



Building legitimacy in flexible work projects: A study on institutional, organizational, and individual narratives

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to investigate legitimacy building narratives of project managers in flexible work projects and their articulation with institutional, organizational, and individual narratives. We use Greimas actantial model to analyze four case studies, collecting data from 27 interviews of project managers, employees and line managers as well as extensive secondary data. This study contributes to project management literature by identifying legitimacy building mechanisms that project managers use in their narratives: on one hand, they build on institutional and organizational narrative components to produce their own project narratives; on the other hand, they perform identity work through heroification to build their own legitimacy as project managers. We also show how some of these narratological components are challenged by other organizational actors (employees and line managers). On a methodological level, we also reflect on Greimas' actantial model as a tool to analyze and compare project narratives at different levels and from different groups of actors.

1. Introduction

Recent literature has pointed out the promising contribution of narrative approaches to the field of project management (PM) research. Scholars have highlighted the role of narratives in shaping projects (Havermans et al., 2015). Projects have also been studied as a space where several narratives “compete” (Sergeeva & Winch, 2021). Literature has shown that project managers heavily rely on narratives to lead innovation projects, especially when it comes to competing aspects of projects (Enninga & van der Lugt, 2016). Project managers thus use narratives to promote their project and give legitimacy to it (Enninga & van der Lugt, 2016, p. 110). Project managers also use narratives to perform identity work so as to develop their own identity and legitimacy (Brown & Toyoki, 2013). Narratives, then, help to make and give sense to projects, and as such, play an important role in project management (Sonenshein, 2010). Having said that, project management literature using narrative methods has been scarce so far, with scholars calling for more research adopting this perspective. This in order to study the institutionalization of project narratives and understand how project managers make use of preexisting formalized narratives (Green & Sergeeva, 2019).

Project narratives are shaped and influenced by their respective project managers who integrate parts of institutional, organizational, and individual narratives (Boje, 2001; Buchanan & Dawson, 2007; Deuten & Rip, 2000). Projects are embedded in a specific context, both at an institutional level and at an organizational level (Boddy & Paton, 2004). Institutional actors such as associations or practitioners' groups promoting best practices might impact projects in their nature and content, but can also give projects legitimacy and narratives to build on (Morris & Geraldi, 2011). Organizational actors have their say in how a project is led and what its outcomes should be (Boddy & Paton, 2004; Brown, 1998). Organizational actors and groups of actors also develop narratives about their organization, their goals, their myths (Bathurst & Monin, 2010; Gabriel, 2004). There is, to our knowledge, no research that currently addresses the interplay between these three levels, and, more specifically, research that considers the reception of employees and managers to organizational project narratives.

This article thus seeks to answer to the following research question: How does the interplay between institutional, organizational and individual narratives shape the legitimacy of projects? To do so, we investigate flexible work (FW) projects and focus on how project managers include narrative components from the institutional environment to

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legitimize the project and their role as project managers. We also look at how other organizational actors receive and may challenge these project narratives.

We study FW projects, which refer to the implementation of new time and space arrangements (telework combined with activity-based working spaces) enabled by the extended use of digital tools in most work activities (de Kok et al., 2014). FW projects are supported by many initiatives at the national and supra-national level, which aim at developing norms and standards of FW (Jemine, 2021). They therefore represent a favorable empirical field to investigate different levels of legitimating narratives.

FW has been a large organizational trend in the last decade – flexible work projects have spread among organizations worldwide long before the Covid-19 crisis. FW projects share a global vision of flexible working, structured around several key components: HR practices focused on autonomy at work and cooperation among peers, office layout structured according to work activities, and massive use of information technology (Raguseo et al., 2016). They have been linked to the digital transformation of organizations, and are thus part of an established fashion effect of the so-called “musts” of the digital era (Jemine et al., 2020). This also gives rise to a variety of normative discourses about the alleged benefits of FW (Taskin et al., 2017). Most FW projects develop over a limited period of time, marked by the achievement of different steps until an effective office relocation or redesign takes place (Jemine et al., 2021).

The expected results as well as the temporal definition of FW projects highlight their relevance as projects, matching the definition of a project by the Project Management Institute: “A temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service, or result. The temporary nature of projects indicates a beginning and an end to the project work or a phase of the project work. Projects can stand alone or be part of a program or portfolio” (Project Management Institute, 2017, p. 34). Furthermore, FW projects present the specificity of combining different sets of challenges (mostly technological, spatial, cultural) (Jemine et al., 2021; Mitev et al., 2021). This highlights the need for thorough PM that coordinates activities, tasks, and decisions of a variety of experts (IT specialists, architects, HR practitioners). In some instances, FW projects call for a “project team” steered by several project managers with various fields of expertise to manage the complexity (van Diermen & Beltman, 2016). The multiplicity of actors involved thus raises questions in terms of who qualifies as a “project manager” and who might benefit from this label. Another characteristic of FW projects is their strong institutional embeddedness: FW projects are implemented in specific institutional contexts that call for specific arrangements in terms of labor relations, mobility, and cybersecurity, to name a few. At the same time, the institutional environment can also create a trend towards FW (Aroles et al., 2021). As such, the institutional environment plays a key role in FW projects as it provides project managers with a set of narratives to rely on to provide legitimacy to their project. It is important to highlight that our empirical study on FW projects has been conducted before the Covid-19 crisis, given that the crisis led many organizations to implement FW with greater urgency (Agba et al., 2020), and this rush might have led these organizations to neglect important PM aspects (Chatterjee et al., 2022; Pokojski et al., 2022).

This paper examines four projects of FW implementation within four large Swiss companies that are active members of an association in favor of FW. In Switzerland, the “Work Smart” association federates corporate efforts to implement FW (Work Smart, 2020). Drawing on an interpretative narratological perspective, this research analyzes project managers narratives and confronts them with (1) the archetypal institutional narrative shared by the association and (2) the composite narratives of employees and managers. To do so, Greimas’ actantial framework (1966) is used to articulate different narratives to highlight their specificities. Results identify how an association that unites major economic actors can develop institutionalized narrative components likely to be relied on by project managers in their narratives to foster the legitimacy

of projects. Results also highlight how project managers build on other resources to create legitimacy around the project, e.g. how their narratives rely on project sponsors and stakeholders who are benefiting from the project to give legitimacy to it. In their narratives, project managers emphasize the complexity of FW projects and their identity as heroes who are able to take on the challenge. Finally, the results section also presents the composite narratives that other organizational actors such as employees and managers develop around FW projects.

This article highlights how project managers combine institutional, organizational, and identity narratives to build the legitimacy of FW projects. It also provides insights into how these project narratives are transferred into the narratives of other organizational actors, providing an indication of the potential of project managers’ narratives to legitimize FW projects within the organization. Finally, it highlights the usefulness of using Greimas’ actantial model (1966) for project managers as a reflection tool on the projects they are managing, on their relationships to project stakeholders, and on their management, and involvement, in projects. This work also balances institutional and organizational narratives with more nuanced discourses from other organizational actors.

2. Theoretical framework

Narrative approaches have been increasingly used in the last decade in PM literature (Sergeeva & Winch, 2021), even if they still remain marginal (Green & Sergeeva, 2019). Narratives are important for reasoning, and for constructing and sharing meanings (Brown, 2004; Taylor & Van Every, 2000). As such, they play a key role in creating legitimacy and driving change (Buchanan & Dawson, 2007; Currie & Brown, 2003). Narratives offer a plot to make sense of new management practices and thus legitimize these (Golant & Sillince, 2007; Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2016).

