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Who supports project careers?

Leveraging the compensatory roles of line managers

Abstract

This exploratory research examines who supports what aspects of career development on projects. Our main finding is that while project professionals receive support from formal and informal sources, a compensatory mechanism is at play. When support does not come from direct line managers, project professionals are compelled to initiate informal practices including mentoring, buddy systems, and communities of practice. Practical implications arise for organizations regarding how to ensure sufficient mechanisms are in place to compensate for lack of line management career support and to allow project professionals to access the development opportunities they need by supporting their self-initiated efforts.

Keywords

Support, mentoring, project careers, compensatory dynamics, systemic constellation

Introduction

Project-based careers have gained increased in significance with the proliferation of Project Based Organizations (hereafter PBOs) (Keegan & Turner, 2002; Miterev et al, 2017; Gemünden et al 2018) and the projectification of organizations and societies (Schoper, et al, 2018). As more and more professional make their careers on projects, these developments offer opportunities for the study of careers on projects as an emerging area of study. A person's career is defined as "the unfolding sequence of his or her work experiences over time" (Arthur, Hall, & Lawrence, 1989: 8). Careers can be enabled or constrained based on the amount and type of support people receive from organizations (Kraimer & Wayne, 2004; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). However, as we know little on this specific topic, we carried out a study to explore careers on projects in greater detail. Our research question is "*Who supports what aspects of career development on projects?*". Research combining a focus on both careers and projects is valuable given that we have little knowledge of who provides support, and what types of support, in what appears to be an increasingly important sector. In this paper, we explore how careers on projects evolve and ways of supporting these careers. Consistent with the nascent state of the literature, we adopt a qualitative, exploratory approach (Schwandt, 1994) which has the potential to yield valuable new insights. Given trends in projectification, it is also of increasing interest to researchers and practitioners interested in both project organizing and careers (Akkermans, Keegan, Huemann, & Ringhofer, forthcoming).

Thus, in this paper, we explore how careers on projects evolve and ways of support of these careers. Since literature in careers on projects is still emerging, we adopt an explorative approach and this sets the boundary conditions for our conclusions.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we provide insights on career theory as well as on careers on projects and present our research question and what motivates a focus on this particular issue. We then discuss our three-step data gathering process and how we analyzed the data. After this, we

1 present our results from the data analysis and discuss our findings. We conclude with some practical
2 recommendations regarding support of project managers' careers.

4 **Developments in Career Theory**

5 In recent years, concepts such as boundaryless and protean careers have displaced notions of
6 traditional organizationally managed careers (Inkson, Gunz, Ganesh, & Roper, 2012; Van Buren,
7 2003). The idea that careers are the property of and should be controlled by their owners
8 (individuals), and not by organizations, aligns well with mainstream psychology focused career
9 literature. For example, Inkson (2008, p. 551) argues "the organizational career-boundaryless career
10 contrast, although it may be critical to organizations and their managers, is largely irrelevant or
11 incidental to mainstream career theory and practice, whose proponents would argue that all careers
12 are, and should be, managed by the individual, and that the individual normally has points of reference
13 outside the current organization and normally crosses boundaries during his or her career". In Arthur
14 and Rousseau's (1996) formulation of the boundaryless career, careers develop independently of any
15 single employer across multiple projects. The boundaryless career concept has become accepted by
16 many as the mainstream career model with other terms carrying the same connotations including the
17 protean career with "individually defined goals....[driven] by the person, not the organization"
18 (Briscoe & Hall, 2006: 6).

19 However, these assumptions are challenged by a growing number of career scholars who view careers
20 and changes to careers from a broader organizational and societal perspective (Van Buren, 2003), and
21 emphasize the duality of individual/organizational responsibilities and the interdependency between
22 individuals and organizations in careers where individuals influence organizations as well as vice
23 versa (Fleisher, N. Khapova, & GW Jansen, 2014). Employability theorists, for example, eschew a
24 focus on only the individual or the organization in their examination of careers (Bozionelos et al,
25 2015). Van Buren (2003: 132) argues "that employers have obligations to help employees maintain
26 their employability....satisfying employability obligations partially resolves the ethical problems

posed by boundaryless careers”. As employability refers to the continuous fulfilling, acquiring or creating of work through use of competences and adaptability of such competences to changes in internal and external labor markets (Van Der Heijde & Van Der Heijden, 2006; De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2011), a focus on how individuals and organizations achieve this, and their interdependencies in achieving this (Fleisher et al., 2014), is important.

