

# **BUILDING BRIDGES ACROSS BORDERS: AN INTEGRATIVE LITERATURE REVIEW OF PROJECT WORK AND CAREERS<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Project-based forms of work have been steadily increasing in all sorts of organizations, which has led scholars to investigate their effects on career development and career management practices. However, disciplinary and conceptual divides have prevented comprehensive conceptualizations of project workers' careers to emerge to this day. Building on an integrative literature review, the paper underlines the predominance of individual-centred research designs giving pride of place to project managers, at the expense of organizational-centred studies accounting for the multiple stakeholders involved in project workers' careers. Five research perspectives on project work and careers are highlighted: project work may be studied under the prism of career management, career transitions, career orientations, career advantages, and role transitions. The review is concluded with a comprehensive framework articulating project work and careers. The paper ultimately pleads for further investigation of project work and careers from a multi-stakeholder and organizational perspective.

## **Keywords**

Project work, career management, career development, integrative literature review, project management

## Introduction

In the last decade, projects have grown into an increasingly prevailing form of organizing work both in industries and in the service sector (Keegan et al., 2018; Manning & Sydow, 2011). Recent research has shown that approximately one-third of our economic activities were now organized in the form of projects (Schoper et al., 2018). Because of their non-routinized character and their temporary nature, projects generate multiple challenges in terms of workers' appraisal (Keegan & Den Hartog, 2019), leadership (Bredin & Söderlund, 2013), training (Popaitoon & Siengthai, 2014), and knowledge transfer (Havermans et al., 2019). More specifically, career management, as well as career trajectories of project managers (Akkermans et al., 2020) and project team members (Keegan et al., 2018; Popaitoon & Siengthai, 2014), are topics that have recently begun to attract scholarly attention. Yet, the academic literature on project workers' career development and management has, so far, barely reflected on the following question: how do the concepts of project work and careers intertwine with each other?

By means of an integrative literature review, the aim of the paper is to develop a conceptual framework of the existing bridges between the concepts of careers and project work. Such a framework, we argue, is particularly timely and significant for forthcoming studies on these topics. To this day, existing research on project workers' careers has remained scarce and fragmented, as multiple scholars have adopted "exploratory" and "scoping" research designs over the last decade (e.g. Bredin & Söderlund, 2013; Crawford et al., 2013; Huemann et al., 2019). Despite the availability of rich and insightful data on project workers' careers, few efforts have been made to provide conceptual clarity on project work in relation to careers (Akkermans et al., 2020). We argue that disciplinary divides might have prevented such conceptualizations to emerge, as the topic lies at a crossroads between project management, career theory, and HRM. In this paper, an integrative literature review is conducted to overcome these divides and offer a comprehensive framework of project work and careers.

The paper is structured in five main parts. First, a description of project work and its implications for career management is developed. The paper then introduces the search strategy and the methodological choices underpinning the integrative literature review. Third, an analysis of the methods and theories that are commonly used to bind project work and career management is offered. The review then examines how the concept of "project" has meaning in the fields of career and HRM studies, and how career-related concepts have been used in the field of project management, through the identification of five ways of conceptualizing the relationship between project work and careers. The review ends with a recapitulative framework and discusses avenues for future research. Ultimately, we believe that the paper may be of interest for scholars willing to explore the interactions between project work and careers as well as for practitioners – project workers and managers, as well as HR and line managers – interested in the current state of theoretical debates on the matter.

## General background

### Project work

Project work has become an increasingly common term to designate the organization of work around a distinct setting that is the “project” – a more or less unique endeavour that temporarily gathers provisional groups of actors for the accomplishment of a specific set of tasks (Manning & Sydow, 2011; Smith, 2015). Project settings commonly include a group of project workers who are allocated, recruited, or mandated to execute the project, and operate under the supervision of a project manager (Bredin & Söderlund, 2013). In early contributions, scholars were particularly interested in the study of specific “project-oriented firms”, i.e. firms possessing certain features such as project management as their core and main strategy (e.g. Huemann et al., 2007). Over time, however, it has become increasingly acknowledged that projects had become the everyday work environment of many managers and employees, and that all kinds of organizations were now relying, to various extents, on project work as a way to structure their activities (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011; Keegan et al., 2012). As such, project work has been increasingly depicted as an alternative form of organizing work, characterized by employment discontinuity, uncertainty and unpredictability, as well as varying degrees of complexity that call for specific expertise (Gillier & Lenfle, 2019; Nesheim & Smith, 2015; Welch & Welch, 2015).

In this context, most often than not, researchers’ attention has inexorably been drawn to project management practices and/or project managers themselves. Examples are plentiful: research has, among others, investigated and emphasized project managers’ work overload (Delisle, 2010), ability to coordinate project team members (Hodgson, 2004), issue-selling behaviours (Henderson et al., 2013), maturity (Kerzner, 2009), identity construction (Hodgson et al., 2016), retention (Ekrot et al., 2016), development paths (Savelsbergh et al., 2016), management styles (Lewis et al., 2002), and role in project success (Hällgren & Maaninen-Olsson, 2005). Considerable efforts have been invested in the study of project *management*, and project managers’ roles, tasks, responsibilities, and challenges. This might seem surprising, since project managers are actually a very small portion of the total population of project workers (Packendorff, 2002). Indeed, project *work* and its implications for other actors involved in projects – notably project team members (hereafter called “project workers”) as well as further stakeholders such as HR managers and line managers – have received way less scholarly attention. In this paper, therefore, we suggest zooming out from project management to refocus more broadly on project work instead, understood as the work performed by individuals in the course of projects (Ekstedt, 2019). This reframing seems timely as more and more people are involved in projects as part of their employment (Packendorff, 2002), which suggests that project management should not be the sole lens available to study project work and its implications for organizations and individuals.

The term “project work” might sound particularly broad, as it encompasses a very diverse range of situations and everyday realities. The nature, scope, length, and complexity of projects are wide-ranging, and the implication of individuals within projects can vary anywhere between routine (i.e. workers who solely work within project settings, which is notably common

in the IT sector) and exception (workers who occasionally participate in a project) (Packendorff, 2002). Besides, projects workers can be hired under a wide range of conditions (e.g. directly hired through a fixed-term or permanent contract, outsourced through a temporary contract with a third-party agency or consulting firm, or working as a self-employed or freelancer providing services to the company). Project workers can also endorse a wide variety of roles with project contexts (i.e. manager, team member, expert, administrative support, sponsor, analyst, etc.) While project managers are usually viewed as an elite form of workers with high employability and advanced skills (Akkermans et al., 2020), many projects also rely on the implication of lower-skilled workers who carry out support functions in project teams.

