Managing Improvisation within Change Management: Lessons from UK Financial Services

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Organisational improvisation is increasingly seen as a useful management skill, particularly in dynamic or turbulent business sectors, and there is growing evidence of its benefit in the management and implementation of change. The data here are collected within one such situation; the project management of change in the UK financial services sector. An interesting finding is the extent of improvisation taking place, notwithstanding the basic project management paradigm of 'plan, then execute'. Compelling evidence also emerges that those organisations providing the temporal space and organisational culture to support improvisation within a given framework are more successful at implanting organisational change.

INTRODUCTION

Improvisation is becoming more accepted as a means of achieving within organisations [Chelariu *et al*., 2002], and an evolving literature is attempting to explain and contextualise this phenomenon. Change is a constant within organisations, whether it be in processes, products, systems, or a myriad of other areas, and many organisations have adopted projects as a convenient and effective framework for managing such change. Improvisation has been identified as a combination of intuition, creativity, and bricolage that is driven by time-paced pressures, and in a project context, it involves moving away from an agreed plan in order to accelerate the implementation of actions [Moorman and Miner, 1998a, 1998b; Cunha *et al*., 1999]. Recently, the various constructs that combine to explain organisational improvisation have been extended to include elements of adaptation, compression (of timescales), and innovation [Miner *et al*., 2001].

In the 1960s, improvisation was seen as an organisational dysfunction, in that it led away from the traditional incremental route of 'plan, then execute the contents of that plan' [Quinn, 1980]. However, Weick [1979] was an early advocate of improvisational activity as helpful, and the growing interest in this area has also resulted in

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improvisation being accepted as an addition to the lexicon of management skills that can assist in achieving the expectations of a corporate planning exercise. This movement has accelerated in intensity in the 1990s, given the need for faster cycle times and more innovative solutions to gain or retain competitive advantage [Crossan, 1997], and it shows no signs of abating.

This movement towards managerially sanctioned improvisational activity appears to be changing the way in which many organisations are addressing both the way work activity is achieved, and the way it is supervised. Many organisations are allowing temporal opportunities to emerge for employees to experiment with new, innovative, and hopefully more effective ways of executing work, and this is resulting in new management challenges. Specifically, if organisations are creating temporal space and opportunity for employees to use improvisational working practices to develop new ways of undertaking tasks, this poses challenges for the control and supervision of work. Additionally, individual employees will be working independently within organisations, hopefully generating efficiencies and innovations. Such activity needs to be captured, and employees need to be motivated, rewarded, and encouraged to share findings and emerging best practice with the organisation, and with other employees.

This research has uncovered a number of areas where organisations operating within the UK financial services sector are engaging with these problems. In the more progressive organisations within the study, routines are being developed, amended, and ratified to cope with the greater degrees of freedom demanded by improvisational working practices, and their use within the management of change. Mechanisms to capture such emerging practices are also evolving, and frameworks are being developed to limit improvisational activity to levels where an element of control can be asserted. But organisations are still wary of allowing employees the freedom to improvise, and this is resulting in tensions in balancing formality with informality. The management of this tension, combined with management of the balance between risk and innovation, could lead to effective organisational routines and mechanisms. The demands of managing this balance are, however, far from straightforward.

In this paper some data from a study on the management of strategic change within the UK financial services sector is documented. This study was carried out during 2000–2001, and it revealed a number of findings. This paper concentrates on one aspect; the rise of improvisational working practices, and the (often informal) routines and mechanisms that are evolving to manage them. A limited review of the literature on improvisation is presented, building on work by Cunha *et al.* [1999] and other key writers in this area. Some attention will also be given to future directions for research. This will be followed by a description of the study that provided the data for this paper, and the findings applicable to the management of improvisational work practices. There will then be a discussion of the issues raised, and conclusions will be drawn. The literature relating to organisational improvisation is presented first.

THE LITERATURE ON IMPROVISATION

Improvisation involves combining known and unknown routines in different contexts, and can be considered from a philosophical as well as an organisational stance.

Ryle [1979: 121–30] adopts a philosophical viewpoint, using the perspective of how thoughts develop, and how improvisation features in that process. He suggests that: 'the vast majority of things that happen ... are ... unprecedented, unpredictable, and never to be repeated' [Ryle, 1979: 125]. As a result of this:

> it follows that the things that we say and do in trying to exploit, avoid or remedy that small minority of the particular partly chance concatenations that happen to concern us cannot be completely pre-arranged. To a partly novel situation the response is necessarily partly novel, else it is not a response. [Ryle, 1979: 125]

He suggests that however well an activity is planned, there will always be a novel set of circumstances to deal with, and that therefore improvisation is a part of daily life, thought, and communication. Ryle [1979: 129] describes improvisation as 'the pitting of an acquired competence or skill against unprogrammed opportunity, obstacle or hazard', although he is not specific about the meaning of an 'unprogrammed opportunity'. It is however clear that he sees improvisation as using resources that are to hand to resolve unforeseen occurrences. This is the essence of bricolage, which can be described as constructing a solution with the resources that are to hand at a given moment [Levi-Strauss, 1966].

The organisational view of improvisation adapts these principles to achieving tasks within organisations. Improvisation has for some years been a part of, or at least recognised in, organisation theory. The early view was expressed in terms of organisational dysfunction: either as an unintended outcome [March and Simon, 1958], or as an organisation design failure [MacKenzie, 1986]. There is, however, a growing body of post-1994 literature that considers improvisation as an organisational attribute that:

> contributes to and is an outcome of organizational absorptive capacity for new knowledge, structural flexibility, market flexibility, operational flexibility, intrapreneural culture and of the organization path dependence of exploitation and exploration adaptions. [Lewin, 1998: 539]

It therefore appears that as a result of the speed and degree of change within organisations and their environments, the organisational perception of improvisation has been revised. From being an outcome of 'getting things wrong', and having therefore to effect a repair, improvisation is now seen as a positive skill in making meaningful decisions within a limited time-scale, without optimum information and resources.

