

# Between Success and Failure: Imperfect Projects as Common Practice

## Guest Editors:

### **Alfons van Marrewijk**

Delft University of Technology, BI Norwegian Business School Oslo, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam  
a.h.van.marrewijk@vu.nl

### **Iben Sandal Stjerne**

Copenhagen Business School  
isst.ioa@cbs.dk

### **Jörg Sydow**

Freie Universität Berlin  
joerg.sydow@fu-berlin.de

Over the past decade there has been growing interest in theorizing and researching temporary organizations (Bakker et al., 2016; Burke & Morely, 2016), including recognizing the relevance of temporary organizing forms—in particular of projects—in society (Jensen et al., 2016). One of the key challenges that has remained underexplored thus far, and holds opportunities in this field of study, is the frequent failure of projects to meet their goals (Brown & Jones, 1998). Since projects, and in particular complex projects, regularly fail (Flyvbjerg, 2016), a debate has unfolded looking at the disappointment and perception of failure, resulting in harsh criticism of project management.

Projects fail to live up to expectations or to deliver their promised change goals for various reasons, depending on the level of analysis. Looking at explanations, failure results from a lack of clear goals, fuzzy role expectations, internal power dynamics, or inappropriate evaluation measures (Van Marrewijk et al., 2016). A broader explanation of project failure is a lack of managing the project embeddedness in relation to more permanent structures, for example, ensuring strategic relevance and political backing within an organization (Engwall, 2003) or a larger project network (Sydow & Staber, 2002). Temporal misfits among partners or the temporal shadows of past and future projects may also arise (Stjerne et al., 2018) and lead to the early closure or death of a project (Novy & Peters, 2012).

However, even though these failures, breakdowns, early project deaths, and unrealized ventures may be perceived as imperfections of projects, they hold an opportunity to

prompt project managers and other project team members to improvise, experiment, and learn (Stjerne & Svejnova, 2016). But how can individuals and, even more important as well as more complicated, organizations learn from near misses and even complete project failure? As the transfer of knowledge from the temporary to the permanent is difficult to organize (Wiewiora et al., 2019) and vicarious learning does not seem to work either (as the decontextualized idea of *best practices* is inappropriate), does each individual, team, organization, network, or community have to learn for itself?

Our answer to this question is that more serious, theory-informed empirical research of imperfect projects, including near misses and complete failures, would help to improve our collective understanding of this topic. Assuming that imperfect projects are the opposite of perfect projects, we suggest regarding the positive assertion of imperfection as a rich source of insights, necessary to learn from in order to improve temporary organizing in general and project management in particular. In perfect project management thinking it is assumed that project goals can be formulated and met by thoroughly planning, integrating tasks, coping with risks, managing stakeholders, and thus knowing the future (Sanderson, 2012). Imperfect project management thinking adopts a more realistic view, which is informed by project practice and considers, among other things, internal power dynamics, barriers to obtaining project goals, and the strategic behavior of project actors (e.g., Willems et al., 2020). We would like to encourage project scholars to develop imperfect project management thinking by exploring what can be learned from near misses or failing projects.

Therefore, we will be organizing a subtheme on learning from imperfect projects at the upcoming 38th EGOS Colloquium in Vienna, Austria (7–9 July 2022). Following this event, we will compile a special issue of *PMJ*, titled “Between Success and Failure: Imperfect Projects as Common Practice.” Please submit your short paper to <http://www.egos.org> by **11 January 2022** and/or your full paper to <https://www.pmi.org/learning/publications/project-management-journal/guidelines> by **30 September 2022**. You are more than welcome to join this important conversation.