

GOVERNMENT-TO-GOVERNMENT PROJECTS IN AN INSTITUTIONALLY EMBEDDED ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

Government-to-government exchanges have a significant economic and social impact yet present unique theoretical challenges. Despite this, these exchanges have received very limited attention in the literature. We seek to add to the small body of literature through a multidisciplinary inquiry based on theory drawn from institutional theory, work on organizational boundaries and business-to-business marketing. Through a qualitative study of a three year 7.5 million Euro project between a government donor (buyer) and an university research centre (seller), we found that the boundaries between the project buyer and the seller are constantly converging and that multiple stakeholders conduct boundary work to break or strengthen the demarcations and so drive their own agenda. Our research contributes to the Industrial Network approach by opening the ‘black-box’ of government-to-government exchanges and by illustrating the role of boundary work in actively managing business networks.

Track: General track

Keywords: G2G exchanges, boundary work, network relationships

Competitive paper

INTRODUCTION

The concept of *exchange* is central to marketing (Hunt, 2014; Bonoma & Kosnik, 1989). Yet, exchanges with one of the largest customers, government, has rarely been studied, with a few exceptions (Josephson et al., 2019; Perkmann et al., 2013). Yet, this small body literature does not consider the implications of government being both the customer *and* supplier. These exchanges are nevertheless pervasive. For example, government often buys and supplies defense; the UK defence budget for 2019 is 56.2 billion euros and a significant proportion is directed towards contract research with universities. Governments also buy and supply health research, e.g. through hospitals or research institutions. We call this a government-to-government (G2G) exchange and note that research in this area is nearly non-existent. For example, Lilien (2015, p. 544) states that “there is virtually no academic work on sales to the military or to federal, state and local governments in the US or elsewhere”.

Importantly, G2G exchanges are not merely a different phenomenon explainable using current business-to-business marketing (B2B) thought. In contrast to B2B exchanges, government entities supply and procure on behalf of users (citizens) who are seeking cost effective individual, social and cultural benefits, rather than revenues and profit. A further distinction is the long-term and far future oriented nature of the outcomes sought, whereas in B2B exchanges the focus is on the relatively near present. The more elongated time frames of G2G planning horizons, along with the social and cultural constraints and expectations leads to a complex, multilayered, resilient and highly institutionalized environment. Most of the world’s oldest organizations are universities, with some older than a thousand years, resulting in multiple layers of rules, norms, values, and meanings that are carefully built up over different eras of history (Donoghue, 2008). Government bodies are also known for inertia, stiffness and inherent tendency for nitpicking (Meyer, 2015) and politically demarcated boundaries (Klijn & Teisman, 2003). What this implies for the exchange is that the processes by which meaning is constructed, trust is built and knowledge is communicated are institutionally embedded (Giddens, 1984; Uzzi, 1997).

Moreover, whereas in B2B exchanges there is typically a myriad of possible exchange partners, most countries only have one government (albeit at different levels). One implication of this is that, compared to B2B exchanges, more homogenous and resilient exchange norms are present. Yet another distinguishing characteristic is that in most legal systems, one government party cannot take another government party to court due to the so-called “arm-of-the-state” immunity. Compared to typical B2B exchange where court ordering is a possibility, G2G exchanges are thus faced with different enforcement mechanisms. Temporality, or time compression, is another essential characteristic of government-university exchanges. Typically, government bodies fund projects with strict timeframe. Consequently, both sides apply various forms of temporal organizing (e.g., Burke & Morley, 2016; Hadida, Heide & Bell, 2018) within the more enduring organizational context, which leads into a complex of boundaries in and between the project buyer and seller (Sahlin-Andersson & Söderholm, 2002). The result is a complex network of relationships between departments, disciplines, faculties, government agencies and the mother university.

Lastly, government funding is highly competitive and increasingly treated as an investment: projects are expected to become self-sufficient over time and provide a continuous impact on the well-being of the society. In this way, not all government funded projects are designed to end (Jacobsson, Burström & Wilson, 2013; Ojansivu, Alajoutsijärvi & Salo, 2013) rather their trajectories may change over time (Kreiner, 1995; Linehan & Kavanagh, 2006; Packendorff,

Crevani & Lindgren, 2014; Vaagaasaar & Andersen, 2007) as the project goals are revisited in the interactions between project stakeholders (Ojansivu & Medlin, 2018). Given this institutionally, temporally, competitively and rule embedded setting, we are interested in the boundary work (Gieryn, 1983) that elucidates the efforts of individuals and groups as they seek to negotiate, manage and challenge the tangible and intangible boundaries in which they are culturally, socially and politically embedded. These boundaries are manifested in bureaucratic governance structures (departments, centres, working groups, advisory boards etc.) that have the authority to influence the decisions for the temporary project organization. As pointed out by Jacobsson, Burström and Wilson (2013, p. 581): "...there are some decisions made by the permanent organization for the temporary organization". Therefore, the distinction between decisions 'in' and 'for' the project is subtle, but important in G2G exchanges. Intriguingly, boundary work is not well understood in marketing in general and in B2B marketing in particular (cf. Gadde, 2014; Medlin & Guercini, 2018; Munksgaard, Oles & Prenekert, 2017). To address this important lacuna, we focus on G2G research through a specific case study of contract research project between a government agency and university by asking:

- 1) How is the G2G embeddedness manifested in the decisions made in and for the project?
- 2) How do project stakeholders cope with the G2G embeddedness to influence the project trajectory?

EMBEDDEDNESS IN G2G PROJECT EXCHANGES

Embeddedness means that the decisions made in and for the project are not purely rational, but rather they are influenced by the cognitive processes and pre-existing social ties of the project stakeholders as well as their shared collective political and cultural understandings (Granovetter, 1985; Uzzi, 1997; Zukin & DiMaggio, 1990). Embeddedness creates boundaries that are not only tangible, such as material ownership or physical space, but which also transcend themselves in intangible form including social and symbolic (Lamont & Molnár, 2002), mental and social (Hernes, 2004; Levina & Vaast, 2008), cultural (Wimmer, 2008) or knowledge related (Barrett & Oborn, 2010, Carlile, 2004). Whether project stakeholders are aware of these boundaries depends on their 'social skill' referring to flexibility, intuitivism and creativity in interpreting meaning in interactions (Fligstein, 2001). With stakeholders we mean 'any identifiable group or individual on which the organization is dependent for its continued survival' (Freeman & Reed, 1983, p. 91).

