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## **When project-based management causes distress at work**

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Project-based working is so widespread today that Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (1999) go so far as to regard the project-based 'mode of justification' as a component part of the new ideology of modern capitalism. This particular set of principles is applied in the legal, educational, psychological, political and managerial spheres, which confirms Jean Pierre Boutinet's vision (Boutinet 1990) of the project as a pervasive element of social life. The injunctions to make commitments and the promises of self-realisation purveyed by certain segments of the management literature have helped to create the myth of the good fortune to be gained from project-based work. The very vocabulary of project-based management seems laden with connotations: surpassing of oneself, reaching out beyond one's normal capacities, prevails over stress, leadership or coaching replaces authority and direction or guidance does duty for control. Employees working on projects become actors, a choice of language that emphasises the autonomy they are supposed to enjoy in order to get involved and bring projects to their conclusion.

This 'managerially correct' discourse raises questions. It has something of the nature of an idealisation mechanism, as Jean Pierre Boutinet emphasises in the updated preface to his book *'Anthropologie du projet'*. It seems to us, from the evidence provided by the project actors we have met, that certain collateral effects on human resources are produced; in particular, various forms of distress emerge for which no responsibility is really taken.

This concern has to be set alongside the emergence of a professional and academic literature on distress at work, some of which has received considerable media attention (Dejours, 1998; Hirigoyen, 1998; Neveu, 1999). Companies are said to have placed too

much reliance on organisational innovations, without taking individuals into account. *'The nature of work has changed; it has become more fluid, flexible and reactive and, for many employees, certainly more interesting. However, the changes have also given rise to a new phenomenon: pressure. Various indicators show that work intensification and the resultant pressure are having a dangerously damaging effect on working conditions, with worrying increases in absenteeism, mental illness, occupational diseases, workplace accidents, even suicide and, to a different extent, alcoholism and drug addiction in the workplace'* (Askenazy, in Impériali, 2005). Projects are not immune to these damaging effects – far from it. As a heightened form of professional activity, it exacerbates the problems experienced under normal conditions (Garel, Giard, Midler, 2004). It also poses specific problems, such as the 'mourning' associated with the end of an assignment (Dubouloy, in Asquin et alii, 2005).

Our experience as teachers of project-based management on continuing training programmes has given us an opportunity to observe the gap between the discourse companies use and the testimonies gathered in the context of interplant training courses. We met project actors at times that encouraged them to stand back and review their experience. Collecting these testimonies outside of the workplace context or of an assignment allocated to them by their managers seemed to us an interesting approach that could reduce the inhibitions produced by the idealisation of project-based management in companies. Taking advantage of a well-disposed audience or picking up discussions that they would perhaps not have dared to have in the context of an interview, the project actors produced a strong and authentic discourse on the unexpected consequences of their involvement in projects. The intensity of these

accounts surprised us and we have pondered over the meaning we might attribute to their contents and to what they revealed in this context. Our intention was to take this opportunity to try to understand more clearly the forms of distress associated with the project actors' experiences. As the leaders of the discussions, we organised a series of exchanges of experience whose aim was to gather together and share not only the benefits of project-based work organisation as perceived by the participants but also the difficulties and risks that they may have encountered. This exercise, which was repeated several times a day with groups of about thirty people, enabled us to gather, in a phenomenological way, more than two hundred verbatim accounts over a period of more than two years. The seminar participants were middle managers from various companies, all of whom had been involved in projects, either as project managers or simple team members. We undertook to disseminate their accounts within academic circles, even if it meant putting across a message at odds with the dominant culture.

