



# Shaping interorganizational strategic projects through power relations and strategic practices

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## ABSTRACT

Power in interorganizational strategic projects, used for implementing strategic change, is essential but not well understood. This paper devises a conceptual framework in which power relations, strategic practices and an order and conflict view are integrated. An ethnoventionist approach, including ethnography and interventions, is used to show power relations and strategic practices in an interorganizational change project. This project aimed to improve the collaboration between nine organizations in the joint building of subsurface utilities and telecom networks. The findings show four relevant power relations and the delegating of power from top managers to shop-floor workers, which triggered middle managers to constrain the change process. Implementation of these innovations. Theoretically, the study contributes to the debate on interorganizational strategic projects with a conceptual framework including power relations, strategic practices and the order and conflict view, demonstrating the long-term effects of strategic change projects.

## 1. Introduction

Interorganizational projects and programs have frequently been used for driving strategic change in the collaboration between two or multiple organizations (Bresnen et al., 2005; Cropper & Palmer, 2008; Kornberger & Clegg, 2011; Sydow & Braun, 2018). The configuration of interorganizational projects as groups of firms that interact to coordinate their efforts for a complex service or product during a finite period of time (Sydow & Braun, 2018), may give rise to disagreement, discord and power struggles between project actors. Namely, in such projects interactions between actors and their power positions are situated within nested and overlapping institutional contexts, providing unclear guidelines for interaction and expectations on power, thus resulting in conflicts over multiparty strategic goals (Levina & Orlikowski, 2009). Notwithstanding their strategic intentions, the reality of interorganizational projects is one of continuing conflicts (Marshall, 2006), imbued with power issues (Huxham & Beech, 2008).

To better understand the nature of interorganizational strategic projects, we need to unravel the dynamics of power relations in inter-firm interactions (Cropper & Palmer, 2008; Huxham & Beech, 2008; Sydow & Braun, 2018). Power is a social relation, produced and reproduced through the everyday practices of project actors (Clegg,

1989; Fleming & Spicer, 2014). For example, between actors from diverse parent organizations collaborating in a project team (Schruijer, 2021), or between client and contractor organizations Huxham & Beech (2008), suggest to study the identification and use of power at both micro and macro levels in interorganizational projects. In sum, the concept of power is essential in understanding interorganizational strategic projects, but not well studied (Cropper & Palmer, 2008; Huxham & Beech, 2008; Sydow & Braun, 2018).

To theorize the dynamics of power relations in the study of interorganizational strategic projects, without forgetting their stabilizing qualities, we draw on a conflict view as well as order view (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Order view analyses are primarily concerned with providing explanations of society in terms of unity and cohesiveness, while conflict view analyses search for explanation for radical change and structural conflicts. Building on the assumption that order and conflict may exist 'in tandem' (Van Marrewijk et al., 2016), interorganizational strategic projects constitute both elements of order and conflict.

Adapting this order and conflict view to studies on interorganizational projects, we see project scholars have tended to adopt an 'order view' to explain how project actors establish and maintain clear role structures and harmonious relations to cope with uncertainty, rather

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than taking a ‘conflict view’ focusing on conflict-ridden negotiations and power struggles. The order and conflict view thus allows us to better understand what project actors do when they shape strategy in inter-organizational change projects, thus tackling the actuality of project based working and management comprising “how practitioners think in action, in the local situation of a living present” (Cicmil et al., 2006: 676). Here, a focus on strategic practice as the doing of strategy can provide insight into intentions, political agendas, personal drives, and the identification of tensions and power asymmetries (Cicmil et al., 2006). Strategic practices are here understood as a series of activities that aim to shape the future (Burgelman et al., 2018) and are seen as embedded in wider organizational contexts (Kornberger et al., 2021; Seidl & Whittington, 2014). Strategic practices have both ordering and conflicting implications and are relevant for the study of dynamics of power relations in project settings because they are powerful practices that represent and (re)establish power relations (Carter et al., 2008). Thus, understanding strategic practices enables researchers to analyze the dynamics of power relations.

Based upon the discussion above, the central research question in this paper is *how do power relations and strategic practices shape inter-organizational strategic change projects?* To answer this query, we draw from an ethnoventionist research approach of the interorganizational strategic change project called Innovation Atelier, from its start in 2012 to its end in 2017. The ethnoventionist approach uses ethnography to facilitate intervention strategies intended to improve organisations (Van Marrewijk et al., 2010). The Innovation Atelier (further abbreviated in this paper with IA) is a change project strategically initiated by four operators of telecom and utilities networks, and five contractors, responsible for the relocation and expansion of these networks. The IA contract is based upon a partnership philosophy (Ruijter et al., 2020), namely in which all operators and contractors are perceived as equal partners, to reduce process costs and delivery time and to enhance the quality of their joint collaboration.

The findings show how enabling and constraining strategic practices, in the context of four power relations, led to the ultimate failure of the IA to achieve its strategic goals. Empirically, our field study is deeply grounded in the actuality of interorganizational projects implementing strategic change. Theoretically, the study contributes to the debate on interorganizational projects (Cropper & Palmer, 2008; Stjerne et al., 2018) by demonstrating how the delegating of power to shop-floor workers enabled the provision of innovations, but also triggered middle managers to constrain the implementation of these innovations. Power pressure by contractors and private operators enabled the successful implementation of innovations in pilot projects, but not in the permanent organizations. Top managers decided that first supportive ICT tools needed to be developed and terminated the change project. These findings show the long-term effects of strategic change projects, which has been underacknowledged in earlier studies (see Sydow & Braun, 2018). Furthermore, we shed light on the potential relations and shifts in power in strategic projects as asked for by others (Martinsuo et al., 2021). Finally, we show that strategic change is also shaped by what actors fail to do, casting light on the uncredited ‘unheroic’ strategic practices (Whittington, 1996).

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, we discuss the theoretical concepts of order and conflict, power as relation, and strategic practice in relation to interorganizational projects. Next, in the methods section, we show how we operationalized our ethnographic field research, involving 93 interviews with top and middle managers and shop-floor workers, and participant-observation during 70 meetings. Subsequently, in the findings section we structure our empirical data according to ordering and conflicting strategic practices for analytical purposes, enabling us to truly unpack the interorganizational change project. We then discuss the implications of our findings and conclude by summarizing our main contributions, limitations and suggestions for future research.

## 2. Interorganizational projects: order and conflict, power, and strategy

The interest in interorganizational projects has recently grown in project studies (e.g. Jones & Lichtenstein, 2008.; Stjerne et al., 2018; Sydow & Braun, 2018) Sydow and Braun (2018). distinguish and discuss four distinct features of interorganizational projects. The first feature is the bridging of interorganizational relations, which allows organizations to temporarily work together. Second, is the disordering of hierarchies in interorganizational teams as members of diverse organizations with different work practices and cultures are working together over a fixed period of time (Van Marrewijk & Veenswijk, 2006). The third feature is the blurring of organizational boundaries which support employees from different organizations in working together on one task. Fourth, interorganizational projects are excellent settings for the reframing of individual behavior and learning new behavior. Specifically, inter-organizational strategic projects function as ‘temporary trading zones’ (Lenfle & Söderlund, 2018) in which employees of various organizations create, through strategic practices, new power relationships to coordinate the project. The resultant sense of non-hierarchical equality, togetherness, and common purpose can facilitate transformation in the collaboration between project partners. Simultaneously, interorganizational projects are constituted by multiple practices, embodied in and accomplished by various actors from different organizations who bring along different work practices, narratives, norms and values (Levering et al., 2013). For example, Schruijer (2021) asserted conflicts in inter-organizational teams related to overrated perceptions of own-group power over others. In another example, Dille et al. (2018) found conflicts between organizations over the pace of change in a strategic project, which was based upon variation on the notion of temporality. Consequently, strategic change is especially complex to investigate in interorganizational contexts, due to its multi-actor and multi-level nature, and the power struggles, which are central to such contexts (Löwstedt et al., 2018).