Viewing the government-university project exchanges through embeddedness lends itself to the concept of an institution. We follow Fligstein (2001, p. 108) in defining institutions as "rules and shared meanings...that define social relationships and guide interaction by giving actors cognitive frames or sets of meanings to interpret the behaviour of others". Indeed, institutions comprise regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements (Scott, 2008; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999; Thornton, Ocasio & Lounsbury, 2012) and they are socially constructed meaning that they need to be also socially interpreted.

Interestingly, the social construction of institutions means they are also historically contingent; what is considered 'appropriate behavior' or 'common practice' in facing choices is a result of a long socialization process (e.g., Durkheim, 1956; Fligstein, 2001). Thus, project stakeholders face multiple social identifications (March & Olsen, 1989; Holland et al., 1998), which they need to make sense of in order to succeed in the project. As postulated by Packendorff, Crevani and Lindgren (2014, p. 15) "At each point (of the project), not only is the 'future' renegotiated, but also the past and its meaning". Thus, the future is never completely shared, it is always

adjusting and full of open choices which are emerging through the project stakeholder interactions even as the project is finishing. How do the various project stakeholders then steer or navigate the project in their preferred direction? We argue that boundary work could provide valuable insights into such process.

BOUNDARY WORK IN G2G PROJECT EXCHANGES

The boundary work concept was originally coined by Gieryn (1983) to elucidate the activities by which scientists distinguished themselves from non-scientist amateurs and frauds. Defined as “negotiating, establishing, managing, challenging, or removing demarcations” (Stjerne & Svejenova, 2016, p. 1774) boundary work can shape organizational outcomes considerably (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). For example, *rigid* boundaries reflect an entity isolated from the rest of the organization, whereas *porous* boundaries blur the separate identities of organizational entities (Sahlin-Andersson, 2002). An important aspect of boundary work is *framing* the project in a way that motivates different stakeholders (Perkmann & Spicer, 2007; Sahlin-Andersson, 2002; Stjerne & Svejenova, 2016). For example, by defining a project as ‘exceptional’ signals experimentation for the project stakeholders and detachment from their organizational routines and practices, thus legitimating the action of the project team (Sahlin-Andersson, 2002, p. 259). Yet, boundaries do not morph on their own, there needs to be actors enacting boundary work.

Indeed, for boundary work to be successful it requires shared agency (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000; Zucker, 1988) as “...the drawing of boundaries is an interactive and negotiated process mediating a variety of internal and external relationships” (Araujo, Dubois & Gadde, 2003, p. 1257). As a result, boundaries are constantly subject to construction and reconstruction (Hernes, 2004) even though they may appear relatively stable on the surface. As Tsoukas and Chia (2002, p. 572) point out, when we observe an acrobat on the high wire keeping her balance, we fail to recognize that she succeeds by correcting her imbalances continuously. In this way one needs to dive deeply into the project exchanges between the government donor and the university to tell apart stability from change and to carefully analyse the stakeholder influence on the observed project trajectory.

METHODOLOGY

The research setting and design

The methodological choices made in this study are guided by the objective of studying G2G exchanges between a government donor and a university research centre. We take a dynamic view on projects, as they evolve. More precisely, we adopt a processual case research method (Langley, 1999; Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas & Van de Ven, 2013) in which the process is defined as “a sequence of individual and collective events, actions, and activities unfolding over time in a context” (Pettigrew, 1997, p. 338). This method is combined with qualitative data analysis (see Miles & Huberman, 1984). The data collection and analysis have taken place retrospectively, yet they follow an iterative reflection: The case has informed our search for relevant literature and theories that have enabled us to specify and contextualize the case (Siggelkow, 2007).

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to gain understanding of the relevant interactions between project stakeholders (Kumar, Stern & Anderson, 1993; Arksey & Knight, 1999). Altogether thirty-one interviews were conducted: twelve with the project seller (Unico), five with the seller advisory board, three with the Rector's office (Chancellery) and five with the government buyer (DE). Other interviews included four within the mother university (Riverside) for the purpose of scoping the context of the project, one with the competing university (Oklahoma) and one with project seller's partner organization (see Table 1).

Table 1. Interview data

Entity	Unico	Advisory board	Chancellery	DE	Other
Selection criteria	Member of the seller	Member of the advisory board	Member of the Chancellery	Member of the buyer	Contextual information
Sources of data	Personal interviews, project proposal, funding agreement, project work plan, project transition plan	Personal interviews, confidential memos of advisory board meetings	Personal interviews, Research Centre Policy agreement	Personal interviews	Personal interviews
Number of informants	12 key informants	5 key informants	3 key informants	5 key informants	6 key informants
Positions of the key informants	Director 1 Director 2 Centre manager 1 Centre manager 2 Business manager Director's secretary Professor Professor Senior Res. fellow Research fellow Research fellow Doctoral student	Chair of the Board Dean Bus. School Head of the Dept. Business manager Chamber of Com. Rep	Vice-Chancellor Vice-Principal Portfolio manager	Sec. dep. Employment Sec. dep. Education Ass. Sec. dep. Employment Group Man. dep. Employ. Branch Man. dep. Employ.	Prof. Management Prof. Economics As. Prof. Sociology Enterprise prof. Director Pol. & Res Dean Oklahoma
Duration of interviews	1–2 hours each	1–2 hours each	1–2 hours each	1–2 hours each	1–2 hours each
Total	31 informants	31 interviews	53 hours	996 transcribed pages	

All interviews were recorded with permission and then transcribed and analyzed. In addition, interviews were supplemented with informal discussions to make sense of the phenomenon and to clarify the different informants' perspectives. The principal author had access to secondary data, including original project proposal, funding agreement, project work plan, project transition plan and confidential memos of project advisory board meetings. These secondary data sources enabled the researcher to assess each respondent's answers and triangulate the material, as is recommended in the literature (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1990).