The discourse was analysed without any pre-established structure, using a qualitative approach suited to the exploratory nature of the exercise. The purpose of the phased pedagogical method we adopted (individual reflection, work in small groups and then recounting on a voluntary basis) was to ensure better control of the sincerity of the participants' accounts, of whose experience we had no prior knowledge. Thus the attention we paid to creating an atmosphere of security and trust helped to ensure not only that the accounts were sincere since but also that they were an authentic expression of the situations experienced by participants, some of whom recounted their experiences with considerable emotion. It will readily be acknowledged that the internal validity of data collected in this way has a counterpart linked to reliability (Allard-Poesi et

al, 1999). We did not really conduct interviews; rather we structured exchanges between actors. Since these exchanges could be of variable duration and form, we opted for an inductive, open code approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The aim was to discover, using a grounded theory approach, the categories of effects project-based management produces on individuals and groups. Consequently, the contents of this article are not based on the results of a carefully prepared and implemented research exercise. It advances hypotheses, the relevance and coherence of which are, at the least, those accorded them by the project actors concerned.

We have identified three major categories, which will form the three sections of this article. These are individual risks linked to excessive involvement and commitment, risks associated with the destabilisation of professional identities and, finally, risks arising out of the increasing precariousness of professional careers within companies. We have decided to begin each section with a more detailed testimony that seemed to us to express the essence of the verbatim accounts relevant to each of these categories. Each of these situations, supplemented by other extracts from participants' accounts, serves as a basis for formulating a set of proposals to be investigated in subsequent research projects.

## **THE INDIVIDUAL RISKS OF EXCESSIVE INVOLVEMENT AND COMMITMENT**

The level of demands and pressures that a project can bring to bear on individuals is clearly underestimated. The testimonies we collected give us cause to believe that certain individuals experience forms of violence for which they may, paradoxically, consider themselves partly responsible. This weakens their ability to resist and may trigger a process of isolation that in some cases become destructive.

### ***Daniel's case: when a project burns up human energy***

What usually stands out from the accounts of people who have worked on projects (often large-scale and successful ones) is the considerable expenditure of energy they mention. This expenditure of energy is as much a product of an exalted discourse constructed after the fact as an expression of genuine overstretch made necessary by constraints of time, resources and specifications. While the reconstructed narratives tend to minimise the serious constraints that have been experienced, they particularly deny the effects on individuals. The project culture inhibits their ability to mention these difficulties, and it was precisely for this reason that we collected the statements outside of the actual context of the project or company in question.

Daniel is an engineer with an aeronautical equipment manufacturer. At the age of 35, he seized the opportunity to take part in a major project for his company. According to him, the project arrived at just the right time. *'This project was something of an opportunity for me to push myself forward. I was initially recruited to work about two days per week on it, so I continued to work the rest of the time for my department. It wasn't easy, since the two days were a bit theoretical. For example, I had to make myself available to attend a quality meeting if there had been a hitch, or to discuss an urgent matter that had arisen, even though I was supposed to be working on the files allocated by my head of department'*. During this initial phase of the project, Daniel acknowledges that he went along with the situation, with a certain degree of excitement. *'Knowing that your opinion is being sought, that you're needed, frankly it's gratifying, and the project manager took*

*advantage of that in order to push me into always working just that little bit harder'.*

However, over and above this intense excitement, Daniel clearly felt torn between two worlds, two realities that were unaware of each other. The first was that of this department, characterised by a medium-term career dynamic. He had been working there for 11 years, during which time he had developed a technical expertise that was now coveted by the project team. It was part of his identity and he had no desire to deny it. The second reality was that of the project. In the few weeks (only) that he had been working on it, Daniel felt he had forged relationships that he had never known with his departmental colleagues. He had to 'put his back into it', sort things for himself, demonstrate independence. He was very aware that, here, the dynamic at work was a short-term one. He told us that this hyperactivity was both doing him good but also exhausting him! *'At the end of this period, after five months on the project, I was beginning to feel tired, like I was worn out. The initial excitement, which helped me deal with a fairly heavy workload, had given way to a period of doubt. Having tried to meet the demands of the project, I was wondering where the limits might be!'*

Daniel recognised that he could not stand it any longer. The overwork was being further compounded by stress, even anxiety. He had chosen to join the project team because he had realised it was a sort of nursery for the company, which was trying to identify managers with potential. The difficulties that were accumulating could make such exposure counter-productive. His reaction was to do even more: it was essential to avoid any accusations that he had not done everything possible to bring his work to a successful conclusion. *'The pressure was enormous. The project manager gave me to*