Based on Vaara et al. (2016), several characteristics of organizational narratives seem particularly relevant in the context of this research. First, organizational narratives have a chronological dimension: they offer a representation of events that make sense of the past and present, and also envision the future (Patriotta, 2003). Second, organizational narratives are used for sensemaking and sensegiving purposes both at the individual level as well as at the organizational level – human beings are constantly trying to create coherent narratives of their lives (Bruner, 1987; Martin & Wajcman, 2004; Watson, 2009). Third, organizational narratives are characterized by fragmentation (Boje, 2001). Narratives are sometimes incomplete, with parts being implicit or untold (Vaara et al., 2016). Fourth, organizational narratives are part of a complex narrative system with both macro-narratives (i.e. societal narratives) and micro-narratives (i.e. individualized stories) (Vaara et al., 2016). Fifth, organizational narratives have performative power and agency: using narratives can influence the future of organizations to bring change (Sonenshein, 2010). Narratives participate in shaping a reality that did not exist before them (Brown, 2006). As such, project narratives can define a project mission and vision, but also craft the project identity for internal and external stakeholders (Sergeeva & Winch, 2021).

Put together, these characteristics suggest that narratives can be used to construct meanings that lead to a “preferred redefinition of organizational reality” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). As such, project managers could rely on narratives to associate specific meanings to their projects. However, the fragmentation of narratives as well as the complexity of the narrative system suggest (1) that organizational narratives may draw from ‘bigger’ societal and institutional narratives (Corvellec & Hultman, 2012; Leonardi & Jackson, 2004) and (2) that several narratives may coexist and compete in organizations (Buchanan & Dawson, 2007; Dawson & Buchanan, 2005). In the context of project management, this invites researchers to investigate how some competing narratives can surround and make sense of a project, as well as question how organizational narratives do or do not depend on institutional narratives, in an institutionalized form of narrative

repetition (Dailey & Browning, 2014). Finally, the identity-construction dimension of narratives raises interest in understanding how project managers use narratives to make sense of their work and roles in projects.

2.1. Project management narratives

Research in PM literature studying narratives is growing, but is still scarce (Sergeeva & Winch, 2021). Several approaches and methods have been used to make sense of the narrative dimensions of projects, leading to diverse contributions. Amtoft (1994), in one of the first papers on the topic in the field, makes the distinction between what she refers to as life stories (i.e., stories about the past of the project) and reputation stories (i.e., stories around the project that take the form of tales, myths, and rumors) (Amtoft, 1994). Boddy and Paton (2004) study competing narratives in projects and present them as the representations of different perspectives about the project. They suggest that project managers should get a better understanding of all competing perspectives to best manage these competing perspectives.

Recent research in PM literature has adopted more thoroughly defined and original approaches to study narratives in the context of project management, focusing on competing narratives and on narrative temporal construction.

Scholars have notably investigated how different levels of narratives interact: Sergeeva and Winch (2020) focus on how institutionalized grand narratives (i.e., developed by a government) interact with organizational counternarratives (i.e., developed by organizations, in response to the grand narrative). They emphasize the contextualized dimension of project narratives and how counternarratives are used as a way to make sense of grand narratives. Ninan and Sergeeva (2021) focus on the specific narratological artefacts that are labels. Labels are given not only to the project, but also to people and practices in an effort to shape the organizational identity narrative. The paper identifies two sets of actors in the frame of the project, promoters and protesters, both actors that seek to maintain their labels while contesting the ones of their counterparts. The opposition between promoters and protesters is further investigated by Sergeeva and Ninan (2023). The authors explore how comparisons are used in megaprojects. They show that comparisons used by promoters and protesters play a crucial role in creating narratives, and significantly shape policy outcomes (Sergeeva & Ninan, 2023). Ninan and Sergeeva (2022) also study how narratives and counter-narratives are set up by promoters and protesters of the projects, and how these narratives influence the eventual vision of the project. They highlight the continuous interaction between setting up a narrative, setting up a counter-narrative, and countering the counter-narrative (Ninan & Sergeeva, 2022). This highlights how project narratives are multiple in nature, built interactively and existing in construction / competition with other narratives. Focusing on the temporal dimension, Sergeeva and Winch (2021) focus on UK rail project narratives and use a realist approach (Vaara et al., 2016, p. 508) to identify how different types of narratives appear at different times of a project's life cycle and how they influence other phenomena. This temporal perspective on project narratives is also addressed by Winch and Sergeeva (2022) who develop a perspective on temporal structuring in project organizing and identify three types of temporal work involved in generating project narratives: convincing oneself, convincing the team, and convincing stakeholders.

Another fruitful area for consideration is identity narratives, or rather how project managers use narratives to perform identity work (Brown, 2015). Identity work is a complex and ongoing process, involving the creation, presentation, and sustaining of personal identities that support individuals' self-concepts (Snow & Anderson, 1987). Individuals in organizations continuously develop plausible understandings of their selves, and these identities pattern actions and outcomes (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Clarke et al., 2009). Narratives play a significant role in identity work as they serve as powerful tools for

constructing the identities of individuals and the organizations for which they work (Brown, 2015). By employing discourses to identify and position oneself in advantageous ways, actors shape, legitimize, or problematize power relations and status positions (Ybema et al., 2009). Thus, narratives and discourse serve as a powerful form of identity work, helping to construct and negotiate managers' professional identity and helping to influence their future actions and performance (Koveshnikov et al., 2016). For example, Hodgson and Paton (2016) investigate the identity work of project managers operating within multinational, project-oriented companies, focusing on how they reconcile the inherent tensions within their positions, revealing that project managers negotiate between two primary discourses in their identity work: the "cosmopolitan identity", which views project management as a universally transferable professional skill set, and the "local identity", which sees project management as an extension of a technical role highly dependent on specific organizational and industry knowledge (Hodgson & Paton, 2016). Sergeeva and Green (2019) study innovation narratives in the construction sector and more precisely the interplay between innovation narratives and personalized stories. Sergeeva and Kortantamer (2021) explore the self-identities and personalized narratives of authentic leaders in project-based organizations, focusing on how these leaders construct coherent narratives based on their experiences and reflections in the past, present, and future. They highlight the process between repetitive, coherent narratives and personalized stories articulated by leaders. This process is marked by the interweaving of self-narratives and the context in which they are formulated (Sergeeva & Kortantamer, 2021). This work shows how narratives can help perform identity work and are actively used by project managers to develop their identity and their legitimacy (Brown & Toyoki, 2013).

These approaches highlight the importance of project narratives, but more specifically the complex imbrication between identity narratives, project narratives and grand narratives, as well as the contextual and political dimension of project narratives. Using an interpretative approach (Vaara et al., 2016) would be particularly useful to better understand how organizational actors make sense of change projects such as flexible work arrangements. We intend to use Greimas actantial framework (Greimas, 1966) to analyze different types of narratives: the institutional narrative (i.e., the one promoted by the Work Smart association), the narratives of project managers, and finally the narratives of other organizational actors.