The literature acknowledges that project work has significant implications for individuals engaged in project teams (Dahlander & O'Mahony, 2011; Ekstedt, 2019). Project workers are notably expected to face multirole conflicts and demands arising from their double belonging – to the organization and to the project team (Delisle, 2010). This, in turn, might have an impact on their work motivation (Dwivedula & Bredillet, 2010a) as well as on the construction of their work identity (Hodgson & Paton, 2016). Commitment towards the organization and towards the project are not necessarily vowed to be in conflict, as research has shown that project workers can both identify with their organization and with the project itself (Dwivedula & Bredillet, 2010b). Nevertheless, project work offers a space of tension between the organizational context and the project context when it comes to constructing one's work identity (Hodgson & Paton, 2016). Related to this tension between everyday work and project work is the increased accountability and responsibility that is usually associated with projects (Ekstedt, 2019). Project team members are usually held accountable for the success of a project, even if they are not necessarily granted the needed power to design them (Packendorff, 2002). Projects can thus be viewed as unique contexts for individuals to develop cross-function sets of skills (Dwivedula & Bredillet, 2010a). Moreover, as exemplified below, project work raises specific challenges in terms of human resources management and, more specifically, career management and development.

### **Organizing project work**

In terms of HRM, project work implies, by definition, temporary changes in authority relationships, staff movement and/or external recruitment processes, as well as knowledge transfer processes (Nesheim & Smith, 2015). In this picture, one of the most notable implications of project work for HR managers is the devolution and sharing of HR responsibilities between HRM departments, project managers, line managers, and project workers (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011; Keegan et al., 2012). Many HRM practices such as project workers' recruitment and appraisal would, in project work settings, require a higher degree of collaboration between the actors of this "HR quadriad" (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011). Besides, project work has also been identified as a form of organizing work that was particularly prone to cause overload and work-life conflicts (Noury et al., 2017; Turner et al., 2008). Indeed, project work is prone to entail unpredictable work and emergencies, and to unfold in intense contexts characterized by a lack of resources and by pressing deadlines, which force project workers to extend working hours and prioritize certain aspects of their work at the expense of others (Delisle, 2020). In sum, the distinctiveness of project work in terms of HRM lies in

sharing HR responsibilities within the “HR quadriad”, and stems from the temporary nature of the project settings that momentarily disrupts the conventional life of organizations as well as the work situation of individuals engaged in projects.

In this picture, career management and development in the context of project work is a central issue; project work can have considerable implications for project workers’ careers (Lloyd-Walker et al., 2016). Project work has often been mentioned as the main cause behind the “*demise of the traditional organizational career*” (McKevitt et al., 2017, p. 1674), insofar as project work favour horizontal modes of career progression within organizations, rather than vertical ones (Dahlander & O’Mahony, 2011). From the perspective of project members, the temporary nature of the project necessarily implies career transitions, as members of a project are well aware that each project has an end, and that they will eventually transition towards another role, either in the same firm or elsewhere (Dubé, 2014). From the organizational perspective, project work calls for elaborating new strategies when it comes to managing project workers’ careers (Keegan et al., 2018). These managerial strategies can relate to the *pre-project* stage (staffing and attracting skilled project workers); the *project* stage (developing career opportunities for them); and the *post-project* stages (dealing with issues of sustainability, knowledge transfer, and skills retention).

In the *pre-project* stage, a central challenge for firms consists in increasing the attractiveness of project work within organizations, so that projects are adequately staffed from the outset. This includes attracting skilled individual for project management positions (Ahsan et al., 2013), providing initial training to future project leaders and team members (Darrell et al., 2010), and offering stimulating career opportunities for individuals committing to projects (Carden & Egan, 2008; Havermans et al., 2019). In this stage, an under-researched question relates to the strategies developed by firms to convince and persuade talented individuals to commit their agency to a project team (Rogers, 2019). Studies have also surveyed project managers with the aim of identifying their motivations to join new projects, as well as the required skills and expertise needed to take on project management responsibilities (e.g. Richardson et al., 2015).

When it comes to the *project* stage, several authors investigated the career opportunities offered to project workers, exploring their development within firms in the course of ongoing projects (e.g. Savelsbergh et al., 2016). Projects have been shown to be rewarding contexts for developing various professional skills, working in teams, and achieving meaningful results (Havermans et al., 2019). In management terms, taking care of project workers’ in the course of projects is not least in importance: the lack of career and promotion opportunities, as well as professional stagnation, has been identified as the primary cause underlying project workers’ turnover; and project workers’ – and especially managers’ – turnover is, in turn, a critical issue likely to negatively affect the project performance (Parker & Skitmore, 2005). In this perspective, scholars have questioned the (in)ability of organizations to develop formal specifications for the career advancement of project workers and to offer them rewarding project-based career paths (Bredin & Söderlund, 2013; Keegan et al., 2018; Richardson et al., 2015).

Finally, since projects imply a distinctive organization of tasks and individuals for a limited period of time, a central managerial issue concerns the sustainability of the individuals involved in projects once they come to an end (Manning & Sydow, 2011). Common concerns at this stage include the retention of project workers' key skills within the organization (Ekrot et al., 2016), the "cross-pollination" of knowledge through different projects (Arthur, 2008), and the effects of projects on career satisfaction (McKevitt et al., 2017). Connections can be made with the literature on talent management, which can help in understanding how capitalizing on successful projects and project workers can help organizations in gaining competitive advantage (Crowley-Henry et al., 2019). Project workers can, in the course of a project, generate valuable ideas and knowledge for the organization, who might then have a direct interest in pursuing collaboration with them (Panico, 2009). Many authors have also emphasized the role of discontinuity and uncertainty in project-based career trajectories (e.g. Lloyd-Walker et al., 2016) and the crucial importance of adaptability for project workers to build a long-term career (Furniss et al., 2018).

It should further be noted that project work has often been associated with non-standard employment arrangements, and that a distinctive feature of project work lies in the collaboration between project members who may find themselves in very different types of contractual relations (Nesheim & Smith, 2015). While the diversity of work arrangements within a team has been shown to result in improved performance (e.g. Akron et al., 2016), the role of contractual arrangements in career management and development of project workers has, surprisingly, received little attention in management research (Nesheim & Smith, 2015). Yet, project work has repeatedly been associated with uncertain career perspectives and even precarity (e.g. Greer et al., 2019). Contemporary career theories nonetheless acknowledge that employment arrangements constitute a determining element of career sustainability (e.g. Chudzikowski et al., 2020) and that external labour markets are increasingly influencing organizational staffing choices (Born & Witteloostuijn, 2013). As a consequence, HR managers aimed at retaining and rewarding project workers should also consider the large range of employment contracts when it comes to designing new career policies (Lo Presti & Elia, 2020).

### **Project work and careers: the borders to cross**

Despite raising multiple challenges that are often described as of major importance for managers and HR professionals, existing research on careers and project work has, to this date, remained highly fragmented and eclectic (Dahlander & O'Mahony, 2011; Huemann et al., 2019; McKevitt et al., 2017). Scholars continue to conduct "exploratory" or "scoping" research on project work and careers (e.g. Crawford et al., 2013; Havermans et al., 2019; Hodgson et al., 2011; Ling et al., 2018) as if there was no available synthesis of the current state of the literature on the topic. Most recently, Akkermans and colleagues (2020) argued that this lack of integration in the literature remained a major obstacle for advancing our understanding of career management practices for project workers and managers. We hold that such a lack of integration is partly due to the difficulty to bridge between three disciplinary fields that have developed in relative isolation so far. The first of these fields, project management, has shown a strong interest in researching the career paths of project managers and, to a lesser extent, of project workers (Akkermans et al., 2020; Ekrot et al., 2016; Havermans et al., 2019; Huemann et al.,

2019; Lo Presti & Elia, 2020). Second, somewhat surprisingly, the aforementioned issues and challenges raised by the spread of project work within organizations are largely absent from leading career-oriented journals, notwithstanding some exceptions (e.g. Skilton & Bravo, 2008). Finally, in the larger field of management and HRM, where career management has been a well-established research object (e.g. Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2019), the effects of project work on HRM career policies have received scant attention to this day.