There is a trend within academic writing to apply metaphors to many aspects of management and organisational development. Leybourne [2002] considers metaphors for organisational improvisation, condensing the significant output that considers the area using both jazz performance [Barrett, 1998a, 1998b; Berliner, 1994; Hatch, 1999] and theatre [Crossan, 1997], and which resulted in a dedicated AoM conference track in 1995. This use of jazz music or, more specifically, improvisational jazz performance, as a metaphor for improvisation within organisations is a popular contrivance, with Hatch [1998] being an introduction to these themes. Hatch [1999] is a more comprehensive and coherently argued publication, built around the jazz

improvisation theme, but with links to sense-making [Weick, 1979], and to teamwork and collaboration, as well as to organisational culture and identity. Hatch also considers temporal aspects of improvisation, providing a link with the work of Moorman and Miner [1998a, 1998b]. Crossan suggests that many companies have created an over-reliance on the planning process, which because of its long time horizons, cannot be described as a creative and spontaneous process. She posits that lessons from improvisational theatre can assist in delivering 'faster, better, smarter' [Crossan, 1997: 39] innovative solutions and faster cycle times.

Improvisation is also linked with aspects of time, particularly pressure to keep to a demanding or compressed timetable. Moorman and Miner [1998a, 1998b] consider definitions and components of improvisation. Improvisation in this context is defined as: 'the degree to which composition and execution converge in time' [Moorman and Miner, 1998b: 698]. It follows from this that the more proximate the time between the design and implementation of an activity, the more that activity is improvisational. This temporal link between the two activities is considered to be important in judging the degree of improvisational activity. They also suggest a continuum of degrees of improvisation, building on some of the ideas of Weick, and address constructs related to improvisation, suggesting that there are three correlates of improvisation; bricolage, intuition, and creativity. Moorman and Miner [1998b] considers the link with learning and organisational memory, suggesting that improvisation produces new learning, which can then be lodged in the memory of the organisation. Miner *et al.* [2001: 314–5] extends this set of three correlates or constructs, adding adaptation, compression (defined temporally), and innovation, and suggesting that the combination of these six constructs can result in a specific type of learning.

Bricolage has already been mentioned as involving the use of resources that are to hand to resolve unforeseen occurrences. Lehner [2000] develops the use of bricolage within organisational improvisation, broadly supporting a positive relationship between implementation and bricolage, as: 'planning threatens flexibility whereas bricolage enhances flexibility of strategy implementation'. He also discusses environments that are subject to: 'high dynamism' that may: 'render planning futile' [Lehner, 2000: 4–5], thereby supporting a key assertion of this paper, that improvisation, i.e. the fusing of planning and execution, is widespread in fast moving commercial sectors.

Cunha *et al.* [1999] provide a comprehensive review of the emerging 1990s improvisation literature. They formally define improvisation, together with a review of its antecedents, influencing factors, and outcomes. A literature review is included, dividing existing work on theory development in improvisation into first, second, and third stage articles. First stage articles attempt to transpose the improvisational work carried out in jazz extemporising and theatre to organisational contexts. Second stage articles move improvisation away from the arts and into organisations, developing definitions (usually using a grounded theory approach), and building the foundations to allow research of a more positivist leaning. An emerging third stage is also identified, considering amongst other areas a temporal perspective of organisational improvisation. Chelariu *et al.* [2002] expand on certain elements of this work, offering a comprehensive review of the way learning interacts with

improvisation, and presenting a typology of improvisation. There are also links with the use of improvisation within projects.

There is also the need for an underpinning structure or framework, and the need for skills and knowledge, which can be learned or rehearsed, for improvisation to work within organisations. Although improvisation takes place often within project management, especially towards the end of a project, when bricolage comes into play because budgets are exhausted and the completion date is near, there is little mention of projects in the literature. Projects are mentioned tangentially in Chelariu *et al.* [2002], but otherwise a different context is used [Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997], unrelated to the use of project management to implement change. Interest in improvisation appears therefore to be growing, although little work has been published relating to its use within projects. Also, there is little doubt that as improvisational working practices are becoming more recognised as an option for some managers and project-based workers, mechanisms and routines are evolving to manage them. This is an area that deserves attention, notwithstanding the fact that it seeks to formalise to some extent the essentially dynamic nature of improvised work, and the employees involved in its use.

A DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

The original study that underpins this paper was designed to consider the interface of implementation, projects, and change, focusing specifically on behaviours rather than tools and techniques. There has been a tendency to consider this interface in a narrow way, following positivist traditions. In this study however, six financial services organisations, varying in size, maturity, and perceived success, were investigated using a case study approach. The intention was to delve deeper into phenomena that can only be accessed using methods such as case studies [Yin, 1984, 1994]. This method is able to yield the rich and deep [Bryman, 1988] observational and narrative data that can produce new insights and explanations; 'increase[ing] the chance of discovering the unanticipated' [Gersick, 1988: 12]. An emphasis on 'discovering the unanticipated', allows the development of new explanations and theory from qualitative data, and case studies are often seen as the ideal vehicle for this [Frost and Stablein, 1992: 49].

This phenomenological, case-based phase of the study produced 11 factors, which are documented elsewhere. The validity of these factors was then tested using a more positivist research questionnaire, which was exposed to a sample of 521 practising project managers working in the financial services sector. Scale validity was ascertained using Cronbach's Alpha test, and correlations and a stepwise regression were carried out. This quantitative phase of the research is, however, outside the scope of this paper. One significant finding of the full study, the wider findings of which are documented elsewhere, is the increasing use of improvisation within the project-managed implementation of strategic change, notwithstanding the basic project-based paradigm of 'plan, then execute'.

It is the findings relating to the way in which improvisational working practices are developed and managed within the six organisations that concern us here.

SAMPLE AND METHOD

As has been mentioned above, the study that underpins this research, and provides much of the primary data upon which the findings articulated in this paper have been based, was located in a sub-sector of the UK financial services sector. Six retail lending institutions, ranging from a major quoted bank, through building societies and ex-building societies (UK-based mutually owned organisations originally formed specifically to supply housing finance), to smaller retail lending organisations, were used. This sample was chosen taking into account the relative populations of organisations in each of the sub-sectors, the required number of cases required to provide an opportunity to develop theory [Eisenhardt, 1989: 537; Stake, 1994: 237], and the need to include cases with differing characteristics, or polar types [Pettigrew, 1988]. The data collection and analysis took place during 2000–2001, involving many visits to the organisations, and the collection of around 100 hours of interview data. Observational and secondary data, including project documentation, was also incorporated into this broadly qualitative study. This data was analysed, and each of the six organisations written up as a case study. Cross-case analysis was then undertaken, and a number of themes, trends, and modes of operation were identified. The quantitative phase followed this analysis.