In order to acquire longitudinal data spanning the period 2011-2019, the data was collected over several phases and a clear objective was set for each phase (see Table 2). In the first phase (October 2018), we started to scope projects for government-to-government exchanges at the Riverside university. We interviewed an enterprise professor in engineering, an associate professor in sociology, a professor in economics and a professor of management to fully comprehend the characteristics of universities as a context for government funded research projects. In the second phase (late October 2018 to April 2019) we identified Unico as the focal entity of the study and commenced interviews with members of Unico, Unico's advisory board and the project buyer Department of Employment (DE). In the final third phase (late April to May 2019) we broadened the data collection to the senior management level at the Riverside university to fully capture the embeddedness of the project. We interviewed the head of the department who was administratively in charge of Unico, the dean of the business school for who the head of the department reported and the Vice-Chancellor and his team for who the

dean of the business school reported. We also interviewed the dean of the Oklahoma who had been in charge of the bid competing with the Riverside bid.

Table 2. Data collection process

	Phase 1: October 2018	Phase 2: October 2018–April 2019	Phase 3: April 2019–May 2019
Purpose	Provide a background for the study; examine the characteristics of universities as a context for government funded research projects.	Retrospective examination of the pre-project (2011-2013) and project period (2014-2016) of the case study.	Retrospective examination of the project transition period (2017-2019) of the case study.
Objective	To understand the background of the case study and to identify the central persons and their roles at Unico and Riverside.	To obtain an in-depth understanding of the events shaping the development of the research project under scrutiny.	To obtain an in-depth understanding of the events shaping the transition from government funded to university funded research centre and to understand the broader institutional embeddedness of the project.
Primary data	Four interviews with members in the Riverside university.	Twenty-one interviews with the members of Unico, Unico’s advisory board and the Department of Employment (DE)	Five interviews with the senior management of Riverside and one interview with the Dean Oklahoma.
Secondary data	–	Archival data including the project proposal, funding agreement and project work plan	Project transition plan and the University Research Centre Policy agreement
Cumulative number of interviews	4	21	31

Data analysis

The nine years of history (2011-2019) presented a challenge in capturing a concise case description of the main events shaping project exchanges. Establishing the veracity of this kind of research is always problematic (see Miles & Huberman, 1984). When only the nature and content of the exchange varies, change is incremental, but when the incident has potential to generate radical change, i.e., break or instigate relationships, the event is conceptualized as critical (Halinen, Salmi & Havila, 1999). Furthermore, change can be confined or connected; the former indicating changes limited to the buyer-seller relationship, whereas the latter has implications also for the connected relationships (Easton & Lundgren, 1992; Halinen et al., 1999). This study applied the process of periodization (Hollander, Rassuli, Jones & Dix, 2005) to summarize and then structure the material into three chronological periods. The three periods were: pre-project 2011-2013, project 2014-2016 and project transition 2017-2019.

The first period notes the bidding process and securing the government funding. The second period begins with signing the project funding agreement and setting the project work plan in motion. In the third period the government 7.5 million euro seed funding runs out and the project transitions into university funding and becomes integrated to the business school. Several procedures were followed to authenticate the data interpretation (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Silverman, 1993). These procedures included reviewing past interviews in light of recent ones, filling the gaps in the data with recursive informal discussions with key informants and comparing the answers with secondary data. Furthermore, the different understandings of interviewees were carefully and anonymously shared with other informants, exposing the differences in view to repetitive dissection. This was important considering the individual level of analysis, and that a respondent's understanding is necessarily partially individual and also social (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The study reports the case in as much detail and variety as possible so as to increase a reader's understanding, to enable readers to make their own interpretations, and to allow readers to transfer the knowledge to other contexts (Lincoln &

Guba, 1985). The results are presented in the next section. To maintain confidentiality pseudonyms are used for all individuals, project names, entities and regions.

CASE STUDY OF A THREE YEAR GOVERNMENT-UNIVERSITY RESEARCH PROJECT

The project seller, *Unico*, is a research centre in a university-based business school. Unico was established after the university, Riverside, secured a 7.5 million euros three year government funding aimed for setting in motion a major countrywide workplace reform. In the peak of its existence Unico employed 38 members comprising 19 academics and 19 professional staff. The centre was set up as inter-organizational temporary organization (Burke & Morley, 2016) borrowing professional staff and academics from various disciplines through secondments as well as hiring outside the mother university with fixed term and casual contracts. The project buyer, the Department of Employment (DE), was authorized by the governing Green Party at the time and the Minister for Employment to organize a competitive tendering to allocate a 7.5 million euros research contract. This contract was part of the governing Green Party political goals to increase the work productivity of the nation. The Department of Employment set up an intra-organizational temporary organization (Burke & Morley, 2016) borrowing a five member core team from its permanent staff to manage the project. It reported to the Secretary of the Department of Employment who liaised directly with the Minister for Employment.