Therefore, all indications are that debates around project workers' careers are so far largely taking place within the project management arena. Yet, paradoxically, available studies routinely summon analytical concepts from career theory – such as boundaryless careers (Welch & Welch, 2015), protean careers (Lo Presti & Elia, 2020), and career anchors (Havermans et al., 2019) – as well as organizational and HRM concepts – among which job satisfaction (Hölzle, 2010), workplace inequality (Henderson et al., 2013), and organizational commitment (Keegan et al., 2018). Moreover, existing studies lead to significant implications of project work for career theory and models (e.g. Savelsbergh et al., 2016) just as much as for HRM policies and career management practices (e.g. Ekrot et al., 2016; Hölzle, 2010). In sum, there are numerous yet poorly exploited connections to make between project work, individual career management, and organizational career management. This observation suggests that researching project work and careers ideally calls for an interdisciplinary approach – encouraged by many scholars (Akkermans et al., 2020; Arthur, 2014; Dahlander & O'Mahony, 2011; Keegan et al., 2018) – bringing together psychological, managerial and sociological approaches to careers and projects. Consequently, the purpose of this paper is to develop an integrative literature review (Elsbach & van Knippenberg, 2020) investigating the conceptual connections between project work and careers.

## Methods

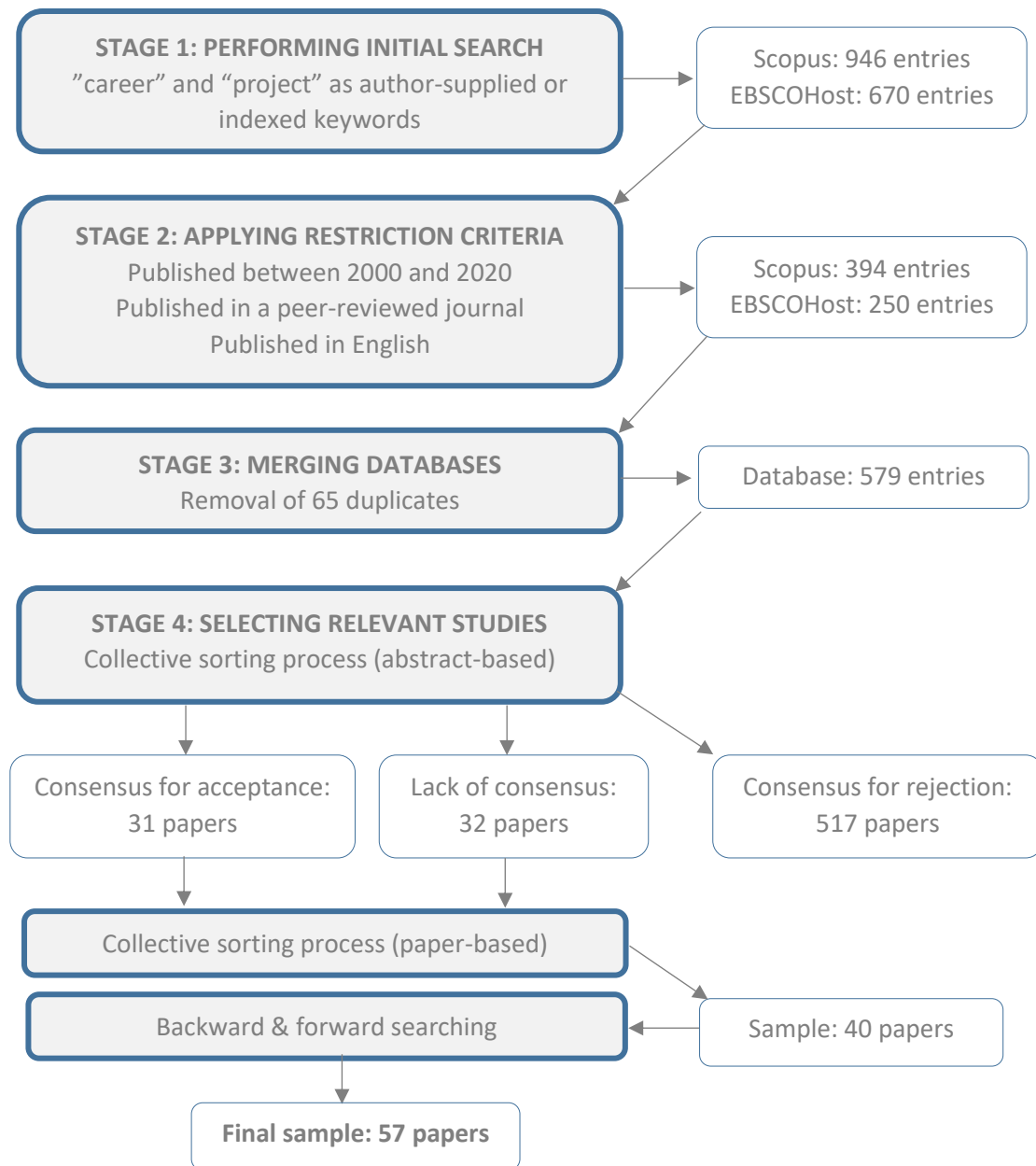
Integrative reviews in business have been encouraged as means to create preliminary conceptualizations around emerging topics and research questions (Snyder, 2019). Characterized by a rigorous search strategy and a critical analysis of the studies under review, integrative reviews aim to produce new conceptual frameworks and theoretical models on themes that have received limited attention (Torraco, 2005). Integrative literature reviews are particularly appropriate for unveiling unaddressed questions and contradictions (Torraco, 2016) – such as, in the present case, the conceptualization of project work with regard to the HRM and career literature, and the role of projects in project workers' careers. While they may not follow strictly defined methodological standards and norms (Snyder, 2019), integrative reviews should be made as transparent and replicable as possible for further researchers (Torraco, 2005). In this case, the research process was designed around five stages that are the definition of a search strategy and the search in specialized engines, a pre-filtering stage, a consolidation of the database for the review, a three-step selection process of the relevant studies, and a content analysis of the selected papers (see Figure 1).

First, the authors selected two renowned databases (Scopus and EBSCOhost) and scanned these databases for all papers referencing both “project” and “career” as separate keywords (either author-supplied or indexed “subject terms”). The decision was made to base the research strategy on keywords in order to avoid inflating the review with studies making a

too generic use of the terms “project” and “career”. Then, three main criteria were used to refine the search process. Given that the relations between project work and career management have only begun to attract interest most recently (Akkermans et al., 2020), papers that were written prior to 2000 were not considered for review. Besides, the review only included papers published in peer-reviewed journals and did not retain books and book chapters, conference papers, white papers, and theses. Finally, non-English entries were removed from the sample, a common practice in literature reviews, since these papers are expected to have little influence on international debates (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2013).