The study identified a number of processes, mechanisms and routines that the six organisations used to (formally and informally) develop and manage improvisational working practices. The prime focus of this paper is, however, the movement away from standardised and documented processes and mechanisms, towards more improvisational modes of working, and how mechanisms evolve to assist with the way work in this area is monitored, managed, and controlled. Often this improvisational activity is informal and surreptitious, and as such causes problems for the organisations, especially as they operate in a sector that is traditionally risk averse [Brooks and Dawes, 1999: 197; Trethowen and Scullion, 1997: 62].

FINDINGS

Inevitably, the six case study organisations displayed varying levels of maturity, sophistication and effectiveness in their understanding, control and management of improvisational working practices. To some extent, this was linked to their confidence in the abilities of employees to improvise effectively, within a given framework that limited the extent of improvisational activity. The cultural norms and values of the organisations also significantly affected the way in which improvisational working practices were used, or in some cases abused. Each organisation that contributed to the study is examined separately, the various issues examined, and a summarising analysis made. A comparison across the six organisations will then be considered as a part of the wider conclusions.

BigBank

At *BigBank*, a major UK-based bank with over 77,000 employees, there was significant support for improvisation, with many operational areas, all change management

respondents, and all interviewed project managers confirming that much of their work is improvised. There is evidence that although the bank has implemented formal structures and processes in almost all areas of operation, within areas involved with the management of change another set of activities achieves much of the real progress. These activities are based on informal networks and relationships, and they appear to operate largely outside of the procedures and guidelines documented by the bank.

One senior change manager linked this to the organisational climate of the bank, arguing: 'I think the climate within the company is more one of, if you . . . can find a better way of achieving the goal more effectively, then I think you have the freedom to [do that]. Therefore, improvise or innovate'. He goes on to suggest that: 'improvisation and innovation are fundamental to becoming more effective as a business operation, and without it we will just end up with robots'. Also, linking this approach to learning, that: 'it is particularly selfish of someone to find a better way and then to keep it to themselves'.

During the discussions within *BigBank* many instances of these informal routines and improvisational activities were identified. A senior manager in the management development area of the bank suggested that:

> actually most of the work that does happen in the organisation is done through informal structures, loose collaborations of people who have similar views or initiatives . . . I might assemble 2 or 3 people who I know have a particular specialism in an area . . . if I can get them to contribute a day here or a day there because of what they can offer, then that works a lot better than going through the line management process of saying, 'can you free up 3 days of resource next November'. You just get on the phone and make something happen informally, which fits with the idea of improvisation for me.

Improvisation is therefore recognised within *BigBank* as a valid, and in some areas an essential component in the implementation of change. Other data did however indicate that at the customer-facing level within *BigBank*, the opportunity to improvise is being deliberately removed from employees in favour of IT-based decision systems.

This removal is one way of managing and controlling improvisation, but it negates the use of innovative thought and creativity to achieve work in many departments. Investigation and analysis of the areas that are the subject of the wider study, namely those involved in the implementation of change using a project-based framework, demonstrated that much activity is improvised. Certainly, within *BigBank*'s Group Projects and Change departments, it appears that provided the changes are achieved, details of the process are of little concern. Project and Change Managers do undergo extensive training in the processes and procedures to be followed. These are then often ignored, with the approval of senior managers, especially where there is temporal or resource-based pressure. This is causing difficulties in capturing emerging best practice in this area within *BigBank*.

It became evident during the research that *BigBank* was suffering from the requirements of managing change and integration initiatives on many fronts

simultaneously with insufficient resource. During the research period, the organisation was involved in integrating two large 'high street' banking groups, and there were a number of significant political agendas being pursued by the incoming senior managers of the two merging organisations. Change managers particularly were under intense pressure to deliver against pre-agreed timetables, regardless of the fact that resources were constantly being redeployed. Improvisational working practices within *BigBank* are therefore principally used to claw back time over-runs and to compensate for loss of human resource, as political agendas are imposed upon the change and integration activity.

MutualCo

MutualCo is a mutually owned building society specialising in the provision of housing finance. In this organisation much improvisation takes place. It is however often surreptitious, occurring to meet compression of timescales, and changes in the scope of previously agreed implementations. The level of improvisation was not recognised with any clarity by the outgoing Director of IT, who described this type of activity in terms of 'work-arounds' and 'management of the issues'. Programme and project managers articulate improvisational processes more strongly, suggesting that: 'I improvise to get things done', 'I will get it done any way I can', and: 'you couldn't get a project "live" without improvisation'. The group IT manager reinforced this view, suggesting:

> if our Chief Exec wants something done, it is going to happen, and if he wants it done in a month, we will say, I doubt if we can do it. We will try for it, and we will do it, but the first thing that goes is following all the rules and regulations, crossing the 't's, dotting the 'i's, doing the documentation, that goes out.

It appears however that this is accepted within the organisation, and one Programme Manager, when discussing improvisation, stated categorically: 'with my current project [the creation of a web-based "product application" facility], the sponsors are not interested in change management. They just want to get it done'. This is clear evidence of the existence of high levels of improvisational activity within the project management of change at *MutualCo*. It is however accepted within *MutualCo* that 'improvisation increases risk on a project'. The good managers therefore concentrate on the control of risk, whilst still using improvisational work practices. It appears that, notwithstanding a real sense of risk aversion within this organisation embedded by 150 years of tradition, and a stable market for the single loan product offered for much of that time, areas of the business are changing significantly. As a result of the relative lack of development and change historically within *MutualCo*, the project-managed change that is now being achieved is required quickly in spite of the many problems that exist within the organisation. Programme and Project Managers using improvisational practices appear to be the catalyst for such change.

   Problems emerge in attempting to manage such improvisational activity. The fact that a large element of this activity is surreptitious, and is occurring out of the view of senior managers, means that by definition there are no procedures to manage or control it. Regretfully, improvisation within *MutualCo* occurs to meet unacceptably

ambitious levels of change activity imposed upon employees already under intense pressure to achieve. Improvisation allows them to temporally compress agreed time-scales, but it is manifestly evident from data and observations that a large element of control is lost. Also, no attempt is made to seek an optimum solution, and learning is not captured at the organisational level.