*understand that we were all in it together, that we were collectively responsible for anything that might happen, good as well as bad. It was at this point that I opted out. The pressure I had been subjecting myself to, plus the pressure my department had been putting on me for so many long months, as well as the pressure from the project manager and then from the team members, it was all too much: I was exhausted, drained, completely lacking motivation'.*

### ***From initial exaltation to the trap of pressure***

Daniel's story clearly illustrates the phenomenon of the gradual and insidious slide from a situation of strong motivation to exhaustion. Projects are recognised as a locus for high levels of commitment because of their intrinsic characteristics: they present a time-limited challenge that stirs individuals into action, giving them clear objectives to be fulfilled through team work and marking a break with the daily work routine. Individuals naturally feel involved intellectually (direct input of ideas in the project construction phase) and socially (belonging to a team), as well as emotionally (the energy deployed also creates a natural attachment to the project and the team). It is precisely this creation of meaning and involvement that brings with its risks for individuals as soon as the pressure starts to intensify. In analysing the various verbatim accounts, we have identified three sub-categories of pathologies linked to project-based working: actors given no alternative, actors taking professional risks and actors suffering psychoaffective disorders.

– *Actors given no alternative*

The philosopher and sinologist F. Jullien (2005, p. 32), who worked on performance and strategy, explains how Chinese generals gave their troops no alternative but to fight courageously in order to win battles. Fernand Cortès, in his time, also took a (still notorious) gamble when he burned his vessels in order to make return impossible and thus force his troops to ensure the success of his conquest on behalf of the King of Spain. Takeuchi and Nonaka (1986), in their analysis of project management, use the image of a team consigned to a basement and management pulling the ladder up after them and asking them to work out how to get back up again within a certain time while remaining within budget and reaching certain quality standards. Generals, like project managers, do not ask whether their troops (or teams) are cowardly or courageous. It is not individuals' qualities that are at stake, but the conditions created in order to give the troops (or teams) no alternative but to fight courageously. *'Sometimes, you have the impression that you have no choice and that there is no other solution. Slog away, move forward, whatever the cost. You get into a sort of spiral that's constantly accelerating and from which you can't escape'* (Michel, IT project, banking). In addition to pressure from management, the need to meet deadlines, comply with technical specifications and stay within budget also gives rise to very strong pressures, as do modes of organisation. *'So you have to spend the whole night there if necessary, but you can't be late, because otherwise the others will do the same to you when you need them'* (Lila, internal reorganisation project, IT). Project-based working, a supremely goal-oriented activity, exacerbates the pressures because it simultaneously increases both the contacts between individuals and the need to perform. This in turn gives rise to a subtle interplay

between cooperation and revenge, which creates pressures that are all the stronger and more insidious because they are exerted directly by team members on each other.

– *Actors taking professional risks*

Projects are permanent machines for making demands and judgements. Individuals who previously worked separately and without knowing each other in a sequential organisational mode are brought together on the stage set of a cooperative project and are thus exposed to the gaze of others. The social pressure also weighs heavily on individuals, and is all the more intense for being exerted among peers within the team. At the numerous project meetings, team members are obliged to explain themselves, to analyse their errors and to justify their choices and expectations. *'You're permanently under the others' gaze. You feel you're being assessed all the time. This sometimes pushes you into doing a bit too much, particularly when it comes to making promises'* (Marie, industrial project, agro-food industry). The presence of partners also working with rivals can create even greater pressure, as can the active participation in the team of customers or representatives of the contract-awarding body. *'When the customer asks you a question, it's difficult to say you don't know. So you're sometimes forced to commit yourself, without being certain you'll be able to keep your promises'* (Stéphane, infrastructure project, engineering industry). Finally, actors are exposed on a personal level. *'Generally, in a company, when people aren't happy, they moan and complain. In a project, when you don't agree with something, the question the other team members hurl at you straightaway is: so what are you going to do about it?'* (Jean Pierre, advertising project, communications industry). Thus individuals are challenged directly

about their ability to contribute to the project, to be creative and to contribute new ideas. The principle of individualised incentives and penalties that tends to prevail in HRM systems further reinforces this tendency (Segrestin, 2004 ; Retour, 1998). Thus actors are called on to contribute or to quit the project!

