The Role of the Follow-up Process in Project Management

A multiple-case study

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Uppsala University
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Master Thesis
Spring 2014-05-27
Abstract
Follow-up is a natural component of both project management and projects which, curiously enough, the research community has not previously addressed. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the role of the follow-up process in project management. The follow-up process is defined as a process where execution and implementation is improved through the exertion of continuous control. The method used was a multiple-case study, building on data from four organizations actively implementing follow-up processes. The data comprised interviews with project managers from the case organizations, company documentation, annual reports, publicly available information and presentations. The sectors the case organizations operated in were IT services, manufacturing, event organization, and a governmental administrative authority. Five themes emerged from an analysis of the empirical data which were found to influence the follow-up process in projects. The five themes are Documentation, Standardization, Accountability, Learning and Risk Assessment. With insights from the five themes, the research community and project managers can gain a strong understanding of what the follow-up process looks like and its role in project management. The implications for project managers include a better appreciation of the follow-up process and knowledge of the aspects to consider when setting up a new project process. With this paper the authors hope to contribute to the improvement of project management research and practice through a heightened awareness and understanding of the follow-up process.

Keywords: Project management, projects, follow-up, follow-up process, documentation, multiple-case study.
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1. Introduction

The last few decades have been characterized by increased globalization, competition and change. Simultaneously, technology has rapidly developed and has fundamentally changed the ways we work, creating new possibilities as well as challenges. In this environment the prevalence of temporary forms of cooperation and project-based work has become increasingly common (Hällgren, 2010; Brookes, et al., 2014). Much of the knowledge surrounding projects is largely focused on aspects such as economic planning, people, culture, organizational attributes, risk management and strategic orientation (Project Management Institute, 2008). Anantatmula (2010) has found that it is essential to define roles and responsibilities for a project to succeed, and Atkinson (1999) has found that the most important criterion when determining evaluation is that the criteria must be dependent on the project’s focus. Hällgren and Söderholm (2010) argue that project managers’ need to have the ability to swap from a style of project control that is tightly coupled to one which is loosely coupled in order to be able to deal with unexpected deviations in the project plan. In spite of these findings most current project management research focuses heavily on tools and techniques (Morris, 2006) without addressing how, from project manager’s perspective, they can practically employ those tools and techniques (Engwall, 2012). Engwall (2012) calls out for studies that can illuminate how project management principles and techniques are actually applied in different empirical settings thereby reducing the practice of merely applying theoretical models and myths without using empirical support. Altogether, project management models that are turned into general models may lose relevance in the transaction process from observation to theory (Hällgren, et al., 2012). As noted by Blomquist, et al. (2010), research on project-based work and other temporary organizational forms are both immature and insubstantial when it comes to understanding what actually occurs in projects.

One aspect of project management that has not been given much attention in project management research is ‘follow-up’ and how it connects to project execution and project progress. It is especially noteworthy since follow-up typically is a natural constituent in both project management and projects. Given many projects fail to be completed on time and on budget (Atkinson, 1999; Anantatmula, 2010) it seems there is still much that can be done and learned in order to improve the practice of project management. Part of the reason projects fail can be attributed to knowledge imperfections of what is actually occurring throughout the internal and external environment of a project. Better knowledge and structured use of practical techniques and tools, such as follow-up, can help create a more logical way for people to understand how a project’s progress relates to the project plan. Follow-up and other
evaluation mechanisms are also likely to have an important role in providing a feedback loop and guiding actions and implementation proactively, making the project plan a dynamic tool based on what is actually occurring in a projects internal and external environment.

Project managers are faced with plenty of choices to make, and following up on prior decisions and providing feedback serves an important role in contributing to initiating action. Feedback loops enhance the expectation, motivation and commitment for action, and consequently mitigate the likeliness of thoughtless action to occur (Swieringa & Weick, 1987). Goodman and Truss (2004) report in their case study that follow-up through the use of feedback and iteration plays a crucial role in enabling execution.

Purpose
The sheer magnitude of the phenomenon and the apparent practical importance of the follow-up process in project management indicates that the subject deserves attention. The purpose of this paper is to study the role of follow-up in project management through a multiple-case study. More specifically, we address the following research questions:

- What is the role of the follow-up process in project management?
- How do project managers practice follow-up?
- Which factors improve or obstruct follow-up?

By studying the role of follow-up we hope to contribute to the limited knowledge domain of what project management is about and how project managers actually work. A better understanding of the follow-up process in project management may also positively add to the understanding of project execution. From reviewing the literature we have noted an empirical cavity in the field of follow-up processes and that the subject is only covered in passing while covering other subjects. The role of follow-up has previously not been studied as a separate field of research although, as we claim, the role is of significant importance in project management.

Method and Findings
A multi-case study design has been employed in order to answer the research questions. Eight project managers from four organizations have been interviewed with questions about which role follow-up plays in their way of working with projects. In addition to interviews with project managers, other forms of data has been collected that help explain the role of the follow-up process, this includes internal documentation, annual reports and presentations.
One of the main findings was that documentation in projects may suffer when the project is doing well. The lack of documentation might pose a risk for the future welfare of those projects. Another main finding connects accountability, the individual project member’s sense of responsibility, to the follow-up process. There are costs associated with having a rigid follow-up process, these cost can be greatly reduced if the project members are accountable for their actions and operate autonomously.

**Key Concepts of the Follow-up Process**

When conceptualizing the area of follow-up processes in literature and through interaction with organizations we have encountered the same concept occasionally being labeled differently in different organizational contexts. Some of the more prevalent labels are review sessions, operational review (MTC, 2013), evaluation mechanisms (Bruch & Ghoshal, 2004), internal meetings (Deloitte, 2013), and reflective meeting (PD3). Our definition of the follow-up process is a process whereby execution and implementation is improved through the exertion of continuous control throughout the lifetime of a project. To avoid confusion and to improve understanding of the study we will henceforth refer to the studied concept under the label ‘follow-up’. To sum up, a follow-up process has the purpose of following-up on previously taken decisions, and can result in new decisions being taken that subsequently are followed-up, until project completion.

