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ADVISOR: MATS JUTTERSTRÖM

INTERIM MANAGEMENT & ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING

A Paradox for Learning in Times of Crises?

Erik Högman & Charlotte Pontusson

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INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly changing business climate companies often face exceptional situations and tasks. As a result, the demand for heterogeneous human resources, additional flexibility and management skills has increased. (Bruns & Kabst, 2005) One solution that has faced increased support during the last 25 years is interim management, i.e. a management professional who is contracted to provide a client company with short-term cover, troubleshooting in an area of expertise, or completion of a pre-defined project (Feltham & Hughes, 1999; Inkson et al., 2001; Minto, 2006). Thus, an interim manager enables enterprises to flexibly utilise their skills without any long-term commitment (Inkson et al., 2001; Bruns & Kabst, 2005). The interim managers enable the company to utilise specialist skills without making long-term commitments; they are often contracted for only 6-9 months. The interim managers often have extensive experiences from executive positions and they are less constrained by company history and habits. Hence, they may bring new ideas to bear on old issues. (Russam, 1996; Inkson et al., 2001; Russam, 2005; Bruns & Kabst, 2005) The growth of interim management is driven by strong underlying trends such as: (1) higher focus on action than strategy and advice, (2) less patience from owners on profitable result, (3) executive searches with long recruitment processes, and (4) increased need for flexible resources on executive levels (Inkson et al. 2001; Bruns & Kabst, 2005). The Swedish interim management market is still in an early stage compared to more mature markets, such as the UK market. Today there exist approximately 4000 active professional interim managers in Sweden.

In these exceptional situations and tasks, scholars stress the importance of learning instead of only repeating basic pre-planned motions in order to detect and handle disruptive situations (Lagadec, 1997; Deverell, 2009). Accordingly, organisational learning is a never-ending process for the organisation (Swieringa & Wierdsma, 1992; Kearns, 2015). It is the ability of an organisation to observe, assess and act upon stimuli in a cumulative, interactive and purposeful way that makes them into learning organisations (Meyers, 1990). Organisational learning can be described as the process of communicating and embodying the individuals' skills and insights (Hedberg, 1981; Attewell, 1992). The concept of organisational learning originates from experienced-based learning (Kolb, 1984) and learning loops (Argyris & Schön, 1978; 1996), showing how individuals learn from reflection, trial and error. What is learned is often encased into programs and standard operating procedures that members execute routinely (Nyström & Starbuck, 1984). However, in order to establish new patterns, other previously learned behaviours may need to be unlearned, especially at top-management level (Nyström & Starbuck, 1984; Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2008; Moynihan, 2008; Deverell, 2009).

There is an exciting paradox in the relationship between the short-term cover that interim managers provide and the long-term focus of organisational learning. Do they contradict each other, or is it possible to overcome the paradox concerning the short-term focus of interim managers and the long-term perspective of organisational learning? Our study intends to open up the black box about interim management and its effect on organisational learning and provide academic evidence to the limited researched topic of interim management and organisational learning in an organisational crisis setting.

Based on this premise, the following research question was formulated:

“How will interim managers affect organisational learning in times of an organisational crisis?”

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative method, which is preferred when studying an organisational process or movement (Andersen, 1998). Additionally, an abductive reasoning was applied, whereby one seeks to explain relevant evidence by beginning with some commonly well-known facts that are already accepted and then working towards an explanation. The study was conducted through a multistep approach that consisted of an exploratory literature review combined with 24 semi-structured interviews with interim management service providers, interim managers, companies and industry experts. Two case companies were chosen in order to make a good comparison between the cases as well as generate a broader and more general empirical base. Case company 1 is a smaller company compared to company 2, however, both are to be classified as small to medium sized companies and enhances comparability. Both companies were in a transition/turnaround phase with scarce financial resources when the interim managers entered the company. Additionally, both companies have ended their interaction with the interim manager, thus the interim manager have formally left the company.

To account for potential threats of reliability the authors engaged in investigator triangulation and interview templates guided the interviews to minimise inconsistencies. Additionally, the authors aimed to increase the external validity, meaning that the findings and conclusions are generalizable beyond this study, by having a broad sample of respondents that covered the whole spectra of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interim Management Definition & Factors Driving the Interim Management Industry

Academic literature and research in the field of interim management is limited and in a nascent state compared to other management and organisational areas (Goss & Bridson, 1998; Bruns & Kabst, 2005). Many studies compare firm performance before and after the use of an interim manager. These studies often give dissimilar results where some researchers conclude that firms acquiring interim managers will experience lower performance during the interim manager's tenure than those firms who immediately replace their managers, whereas others conclude the opposite.