2.2. Greimas actantial model

Organizational narratives are often fragmented and some parts of the plot can remain implicit (Boje, 1991; Vaara et al., 2016). Organizational narrative analysis must thus rely on multiple snippets of narratives to try to make sense out of the "mosaic of stories" (Deuten & Rip, 2000) that are told about projects. The existence of a multiplicity of fragmented and competing narratives and stories within an organization brings the necessity of using narrative frameworks to provide a structured analysis of narratives, especially when relying on composite narratives (Vaara et al., 2016). In composite narrative analysis, the goal is to identify patterns in the narratives of actors (Vaara et al., 2016). Greimas actantial model provides a framework to analyze stories by focusing on the actors (or actants) of the narratives and their roles in them (Greimas, 1966). Greimas actantial model 1966 has been used extensively in organization studies over the past 20 years in an interpretative approach, most notably to study organizational changes and mergers and acquisitions (Demers et al., 2003; Gertsen & Soderberg, 2000, 2011; Soderberg, 2006; Vaara, 2002). Greimas' actantial model has proven to be helpful to analyze multiple competing narratives and their evolution over time (Gertsen & Soderberg, 2000, 2011; Soderberg, 2006). The model has also been used in project management literature (Munk-Madsen & Andersen, 2006). Greimas' actantial model helps provide a structured rendition of narratives and thus makes it possible to articulate multiple composite narratives with the same analysis grid (Fig. 1). The

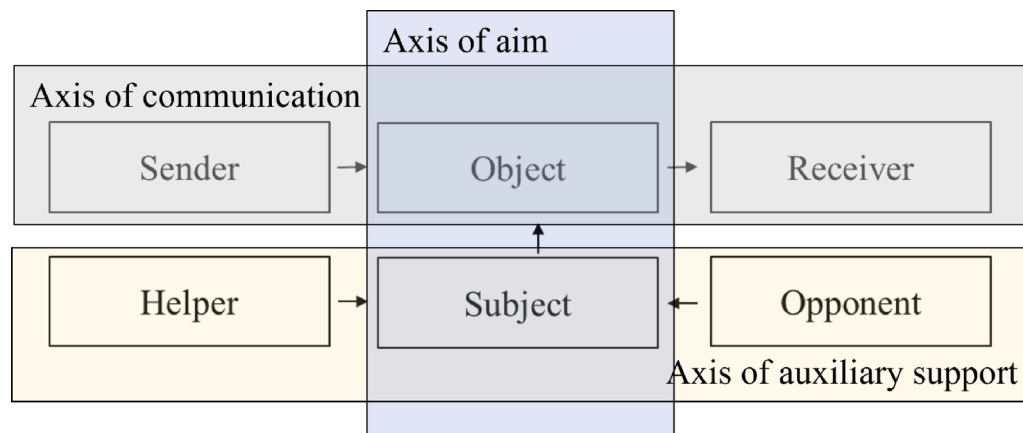


Fig. 1. The actantial model (Greimas, 1966).

actors / actants in the model are either subject or object, sender or receiver, helper, or opponent. The actors can be humans but also artifacts or abstractions. In tales and stories, the structure of the narrative and the relationship between actors are defined as follows: the subject follows a quest toward an object. The sender legitimizes and motivates the subject to pursue this quest destined for the receiver. The sender can be considered a ‘mandator’ as this actor gives a mandate to the subject (Bencherki & Cooren, 2011). The receiver can be presented as the beneficiary of the quest (Robichaud, 2003). Helpers support subjects in their quest while opponents try to prevent them from succeeding. Greimas’ actantial model is structural, focusing on the relations between phenomena and actors as the basis of the narrative (Soderberg, 2003): the relationship between subject and object, which can be defined as the axis of desire, search or aim; the relationship between sender and receiver as the axis of communication; and the relationship between helper and opponent as the axis of auxiliary support or power (Gertsen & Soderberg, 2000).

An archetypical project manager narrative could illustrate the model as follows: in the axis of aim, the project manager (subject) wants to successfully complete the project (object). In the axis of communication, the project sponsor (sender) determines the aim and scope of the project for the company and its stakeholders (receivers). In the axis of auxiliary support, the project manager is helped by colleagues and managers (helpers) but has to face resistance from some people in the organization and technical challenges (opponents).

3. Case study design

This research relies on Greimas’ actantial framework to construct and compare narratives of project managers, composite narratives from various organizational actors in each case, as well as the institutional composite narrative of a FW promoting association. While other studies use individual narrative analysis to compare different actors’ perspectives and identify specific turning points in change narratives within an organization (Gertsen & Soderberg, 2000, 2011), we use the actantial model to build individual and composite narratives based on individual and collective discourses of organizational actors on corporate FW projects in an interpretative approach (Polkinghorne, 1988; Vaara et al., 2016, p. 503–505). Vaara et al. (2016) distinguish between three main approaches to narrative research: the realist approaches, the post-structuralist approaches, and the interpretative approaches. The realist approaches conceptualize narratives as objective representations of organizational phenomena and as a source of data. The post-structuralist approaches are presented as the ones that either try to deconstruct prevailing or dominant narratives or to identify the role of emerging narratives. Finally, interpretative approaches consider narratives as organizational actors’ constructions of organizational

phenomena, whether individual or composite. Using an interpretative approach thus allows for a focus on individuals’ and groups’ construction of FW projects.

Composite narratives are built by collecting narratives from several organizational actors and by aggregating fragments from individual narratives of these actors (Currie & Brown, 2003; Sonenshein, 2010; Vaara et al., 2016). The actantial framework was particularly relevant to aggregate multiple narratives and structure the composite narratives of organizational actors for each case. This made it possible to compare composite narratives and to analyze how they integrate the narratives of other organizational and institutional actors.

FW projects in Switzerland are promoted by an association called “Work Smart” that is composed of many small, medium and large Swiss companies (Work Smart, 2020). “Work Smart” presents itself as a network of companies that want to develop spatial and temporal work flexibility and that are willing to help each other. “Work Smart” organizes events where companies can present their flexibility projects, how they have led them and what were the results. “Work Smart” also has a very rich website that offers explanations and arguments in favor of FW, as well as examples and studies. Some of “Work Smart” companies are also consulting companies who also propose to accompany FW projects. In a narratological sense, “Work Smart” offers institutional narrative components (best practices, norms, stories) that project managers can rely on. We therefore first built the composite narrative of Work Smart FW projects, by collecting data from the website texts (best practice milestones and recommendations). Media texts have proven to be very useful to recreate organizational narratives (Hellgren et al., 2002; Vaara & Tienari, 2002). This website text was completed by notes from 4 Work Smart presentations attended by two co-authors, who built an actantial model reflecting the institutional composite narrative of Work Smart on project processes.

We then collected empirical data from four large Swiss companies in which FW projects have been carried out before Covid-19 by interdisciplinary project teams consisting of two to three project managers who were identified as such in the organizations, with complementary IT, HR, and infrastructure specializations. In each case, we conducted at least six individual narrative interviews that lasted between 60 and 90 min. Considering that narrative analysis should focus on meanings embedded in contexts (Pentland, 1999), we followed an interview guide (see appendix) containing open-ended questions on the different voices surrounding the context of the project (Pichault et al., 2022). It also included questions on how interviewees interpret the role of key actors and key elements of the project process (Sonenshein, 2010). The interviews for each case company included at least one project manager, one HR manager and one IT manager, two line managers and two employees. In one case (the insurance company) the interviewed project manager was from HR. In the three other cases FW projects we

Table 1
Composition and specificities of study sample.

Type of company	Project characteristics	Interviews
Regional electricity, water, and gas distribution company	<u>Scope:</u> Pilot project affecting half of the company. <u>Status:</u> Pending approval for a company-wide deployment	8 (three managers - two project managers and one line manager, three employees, one HR manager, one IT manager)
Public national media company (radio and television)	<u>Scope:</u> Project on half of the company <u>Status:</u> Moving into the new building will take place in the next few years.	7 (two managers - one project manager and one line manager, two employees, one HR manager and project manager, one HR manager, one IT manager)
Telecom company	<u>Scope:</u> Projects concerning some units in specific domains (marketing, client acquisition, HR). <u>Status:</u> Ongoing process, as other units are on-boarded gradually.	6 (two managers - one project manager and one line manager, two employees, one HR manager and project manager, one IT manager)
Insurance company	<u>Scope:</u> Project concerning some specific units within the company (HR, IT) <u>Status:</u> Ongoing process, as other units are on-boarded gradually.	6 (two line managers, two employees, one HR manager and project manager, one IT manager)

interviewed two project managers, one from HR and one from IT or infrastructure. Questions were asked in an open manner, leading to lengthy responses from respondents. The follow-up questions allowed respondents to complete their narratives. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The entire empirical material represents 27 interviews and 246 165 words. The specificities of the projects studied and the sample are presented below in Table 1.