– *Actors suffering psychoaffective disorders*

Project-based working increases performance anxiety and the competitive spirit that arises from it. The literature includes a small number of papers on the psychoaffective aspects of involvement in projects and its consequences in terms of stress, burnout and even the consumption of doping substances (Sommerville and Langford, 1994; Gällstedt, 2003). The discourse of 'good stress' (the kind that is banished by work) has found a fruitful sphere of application in projects (Dubreil, 1993). More generally, project management is the cause of various forms of stress (Flannes and Levin 2001, p. 286) :

- stress caused by the tensions and loyalty issues associated with matrix management;
- stress linked to problem-solving within strict constraints;
- stress caused by variations in a project's rate of progress (defence of positions, review, pause for thought, shift into action, change of direction etc.) ;
- and finally the stress caused by direct exposure to the gaze of one's peers and permanent evaluation of one's contributions.

The pressure frequently generated by project-based working does not suit everyone. Some resist it, while others crack up having seen their suffering largely ignored. Moreover, the option of withdrawal from a project is scarcely conceivable. It was

certainly physical and psychological exhaustion of this kind from which Daniel was suffering.

## **THE RISKS OF DESTABILISING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES**

In the search for interdepartmental cooperation, project-based working blurs the usual reference points that help to shape professional identities and disrupts the ways in which professional expertise is mobilised. The breaking down of the 'silo' mentality, which is an essential part of the drive to maximise systemic performance, makes it all the more necessary to put in place measures to repair those professional identities at the end of a project in order to enable employees to continue to develop the expert knowledge that the company will undoubtedly demand of them when a new project is launched.

### ***Agnès's case: when a project calls expert status into question***

Agreeing to participate in a project also amounts to taking risks with one's professional identity. The more expert knowledge constitutes a fundamental part of an employee's professional identity, the more a project may potentially destabilise it. It is no longer a case of communicating with other people with the same knowledge, methods, habits and jargons, but rather of comparing one's expert knowledge and thus seeing it challenged by people who do not have the same referents.

Agnès is a young architect. She was assigned to a project team working on a bold urban

scheme linked to a public transport network. The architecture department had chosen her for her high level of technical competence, which made her the ideal person to work closely with the project manager, who was not a specialist in the area. Agnès operates as an expert and is recognised for the knowledge she possesses. *'At the beginning of our working relationship, I appreciated our direct exchanges. The team was restrained, we were in the very first weeks of the project; the project manager paid great attention to my proposals and my warnings'*. The customer, for whom she is a reference point for service quality, was very eager to hear her comments.

*'The difficulties began when the project manager brought individuals unconnected with our current concerns to our meetings. He sought the opinion of an urban planner, who was not at all knowledgeable about the technical problems we had to resolve, as well as that of public transport users and residents. It's always a good policy to seek opinions on a consultative basis, but he made a big deal of their suggestions'*. This phase was complicated for Agnès, because she found herself faced with actors without any legitimate power in the project but who were, nevertheless, going to make her modify certain technically highly sophisticated features of the scheme that clearly reflected her expertise and that of her department. She was concerned because the project was being 'dumbed down' to a certain extent. *'A certain degree of boldness was required for this project. Technically, we were well below what we were actually capable of. I don't think lay people can really influence this kind of project... Isn't that a form of demagogy?'* Clearly, her status as an expert affords her protection but makes it difficult for her to work in a group. Thus when the project expanded and entered the implementation phase, Agnès became a member of the team along with all the others.

This immersion in an extended group of actors caused her further difficulties. *'I had the impression that my work was being diluted in this group. It was difficult for me to show my department clearly what I had been doing, since the proposals were being reworked and modified. Even though it was me who, ultimately, had to validate them, they were no longer wholly mine'*. Agnès lost the exclusivity of her privileged relationship with the project manager, who had extended his circle of advisors and collaborators.