The growing popularity of interorganizational projects is accompanied by a quest by project scholars for a deeper theoretical and empirical understanding of this type of project (Cropper & Palmer, 2008; Jones & Lichtenstein, 2008; Sydow & Braun, 2018; Van Marrewijk et al., 2016). In this paper we do so by developing a conceptual framework which includes an order and conflict view (Burrell & Morgan, 1979), the concept of strategic practices (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009) and the conceptualization of power as a relation (Clegg, 1989; Fleming & Spicer, 2014). A conceptual framework is “a network of interlinked concepts that together provide a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon” (Jabareen, 2009: 51). To encapsulate our theoretical framework, we adopt an order and conflict view on strategic change projects to account for how change is enabled and constrained through practice and to shed light on power relations in an interorganizational context. To further unearth how power relations are represented and (re)produced, we focus on the strategic practices of project actors at diverse levels. The conceptual framework helps us to understand how power relations and strategic practices of project actors shape the process of interorganizational change projects over time and in practice.

### 2.1. Order and conflict view

In his influential paper ‘Order and Conflict Theories of Social Problems as Competing Ideologies’ sociologist Horton (1966) provided an account of the differences between major theoretical frameworks in the social sciences and identified two main types of explanations; order and conflict analysis of society Burrell & Morgan (1979). further developed the order and conflict analysis and pay attention to order elements of integration, functional co-ordination, consensus, commitment, cohesion, solidarity, reciprocity, co-operation, stability and persistence, and simultaneously focus upon conflict elements of coercion, division, hostility, dissensus, conflict, mal-integration, change, disintegration

(Burrell & Morgan, 1979: 19) Burrell & Morgan (1979). suggested that the order and conflict views are two sides of the same coin; they are not mutually exclusive. For example, example, Levering et al. (2013) identified continuity of some interorganizational project practices and change of others, both influenced by combinations of self-reinforcing mechanisms.

A large number of studies assuming that an interorganizational project constitutes an inherently and extremely transient context motivates project actors to create and organize some measure of order and permanence (e.g. Bechky, 2006.). These studies often understand interorganizational projects as episodic, stable and homogenous static entities (e.g. Crawford, 2014.), which has been challenged by other studies that lean towards a more critical conflict view (Cicmil et al., 2006; Sydow & Braun, 2018). Viewed from a conflict perspective, organizing is a process infused with overt or covert power struggles in which people strategically attempt to impose and sustain or resist and overthrow an emerging order (Clegg & Kreiner, 2013). For example, in their study on the Panama Canal Expansion megaproject, Van Marrewijk et al. (2016) used the order and conflict perspective to explore the power struggle over temporary roles between client and agent and showed that collaborative arrangements and hierarchic positions are seen as potentially contested; i.e. as something to fight for and to fight over in negotiations between actors with conflicting interests. Therefore, the order and conflict view asks for a closer inspection of the concept of power.

## 2.2. Power as a social relation

Power is, besides a number of exceptions (e.g. Cropper & Palmer, 2008.; Jones & Lichtenstein, 2008; Van Marrewijk et al., 2016), often underacknowledged in interorganizational project studies. Projects can be perceived as temporary organizational entities constructed from and constituting relations of power (Clegg & Kreiner, 2013; DeFillippi & Arthur, 1998). At the same time, these relations are objects of ongoing construction and contestation as partners in a project are variably able to exploit the ambiguity that characterizes collaboration in interorganizational projects (Davenport & Leitch, 2005). For example, Mahalingam et al. (2011) described institutional differences between the bureaucratic orientation of the client versus the professional stance of the contracting firms resulting in conflicts in daily work practices. Power relations in such projects are not fixed and stable, but can change over time, in what Huxham & Beech (2008: 571) call ‘the passing of power batons’. Power relations in projects are thus formed, reproduced or transformed through concrete strategic practices and interaction of interrelated people and organizations in strategic change projects (Levina & Orlikowski, 2009; Marshall, 2006). For example, planned action may be interrupted by situational contingencies and force actors to attend to other matters of concern (Clegg & Kreiner, 2013).

In interorganizational project, the absence of a clear hierarchical organizational structure among partners (Jones & Lichtenstein, 2008), might give rise to conflicts (e.g. Clegg & Kreiner, 2013.). For example, at the interface between organizations as they negotiate their roles, positions, sphere of influence, interrelations and differences (Van Marrewijk et al., 2016). Operating in a field of tension, oscillating between collaboration and conflict, some organizations will have more power or leverage to influence the strategic change project. In sum, power is a relational construct that is continuously (re)produced and (re)shaped by strategic practices of diverse actors in an interorganizational context (Levina & Orlikowski, 2009).

## 2.3. Strategic practices

Strategic projects are shaped by their implementation, which focuses on the relation between strategy and practice through describing the course of events as emergent interplay between strategizing and doing (Kornberger et al., 2021). This interplay is embedded in wider organizational contexts, and are integral to longer strategic processes of

planning, decision-making, change and outcomes, which are all crucial for a comprehensive understanding of strategy making (Kornberger & Clegg, 2011; Seidl & Whittington, 2014; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). In these contexts, strategies continuously (re)produce and (re)shape power relations through strategic practices as they intend to shape the future (Burgelman et al., 2018). Notwithstanding the importance of strategic practices, we do not know much about the long term effects of strategy (Kornberger et al., 2021).

Strategic practices shape change, which is here understood as a multi-level and multi-actor process of meaning-making, negotiating and organizing (Van den Ende et al., 2020), influenced by interwoven cognitive, emotional and territorial agendas of managers and shop-floor workers (Grundy, 2000) Löwstedt et al. (2018). found that project mind-sets and skill-sets afforded project actors legitimacy to act as strategists on all organizational levels. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the relation between these different levels of analysis is co-constitutive and recursive, as contexts, fields and processes also shape practices and actors. We understand strategic change as continuous, uncertain, and transpiring during day-to-day interactions and activities (Hornstein, 2015). This produces everyday changes at the micro-level, which simultaneously serve to (re)shape organizational processes, fields and institutional contexts (Kornberger et al., 2021; Van den Ende & Van Marrewijk, 2019).

## 3. Methods

The study was executed through an ethnoventionist approach, which combines ethnography and the doing of interventions (Van Marrewijk et al., 2010). Ethnography is an excellent method for studying strategic practices as it describes, interprets and explains practices through direct data collection by researchers who are physically present over a long period of time (O’Reilly, 2005). The contribution of ethnographic fieldwork is well recognized in project and organization studies (Pink et al., 2013; Ruijter et al., 2020; Ybema et al., 2009), but frequently lacks explicit attention to strategic management issues (Van Marrewijk et al., 2010). An exception is the study of Pitsis et al. (2003), who used ethnographic methods to help the project management of the Sydney Harbour NorthSide Storage Tunnel to reflect upon their project culture and the collaboration between the project partners. In sum, the essence of the ethnoventionist approach is to obtain a deeper understanding of organisational change.

The combined role of ethnographer and consultant introduces methodological problems of subjectivity (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006) and sympathetic interpretations (Vaara, 2003). Reflecting upon the roles sheds light on both the theory and practice of how applied fieldwork is done (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006). In the IA study, the first author was hired for one day a week to help the involved partners to improve their mutual collaboration. In this role, unintentional and intentional interventions were executed. Unintentional interventions are those incidental interventions that arose from informal talks, lunches and gatherings while intentional interventions would comprise organizing workshops, arranging meetings with CEOs, sharing advice and giving feedback to participants. The impact of the first author on the IA process was on the creation of awareness among participants about their collaboration Humphreys (2005). calls these insights self-reflexive personal vignettes, which add authenticity and exposure to interpretations, and, importantly, are useful for others.