In the case data processing, we used Greimas’ actantial model to systematically identify the narrative structure of the project process in each interview by building 27 individual actantial models. We distinguished between two types of interviewees: on one hand the project managers and on the other hand other organizational actors (e.g. employees and managers). For each case, project managers narratives were analyzed as ‘main project narratives’, using the actantial model to identify similarities and discrepancies in terms of relations between actors throughout the various narratives. In the case of the insurance company, the ‘main project narrative’ was the individual narrative of the only project manager interviewed. In the other cases, the ‘main project narrative’ was the composite narrative of the two project managers that were interviewed. These project narratives are considered as representing the ‘official’ organizational narratives, since they originate from the projects’ central players and constitute the main narrative. Then, we also developed composite narrative frameworks for each case by combining and aggregating the narrative elements of other organizational actors (employees and managers) (Dunford & Jones, 2000; Sonenshein, 2010; Vaara et al., 2016). This process of developing composite narratives for employees and managers made it possible to identify common grounds through the interviews within the same organization. These composite narratives of employees and other organizational actors are considered as representing the individual level of narratives, since they are built on the individual perceptions of organizational actors. The composite narrative frameworks for project managers and other organizational actors were validated by two researchers (Cheung & Tai, 2023). The validation consisted of confronting individual and composite frameworks to check for alignment. Table 2 presents which source of data was used at each level.

In a second step, we have systematically compared the institutional narrative of Work Smart, the project manager(s)’ narratives and the other organizational actors’ composite narratives. Following the axes of

Table 2
Narrative levels and analytical steps.

Narrative levels	Analytical steps
Institutional level (on 1 association)	1 institutional composite narrative based on document analysis of best practice milestones and recommendations on the website of Work Smart + 4 Work Smart presentations
Organizational level (in four large Swiss companies)	3 organizational composite narratives based on 6 interviews of FW project managers; 1 FW project manager organizational narrative
Individual level (in four large Swiss companies)	4 composite narratives of individual organizational actors based on interviews of 2 HR managers, 4 IT managers, 5 line managers and 9 employees

actantial model, we have tried to identify similarities and differences across cases, using contextual data to understand and categorize potential differences across cases and levels.

4. Results

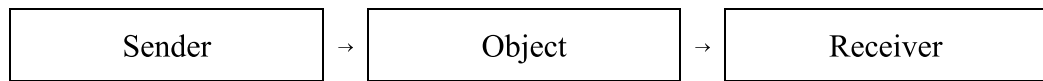
The results of our analysis are presented in three sections, following Greimas’ actantial model axes (Greimas, 1966). In the first section, following the axis of communication, we identify influencing and influenced project stakeholders and describe their relationship to the object. In the second section, following the axis of aim, we focus on the subjects or heroes of the projects and on their quest, in the institutional narratives and in the cases. In the third section, following the axis of auxiliary support, we identify the helpers and opponents of the projects in the institutional narratives and in the company cases.

In each section, we confront the institutional narrative of the Work Smart association with the composite narratives of project managers as well as with the composite narratives of other organizational actors. Excerpts from the official Work Smart documentation and quotes from our interviews are presented to provide illustrations. The energy company is used as transversal reference case to compare the actantial model axes of its actors with other companies.

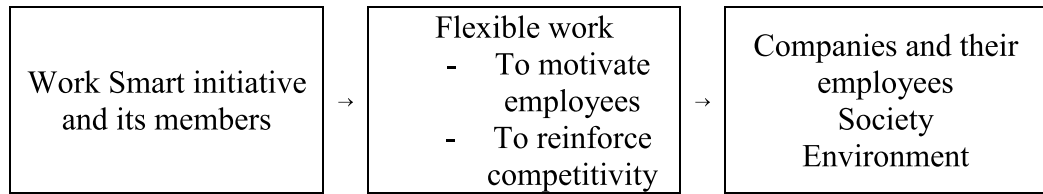
4.1. Axis of communication: giving legitimacy to the project by relying on stakeholders?

This axis corresponds to the definition of the mission or quest, and the relationship between the senders who initiate the mission and those who will benefit from the outcomes of it. Comparing the narratives on this axis helps to point out differences between the institutional narrative of Work Smart (which defines project stakeholders very broadly) and individual and collective narratives where project stakeholders and missions are defined in a more contextualized way (Fig. 2).

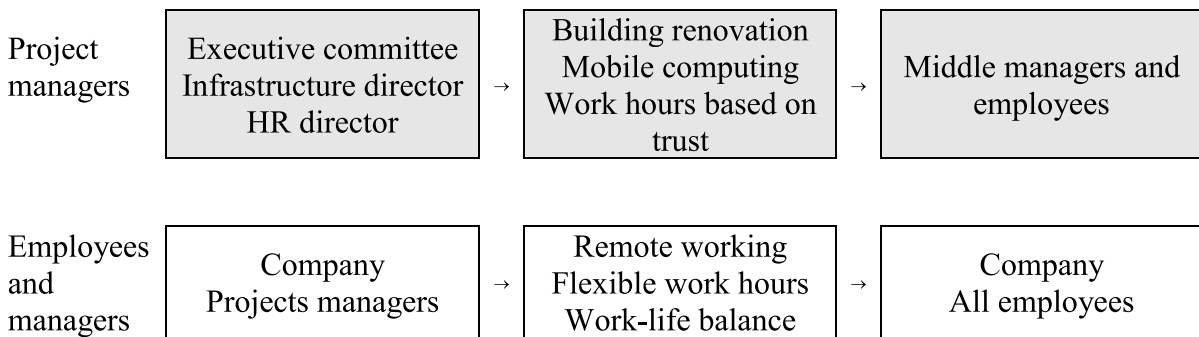
In the institutional narrative of Work Smart (Fig. 3), in which the association itself can be considered as an institutional sender, FW projects led by companies are given legitimacy by their numerous impacts. The Work Smart narrative identifies a very broad spectrum of positive impacts of FW projects: “Flexible work benefits everyone: employees, employers, society and the environment. In other words, it benefits the whole



Work Smart



Case A: Energy Company



Case B: Insurance company

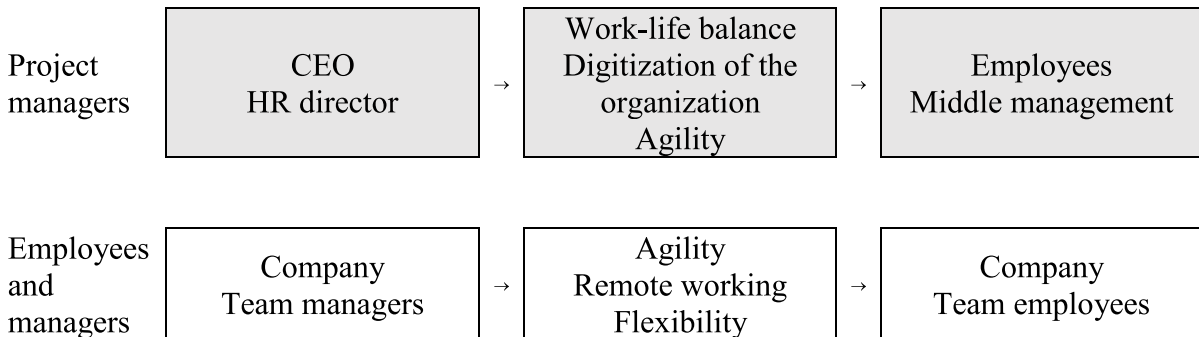


Fig. 2. Axis of communication.

country” (Work Smart website). These impacts can be of economic nature and concern productivity increases: “[There is] a 12 % increase in employee productivity thanks to flexible working models.” (Work Smart website). They can be of social nature and concern the well-being and work-life balance of employees: “Greater flexibility in daily work and family life increases employees’ satisfaction and commitment” (Work Smart website). Finally, the impacts can be of societal nature and concern the whole society as well as the ecological environment: “Greater flexibility in the management of daily work makes it possible to make more homogeneous use of the transport infrastructure [...] Each car trip less helps reduce the CO₂ level in the air. Flexible work allows you to work from time to time from home or from a location close to home. This shortens or even eliminates trips to work.” (Work Smart website).