The pre-project stage commenced long before the Riverside team put in a formal bid. Riverside, and especially the Rector and his team, was up to date with the political landscape and the forthcoming workplace reform. The soon to be director of Unico, professor Mia Cowdrey, had been in contact with the Rector and briefed him about the forthcoming reform. Following a meeting with the Secretary of the Department of Employment, the Rector informed Mia that Riverside would be competing in the bid and that he would like Mia to take charge of it. The government released a request for tender to establish a centre a few days before Christmas in 2012 and soon Mia was contacted by the Rector:

“I got a call from James [the Rector] saying it’s time, put your boots on, we’re going right in. And then we had literally six weeks to put together a proposal to establish the centre.” (Mia Cowdrey, interviewed 26th September 2018)

Mia had two professional grant writers to help her finalise the bid. Government then requested a second version in February. In the final stage it was Riverside against another large globally renowned university referred as Oklahoma. The feedback that the Rector received from the selection committee was doubtful. Thus, Riverside commissioned a veteran politician, Gianna Ricci, and a senior national chamber of commerce member, Chris Michelson, to review the quality of the bid and offer advice. Gianna Ricci comments:

“...their proposal was much too academic, too bureaucratic, and it needed to have a more practical base. A better link to workplaces, you know, actual workplaces in the community including inner suburban areas.” (Gianna Ricci, interviewed 14th February 2019)

Even Mia was reserved about the possibilities of the bid as she was aware of the ground work the other contender Oklahoma had been doing with the Department of Employment issuing the bid. Also there were rumours circulating in the academy as Mia Elaborates:

“After I put in the submission I attended a conference and one leading professor in industrial relations at that conference said, ‘you know you’ve got a snowball’s chance in hell of getting this money, you’re not going to get it’.” (Mia Cowdrey, interviewed 26th September 2018)

In fact, a colleague of Mia in the same business school had joined the bid of the competing university Oklahoma and an intervention of the Rector was needed for the professor to reluctantly join the bid of Riverside. To indicate their commitment, Riverside offered 5 million euros in cash and in in-kind to support the bid. Against all the odds, in late March 2012 Riverside received a message that they had won the bid. Then suddenly, a historical leadership change in the political system occurred and the governing Green Party lost power and was replaced by a Social Party. All these political changes created uncertainty for the project:

“There was a new Social government in place, I suppose we had anticipated that in fact it might be, first of all, like a withdrawal of the funding, so it wouldn’t go ahead, or a best case scenario there might be some significant cut-backs to the funding that would be provided to establish the centre.” (Mia Cowdrey, interviewed 26th September 2018)

With the new Government coming in, there were significant changes in the machinery of the Government. The portfolio of the Department of Education and Employment was reconfigured, so that Education became its own Department, and Employment became a separate Department. As a result, there was a new Minister for Employment and also a new Secretary for the Department of Employment. These two persons were the key senior executives on the Government side relating to Unico. Luckily, even though the funding agreement had not been signed, Government had publicly announced Riverside winning the bid. However, the contract remained unsigned until June 2013 and the centre was formally launched in February 2014. The funding agreement took some time to be worked out. From the government side there was a five-person team affiliated with the Department of Education reporting to the Minister for Education, which was negotiating the contract with the Riverside Rector’s team. In the 46 page long funding agreement, the 7.5 million euros were considered seed funding:

“The Centre will be a joint venture of industry and Government, with Government funding expected to be supplemented by financial and in-kind contributions from the private sector, including major employers.” (Funding agreement, 4 September, 2014)

“The Recipient must prepare and provide, for the Program Delegate’s approval, a comprehensive and detailed Financial Sustainability Plan which explores strategies to reduce the Centre’s reliance on Government funding beyond the expiry of this Agreement.” (Funding agreement, 4 September, 2014)

Unico was set up as a Government investment aiming to generate a major workplace reform over time including “a broader movement to ‘do things differently at work’, by recognising that leadership is a crucial mechanism to improve productivity” (funding agreement, 4 September, 2014). The contract negotiations were difficult given that Riverside had promised 5 million euros in cash and in in-kind contribution and because the centre was designed as an inter-organizational temporary organization (Burke & Morley, 2016). It was thus difficult for the Government to make sense of the funding as the centre would be employing (borrowing) academics that were already permanent faculty members, but working across different faculties and research centres of Riverside and other partnering universities. Director, Richard Stein, responsible for the 5-member Government team explains:

“It was just really hard to separate out the Centre – a lot of the people who worked for the Centre, I gather, were you know, some version of a University employee as well, or you know, had been – they were working in the premises of the University, and it was just hard to work out which bits of funding –

because you know I said they were co-funded, so they [Riverside] had to fund.” (Richard Stein, interviewed 8th March 2019)

Another difficult aspect of negotiations was simply making sense of the bureaucracy and complex formal and informal pecking orders. Both parties had complicated hierarchical structures and negotiators needed to match the seniority of the other party. Mia Cowdrey explains:

“I’m not the equivalent of a Departmental sort of Secretary, who’s got an annual budget of like \$2.5 Billion euros, the Rector is. So, often it wouldn’t necessarily involve a conversation with James [the Rector] involved, it might be between one of his senior advisers speaking on behalf of the office into the Department [Employment] and so on. So there were a managed set of stakeholder relationships, to put it in sort of academic parlance.” (Mia Cowdrey, interviewed 26th September 2018)

Both parties were complex and together even more so. Richard Stein elaborates:

“We were working with all of our Government processes and then working with Riverside was like working with another Government, just because of all the structures and the hierarchy and the – all those different processes and things.” (Richard Stein, interviewed 8th March 2019)

To advice the centre and to incorporate the various project stakeholders including the Department of Employment, Riverside, private businesses, labor unions and the national chamber of commerce, a project advisory board was set up with a representative of each stakeholder. Following her valuable comments and a historical affiliation with the Green political party that originally issued the bid, Gianna Ricci was requested to chair the advisory board for Unico. Soon, the rigid institutional boundaries started to surface. First, the Secretary of the Department of Employment, Erik Stellenbosch, was reluctant to yield in any of the deliverables of the funding agreement. This proved to be counterproductive, as many of the contractual clauses had been negotiated between lawyers based on the original project proposal without consulting labor and workplace experts. Mia had been taking leave of absence at the time and had not been consulted. This resulted in project deliverables that were not only unrealistic, but also worthless for the project stakeholders. Erik Stellenbosch, however, argued that what was agreed had to be delivered no matter how trivial it would appear at the time. Richard Stein, the main Government negotiator of the funding agreement elaborates:

“I think one of the negatives from my perspective was that it [funding agreement] made it, well I don’t know, just from discussions I had with them [Unico], I think it made it maybe harder for them [Unico] to be innovative, because it was already decided at the start what they were going to do for the next three years.” (Richard Stein, interviewed 8th March 2019)