### 3.1. Research instruments

The research team consisted of a senior researcher (first author), seven master students, and one post-doc researcher (second author). The senior researcher was physically present in all meetings from the beginning to the end of the strategic change project. The seven students, under supervision of the senior researcher, participated in the study to collect a more diverse data set. To familiarize with the sector, processes

and technology, the students conducted fieldwork during construction site visits. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, observation and desk research. These will be discussed below.

At the start of the IA, in 2012, the senior researcher executed 12 semi-structured interviews, and presented the findings to the IA partners in 2013. Subsequently, each year between February to May of 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017 (except for 2016; only one) two master students conducted semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow the freedom to explore the ideas and perceptions of the participants in a conversational tone, but it also contains some fixed topics and pre-determined questions that can be compiled in order to obtain a certain level of standardization (O'Reilly, 2005). Together, the research team executed 93 interviews with members of the two IA workgroups, which consisted in total of 30 representatives from all involved organizations, and of the steering group, consisting of 15 top and middle management representatives (see Table 1). Interview selection was related to the interviewee's centrality to the IA strategic change project; causing some IA members to be interviewed multiple times, while others, for example work group members of contractors 4 and 5, were not interviewed at all. However, informal conversations were held with all members of the IA. The interviewees agreed to allow the researchers to record the semi-structured interviews, which were then transcribed, coded and analyzed in Dutch, while used fieldnotes and quotes were translated into English.

Participant observation was conducted in almost all of the 30 steering group meetings, which typically lasted between two and three hours and were, on average, organized six times a year. In total 25 steering group meetings have been recorded and used to make notes on the progress of the strategic change process. Participant observation is a strong research instrument for obtaining an in-depth understanding of organizations (Ybema et al., 2009). Furthermore, a larger part of the 40 workgroup meetings have been observed, while 20 of these have been partly recorded. Workgroup meetings typically lasted four to eight hours and were organized every other week. The recordings have been used to select and transcribe relevant scenes. To support the triangulation or researcher findings (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006), the first author organized regular meetings with the master students, aimed at

supervising, sharing analyses and results, and giving feedback. Finally, desk research on the strategic plans of involved organizations and reports helped to understand the details and challenges of the involved operators.

### 3.2. Data Analysis

To ensure a rigorous analysis of the field data (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), the senior researcher was supported by a post-doc researcher, someone who had not been involved in the field, to (re)analyze all interview transcripts and fieldnotes. The perspectives and analyses from the insider (senior researcher) and outsider (post-doc) were then drawn together in order to obtain a more in-depth, holistic and enriched view on a social reality, through different prisms (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006). Such an analysis, where data are understood within the context of the case, strengthens claims made about actors' interpretations.

A five-step interpretive method was engaged for the analysis (LeCompte & Schensul, 2013). In the first step, members of the research team familiarized with the processes and practices of the joint building process. In the second step, after all data had been gathered and organized, all interview transcripts and observational notes were reread to find which power relations were dominant in IA. Resulting from this step, four power relations were analyzed: (1) between operators and contractors; (2) between public and private operators, (3) between top management and work floor, and (4) between the IA project and the partner organizations. In the third step, the researchers constructed a timeline of the reported events, milestones, and incidents in the IA project. In a fourth step, the timeline and the order and conflict view (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) were used to identify ordering and conflicting strategic practices in the collected empirical data. The researchers went through multiple readings of observational accounts, interview transcripts and the master theses. From these iterations between tentative assertions and field data (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006) the ordering strategic practices emerged; signing a partnership contract, delegating innovations, joint reflecting, pressuring, temporal tailoring, and clarifying new practices. Additionally, the conflicting strategic practices of delaying, securing jobs, limiting activities and ghosting emerged. In the fifth and final step, the preliminary findings were discussed, as a form of 'member-checking' (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006), with practitioners in the telecom and utilities sector to verify outcomes.

### 4. Context

The study focusses on the interorganizational strategic change project IA, in which four operators Water (1.400 employees), Energy (7.200 employees), Telecom (11.000 employees) and Cable (8.000 employees) and five utility contractors Stone (250 employees), Brick (500 employees), Concrete (350 employees), Clay (580 employees) and Sand (900 employees) participated (the company names have been anonymized, see Figure 1). Diverse spatial, societal and economic developments forced operators to improve their collaboration in the joint planning, coordinating, realizing and funding of the construction and maintenance of utilities and telecom networks. First, there is increasing competition over subsurface space, which makes it difficult for network owners to act independently, as networks are, for a larger part, realized in the underground. Second, the construction of new, and the maintenance of old, networks are a significant threat to the quality and societal use of urban space as these networks are not visible, difficult to access and object of slow degradation. This includes frequent damage of (new) pavement and nuisance such as road blocks, noise, limited access to network services, disruptions and temporary malfunction all adversely impacting local quality of urban life (Biersteker et al., 2021). Local governments no longer allow network owners to 'go at it alone' in construction and maintenance work, indicating that operators can no longer work according their own planning. Third, (hidden) cables and networks, instable subsoils, archeological findings, and contamination

**Table 1**  
Representation of interviews during research period.

Organization	Interviewees	Number of interviews				
		2012	2014	2015	2016	2017
Energy (Operator 1)	Steergroup	1	2	3	2	3
	Workgroup	-	4	4	1	3
Telecom (Operator 2)	Steergroup	1	-	1	1	2
	Workgroup	-	2	3	1	3
Water (Operator 3)	Steergroup	-	-	1	1	1
	Workgroup	-	-	1	-	1
Cable (Operator 4)	Steergroup	1	-	-	1	1
	Workgroup	-	-	1	1	1
Stone (Contractor 1)	Steergroup	1	1	1	1	1
	Workgroup	-	1	1	1	-
Brick (Contractor 2)	Steergroup	1	2	2	1	2
	Workgroup	-	2	2	1	1
Concrete (Contractor 3)	Steergroup	1	1	-	-	-
	Workgroup	-	2	1	1	2
Clay (Contractor 4)	Steergroup	-	-	1	1	1
	Workgroup	-	-	-	-	-
Sand (Contractor 5)	Steergroup	-	-	1	1	1
	Workgroup	-	-	-	-	-
Others		6	-	-	1	-
Total		12	18	24	15	24

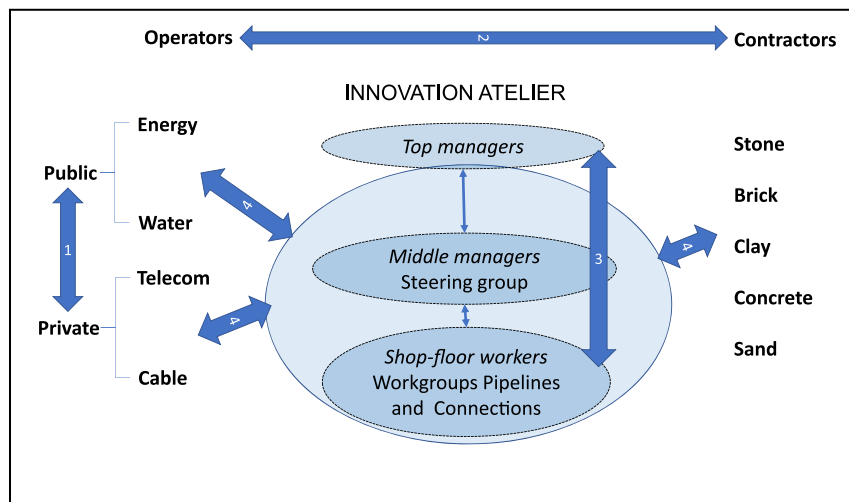


Figure 1. Power relations 1, 2, 3 and 4 in the Innovation Atelier

of subsoil are risks which increasingly cause delays and budget overruns in construction projects (Biersteker et al., 2021; Vilvenhan & Kalidindi, 2016). Fourth and final, the joint building process requires innovation and streamlining as Dutch house owners complain over long and complex procedures, sometimes resulting in new houses being delivered without utilities (NRC Handelsblad, 14<sup>th</sup> of June 2017). Relocation and expansion of these networks are the most common causes for time delay and cost overrun in housing projects (Vilvenhan & Kalidindi, 2016). However, the contractors are in fierce competition over prices, operate in a heavily competitive market with little profit and almost no financial room for innovation.