In most of the companies, project managers identify executive committee members as the main senders who initiate and formulate the

mission with priorities that are specific to each context. In all companies, the project mission - or object of the quest - is a project with multiple objectives inspired by the multiple voices of committee executive senders. For project managers, the receivers are first and foremost the organizational actors as a whole, notably employees and middle managers.

For the project managers of the energy company, the project is sent or supported by several members of the executive committee. The initial sponsor of the project was the infrastructure manager who became CEO. He set multiple project goals, including work flexibility, use of new mobile technologies, reconfiguration of the building and new allocation of space. This infrastructure dimension first raised issues of legitimacy and resistance among employees. In the implementation phase, the project was also strongly supported by the HR Director, and this allowed project managers to emphasize the positive human impacts (work hours

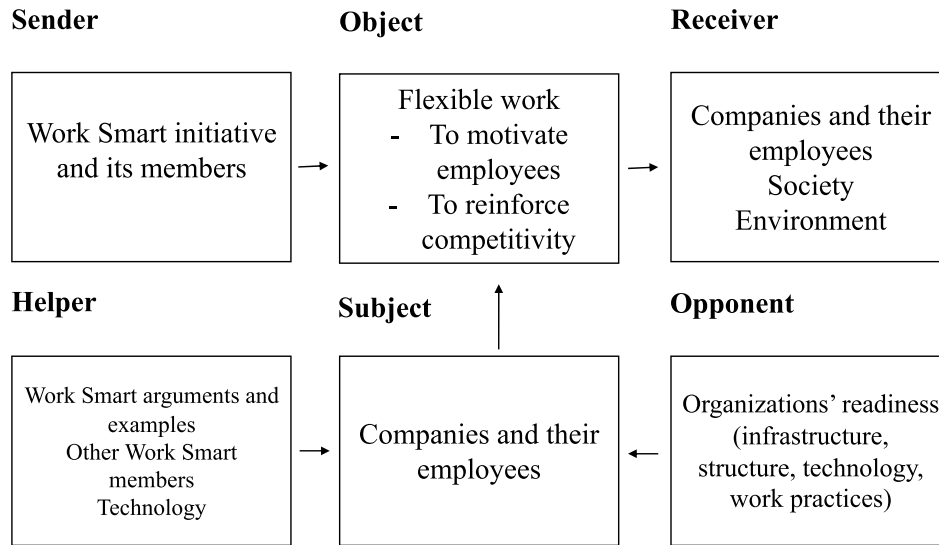


Fig. 3. Work Smart actantial model.

based on trust) in their narrative and thus give more legitimacy and leverage to the project towards the organizational actors:

“In the implementation phase, it was the HR Director who took over the lead. Clearly, the project is identified as an HR transformation project, which is good because it is not a real estate project. For a long time we would have been hearing: ‘yes, you want to save square meters on the back of the employees’. And we don’t hear that anymore. With this HR sponsorship, I think the project has taken on another dimension.” (Project manager, energy company).

In the project managers’ narratives of other companies, we also observe multidimensional goals of projects associated with several sponsors. In the narratives of the insurance company’s project manager, the main sender, or main sponsor of the project, is the HR Director: *“Our HR Director started at XXX a year before I joined the company and she was the one starting to implement this whole flexible work project”* (Project manager, insurance company). The consequence of this HR leadership will be to prioritize the psycho-sociological project impacts (e.g., work-life balance) in the quest and to identify employees (and potential future employees) as the main stakeholders impacted by the FW implementation project.

In the composite narratives of other organizational actors, the senders and receivers are less clearly identified than in project managers’ narratives. Rather than accurately pinpointing to HR, IT or the members of an executive committee, the interviewees use the company, i.e. the name of company, to describe the entity at the impetus of change: *“[name of the company] is pushing hard in this direction because it saves about 20 % of the workplaces.”* (Employee, insurance company). They also use the company as major receiver or stakeholder impacted by the change. On the other hand, middle managers and employees, while they use the company as an abstract sender and receiver, also mention the names of the project managers, team and middle managers and employees as embodied agents and stakeholders of the project.

4.2. Axis of aim: giving legitimacy to project managers as project heroes

The axis of aim defines the relationship between the subject and the object of the quest. It connects the people who will carry out the mission and the mission itself. While the sender-receiver axis rather insists on the aims of the project and bases the legitimacy of the project on its benefits and beneficiaries, the subject-object axis associates the project missions with the actors who lead and implement the project and who are perceived differently in different actors’ narratives (Fig. 4).

In the Work Smart narrative, the companies that want to join the initiative and their employees are presented as the subjects. The mission that they are pursuing (the object) is to implement flexible work. Both subject and object are broadly defined, in line with the overall narrative of the institution that aims at results on the societal level rather than at the organizational one. The subject here is “everyone”, i.e., all the member organizations and all their employees, because *“Work Smart is everyone’s business”* (Work Smart website). In the narratives of project managers and other organizational actors, the subject is an embodied individual or group of individuals who lead and/or implement a more or less complex project with more or less tangible tasks.

In the project managers’ narratives, project managers usually present themselves or their counterparts as the heroes who will be able to solve the complex problems of the company associated with the multidimensional quest or project mission. They explain why they were chosen, or rather how they emerged as natural leaders of the project in the organization. Interviewees might heroicize themselves or heroicize their project management colleagues as well as managers and teams of pilot projects. For example, in the case of the energy company, project managers describe their special ability of perceiving their environment in a pioneer way, of feeling the trends before they even become reality: *“The project was born [...] when we realized, with my colleague [project co-manager], that there was in our corporate environment some societal, technological, and economical factors that were all converging to provoke a paradigm shift. This was our feeling.”* (Project manager, energy company).

In the case of the media company, this heroicification of project managers is done similarly, by insisting on the efforts made by project managers, by emphasizing the struggles they have fought to defend the project and to carry it out: *“She (my co-manager) has traveled around the world... She’s been to a lot of (similar companies). She’s inspired by a lot of things that are done here and there (...) in Germany, (...) in Brussels too. She understands a lot and shares a lot, she testifies a lot about the environments she observes, etc. She has been observing a lot.”* (Project manager, media company). This illustrates not only the efforts that project managers will consent in order to make the project happen, but also the fact that these efforts also translate into a broader understanding that legitimize their project leadership. This mechanism also appears when they mention their co-subjects or pilot teams who also have a very active role in the project, testing prototypes, participating in the improvement of solutions, being spokespersons and leading figures of the project within the organization. These teams are also described as special or unique in their ability to change, adapt or promote change: *“We have set up a group of*