Following the extraction of the full references, a filtering exercise was collectively performed to eliminate papers that did not fit the objectives of the review. It should be noted that the authors have respectively a sociological, psychological, and management background, which allowed a cross-disciplinary analysis of the retrieved references. Papers assessed as non-relevant to the focus of the review – careers in relation to project work – were removed from the sample. To be evaluated as relevant for the study, a paper had to meet two criteria: (1) to express interest in project work, project organizations, or project workers and (2) to express interest in careers (either from an individual or an organizational perspective). Based on the abstract, the authors individually evaluated each entry either as “relevant”, “non-relevant”, or “not enough information available in the abstract”. At the end of the first round, 7% of the papers were deemed as relevant to the research question, 87% of the papers were assessed as non-relevant, and 6% of the papers were assigned a “second round needed” status. A paper was classified as “second round needed” if the authors could not immediately agree on whether to include or reject it (at least one “relevant” and one “non-relevant” score), or if two authors at least coded the entry as “not enough information available”. For the thirty-two papers concerned, a second round was organized and, after having read the full text of these papers, the authors decided to keep nine of them, resulting in a final sample of forty papers (8% of the initial database).

At this stage, it may be worthwhile to comment on the most recurrent motives for exclusion. Many extracted references merely mentioned some sort of “pilot project”, hence appearing in the sample even if they did not bring further consideration for project work characteristics and effects. The database also contained papers researching “students career projects”, “career as a project”, or “career development projects” (e.g. Moody et al., 2008), which fell out of the scope of this review since they were not interested in project work in organizational contexts. Lastly, many papers focussed solely either on “projects” or on “careers”, with very limited attention given to the other theme (and, as a consequence, to the interaction between both, which is the main focus of this review).



*Figure 1 – Overview of the methodological process*

The relatively low selection rate (8%) and the limited amount of papers retained for the review (n=40) are indicative of a nascent topic, addressed by an emerging and heterogeneous scientific literature. To complement the sample, the authors performed an additional stage of backward searching (i.e. reviewing references from the initially selected articles) and forward searching (i.e. reviewing additional articles having cited the initially selected ones) (Levy & Ellis, 2006). The exercise resulted in the addition of seventeen (n=17) articles providing further insight into the role of projects in project workers’ careers. This additional step made it possible to include papers using alternative terms than “project work” to discuss similar realities, such as “contingent work” (O’Mahony & Bechky, 2006), “portfolio workers” (Ashton, 2015), and “global careers” (Cappellen & Janssens, 2005). While there might be more relevant papers to consider, it should be recalled that the primary purpose of an integrative review is not to be exhaustive (Snyder, 2019), and that these additional references were selected with the aim of

strengthening the conceptual framework developed in the paper and offering a more comprehensive overview of project workers' careers.

Once the database was consolidated, the fifty-seven papers were thoroughly analysed with regard to the issues identified previously. The authors co-constructed a summary table divided into four main columns: methods, theoretical framework, empirical findings, and theoretical contributions. It should be reminded at this stage that, contrary to other methods such as systematic literature reviews, integrative reviews do not pursue a descriptive purpose, which explains why some factors (such as analyses of meta-factors such as journals, year of publication, and geographical distribution of publications) were not covered in the present study (Snyder, 2019). Instead, the authors conducted a critical analysis of the methods and the theoretical approaches mobilized in the papers. Finally, a manual content analysis was performed on the papers to identify the main topics and themes of study (if the paper was built on empirical material) and/or the main theoretical contributions (if included in the paper). The review is divided into two parts. The first provides essential information related to the methods and theoretical bases of the paper under review. The second synthesizes the existing research findings and perspectives on project workers' careers. Findings are then integrated into a comprehensive framework of which the implications are discussed at the end of the paper.

### **Project workers' careers: missing pieces, conceptual fuzziness, and theoretical silence**

When considering scholar interest in project workers' careers, a major trend stands out: project managers appear to be the main focus of attention. This is first illustrated by the fact that project management is currently the breeding ground for research on the mutual effects of project work and careers, as many contributions have been published in the *International Journal of Project Management*, the *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*, and the *Project Management Journal*. While research has taken place in various sectors – e.g. construction firms (Chen et al., 2019), IT firms (Dubé, 2014), engineering firms (Hodgson et al., 2011) and consultancy firms (Noury et al., 2017) –, hence attesting of the increased relevance of project work in many work contexts, scholars have been mostly interested in the study of project managers' developmental paths (Hölzle, 2010; Madter et al., 2012; Savelsbergh et al., 2016), competences (Chen et al., 2019; Ekrot et al., 2016), motivation (Havermans et al., 2019), job satisfaction (Ling et al., 2018), and career models (Bredin & Söderlund, 2013; McKevitt et al., 2017). Accordingly, on the methodological level, studies are commonly designed around empirical research among project managers themselves, involving either interviews of focus groups with project managers (e.g. Crawford et al., 2013; Hodgson et al., 2011; Huemann et al., 2019; Lloyd-Walker et al., 2018), surveys of project managers (e.g. Chen et al., 2019; Ling et al., 2018), or a mix of both (e.g. Henderson et al., 2013; Savelsbergh et al., 2016).

In a nutshell, the project manager appears to be the guest star of contemporary research on project work. Even if some research designs have included interviews with HR managers (e.g. Hölzle, 2010), CEOs (Ekrot et al., 2016), and line managers (e.g. Bredin & Söderlund, 2013), empirical investigations of the wider organizational contexts in which project managers

evolve have remained scarce, and most analyses have been conducted at an individual level (i.e. focussing on project managers themselves). It follows that the effects of project work on the careers of project workers, project team members or “non-managers” are barely discussed in the existing literature. This is somewhat surprising, as wider theorizations of project work, such as the “HR quadriad” (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011), have emphasized the collective and complementary action of project managers, project workers, HR managers and line managers in project work settings. Even more surprising is the fact that many authors have described organizational support as critical for project managers (e.g. Havermans et al., 2019; McKevitt et al., 2017), while paying *in fine* little attention to the organizational and institutional contexts in which project managers’ careers unfold. Consequently, while research on project managers’ careers has well progressed in the last decade (Akkermans et al., 2020), several pieces are lacking for developing a more global understanding of project workers’ careers: organizational-level analyses accounting for project team members, and, in a multi-stakeholder perspective, questioning the co-construction of HR and career management practices within project work contexts.