To fully understand the definition of interim management, an important distinction between interim management, management consultants and employed leadership personnel have to be made. The central difference is the nature of the task and the authority. The main characteristics and deviations are presented in the table 1 below.

	Employed leadership personnel	Management Consultant	Interim Manager
Nature of task	Management of enterprise	Only consultation	Management tasks
Contract-basis	Labour contract	Service contract	Service contract
Authority to instruct and being subject to instructions	Extensive authority. Subject to instructions exists	None	Authority depends on the task; subject to limited instructions
Period of belonging to enterprise	Permanent labour contract	Limited	Limited
Compensation	Monthly salary and possibly profit sharing	Generally daily rate and expenses	Generally daily rate and expenses

Table 1: Delineations of Interim Managers to Employed Managers and Management Consultants (Bruns & Kabst, 2005)

The following definition of Inkson et al. (2001) worked as a working definition throughout the paper:

“An interim manager is a management professional who contracts, often through an agency, to provide a client company with short-term cover, troubleshooting in an area of expertise, or completion of a pre-defined project.”

The main explanatory factor driving the interim management industry is market forces, such as increased international competition and the decreasing life cycle of knowledge, which organisations need to respond to. These market forces put companies under pressure as to efficiently utilise and more flexible acquire workforces, including executive employees (Bruns & Kabst, 2005). Interim managers enable enterprises to flexibly utilise their skills without long-term commitment (Inkson et al., 2001; Bruns & Kabst, 2005). Adding to managerial flexibility, interim managers provide external knowledge resources that are less constrained by company history and habit (Inkson et al., 2001).

Although the tasks of interim managers are heterogeneous, depending on the need of the client, three classical areas may be distinguished: (1) shortages of executives in the daily business, (2) pre-defined projects (i.e. IPOs, IT-implementations, joint ventures or mergers), and (3) crises and turnarounds (Inkson et al. 2001; Bruns & Kabst, 2005).

Organisational Learning in an Organisational Crisis Setting

All organisational systems are deficient and the increase in business complexity increases their general sensitivity toward crises (Zehir & Yavuz, 2014). Furthermore, the notion of a crisis creates a context that challenges existing norms and practices within an organisation (Drupsteen & Guldemund, 2014). It can impact the survival of the whole organisation since it often imposes severe strains on the organisation’s financial, physical and emotional structures. (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993) However, an organisational crisis can stimulate learning and act as learning triggers.

The severity of the consequences from the error relates positively to learning (Homsma et al., 2009). A basic objective of crisis management is to accumulate wisdom by learning together from the event in order to prevent, lessen the severity of, or improve upon responses to future crises (Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2008; Moynihan, 2008). An organisation’s members often use lessons from past crisis experiences as a guide for current action (Wang, 2008). Thus, learning is one way to measure the success of a crisis response, with effective response forming new policies and procedures to respond to future incidents (Pearson & Claire, 1998). In addition, the field of learning during crises need

special attention since it differs from learning in routine situations since it demands a new understanding of the most basic aspects of the causes, consequences and solutions (Moynihan, 2008).

Learning takes place at two levels: (1) the individual level, and (2) the organisational level (Kim, 1998). However, organisational learning is not the sum of individual learning, but the process of communicating and embodying the individuals' skills and insights (Hedberg, 1981; Peler et al., 1989; Attewell, 1992). Thus, being a learning organisation is a never-ending, systematic process of identifying cause and effect predicting the future (Swieringa & Wierdsma, 1992; Kearns, 2015).

The Learning Loops

The notion of organisational learning and 'the learning organisation' mainly originates from the concept of experience-based learning and the later concept of learning loops, see figure 1 below. There are two different learning loops: (1) single-loop learning and (2) double-loop learning. By engaging in single-loop learning, an organisation will detect a mistake, correct it and carry on with present objectives. Consequently, if only direct causes are addressed, learning is limited to single-loop learning. Accordingly, single-loop learning is a way to improve a system that already exists and to follow existing rules. In double-loop learning, on the other hand, the steps of single-loop learning exists, but, in addition, there is also a change in the governing variables that determines why we do what we do. The organisation detects the mistake, changes its objectives and takes the correct actions. Hence, double-loop learning addresses the underlying causes. (Drupsteen & Guldenmund, 2014) Consequently, double-loop learning is about changing the rules.¹ It is important to aim for double-loop learning but the lessons learned from single-loop learning are equally important (Deverell, 2009).