This viewpoint was shared by a Bank Director, Louise Durand, from the Advisory Board. According to her the contract had been designed with good intent, but without insight as to how hard it would be to implement the deliverables, what impact the deliverables would have and how much value the deliverables would add to the economy. At the time of drawing up the contract, it simply was not possible to have that insight. Yet, as Unico started to deliver and investigate the 37 deliverables listed in the Funding Agreement, it became obvious that some of them would add no value, and it would be silly to pursue them, whereas others were adding terrific value and were a great opportunity. The prescriptive nature of the contract created a major challenge for the establishment of the Centre:

“No flexibility, no room to move...in a business the sensible and rational management team would say, stop spending any money on those things that aren’t adding value, take the money from there and add it to the money that you’re spending on the things that add great value because the multiplier effect of

benefit is so much greater over there, that the investment the Government is making and the University is making will be far more impactful if the money is spent there. Yet, the opportunity to do that under the contract was zero, and we had to keep working and delivering things that in the view of the Board would add no value. I mean just a waste of money.” (Louise Durand, interviewed 14th March 2019)

Second, Riverside management was reluctant to listen to the advice of the advisory board in hiring the managing director for *Unico*. In the original project proposal Mia had been listed as an interim CEO to be replaced with a permanent CEO:

“In the event that our bid is successful, Professor Mia Cowdrey has agreed to immediately take on the role of CEO of the Centre and in an interim capacity oversee the establishment of the Centre and its core activities.” (Project proposal, 31 January, 2013)

From the advisory board’s perspective, the CEO of the centre would need to be somebody outside the academy with a business skillset enabling the centre to generate income and become self-sustaining before the end of the government funding. Chris Michelson, a national chamber of commerce member of the advisory board elaborates:

“This type of set-up required a very strong focus on business development and business linkages and you know a higher degree of understanding of you know, events and business development strategy and people with a University background don’t necessarily have that level of experience, and I think that was a very early challenge for the Centre, was marrying the requirements of the University with the needs to run the Centre in a way that would give it a life beyond its funded period.” (Chris Michelson, interviewed 28th February 2019)

The advisory board soon realised, however, that the Riverside senior leadership team (Rector’s office) had other plans and would not be willing to negotiate. In fact, the Rector and the Dean of the business school had made an offer that Mia could not turn down:

“Basically the Dean said, look we’ve got this now, you have to be the Director, so you have to step up to – and the Rector did effectively the same thing, so when the Dean and the Rector say well look, we’ve got it now, so come on, you’ve got to sort of do it, there’s not much choice really, so you sort of step into it.” (Mia Cowdrey, interviewed 26th September 2018)

After Mia was formally announced as the Director of Unico an intensive period of hiring staff and ramp up of the centre took place. One of the first recruitments for Mia was an Operations Manager responsible for hiring and managing the professional staff and the centre contracts and finance as well the relationship with the donor. Mia hired Jeanne Bernard in August 2013 for a temporary role, but their interaction worked so well that Jeanne was soon converted into the Operations Manager role in October 2013. It was not long, however, before the centre ran into troubles with the established processes and routines of Riverside. The problem laid in the constraints for hiring professional staff because of a Commercial Improvement Program (CIP) that had taken place at Riverside recently. Consequently, there was a cap on the number of professional staff that could be hired and so Unico needed to be creative about working around those restrictions. Mia needed quickly an Executive Assistant, but the CIP limited the hiring to the existing Riverside professional staff pool. The soon to be hired Executive Assistant Paul Lenneberg explains:

“So when they worked out that they needed an EA and that they didn’t think they were going to find one within the University pool of staff that they had to go to first, they actually hired me via a recruiter, so the first three months I was with the team I was actually on a contract with the recruitment agency, and then they were able to move me onto a casual contract – a University casual contract after that three months.” (Paul Lenneberg, interviewed 10th January 2019)

This creativity to work around the university restrictions became a necessary part of the daily activities of the centre. There was simply not enough time to play by the rules of Riverside. In essence, this was not grant funding, but project funding with very clear deliverables. The Government was expecting tangible results in workplace productivity and they were not interested in academic outputs, but in evidence based workplace interventions. Jeanne Bernard the Operations Manager of Unico explains:

“If we had ever reported to the Department [Employment] or to any of our stakeholders to say we’re doing great things, look we’ve done this journal article, they would have – it would have been almost worse than just doing nothing, because it was seen as absolutely irrelevant to us, and in fact, if that’s what you’re focusing on, it means you’re not focusing on other stuff. So, there was absolutely an expectation that this was a delivering Centre, which was incredibly challenging to realise, especially in an environment where there was not really any interest in us delivering.” (Jeanne Bernard, interviewed 6th December 2018)

Mia and Jeanne were faced with critical and sharp questions in the Advisory Board that expecting fast paced progress. Jeanne elaborates:

“When are you going to be at workplaces? What are you going to do with them? How are you going to help workplaces? This isn’t about getting data from them [workplaces], this is about helping them get the job done.” (Jeanne Bernard, interviewed 6th December 2018)

This meant that Unico needed to come up with a strategic plan to deliver what had been promised in quite a short time frame. Jeanne elucidates:

“We’d made too many promises, we’d been given too much money to then say, now let’s get on with it, so what actually then really came from that is some thinking on our feet about well how the hell do we actually do that.” (Jeanne Bernard, interviewed 6th December 2018)

A critical matter that needed to be addressed in the strategic plan was not only impact and engagement, but also the need to make the centre financially sustainable before the end of the funding agreement. It was, however, clear that the centre did not have the commercial skills to generate income. The problem was, however, much more deep rooted; the business school was also not equipped to generate income:

“We were not set up to run a commercial operations, both in terms of knowing what was needed in terms of really having the right systems, but also the right skills, and what’s actually required to make a dollar. But the other side of it as well is that the Faculty wasn’t set up to do that either, so getting money in and out of the Faculty is actually really hard, so that was a big source of thing for us, is that sometimes people would want to give us money, and it would be incredibly complicated to get it.” (Jeanne Bernard, interviewed 6th December 2018)