**Thesis Outline**

The paper begins with a theoretical review of literature connected with and occasionally adjacent to the follow-up process. The method section describes how the multiple-case study has been conducted, and a background on the choice of organizations. The results section defines the role of the follow-up process in project management from an empirical perspective by categorizing the information from the cases into five themes; documentation, accountability, learning, standard process, and risk assessment. The discussion focuses on how the themes impact the follow-up process and project management, and connect these findings to current literature. Finally, the paper concludes with a summary of the findings, a discussion on the practical and theoretical implications of the paper, and ultimately ends with a conclusion and suggestions of how the research community can engage in future studies on the follow-up process.
2. Literature Review
Since follow-up is a practical activity and a common constituent in project management it would be natural that the subject has already been studied as a stand-alone topic by the research community. This is however not the case, which in itself is noteworthy, especially considering that projects constantly have a need of evaluation, to gauge performance, outcome, risk (Söderholm, 2008), and to provide feedback and advice (Swieringa & Weick, 1987), in other words, a need of following-up on a projects progress. Not to mention that projects have a tendency to fail (The Standish Group, 2004). These issues together provide an indication that there is still much to learn and understand in the field of project management and specifically in regards to follow-up. However, research in the field of project-based work and other temporary organizational forms is still in its infancy and little is known about the practicalities of projects and project management. A better understanding of practitioners, praxis, practices and the general role of the follow-up process will be helpful to research development, project management education (Whittington, 2002) and may provide a more reflective and contextualized understanding of project management.

Project Management
In order to understand the role follow-up plays in projects it is first important to recognize the context in which follow-up occurs in and to understand the basic factors that influence the follow-up process. The following section briefly explores areas in which the follow-up process is dependent on in project management.

Project management has several definitions, but generally cost, time and quality are reoccurring and important factors. Projects are often performed using diverse resources in order to accomplish an often unique, complex, one-time task, limited by the just mentioned factors – time, cost and quality (Atkinson, 1999). The British Standard for project management (British Standards Institution, 1996) defined project management as:

The planning, monitoring and control of all aspects of a project and the motivation of all those involved in it to achieve the project objectives on time and to the specified cost, quality and performance.

Altogether, the overriding criterion when determining evaluation is contingent on the project focus (Atkinson, 1999). Success of a project is consequently determined by how well the project performs in relation to the selected criteria. Although those in management positions know what those crucial factors are, many projects still fail (Anantatmula, 2010; Atkinson,
1999). In a study on the role of leadership in project management Anantatmula (2010) has made the finding that it is essential to define roles and responsibilities in order for a project to succeed. Anantatmula also argues that it is important to manage outcomes, and that it is subsequently easier to develop a formal evaluation model to determine project success when there is a clearly defined project mission and objective. Evaluating individual and team performance against clearly defined outcomes can help contribute to motivation, increase performance and promote excellence.

“[…] employing formal and consistent processes, facilitating support from key functions and senior management, and communicating expectations must take place prior to developing a system of monitoring and managing outcomes” (Anantatmula, 2010, p. 19).

Engwall (2012) suggests that evaluation can be practically difficult to gauge, and to accurately measure the evaluation of technical progress is therefore inherently challenging. Whether the evaluation takes place continuously, as an ongoing follow-up process or after the project completion, will differ depending on project size, scope and risk exposure.

Even though planning is a way of preparing for and confronting reality (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001) it can be harmful to interpret plans as reality (Weick & Teece, 1987). Rather than just seeking better ways for more planning there is an unmet need to develop skills for using project plans in more inspired and realistic ways (Kreiner, 2012). Kreiner suggests that there is a need to search for intelligent ways of using plans that are not rendered useless in temporary organizational forms, such as project work, that by their very definition are inadequate and imperfect.

Follow-up can be the dynamic form of planning given follow-up builds on what has occurred while simultaneously shaping future decisions. Based on a case study, Söderholm (2008, p. 81) states that projects are rarely just “executing the plan” and that consideration of potential hurdles in both a project internal and external environment need to be taken into account when planning and executing projects. According to Söderholm, project managers face the hurdle of both managing the unexpected while simultaneously executing the project plan. Consequently project management often involves the need to revise earlier plans and decisions. In this aspect, follow-up can be the forum that meets these needs as it creates room for treating both unexpected disturbances while simultaneously focusing on the execution of the project plan.

Built on the heritage of Weick (1976), Hällgren and Söderholm (2010) discusses how project teams respond to departures from the project plan by what is described as a de-
coupling of the deviation from the other activities of the project, treats the deviation, and then re-couples them again. The implications for project management from what Hällgren and Söderholm (2010) discuss is that project management needs to have the ability to go from tightly coupled to loosely coupled project control to meet the unexpected deviation by distinctiveness and responsiveness. Although, as shown by Hällgren and Söderholm (2010), the concept of how deviations in the project plan express themselves has previously been studied, the closely connected concept of how deviations are revealed in a systematized way has been less so. Consequently, in this environment, a disturbance to the project plan first of all needs to be revealed before it can be treated and adjusted for.

According to Blomquist, et al. (2010), the most important constituent in project management is the ability to go from point A to B, which is achieved by following and executing the project plan. However, Blomquist, et al. (2010) points out that research on projects, or temporary forms of cooperation, is both immature and insubstantial when understanding what actually occurs in projects. Blomquist, et al. (2010) goes on to state that in order to understand what project management is, it is first essential to understand what project managers actually do. Understanding what project managers actually do, nonetheless, requires insights on how planning and execution of projects are carried out from a practical perspective. Having a practical emphasis on studies is not new and has been around for several years, especially in organizational studies (Blomquist, et al., 2010). However, the temporality of projects may have implications on how project management is planned, shaped, executed, and what structures plays a crucial role in going from point A to point B.

**Constituents of the Follow-up Process**

Even though follow-up has not been studied as a separate entity in the field of project management, this is not to say the subject has not been mentioned in other research domains. The temporality of projects may however have implications of how structures and praxis develop (Blomquist, et al., 2010) and how other research fields may be extrapolated into the field of project management. When follow-up is mentioned in other research domains it is usually while covering other topics where follow-up is a constituent. Examples can be found in meeting literature where Francisco (2007) argues that follow-up and follow-through are critical to let organizational agendas advance, by pinpointing issues of accountability and demand for results. Agendas and task lists should be used when reviewing actions from prior meetings, and it is important to keep the meetings within agreed-upon timeframes. Francisco
mentions that meeting participants will respect facilitators where there has been follow-through and follow-up of prior commitments.