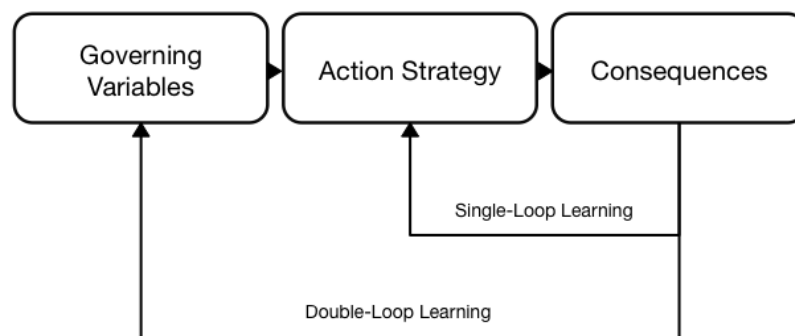


Figure 1: Single- and Double-Loop Learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978; 1996)

Unlearn to Learn

Organisations encase their learning in programs and standard operating procedures that members execute routinely (Nyström & Starbuck, 1984). However, these programs and procedures generate inertia and as their success accumulate, organisations emphasise efficiency, grow complacent and learn too little. Most often, top managers' ideas dominate organisational learning, but also prevent unlearning. In order to establish new patterns, other previously learned behaviours may need to be unlearned (Nyström & Starbuck, 1984; Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2008; Moynihan, 2008; Deverell,

¹ An illustrative example of single- and double-loop learning: Single-loop learning can be compared with a thermostat that learns when it is too hot or too cold and then turns the heat on or off. The thermostat is able to perform this task because it can receive information (the temperature of the room) and therefore take corrective action. If the thermostat could question itself about whether it should be set at a specific degree, it would be capable not only of detecting error, but of questioning the underlying policies and goals as well as its own program. This is called double-loop learning.

2009). Unlearning is critical since habits and beliefs that were previously thought to be useful may now be detrimental. Consequently, organisations in serious crises often remove their top managers as a way to erase the dominating ideas, to disconfirm past programs, to become receptive to new ideas and to symbolise change. (Nyström & Starbuck, 1984)

The Importance of Knowledge in Organisational Learning

To understand learning, we must understand the nature and forms of human knowledge. Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (Kolb, 1984). The first step in many organisational learning processes pinpoints the importance of knowledge acquisition. Organisations frequently increase their store of knowledge by acquiring and grafting on new members who possess knowledge not previously available within the organisation. (Huber, 1991) When the knowledge base has been increased, knowledge is converted and then transferred into actions and strategies, which is known as knowledge utilisation (Wang, 2008).

A common framework to understand different types of knowledge and knowledge conversion modes is the SECI model (Nonaka & Takeuchi's, 1995), see figure 2 below. This model identifies four modes of knowledge conversion between tacit and explicit knowledge:²

- (1) *Socialisation (tacit - tacit)* - tacit knowledge is transferred through social interaction, either through face-to-face contact or through experience. Tacit knowledge can only be acquired through shared experience, since it is space and time specific.
- (2) *Externalisation (tacit - explicit)* - tacit knowledge is made explicit (published or articulated) and the knowledge becomes more clarified, allowing it to be shared with others. This explicit transfer becomes the basis of new knowledge.
- (3) *Combination (explicit - explicit)* - by combining and processing different types of explicit knowledge from all parts of an organisation, new knowledge can be created. After being processed this new knowledge can be disseminated to employees in the organisation.
- (4) *Internalisation (explicit - tacit)* - learning-by-doing: the explicit knowledge becomes the individual's knowledge, thus the organisations'. This conversion mode urges the process of continuous individual and collective reflection to identify patterns. The internalisation process continues at a new 'level', hence a spiral within the knowledge creation.

Conceptual Framework

The findings from past research were combined to develop an integrated framework that conceptualises the relationship between interim management and organisational learning in an organisational crisis setting, see figure 3 below. All the boxes and circles are numbered but they do not indicate any sequence of the components in the model. The newly developed model enhanced our current knowledge about interim management in several ways: (1) it integrates interim management as a way of acquiring new knowledge, (2) it highlights the importance of learning in every stage of resolving an organisational crisis, and (3) it captures the dynamics between interim management and organisational learning and clearly displays the nonlinear and interconnected nature between these two areas.