### ***The destabilisation of individual and collective identities***

Agnès's experience had a profoundly destabilising effect on her. She had started off confident in her abilities and had presented herself as an architect of standing and reputation. However, she finished the project with many doubts. What had she herself done of which she could be proud? Certain decisions that had been taken in the course of the project were out of step with the vision of architecture championed by her department, and she had to justify these choices to her colleagues, whereas it was difficult for her to accept them. Project team members may go through periods of doubt or apprehension as a result of immersion in a foreign world. In project-based working, the hierarchical reference points are disturbed, the boundaries between specialities become blurred and the modes of coordination and cooperation are more changeable. We have identified three sub-categories of pathologies linked to project-based working: the shrivelling up of expertise, difficulties of mutual comprehension between different areas of expertise and, finally, professional identities in abeyance.

#### ***– The shrivelling up of expertise***

In project-based working, the convergence of different types of technical knowledge is not expressed or organised spontaneously. The actors' knowledge is not automatically accumulated in order to produce a collective result. *'There are too many cases in which organisations know less than their members'* (Argyris and Schön, 1978, p. 9). *'Too often, there is a belief that simply bringing experts together in a technical facility is sufficient for them to work well together. In the automotive industry, where technical specialisations have traditionally been strong, it took years'* (Jean-Jacques, industrial project, automotive industry). Our interviewees' statements and Agnès's story lead us to think that the absence of any intervention by the human resources function with regard to professional identities increases the risk that very great difficulty will be experienced in getting experts to express themselves freely and work together. The unpleasantness experienced in previous projects produces a memory effect, which leads to greater nervousness and tension among the experts working on current projects.

Further, we would point to several aspects that are aggravated when actors' expert status is destabilised.

Firstly, an expert has to acquire the pedagogical skills required to explain to a lay person, in simple terms, the constraints of his or her area of expertise. This requires maturity, assurance and awareness of his or her positioning relative to others. *'When a computer scientist speaks, it's generally to explain to you that technical constraints you don't understand mean that your idea is not feasible. It's also a way of cutting short the discussion'* (Sylvie, new service project, public sector). A destabilised expert is unwilling to engage in co-production.

Secondly, it has to be realised how difficult it is to give expression to one's knowledge



confidently and decisively in a new context. *'How am I supposed to anticipate safety standards if I don't have precise knowledge of the final product's characteristics!'* (Michel, logistics project, agro-food). Experts are unable to produce what is expected of them, since their expertise is considered out of context. The reservations with which they hedge in their analyses are such that their relevance is considerably reduced.

Finally, a good part of the knowledge actually emerges in the course of projects. Such knowledge is always 'work in progress'. This is why it may appear vague, ill-defined and difficult to express clearly. If these difficulties become apparent, a destabilised expert may prefer to remain silent. *'I'd rather not say anything than commit myself to solutions I'm not sure are robust'* (Mathieu, industrial project, pharmaceutical industry).

Experts have to be helped to construct the progress of their expertise over the course of a project, which they should not experience as an arena in which they are obliged to compromise and from which they can derive no benefit. Accordingly, we propose that the human resource function should adopt the dialogue-based principle of 'differentiating in order to manage better' as an avenue to be explored.

- *The difficulties of mutual comprehension between different areas of expertise*

Team working adds the problem of mutual comprehension to the difficulties of individual working. An absence of mutual understanding between actors or even a failure to communicate at all is a characteristic feature of collective work processes. Experts may remain prisoners of their own representations, to the detriment of the project they are working on as part of a team. However, awareness of these representations can help experts to put a lot more effort into the project. *'It took me six months to understand why*

*the technical solution I was proposing for the machines created enormous installation problems on the shop floor. I had to put forward a technically inferior, less efficient solution, but one that took account of the physical constraints on the installation of machinery'* (Hector, industrial project, mechanical engineering industry). The difficulties of mutual comprehension within the team may be further compounded by a lack of understanding on the part of fellow experts in the same discipline, and hence to a questioning of professional identities. *'In the course of the project, we had found a formula that put me in an awkward position vis-a-vis our usual practices. I was criticised for not respecting our usual protocols, which would have been too complex and too long-winded for this project. I was regarded virtually as a traitor by my colleagues in the laboratory'* (Valérie, marketing project, pharmaceutical industry).