In domains outside of meeting literature the focus still revolves very much around the need for keeping effective and efficient meetings, with a focus on structures and techniques. In IT-literature Schiller (2011) argues that meetings should be oriented toward follow-up, actions, and take on a future oriented perspective together with a focused discussion targeting actions. The same goes for literature focusing on financial planning, where Jetton (2009) argues that follow-up should be a natural part in meetings and planning. Jetton states that it is important to include a structured evaluation of the current situation, financial goals, financial opportunities and challenges, and follow-up, when planning meetings.

As mentioned, these other domains mainly focus on structures, successful factors of planning and how the factors can be best managed in relation to the project plan (Blomquist, et al., 2010). Instead of describing how follow-up is depicted thought all relevant research domains where follow-up might be mentioned, which would likely result in a fragmented picture, this paper focuses on the role of the follow-up process from a project management perspective through the help of empirical support. The project management perspective on follow-up is mainly reinforced by insights from meeting literature. Meeting literature often has a clear connection with the follow-up process, given that meetings are the natural vehicle for the process. Meeting literature also provides valuable insights on the role of structures and successful aspects of planning.

Meetings are often an important part in the follow-up process. Follow-up and evaluation of the progress of a project or changes in initiative are often embodied through the form of a meeting. A meeting, in this context, therefore has a central role in the follow-up process of previously taken decisions. Both management and employees are reported to spend vast amounts of their working time preparing and executing meetings (Scott, et al., 2012). Without getting entangled in a discussion on the necessities of meetings it can, briefly, be stated that meetings are met with both critique and commendation throughout organizations. Peter Drucker captures the essence of the negative aspects of meetings with the expression “Meetings are a symptom of bad organization, the fewer meetings the better”. Still, although meetings are time consuming, some are necessary (Caruth & Caruth, 2012). Consequently it becomes important to keep the meetings in the follow-up process as efficient and effective as possible since meetings are associated with costs.

By planning ahead and establishing an agenda of what to accomplish before, during and after the meeting, sticking to that plan, managing participants, and evaluating outcomes
(Cohen, et al., 2011; Hjerpe, 2013), the timeframe can be shortened and unnecessary gatherings can be eliminated (Caruth & Caruth, 2012). Additionally, according to Lambert and Agoglia (2011) delayed review meetings result in significantly lower efforts being made by participants than a timely review meeting.

Allen, et al. (2008) suggests that effective meetings include follow-up on prior decisions and follow-up that incorporates feedback on those interventions that came as a result of the previous meeting. Kauffeld and Lehmann-Willenbrock (2012) find in their study that participants are more satisfied with meetings that revolve around functional interaction such as action planning and problem-solving. The study also indicates that functional interaction is associated with higher team productivity and that the team meeting process shape both team and organizational outcomes. According to the findings of Allen, et al. (2012) employees enjoy meetings that have a clear objective, where important and relevant information is shared. And *vice versa*, employees are unhappy when meetings lack structure and are unproductive.

**Summary of Literature Review**

Overall, the follow-up process is where action and implementation is improved through the exertion of continuous control. Prior literature shows that the follow-up process is commonly exercised in projects (Hällgren, 2010). How projects are managed has shown to be an important element, not only for the project itself, but also for the organization as a whole and good decisions are not enough for effective implementation (Swieringa & Weick, 1987). Projects in general result in failure and tend not to be on time or on budget (Anantatmula, 2010; Atkinson, 1999). An improved follow-up process might reduce the extensive failure rate since practitioners believe that follow-up serves as an important instrument for action and implementation in projects (MTC, 2013; Mikaelsson, 2013; Hallencreutz, 2013; Goodman & Truss, 2004). The apparent practical importance that the follow-up process has in projects and for organizations and the sheer magnitude of the phenomenon deserves attention that is not yet met by the research community (Engwall, 2012). The most prevalent gap in the literature is the lack of exploration of the follow-up process itself and its role in projects. The purpose of this study is to help fill that gap by contributing to the understanding of the role of the follow-up process.
3. Method

Research Strategy
To explore the role of the follow-up process in projects we have employed a multiple-case study using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) through a Suddaby approach (Suddaby, 2006). An explorative design was chosen due to the follow-up process in project management being an unexplored area of study. We conducted the study in the absence of an encompassing theoretical foundation on the follow-up process in project management literature. Ten project managers were selected from four organizations. Each manager was asked to take us through the structure of a current or past project that they have been managing. This was followed by questions and discussions about what role the follow-up process had in the relevant project.

Grounded Theory and the Suddaby Approach
The methodology used in this paper is grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) with a Suddaby-approach (Suddaby, 2006). The Suddaby approach of grounded theory focuses on three common misconceptions of grounded theory that are often present in management research. Firstly, grounded theory is not an excuse to ignore the literature. Even though the area of follow-up in project management has previously not been addressed by the research community, we have scanned and presented relevant literature that touch the subject in other fields or that in other ways relate to project management and the follow-up process. Existing theory relating to the follow-up process has been used to interpret and better understand what is known about the follow-up process (Eisenhardt & Graeber, 2007). Secondly, grounded theory is not a presentation of raw data. The data has been analyzed and interpreted to detect patterns and to generate relevant findings. Based on an analysis of this data, five themes have emerged (see Data Analysis). The themes act as the foundation on which the data is presented. Third, grounded theory is not theory testing. In contrast to the positivistic methodology, the grounded theorist does not aim to issue hypotheses and test them. Grounded theory is quite the opposite, focusing predominantly on developing theory. To avoid confusion it should be mentioned that this paper does not develop a complete theory, but rather develop theory in a more general sense by contributing to the project management literature. This contribution lies in the exploration of the follow-up process role in project management.
Sample Selection
The paper consists of four case studies made up by organizations with operations in Sweden. Two cases are from multi-national organizations – one from the IT services sector (Case A) and the other from manufacturing (Case D). One case is based on a Stockholm event organizer (Case B) and the last is a governmental administrative authority (Case C). Table 1 summarizes the case organizations.

The organization in Case D was identified and accessed since it is an organization where one of the authors is currently employed. The organizations in Case A, B and C were identified through guest lectures at Uppsala University. They were selected based on the fact they actively implemented follow-up processes. There were initially five cases but one was terminated after the first interview. This was due to not finding it relevant for the purpose of the study, since the organization did not have an explicit follow-up process that could be investigated. The sample selection is based in wanting a broad representation with different views on the follow-up process. The projects within the cases vary in time, scale, and being internal (Case C and D) or external (Case A and B). The projects varied from projects of one-year duration to projects spanning over a decade. Our hopes were that a multitude of industries, project type and sizes would increase the chances of finding as many interesting aspects of the follow-up process as possible.