To facilitate a solution Mia and Jeanne decided to hire an Industry Engagement Manager that would take care of the commercial aspects of the Centre. It was however difficult to find a person with business acumen within the university. Eventually, after nine months had passed and the centre was still without an industry engagement manager, one of the stakeholders in the Advisory Board, a Bank Director, suggested that the Centre could hire someone from the Bank and bring that person across on a secondment. After few interview rounds, a right fit was found and the Centre had an Industry Engagement Manager. It took some time for Meredith James, the person transferring from the Bank, to come to grips with the situation:

“I mean it’s whole opposite to what I’m used to. So, real businesses have no money and we want to make money. These guys were given 7.5 million euros and they had to spend it, so it’s a very different concept. So, in one hand they had to get this money out the door and invest it, and could do so much with

all this money, and on the other hand, they're saying well we actually need to make money as well, but they didn't need the money, so there wasn't a sense of urgency like a normal business when you've got to make money. I think that's quite an internal disconnect – it's just very different, very unique to be in that situation.” (Meredith James, interviewed 23rd January 2019)

It was a very different operation than what the university was accustomed to. This created a pressure to break with rules and norms of the faculty repeatedly. Examples included booking travels with the corporate credit card, using cab charges instead of individuals paying for the cabs themselves and then claiming back through the university system, and splitting an invoice into three so as to avoid going over a hurdle amount which would require a paper process. Over time the business school faculty became irritated at the Centre pushing and bending the established boundaries. Jeanne Bernard explains:

“We were in large and small ways, challenging some of the basic – some of the very foundational values of the faculty and the Dean didn't particularly support us – I don't even know why, I think the Dean wondered why we even had this Centre, I think it was absolutely a blip on his radar – so we didn't get a huge sort of high level space and support in the Faculty. And that was where there was potential for daily skirmishes around questioning why are you doing it that way, that's not how we do things here, and it was an uncomfortable space because we had this sense of independence, but there was also a sense that you're still in the Faculty and so you have to follow our rules, so it was probably one of the more tense relationships just because the contact was regular so there were more opportunities for tension.” (Jeanne Bernard, interviewed 6th December 2018)

On one occasion, the situation escalated further due to a silly misunderstanding about the Centre's education program. By and large the Faculty was worried about the potential of the Centre interrupting the well-established executive education market that was lucrative income source for many. Mia was called into the Faculty Executive Director's office (Dean) where a group of senior academics were waiting with a screen shot of a website and asking “what is this?” Apparently, the interpretation was that Unico had started to sell Executive Education without clearing with the Faculty. Yet, the screenshot was not from Unico's website. It started to be a common belief in the Faculty that Unico was breaking rules and pushing boundaries. Yet, these beliefs were not completely wrong:

“There was an expectation that we were going to do things like that [break the Faculty rules], and to be perfectly honest, we kind of did a bit, like we were sort of at times, probably asking forgiveness rather than permission you know, we probably were, at times, just trying to run a little bit ahead because we knew that if we did things by the rules we would not have any – there would not be any resonance with the market that we were trying to target.” (Jeanne Bernard, interviewed 6th December 2018)

One of the main things enabling Unico to have autonomy and to do things in more entrepreneurial way in the Faculty was the external funding, but also the legitimacy that the affiliation with the Department of Employment and the specific project goal. The Centre had a commitment and they had to deliver so this was easy to communicate. Indeed, communication and identity building was something in which the Centre shined. Unico had the entire office space refurbished to epitomise contemporary thinking around workplace innovation and to encourage a high performing workplace culture and practices. A mix of open plan and closed offices, collaborative spaces, built-in technology such as telepresence technology fitted throughout – the office space of Unico reminded one of nothing typical for a University or a Business School. Unico had its own independent websites and its logo was protected with a trademark. It had a marketing communications team pushing social media and print content and it had exceptional amount of followers in Twitter. All this momentum was maintained by being careful in hiring staff that would fit with the entrepreneurial spirit of the Centre. With all this momentum Unico delivered three workplace conferences, a major National Workplace

Study (NWS) and minor research projects aiming for workplace reform. Following an evaluation of the Centre by a consulting company contracted by the DE, Unico hired another consulting company to conduct a review of the Centre and to address the sustainability issues highlighted in the report. As the funding period was coming to an end, Unico needed to decide on a transition plan that would guide its activities in the future. According to Jeanne Bernard, the plan was mainly a “façade” as the Faculty had its own agenda:

“Despite what that transition plan said, I think ultimately it was clear from the Dean’s perspective that the minute the contract was done with the Department of Employment, that this [Unico] would be absorbed into the Department of Entrepreneurship and scaled down and become more of a – I guess a traditional research centre, so I always knew this was a risk, but when it became really clear to me that the transition plan was not really going to have that much influence, I think it became clear that – eh – this is all done and dusted anyway.” (Jeanne Bernard, interviewed 6th December 2018)

In the end, the Dean and the recently appointed Head of DOE negotiated an arrangement with the Department of Employment and with Mia of Unico being integrated to the Business School. It meant that a new Operational Model was enacted in January 2017. In this moment the Bank Director, Louise Durand, had made her own observation of the Centre’s future and she decided to resign from the Advisory board:

“So, I had no problem with the University involvement up until the time that the University took it over and there was a new Professor who sort of stepped in..., and he appeared to me to be far more bureaucratic and far more policy compliant and you know, at that point I could see where thing were headed, and I got off.” (Louise Durand, interviewed 14th March 2019)