² *Tacit Knowledge*: knowledge that is difficult to transfer to another person by means of writing it down or verbalizing it. It is personal, context-specific and subjective. *Explicit Knowledge*: is knowledge that is codified, systematic, formal and easy to communicate.

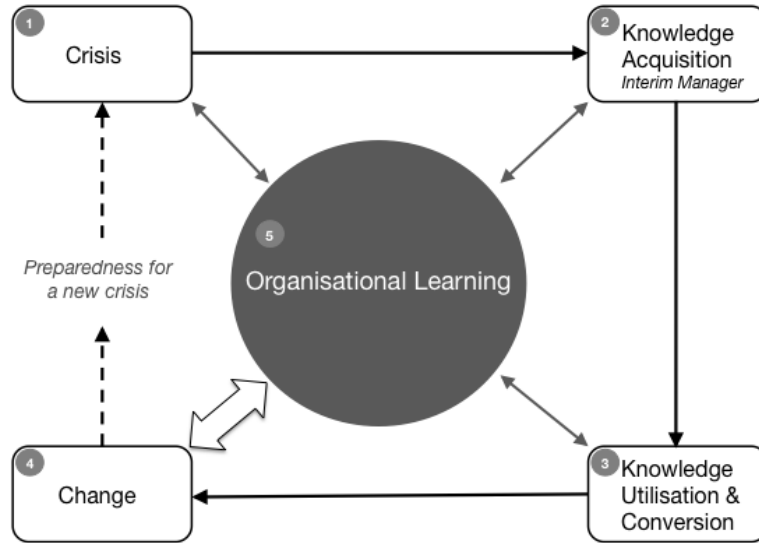


Figure 3: The Conceptual Framework

THE INTERIM MANAGEMENT PROCESSES

The gathered information regarding the interim management process from all respondents enabled us to develop a general and simplistic description of the interim management process, see figure 4 below. The process often involves a diagnostic phase, or a ‘get to know the company’ phase. Thereafter, the solution to the core issues is being launched and carried out. This phase is driven by constant interaction between the interim manager and key personnel in the matter. Last, the interim manager makes room for a successor to take on the role and lead onwards: an exodus phase. Within these phases there can be many differences. However, we find this very simplistic figure helpful to understand the basic dynamics. The two case companies were used to describe the steps. Below follows a short summary of the findings.

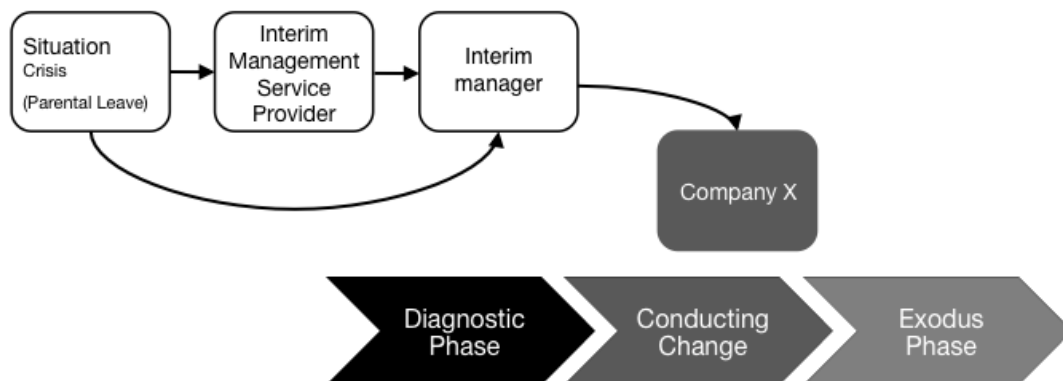


Figure 4: The Interim Management Process

Situation Description and Acquisition of an Interim Manager

In the first step of the interim management process a situation occurs, an organisational crisis, in which the company decides to acquire an interim manager. They can acquire the interim manager either through an interim management service provider or by directly contracting the interim

manager. All companies need to go through some sort of change eventually. The ‘perfect’ company does not exist, and it will probably never exist. According to the conducted interviews, the severity of the crisis often has an impact on the survival of the company. An organisational crisis often imposes severe strains on the organisation’s financial and physical structures. The observed organisational crises have mainly resulted from: (1) inaccurate recruitments and/or lack of crucial skills, (2) an inadequate way of managing the company, and (3) an inadequate company structure.