All of these developments force the four operators and five utility contractors to innovate and improve their joint building process through the IA strategic change project. Top managers involved in the IA remained positioned in the permanent organizations, while middle managers and shop-floor managers of involved organizations were working parttime in the IA (see Figure 1). Working simultaneously both in a project and in a permanent organization is a central characteristic of project-based organizations (Sydow et al., 2004). The IA concerned a reduction of the joint building process costs by 20%, the improvement of customer satisfaction to a minimum of 8 out of 10, a reduction of delivery time by 20%, and a minimal profit margin of 5% for the contractors. Later in 2013, two other operators Cable and Water and two more contractors, Clay and Sand joined the initiative. In the studied region, Energy is the largest partner participating in more than 50% of all joint building activities, while Water (40%), Telecom (30%), and Cable (15%) participate less frequently. For a comprehensive overview of the strategic change process between 2012 and 2017, see Table 2.

## 5. Findings

Based upon our research, four significant power relations have been found in the IA strategic change project. These relations are between; (1) public and private operators, (2) operators and contractors, (3) top management and shop-floor workers, and (4) project and permanent organizations. The power relations will be explained first, after which the ordering and conflicting practices in these relations are discussed.

The first power relation was in the relation between public and private operators. The utilities and telecom sector has undergone a transformation over the last three decades due to policies of de-regulations and technological innovations. In the late 1980s, the successful restructuring of the telecom market stimulated competition and technological developments and resulted in better customer services. Consequently, the operators Cable and Telecom are commercial organizations, swiftly adapting to new technological developments, and

focused upon efficiency and cost reduction. In contrast, Energy and Water are (semi)public organizations prioritizing public service and societal impact. The differences in interests and cultures of the public and private operators in the IA project hinder smooth collaboration.

The second relation uncovered was between operators and contractors, as “historically, the relation between operators and contractors was, in general, really top down” (Interview manager Telecom, April 2014). The unequal power balance between operators and contractors is caused by dependency; “in our market we only have very few clients. We are very dependent on them, so a normal business discussion is difficult because we fear for repercussions” (interview manager Sand, April 2015). The operators provide financial resources, monitor the project and control contractors’ forecasts, plans and milestones, while the responsibility for day-to-day management of the construction project is delegated to the contractors, who manage the project in terms of agreed upon objectives. “The operators... they decide. We have an open discussion, but then they say at the end ‘we will not do it’” (interview manager Sand, April 2015). In this relation the contractor acts either as a broker between the temporary and permanent organization, or is a steward whose job is to manage and guard the operator’s project and objectives (Turner & Keegan, 2001). The contractors strive for a good relationship with their clients but complain over small financial margins, leaving them with no room for innovation: “we want to innovate, to collaborate smarter and we only saw a pressure on the prices with no room for innovation and better collaboration” (Interview manager Stone, February 2014). Contractors are “still seen as profiteers by the operators and they cannot be trusted. That’s the overall picture that prevails within the utility companies” (interview manager Energy, March 2016).

The third power relation was in the top-down relation between top management and shop-floor workers in the IA partner organizations. Traditionally, strategic change in the utilities and telecom sector is, as in many organizations (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016), organized in a top-down fashion, giving little room for bottom up initiatives. For example, a few years earlier, in 2010, the top management of Water started a drastic top-down change program which failed due to heavy resistance from employees and work councils. Notwithstanding the bottom-up design of the IA strategic change project, a lack of mandate and delegation of power is frequently experienced with project actors; “representatives of Energy failed to give permission to continue with the implementation [of innovations] as they felt they didn’t have mandate for such a permission” (observations, March 2014).

The fourth and final power relation was between the IA project and the partner organizations. Decisions in the partner organizations had direct influence on the strategic project. For example, “a new project

**Table 2**  
Timeline of the Innovation Atelier strategic change project.

Time	Milestone	Description	Significance of milestone
November 2012	Signing of contract	5 partners sign contract	Energy, Telecom, Brick, Stone and Concrete start discussions on how to reach change objectives
January 2013	Workshop contractors	Focus on different roles needed	Contractors Union organize a workshop to prepare firms for new collaborative practices of work
September 2013	Design of process	Agreement on change design and objective	Planned bottom-up approach of process with process consultant. Shop-floor workers come up with improvements
October 2013	Organizing workshops	Workshops to prepare shop-floor workers	Employees of partner organizations reflect upon joint work practices and learn to 'think culturally'
November 2013	Shared workshops	Experts reflect upon the joint process	Reflection on work practices. 'Networks' and 'connections' groups explore possible improvements
December 2014	Go/No Go	Steering group support experiments	All partners agree except for Energy which postpone their decision with two months
February 2014	Selection of pilots	Selection of projects	Pilot projects where shop-floor workers can experiment with new work practices
May 2014	Upscaling	Up scaling of number of pilot projects	Senior management of Energy embrace change program of 'Connections' and create project management support
Sept 2014	Evaluation of pilot	Qualitative analysis of opinions of experts	Experiences of shop-floor workers with shared intake, shared engineering and digitalizing of drawings
October 2014	Water and Cable	All partners now participate in program	The missing operators are finally joining after discussions with their top management
December 2014	Go/No Go	Energy decides to put process on hold	Energy representative is fired
February 2015	Restart Project	New manager of Energy	Energy and Water need a 'business case'
April 2015	Start Lean approach		Expansion of project management support with Lean consultant. Start of running and changing days
March 2015	Stop pipes workgroup	Energy starts impact study	Energy needs 3-6 months of study to understand the impact on their organization
Summer 2015	Support sessions		Process consultant and Lean consultant. Gain support for change and to adapt
September 2015	Start pilot 500 cases	Shared team intake cases	Team consisting of employees from all partners jointly do intake one day a week
November 2015	Selection of platform	Use of a digital service platform	Digital platform has to support the exchange of digital information in the chain
December 2015	Go/No Go	Partners decide upon up scaling innovations	Partners decide upon implement innovations in two speeds
	Two speeds		

**Table 2 (continued)**

Time	Milestone	Description	Significance of milestone
January 2016		Implementation of innovations	Innovations are implemented in the organizational processes of telecom partners
March 2016	Financial agreement	Costs were divided among partners	
June 2016		Positive business case	Evaluation of joint building process pilot projects
Sept 2016	Final agreement	Decision for implementation	All partners decided to implement the new joint building process
December 2016	Hesitation Of Water		New process was implemented at one contractor and reflected upon the progress
March 2017	Running process	Daily operations of joint building practices	Implementation of new process at contractor
Summer 2017	Termination of IA	Decision to stop the project	The operators stopped the project
Spring 2018	TV publicity	Using the innovations at national level	The national platform of operators agreed to improve the joint building process

member, from Energy, informed us on the reorganization plans in their organization plans. We realized these plans would have a large impact on the collaboration between Energy and the contractors” (Observations, April 2014). The other way around, the transfer of innovations or new knowledge from the IA project to the wider network of partners was often fraught with difficulties. For example, for successful implementation, the contractors needed access to the IT systems of Energy and Water; “one should be able to see in the system whether there is a cable located in the underground or not” (Interview manager Cable, April 2014). This request for access was denied by the IT departments for many years, thus slowing down the strategic change process.

To cope with these four power relations diverse strategic practices of ordering were used by top managers and shop-floor employees. However, conflicting strategic practices of operators’ middle managers constrained the change project, which was finally stopped by top management. In Figure 2 below a simplified overview of strategic practices in the IA are given. We will follow the timeline in the presentation of the findings while each step in Figure 2 will be discussed in detail below.

### 5.1. Ordering strategic practices of top managers and shop-floor workers

Our study found three ordering practices by top managers and shop-floor workers, which manifested in the early stages of the IA strategic change process. Namely, *signing a partnership contract*, *delegating innovations*, and *collective reflection*.

