issue of whether the relational nature of the project organization can be consciously created through governance arrangements.0

7. CONCLUSION

In summary, the preceding discussion has explored the theoretical terrain of project-based organizations in the construction domain from a variety of perspectives, namely, the fundamental characteristics of temporary organizations; the structural configurations involved in the formation of construction PBOs; the inter-organizational dynamics that influence coalition behavior; the complexities associated with knowledge transfer and organizational learning; and the unique features of governance in large construction projects. These findings can be summarized in terms of three major theoretical propositions.

Conclusion One is that the construction PBO is an organization type that does not lend itself to conceptualization within the framework of the theory that applies to both permanent organizations and project organizations in other industries. The multi-firm nature of the construction project coalition, its temporary organizational existence, the unique production setting in which it operates, and its embedded governance arrangements give rise to organizational processes that can only be explained using a theoretical framework that is unique to the construction industry. This progressive alignment of organizational theory, project management theory, and construction management theory regarding the need for a

[19] Andrew Davies and Michael Hobday, The Business of Projects: Managing Innovation in Complex Products and Systems (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005) 15-22.

[20] Patrick X.W. Zou, Guomin Zhang and Jiayuan Wang, "Understanding the Key Risks in Construction Projects in China" (2007) 25(6) International Journal of Project Management 601, 603-608.

[21] David Engwall, "No Project is an Island: Linking Projects to History and Context" (2003) 21(8) Research Policy 789, 791-796.

[22] Nuno Gil, "Developing Client-Informed Governance of Mega-Projects: the Role of Trust and Interorganizational Context" in Nuno Gil, Joao Mischkind and Tycho Vanderloo (eds.), Managing Mega-Projects: New Perspectives (Routledge, London, 2012) 112-118.

common vocabulary for studying the organization of temporary production processes involving multiple organizations constitutes real advancement, although a full synthesis has yet to be achieved, and a comprehensive theory of construction PBOs has yet to emerge commensurate with the significance of this sector within the world economy.

The second conclusion, then, is that more theoretical effort should be invested into the inter-organizational aspects of the governance of construction PBOs. There is a well-established historical pattern in the study of construction management which has tended to concentrate its attentions upon the intra-project aspects of planning, scheduling, budgeting, and risk management rather than on inter-organizational dynamics. Empirical research has repeatedly found that the level of quality of inter-organization relationships serves as a key predictor of performance in construction projects; this fact, in turn, necessitates the development of an appropriate theoretical explanation. In terms of the latter, both relational contracting and organizational trust theory appear to offer the greatest promise; however, it should be noted that applying the concepts and theories of these literatures to the particular institutional and organizational setting in which construction PBOs operate requires thoughtful theoretical analysis.

Finally, the last major implication refers to the problem of knowledge transfer, which may be seen as perhaps the most practically important theoretical issue in this field. It is not without good reason that systematic learning from project experience and transferring tacit knowledge gained from project teamwork to organizational practices has been widely identified as one of the major problems facing the productivity enhancement efforts in construction. To explain this phenomenon properly, one needs to understand the basic contradiction inherent in it – namely, that of the temporary nature of project organizations creating conditions for acquiring tacit knowledge and the need for its stability and permanence. To address this contradiction, organizational innovations are needed to enable spanning of the project boundary while maintaining the benefits of focus and agility associated with the project-based organizational structure.

A number of specific contributions should be made to the theory of project management in future research work. The first such contribution is the need for a more thorough development of the theory underlying the linkage between the procurement approach and the organizational form within which the project will be conducted.[23] A fuller theoretical analysis of the circumstances under which relational governance may successfully augment formal contractual governance in construction project coalition governance would offer better theoretical support for contract and procurement design. Finally, a more sophisticated theoretical approach to explaining how knowledge transfers take place across project boundaries, incorporating lessons from the vast literature on organizational learning as well as recent advances in the practice-oriented theories of knowledge that have revolutionized thinking about expertise, would fill the theoretically least explored yet most practically significant gap in construction PBO theory.

The construction sector is responsible for a large part of world economic output, employs several hundred million people worldwide, and constructs the infrastructure essential for economic activity of all kinds. The organizational arrangements whereby it achieves this output represent some of the oldest and most sophisticated arrangements found in the history of economic organization. They are certainly deserving of – and are now starting to receive – serious theoretical attention.

[23] Roger Flanagan and George Norman, Risk Management and Construction (Blackwell, Oxford, 1993) 18-24.

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