From the Faculty’s perspective Unico had built a terrific reputation in the four years that it had been established, it had run some very visible noteworthy events, and people were talking about the Centre. So, it seemed a good idea to continue with that momentum despite the lack of Government funding. At this point, the Centre had spent 5.3 million euros from the 7.5 million euros awarded by the Government (Final Report 30 June 2017). In addition, some of the 5 million euros in cash and in in-kind provided by Riverside were still available. The challenge was, however, that the Centre would need to have a broader remit to cater for the engagement needs of the entire Department of Entrepreneurship (DOE). It would in essence need to have a more generic narrative. The problem with preserving the reputation and the established social media followers became the strict guidelines of Riverside. First, only Centres with external funding could have their own independent websites and use their own trademarked logos:

“I understand the University wanting to make sure that its brand is protected, but I think there needs to be a bit more flexibility with – you know, if the Uni is happy to take the Federal money, there needs to be some flexibility with the arrangements that are made within those Centres with the Federal Government, and yes, incorporate those things because to me, that logo is very important to the Centre’s brand, and to not be able to use it anymore – like originally a lot of people didn’t know that the Centre was attached within the University, and then so when we moved to the new Operating Model, when we were sending out the regular newsletters to people that subscribed, there was like this transition of all of a sudden there’s Riverside on the correspondence, and some people didn’t have a clue.” (Paul Lenneberg, interviewed 10th January 2019)

“I think in a lot of ways, it requires a lot, you need money, you need a lot of money to be able to break the rules, like you need – you need kind of to have that – you need, first of all, to be able to go out and pay externals to do the work, because you’re never going to get that work done internally. So the thing is, is that once it [Unico] was wrapped in [Faculty] – you couldn’t break the rules from within the cocoon, you just can’t, I mean you can try a bit but it’s hard.” (Jeanne Bernard, interviewed 6th December 2018)

Preserving the Unico logo was also a priority for the Advisory Board and they encouraged Unico to put up a fight with Riverside. However, there was nothing the Centre could do without the previous Government legitimacy. Second, because of the CIP program of Riverside, there was a fixed professional staff/academic staff ratio if the funding was not external. Due to this, Unico had to cut professional staff from 19 to four. Discontinued positions included Marketing and Communications team, a Manager of Education and Programs, a Research Manager and several Project Officers. The new operational model comprised two full time professional staff positions a Centre Manager and an Executive Officer and two part time positions an Events Coordinator and an Engagement Manager. It was evident that the social capital and corporate knowledge would be lost:

“One of my concerns is the change of personnel and the loss of corporate knowledge that happens at the end of something like this, so with such a huge staff changeover, that’s sort of always on my mind because that happened in another organization that I worked where there were a lot of people that left and you just see all that corporate knowledge walking out the door. And Mia was so involved in stakeholder meetings, like trying to find potential projects to sort of keep bringing work in, with that change of Director, a lot of those relationships were sort of – not entirely lost, but it was going to take work to sort of re-connect and so there was quite a bit of that lost in the process of change of Directors and to a certain extent with some of the professional staff that left, and I think that’s a Uni-wide issue, that’s not just a specific Unico issue.” (Paul Lenneberg, interviewed 10th January 2019)

“When we moved to the new Operating Model Marcus and I were quite concerned about going from a lot of social media interaction with our followers and subscribers to radio silence. So after a little while when nothing was happening, we sort of took it on ourselves to post things on Linked-In and Facebook and Twitter just to maintain a presence with our audience.” (Paul Lenneberg, interviewed 10th January 2019)

Beyond the obvious reasons of Unico’s integration to the Faculty, there were other less obvious reasons. The Interim Director of the Centre, Alexander Schmidt, had the insight to see how the new Operational Model was also a way for the Senior Leadership team to ‘tick the required boxes’:

“I don’t think the Dean would have had a strong opinion on the substantive nature of the Centres, but what he did know is that we need more of these, these Centres are strategically, in his view, a means by which academic institutions can connect more to external stakeholders, Government, private sector, not for profit. As with anything, the Head of Department’s metrics KPIs also, they cascade down from the Dean’s KPIs, so to the extent of the Deans’ being set very strong engagement targets, the Head of Department also feels those, and so I think with Christian [Head of Department], his goal was to enact certain initiatives that led to better engagement, and he agreed that this was the best way to go about it.” (Alexander Schmidt, interviewed 25th February 2019)

According to Alexander Schmidt, Unico was part of an evolving business model of Riverside and it had thus strategic value for the Faculty:

“There’s a fundamental risk match between being a full service University offering generalist degrees and the need to be relevant to an industry. They’re at odds with one another, so the Centre Model is a way of developing a narrative or a lightning rod around an idea, and because these are things ephemeral, they can disappear, as a temporary organization they can disappear. So, when leadership becomes redundant or moot, then the University can pivot somewhere else and build another Centre around a more relevant or a more current topic without threatening the underlying business model.” (Alexander Schmidt, interviewed 25th February 2019)

Besides being a strategic game, it was also a waiting game. The Riverside Senior Leadership team knew that they would be around much longer than the Government party or any of its departments. They were not in a rush:

“I think the way it manifested in the end was that it was just a waiting game, and I think what’s become clear to me, ... is that the University is around a lot longer than any – what any individual Government is, and particularly around any individual. So, the Secretary of the Department of Employment had a massive amount of influence in terms of the leverage and holding the University accountable to what it had promised, and yet, she used that sort of sparingly, she was sort of careful not to use that unreasonably, but also, she moved to a different Department before the end of the contract, so you also know that you can wait out the individuals.” (Jeanne Bernard, interviewed 6th December 2018)

ANALYSIS

Figure 1 summarizes the events in the project and the boundary work conducted by the various project stakeholders. From the Figure 1 one can observe that multiple stakeholders conduct boundary work simultaneously at multiple organizational levels. It is the alignment or misalignment between this work and the agendas of the multiple stakeholders that determines the trajectory of the focal project. What is obvious is that individuals have an active role managing in projects and in the networks they are embedded.