The first ordering practice found was *signing a partnership contract* by top managers of operators and contractors to overcome the traditional unequal relationship between operators and contractors. The contract, specifically focusing upon innovation in the collaboration, was unique in the sector and unconventional based upon a partnership philosophy, namely in which all operators and contractors are perceived as equal partners and collaboration is based upon trust and reciprocity (Ruijter et al., 2020). Narratives of ‘partnership’ and ‘marriage’ were frequently used to discuss the relationship between the partners in the IA (observations, April 2016). Not surprisingly, a long period of negotiating, discussing and modifying was needed to agree upon a partnership philosophy. Finally, during a short ceremony in the autumn of 2012, the top management of two operators (Energy and Telecom) and three contractors (Brick, Stone and Concrete) signed a 57-page thick contract. Water didn’t sign the contract as it was afraid for the (legal) consequences of the unconventional contract; “we are not in the position to

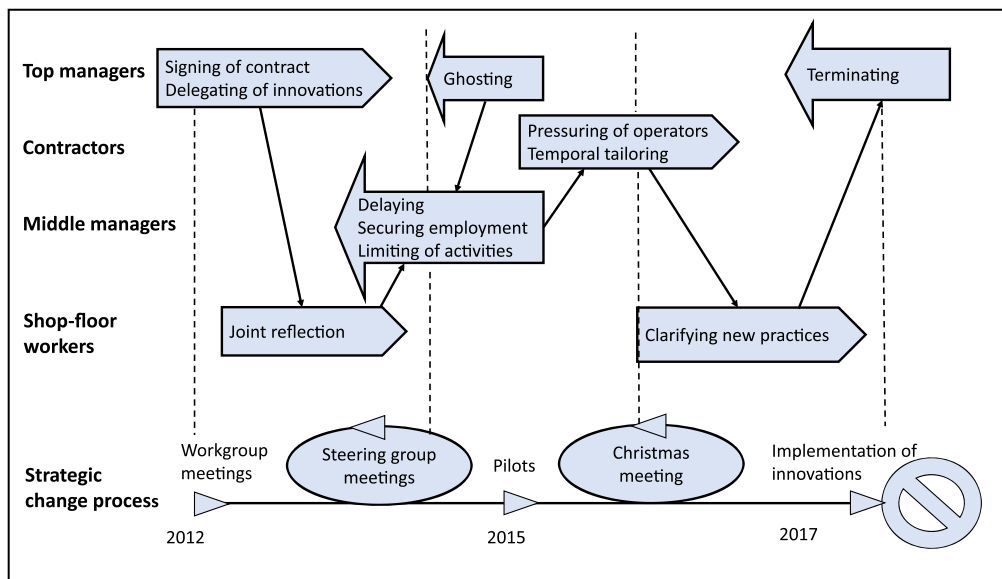


Figure 2. Ordering and conflicting practices in the IA strategic change project.

experiment with a new process” (interview top manager Water, 2013).

The second ordering practice of top managers was *delegating innovations* to overcome the traditional power relations between operators and contractors and between top management and shop-floor workers. The empowering of shop-floor workers in strategic change processes is very unconventional in the utilities and telecom sector. Generally, top managers in this sector organize a change process as a technocratic, step-wise endeavor, far away from the work-floor (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). In contrast, in the IA, top managers agreed that shop-floor workers can best provide innovations; “at a certain moment trust had grown to a level that we finally dared to delegate it” (interview with top manager Energy, September 2014). Two workgroups, called ‘pipelines’ and ‘connections’, were formed, each consisting of 15 representatives from all involved organizations. Innovations in these workgroups had to be presented to a steering group committee in which about 15 middle management representatives could “talk constructively with one another about things that [they could] start doing together” (interview manager Concrete, February 2014) and report back to top management. Together, they would make decisions on whether to implement these innovations in the joint building process.

The third ordering practice was *collective reflection* on problems by shop-floor workers involved in the IA to streamline different perspectives between public and private operators, and between operators and contractors. During regular sessions, workgroups collectively reflected upon the joint building process, thus giving participants the opportunity to swiftly identify problems and suggest improvements: “we are the experts, we can immediately spot the bottlenecks” (interview employee Brick, February 2015). Indeed, collective reflection can be understood as an intervention instrument to change work practices (Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009). During the regular workgroup meetings “after lunchtime, the group discusses initiatives for improving the joint building process and suggests trying this in pilot projects” (Observations, February 2016). Over time, shop-floor workers of both operators and contractors started to learn from each other and establish better, more trustworthy relationships: “Some trust is growing now as we do understand each other better now. You understand each other’s interests and it is easier to call or meet each other” (interview workgroup employee Energy, February 2014). Eventually, once the operator workers felt more affiliated and at ease with their contractor colleagues, more engineering tasks were assigned to the contractors in order to improve the process. For example, to engineer a new utility or telecom connection, formerly all operators separately contacted the client, which accumulated to as much as 20

emails the first day only (observations, April 2016). In the new arrangement, only one contractor employee contacts the client, thereby reducing both costs and process time while increasing client satisfaction. The majority of shop-floor workers in the workgroups were positive about the joint reflection on problems, and they were not afraid to ventilate their opinion and to clarify their standpoints; “it is very open, everyone dares to say what they want or what the problem is, which provides clarity” (Interview workgroup employee Energy, March, 2014).

In sum, the ordering strategic practices (see Table 3 for overview with illustrative quotes) helped to minimize, rationalize, and smoothen tensions in the power relations in the IA project.

## 5.2. Conflicting strategic practices of middle managers and top managers

Initially, the operators’ middle managers supported the bottom-up change design; “great, yes, it is really bottom-up” (Interview steering group manager Telecom, Feb 2014). However, soon they started to realize their difficult position between the workgroups and their parent organizations. Our analysis showed four conflicting practices of middle managers and top managers strengthening imbalanced power relations.

The first conflicting practice is *delaying decision-making* by middle managers of operators, especially over the implementation of innovations that influenced all operator organizations. These managers took back control over their relation with contractors by claiming their role in the steering group on whether to implement innovations in the partner organizations. For example, Telecom was involved in a post-merger integration process, which demanded a different timing to implement innovations. In a same way, operator Energy executed a massive internal reorganization program, which slowed down the IA process; “if we had not had this change program, we would have progressed much quicker [with the IA]” (interview middle manager Energy, March 2014). Furthermore, the practice of delaying enlarged the tension in the power relation between public and private operators in the IA. The operators Cable and Telecom and the contractors Stone, Brick and Concrete wanted to start piloting soon after the start of the project. “In my opinion, especially those who work for a contractor want to go much faster, they want to get to work” (Interview employee Telecom, February 2015). According to respondents, the public operators Water and Energy have a more complex and therefore slower decision-making process. The IA design assumed that all participants would move forward at the same pace to achieve success. “It has to be all or nothing,

**Table 3**  
Ordering strategic practices

Strategic practices	Actors	Power relations	Illustrating quotes
<i>Signing a partnership contract</i>	Top managers	1,2,3,4	<p>“Of course, we remain client and contractor, but at some point, we will have to meet each other at an equal level” (interview employee Concrete, March 2014).</p> <p>“Some in our company think that you have to be harsh on the contractor, to act the boogeyman” (interview top manager of Energy, September 2012).</p>
<i>Delegating innovations</i>	Top managers	3,4	<p>“Use the contractors for heaven’s sake, they are the experts, so let them help you to become better” (interview top manager Energy, September 2014).</p> <p>“We at the shop-floor can analyze and judge the processes we are working on much better than management because we work directly with these processes on a day-to-day basis. We are the experts; we can immediately spot the bottlenecks” (interview employee Brick, February 2015).</p> <p>“The Workgroup is more a whole, they are really working together. On the other hand, everyone has their own background and agenda, and that’s dynamic” (interview consultant, March 2016).</p>
<i>Joint reflecting</i>	Shop-floor workers	1,2	<p>“We really know the processes and think about solutions. We now listen to each other much better and have a better understanding” (interview manager Energy, May 2016).</p> <p>“During the Workgroups, people made jokes about work practices or broken computers and had some small talk, whereas they behaved like colleagues” (observation workgroup, April 2016).</p> <p>“Much easier to sell the ideas to those with a shop-floor position as you are on the same wave length; you relate to each other” (interview employee Brick, April 2015).</p> <p>“Well, at IA you are stimulated to think out of the box, searching for improvements and solutions. This is obviously not our standard daily work. It’s fun to do something completely different” (workgroup member Energy, March 2016).</p>

because in the IA there are a large number of partners. If they collaborate together, there will be an optimal outcome because everything is correlated” (Interview manager Water, April 2015). Since all needed to move together, the slowest (Water) and most powerful (Energy) set the pace. The topic of delaying in inter-organizational collaboration has been notified in other studies (Dille et al., 2018)