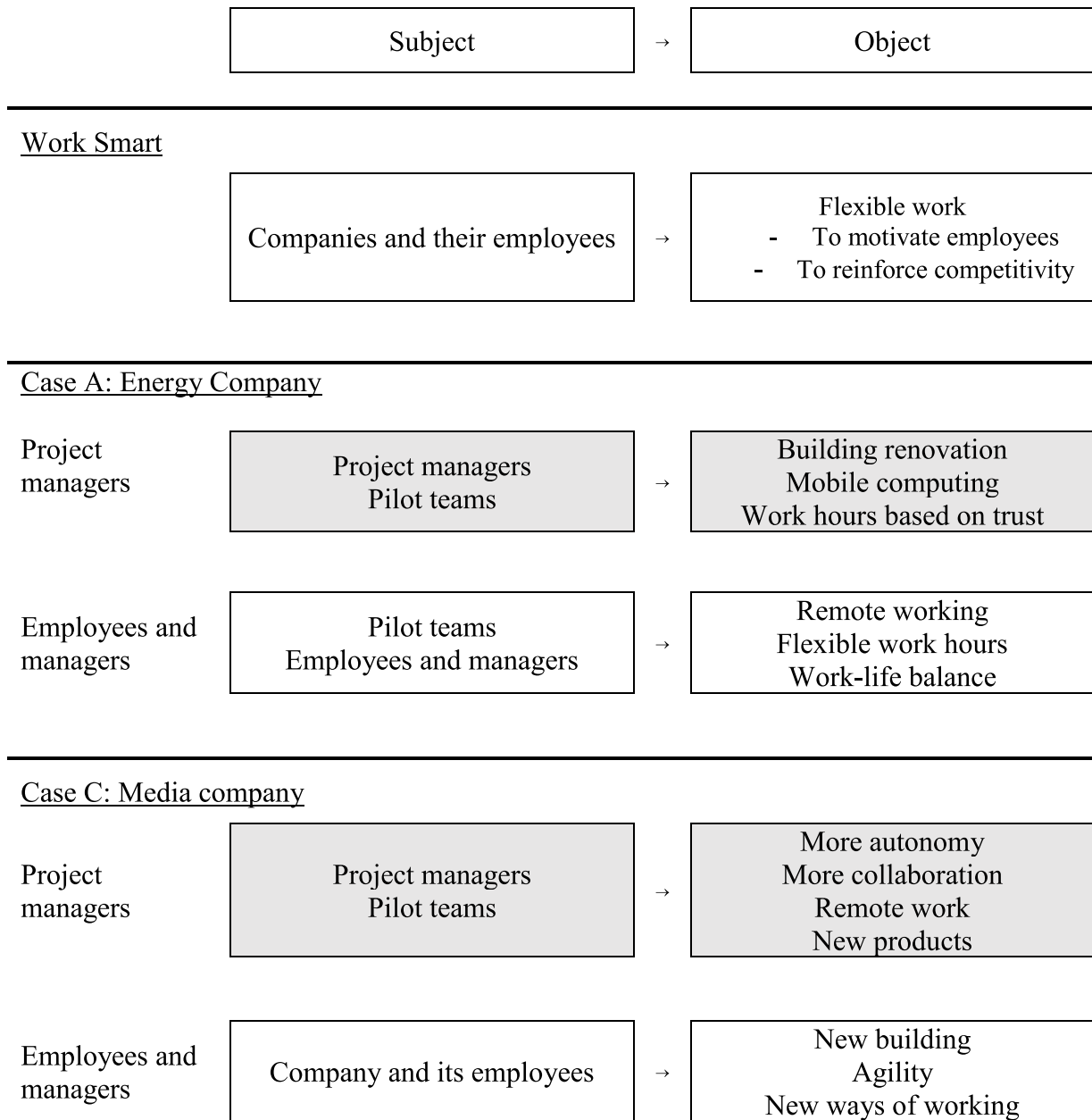


Fig. 4. Axis of aim.

collaborators who are going to be the spokespersons, to get the information up and down the line. We've called them the *formid'able* (a wordplay between the French word for wonderful and 'able'). *Formid'apostrophe able*. It's also the "able" side behind, to make things possible. To keep the spirit of XXX, which is very close to its customers and to its employees, it's important to have a team of employees who communicate." (Project manager, insurance company).

In the composite narratives of other organizational actors, this herofication spreads clearly from individual to collective subjects, from project managers to pilot teams who are involved in FW and even to all employees or the whole company that is going through change. Rather than being the sole mission of project managers, the project depends on everyone in the company. The responsibility of the success of the project falls on every company member: "And then, with this project, well, the average employee, who is at the center of the project, has to make a distinction between work, even if it is done at home, and private life." (Employee, energy company). This is also because the object of the quest is not seen by other organizational actors as a complex mission with

multidimensional clearly defined goals, but rather as a broad object that involves many different actors who are not always clearly defined, sometimes referred to as "the company". For example, managers and employees at the media company talk about a "global vision" when discussing the project: "Generally speaking, the project is about being more agile and in touch with everyone" (Middle manager, media company). In the same vein, the company (and everyone that constitutes it) is referred to as the subject: "The company with the leadership it has had so far is very visionary and I have complete confidence in the things it is doing" (Employee, media company). Rather than seeing project managers as heroes, the narratives of other organizational actors tend to be vaguer, be it about the object, or about the subject.

4.3. Axis of auxiliary support: helpers and opponents of the project manager

The axis of auxiliary support identifies the actors who will help or hinder the subject in his quest. In our case studies, three categories of

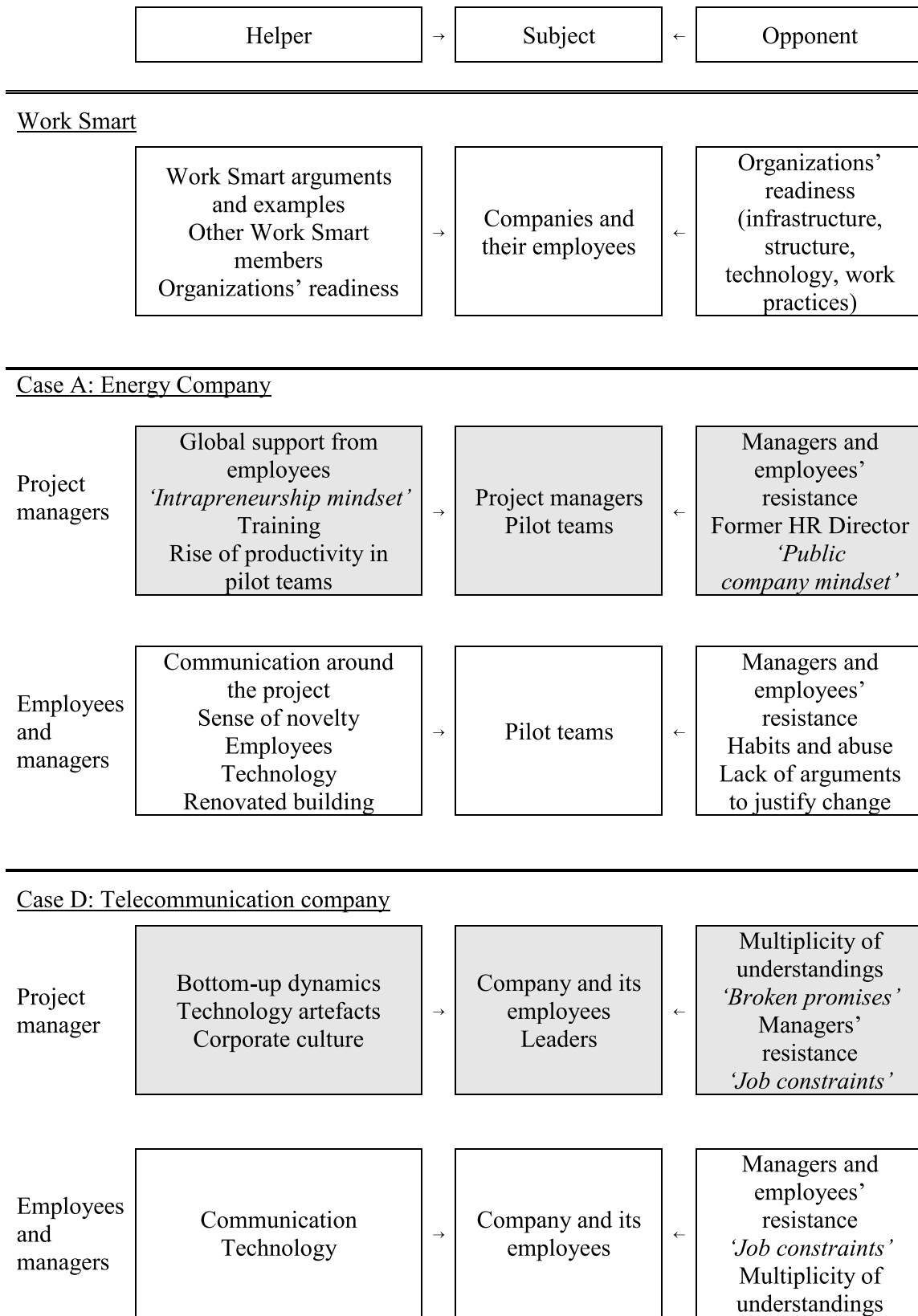


Fig. 5. Axis of auxiliary support.