An employability focus on how careers unfold on projects also addresses concerns associated with careers involving mobility and flexibility across different kinds of boundaries, which leads to concerns expressed for example in the work of Tempest and Starkey (2004: 509) that “...while new ways of organizing might well challenge the old boundaries of industrial society and work organization, they also have limits, particularly in terms of the locus of and the responsibility for the learning that makes the acquisition of key competencies possible”. Developments including rising precarity in labor markets, associated with both the global financial crisis and emerging gig economy trends (Meijerink & Keegan, 2019), as well as technological changes such as automation which eliminate certain types of work, mean it is even more important than ever to ask who is responsible for employees’ careers, and how actors work together, and to examine perspectives and practices related to these questions (Baruch & Bozionelos, 2011).

Underpinning this explicit emphasis on *interactions* between individual and organizational actions is a focus on balance as it relates to both employee/employer interests as well as interests between the employee in terms of their employment but also in terms of their broader responsibilities including family and non-work obligations (Dany, 2014). There is a need to recognize the dual role of employability-oriented practices to enable both individual level career success as well as organizational advantages (Van Der Heijde & Van Der Heijden, 2006) but also that demand actions and investments from individuals and also from organizations.

Project Careers

1 Projects play a key role in many contemporary careers (Crawford, French, & Lloyd-Walker, 2013)
2 and they are often associated with boundaryless careers (Arthur & DeFillippi, 1998; Arthur &
3 Rousseau, 1996). Projects can enable and constrain people in developing their careers as a journey
4 unfolding across a sequence of work-related experiences (Arthur et al., 1989). Understanding the role
5 of projects in careers commends a focus on projects as temporary organizations, as well as the broader
6 context within which such projects are undertaken. While Arthur & DeFillippi, (1998) focused on the
7 hopping from project to project within the film industry, a perspective on careers within organisations
8 how these project careers unfold adds to our understanding. Project careers involve movement across
9 inter- and intra- organizational boundaries as people undertake projects with different clients and in
10 different constellations of project expertise. The proliferation of PBOs (Keegan & Turner, 2002;
11 Gemünden et al 2018; Sydow, Lindkvist, & DeFillippi, 2004; Miterev et al, 2017) and the general
12 projectification of organizations and societies (Schoper et al., 2018) produce consequences for project
13 work (Lundin et al 2015) in terms of the numbers and types of boundaries that people are expected
14 to cross to contribute to organizational development and as a basis for growth and development of
15 (project based) expertise and capabilities at an individual level. As organizations become more project
16 oriented then, and less oriented to stable, functional organization, individual work and careers emerge
17 and unfold in projects involving inter-disciplinary work teams, often in an international context.
18 There is therefore an opportunity for the study of projects and their roles in careers (Keegan et al
19 2018) and to untangle the mechanisms regarding how project careers unfold. Previous attempts to
20 model the career on projects, or in project based organizational settings, includes the work of Keegan
21 and Turner (2003) who suggested spiral staircase careers as an appropriate metaphor to reflect the
22 idea that people will move through a series of varied and wide-ranging jobs while working on
23 projects. While the project-based career might become more common, and involve development
24 based on wider and broader skill development by crossing project boundaries, also internationally,
25 little detailed research to date has explored these development issues and how they are supported.
26 With our explorative study, we aim to answer the following research question: *Who supports what*

aspects of careers on projects? Seeking an answer to this highlights the need to focus on both the individual project professional and the project-organizational context, and their mutual interactions.

Method

The exploratory and interpretivist nature (Schwandt, 1994) of this research guided our design of the study. We combined three steps to gather data on project professionals' perceptions of project careers and the support they did, or did not, experience. We drew together insights from three sources: 1. In-depth interviews carried out using a systemic constellation; 2. Interviews based on systemic constellations combined with additional free text questionnaire responses; 3. Three focus groups. These sources of data allow us to triangulate insights on the support for careers described by project professionals in each step of the research process (Yin, 2015).