Given the above, it is not surprising that, on the conceptual level, a notable amount of papers rely on project management concepts to frame their research, such as project managers’ competencies and competency models (e.g. Chen et al., 2019; Ekrot et al., 2016; Fischer et al., 2005; Savelsbergh et al., 2016), project managers’ roles (Henderson et al., 2013; Hodgson et al., 2011), project management models (Madter et al., 2012), project managers’ profession (McKevitt et al., 2017) and project managers’ vocational interests (Havermans et al., 2019). In a more global perspective, others depart either from project “ecologies” (Grabbher & Thiel, 2015), from the nature of project-based work (Crawford et al., 2013), or from project-driven structures (Lloyd-Walker et al., 2016). Yet, in many cases, it is career concepts that form the main theoretical apparatus of the papers. It is somewhat interesting to note the preferred outputs for research on project work (project management journals) and the theoretical construction of the papers, which, most often than not, mobilize career concepts or larger HR-related concepts such as job satisfaction (e.g. Ling et al., 2018) and work-life balance (e.g. Noury et al., 2017). This is potentially indicative of the need for embedding research on project work and project workers’ careers in HRM research.

The literature review reveals an extraordinary profusion of labels paired with careers. Authors speak here and there of career paths, boundaryless careers, career models, protean careers, career orientation, career anchors, career goals, career support, career trajectories, internal/external careers, career scripts, and career uncertainty. One might wonder if such diversity does not come with a risk of bringing conceptual fuzziness in the study of project work and careers. For instance, the most frequent “concept” in use is, without doubt, the “career path”, a term that is easily found in more than half of the reviewed papers. However, these papers do not share a well-grounded definition of the “career path”. At times, career paths are viewed as formal and are offered by organizations (e.g. Bredin & Söderlund, 2013; Huemann et al., 2019; Keegan et al., 2012). For others, they are opportunities that can be enumerated, so that individuals can have few or many career paths available to them in specific situations (Havermans et al., 2019; McKevitt et al., 2017; Savelsbergh et al., 2016). Still others merely use the term as a synonym to the past professional trajectories of the respondents/interviewees

they met (e.g. El-Sabaa, 2001; Welch & Welch, 2015). Career paths can be operational (De Queiroz et al., 2014), environmental (Markusson, 2010), of low or high quality (Ekrot et al., 2016), and can simultaneously be used to designate the past, the present, and the future aspirations or expected career (Alavi et al., 2012). More than a concept, the term “career path” is often used as a malleable black box to speak of careers and project work.

It should also be noted that, in most papers, theories and concepts are merely used as framing devices (e.g. models or frameworks) and do not constitute the main purpose of the paper. In other words, while most papers are empirically rich, the theoretical contributions of the reviewed papers are often scarce; theoretical implications are not always addressed, and when they are, they often aim at developing summarizing frameworks (e.g. Madter et al., 2012; McKevitt et al., 2017). In several papers, the exploratory character of the research performed is invoked to legitimate a focus on empirical results at the expense of theoretical developments (e.g. Henderson et al., 2013). Consequently, the literature on project work and careers has, to this day, resulted in limited theoretical advancements and, most crucially, very few integrative attempts.

To summarize, existing studies on project work and careers (1) have given pride of place to project managers, at the expense of wider organizational analyses of the implications of project work on careers; (2) have invoked a broad and sometimes confusing diversity of “concepts” that are either project-related, career-related, or HRM-related and (3) have rarely pursued a theoretical or integrative objective (with the exception of the recent review of Akkermans and colleagues (2020)). Research concepts are often used for interpretative purposes, and available research is usually explanatory and empirically oriented. Moreover, there seems to be some contrast between the privileged output for research on project work and careers (project management journals) and the conceptual framework adopted by the authors (largely inspired by career-related concepts). The comparison of the theories being used also confirms the centrality of managers in project studies, as theorizations around project work and project workers remain scarce to this day. For these reasons, we suggest designing an integrative framework that draws on existing research while considering the role and place of projects in project workers’ careers.

## Five perspectives on project work and careers

Following a content analysis of the papers included in the literature review, five ways of conceptualizing project work in relation to careers can be highlighted. These five research perspectives (P1-P5) are represented in Table 1 and further developed below. The main research topics investigated in each perspective are exemplified through direct references to the reviewed papers (see the reference list). We argue that this framework provides a useful basis for understanding and classifying the existing literature on project workers’ careers. It should also be noted that the reviewed literature does not suggest the existence of a mainstream perspective that would prevail over the others: as such, all of them should be considered as complementary ways to discuss the interactions between project work and careers.

Main research object	Conceptualization of project work and careers	Main topics of interest	Research perspectives
<b>P1</b>	<b>CAREER MANAGEMENT</b> Project work causes organizational issues and challenges	Organizational support <sup>9,15,27,29,30,34,49</sup> Development programs <sup>10,11,13,15,16,37</sup> Recruitment and assignment <sup>1,23,28</sup> HRM policies <sup>9,12,32</sup> Retention of competence <sup>19,27</sup> Knowledge transfer <sup>8,18,19,23</sup> Turnover <sup>19,23</sup>	Organizational
<b>P2</b>	<b>CAREER TRAJECTORIES</b> Project work catalyses new career archetypes	Career mobility <sup>38,41,45,55</sup> Career networks <sup>23,31,34,56</sup> Career sustainability <sup>2,14,24</sup> Career success <sup>2,7,26,36</sup> Learning experiences <sup>5,8,23,49,57</sup> Job satisfaction <sup>32,37,40</sup> Work identity <sup>40,42,46</sup>	Individual
<b>P3</b>	<b>CAREER ORIENTATIONS</b> Project work is a distinctive type of career orientation	Competencies <sup>3,7,13,20,22,27,34,37,47,49</sup> Work orientation <sup>3,24,35,40,50</sup> Career capital <sup>23,25,50</sup> Employment forms <sup>34,43,56</sup> Personal characteristics <sup>17,25,50</sup>	Individual
<b>P4</b>	<b>CAREER ASSETS</b> Project work offers career advantages for individuals	Career preparation <sup>4,6,53,54</sup> Education and training <sup>21,48</sup>	Individual
<b>P5</b>	<b>ROLE TRANSITIONS</b> Project work involves role transitions in the course of one's career	Entry & exit strategies <sup>18,26</sup>	Organizational & individual

Table 1 – Five research perspectives on project work and careers

### P1: Projects as organizational and managerial challenges

A common perspective in the literature views projects as short-term forms of organizing work that raise specific challenges in terms of project workers' (and especially project managers') career development. In this view, projects are conceptualized as "threats" to standard career models because of their temporary organization, the flexibility that they require, and the uncertainty that they generate (Lloyd-Walker et al., 2016). Project management is often distinguished from "traditional" management and depicted as a specific management model with a "set of unique challenges" (Bredin & Söderlund, 2013, p. 890). On this basis, scholars underline the lack of well-defined career paths for project managers and project workers in organizations (Bredin & Söderlund, 2013; Hölzle, 2010). While recognizing the challenges of mapping out such paths (Lloyd-Walker et al., 2016), contributions often encourage organizations to offer promising and specific career opportunities to project managers who possess valuable knowledge and competencies (Cappellen & Janssens, 2005; Crawford et al.,

2013; Hölzle, 2010) and to craft HRM policies that include project workers and managers (Ling et al., 2018). Consequently, this first line of research suggests that the specificity of project work calls for organizations and HR practices to engage in laying foundations for building career development programmes (Matter et al., 2012) or career models for project management (Chen et al., 2019).