Case A
MTC is a multinational technology and consulting firm. MTC operates worldwide and has total revenue in the SEK650 billion range. The focus of this paper is on an entity within MTC named the Nordic Quality Department. The quality departments’ objective is to identify potential risk for upcoming projects but also to control and ensure that risk does not increase during a projects lifetime. The work is carried out through follow-up processes, mainly consisting of face-to-face meetings. MTC is an unusual example in that it possesses two patents connected to its follow-up process. (All names and have been anonymized in Case A at the request of the case organization).

Case B
Stockholmsmässan (SM), also known as Stockholm international fairs and congress center, is a company that mainly arranges trade fairs and congresses in Stockholm. SM is the biggest fair and congress arranger in the Nordic and employs about 230 full time employees and had an annual turnover of SEK635 million in 2012 (Stockholmsmässan, 2012). A few things distinguish SM from most other organizations. Firstly, the majority of the operations are run
in project form. Secondly, projects run in parallel to one another. Thirdly, the projects are generally carried out repeatedly, although there are exceptions. Finally, projects are conducted in distinctly different phases over the different projects life spans. For simplicity fairs and congresses will hereafter be referred to as events.

**Case C**

The Swedish Post and Telecom Authority (PTS) is a governmental administrative authority with about 250 full time employees. The authority’s primary responsibility is to monitor the electronic communication and postal sectors in Sweden. PTS deals with matters such as competition, communication services availability and security (PTS, 2014). Case C is largely built around the PTS project “Falken”, which was initiated in January 10, 2011. The aim of the relevant project is to create a new Spectrum Management System that will make the organization more efficient and replace an older internally developed system.

**Case D**

ASSA ABLOY (AA) is a global manufacturing firm with an annual turnover of SEK48 billion, operations in over 70 countries and around 43000 employees (2013). Founded in 1994 through a merger between Swedish ASSA and Finish ABLOY, AA is today the global leader in door opening solutions. The Group is divided into five divisions with the head office located in Stockholm. With a high rate of acquiring other companies, AA is an organization destined to be in a state of constant change and restructuring. One of the four interviewees (PD4) gave a separate perspective of project management from the other three interviewees.

**Table 1. Size and sector of participant organizations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>MTC</td>
<td>Service</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Stockholmsmässan</td>
<td>Service</td>
<td>Small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Post- och telestyrelsen</td>
<td>Governmental administrative authority</td>
<td>Small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>ASSA ABLOY</td>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** Size Large >10000 employees, Small - ≤ 300 employees.
Data Collection
The primary sources of data utilized were interviews, organizational internal and external documentation and transcripts. The interviews comprised eight in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews and one in-depth semi-structured phone interview (see Table 2). The selection process of respondents involved targeting project managers and other personnel involved with the management of projects within each organization. All interviewees were engaged in one or more projects at the time of the interview. The semi-structured interview format was chosen to allow flexibly during the interviews, which fitted the unexplored nature of the study (Kraus & Lind, 2010). All interviewees were considered to be honest and spoke on behalf of their own personal views and experiences. The author’s perception was that they were honest and did not withhold any particular piece of information. All interviewees openly answered all the questions asked and did not hesitate to address weaknesses in their organizations. This does not validate their answers and the authors are conscious of the possible exaggerations and alterations of the truth.
Table 2. Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case organization</th>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Interview length</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A MTC</td>
<td>PA1</td>
<td>2013-05-15</td>
<td>Anonymous</td>
<td>Head of Nordic Quality Department</td>
<td>Stockholm, face-to-face</td>
<td>100 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B Stockholms-</td>
<td>PB1</td>
<td>2013-06-26</td>
<td>Helena Nilsson</td>
<td>Chief of marketing and communications</td>
<td>Stockholm, face-to-face</td>
<td>60 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stockholms-</td>
<td>PB2</td>
<td>2013-07-10</td>
<td>Karin Mäntymäki</td>
<td>Business area manager - Congress and Guest Events</td>
<td>Stockholm, face-to-face</td>
<td>60 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stockholms-</td>
<td>PB3</td>
<td>2013-08-06</td>
<td>Camilla Hållbro</td>
<td>Business area manager - Event service</td>
<td>Stockholm, face-to-face</td>
<td>60 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post- och teles</td>
<td>PC1</td>
<td>2013-07-10</td>
<td>Patrik Rommel</td>
<td>Project Manager</td>
<td>Stockholm, face-to-face</td>
<td>60 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teasterylsen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D ASSA ABLOY</td>
<td>PD1</td>
<td>2014-02-19</td>
<td>Polina Popova</td>
<td>Global Program Director Seamless Flow AA AB</td>
<td>Stockholm, face-to-face</td>
<td>60 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D ASSA ABLOY</td>
<td>PD2</td>
<td>2014-02-26</td>
<td>Marcus Hvied</td>
<td>IT Director HO AA AB</td>
<td>Stockholm, face-to-face</td>
<td>70 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D ASSA ABLOY</td>
<td>PD3</td>
<td>2014-03-07</td>
<td>Heléne Ström</td>
<td>Project Manager AA AB</td>
<td>Conference call</td>
<td>50 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D ASSA ABLOY</td>
<td>PD4</td>
<td>2014-04-22</td>
<td>Daniel Berg</td>
<td>Vice president and general manager of AA Mobile Keys AA AB</td>
<td>Stockholm, face-to-face</td>
<td>60 min</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Analysis
The interviews were recorded and transcribed. An ongoing process of data analysis was conducted throughout the study. Two different forms of analysis were performed; cross-case and within-case analysis (Daymon & Holloway, 2002). Four frameworks were developed, one for each case, with the intention of providing a thorough understanding of the follow-up by visualizing the process (Appendix I). When analyzing the data generated from the cases we found five emergent themes of the follow-up process: Documentation, Accountability, Learning, Standardization and Risk Assessment. These themes have proved to be areas directly influencing and conversely, being influenced by a follow-up process and is presented thoroughly in the results section.

To minimize bias the interviews were compared with company documentation, annual reports, publicly available information and presentations. For example Case A, C and D had
formal documents on how a meeting should be held, these documents were compared to what the respondents said about what happened during those meetings. If discrepancies were identified, clarification was sought through additional interviews.