In addition, the wider data suggests that although Project and Change Managers within *MutualCo* improvise extensively to negate major shortages in human and financial resources, and to deliver initiatives within compressed timescales, the climate of the organisation is not forgiving when such initiatives prove ineffective or abortive. At the time of this study *MutualCo* was housed in six different buildings, awaiting completion of a new headquarters building. Communication was inadequate, the cultural norms and values were fragmented, and scapegoats were sought if initiatives were not delivered or if they under-achieved. Improvisational working practices in such an environment exposed practitioners to penalties, and it is therefore not surprising to find a significant element of surreptitiousness.

ExSociety

ExSociety is an organisation with its origins in the mutually owned building society movement, but whose ultimate ownership has changed twice in the last five years. *ExSociety* is committed to the development of its employees, and the empowerment of those employees to allow them to achieve excellence, particularly in the area of service to the customer. There is recognition within the organisation that improvisation can assist in this, particularly if it allows those within the organisation to create new and enhanced processes to meet organisational targets and customer demands. User and team discussion and briefing forums are then used to share best practice in these areas.

Improvisation is accepted as a desirable skill within *ExSociety*, not only within the Head Office environment, but also within the branch network. One member of the branch staff, when asked whether she had the opportunity to improvise, said: 'Absolutely, all the time really, because, working in a branch, you have got a big variety [of challenges]', and that: '*ExSociety* encourage taking ownership of everything ... it gives people confidence then to think, "well, if there is a problem, how do I solve it", rather than passing it on, and thinking, "well, this is not really to do with me"'. This statement links neatly with the concept of 'ownership' that is enshrined in the corporate values of *ExSociety*. Also, there is a very strong alignment between these values and the attitudes of employees, and improvisation is encouraged if it contributes to the delivery of excellence to the customer.

Support exists for improvisation at the highest levels within the organisation, notwithstanding the rigour of project and programme management procedures within *ExSociety*. Discussions with the Strategic Change Manager also revealed his strong advocacy for improvisational activity, which he sees as the way in which most work is achieved within change implementations. A Compliance Manager did however point out that, given the volume of regulation within the sector, it was important to set boundaries, and that those boundaries would have to be: 'embedded in training'. This suggests a dualist view of improvisational activity within *ExSociety*.

The evidence also indicates that some areas of change management would benefit from a less rigorous approach, provided that a framework was defined for such improvisation.

It is nevertheless understood within *ExSociety* that improvisation has to be controlled, and that there is a tension between the tools and techniques used to manage change, and the less structured ideals of improvisation. This manifests itself in a divergence of thought within *ExSociety*, with senior IT-based managers being less enthusiastic about improvisation than those managers whose roles are more behaviourally oriented.

The management of improvisational activity is handled on a number of levels. During induction, employees are schooled in the cultural norms of *ExSociety*, which are based around high levels of motivation and empowerment, and an ethos of overarching customer service and satisfaction. At the individual and departmental level, employees are encouraged to use innovation and creativity to satisfy customer problems and demands, where possible without passing the situation to another part of the organisation. Training reinforces this 'ownership' ethic, and formal and informal processes capture the emerging best practice. This multi-level approach appears to be highly effective.

In many ways, however, there is a significant 'tension' surrounding the use of improvisational working practices in *ExSociety*. On one hand there is genuine support for such activity, especially at the strategic management level. It is accepted and appreciated that a motivated staff, using improvisational practices effectively to solve organisational and customer-driven issues, is beneficial. There are though certain areas, some of which are sector-specific, that exacerbate these tensions. Notably, the sector is risk averse, and *ExSociety* has emerged from a part of that sector that is traditionally conservative. It therefore imposes rigorous controls on parts of the organisation, whilst encouraging others to embrace improvisational practices for the benefit of customers and the wider organisation. It has developed a motivated and committed workforce, and there is a wide understanding of the implicit boundaries beyond which improvising employees should not stray. This results in many examples of effective improvisation, backed by a set of cultural values that have been embraced by employees, and which assist in focusing such improvisational activity.

FinanceCo

FinanceCo is a mainstream instalment credit provider, and a subsidiary of a major UK banking group. This organisation has been plagued with problems linked to the integration of its various operating divisions into the parent, these problems being amplified by the significant cultural differences between *FinanceCo*, with its entrepreneurial desires, and its parent, a bank operating a deeply conservative, risk-averse business model.

Some areas are therefore actively resisting a move towards more improvisational practices. Many departments have become more rigid in their working practices as a result of the increasing influence of the parent bank, which has a long history of cautious growth, and an aversion to risk taking. This caution is manifesting itself in the

imposition of controls on areas of *FinanceCo*. Specifically, the newly outsourced IT area, and the collections and litigation areas, now operate under service-level agreements with their internal client departments, and in many cases these agreements specify processes and mechanisms that are mandatory. This acts as a deliberate restraining influence on the ability and inclination of employees in those areas to improvise, notwithstanding the supposed desire of the parent bank to learn from the allegedly more entrepreneurial and improvisational practices of *FinanceCo*.

There is however a feeling within parts of *FinanceCo* that improvisational practices will assist in the future development of the organisation, provided that employees can differentiate between true improvisation, and activities that have taken place in the past in order to remedy problems caused by the poor planning of change initiatives. Surprisingly, the strongest proponent of improvisation within work processes was the Audit and Compliance Manager, who considered that this was a vital element in the future development of *FinanceCo*.

Within the lending areas of *FinanceCo*, the management aim is improvisation in order to win business, and to meet customer expectations. The management of risk is equally important, but the organisational focus within *FinanceCo* is on ensuring that loans are profitable, and the flexibility exists to satisfy customer demands. A manager within Group Training and Development suggested that some people felt more secure within a comfort zone that acted as a framework for their actions, whereas others were happy with improvisational techniques. He was also of the opinion that it was up to a project or line manager to manage these preferences within his team.

FinanceCo respondents have mixed views about improvisational work practices, and evidence supports the assertion that there is doubt about their use. Specifically, PRINCE[1] routines imposed on the newly outsourced IT area of the organisation impart a rigour that negates improvisation. It is however apparent that some project managers still improvise surreptitiously to achieve goals, and it is also apparent from the data that there is greater use of both surreptitious and sanctioned improvisational working practices within customer service areas.

Managing improvisation within *FinanceCo* is problematic. A tension has manifested itself between the risk-averse rigid documented processes favoured by the parent bank, and the entrepreneurial, opportunist attitudes that have underpinned the profitable growth of *FinanceCo* during the 1990s. This tension has been compounded by the influence wielded by parent bank executives, who are imposing control over the historic freewheeling tendencies of the *FinanceCo* senior management. In addition, the service level agreements are stifling the opportunity to improvise in many areas, and this is therefore an example of an organisation where improvisational activity is being reduced. This attitude runs counter to the general trend within the study.