The second conflicting practice of middle managers is *securing employment*, especially relevant for members of the public operators. The differences between the (semi)public organizations Water and Energy and the private organizations Cable, Telecom and all contractors were strengthened as middle managers of public partners were reluctant to implement the innovations as they feared a loss of jobs: “they [middle managers] see a disappearance of jobs and they are afraid; therefore, they are more skeptical. They see processes will have to be overthrown, perhaps within their layer” (Interview

employee Telecom, April 2015). While the private organizations were mainly focused on competition, cost reduction and profit, the public organizations were occupied with possible downsizing and job losses. To all participants, it was clear that the process of implementing innovations would have (large) consequences for future employability, the type of work tasks, and the position of middle managers in the involved organizations. Job loss was a very sensitive topic, noticeable in both work- and steering group meetings. An Energy employee stated that “in the six years I have worked for Energy, I haven’t had a project that was so sensitive in the organization” (interview employee Energy, April, 2015). The disappearance of jobs would have direct consequences for middle managers’ departments. Overall, the relations between public and private operators became tenser and more difficult.

The third conflicting practice of middle managers is the practice of *limiting activities* of the IA project, in order to re-establish the asymmetric power relation between operators and contractors, and especially between project and permanent organizations. Limiting was noticeable in the limited selection of pilot projects for the workgroups to practice their improvements of the joint building process. According to the managers of operators, very few projects would match the selection criteria to function as a pilot project. Respondents complained about this socially constructed limitation as “80% of their project can be done by our workgroup” (observation during workgroup meeting, November 2015). It was also observed that access to digital networks of operators was limited; “X claims that Telecom’s management is not supporting the opening up of their digital networks because of competitiveness” (Field notes, workgroup meeting, November 2013). Furthermore, shop-floor workers were not allowed to take initiatives in their departments; “I am allowed to join the [pipelines] workgroup meetings, but apart from that, internally nothing” (Interview employee Energy, March 2015). In this way, the space given by operators to experiment with and apply innovations was very limited.

The fourth conflicting practice was *ghosting* by top managers. Many of the respondents perceived the lack of mandate of middle managers to find its origin in the absence of proper support, commitment and involvement from top management of the operators: “so we need to have the commitment of the higher management, without this commitment there’s a big risk for failure” (Interview middle manager Sand, March 2015). Ghosting practices of top managers in strategic projects have been found in earlier studies (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). The acquaintance of top managers with consequences of a bottom-up change process was low; they were largely absent in the process, even though they were expected to facilitate IA’s implementation; “those companies are big and so their top management doesn’t have time to sit around the table” (Interview middle manager Sand, March 2015). Consequently, middle managers of the operators had insufficient support from top management and authority to make decisions and implement changes; “[middle managers] do not want to make promises they cannot keep and do things they are not allowed to do” (Interview employee Concrete, February 2015). Hence, they became increasingly reluctant to voice their opinion and actively engage in discussions and decision-making during meetings.

The four conflicting strategic practices (see Table 4 for overview with illustrative quotes) helped middle managers to reclaim power in the IA project.

### 5.3. Ordering practices of contractors and shop-floor workers

The conflicting practices of middle managers in the steering group constrained the strategic change process as well as triggered strategic practices of contractors and shop-floor workers in the IA project. We found three different strategic practices to rebalance the emerged power relations in order to re-enable the IA process; *pressuring operators*, *temporal tailoring*, and *logging new practices*.



**Table 4**  
Constraining practices of middle managers and top managers.

Strategic practices	Actors	Power relations	Illustrating quotes
<i>Delaying decision making</i>	Middle managers	1, 2	<p>“3 to 6 more months are needed [by Energy] to round off the decision making procedures” (observation steering group meeting, December 2014).</p> <p>“Making a decision right away simply does not exist around here. This causes severe demotivation amongst contractors” (interview employee Telecom, March 2015).</p> <p>“Now it is often two steps forward and one backward, because afterward things seem unable to do” (steering group member Water, April 2016).</p> <p>“People would get frustrated because they could not continue” (Observation Workgroup, April 2016)</p> <p>“The private companies want to move on, because they are in competition. But the public companies don’t, they have less competition. They are in a comfort zone and they want to stay there” (interview middle manager Sand, April 2015)</p>
<i>Securing employment</i>	Middle managers	1	<p>“There actually comes more work to us, let’s be honest” (steering group member Stone, March 2016)</p> <p>“When we implement all innovations, this would result in maximum cost reduction in the process, but also have direct consequences for the employment with operators. This brings Energy into problems, and this shadows our project, but has not been named openly” (interview manager Brick, April 2014)</p> <p>“Their workers [of public operators] are in a comfort zone. But our company is not a comfort zone: if we don’t make any profit we’re out of business” (interview middle manager Sand, April 2015)</p> <p>“If you talk about IA at our workplace, everyone is like (sound: pfff), it really is priority number one among all employees of my departments. A lot of questions are asked, also towards the management. It brings a lot of concerns.” (workgroup member Energy, March 2016)</p>
<i>Limiting activities</i>	Middle managers	2,4	<p>“Since cases were selected every week, it could happen that one of the contractors would not have any cases for the week and therefore, should help others with their cases. As this happened more to Stone, the representative of this organization would leave early and be less motivated on those days” (Observation workgroup meeting, March 2016).</p> <p>“We are actually doing a lot of cases for other contractors. We want to work on our own cases as well. And that’s what pinches, you know, it does not feel right” (steering group member Stone, March 2016)</p>

**Table 4 (continued)**

Strategic practices	Actors	Power relations	Illustrating quotes
<i>Ghosting</i>	Top managers	2,3	<p>“[the IA] remains intangible [because it misses] someone who takes the lead” (interview middle manager Energy, April 2014).</p> <p>“[the IA] is free of obligations [which] is a pity [...] I don’t know who has to take the lead” (interview employee Water, March 2015).</p> <p>“X claims that Telecom’s management is not supporting the opening up of their digital networks because of competitiveness” (field notes, workgroup meeting, November 2013).</p> <p>“Now we are stuck. The only way we can make progress is when we get the green light and full commitment from top management” (interview employee Stone, February 2015).</p> <p>“I went to my manager and indicated that I no longer wanted to be a project leader if there was no support from the top” (informal conversation with Energy project manager, September 2015).</p>

The first strategic practice is *pressuring operators* by the contractors to get the IA strategic change process back on track and thus rebalance the unequal power relation between operators and contractors. The contractors were very much dissatisfied with the slow progress of the operators’ middle managers’ decision making. In the IA contract, it was agreed that contractors would not be compensated for a yearly cost indexing, but would benefit from expected cost reduction of 30%. However, the slow progress of implementing process improvements prevented contractors to benefit financially and, thus, to pressure the operators for faster movement, the contractors asked for help of the Contractors Union. This union represents contractors in discussions with operators on nation-wide regulations, laws and tendering procedures. Consequently, the Contractors Union blocked the tendering of new construction work by Water and Energy; “I have spoken with Water; we do no longer accept their conditions of tendering construction work” (representative of Contractors Union). In this power play with the union, operators were reminded to fulfill the promises made in the IA contract and continue with the implementation process. Furthermore, we observed social pressure of participants in the steering group to continue; nobody wanted to be responsible for the failure of IA after so much time, money and energy was invested in the process.