Step 1

In step 1, we conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with project professionals. These included project managers, heads of project management expert pools, program managers, Project Management Office (hereafter PMO) managers as well as PMO members. We used a snowball sampling strategy (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2018; Tracy 2012). After each interview we asked participants to recommend colleagues who may be interested in participating, providing they had at least 10 years of project related career experience. An overview of participants by their roles held when we interviewed them is provided in Appendix 1. In this sample, we focused on project professionals in Austria consistent with our snowball approach. This step entailed a broad exploration of project professionals' careers, the importance of projects on careers, and the support project professionals receive for career development. We designed a specific type of in-depth interview using systemic constellations (for details see Huemann, Eskerod, & Ringhofer, 2016) to allow interview participants to visualize and then design their careers using visual aids (see Appendix 2). The interviews accompanying the constellations were digitally recorded, fully transcribed, and analyzed,

to determine the role of projects in careers, and how project professionals make their careers on projects as well as the types of support they receive throughout their careers. We coded the transcripts for insights on both types of support and also who provides support (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The core themes that emerged from this stage included the types of support project professionals experience throughout their careers.

Step 2

To explore this further, we carried out two additional steps focusing more specifically on the topic of support for careers. In Step 2, we “narrowed the lens” by asking a smaller group of project professionals (9) to carry out the constellation exercise (as in step 1) and additionally to complete a short questionnaire using free text responses on career support. These questionnaires were coded and analyzed for themes on support and especially who provides it, what they provide, and when. The focus in this step was more explicitly on the career support.

Step 3

In step 3, we wanted to gain richer insights on the meaning of the data on support practices and experiences. To achieve this, we carried out three focus group workshops with a cross section and varying numbers of project professionals (respectively 21/15/7) to examine in-depth the support project professionals received throughout their careers. This allowed us to explore in depth the stories regarding line management support, support generally, and support practices and roles.

Data preparation, transcription and analysis

We recorded and transcribed all interviews in step 1. Most interviews were held in the German language and were first transcribed in German. We then translated the transcriptions into English. One member of the research team member, a native English speaker, checked the transcriptions and clarified the meaning of translations, where these were unclear, by working with the German

1 researchers. The last step included a re-check of the translations by the German language researchers
2 considering the comments from the native English speaker and comparing the relevant sections with
3 the original transcripts or recordings from step 1. We attended a workshop to clarify all final issues.
4 These processes achieved high quality translations of all of the interview transcripts.

5
6 Based on the research question and literature, we developed a series of start codes to analyze the
7 interviews (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Using NVivo 11, a software package for analyzing qualitative
8 data, we coded all interviews using our preliminary start codes (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012).
9 As the interview analysis proceeded, we refined our list of codes based on emerging findings and
10 updated these to reflect the emergent patterns regarding support.

11
12 Our key finding from step 1 is that different types of support are available to project professionals.
13 We wanted to probe this finding more closely. We therefore carried out steps 2 and 3 of the study. In
14 step 2, we asked 9 project professionals to carry out the constellation exercise and to reflect on three
15 key projects.

16
17 We then asked them to write free text responses to the following questions:

18 *In terms of this project and your career (each of three chosen as key project):*

- 19 • *Did you get any support?*
- 20 • *If so: Who supported you on this project?*
- 21 • *If so: How were you supported?*
- 22 • *If so: What was the outcome?*

23 In a final step to gain clearer and also richer and broader insights on career support, we carried out
24 three focus group workshops addressing the same questions of support for careers on projects.

Our analysis resulted in three core narratives pertaining to support for careers on projects. We present these below as our main results in this paper. These narratives are composed from a holistic and recursive analysis of the data from the constellation-based interviews in step 1, interviews plus free text responses in step 2, and the focus groups in step 3 as these pertain to mentoring. Our final coding table (see table 1) shows the results of the analysis of the data on support across all three steps with each step providing more depth or detail, and clarifying puzzles or differences, on the issues regarding support. In the next section we present our results.