To reduce subjectivity the study is based on multiple data sources and the authors have conducted all interviews jointly. Where uncertainties have arisen the collected data has been crosschecked.

**Methodological Limitations**

There are several limitations linked to the amount of data gathered. Firstly, more organizations and interviews would result in a more complete understanding of the process. We would have been able to identify more themes and further develop the existing ones. Secondly, the data is limited to the views of the project managers. With more resources the data set could have been expanded with interviews of all project members and external stakeholders, ideally, at several points in time. The third limitation is the limited set of cases. This last limit increases the chance that our cases were extraordinary with projects not representative of the average project.

There are limitations associated with using interviews as the primary method of collecting data. The data will be contaminated by bias primarily from the interviewee but also from the respondent. The data is presented through the filter of the interviewees and pose a risk of being altered when interpreted. Certain types of respondents may also be hard to approach due to their importance to the organization or because of time restraints. This is particularly prominent in the area of management studies. The presence of the interviewee in a face-to-face interview may affect the respondent in several ways. The respondent may feel pressured to deliver informative and interesting answers, and are prepared to exaggerate and to some degree alter the truth to do so. The issue of truth is particularly problematic if the researchers reassure that the respondent words correspond to truth (Kothari, 2004). Many of the limitations presented above can be reduced if the researchers are conscious of them throughout all steps of the collection and analyzing of the data. The authors have taken these limitations in account when generating and analyzing the data.

**4. Results**

The following section explains how the different case-organizations use follow-up processes in project management. The results have been arranged around five prevalent themes that have come to dominate the collected data. The five themes we have derived are
documentation, accountability, learning, standardization, and risk assessment. The findings from the cases are presented jointly under each theme and focus on the role each theme plays in the follow-up process. One separate theme does not unilaterally exclude components from another theme to be included under its heading. Where the themes have overlapped the dominating theme has determined how the content has been categorized. The themes are summarized in Table 3. Appendix I provides a visual representation of the follow-up process from each separate case.

**Documentation**

The first and most prevalent theme, ‘documentation’, has been recorded as an important element in all cases. Documentation commonly takes the form of protocols and reports with the purpose of providing a foundation which follow-up can be carried out against. Documentation is also strongly linked to knowledge transfer and the theme Standardization.

In case B documentation takes place in the form of protocols that are used to look for setbacks, experiences and successful achievements in project execution. PB2 comments that difficulties with this approach are especially prevalent in knowledge transfer in non recurring projects. And instead of documenting “[…] there is probably a lot on people’s minds”. PB2 comments that while starting up new events, Case B looks at the documentation from roughly five previous events with similar size. However, there is a risk when working with highly experienced project teams that they will mostly act on intuition. In Case B the protocol from the concluding follow-up becomes the starting point at the initial meetings for recurring events. As will be noted there is a similar documentation process in place for Case A. However, in contrast to Case B, Case A thoroughly documents all its follow-up meetings, not only the concluding follow-up meeting.

PA1 argues that documentation leads to instructions being made more explicit and that without this explicitness it is easy to prioritize other work. Project members will often prioritize their own work tasks even though the outcomes of the follow-up sessions include vital steps and actions for the project.

“I believe that many people participate in meetings without documenting. What then is the purpose with the meeting? To be able to follow-up taken decisions, proper documentation is essential” (PA1).

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After each follow-up meeting the Nordic quality department in Case A writes an action list which indicates what should be done until the subsequent follow-up meeting and which deadlines the project manager has to work towards.

“MTC [Case A] uses follow-up on its projects in order to control and secure that decisions lead to forceful action and ensures that the original strategy remains in focus” (PA1).

Case A documents and archives each follow-up meeting in a specific knowledge database that expands with new projects. By building on the experience emerging from follow-up processes in earlier projects MTC strives to mitigate risk by reducing the likeliness of repeating previous mistakes.

According to PC1 documentation is important for follow-up to have any real impact:

“What a decision is made during a follow-up meeting, it should be thoroughly documented in order for it to later easily be tracked back and to be followed-up on while being executed.”

In Case C documentation serves to prevent situations where individuals can claim later that a decision or non-decision was never actually made, and to explain why certain measures have been omitted. All decisions and non-decisions are followed up at the succeeding follow-up meeting.

In Case D the project group and project meetings follow an explicit structure when it comes to documentation. The meetings are expected to be documented thoroughly but the amount of detail in documentation is dependent on the projects progress.

“If a project is not going well documentation becomes more important. You want to be able to ‘blame’ someone. When on the other hand things are going well, you lose some of the documentation, people reduce the amount of detail in their documentation and meetings tend to go from formal to informal. It really weakens the process by the lack of information as a basis for the decisions that are made.” (PD2).

PD3 stress the importance to take the time to sit down as a project group and evaluate the performance of a project. The project managers summon the project group to a meeting to follow-up on the project progress. In these meetings the group discusses what has been handled well and what could be done differently. PD3 expresses that ideally these meetings would occur continually in all projects, combined with accompanying documentation. The meetings are documented with the intention of using the information to improve future
projects. However, according to PD3, at this point in time, some projects are not being documented to an adequate extent and some are not documented at all.

The purpose of documentation is to make good decisions that are based on facts. Similar to Case B, a common obstacle in Case D is that managers tend to base their decisions on intuition rather than on rational grounds. Management wants documentation in order to ascertain which decisions are well informed and based on facts and figures, the opposite of intuition (PD1).

The work in the section that PD4 is engaged with is permeated by the use of priority lists that are continuously reevaluated and followed-up, and the documentation process is stressed to be purposeful.

“You do not want an overly heavy [documentation] process over yourself, since then you will spend time on it instead of developing the projects or the products. Unless there are legal requirements, I believe documentation processes should be viewed upon as support lists, where you can see which documents can exist, in case you forget about something. […] It is important to follow-up, I really believe so, but I also believe in actions. A meeting that does not result in a [written] action list is a worthless meeting, since then you have only wasted time babbling about things. We sit in telephone conferences all the time and if we don’t have follow-up on what we have talked about the entire meeting will have been pointless. Naturally everything you do should result in action lists than can be followed up on, and they must constantly be revised. However, you must dare to trash actions, i.e. if you at a follow-up meeting a week later realize you thought entirely wrong about something […]. (PD4)

In Case C the so called ‘steer-committee’ meetings are preceded by a report. The report follows a strict format in terms of structure, template and content. The report indicates how the project is progressing and if there are any decisions that must be made at the upcoming meeting.