The second ordering practice is *temporal tailoring* by contractors and operators to adjust the different organizational speeds in the change process between public and private operators, operators and contractors, and the project and permanent organization. Contractors and private operators Telecom and Cable wanted to speed up the change process while Water and Energy slowed down the implementation of the pilots. “Some simply want to go faster, and the contractors are one of them” (steering group member Contractor A, March 2016). The tension over the speed of change was growing towards the end of 2015; “I had to say or we stop or we are going to do things differently. Well, that maybe was a strong message, however, it brought more understanding” (steering group Operator B, April 2016). A remarkable meeting just before Christmas 2015 turned the table as “the Telecom manager suggested to split the change process into two speeds; one fast lane with direct implementations for Telecom and Cable and one slow one for Energy and Water. Everybody wondered why they hadn’t thought about this earlier; there was a relief that the IA could go on” (observations

steering group meeting, December 2015). The steering group members decided for a dual track to enable the IA process. While the private operators directly implemented innovations, such as an app for checking the contamination of subsurface, the operators Energy and Water needed more time.

The third ordering practice found is *logging new practices* to smoothen the relations between top management and shop-floor workers, and project and permanent organizations. Top management of operators needed evidence of possible IA benefits; “my manager always asks; ‘what will be the benefit of it? And show it to me!’” (Interview with employee Water, April 2015). Especially Energy and Water asked the shop-floor workers to translate the proposed innovations into business cases as “she [Energy manager] has the dilemma that she doesn’t know when to say yes or no” (interview employee Energy, March 2015). Consequently, the IA organized a pilot of 500 cases in weekly workgroup sessions. This collective reflection upon new work practices in which shop-floor workers of operators and contractors exchanged potential process improvements resulted in a deeper mutual understanding. “The improvements were picked up faster, with more energy in the workgroup, which also resulted in enthusiasm of the steering group” (observation March–April 2016). For example, earlier, each separate operator checked in a database or ordered research on possible contaminated soil. The improvement was that the workgroup of joint operators now single checked the contaminated soil, thus reducing process time and waiting time. These improvements were logged in order to build a solid business case. “We can justify what we do and therefore improvements are really measured and visible” (Project manager Energy, March 2016). The business case shows a cost reduction of 42% in the engineering of a case (goal was 20%) compared to the start situation and a reduction of 29% (goal was 20%) in the time needed to prepare a case (internal Energy document, December 2015). A large part of these reductions was reached by reducing the number of checks on contaminated soil. As not all projects were finished (25%) the number of customer reactions was low, but the first reactions of customers were very promising (internal Energy document, December 2015). Based upon these figures, the steering group decided to implement the suggested innovations and start with Brick, which was perceived by respondents to be a major success. See for an overview of the ordering practices Table 5 below.

#### 5.4. Terminating by operators’ top managers

Notwithstanding the positive results of the pilot projects, the operators’ top managers used conflicting practice of *terminating* to end the IA project, thereby re-establishing power relations between operators and contractors, top management and shop-floor workers, and project and permanent organization. When, finally, the results of the IA came to top management level, they were hesitant to implement the process innovations given the large consequences for their organizations. During the execution of IA, the institutional field of the operators had changed. The need to coordinate the planning and execution of their work was still relevant, but recent societal trends of climate change, energy transition and urbanization demanded a faster strategic transformation of the operators, especially of Energy and Water. In interviews, the operators’ top managers acknowledged that the topic of subsurface network construction was not regular and not prioritized on their strategic agenda. The experiences from the IA change project have shown top managers the need for supportive ICT tools. Paradoxically, the operators’ top managers want to facilitate the transformation by stopping the IA strategic project and developing new ICT tools. “Energy and Water, they do see the potential [of IA] but they are unwilling to continue” (workgroup member Sone, March 2016). Many respondents experienced the absence of proper support, commitment and involvement from operators’ top management; “you need to have support and trust from your manager and also the authority to engage in discussions and make decisions” (interview employee Energy, March 2014). Finally, in the summer of 2017, after arduous discussions, both the implementation of

**Table 5**  
Ordering practices.

Strategic practices	Actors	Power relations	Illustrating quotes
<i>Pressuring operators</i>	Contractors	2	<p>“I still believe what is on paper, that one A4. Yes, there are still simply things that we encounter every day” (steering group member Telecom, April 2016).</p> <p>“Cable always has been a bit more dynamic; they were already mean and lean and much more commercially driven. Certainly, this applies to Telecom as well now. So yes, there is much more pressure of course” (steering group member Stone, March 2016).</p> <p>“I think it’s fine if the process can be adopted more quickly than anything else, and then they can already realize those benefits that’s fine” (steering group member Energy, May 2016).</p> <p>“Those cable companies want to go as quickly as possible” (steering group member Energy, March 2016).</p> <p>“I don’t need feedback, not all the reports. Yes, a phone call, ‘okay, it works?’ If the contractor is satisfied, our people are satisfied, and well, I don’t need more. And the customer is connected” (steering group member Cable, April 2016).</p>
<i>Temporal tailoring</i>	Public and private operators	1,2,4	<p>“The tension in the steering group was there. Everyone felt that this could be the end of the process as the managers of Telecom and Cable clearly stated in their emails that they wanted to start to implement improvements and no longer wait” (observations steering group meeting, December 2015).</p> <p>“At that meeting the atmosphere was truly tense, however, this has been a real turnaround in the project” (steering group member Energy, March 2016).</p> <p>“It is very good that we are still together since there were some moments, I thought things would explode... At the same time, some concessions on the collective have been made with those two rates of change” (consultant, March 2016).</p> <p>“I think it’s fine if the process can be adopted more quickly than anything else, and then they can already realize those benefits, that’s fine” (steering group member Energy, May 2016).</p>
<i>Logging new practices</i>	Shop-floor workers	4	<p>“Energy does not want to continue with any pilots or implementation of ideas before they have a better understanding of what the consequences will be like” (field notes workgroup meeting March, 2015).</p> <p>“If you don’t speak the same language then it becomes very difficult to let seven organizations do the same thing” (interview manager Energy, May 2016).</p>

(continued on next page)

Table 5 (continued)

Strategic practices	Actors	Power relations	Illustrating quotes
			<p>“To me it seems very good to keep the same group, also for the work atmosphere. [...] The atmosphere is fine, there is a lot of energy in the group” (workgroup member Energy, March 2016).</p> <p>[...]“And for us mainly the customer contact is very important. Like this morning, I have someone we always work with, so that’s much easier and shorter. That’s ideal, that’s good” (workgroup member Concrete, March 2016).</p> <p>“Finally, there is a little momentum. And knowledge is power so therefore I think this approach is so good. We can justify what we do and therefore improvements are really measured and thus visible” (interview manager Energy, March 2016).</p>

innovations and the IA process was terminated and dismantled. This termination was disappointing for the contractors, the workgroups and the senior researcher.

## 6. Discussion

In this paper we explored how strategic practices of project actors in the context of their power relations both enabled and constrained the interorganizational change project IA, finally resulting in the failure to achieve its strategic goals. The characteristics of the IA, with tensions between public and private operators, between operators and constructors, between top management and shopfloor employees and between project and permanent organizations, gave rise to power struggles. We used an order versus conflict perspective (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) to understand how the four found power relations were objects of constant struggle between top managers, middle managers, and shop-floor workers of diverse organizations.