What is happening here is an attempt by the risk-averse and conservative parent to rein in and control the previous excesses of a profitable, but maverick subsidiary. Areas of *FinanceCo* have been outsourced, and these actions have restricted the level of improvisational activity in a company where that activity was essentially unregulated. This is also the only organisation within the study where some interview respondents suggested that improvisation was badly executed, leading to wider

problems, and one respondent (an IT programme manager) indicated that he would be unhappy if improvisation happened within his remit. This re-focusing of the business has resulted in a movement from the previous entrepreneurial culture to a significantly more rigid set of cultural norms and values, and many employees were essentially de-motivated.

NewCo

NewCo is a consumer lending organisation formed in the late 1990s. This organisation has about 130 employees, all of whom operate from a single site, dealing with customers using an internet site [http://www.*NewCo*.co.uk] and a number of telephone-based call centre teams. There is a view within the organisation that innovative thinking, rapid decision-making, and a speedy transition from idea generation to implementation should be encouraged, and there was an attempt to reflect this in the way in which the organisation developed in its first year of operation. As the organisation has grown, a degree of formality has been introduced, but the senior management of *NewCo* encourage innovation by their staff, together with creativity. These are important components of improvisation. These improvisational work practices are encouraged by deliberately not surrounding employees with documented routines and formalised sets of expectations about how work is to be carried out. Team members and their managers decide on work flows, responsibilities, and job design, and there is also an informal forum to discuss these issues, and a mechanism, albeit also informal, to feed emerging best practice back into new written procedures. A set of limits to the framework within which work can be improvised is encapsulated into induction training, and is also passed on to new employees via a 'buddying' system, which also provides an element of informal control.

This organisation has grown quickly, and changes have been implemented to facilitate that growth. However, the required temporal compression in the strategy development process has been affected by the acquisition of *NewCo*. Currently, this is not unduly affecting the organisation, and when looking for an example of improvisation, the Marketing Director suggested that: 'our approach is not so rigid as to make that a highly noticeable occurrence'. Even within the risk area, where control is most evident, the Head of Risk suggested that 'you have got to improvise all the time to find the solution', and that 'to improvise is to be innovative, and you need to be innovative to succeed'. This, taken with other evidence within the data, would seem to indicate that improvisation is an accepted part of work within *NewCo.*

There are many examples of improvisation within the data. Most notably, the whole area of user-led change to internal processes involves improvisation, as the majority of these initiatives appear to arise as a result of team members undertaking tasks or meeting customer expectations outside of formal organisational procedures. If these initiatives are proven to work, they are informally adopted, and disseminated across the organisation using formal and informal employee networks. Ultimately, they are formally adopted into organisational routines. There is evidence that this improvisational activity is seen by *NewCo* as 'a way of staying ahead of the competition' by compressing the time needed to react to market signals. There are also strong parallels to learning organisations in these activities.

Improvisation is in addition accepted as an important factor within IT-based work, and the Head of IT is enthusiastic about improvisational techniques, saying: 'I think that it throws things open for people to be a little bit more creative than usual. Sometimes when you do that, you get better ideas brought in.' She goes on to say of improvisation: 'yes, I think it is a good idea, but I think there is a place for it . . . there are only certain times when you could do it, and I think that it would have to be clearly understood what you are doing as well'. This view reflects the more rigorous procedures and controls that need to be present within the implementation of new IT systems and infrastructures, particularly in respect of testing and risk management activities.

NewCo allows employees more freedom to improvise than any other organisation within the study. Control is effected in three ways, Firstly, and at the highest level, the organisational values are championed by senior and middle management, and adopted by all employees. These values are based around a customer and employee focus, and honesty and transparency at all levels within *NewCo*. Secondly, team leaders and managers are close to team members, and the integration of management with team members is high. Thirdly, employees work with a 'buddy' or partner, and monitoring of activity is therefore integrated at the most basic level. The organisation is, however, growing, and there is an appreciation that more formality will have to be introduced as this happens, especially if *NewCo* moves away from single site operation.

This young, dynamic, and successful organisation has grown organically by allowing its young team of highly motivated employees to develop routines that are highly effective, and sufficiently flexible to meet the demands of extreme growth (turnover increased from £4.5 million to £294 million in three years). Brico-lage has been employed, as this growth has been more rapid than originally antici-pated, and resources have therefore been limited. It seems that one key to the undoubted success of this organisation in harnessing and encouraging improvisational working practices to meet its challenges is the cultural and behavioural make-up of an energetic and motivated employee cohort, who have the trust and support of the senior management, and do not have a historical burden of embedded practices to unravel and overcome.

DivestCo

DivestCo is a long established and, for many years, dominant player in its sector, pro-viding consumer credit facilities. There is an acceptance within *DivestCo* that some of the organisational change problems encountered in the mid-1990s were caused by a lack of formality and control within internal project-managed change processes. This area has been formalised significantly with the adoption of routines and procedures from a PRINCE-based methodology. Additionally, the continuous improvement initiatives applied within *DivestCo* have assisted with less formalised change.

There is therefore a natural tension between the rigidity and robustness of these routines, and the desire to improvise in order to shorten delivery times for change initiatives. This has resulted in a desire to improvise, which is tempered by adopted standards and procedures. At various levels within the organisation, the rec-ognition of improvisation as a positive factor is accepted, with the Head of H.R.

saying: 'it probably doesn't happen enough', and the Strategic Change Manager saying: 'I do it all the time'. Another senior manager who is responsible for organisational development indicated that, 'as an organisation we would see ourselves as fairly improvisational. We are not afraid to jump off the plan. It is part of our "can do" culture'. It is however evident that some functional areas are less inclined to improvise, as evidenced by the Finance Manager, who stated: 'improvisation sounds a bit scary to me, I have to say, from an accountant's point of view'.

Evidence supports the use of improvisation within *DivestCo*, but it is apparent that there are considerable differences of opinion as to how it is used. The rhetoric surrounding improvisation relates to flexibility, servicing the customer, and being innovative in the way lending can be structured. However, the reality seems to be closer to achieving the 'can do' philosophy by doing whatever is necessary to deliver change project outputs, regardless of the current need for them.