A persistent question when it comes to the study of project workers relates to the planning of their careers. The delegation of career planning to the individual and/or to the organization is a long-standing debate in the literature on careers which is reflected in the present review. It has traditionally been assumed, in line with recent developments around boundaryless and protean careers, that individuals involved in projects were increasingly taking over their own career planning, a claim that could be found in many reviewed studies (e.g. Akkermans et al., 2020; Lloyd-Walker et al., 2018; Lo Presti & Elia, 2020). Conversely, this line of research has repeatedly recalled the fundamental role of organizations in the planning of project workers' careers, emphasizing, among others, the need for implementing transparent promotion policies (Hölzle, 2010), encouraging mobility across diverse management positions (Bredin & Söderlund, 2013), and supporting horizontal forms of organizing (Dahlander & O'Mahony, 2010). Pleas for an increased and more active commitment of organizations in the management of project workers' careers are fairly common in the reviewed literature (e.g. Havermans et al., 2019; Huemann et al., 2019; Ling et al., 2018), which suggest that career planning is not fully delegated to individuals. In that view, the responsibility for career planning is also shared with 1) HR specialists – who can rethink assignment and performance evaluation processes for supporting project work (Keegan et al., 2012) and organize training programs (Turner et al., 2008), 2) line managers – who can assist project workers through mentoring and coaching (Crawford et al., 2013) and by acting as career advisors (Huemann et al., 2019), and/or 3) project managers – who can actively bargain to formalize career models themselves (Bredin & Söderlund, 2013) but also evaluate the performance of their project team members, who may be lower-skilled workers in need of career support (Keegan et al., 2012).

It is important to note that the reviewed literature has been mostly investigating relatively straightforward contexts where project work unfolds in a bilateral relationship between an employer and a project worker (e.g. Bredin & Söderlund, 2013). However, recent contributions have reported on more complex situations where the organization that employs the project workers is different from the organization that develops the project; in these cases, a triadic relationship can be established between project workers, their employer – a “labor market intermediary” – and the client organization (e.g. Lorquet et al., 2018; Sulbout et al., 2021). The literature on multiple authority relationships with regard to project workers appears to remain fairly emergent, and scholars have mostly acknowledged the distribution of HRM and career planning responsibilities in project work settings internally – that is, between project workers, project managers, line managers, and HR specialists within the organization where projects are being developed and worked upon (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011; Keegan et al., 2012).

The particularity of this research perspective lies in its focus on career planning and management in relation to project work. It addresses the question of project work through the

lens of organizational challenges and risks – such as knowledge retention, turnover, recruitment, and job satisfaction – that are faced by firms who increasingly have to deal with external project workers (Crawford et al., 2013). Researchers seek to answer questions such as “*how can organizations offer career development opportunities for project managers?*” (e.g. Hölzle, 2010), or “*who supports the career development of project workers?*” (Huemann et al., 2019; Savelsbergh et al., 2016). A common argument is that managing projects and careers of individuals engaged in projects should become part of the HR strategy of the organization (Hölzle, 2010; Ling et al., 2018; Savelsbergh et al., 2016). The articulation of project work and careers, then, lies in the organizational issues (e.g. planning and implementing career paths for project workers) and the managerial challenges (e.g. retaining project workers’ competencies) that emerge from the specific characteristics of projects themselves.

## **P2: Projects as career trajectories’ catalysts**

A second approach consists in investigating the career trajectories of individuals involved in project work. This perspective draws from the observation that “*projects produce careers*” (Grabher & Thiel, 2015, p. 330). Several authors have argued that project work revolves around temporary assignments which induce highly mobile and flexible careers and might not be strongly supported by organizations (Crowley-Henry et al., 2019; Vincenti & Boccardelli, 2016; Welch & Welch, 2015). Consequently, the actual unfolding of project-based careers from the project worker/manager’s viewpoint becomes the central theme of interest. The authors adopting this perspective usually contrast between “traditional” career trajectories, based on well-defined patterns of training and chronological succession of career stages, and the more chaotic, unintentional, and discontinuous careers based on project work (Grabher & Thiel, 2015; Richardson et al., 2015; Yalçınkaya Çalışkan & Acar, 2016). Analyses of project managers’ career trajectories reveal that project work requires individuals to maintain a rich professional network (Welch & Welch, 2015), to acquire hybrid expertise and marketable skills that transcend traditional knowledge boundaries (El-Sabaa, 2001; Markusson, 2010; Vincentini & Boccardelli, 2016), and to secure prestigious projects that enhance their reputation (Grabher & Thiel, 2015; Lingo & Tepper, 2013; Moureau & Sagot-Duvaurox, 2012). The nature of the employment relationship between the project worker and the organization (temporary or permanent, internalized or contingent) strongly matters here, as temporary project work creates stronger incentives for individuals to create networks and build a reputation to secure their future employment (O’Mahony & Bechky, 2006; Skilton & Bravo, 2008).

Following calls to investigate the increasing variety of career movements (e.g. Vincentini & Boccardelli, 2016), a profusion of career archetypes have flourished to illustrate the effects of project work on individuals’ career trajectories. Authors speak of “*portfolio careers*” to designate individuals who develop a wide array of work activities by chaining multiple contracts (Lloyd-Walker et al., 2016); of “*spiral staircase careers*” to emphasize the wide-ranging character of project work (Huemann et al., 2019; Welch & Welch, 2015); of “*workplace vagabonds*” to describe the frequent changes of employers (Crawford et al., 2013); of “*job hoppers*” to highlight the ease of project experts to switch between projects (Born & Witteloostuijn, 2013); of “*mercenaries*” to reflect on the tendency of external project managers to emphasize their internal career (Welch & Welch, 2015); and of “*lone wolves*” to underline

the risks of social isolation inherent to project-based careers (Havermans et al., 2019). These labels reflect the varying levels of job security (Greer et al., 2019) and the different contractual arrangements (Nesheim & Smith, 2015) that project workers may experience through their career trajectories. Building on narratives and survey results from project managers and project workers, these studies raise research questions such as “*Where do project workers come from?*” (Richardson et al., 2015) or “*What are the career trajectories of project professionals?*” (Grabher & Thiel, 2015). In this perspective, project work is conceptualized as a catalyst for new forms and patterns of careers.