- *Professional identities in abeyance*

In these situations of conflict between projects and specialist disciplines, some come down more or less explicitly in favour of project-based working and gradually distance themselves from the good practices associated with their areas of expertise. Eventually, such individuals are no longer acknowledged as reliable spokespersons by their own disciplines. Conversely, they find it increasingly difficult to make sense of the rules governing their original disciplines, which they regard as excessively rigid and out of touch with the requirements of projects, which are always contingent. The proliferation of interdepartmental work groups leads to the break-up of professional identities and the loss of reference points for individuals. *'After five consecutive projects, I feel less and*

*less like a telecoms engineer and more and more like a designer of customised solutions'* (Thierry, IT project, telecoms industry). As projects come and go, so the principles of affiliation become temporary, multiple, unstable and contingent (Martin, 1992). The development of identity at work takes place in a fluctuating, fragmentary environment, which is sometimes conflictive and heavily dependent on opportunities or constraints (Kilduff and Mehra, 1997). *'Some return to their jobs as experts after a project and have to find their bearings again and resume their old habits. Others have an opportunity to start work on other projects... and loosen their ties with their original teams'* (Anne-Marie, sales project, large-scale retailing). Traditional solidarities (based on membership of a profession) are replaced by local, opportunistic and selective solidarities (based on membership of networks), from which individuals benefit (or not, as the case may be) in accordance with their own behaviour and competences. *'This international project, in a hostile country, left its mark. We went through a lot of things together! Some said quite clearly that they didn't want to go through that again. But others, like me, remained in close contact. We're ready to go again, at the slightest chance'* (Jean Paul, engineering project, construction and civil engineering sector).

## **THE RISKS OF INCREASINGLY PRECARIOUS CORPORATE CAREERS**

Project-based working also poses a risk to the development of competences and to the coherence of the corporate careers of those who become involved in it.

### ***Alberto's case: when projects generate precariousness***

Companies often make efforts to encourage involvement in projects, particularly by presenting them as career springboards. However, the intensity of the drive to sell project-based working is seldom matched by any real commitment to providing the necessary support or 'after-sales service'.

Alberto is an IT analyst. For several years, he has been working on a series of software development projects and customer follow-up missions. The crisis in the IT industry has affected his work and substantial projects have become scarce. Competition from colleagues has become a reality. Everybody wants to work on the same projects, if only to keep in touch with what is going on. *'Ultimately, the project managers benefited from the increasing scarcity of projects, since it meant they were able to choose their team members. In this period of uncertainty, being part of a project was reassuring for us. This left unanswered the question of what we would do afterwards. Our decisions had nothing to do with following a career plan; we were concerned simply to preserve what was most important, namely our jobs. Some people move from project to project as if they were so many temporary jobs'*. Alberto is alluding here indirectly to the existence of an internal labour market.

This tension seems to affect team solidarity in the course of projects. *'I was on a project where the main topic for discussion at lunch, six months before the project was to end, was who would be allocated to what future project. Among the programmers, I saw animosity increasing between people who worked together but who were applying for*

*the same position in the key project that was always about to be launched'. Alberto speaks of opportunistic behaviour: 'Ultimately, those who played the game have been the losers. Individuality has been encouraged, and once that begins, it's contagious'. Solidarity outside projects is also affected. All employees know that their career development depends on being recruited on their companies' key projects.*

*'I could be at risk today if I hadn't had the good luck to be on several high-profile projects. It doesn't matter that I'm a good analyst, what counts above all is the projects I've worked on and the contacts I've made'. Those involved in project-based working form personal networks and pursue individual trajectories. The autonomy that project-based working confers makes individuals responsible for their own fates: 'You shouldn't rely on support from the other analysts. It's every man for himself, working on his own project! Fortunately I've maintained good contacts with the former project managers who valued me and who, I hope, will continue to think of me in future'.*