There is an appreciation within the company of the positive effects of improvisation. Notwithstanding this appreciation, with the current exercise to develop a new vision and values for the organisation, together with the cultural changes that may be required in their adoption, there is a view that improvisational tendencies may need to be suppressed in the short term. It is however recognised that controlled improvisation is good for the organisation, as it contributes to the generation of ideas, to the creation of new and innovative products, and to initiatives that will ultimately lead to the development and success of *DivestCo*.

There is strong evidence of the use of improvisational processes within *DivestCo*, and there is a perception at the strategic level within *DivestCo* that a key element surrounding improvisational processes is the control of risk. This is to be expected in a long-established company within a highly regulated sector. *DivestCo* does address this link between risk and control formally, running a series of workshops on balancing risk with control. One Project Manager suggested that about 50 per cent of his work was improvised, and a number of respondents saw improvisation as an extension of the continuous improvement process that is used to manage more informal change within *DivestCo*.

The control of improvisation within *DivestCo* is however problematical. A significant difference in attitudes manifests itself when change is managed, with senior managers, the parent, and embedded attitudes from earlier change projects arresting attitudes, and pressure to achieve and the aforementioned 'can do' ethos encouraging the use of improvisation. It is also evident that some functional departments, notably the accounting area, have difficulty with improvisational work practices, whereas other areas are keen exponents. Controlling these attitudinal diversities is proving a challenge for *DivestCo*. The organisation attempts to address issues relating to improvisational activity, notwithstanding the fact that a number of employees at different levels within *DivestCo* have articulated difficulties in formalising and capturing such organisation-specific knowledge. There has been a gradual increase in improvisational activity over the last two or three years in order to meet demanding volumes and timescales for change. This activity is however primarily surreptitious, as the implications of earlier failures is embedded in organisational memory, and such improvisational activity is therefore relatively uncontrolled.

COMPARATIVE FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

An important outcome of the original study is that although improvisation within projects could be construed at a simple level as bad project management, as it implies a breakdown in the 'plan, then execute' paradigm, there is almost universal support for it in a project and change context. This is a significant finding for three reasons. Firstly, little has been published regarding this phenomenon. Secondly, the concept of improvising within projects does not appear in textbooks relating to the management of projects. Thirdly, there is no explicit reference to improvisation or to the sort of deviation from plan that is involved in improvised work either in the US Project Management Institute [2000] *Body of Knowledge* or the Dixon [2000] UK Association for Project Management *Body of Knowledge*. The newly revised 2004 US Project Management Institute *Body of Knowledge* has a short reference to 'workarounds', defining them as something 'not planned in advance of the occurrence' [PMI, 2004: 380], but limits their use to risk planning.

There is however strong evidence of the extensive use and acceptance of improvisation to manage change within the case study organisations. Some of this activity is conscious, and some emerges because of circumstances. Chelariu *et al.* [2002: 141] suggest that this organisational activity is 'a reflection of the pressures of an environment characterised by unprecedented fast change'. Stacy [1996] maintains that these environmental conditions are uncertainty, complexity (described in terms of interdependent environments), and dynamism (described in terms of short-lived opportunities and threats to survival). The UK retail financial services sector is such an environment. It would appear that organisations faced with these conditions often find traditional planning and implementation models less effective. Dickson [1997: 37] and Moorman and Miner [1998a: 1] both recognise the need to manage new change during implementation, and Tushman [1997: 15] discusses managing multiple changes concurrently.

Improvisation assists in dealing with this volume of change, and *BigBank* senior managers and project managers are keen exponents. *MutualCo* managers suggest that they could not operate without improvising, notwithstanding the risk-averse history of the organisation. *ExSociety* has the most rigidly applied project standards and procedures, but at senior levels there is a belief that there is insufficient improvisation, and that this is stifling innovation. Interestingly, given its success in managing change, there is less improvisation by project managers within *ExSociety* than in any other case study organisation, with the exception of *FinanceCo*, which produced the least evidence of improvisation. *NewCo* uses such techniques across the organisation, and is also developing effective mechanisms to capture the emerging best practice that accrues. Its success at managing change is also demonstrated in the data, notwithstanding that it would be at the opposite end of the 'level of improvisation' continuum to *ExSociety*. Evidence from *DivestCo* indicates that there is a willingness to improvise, but this is arrested by the memory of major failed projects in the mid-1990s, where an element of blame was attached to insufficiently rigid processes. It is apparent from the data that there are significant differences across the organisations, and across levels

of seniority within those organisations. Much improvisation is also surreptitious, avoiding accountability and the scrutiny of senior managers.

Given Stacy's [1996] environments, it is understandable that employees within the case study organisations may wish to use improvisational practices. There are however doubts as to the effectiveness of this improvisational activity, and none of the organisations are able to support empirically an assertion demonstrating that improvisation aids the management of strategic change. *BigBank* is attempting this through benchmarking initiatives. *MutualCo* has problems, particularly with the increase in risk that has to be managed. *ExSociety* senior managers cite an assumed link between improvisation and innovation, and are intentionally allowing employees the organisational and temporal space to learn from experimentation and improvisation. *FinanceCo* and *DivestCo* display little evidence of effective improvisational activity, and *NewCo* is at the opposite end of the continuum, encouraging improvisational activity at all levels within the organisation. This is an area where the other organisations, with the exception of *ExSociety*, which has a set of forums that could assist in this area, tend to be weak. Also, the relative success in managing change of *ExSociety* and *NewCo*, with significantly different levels of rigidity within their change frameworks and in the levels of improvisational activity, indicates that neither of these factors is significantly instrumental in indicating the successful implementation of change. Table 1 maps the acceptance, application, and effectiveness of improvisation practices across the six organisations.

Different attitudes prevail towards improvisation in a customer-facing role. *ExSociety* and *NewCo* encourage staff in such roles to take responsibility for solving and satisfying customer requests, where possible. This often involves a degree of improvisation. *MutualCo* is also moving towards achieving this in at least one department, but is far behind *ExSociety* and *NewCo*. The other organisations have all imposed stringent head office controls on customer-facing employees, and this is particularly so in *BigBank*, where almost all branch and sales discretion has been removed.