Findings

The basis of the narratives is the *WHO*, *HOW* and *WHEN* of support for project careers. We first, we discuss the *WHO* – who provides support. Second, we illustrate *HOW* support is provided by presenting practices described by project professionals. Finally, we discuss the data that emerged on the timing of career support, including specific relationships such as mentoring, and when these are likely to be formed.

Table 1: Final codes: Support

Parent code	Child code		
Support	Actors (WHO)	From employing organization	Line manager (direct)
			Line manager (indirect)
			HR department
			Project owner
			Other project manager
			Project team member
			CEO
			PMO
			Partner
		Outside employing organization	Project manager
			Project management association
			Consultant
			Customer
		Private	Family
		Others	University
			School
	Practices (HOW)	Formal practice	Formal buddy system
			Formal networking
			Formal coaching system
		Informal practice	Self-initiated mentoring (internal)
			Self-initiated mentoring (External)
			Self-initiated buddy system
			Communities of practice
		Duration	Long term

	Timing of support relationships (WHEN)		Short term
		First appointed	New project During crisis
		Self-appointed	To compensate for lack of line manager or other organizational support

Narrative 1: *WHO* provides support?

Our first narrative focuses on the question of “who provides support to project managers in terms of their careers?” Our questions in the interviews and focus groups were posed openly as to the actors that might provide support. We did not focus on company internal and company external actors and were interested in who professionals themselves identify as providing support.

We identified early on in the analysis that some project professionals feel unsupported in their careers and development both generally, and on specific projects. Therefore, prior to presenting the data on who provides support, we first present data indicating that many project professionals feel “alone”, and not at all supported in their careers while on projects. They do not feel that their line manager or project manager supports them, and perceive that they do not have anyone to turn to.

This was my very first project. The only support I got was an overview of the project by my then PM (name of PM) during the first day of the project...Then I was left alone with the customer for 3 months. One day a week. My PM came back for a mid-term review of my work, changed a couple of things in the way I was working, and left me there for another 3 months. Then we made a final presentation, reviewed by another experienced consultant, and well received by the customer. I learned 2 very important lessons here 1) Once you're in the water, you better start swimming. 2) Your very first customer most of the times is your boss, and that doesn't make that much sense. 3) Sometimes you don't have skills to do what you're asked, nor the power to change that. And you still have to deliver (S2, FF, FTR)

1 *There was neither mentoring nor coaching (S2 Interview 6, FTR)*

2
3 *I stand alone in the rain (S3, focus group workshop, translated to English)*

4
5 *It was my wish to get support. But we had no resources (S3, focus group workshop, translated to*
6 *English)*

7
8 *There was very little support. I got an external PM education but there was no other support. (S3,*
9 *focus group workshop, translated to English)*

10
11 *The support was to have a set of internal PM standards in the company (S3, focus group workshop,*
12 *translated to English)*

13
14 ***The Line Manager is the main provider of career support on projects***

15 With the exception of the data coded to ‘no support’ as above, we coded most data for who supports
16 career development on projects to the line manager. Furthermore, the support of the direct line
17 manager was often not limited to one particular project but seen in the context of a long-term
18 mentoring or coaching relationship over many years. The data suggest line managers can support
19 careers on projects by pointing project professionals to training opportunities, or giving them career
20 related advice based on their own experience in the organization or industry.

21 *My direct line manager supported me for 17 years. (S1 Interview 8, translated to English)*

22
23 *It was my direct line manager who supported me. On the one hand he gave me the opportunity to*
24 *participate in trainings, but on the other hand he shared his personal experience with me. He was*
25 *educated in a different area [lawyer] than me and this was very fruitful as I realized that different*
26 *knowledge from different areas is important for projects. (S1 Interview 18, translated to English)*

1
2 *Yes, I had as one of the few people there - a good connection with my direct boss ...so we were able*
3 *to I don't know, connect with each other... He was always in the back-ground as a source of*
4 *support. (S1, Interview 5)*

5 *It developed unofficially because we [the line manager and the project manager] like each other.*
6 *He [the line manager] was my mentor. His door was always open and it was possible to reach him*
7 *every time if I had a question. He shared his experience with me and always supported my*
8 *decisions. (S1, Interview 10, translated to English)*

9 *He [the line manager] was just there, being available (S1, Interview 1, original).*