“The report indicates which decisions must be made in order for the project not to come to a standstill. Nonetheless, sometimes no decisions are made. We are supposed to make decisions but we make none, nothing comes out of it, they simply cannot make a decision, they just sit there [at the meeting]. Although I explicitly point out ‘how shall we proceed [with the decisions]?’ nothing happens. And it is pretty commonplace, because people want to go home and contemplate; they want to think more about it.” (PC1).
The steer committee meetings are succeeded by a protocol. The protocol has an item called ‘decision items’ which summarizes the decisions made during the meeting. Decisions that result in non-decisions are labeled ‘direction decisions’.

“Some decisions are concealed or labeled direction decisions instead of calling them for what they are – non-decisions.” (PC1).

Case C documents all decisions in a protocol with a clear distinction between decisions and direction decisions.

**Accountability**

The second theme, ‘accountability’, has appeared as a means of achieving execution on decisions resulting from, or being part of, the follow-up process (Case A, B and D). Accountability is primarily related to the follow-up process in two ways. Firstly, the way the project executive is held accountable for actions and the project plan. Secondly, accountability refers to each individual project member’s level of accountability in project execution, in other words, the project member’s ability to do a good job autonomously.

Case A stresses that the follow-up participant (often the project executive) is kept fully accountable to its actions and must be able to explain, back up all steps taken, and be able to clarify why certain actions have been omitted. PA1 explained that when a project is outside of the relevant scope the project participant must be able to present a plan of how to get back on track.

PA1 considers it to be important that there is mutual trust and confidence between the meeting facilitator and the meeting participant. The hope is that the follow-up process should be experienced as cooperation between the Nordic quality department and the project participants. The Nordic quality department wants to avoid an ‘us and them’ sentiment.

Case B uses follow-up as a tool to anchor decisions with project management, to ensure that they are aboard of all the issues and support any decisions made.

“Follow-up is much about tracing decisions back to the individual, which it most often is about [individuals], and try to understand the individuals point of view on this or that […] and to capture it [the issue] to later be able to enforce the decision” (PB3).

PD2 suggests that a good way of going from decision to implementation in projects is achieved by accountability. PD2 mentions that if members of a project group feel responsible for their work and objectives, things will automatically get done.
"Accountability is actually the mantra of ASSA ABLOY. We have no processes, except in finance. Other than that we basically have no processes. Still ASSA ABLOY delivers 16% EBIT. I mean, somewhere correct decisions are made, and I think that is the result of an extremely high degree of accountability on the individual level." (PD2).

PD2 connects accountability with culture. Case D originates from family businesses of SEK 200 - 300 million where employees are used to everyone having a responsibility autonomously. Lack of resources is another accountability enforcer; there is simply not enough time for management to control and delegate, thus forcing employees to work autonomously.

**Learning**

The third theme, ‘learning, concentrates on how the follow-up process reveals deviations and inefficiencies in the project plan, and provides a feedback loop and guidance to project management (Case B, C and D). Learning concentrates on how systematic follow-up of decisions and project progress affects project risks and project execution.

In Case C, follow-up on project group meetings and management meetings serves to ensure that project execution is in line with prior decisions. Follow-up also serves to realign side-projects when changes are made in interdependent workflows. PC1 provides an example of a side-project that had been producing material over a long time period for another side-project that had already been terminated:

“[…] there might still be consultants working on it [the side-project], and getting paid for the work as well. An important job when decisions such as these are made is to ensure that the people working on the side-project are reallocated or removed” (PC1).

In Case B deviations occurring during a project are to be reported and documented at the follow-up meeting, whereupon the report is treated by the management team. PB2 comments on the process:

“A process that results in many deviations is a faulty process and in itself becomes an indication that the process must be changed. Generally I think this is something important, but that often gets swept under the carpet when moving on with other things. Then you forget to draw lessons from what has previously happened, which is really important.” (PB2)

PB2 describes that stressful situations easily arise in the type of business Case B are engaged with, that execution of operations seldom run according to plan and that it often is a matter of
provisional solutions. PB2 explains that unless there is a formal procedure for capturing this knowledge and to prevent ending up in the same situation over and over again, the same kind of problems will repeat themselves as if they never appeared in the first place.

“It is hard to learn from what is happening in a stressful situation where you might have maybe two to five days [of delivery], when everything more or less is a there and then situation”.

According to PD3 follow-up in project management is about learning from the past, getting an overview of the current situation and being proactive;

“[… to be able to forecast and predict, it is about proactivity. To just follow-up what you have planned to carry out is actually carried out is basic level; it [follow-up] is something that always must be performed as a project manager. Your hopes as a project manager are to be able to predict risks, before the risk poses a threat to operations, not when they [the risk] have already occurred […] and to be able to forecast if costs are about to takes off. […] plus, follow-up is carried out very unfrequently [at AA], but that is something that is not unusual for us, but we will have to do more of it [follow-up in the future].”

PD4 argues that external factors to the project environment can impact progress in ways that are hard or impossible to foresee in advance. Instead of letting the follow-up process become a strictly evaluative tool PD4 reasons that the follow-up process should be used as a feedback loop to create a forum for learning and proactivity.

"Continuous development is the core of modern ways of working, as I see it. I am definitely not a proponent of 'we did an action there four months ago, and it was not completed until there. Things change all the time and I believe you have to be prepared to have a flexible work approach. Naturally there is still a need to be structured and follow-up on things, but it can easily escalate into on long ‘blame game’. [Follow-up] is not so much about measuring when an action occurred and when it was completed; it needs to be more pragmatic. In other words; where are we, what can we learn from what we have behind us and how to we best proceed onwards. […] you have to have a constructive view on it [follow-up].” (PD4).

According to PD4 follow-up is partly conducted to ensure that delivery takes place on what was intended to be delivered, unless it changes on the way from the projects start to finish.

“Follow-up is about getting an overview of where you are, where you are moving towards, to get an idea of where you want to be, and with an open mind take in [the information] and adjust
accordingly. And, to close down a project that no longer makes sense and to adjust plans according to what you have learnt on the way, and to follow-up things that has fallen between.”