Findings from this study indicate that project and change managers embrace improvisation almost universally as a means of achieving change. Many managers, across all six organisations, have strongly articulated opinions about the need to move away from agreed plans in order to execute that change. Indeed, managements

TABLE 1
USE OF IMPROVISATION WITHIN THE CASE STUDY ORGANISATIONS

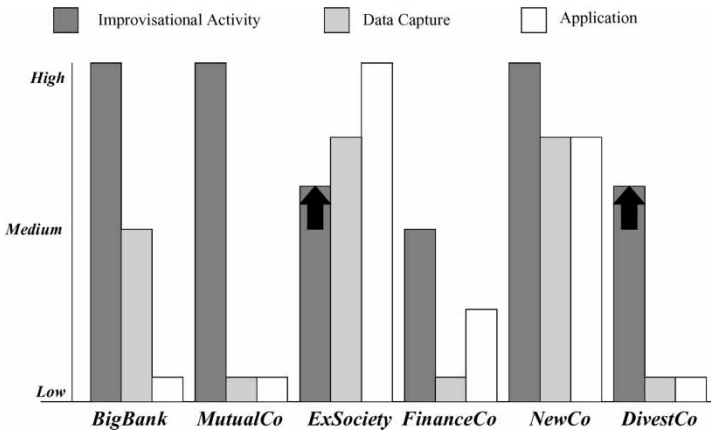|	Acceptance	Application	Effectiveness
BigBank	Strong	Widespread	Poor
MutualCo	Strong	Widespread	Poor
ExSociety	Growing	Growing	Improving
FinanceCo	Weak	Limited	Poor
NewCo	Strong	Widespread	Improving/Good
DivestCo	Growing	Limited	Poor

may 'make a conscious decision to improvise as a means of creating more flexibility of behaviour and more spontaneous decision making' [Chelariu *et al.*, 2002: 141]. Crossan and Sorrenti [1997: 155] see this as 'intuition guiding action in a spontaneous way'. This is especially true within *BigBank* and *FinanceCo*, where improvisation is also seen as a means of circumventing intra- and inter-organisational political resistance. It is also apparent that improvisation often takes place without senior management knowledge, especially within *BigBank* and *FinanceCo*. Chelariu *et al.* [2002: 141] view change teams as likely sources of such improvisation, a finding that is borne out by evidence from this study.

It would however be imprudent to allow all employees to improvise without limitation. Managers need to support improvisation, and therefore require it to be bounded by some kind of limiting framework. This is supported by the literature; Brown and Eisenhardt's [1997: 16] 'limited structure', Cunha *et al.*'s [1999: 318] 'minimal structure', and Weick's [1998: 545] 'guidelines'. As the financial services sector is highly regulated, and tends to be risk averse [Brooks and Dawes, 1999: 197; Trethowen and Scullion, 1997: 62], such a framework is usually based around the management of risk. It is also recognised that improvisation is more effective if mechanisms exist to share successful improvisational activity [Moorman and Miner, 1998b: 713; Chelariu *et al.*, 2002: 142], and to communicate lessons learned from it to relevant parts of the organisation that can benefit from such activity [Moorman and Miner, 1998b: 713]. This requires the development of organisational memory [Moorman and Miner, 1998b: 713–14]. Respondents within all the case study organisations voiced concerns about the ability of their organisation to capture good improvisational practice and encapsulate it within such a memory for future use. Both *ExSociety* and *NewCo* have mechanisms to assist with this. In *ExSociety* improvisational activity is an enabler, and a change management team identifies and implements new improvisational processes as part of the streamlining of work processes. There is however evidence that the IT-based change initiatives do not include as much improvisational activity as initiatives to change operational processes, because of the more rigorous and defined procedures that surround the implementation and testing of new IT-based systems. *NewCo*, a significantly smaller and younger organisation, uses improvisation at all levels, and has informal forums to identify and disseminate improvisational practices that have the potential to become best practice within the organisation. There appears to be little evidence of such initiatives in the other four organisations, notwithstanding the rhetoric surrounding this activity in *BigBank* and in *MutualCo*.

Figure 1 categorises the extent to which the six organisations generate improvisational activity, capture the supposed benefits of this activity, and apply it to assist in future change. The data indicate a significant and growing level of improvisational activity across the six organisations, although the reasons for this activity differ. *ExSociety* and *NewCo* are encouraging such practices to release innovation in project processes, whereas *BigBank* and *MutualCo* are using them to claw back time and cost overruns, or to deliver change under pressure against changing requirements. *FinanceCo* and *DivestCo* lag behind in this area. It is also apparent that although improvisation is increasing in *DivestCo*, its application is not

FIGURE 1
IMPROVISATION, APPLICATION, AND LEARNING

controlled. Only *ExSociety*, *NewCo*, and to a lesser extent *BigBank* are in any way successful in converting improvisational activity into useable data to assist future change initiatives. In *NewCo*, this data resides within the cognitive capability of its employees, and would not be retained in the event of a migration of those employees away from the organisation. The application of such data is equally problematical, although *FinanceCo* has attempted to improve its capability in this area, albeit by applying informally and personally held data, rather than data from a central repository.

This study has also uncovered an appreciation of the possibilities that the knowledge economy offers to organisations that can successfully exploit its opportunities, and there is a growing acknowledgement of intellectual assets as a key competitive resource. Knowledge working is recognised as an influential area for attention within evolving and progressive organisations. New knowledge comes about through exchanging and combining existing insights in novel ways, and trading and combining knowledge depends on people being able to work together, to understand each other and to trust each other. Taken together, these relationships can be viewed as social capital, which underpins knowledge creation and thereby, value creation. Managers have to manage this process, and organisations can provide the culture for it to happen. *ExSociety*, and to a lesser extent *NewCo*, appear to be achieving this demanding set of challenges better than the other case study organisations. There is however a fundamental problem. The tacit knowledge that employees acquire through experience is a form of power. Foucault considered power and knowledge to be inextricably linked [Foucault, 1977]. The possession of knowledge confers power on the possessor, and the sharing of that knowledge, which is the essence of the learning organisation, reduces the power of that employee. Influencing the cultural norms of the organisation to remove the barriers to knowledge sharing is a daunting task, particularly

in large organisations with deeply embedded cultural language, values, symbols and myths.

A major finding of this study is a consideration of the extent of improvisational working practices within the management of change. Although there is no doubt that practitioners have always improvised to some extent during the implementation of strategic change, the scope and extent of the improvisational activity within the case study organisations was a revelation. It is manifestly clear that improvisational activity is widespread within the management and implementation of change. The reasons for this are varied, but have common origins. Firstly, all the organisations are attempting to manage change on many fronts, with insufficient human, physical or financial resources. Secondly, the temporal pressures on change managers to deliver solutions to business problems, or to improve processes, mean that change managers attempt to reduce delivery times by moving away from the original plan. This is particularly evident in *BigBank* and *MutualCo*. Thirdly, because of the speed with which new products have to be developed to keep abreast of competitors, requirements change in scope and nature during the development and implementation life cycles. Traditional methodologies call for re-planning within a set of change control procedures, but temporal pressures do not allow for this to happen, and improvisation ensues in an attempt to deliver to the new organisational and strategic requirements.