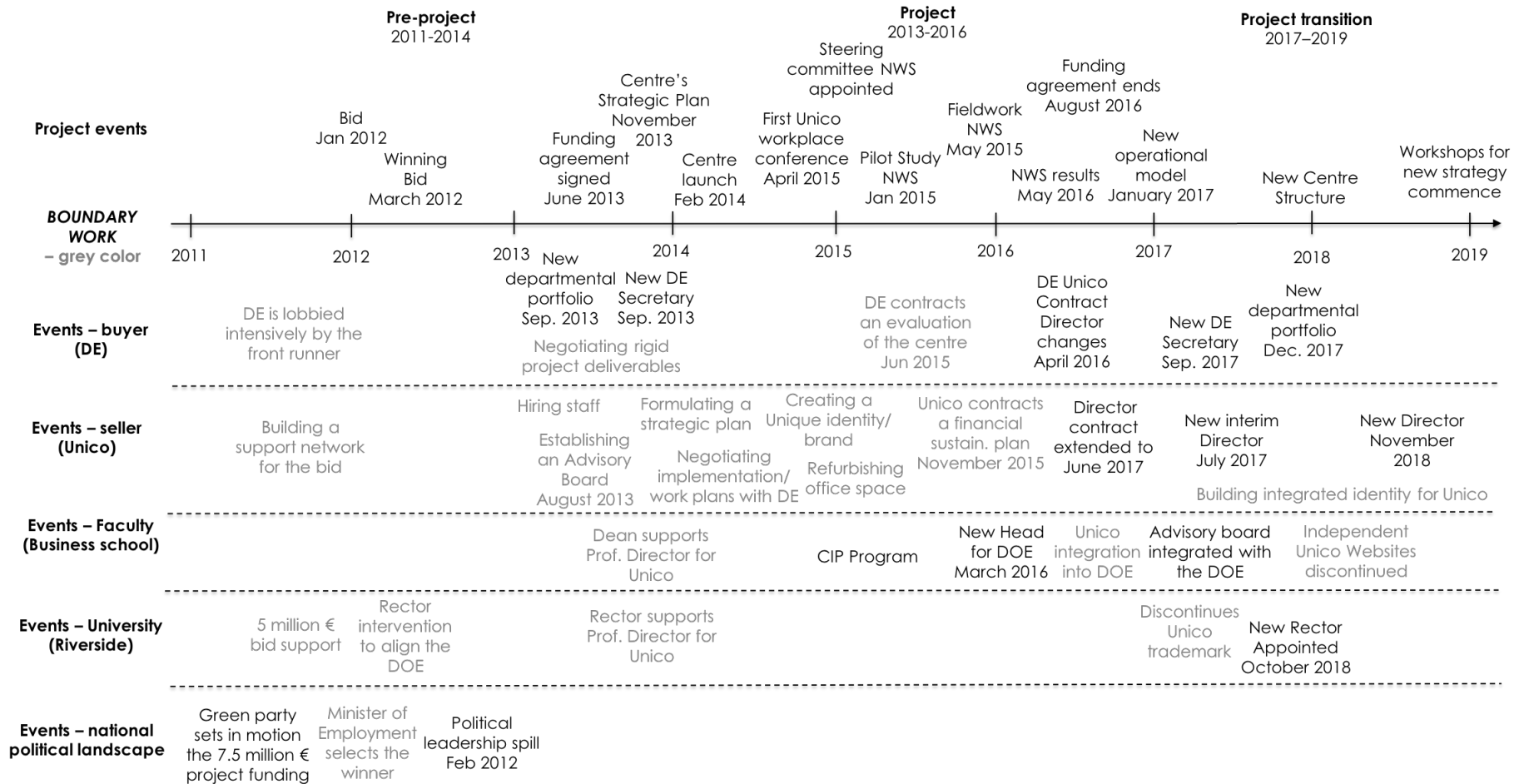


Figure 1. Summary of the events in the project and the boundary work conducted by the various project stakeholders.

CONCLUSIONS

In this research we sought to open the 'black-box' of government-to-government exchanges in B2B marketing and to illustrate the role of boundary work in actively managing business networks. Our argument was that government-to-government exchanges have a significant economic and social impact, yet they present unique theoretical challenges. Interestingly, these exchanges have received very limited attention in the literature. Therefore, we proposed two research questions: 1) How is the G2G embeddedness manifested in the decisions made in and for the project? And 2) How do project stakeholders cope with the G2G embeddedness to influence the project trajectory?

To address these questions, we commenced a multidisciplinary inquiry building on institutional theory, work on organizational boundaries and business-to-business marketing. We conducted a qualitative study of a three year 7.5 million Euro project between a government donor (buyer) and an university research centre (seller). We illustrated how the centre sought to find an institutional framing legitimizing its role in the marketplace and enabling it to navigate the competitive and politically laden G2G environment. We found that through institutional boundary work the centre was able to break with the rules and norms of the business school and create its own identity. Eventually, however, critical decisions were made for the centre by the connected stakeholders in the network and the centre became integrated to the business school. This indicates how the boundaries of the temporary and permanent organizations overlap and how critical decisions are sometimes made by the permanent organization for the temporary organization (Jacobsson, Burström & Wilson, 2013). Consequently, the distinction between decisions 'in' and 'for' the project is subtle, but important in G2G exchanges.

We find G2G exchanges an interesting area of research where the theory of the temporary organization (e.g., Burke & Morley, 2016; Hadida, Heide & Bell, 2018; Lundin & Söderholm, 1995), boundary work (e.g., Gieryn, 1983; Stjerne & Svejenova, 2016; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010) and B2B marketing (e.g., Håkansson & Snehota, 1995) amalgamate. We view the emerging boundary zones literature in the IMP (e.g., Gadde, 2014; Medlin & Guercini, 2018; Munksgaard, Oles & Prekert, 2017) as a promising new avenue for research. Intriguingly, boundary work is not well understood in marketing in general and in B2B marketing in particular. Our research is an attempt to introduce the institutional perspective of boundaries (e.g., Holland et al., 1998; March & Olsen, 1989; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999; Thornton, Ocasio & Lounsbury, 2012) into the IMP research. Our findings indicate that the boundary zones of interaction in G2G environment appear fragile and temporally vulnerable, but at the same time, individuals have an active role in shaping the demarcations.

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