10 *I had discussions with colleagues and my line manager (S3, focus group workshop, translated to*
11 *English)*

12 *My direct line manager was an experienced project manager. He supported me (S3, focus group*
13 *workshop, translated to English)*

14 *Of course my direct supervisor in the line. He was also the program manager of this program. Of*
15 *course this is very convenient, because then you have a contact person for both topics. The one is*
16 *fundamentally the career development or the further development on the line and the second is the*
17 *project completion or the project success. (S1, Interview 20, translated to English)*

18
19 ***Other project managers can compensate when support is low or absent***

20 Next, we coded most data on the SUPPORT-WHO to “other project managers”. In the absence of
21 clear support from line managers and in order to “not be alone” project professionals organize
22 themselves into small or large networks, informal buddy systems, or communities of practice, in order
23 to share experiences as well as to support each other and discuss problems or crisis situations. They
24 reach out to other project managers, either peers or those with more experience, and accept support
25 from project managers inside and outside their organizations. Opportunities for sharing experiences

1 and gaining advice from people in the same situation seems to be an important source of support for
2 project managers.

3 *Then when I moved on to the corporate project management team, we were just a few people, I*
4 *think it was a handful of project managers and we established a buddy system so that we have a*
5 *deputy available and to help each other and do some exchange, how we can improve and how to do*
6 *it better. (S1, Interview 1, original)*

7 *There have been some role models. For example, several project managers from whom I have*
8 *learned a lot: an Austrian project manager from [an Austrian university], who were very much*
9 *involved in this funding project. Furthermore, there was a project manager from Canada and one*
10 *from Luxembourg in this project. (S1, Interview 14, translated to English)*

11 *I got informal support from colleagues (S3, focus group workshop, translated to English)*

12 *I had a project-buddy who supported me (S3, focus group workshop, translated to English)*

13
14 Participants express that other project professionals – project managers, colleagues and teams or
15 project managers from other organizations – often become the primary source of support for them.

16
17 *Most important support came from the project team (S2, Interview 3, FTR)*

18 *I have learned a lot from my mistakes and the actions of others. There was a lot of exchange with*
19 *other project manager (S3, focus group workshop, translated to English)*

20 *I got support from an experienced project manager (S3, focus group workshop, translated to*
21 *English)*

22 *Knowledge exchange with other project manager (S3, focus group workshop, translated to English)*

23
24 ***Other internal roles and career support***

We coded data to other actors in specific roles – such as project owners, HR specialists and PMO members – who may provide support. However, with few exceptions which we provide below, these actors do not provide support to project professionals in terms of their careers.

In terms of ‘project owners’, one observation emerged that if the direct line manager is also the project owner, career support is performed by this person *acting from their role as a line manager*. This finding is consistent with the general observation that it is mainly line managers that are identified as providing career support.

Career support was not expected from project owners in that role. Neither the HR department nor the project management office were seen as providing any kind of career support. One exception to this which we noted regarding the project management office is that PMO members felt responsible for providing career related support if they had, themselves, experienced support as junior project professionals. The data suggests this finding related more to personal tendencies to offer time for supporting others’ careers than to the role in the PMO.

It is my personal interest to support young project manager. For a company it is essential to share knowledge and experiences with juniors. [...] People have a formal education when they start working in a company, but they have none or little experience, how this works in practice. Sharing personal experience, how different things work in practice, is a very important process. (S1;

Interview 18, translated to English)

Regarding the HR department, they only became actively involved in career support if this responsibility was formally allocated to them, which was not always the case. In general, members of the HR department are completely absent from the narratives of project professionals regarding sources of support for careers on projects.

External roles and career support

Finally, we coded a very small amount of data to career support provided by external people.