### **P3: Projects as a distinctive career orientation**

Some studies rather view project work as a particular sort of career orientation. Within this literature, career orientation is defined as individuals’ “*final preference for pursuing a career path after considering situational factors*” (Alavi et al., 2012, p. 664). Scholars have set as a goal to grasp the propensity of individuals to opt for project-based careers, and investigated the motivation factors supporting individuals’ choices to engage in project-based forms of work. As research has illustrated, project-based workers sometimes pursue a “calling” or a quasi-spiritual orientation and find in projects opportunities for self-fulfilment and accomplishment (McKevitt et al., 2017). A project work career orientation requires trade-offs between job security and flexibility, and project workers might have different preferences when it comes to pursuing temporary project contracts or seeking a permanent position (Lloyd-Walker et al., 2018). In this view, how project workers build their identity is an important concern. Indeed, project work involves ongoing identity tensions between the affiliation to the profession and the temporary belonging to an employing organisation that can be difficult to manage (Hodgson & Paton, 2016). These studies, therefore, emphasize the extent to which individuals’ career preferences fit with project management roles. Others have developed a more deterministic approach to career orientation, arguing that the inclination of individuals to endorse project management’ roles is directly related to specific “psycho-demographic” traits such as gender and ethnicity (De Queiroz et al., 2014). In any case, this line of research acknowledges that the choice to pursue a project-based career depends on specific sets of skills, personal characteristics, and contextual factors (Lloyd-Walker et al., 2018).

The particularity of this research perspective lies in its emphasis on individual career preferences, work identity, and the perceived benefits of project work for one’s career (Havermans et al., 2019; Lloyd-Walker et al., 2018; McKevitt et al., 2017). By contrast with the precedent perspective, which emphasizes past trajectories and experiences, the authors exploring project work as a career orientation rather focus on personal motivations, aspirations for the future, and vocational choice. Common research questions include “*why do people want to become project managers?*” (Havermans et al., 2019) or “*how to explain the career choices of project-based workers?*” (Lloyd-Walker et al., 2018). In this perspective, projects embed a specific type of career that people with given characteristics are more prone to follow than others.

#### **P4: Projects as career assets**

Other studies rather examined project work as a source of experience and learning for professional advancement and career development. It has been argued that being involved in projects could sometimes confer career advantages, as several organizations value project-related skills and competencies (Chudzikowski et al., 2020). For instance, engaging in industrial projects has been shown to enhance doctoral candidates' career perspectives (Lee & Miozzo, 2015). In the same vein, a study conducted by Uddin and Khanzode (2014) in the construction sector has illustrated how participating in projects involving the use of the *Building Information Modelling* (BIM) could open up new avenues for workers and students career advancement. Being able to master project-related skills, such as resource allocation, teamwork, leadership, and competency development, would increase employability and career perspectives (Allison, 2015; Floris et al., 2020; Van der Heijden et al., 2022). This research perspective usually leans towards the educational implications of project work and aims to provide recommendations related to projects as learning opportunities. Research questions in this perspective take various forms such as: “*to what extent is the project a career advantage?*” or “*how does the participation in projects enhance professionals' career paths?*” (Russell et al., 2014; Uddin & Khanzode, 2014). Here, project work is viewed as a set of opportunities for learning and developing skills that could positively impact individuals' career opportunities.

#### **P5: Projects as role transitions**

A fifth perspective on project work and careers consists in conceptualizing project work role transitions that occur during one's career. Scholars claimed that there would be under-researched challenges in transitioning in and out project roles (Hodgson et al., 2011; Dubé, 2014). Hodgson and colleagues (2011) emphasized the risks of leaving behind a well-established occupation to enter into a less recognized one, and the difficulty of endorsing a role that often lacks a strong institutional identity. It further appears that, in practice, projects often remain fragile forms of organizing work, with ill-defined resources, authority, and autonomy (Hodgson et al., 2011). Besides project workers can experience constant insecurity and adverse working conditions that undermine their professional status and make their transition towards the role a yet more difficult experience (Greer et al., 2019).

In the same vein, closing projects and exiting a project management role can also be seen as a professional challenge (Dubé, 2014). Intense and thrilling projects may, when they come to an end, leave their participants “*with a shock of high magnitude*”, to the point that they experience depression or even mourning (Dubé, 2014, p. 28). Several authors have emphasized the rewarding character of a successful project, and its importance within individuals' professional biography (Dubé, 2014; Grabher & Thiel, 2015). In these studies, a particular emphasis is placed on the diversity of individuals' experiences as they transition through project and non-project roles. Questions that are raised include “*what does transitioning towards a project management role involve?*” (e.g. Hodgson et al., 2011) and “*are transitions out of successful projects effortless?*” (Dubé, 2014). This perspective views projects as sources of prestige and visibility that may become the highlights of one's career, but generate transition costs and risks.

## Discussion

### Integrating research on project workers' careers

This literature review was conducted with the aim of summarizing and organizing existing research on project work in relation to careers. It departed from the working assumption that project work is a distinctive form of work that has implications for careers (Akkermans et al., 2020). In the literature, projects are described as a space of convergence between two flows, one of them being the life of an organization, and the other being a project worker's career, commonly viewed as a sequence of work experiences unfolding over time (Huemann et al., 2019). However, to this day, research on project work and careers has featured several limits. First, this literature has remained largely fragmented, with multiple exploratory research designs and few attempts to integrate them together (Akkermans et al., 2020; Bredin & Söderlund, 2013). Second, this lack of integration has had harmful effects when it comes to the theoretical foundations developed to study project work and careers: as exemplified in the paper, elusive concepts such as the "career path" are commonly used equivocally and accept different levels of meaning. Finally, extant research has also been heavily inclined to study project management and project managers at the expense of other stakeholders impacted by project work (e.g. lower-skilled workers involved in projects, line managers, HR managers), which results in an incomplete understanding of the issues and challenges raised by project work.

To overcome the first limitation mentioned above (i.e. the lack of integration of existing research), the paper has identified five research perspectives, each of them building on a distinct conceptualization of project work and careers. Taken together, these perspectives combine the findings of two streams of research that have historically developed in relative isolation: organizational challenges of project work on the one hand, and individual effects of project work on careers on the other hand (Hölzle, 2010). The five perspectives also bridge between career studies, project management studies, and HR-centred studies, a necessary condition for making further conceptual and theoretical advancement on project work and careers. We argue that Table 1 makes it possible to classify existing research around five dominant perspectives that are career management, career trajectories, career orientation, career assets, and role transitions, which opens up new possibilities for structuring a research field that has so far remained highly fragmented (Huemann et al., 2019).

The framework suggested in Table 1 can be used to bring theoretical insight into ambiguous terms such as the career path. It becomes possible to distinguish and to contrast between the *designed* career path, which is the formal career model for project managers/project workers implemented by organizations (Bredin & Söderlund, 2013), the *perceived* career path, which designates the opportunities that individuals envision for their development (Savelsbergh et al., 2016), and the *lived* career path, which refers to, the cumulative professional experiences of a worker from his own perspective (Welch & Welch, 2015). The designed career path is an organizational and managerial answer to challenges raised by project work within firms (P1) – i.e. how do we retain project workers' competencies beyond the context of the project? The perceived career path, on the other hand, refers to individual perceptions of career orientations

(P3), while the lived career path embeds the past career trajectory of an individual worker in all its complexity (P2).