**Standardization**

The fourth theme, ‘standardization’, explores how a standardized work method in project management and the follow-up process influences project preparation, implementation and knowledge transfer (Case B, C and D). The theme also touches upon how standardization affects learning, governance and comparability of the organization’s experiences.

Evaluation criteria in Case C are not declared in advance of project initiation. Instead, the importance of communication is stressed to the project participants.

“[…] naturally there is a point [in describing the evaluation criteria], but there is an even higher importance in getting the project participants to understand what the documents actually mean. I have seen this a hundred times – documents being produced, circulated and talked about, but the receiving participants does not understand the content and has never worked in that way [as being described in the documents]. […] most organizations have project models, but what is important is to use them on repeat, always the same model for everyone, always. You cannon have exceptions for separate departments.” (PC1).

The argument of Case C is that uniform project processes shape understanding and provides project management easy evaluation criteria when following up prior decisions and gauging risk. The same type of documentation and documents in all project processes is argued to contribute positively to comparability, making it easier to make decisions connected to moving into a new phase of a project. Progress is also considered easier to evaluate, in that if certain parameters and decisions have not been fulfilled, the project is not allowed to move into the next phase.

In 2013 Case D created a standardized process of project management called Antura available to the organization, whereas four years earlier it mainly relied on setting up end goals that work then advanced towards. The current project method involves setting up a roadmap containing milestones covering the project’s expected lifetime. The milestones have clearly predefined deadlines for which follow-up is carried out.

PD3 comments on the benefits of having a working follow-up process in project management;

”[…] that we for the next time [a similar project is carried out] learn to work smarter, better and more effective. That we also seize the moment, getting better at simply planning and budgeting
the projects, and recover the knowledge we have in the projects in order to set expectations right and plan the time in the best way.”

Similar to Case C the argumentation in Case D emphasizes the benefits of having a standardized follow-up process and project methodology for reoccurring projects.

“[…] of course, if you are looking at a single project, yes then it will be faster to be out [in the organization] and ‘running around’ and delivering the project and not thinking any further than that. But we need to think long term all the time and several processes, according to me, repeat themselves. Projects with external stakeholders have several similarities, and if we can conduct the projects smarter we will gain money in total, and become less dependent on individuals. […] hopefully we can both use less [money] and consume less time in the next project, and also start from the right spot directly. The more you learn about creating and planning projects, the bigger the likeliness to meet the set budget and time plan.” (PD3).

Standardizing follow-up also enhances the effectiveness of governance and decision-making. Follow-up has to be adapted to different levels in the organizational hierarchy. One method of following up may or may not be suitable depending on where in the hierarchy someone is situated (PD1).

According to PD1 Case D does not yet have a cemented standardization of running projects but is introducing a system which will contribute to a consolidation of how projects are run and documented. The system is called Antura. There have been difficulties in changing and adapting to the new structure of follow-up because of culture, informal management and old routines. Culture is a major obstacle to standardization (PD1). The purpose of following-up and implementing a system like Antura in Case D is to increase learning within the organization and to have more automated processes.

“[The purpose with the new process is to] create a machine which when you start it, just keeps running by itself. You don’t question the system, but just do what it tells you.” (PD1).

Case B conducts the follow-up of a project’s core issues at the end of each project, which simultaneously marks the beginning of the succeeding project since most of Case B’s projects are recurring events. That different projects preconditions, such as time, size and resources differs does however not affect the general project cycle structure; the consituents of the cycle remains the same and the process is standardized (Appendix I – Case B). Case B considers the need of conducting follow-up as important and PB2 comments on her experiences from various events;
“It is hard to learn from what is happening in a stressful situation where you might have maybe two to five days, when everything more or less is a there and then situation”.

In Case B the output data from the concluding follow-up is analyzed and interpreted in relation to the context of the event. What are considered important elements or lessons learned in the output of the event being followed-up becomes the input and starting point of the succeeding project. Output, in the form of suggestions from concluding follow-up meetings, also goes to a management team. The management team evaluates which decisions are considered important, which are dual suggestions, and which suggestions have already been processed. The suggestions thereafter go back to the project managers and the rest of the organization in the form of either formal decisions or updates to governance documents to be implemented into respective projects processes (PB3). The compliance with these recommended changes are later controlled by internal audit and supervising managers, however, as PB2 comments;

“Processes [like the one just described] sounds great in theory but are hard to get to work well practically throughout all parts of an organization, especially in one like SM [Case B] since it is set up as a matrix organization”.

PB2 comments that although the process of conducting projects is systemized and standardized in Case B it is often uncertain when the resulting insights will be needed, and consequently used. PB2 mentions that capitalizing and transferring gained knowledge, beyond that of the individuals involved in a project, where the knowledge originates from, to another part of the organization is inherently challenging. The follow-up meeting thus captures the learning outcomes from successes and difficulties when conducting projects and becomes part of the collective learning. Although, difficulties still remain when new projects involve a different system and different people other than those from which the knowledge originated from.

PD4 comments on that ASSA ABLOY headquarters is driven by telephone conferences due to work and coordination with its divisions;

“It is very important to have some structure there [at the telephone conferences], that when it comes to action lists it is on the basis that there has been a progress meeting that result in action lists, which are then followed up at the [later telephone conference] meetings. Almost all projects that are run [...] more 'hands on' there is at least a weekly call where all the stakeholders calls in and checks off to synchronize. If it is a big focus project there might even been daily [calls], for about 15 minutes, were we follow-up exactly how things are going”
PD4 does however advocate a situational approach to project management and follows-up by the application of an Agile project management model;

"You need to be pragmatic, try to listen and get a feel of ‘where are we, where are we moving, are we making the right things’. And sometimes you realize you are making the wrong things and then you need to let go and change tracks.

**Risk Assessment**

The fifth theme, ‘risk assessment’, includes events that are generated in projects internal and external environment before and during project execution that result in a risk rating (Cases A and C). The theme also deals with how the risk assessment can influence the follow-up process frequency.