### ***Double-edged competence development trajectories***

Alberto's statement on post-project management raises the more general question of the development of competences, the recognition thereof and the management of project participants' career trajectories. Analysis of the various statements led us to identify three sub-categories of pathologies linked to project-based working: the difficulty in gaining recognition for competences acquired in the course of projects, the problem of synchronising projects and career trajectories and, finally, the failure to deal with 'project incompetence'

- *The difficulty of gaining recognition for project-acquired competences*

Project situations create opportunities to experiment and acquire managerial and cross-cutting competences that complement technical expertise. Nevertheless, this positive prospect raises the question of the recognition of these newly acquired competences, particularly when the project is over and participants return to their original departments (if indeed they do). There are at least three reasons for this recurrent difficulty.

Firstly, these soft competences frequently do not fit easily into the competence grids of the various expert disciplines. *'Our reference system, which is based on highly specialised knowledge and competences, cannot accommodate all the know-how I had acquired in the course of the project »* (Claude, R&D project, high-tech sector).

Secondly, it is not always easy for individuals to express what they have actually learnt from their involvement in a project. In the absence of any personal evaluation methodology and specific support, they will find it difficult to formalise the new know-how they will undoubtedly have acquired. *'I realise that I'm better at working in a team, at assessing risks and taking part in group decisions, but that sounds trite and I don't know how to persuade my boss that I've improved in these areas'* (Valérie, multi-média project, communications industry).

Finally, these new competences are sometimes regarded simply as not useful and therefore go unrecognised in certain disciplines. *'Here, we provide expert legal advice. The fact that I am able to discuss a client's needs or pose a problem in a different way is not useful, even dangerous. On the other hand, I am criticised for no longer being familiar with the most recent legislation; I'll have to start working on that again very*

*quickly*' (Philippe, complex case management, insurance industry).

- *The problem of synchronising projects and career trajectories*

This question of the development and recognition of competences echoes the more general problems surrounding the management of project participants' career trajectories. In many companies, unfortunately, insufficient account is taken of participation in projects when it comes to the structuring of medium-term careers and trajectories. In order to deal with this, the actors concerned seek to assert their particular interests and to develop personal strategies that may damage the project itself and create social tensions that may have serious consequences. The proliferation of projects has supplemented the standard promotion paths based on purely vertical progression with opportunities for developing horizontal trajectories (in which individuals move from project to project) or even trajectories based on alternating periods of participation in projects and work in specialist departments. However, such practices are not risk-free. As an HR director revealed to us: *'Ten years' experience in a specialist area will not be matched by experience of ten projects, each lasting a year. In terms of career management, a 'niche' situation as project manager can very quickly become a 'prison'* (Pierre, general secretary, international trading company). Individuals may well move from one project to another as opportunities arise, without ever joining their company's recognised specialist career paths.

- *The failure to deal with 'project incompetence'*

Project-based working collectively generates new socialisation and exclusion dynamics. *'Where I work, it's always the same people who are allocated to projects. Others never get a look in'* (Marie, banking sector). New social stratifications develop, between those who very much in demand and those who gradually become outcasts from projects. As Bertrand Nicolas (2000) stresses, while project-based working is recognised in managerial discourses and in corporate practices, this results in the discrediting of those not involved in projects. *'I'd like to work on projects as well. But it's always the same people who are selected. And I very much have the impression that I won't have any more opportunities. But I know it's difficult, and I'm not sure I'm up to it'* (Anne, education sector). More insidiously, reputation effects, conveyed by rumours, are disseminated about actors, some of whom are regarded as 'champions' and others as 'millstones'. *'Even though it's not written down anywhere, it's well known who's indispensable and who it's better to avoid getting lumbered with in the team'* (Anne, education sector). Informal recruitment networks form and self-selection processes among the actors themselves lead to the emergence of parallel management systems. Obviously, the rumour effects develop outside of any formalised evaluation system and outside the purview of the HR function. This could simply be interpreted as a healthy project population ecology, which eliminates the least competent and promotes the best performers. The project principle also breaks down traditional solidarities and individualises behaviour. What happens to those who are not competent, who are no longer competent (i.e. they once were) or who need more time to become competent? *'It's always difficult to say that you can't do something. You work hard, cover your tracks and try to dilute problems within the group. In short, you have to protect yourself, because if you're forced out of the project, it's not good for your future career in the*