actors play an important role in the implementation of the project, either as opponent or as helper. The first and most obvious category is the Work Smart association, through its direct and indirect normative effects. Employees and managers represent another important category of

adjuvants or opponents. The third category is technology, which can also be described as an opponent as well as a major helper to FW projects (Fig. 5).

The Work Smart narrative identifies several categories of opponents and helpers. One of the main forces on the axis of auxiliary support in the Work Smart narrative is loosely defined as “organizations’ readiness”. In that respect, organizations require a certain level of maturity to successfully implement FW projects. This maturity level depends on several dimensions, such as infrastructure, structure, technology, or work practices. This readiness can be a helper, or, in cases of lack of readiness, an opponent. Technology is also inherently an ambivalent factor of this organizational readiness, slowing down the implementation of FW if the company does not have the right hardware and software, but also potentially enabling FW. Technology and infrastructure are mentioned, but people are not featured in this Work Smart narrative of organizational readiness.

In the institutional narrative, an important helper is the association Work Smart itself, which provides advice and best practices to its members: “There is no single solution for the successful implementation of flexible work, but there are success factors. The members of the Work Smart initiative share their rich experience and knowledge in this area within the network. The network consists of more than 200 Work Smart Supporters who commit, by signing the Charter, to promote flexible working practices internally” (Work Smart website). The association provides narratives of FW that its members will be able to rely on and offers opportunities for identification and exchange of good practices within the network, especially since most of the companies in the Work Smart network benefit from a good reputation at the national level: “We’re part of this Work Smart initiative, so there’s quite a bit of exchange. We often meet with [the insurance company] or [a transportation company] and we talk about our projects” (Project manager, media company). The Work Smart network also enables the dissemination of best practices or authoritative arguments from opinion leaders and best practices across national borders: “We got some ideas from big American companies like Google, Amazon, that have created structures that are completely different from ours, and that have inspired us”. (Project manager, telecommunication company). Work Smart thus helps project managers on an operational level (through advice and sharing of best practices), but above all on a legitimacy level, through the network effect and the names of participating companies.

Looking at the project managers’ narratives, three main categories of opponents and helpers emerge: Work Smart (as seen in the previous paragraph), people and technology. Project managers first focus on people to show the mechanisms of advocating for FW projects as well as resisting to them. In some cases, some managers and employees are mentioned in their opposition and resistance role to the project; but in the same cases, the commitment of other managers and other employees is a strong leverage for the implementation of the project. In the case of the energy company, while the project has been successfully rolled out in many units because of the commitment of teams and unit managers, some managers also showed some resistance, especially to the flexible space dimension: “Some senior executives were immediately clearly against it, saying ‘I will never give up my office’” (Project manager, energy company). In the energy company, the support of the executive committee is seen as an important factor in the project legitimacy to deal with this resistance. This appears also in the narratives of other case companies like the telecommunication company: “So we’ve had a lot commitment from the top management. And we’ve been working a lot with their testimonials, like the CEO making a video here and there” (Project manager, telecommunication company). Project managers insist on the importance of progressively gaining adjuvant forces to weaken and train the opposition actors: pilot teams, facilitators, good practices, messages from the management, etc.

Technology also plays an important role in project managers’ narratives, at first portrayed as an opponent but quickly becoming an adjuvant of change. The dynamics of the project managers’ narratives highlight the changing roles of technology during the project: from being an opponent (because of an outdated IT system), it becomes an adjuvant when the system is up to date. Technology is an opponent when

it slows down the progress of the project: “In the beginning, IT tools didn’t really keep up. [...] I would have liked to see the right tools available very quickly from the pilot phase, to experiment with collaborative tools, for example. It was only last year that we got Skype.” (Project manager, energy company). But in most cases, the role of technology has evolved as the project was progressing and as the actors adopted new technologies: from being an opponent, it has become a helper, facilitating FW thanks to appropriate computer tools. Technology eventually made FW possible: “Well, it is a work culture that we want to establish for XXX, and we use IT tools to make this possible. What it means for me as an employee, is that I can work with the device I want, wherever I want.” (Project manager, telecommunication company). In most of our cases, the project managers also insist on the symbolic role of mobile technologies to embody and materialize the new link to the organization: laptops and smartphones become the new office. Digital technology also gives a modern image to the FW project: “we’re in a digital world, and interconnected world and this brings us new flexible ways, new ways of working easily” (project manager, telecommunication company). In this respect, technology has a dual role as an adjuvant: an organizational and technical facilitator role and a symbolic role that associates an image of modernity to the project and gives it greater legitimacy.

Employees and managers clearly illustrate the opponent / helper dynamics in their narratives, and discuss mostly the role of technology. In the narratives of employees and managers of the energy company, technology appears as a driving force as well as a prerequisite to the projects. On one hand, technology and the change it creates is a wave you cannot miss: “I think that we have to evolve with the technologies because everything that was, I would say, the standard before, evolves and then we have to evolve with it. It’s very important not to stay with the past.” (Employee, energy company). On the other hand, technology has been fundamental in creating an environment that make FW happen: “So let’s just say it was a must to have the right technology to get into this. A few years ago, we might not have launched this project because we didn’t have the infrastructure to support it.” (Employee, insurance company). The composite narratives of employees and managers make less use of the Work Smart network but rather build on other role models from other organizational actors, managers or pilot teams. The duality helper/opponent also appears about employees and managers’ attitudes to change. Some interviewees might consider themselves as helpers while justifying resistance by the uncertainty that surrounds the change project, with concerns about their job, the working conditions and their future. Some employees as well as some managers further add that the change has been forced upon them, and that the company is going too far: “By default, there are always people who are reluctant because they think it’s an invasion. The company goes too far for them, they would rather have some distance. Some employees, when we talk about remote work, they immediately say: ‘Oh no, no, work stays at work, I don’t want to work from home’ So I hear it, I understand it.” (Manager, telecommunication company). This illustrates the duality of the roles of people as helpers and opponents, roles that change depending on the situation of the actors.

5. Discussion

This study first contributes to the literature on legitimacy in project management (Currie, 2012; Dille et al., 2018; van den Ende & van Marrewijk, 2019). It offers, through a narrative approach, a comprehensive presentation of legitimacy levers in project narratives by integrating the institutional, organizational, and individual levels.

Current research in project management narratives has mostly investigated the interplay between institutional narratives and organizational narratives (Sergeeva & Winch, 2020), highlighting the contextualized dimension of project narratives and how counter-narratives are used as a way to make sense of grand narratives. Our results are in line with these findings as we show that project managers include an organizational dimension to the narratives of their projects. However, our study adds another layer of narratives, that of other

organizational actors. By analyzing their narratives and comparing them with project managers' narratives, this research makes it possible to identify similarities and differences between these two layers and suggests that some legitimacy-building techniques used by managers may not transfer to the other organizational actors.