Diagnostic Phase

Our conducted interviews show that interim managers quickly diagnosed the situation during their first weeks in the organisations. The interim managers’ way of gathering the needed information for a proper diagnosis differs. Some interim managers wanted to see all financial information first while others started their diagnostic phase by observing and talking to employees. Often a mix of information sources is used during this phase and all interim managers have the ability to quickly diagnose the most urgent and vital problems to solve.

Conducting Change Phase

The study shows that interim managers focus their efforts on the most critical issues in the companies in the ‘conducting change’ phase. However, the interim managers have different approaches in their work to conduct the necessary changes. Some interim managers emphasise the work of supporting and coaching employees whereas others stress the importance of building new structures and routines. Nevertheless, all interviewed interim managers urge the need for constant communication with key employees.

Exodus Phase

When changes have been implemented, it is time for the interim manager to hand over the position to the successor in the ‘exodus phase’. From the conducted interviews, the following dimensions of the handover can be identified: (1) many interim managers recruit their successors and then introduces the new manager to the position and discusses all the processes and challenges and, (2) the interim managers introduces new routines and structures that are most often documented and forwarded to the successor. However, from the conducted interviews we find that many of the initiatives are not taken over by the successor and/or the organisation.

ANALYSIS

The empirical findings were analysed through the lens of the developed multidimensional conceptual framework to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between interim management and organisational learning.

Organisational Crisis

Both of the case companies faced severe disruptions that induced serious threats to the survival of the organisations. These disruptions imposed severe strains in the financial and physical structures. Thus, the organisational crises had a high magnitude and required immediate attention. Both needed to take action and make a turnaround to handle the scarce financial resources. Furthermore, it became clear that a crisis does not often occur in isolation but that a single crisis can cause a chain reaction. The empirics also show that organisations have to take the threat of an organisational crisis

seriously and that actions are needed. In our sample these actions had to be undertaken within a short time period.

Knowledge Acquisition – Acquiring an Interim Manager

The empirics show that the studied companies facing severe organisational crises decided to acquire new knowledge by acquiring an interim manager. This was done in order to quickly manage the ‘diagnostic phase’ and find the core issues that the company had to deal with to become profitable. Both companies had an existing knowledge gap and that they had to invest in knowledge acquisition to overcome the organisational crises rapidly. Due to the companies’ inability to resolve the crises, it is also clear that they had to acquire an executive who could bring a new and outside perspective to the situation. According to all interviewees, this is the interim managers’ key skill, and it is a result of their extensive experience from executive positions, often from a wide range of industries. Adding on, in both cases the interim managers provided external knowledge resources that were less constrained by the companies’ histories and old habits.

Knowledge Conversion & Utilisation

In the diagnostic phase, knowledge is being converted from employees to the interim manager. Tacit knowledge from employees is being transferred to tacit knowledge to the interim manager, showing the so-called socialisation conversion in the SECI model (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). In the ‘conducting change’ phase, the knowledge conversion is reverse. Knowledge is converted from the interim managers back to the employees. The interim managers utilises their new tacit knowledge in combination with their old knowledge gained from their previous experiences to make the necessary changes. In this phase, communication is key. Accordingly, interim managers will take their tacit knowledge and make it explicit, engaging in externalisation according to the SECI model (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). This, in turn, will lead to internalisation conversion since the employees get new tacit knowledge by engaging in the new ‘tools’. In the end, the interim managers also combined their new knowledge with their prior experiences and tacit knowledge to come up with actions and strategies, known as knowledge utilisation. Socialisation conversion in accordance to the SECI model (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) is also identified in the ‘exodus phase’ when the interim manager hands over to the company and the successor. However, in one of the case companies some employees felt the lack of a proper handover from the interim manager. Thus, knowledge conversion depends on active choices of the interim manager in the ‘exodus phase’.

Change

The last step in the conceptual framework is the change dimension. The changes and implementations in the case companies indicate that learning has taken place since a change in behaviour or way of doing things has occurred. However, not all changes are a result from learning. This is further developed in the next section, *Organisational Learning*, to understand what changes that are connected to organisational learning in terms of single- and double-loop learning.

Organisational Learning

The crises in the case companies acted as learning triggers. The repeated financial losses, due to inadequate reactions, show that both companies repeated basic pre-planned motions. Thus, both companies demanded new understandings of causes, consequences and solutions and someone who could challenge existing practices. Both companies responded to the crisis by engaging in knowledge acquisition, i.e. acquiring an interim manager, suggesting that an interim manager can be a vital tool in resolving an organisational crisis.