Viewed from an ordering perspective, the top managers involved in IA used two strategic practices to enable, legitimize and mobilize the inter-organizational change project. The first practice was signing a partnership contract in which involved operators and contractors agreed to harmonize their unequal power relations and divergent interests. Frequently, strategic change projects start with shared optimistic intentions that are hard to disagree with, which Alvesson & Sveningsson (2016) call the ‘cloud of goodness’. The second practice was empowering shop-floor workers through delegating the generation and testing of innovations in the joint building process, thus trying to overcome the unequal power relation between top management and shop-floor workers. These two strategic practices enabled the IA change process by harmonizing power relations. In the workgroups for example, operators’ employees felt more affiliated and at ease with contractors’ employees, thus agreeing to delegate power to the contractors.

Viewed from a conflict perspective, the temporary power shift to work-floor employees did not result in a long-term power reconfiguration, but triggered constraining strategic practices of middle managers and top managers to restore and re-impose the existing order. The strategic practices of delaying, securing employment and limiting activities by middle managers were found, while ghosting by top managers was observed. We know from prior research that ghosting practices of top managers negatively influence strategic projects (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). In line with Grundy (2000), we observed the interwoven cognitive, emotional and territorial agendas of middle managers. Their

agendas constrained the change project and re-imposed the existing order between operators and contractors, and between management and shop-floor workers. In turn, contractors and shop-floor workers used strategic practices of ordering, for example, by pressuring operators to continue with the pilots, and by logging new practices to overcome operators’ resistance.

Our research offers four conceptual take-aways from IA. Firstly, the study contributes with a conceptual framework which integrates an order versus conflict view with the concepts of power relations and strategic practices. This trigonal framework helped to unearth how power relations in interorganizational projects are represented and (re) produced by strategic practices, as asked for by others (Clegg & Kreiner, 2013; Jones & Lichtenstein, 2008; Sydow & Braun, 2018). The framework also enabled us to demonstrate how entangled power relations and strategic practices shaped the change process of interorganizational projects, which has been underacknowledged in earlier studies (see Sydow & Braun, 2018). And building on the prior point, the framework allowed for a more precise exploration of the strategic practices that enabled and constrained the strategic change process. This is very valuable for our understanding of how strategic projects in multiparty arrangements contribute to large societal issues.

Secondly, the findings contribute to our understanding of the role of power in interorganizational strategic projects as asked for by others (see Sydow & Braun, 2018). The findings confirm the claim that the characteristics of inter-organizational change projects give rise to struggles over power relations between project actors (Levina & Orlikowski, 2009; Schrujjer, 2021; Sydow & Braun, 2018). These power relations have proven to be unequal, full of tensions, and related to organizational histories. Project actors, coming from diverse organizations, brought with them diverse and at times opposed understandings of how to improve the joint building process. For example, actors of operators had overrated perceptions of own-group power over the constructors, much in the same way as Schrujjer (2021) described conflicts in interorganizational teams. Furthermore, the findings confirm that power relations in multiparty arrangements are dynamic and can shift over time (Levina & Orlikowski, 2009). In our case we observed a temporary shift of power relations from top management to shop-floor workers in the IA project, which did not result in a permanent transformation of power relations.

Thirdly, the findings showed that strategic practices at the micro level shaped the implementation of the change project and thus its long-term effect. Although a strategy’s power lies in its capacity to shape the institutional context (Kornberger et al., 2021), our case showed that not all partners had the same goal in mind. This shaped the strategic change process in unforeseen ways. For example, strategic practices of top managers to harmonize the asymmetric power relation of shop floor employees and middle managers, triggered the middle managers to restore power relations. Findings show the recursive relation between power and strategic change, thus influencing and shaping the future of power en strategy theory. For example, the delegation of generating innovations and the joint reflection of shop-floor workers triggered middle managers to resist to implement innovations. In this way, we shed light on the “potential relations and shifts in power” as asked for by others (Martinsuo et al., 2021).

Fourthly, our study contributes to the debate on interorganizational strategic projects with a focus on what project actors do not do. The focus of interorganizational strategic change projects is typically on what actors *do* to achieve their success (Martinsuo & Hoverfält, 2018), while studies on what actors *don’t* do, and what strategic projects fail to deliver are a clear minority. Our findings show that strategic change is just as much shaped by what actors fail to do, as by what they *do* do; “the non-issues, non-decision making, the exclusions from the agenda, the overlooked and un-noted actors, acts and omissions, those things that are strategically unthinkable” (Carter et al., 2008). For example, conflicting practices of delaying by middle managers and ghosting by top managers are indicative of what is left unsaid and undone, which

reproduce existing power relations and thus constrain the strategic change process. This casts light on the daily ‘unheroic’ practices (Whittington, 1996), by which project actors from diverse organizations situationally cope, navigate and negotiate in strategic projects and programs. Relatedly, our case contributes with a failed project. While failed projects may be perceived as imperfections of strategic projects, they also hold an opportunity for improvisation, experimentation and learning (Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009). Failed projects, such as the IA project, can thus provide fertile ground for reflection and learning at individual, project and interorganizational levels. The IA enabled operators and contractors to make low-cost experiments, as they are temporary autonomous efforts to induce change (Sydow et al., 2004).

## 7. Conclusions

In this paper we focused upon the research question of how power relations and strategic practices of project actors shaped the interorganizational strategic change project IA. To answer the question we used an ethnoventionist approach (Van Marrewijk et al., 2010) to study the IA from its inception in 2012 until its termination in 2017. To unearth and understand the power relations and strategic practices responsible for the failure of the interorganizational strategic project, we developed a conceptual framework in which an order and conflict view (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) is connected to the concepts of power as a relational effect (Clegg, 1989) and to strategy as a practice (Burgelman et al., 2018). This framework helped to reveal a multi-actor and multi-level strategic change process in which ordering and conflicting strategic practices of top managers, middle managers and shop-floor employees, all in their own way, finally contributed to the project’s failure to achieve its strategic goals. These strategic practices were triggered by, or tried to harmonize, four power relations in the project; (1) between public and private operators, (2) between operators and contractors, (3) between top management and shop-floor workers, and (4) between project and permanent organization.

Our study shows the importance of acknowledging and studying power relations in interorganizational strategic change projects. The characteristics of inter-organizational projects bring along a wide diversity of actors with distinct power relations, interests, and work practices. Our findings confirm that interorganizational projects can potentially be temporary trading zones (Lenfle & Söderlund, 2018), and generative for experimenting with and learning new practices, as indicated by Sydow & Braun (2018). However, struggles over power relations between actors in interorganizational settings are likely to arise (e.g. Van Marrewijk et al., 2016.). We therefore invite project scholars to critically reflect on power relations, or the assumed absence of such relations, in interorganizational change projects and programs, as asked for by others (Martinsuo & Hoverfält, 2018; Wooldridge et al., 2008).

Limitations of the study are in its research design of the ethnoventionist approach (Van Marrewijk et al., 2010). Keeping the balance between the application of sound theory and rigorous academic research methods at the one hand, and being relevant to practitioners in the organizations studied is a real challenge for scholars. These scholars have to prevent ‘going native’, which is a too strong identification with those being studied (Ybema et al., 2009). However, the strength of the ethnoventionist approach is in its capacity to unravel power relations from the inside of projects, where the real action is. Furthermore, this approach has the potential to empower practitioners and thus be influential in strategic change projects, which is needed to tackle large societal issues of energy transformation, circular economy and climate adaptation.

The practical contribution of this study is found in the need to carefully facilitate and mediate the strategic change process of interorganizational projects. Much time and effort of a project or process manager is needed to facilitate actors reflecting on their work practices, which has proven to be an important tool to change collaboration in interorganizational projects (e.g. Ruijter et al., 2020.). In retrospect,

authors should have paid more attention to middle managers, important mediators between the temporary endeavor and the permanent organizations (Van den Ende et al., 2020; Wooldridge et al., 2008), who cannot be assumed to be change supporters without sufficient support and mandate. Furthermore, authors should have done more to keep the strategic change project on the agenda of top managers, in order to provide their active and visible involvement and to vertically align middle managers and shop-floor workers in their organizations.

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