There are perceived benefits to improvisational working practices, provided that they are recognised and supported organisationally. Firstly, they have the potential to generate what *BigBank* describes as emerging best practice. This can be captured and shared across the organisation. Regretfully, of the six organisations in this study, only *NewCo*, and to a lesser extent *ExSociety*, have the mechanisms and routines to achieve this. It is also apparent that *NewCo* can only do this informally, although routines were being developed to formalise the capture and dissemination process. Secondly, talented managers can circumvent the formality of rigid methodologies to deliver change quickly, and with the maximum of flexibility and innovation. However, the risks of this approach are obvious in a sector so risk averse and bounded by regulation and legislation. Surprisingly, audit and compliance departments within the chosen organisations voiced strong support for improvisation in most cases. Perhaps this support for improvisational work within projects is a tacit acceptance of its importance in achieving change, providing risk management routines are comprehensive and rigorous. This acceptance of improvisation is however poorly communicated in many instances, and much improvisational activity is therefore surreptitious, resulting in differing perceptions of this type of activity across managerial levels. Certainly, the tension between improvisation and rigid project methodologies is causing challenges to organisations, only some of which are being creatively resolved.

The apparent increase of improvisation within the organisations is more difficult to document. The enigmatic nature of the processes that are evolving to monitor and direct growing levels of improvisational activity implies that organisations are also having difficulty in controlling and documenting it. This is compounded by the surreptitious nature of much improvisation. Table 2 synthesises the approaches of the six case study organisations in this area.

TABLE 2
CONTROL OF IMPROVISATION WITHIN THE CASE STUDY ORGANISATIONS

BigBank	*Change Areas* – Improvisation encouraged, but little control or formality
	Operational Areas – Removal of ability to improvise by imposition of rigid processes
MutualCo	Little control of improvisation, which is mostly surreptitious and escalating to meet poorly defined change demands
ExSociety	Effective multi-level approach, encapsulated in induction and training, with effective improvisation re-used for organisational benefit
FinanceCo	Problematic, and mostly surreptitious, curtailed and restrained by specific 'service level' process restrictions
NewCo	Effective multi-level approach, enshrined in organisational values, with effectiveness enhanced by modest size and single site operation
DivestCo	Little control, and much surreptitious activity, with capture and re-use of good improvisation problematical

There is growing acceptance for improvisation in organisational life. Organisations that embrace organisational activity do however have to manage this activity on two levels. Firstly, employees are often happy to improvise, but have a cultural prejudice which suggests that what they plan and execute has more value, and is more likely to be effective, than what they spontaneously generate. Plans anchor people's ideas and actions, but people become attached to such plans, and return to them even when they are ineffective. There is a perception that it is problematical not adhering to a plan, even in situations where plans, maps and models are deficient.

Suchman [1987] sees this problem in terms of human–machine communication, and reflects on how humans respond in a 'situated' way. Her explanation of situated action is: 'that every course of action depends in essential ways upon its material and social circumstances' [Suchman, 1987: 50]. Essentially, this means that as it is not possible to plan for every material and social circumstance, humans improvise, whereas machines can only respond to something that has been programmed. Machines cannot therefore innovate, and it appears that some organisations have the same problem, and for almost the same reasons. Many organisations attempt to plan for all eventualities, and many employees ensure they have a plan-based artefact to display to senior managers for protection and justification of their actions. This does not however negate their ability or desire to improvise.

A second difficulty is related to the fear experienced when overstepping a safe boundary into the unknown area of improvisational activity. Often employees will decide to follow plans, even though it may be less effective to do so. There is also a political dimension since when employees improvise they have nobody to blame. An organisational culture that supports employees can assist, and *ExSociety* and *NewCo* appear to have this kind of culture.

At this point it may be useful to consider the culture and climate within which effective improvisational working practices can thrive. Evidence from this study has suggested that improvisation, which contains elements of intuition, creativity and bricolage [Moorman and Miner, 1998a, 1998b], benefits from a cohort of motivated and committed employees who are prepared to draw on experience, and an

intuitive feel for what is possible, to solve organisational problems with limited and immediately available resources. In order for such activities to flourish, those employees have to be encouraged to step outside their comfort zone attempt to achieve outcomes without following documented procedures. This requires willingness on the part of the organisation for this to happen, an understanding that learning from failure is as valid as learning from success, and a move away from a 'scapegoat' mentality. An understanding that it is desirable to capture successful improvisations and codify that knowledge to inform and expand organisational memory is also helpful.

Some organisations recognise that action taken to resolve unforeseen problems has value in its own right. *ExSociety* and *NewCo* subscribe to this view. Much organisational improvisation is however relatively unseen, and is often perceived as something people do surreptitiously. But, employees do improvise, and the data supplies compelling evidence of this. A fundamental problem is that many employees do not like to admit to improvising, as it puts them at risk. Improvisation forces employees to take responsibility, as there is no plan to support decisions. Improvisation can be an effective addition to tools for change, and particularly so within the project environment. It appears that the managed tension within an organisation that balances formality with informality, and risk with innovation, could lead to organisations that are effective at project-managed change.

There is no doubt that there is a trend towards the fusing of planning and implementation in the organisations studied, or alternatively 'composition and execution converge[ing] in time' [Moorman and Miner, 1998b: 698] within the use of projects to implement strategic change. All but one of the respondents endorsed such a proposition, and a plethora of secondary data exists in support. The link between improvisation and the difficulties in applying sequential implementation techniques during periods of rapid change is however more difficult to establish. Evidence from this study produces a number of reasons for improvisation, including temporal pressure, insufficient resourcing, poor project planning, and changing expectations of project success. An improved mechanism to deal with such difficulties, which balances formality with informality, could assist in the implementation of project-managed change.

NOTE

1. PRINCE (PRojects IN a Controlled Environment) and its successor PRINCE2, are project management methodologies developed for use in UK government departments, and widely adopted in the private sector as a structured methodology for the effective management of any size or type of project.

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