At the institutional level, our study shows the role of an association and its members in establishing storytelling norms and best practice guidelines, a mechanism already identified for project legitimization (Currie, 2012; Frumkin & Galaskiewicz, 2004). The association also facilitates the spreading of narrative components on technology and societal trends of digitalization that will be integrated into project managers' narratives. Our study thus allows to articulate the institutional narrative of the association with organizational narratives of project management as proposed by Geraldi and Söderlund (2016). At the organizational level, the first axis of the actantial model highlights the use of different stakeholders in the project legitimization strategies. Discourses on stakeholders can vary from one company narrative to another, and, within the same company, from one phase of the project to another. Finally, by integrating the level of other organizational actors, this study further shows how some narrative components may efficiently transfer from institutionalized narratives to the narratives of project managers, and from these to the narratives of other organizational actors, while others may fail to transfer. This highlights the complexity of the legitimating process through narratives in which some narrative components may be contested or ignored by other organizational members.

Research in PM narratives has investigated the specific case of identity narratives, focusing on how project managers use identity work and narratives to gain legitimacy (Brown & Toyoki, 2013), through the interweaving of self-narratives and the context in which they are formulated (Sergeeva & Kortantamer, 2021). Our research also highlights the identity work and heroification processes performed by project managers and their project teams. The analysis invites us to consider - and legitimize - project managers and their teams as skilled and rallying heroes who are able to manage complex and challenging quests. We insist on the narrative dimension of this heroification: it is a storytelling mechanism aimed at legitimizing project managers and their team; it should be noted that our analysis does not aim at critically analyzing the skills held by project managers (Loufrani-Fedida & Misonier, 2015). This mechanism of heroification is part of the identity work performed by project managers to make sense of their roles and to gain legitimacy (Brown & Toyoki, 2013; Hodgson & Paton, 2016). Our study shows that to gain legitimacy as heroes, project managers heavily rely on organizational resources and support as well as on institutional resources. One of the most interesting insights of this research might be the discrepancy in the narratives of different groups of actors regarding the heroification: whereas project managers see themselves and their counterparts as heroes, this role is less clearly perceived by other organizational actors. This might question the efficiency of the identity work performed by project managers, since other organizational actors seem to minimize this part of their narratives (Sims, 2003). As such, the identity work and heroification mechanism might lead to challenges in project management as roles and responsibilities do not seem to be perceived in a similar way by all organizational actors.

Another contribution is the use of the Greimas' actantial model to analyze project management narratives. Literature on organizational narratives using Greimas' actantial model usually investigates major organizational changes, such as mergers or acquisitions (Demers et al., 2003; Gertsen & Söderberg, 2000, 2011; Söderberg, 2006; Vaara & Tienari, 2002). In cases of organizational change, the organizational phenomena investigated are often inherently difficult to delimit within a precise time and action scope, resulting in fragmented and partial organizational narratives (Vaara et al., 2016). In the case of project management, the organizational phenomenon under study is more strictly defined (the project) and more clearly framed in time, which makes it particularly interesting to use a narrative analysis model such

as Greimas' model. This model allows to identify the key actors and dimensions of the project based on project managers' narratives: sponsors and stakeholders, mission and key dimensions, skills and responsibilities of the project managers, as well as opponents and helpers to the project realization. Some of these elements can also be identified in institutionalized narratives of corporate networks and associations promoting project standards such as Work Smart, as well as in the individual narratives of employees and managers. This research shows the potential of Greimas' actantial model to structure composite narratives of groups of actors in an interpretative approach (Vaara, 2002), surveying projects in different company contexts. This study extends existing work using Greimas' actantial model by systematically comparing narratives with a similar frame through different levels (institutional, organizational, and individual).

Our interpretative narrative approach also contributes to the understanding of FW project management. FW projects appear as complex projects with specific objectives, deliverables, key actors and stakeholders that integrate both 'hard' dimensions (related to IT and buildings) and 'soft' (organizational and human) dimensions (ten Brummelhuis et al., 2012). Our results however show that not every narrative insists on the same components, depending on contextual factors and on the perspective adopted. These differences in narratives show the limits of the institutionalization mechanisms and of the standard-setting capacity of the association in favor of FW. These differences can also be explained by actors' logics: the senders in our narratives (i.e. the project sponsors) have a great influence on the way projects are oriented, on the priorities that are chosen and on the way the receivers (i.e. the stakeholders) will be impacted by the project. This illustrates the political dimension of (FW) projects, which represent important issues for organizations and in which organizational actors will position themselves to try to influence project narratives (Brown, 1998).

6. Conclusion

In this study, we focused on project narratives and how project managers build organizational project narratives to legitimize their projects and their own role in these, and how these narratives translate into the narratives of other organizational actors. We identify the different legitimacy-building mechanisms set in place by project managers – most notably based on the institutional narrative and on their own heroification – to create legitimacy over their projects and foster project success. We nuance these mechanisms by confronting the narratives of project managers with the narratives of employees and managers.

6.1. Limitations

This work suffers from several limitations, most notably linked to the methodology used. This study adopts an interpretative approach (Vaara et al., 2016) to analyze narratives of FW projects. One of the main criticisms of the interpretative approach and of the studies that have relied on it is its tendency to focus on polyphony, i.e. on the variety of actors' narratives within the organizations, without considering aggregated narratives in multiple levels of analysis (Vaara et al., 2016). Another criticism that has been tied with the focus on polyphony is the lack of emphasis on causal power in the interpretative analysis (Fairclough, 2005). To mitigate this limitation, we used the actantial model of Greimas (1966) as it helps structure narratives and provide clear relations between actors. However, the actantial model comes with its own limitations, as it fully depends on the quality of the narratives collected and their authoring (Gadais et al., 2021). By nature, the actantial model constrains the narrative to the six roles of helper, subject, opponent, sender, object, and receiver. This can lead to a simplification of the narratives and might not fully grasp the complexity of actors' roles in the project. It also can lead to a stereotypical framing of

organizational and institutional actors (i.e. technology as a helper or resisting employees as opponents) when there might be more to it than just the boxes of the framework. In that sense, the actantial model requires to be used with caution and as a starting point for further elaboration and analysis.

6.2. Implications

Analyzing FW narratives through institutional, organizational, and individual levels made it possible to identify specific challenges associated with narratives authored by project managers and how they are received by other organizational actors.

One key finding is that project managers rely on many narrative components from the institutional narrative to build a full-fledged FW narrative, but that does not necessarily transfer into the narratives of other organizational members. Whether it is about the objective of the project, or the helpers and opponents, employees and managers tend to identify the protagonists of the narrative less clearly, showing a partial understanding of the project. This can lead to misunderstandings about the potential goals and steps of the project. The key recommendation that comes from this finding is the need to adopt a dialogic approach when communicating with all the actors involved, paying specific attention to their perceptions and sensemaking activities (Weick, 1995).

Another key finding is that project managers tend to heroify themselves in their own narratives of change projects, while other actors in the organization may perceive the project as a more collective effort. Here again, this difference in perception can lead to confusion and misalignment. The key recommendation is to clarify the roles and responsibilities of all the actors involved in the project, to ensure that everyone clearly understands to whom they should turn to express their interests and concerns. Altogether, adopting a narrative approach makes it possible to identify the strengths and flaws of the narratives that surround projects and suggest that a key parameter for success is the capacity of project managers to articulate the different narrative levels in an integrated theorization work over the course of the project, thus reinforcing its moral and/or pragmatic legitimacy (Suchman, 1995; Tolbert & Zucker, 1999).

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Bertrand Audrin: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Eric Davoine:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **François Pichault:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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