It was one guy from [name of company]. [It] was one of the companies in my project. And he was a kind of a mentor, I would say. He had also, he had a department at [name of company] running projects there and he had a lot of employees in the same age range as I was at that point of time. So that's why maybe he saw that I could be one of his team and that's why he was a little bit coaching me. But I have not asked for being coached either. He did it and he supported me very well so that was perfect. (S1, Interview 6, translated to English)

I got some support from [project management association]. I got a network there, and within this network I got support (S3; focus group workshop, translated to English)

I got some support from the CEO of [company name]. He was my client. Furthermore, there was [name] from [company name]. He was the general manager of the company. The third person [who supported me] was [name] from [company name]. All of them were seniors at this time and had a lot of experience. (S1, Interview 18, translated to English)

I got support from an external consultant. There was no support from internal roles (S3, focus group workshop, translated to English)

Narrative 2: Career support practices

To untangle how project careers unfold, we focused on the practices provided to support project careers and identified several core practices. These are differentiated into formal and informal practices and summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Career support practices

Formal	Informal
• Coaching system	• Self-initiated Mentoring

- Buddy system
- Formalized networking

- Self-initiated Buddy Systems
- Self-initiated Communities of practice

Formal practices included organizationally mandated coaching systems, buddy systems, and formalized networking practices. For example, we found company support for mentoring came in the form of companies providing formal structures such as a “PM breakfast” for knowledge exchange and mentoring for a group of project managers. In addition, companies nominated experienced project managers to perform mentoring in informal ways. Furthermore, companies support mentoring in a general way and provide infrastructure such as rooms or give “time” to perform mentoring. However, in many cases, aside from providing space and time, the company was not involved in how the mentoring was performed. This means they also have no systems for evaluating the effective delivery of mentoring support, or ways to pick up on gaps in the delivery.

We found formal coaching practices in place where experienced project managers are explicitly nominated to support one inexperienced project manager. Active support by formally appointed coaches appears to be linked with whether these project professionals, or other professionals, see the value of such initiatives. It works only if the coach is willing to be actively involved and also if the company wants and supports coaching or career support on projects in an active manner. Not all those involved are enthusiastic and doing it by choice.

I’m a project coach. [...] The company force me to do this (S1, Interview 15, translated to English)

I gave support to younger project managers. The result was that I had more competitors [in the company] (S3, focus group workshop, translated to English)

Formal practices like networks bring people together and can be the starting point for mentoring activities to grow more organically.

1 *One part of the PMO task is the organization of networking events. We organize a PM breakfast a*
2 *few times per year and invite all project managers. We define key topics and nominate experienced*
3 *project managers to talk about these topics. Furthermore, we perform smaller internal meetings for*
4 *knowledge exchange in each department. (S1, Interview 18, translated to English)*

5
6 *In our company, we have a regulatory peer review with some line managers (S3, focus group*
7 *workshop, translated to English)*

8 *We have a project-buddy system in our company (S3, focus group workshop, translated to English)*
9

10 *We had regular resounding pools, where they can place their entrance or new ideas. One of them*
11 *he was extremely interesting HR project manager. But they came up with this idea he wanted to*
12 *make workshops about benefit. Perfect, do it. Then you are the expert for HR projects and you now*
13 *starting leading workshops and educational programs in order to find out what means HR project*
14 *manager for [company name]. (S1, Interview 6, original)*

15 *Then when I moved on to the corporate project management team, we were just a few people, I*
16 *think it was a handful of project managers and we established a buddy system so that we have a*
17 *deputy available and to help each other and do some exchange, how we can improve and how to*
18 *do it better. (S1, Interview 1, original)*

19
20 Other examples of formal practices include formal buddy systems where an experienced “buddy” is
21 responsible for an inexperienced employee. In contrast to formal coaching for a specific project, the
22 buddy system is not limited to a specific task or time frame. It is more open and includes advice on
23 company internal processes and support regarding the company culture or working style for those
24 working on projects.

We also coded data on career support practices to the category ‘informal practices’. This included informal mentoring, informal advice, ad hoc communities of practice, etc.

At this point in time, coaching or mentoring was not established. We gave them [the young unexperienced project manager] more tasks if we realized that they are willing to learn. (S1, Interview 15, translated to English).

There were some certified project manager in our house [the company]. They organized sessions for knowledge exchange. (S1, Interview 7, translated to English)

Narrative 3: Timing

Finally, we coded results at this narrative that suggest explicit career support often happens on the first project. For example, project professionals are more likely to be assigned mentors on a first project than on subsequent projects.

I did not receive any mentoring or coaching support since it was not my first project (S2, Interview 6, FTR)

On further projects, project professionals are less systematically given support, and some express that they less systematically need support.