*company*' (Pierre, events project, communications sector). According to Ehrenberg (2000), there has been a shift from the rule-governed principle to the use of autonomy and individual initiative as a constant reference point, in which the archetypal figure is the entrepreneur. This is the origin of the feeling among many employees that they are 'not up to it' in projects in situations in which, outside of a project, it would be enough simply to conform to the norm and the relevant work routine.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter has been to reconstitute, in a structured way, information obtained in the course of an exploratory research exercise, which was designed in such a way as discreetly to gather statements outside the workplace, but with sufficient safeguards to ensure their authenticity. The diversity of situations, projects and positions held by the actors makes any attempt at generalisation questionable, but over and above the three categories of risk and the nine main pathologies we have identified, we would like to propose a number of potential lines of enquiry, for both researchers and human resource practitioners:

- The isolation of individuals: whether it be Daniel attempting to rebuild his career, Agnès facing her doubts or Alberto attempting to construct his own career path, they all have in common the experience of being alone, left to their own devices, without anyone to help them take stock and draw lessons from their experience. All three believe they have learnt nothing from their ventures into project-based working and at the end of it all feel they have been weakened and even made to feel guilty.

- The loss of collective capacities: beyond individuals, it is entire organisations that are being weakened. Isolated individual situations may undermine the potential for collective mobilisation if they are allowed to proliferate. Daniel's project may have been successful, but the company lost a co-worker, or at least his capacity to commit himself and seek to surpass his previous achievements. In Agnès's case, the feeling of misunderstanding or even conflict between her specialist discipline and project-based working has been strengthened. For Alberto, finally, without support for or recognition of individual development trajectories, the company as a whole will not progress.

- A double-edged sword: is project-based working actually a tool for individual, collective and organisational development or a new form of exploitation and domination? All the positive and progressive connotations associated with project-based working encourages individuals to commit themselves to it, in accordance with the soft coercion principle (Courpasson, 2000). However, projects also bring with them a number of risks for individuals, social groups and professional identities. This aspect of the project phenomenon should be made explicit to the actors concerned;

- Challenges for HRM: project management is cross-cutting by its very nature and calls into question not only the remit of the HR function but also that function's very existence (Zannad, 1998). The HR function's traditional responsibilities have developed historically within the framework of the 'human resources' discipline. This acknowledgement of the mismatch between HR practices and project-based working raises some fundamental questions about the difficulties the increasing segmentation and differentiation of

populations, situations and modes of organisation pose for HRM systems. The emergence of 'dual' organisations, in which project-based working and specialist departments exist alongside each other, is potentially a source of collective enrichment, provided that the transfers between projects and specialist departments are properly planned and implemented.

Thus the use of projects to increase competitiveness has its price: organisations have to evolve in order to accommodate new operating principles, which tend to be more cross-cutting, and durable organisational systems have to coexist with other, more provisional ones, such as projects. As Baron (1999) notes: *'The challenge for the HRM function is whether it can abandon its uniform management model in favour of a number of diverse models that can adapt and evolve in line with the structures and challenges they face'*. Thus an organisation's ability to operate effectively on a cross-cutting, inter-departmental basis depends on the ability of HRM systems to support, incentivise and recognise the human resources involved in activities and trajectories that diverge from the standard organisational models.

These changes that the HR function will have to go through raise the more general question of the future of professional identities as project-based working gains ground in companies. It is possible to conceive of a division of labour between, on the one hand, a human resources department whose job it is to maintain the competences possessed by the specialist disciplines and to manage the careers of specialists and, on the other, a human resources department attached to the project manager, which would be responsible for managing those employees working on projects. In this way, the identity problems and solitude of actors working on cross-cutting projects would be dealt with

directly. It is by becoming involved in the processes of every project and constructing a coherent system for managing project-based working that the HR function can adapt to the development of project-based management (Garel, 1998). The accounts given by our interviewees are an invitation to the HR function to question and reinvent itself.

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