In the 'diagnostic phase' our findings show how the interim manager, by engaging in socialisation and reviewing financial statements, gathers knowledge about the organisation to make an analysis of the situation. From this analysis the interim manager develops actions and strategies to solve the organisational crisis. Thus, in this phase, the interim manager governs the magnitude of the change that the organisation will engage in. The magnitude of change differed between the two case companies. The interim managers focused their efforts on the most critical issues, but the depth of the proposed actions varied. Consequently, interim managers can, in the 'diagnostic phase', decide which learning-loop to engage in, i.e. if the organisation should follow the rules and improve existing systems or change the rules (Argyris & Schön, 1978; 1996). This makes interim managers into learning triggers.

Furthermore, within the 'conduct change' phase, the empirical evidence shows differences in employees' reflection and engagement. One of the case companies improved systems that already existed, followed existing rules and addressed only direct causes. Hence, learning was limited to the observed single-loop learning. Contrasting, in the other case company, the interim manager involved the management team in critical decisions and worked persistent to make everyone in the organisation understand causes and effects. The interim manager involved several key employees in the anchoring of appropriate solutions to the problems, emphasising reflection. They had to reflect over previous actions and received new understandings and mindsets, showing tendencies for reflection driven by the interim manager. Thus, in this company, the steps of single-loop learning existed, but there were also tendencies of changes in the governing variables and addressing the underlying causes, showing that double-loop learning occurred.

Adding on, the unlearning dimension was only visible in the company that engaged in double-loop learning.

CONCLUSION & CONTRIBUTION

We find that interim managers affect organisational learning by engaging in single- or double-loop learning by acting as learning triggers. This is based upon their route of action that in turn shifts the way in which strategies and consequences are framed. The interim managers can choose to either follow the rules or to change them. Thus, interim managers can overcome the paradox between interim managers' short-term turnaround focus and the never-ending process of organisational learning. However, the severity of the organisational crises and the necessity to quickly conduct changes may impose constraints to how much interim managers affect organisational learning.

The interim manager will trigger learning by engaging in different forms of knowledge conversion and knowledge utilisation. In the first phase of the interim management process, the 'diagnostic phase', knowledge is converted from employees in the company to the interim manager. In the later phases, the phase of 'conducting change' and the 'exodus phase', the conversion is reversed from the interim manager back to the employees, which will result in necessary actions and strategies.

Adding to the above, our findings evidence that there is a challenge for interim managers to be able to effectively apply the unique types of learning to their appropriate situations. During the strained situation that an organisational crisis imposes, opportunities for organisational members to interact,

reflect and develop shared mental models are necessary for learning to occur. Thus, while keeping the battered ship floating and sailing at the same time, the interim manager also have to learn the men/women to sail without him/her as a skipper. If not, the interim manager will have limited effect on organisational learning.

Furthermore, interim managers' effect on organisational learning also depends on the organisations' willingness to learn from the interim manager. In some cases, the organisations might also have to unlearn learned behaviours, past practices and old habits to establish new patterns. Organisations have to recognise and remove the barriers to organisational learning in order to release the vital benefits it brings. Thus, being able to work with some of the 'stuckness' is one part of what organisational learning is about. It takes a strong belief in learning from both parts, the interim manager and the company, to embrace the potentials of learning. Otherwise, the effect on organisational learning will be hampered and lessons learned lost if the organisational mindset throughout the interaction does not support it.

To summarise, the study captures the dynamics between interim management and organisational learning. It clearly displays the nonlinear and interconnected nature between these two areas imposing an interesting paradox between the long-term perspectives of organisational learning and the short-term nature of the interim managers' tasks. The interconnected nature adds to literature by making both organisational crises and interim managers into learning triggers, since interim managers set the course of action. We believe that the organisation plays a vital role in the dynamic relationship between the organisation and the interim manager. The interim manager must be willing to convert his/her knowledge to the organisation and the organisation must have the willingness to learn. Thus, when initiating these processes it might be beneficial to draw attention to the organisation's willingness to learn from the interaction. This implies that during the phases of choosing an interim manager, consideration can be placed on the organisations' propensity to learn from the interactions.

We hope that the study will help managers, interim managers and interim management service providers to better understand the importance of emphasising organisational learning in all parts of the interim management process. By adapting our conceptual framework, we propose that more considerations should be given the difficult task of learning and that everyone involved should emphasise reflection.

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