Freedom is very important for me. I don't need anyone who tells me what to do. [...] I don't need mentors anymore. They were important in the beginning. At this time my direct line manager was also the programme manager. This worked well. (Interview 20, translated to English).

Mentoring and advice are particularly important for inexperienced project managers, especially when handling their first project in a new context. The balance between knowledge, gained in school or university, and the way “things work in practice”, is important to master though difficult for newcomers.

1 *It is my personal interest to support young project manager. For a company it is essential to share*
2 *knowledge and experiences with juniors. [...] People have a formal education when they start*
3 *working in a company, but they have no or less experience, how this works in practice. Sharing*
4 *personal experience, how different things work in practice, is a very important process. (S1,*
5 *Interview 18, translated to English)*

6 *I was the first one who used the official [project management standard]. I was some kind of*
7 *prototype. I got some trainings and a coaching. The benefit for the company was, that I tested the*
8 *standard in an ongoing project and they [the company] saw what happened. Furthermore, I was*
9 *coached by some externals. (S1, Interview 11, translated to English)*

11 **Discussion**

12 Based on our findings, we conclude that career support on projects is nascent. In the following section,
13 we develop propositions emergent from our exploratory research approach.

15 *Proposition: The application of a compensatory lens sheds light on who takes a role in career support*
16 *on projects, if line managers cannot, or will not, or are not mandated to, fulfill this role.*

17 While organizations may have formal career ladders and structures, support for careers on projects is
18 still largely hit and miss. Project professionals may receive support from their line managers,
19 supporting the call by Bredin and Söderlund (2013) to reframe line managers as career advisors and
20 coaches. However, we do not advocate that line managers are the only actor seen as providing support
21 for careers on projects as this would neglect the many project professionals for whom line managers
22 are not available, too busy, or with whom contact is too episodic. Our view is that given the vast
23 contextual differences in careers on projects, and taking into consideration the often shifting and
24 volatile relationships project professionals have with multiple project and line managers (Keegan &
25 Den Hartog, 2018), adopting an explicit compensatory lens when conceptualizing careers on projects
26 is valuable.

1
2 This compensatory lens both acknowledges and welcomes the roles line managers can and often do
3 play in supporting careers on project, but also sensitizes organizations, project managers and
4 researchers to the need to consider the other “less official” sources of support that can and must be
5 activated when line management coaching, mentoring and support does not materialize, as is
6 unfortunately often the case. Our compensatory logic recognizes the interactive effects of both
7 individual responsibility for career development that are impressed upon us by boundaryless career
8 theory, and the balance urged by employability theorists is recognizing that though responsible for
9 their own career, project professionals must use the supports around them – on projects – and these
10 are available in different forms depending on the context.

11
12 *Proposition: HRM departments are not visible to project professionals from the perspective of career*
13 *support*

14 In our study, the HRM department as a source of career support was not mentioned or considered
15 by our respondents. Indirectly, HRM departments are represented in the findings, if we look at
16 formal practices, as they are often designed by HRM specialists. HRM departments or specialists
17 are not explicitly presented as an actor providing support, rather, they are only indirectly present via
18 the formal practices they contribute to or design. For example, the formal buddy systems and
19 mentoring systems that organizations offer are linked with the presence of HRM specialists. This
20 observation is in line with other studies, that describe HRM specialists as operating on a more
21 strategic level, and quite far away from the project professionals (Huemann 2015; Keegan et al,
22 2012).

23
24 *Proposition: Co-creation of career support by project professionals*

25 Based on the findings, project professionals need to be able to access support from different actors
26 depending on the mix of projects and links to the line as well as the effectiveness of line manager
27 support. One somewhat optimistic finding from this study is the opportunities presented by the co-

creation of career support by project professionals who miss line manager support. These types of practices, that compensate for line manager lack of support, should be studied more systematically and explicitly. They should also be both acknowledged and mobilized by organizations and individuals for supporting careers on projects. This also gives Project Management Associations a vital role they can more explicitly play in the career support of project professionals.

