

CONSTRUCTION ENGINEERING MASTERS DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Re-organising in a changing world: Planning for emergence

The UK's built environment industry is experiencing massive flux as it emerges from the global pandemic with volatile markets responding to political, social, economic, and environmental challenges. Organisations must adapt to thrive yet reorganising at scale requires consideration of complex interacting factors including strategy, purpose and identity alongside ambiguity, uncertainty, and flexibility to respond to shifting markets.

This research explored the reorganisation of a leading professional services consultancy in the UK built environment context, investigating the perceptions of senior leaders during the initial rollout of a new formal structure. Qualitative research comprised two rounds of semi-structured interviews with senior leaders up to board level to identify interacting factors and tensions in the environment during the gradual development of new order. The organisation was characterised as a complex social system with many interacting parts, from which behaviour emerges as a function of interactions, with the possibility of many different futures occurring. Analysis sought to identify potential components of an enabling environment to enhance the likelihood of more desirable futures occurring.

The research addresses factors relating to the restructuring of a large, interconnected knowledge-based firm from the perception of senior leaders, while demonstrating the benefits of a complexity-based research methodology and the use of complexity theory concepts to describe features of the reorganising process. This research therefore contributes to the literature gap comprising a lack of first-hand data considered using complexity theory considering perceptions of senior leaders. Analysis identified a company moving from a well-defined siloed structure with a strong hierarchy and consensus-seeking culture, to a balanced matrix with tension enabling decentralised decision-making and enhanced autonomy. The reorganisation was perceived as a large-scale disruption, followed by an evolving process in which new order was developed with an intention to remain flexible over time. A new "cohort" of leaders was appointed to key roles, creating far-from-equilibrium conditions in which leaders across the organisation sought to develop meaning and resolve tensions over time. The presence of ambiguities and tensions were perceived to have benefits (e.g. reduced need to escalate decisions by achieving consensus on a local level) and disbenefits (with short term risk associated with uncertainty in accountabilities). Skills networks were identified as a key cross-cutting function, separate to the formal operating structure, but key to permeating the matrix; with a question identified regarding how the operational leaders of the organisation could better influence these networks to ensure that perceived skills gaps relating to new market opportunities are addressed. Performance indicators were perceived to be simplistic at the outset, focussed on high level financial targets, with a desire to develop more nuanced long term strategic measures.

Overall, the use of complexity principles was found to be beneficial both in the process of research (using EMK Complexity Methodology) and the subsequent description and analysis of findings and recommendations. When looking forward, the reorganisation was expected by leaders to promote a more flexible environment with more decentralised decision-making and increased agility to respond to market volatility, but the short-term focus of the research means that only time will tell if the new structure is considered successful.

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