The originality of the paper also lies in its holistic view of project work and careers. Most of the reviewed studies focus almost exclusively on project managers' careers (e.g. Ekrot et al., 2016; Havermans et al., 2019; Hölzle, 2010; Lloyd-Walker et al., 2016; Lo Presti & Elia, 2020; McKevitt et al., 2017; Savelsbergh et al., 2016). These project managers are usually assumed to be highly skilled or even specialists in their discipline (Richardson et al., 2015). Yet, as more and more people are becoming involved in projects as part of their daily job, project managers ultimately amount to a very limited portion of the total population of project workers (Packendorff, 2002). These project workers might not have the high employability of "elite consultants" (Noury et al., 2017, p. 22). Since employability has been shown to be detrimental to career success (Van der Heijden et al., 2022), this raises the question of how project workers can develop their careers when projects come to an end and in the eventuality their skills become obsolete. The five research perspectives identified above are not exclusive to project managers and can be used to improve our understanding of how regular workers' careers are being impacted by their participation in projects.

### **Directions for future research**

The paper suggests four avenues for future research on project work and careers. The first consists in investigating the "forgotten" actors of project work who received scant attention so far. Whereas project work has been depicted as a global phenomenon, available research mostly focuses on its implications for project managers (e.g. Havermans et al., 2019; McKevitt et al., 2017; Richardson et al., 2015). The impact of project work on the careers of other project members remains, therefore, understudied, and surprisingly little is known about how individuals participating in projects may use them as career opportunities, or about how they construct and maintain their identity as their career unfolds in a diversity of work contexts (Hodgson & Paton, 2016). This is somewhat surprising as, for every project manager, there is a project team made of members who are also pursuing their own careers while participating in the project. It is likely that the issues and challenges faced by these project workers differ at least partially from the ones faced by project managers and would deserve further attention. This is also an important question for companies, as mobilizing skilled internal managers and employees on temporary projects for which they receive little direct benefit has become a growing issue in many organizations (Jemine et al., 2020). Besides, other actors such as HR managers and line managers remain rarely consulted in existing research, although they are often providing informal and compensatory practices of career development to project workers (Huemann et al., 2019). Finally, whereas some studies indicate that project work may be increasingly organized by and through "labour market intermediaries" (or "LMIs") – organizations that provide project workers to other organizations – (e.g. Lorquet et al., 2018), the role of these "third parties" in career management has not yet been tackled nor explored in the reviewed literature. In sum, developing more inclusive approaches by looking beyond project managers would most likely benefit research on project work and careers.

Second, research on project work and careers would also benefit from developments anchored into organizational-centred perspectives. Existing studies are often adopting individual perspectives which, heavily influenced by protean careers and boundaryless careers theories, focus on career trajectories of project managers. While there is nothing wrong with these approaches, it follows that organizational support is commonly seized through the sole perception of project workers and managers (e.g. Huemann et al., 2019; McKeivitt et al., 2017; Richardson et al., 2015). It is somewhat striking to witness so many authors adopting a fairly prescriptive tone in which they prompt organizations to provide increased support to project managers (Havermans et al., 2019; Huemann et al., 2019; Ling et al., 2018; Lo Presti & Elia, 2020); yet the reasons for which organizational leaders decide or do not decide to develop such supportive politics are never accounted for. Consequently, we have very little information on the organizational strategies developed by firms to frame and manage the careers of project workers, on the strategic positioning of the HR departments, or on the elaboration of formal policies addressing project work. Yet, as project work is expected to grow in size and importance at the expense of “regular work”, it has been predicted that the separation between the internal and the external workforce would blur out, which would lead organizations and HR departments to play an increased role in the management of external workers’ career development (Borowski & Khurana, 2019). This observation pleads for developing alternative lines of research focussing on the elaboration and the enactment of organizational strategies framing project work and dealing with project workers.

Third, the review unveiled that the role of employment arrangements in project workers’ careers has received scant attention to this day. Studies on project work have been mostly interested in “employability” as a relevant concept to understand project managers’ career choices, hence focussing on the ability of individuals themselves to obtain, secure, and retain employment (Akkermans et al., 2020). However, the influence of the contract type between the project worker and the organization (temporary or permanent, directly hired or outsourced) on career-related issues remains an understated question. At best, existing research has briefly hinted that the employment uncertainty inherent to project work was a key conceptual factor to understand project-based career trajectories (Lloyd-Walker et al., 2018), while briefly mentioning the difficulties of managing temporary project workers and securing cultural coherence within project teams (Grabher & Thiel, 2015) and the disincentive effect of short-term project contracts on longer-term organizational concerns such as knowledge transfer (Smith, 2015). The only notable exception lies in Lloyd-Walker and colleagues’ study of project managers (2016), which highlighted that temporary project work was not always perceived more negatively than permanent employment by project managers themselves (p. 922). We believe that issues of employment arrangement and work status should be studied and discussed further, especially given the rise of alternative and non-standard employment forms such as freelancers and independent professionals (Lloyd-Walker et al., 2016; Pichault & McKeown, 2019) or skilled contingent workers (Sulbout et al., 2021). Indeed, it has been suggested that the rise of such alternative employment forms would gradually diminish the influence exerted by organizations and managers on career paths, and that individual career decisions driven by self-interest would gain traction (Welch & Welch, 2015). An underlying and emerging question relates to the impact of employment settings on the sustainability of project workers’ careers

(Chudzikowski et al., 2020) or, conversely, on the intensification of project workers' precarity (Greer et al., 2019).

Fourth, we argue that scholars could engage in more theory-oriented discussions around project work and careers. As illustrated by the review, most authors continue to depart from well-grounded concepts from career theory, but do not seek to expand these concepts to fit the project work singularities that they unveil empirically. Yet, as exemplified by our developments around the so-called concept of "career paths", there is room for improving underlying project- and career-related theories. It is also worthy to note that the reviewed literature rarely adopts a critical tone towards project work in relation to careers. The only exception was Smith (2015), who pointed out fundamental temporal contradictions between the short-term orientation of "projects" and the longer-term orientation of "careers", hence opposing both research objects rather than trying to bring them together. We believe that more theoretically-oriented developments and critical essays could usually complement a field of research that is, at the present time, mostly exploratory and empirically-oriented.

## Conclusion

Project-based forms of work are spreading in all kinds of sectors, raising new challenges in terms of career planning and development. Yet, available literature on the matter appears to pertain to the project management area, while raising multiple challenges in terms of HR, management, and career development, hence calling for interdisciplinary conceptual approaches. For these reasons, the authors conducted an integrative literature review by scanning two databases for scientific papers published in the last twenty years and interested simultaneously in project work and careers. The analysis highlights five existing ways to articulate project work and careers. Project work is either viewed as (1) raising a set of organizational challenges in terms of career management; (2) inducing new career trajectories and archetypes; (3) being a particular career orientation among others; (4) conferring lasting career advantages to individuals; (5) involving complex role transitions. On the basis of these five perspectives, the need for overcoming disciplinary barriers (between career scholars, project management scholars, and HRM scholars) as well as conceptual divides (between individual-centred and organizational-centred perspectives) is underlined. Finally, the paper highlights four possible avenues for future research. They consist in expanding research methods to include multi-stakeholders investigations of project work; conducting in-depth studies of organizational and HR strategies aimed at managing the careers of project workers/managers; paying increased attention to the impact of employment settings and forms on project workers' careers; and committing to theoretical and critical research on project work and careers.

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