Proposition: If people have been supported during their own career, they also provide career support to young professionals

Experience with having received advice or mentoring emerged from our study as an important indicator of whether project professionals are willing to support others with advice and mentoring activities. Many seem to want to give back, and they reciprocate the kinds of support they received during their early career. Our study revealed that career support was provided especially on first projects and in project crisis situations. These interventions suggest that career support is salient mainly at moments when it is required in order to avoid damage to the project manager's career. If the senior project professional has this experience, they are ready to mentor young project professionals. In contrast, if they perceived that they not receive support in their project careers, they do not provide support to others. From a practical point of view, this suggests a relatively straightforward mechanism for building compensatory career support capabilities by making everyone a mentor at least one time as part of their project career development journey.

Conclusions, limitations and future research

This study contributes insights on the compensatory roles emerging in support of project based careers, a nascent area of research in need of more systematic attention from career and project management scholars. There are several limitations to be considered when evaluating the results of this research, limitations that create boundary conditions for applying the findings of our study. First,

1 our study is based on 20 interviews, which is a small though adequate sample best on best practice in
2 qualitative research (Guest et al, 20014). Our data is thus limited and does not cover all of the
3 potentially relevant industries or project types that could provide valuable insights on careers on
4 projects and support. A further limitation, linked with our strategy of snowball sampling, is that all
5 of the interviews were performed with project professionals from Austria. Although most companies
6 work internationally, the results present a limited view on this topic. For further research, it would be
7 valuable to perform interviews in different industries, incorporating more diverse project types, and
8 also internationally operating organizations. Second, the interviews focused on the whole career, and
9 career development support was only one aspect. As interviewees told the whole story regarding their
10 careers, and in a short amount of time, it is possible that we missed more and/or different types of
11 career support methods. To overcome this problem, we performed step 2 and step 3 in the data
12 preparation and collection. In future, research regarding different aspects of career models for project
13 professionals, such as incentive systems or formalized career development, could improve our
14 insights on these important career related themes. Finally, we have highlighted the compensatory
15 roles of line and project managements in supporting career development. We have not, so far,
16 identified antecedent factors for project professionals to self-initiate support, and the relative
17 importance of personal or organizational issues which underpin the patterns we observed in this study.
18 For example, if organizations provide a strong mandate to line managers to support career
19 development, it is less likely these compensatory dynamics will prevail than when organizations fail
20 to, or choose not to, devolve such responsibilities to line managers. Identifying organizations with
21 and without such a mandate, and comprising career support in terms of who provides and what is
22 provides, can provide deeper and more precise insights on these issues. Future research can be
23 valuable in unpacking these factors and providing practical guidance to organizations and individuals
24 regarding support for careers on projects.

25

26

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3 *Boundaryless Careers*, as well as to all interview partners and focus group participants.

4

5

6

1 **Appendix 1**

2

3 We purposefully selected the interviewees based on their experience as project professionals. We
4 used snowball sampling to build up on our initial pool of potential interviewees gained through
5 personal or professional contacts as well as project management associations.

6 Table 1: Step 1 Interviews - Sample

Actual Role	Number of interviews
Project manager	12
Head of PM pool	2
Programme manager	2
PMO head	3
PMO member	1

7

8 **Appendix 2: Figure 1.: Sample of Final Constellations from the Interviews**

9

10 To explicate and visualize the careers of project professionals we used a form of a Systemic
11 Constellation (Huemann et al 2016) (see figure 1).



12

1 We asked the interviewees to make their career paths, including important projects, visible. We
2 prepared a set of cards in different colors and formats. The interviewees could select the cards they
3 wanted to select and it was possible for them to express a special meaning through the use of different
4 cards e.g. “big red circles as crisis projects, etc. All interviewees prepared their career path by putting
5 the cards on the floor. In the next step, the interviewees explained their career path to the researcher.
6 The researcher followed a rough interview guide including sections regarding:

- 7 • Did you get support within this project or these projects for your career?
- 8 • How did you get this support?
- 9 • Who supported you?
- 10 • When did you get this support?
- 11 • Were there any obstacles in this project regarding your career development?

12 In addition, we asked the interviewees to make the resources for career development on projects
13 visible to us. On average, the interviews lasted 1 hour and 30 minutes, including the time spent by
14 the participant preparing to present their career path using the cards.
15

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