Projects conducted in Case A are preceded by risk evaluation before initiation (Appendix I, Case A - Phase 2). The risk evaluation results in a risk rating that determines the structure of the follow-up process and the frequency of follow-up meetings. A lower risk rating results in fewer follow-up meetings, and a higher risk rating results in more frequent follow-up meetings. The structure of the follow-up process is standardized in Case A and the follow-up meetings occur at predetermined dates based on the risk rating the project has received. The frequency spans from once a month in high-risk projects to annually in low-risk projects (Appendix I, Case A - Phase 4). Deviations from the project plan or unforeseen events are handled by the application of standard methods, tools and processes. Projects are evaluated using tools that focus on identifying the risk of exceeding budget, having an unsatisfied customer, and the risk of not delivering on time. Case A’s follow-up process also focuses on how the transfer between sales department and project group has been achieved (Appendix I, Case A - Phase 3). The follow-up sessions, that are conducted after the contract is signed (Phase 3), provides an independent continuous assessment with the purpose of verifying that the project is being managed in line with the contractual commitment and to confirm that the customer’s requirements are being fulfilled.

In Case C, before a step in the project can be deployed it first must be preceded by a risk analysis (Appendix I – Case C) (deployment occur at the end of a step). The resulting risk analysis lists known risks within a probability interval ranging from 1 to 5 with a corresponding consequence impact between 1 and 5. A step ready for deployment with an aggregate risk rating surpassing a predetermined threshold is prevented being enacted. The aggregate risk-rating threshold varies with the type of project. Case C conducts a final follow-up before a step in the project is completed which involves risk analysis and the assessment of
the different modules that are in production (Appendix I – Case C). This is done to ensure that the step is ready for finalization and subsequent implementation. The pre-stage completion follow-up also involves the assignment of managerial routine maintenance personnel to post completed stages. This serves to follow-up on whether or not that completed stage delivers what they were intended to deliver.

Summary of Results
When analyzing the data we observed several interesting themes that were emerging from the cases. Most of the themes are attributed to the internal environment of the case organizations, although not exclusively. Table 3 visualizes which themes are a part of each case.

Table 3. Summary of themes from the cases

Documentation has proven to be an important part in the follow-up process in all cases. Documentation commonly takes the form of protocols or reports and its main purpose is to be able to improve future decisions and projects by learning from past experience by creating a foundation on which follow-up can take place. Documentation is closely linked to meetings in that it is essential for a successful follow-up process to thoroughly document meetings. When meetings are documented rigidly, the foundation is improved and this helps the members in a project group to make better decisions and prioritize their work. It has been noted that the amount of detail in documentation a project receives is dependent on how the project is performing. If the project is going well documentation seems to stagnate and vice versa.
Accountability is primarily related to the follow-up process in two ways. The first is the way in which the project executive is held accountable for the actions and the plan of his or her project. The project executive must be able to provide a corrective plan if the project has deviated from the original plan. Secondly accountability refers to each individual project member’s level of accountability or in other words his or her ability to do a good job autonomously.

In the theme Learning, the focus is on the follow-up process role in dealing with deviations and inefficiencies in the project plan and how the process can be used to create guidance for project managers. Systematically following up on decisions increases security and ensures that project execution is in line with the project plan, thus creating stability and predictability. Continual deviations in the project plan are indications that the plan is fundamentally flawed. When identifying this through follow-up, the plan can be revised and improved.

The findings in Standardization highlight how the follow-up process can be standardized and what implications that has for projects. By having a standardized process, follow-up can be used to a wider extent throughout the entire organization, which in turn enhances learning and enables project teams to look at previous projects so that they can work smarter, better and more effectively. Standardizing follow-up has also shown to enhance governance and decision-making. By standardizing the process, information will be gathered and stored more systematically, thus decisions can be made on a more solid basis.

Risk assessment insures against threats that are generated in a project’s internal and external environment. Case A is the organization that most thoroughly worked with risk rating and acts as a good illustration of how risk assessment is related to the follow-up process. Before being initiated, each project is rated based on what threat they pose and the follow-up process is designed based on that rating. If a project is rated as high risk, follow-up will take place more frequently and vice versa.

The overall picture of the follow-up process is that it is an important part of project management and that the process takes many forms (see themes above). Our findings fall in line with the initial definition of the follow-up process in that it is indeed a process where execution and implementation are improved through the exertion of continuous control. But our findings suggest that following up goes beyond just control. As seen above, the follow-up process is also a tool to improve already established practices through, for example, documentation and standardization.
5. Discussion

When analyzing the data it becomes evident that documentation is, in all cases, an important constituent for a successful follow-up process. Current research also supports this claim in the field of agendas and reports created prior to a meeting where follow-up takes place (Lambert & Agoglia, 2011; Cohen, et al., 2011; Hjerpe, 2013; Francisco, 2007). What research has not yet illuminated is a harmful paradox that can arise when a project is performing well. A well-documented follow-up process in projects has been shown to guide and lead to successfully executed projects (PB2; PA1). Our findings suggest that when projects are performing well, documentation decrease significantly, sometimes to the extent that entire meetings are replaced with informal reconciliations. Poor documentation may lead to an unstable project environment with decisions taken on loose grounds. This finding is particularly interesting because with this knowledge project managers can make sure to keep the level of documentation constant, independent of how the project is performing, by requiring project members to keep documentation rigid at all times regardless of how well the project is progressing.

One of our main findings is how accountability can be used to reduce costs of resources otherwise consumed by the follow-up process. Research has come to similar conclusions about accountability as those presented in this paper in some cases, such as the importance of the assignment of roles and responsibilities by managers (Anantatmula, 2010), the necessity of meetings (Caruth & Caruth, 2012) the costs of meetings (Cohen, et al., 2011; Hjerpe, 2013; Lambert & Agoglia, 2011), the importance of a clear objectives (Allen, et al., 2012) and issues in accountability (Francisco, 2007). How accountability can replace parts of the follow-up process is not yet found in literature. The follow-up process is deemed very important for projects but is none the less associated with costs (Scott et al., 2012; PB3). It is costly to have project teams gather in meetings and to control that project actions have been implemented. Our findings show that accountability can act as a substitute for control. If a project team has a strong sense of accountability, the project manager (and the team) may use time from what would otherwise be spent on following up and focus the time on other activities related to the project.

Research discusses the dissonance between the project plan and how a project is actually run. Although planning is a way of preparing for reality, the plan may in some instances never conform to what actually happened (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001; Weick & Teece, 1987; Häggren & Söderholm, 2010). Our findings take this reasoning to the next level by showing that in reality, looking at how the project is actually running, project managers may detect
deviation in the project plan and may thereby criticize and revise it. These skills do not come naturally and must be developed by the project manager in order to use the project plan in a more realistic manner (Kreiner, 2012; Blomquist, et al., 2010). Put differently, in theory the project plan should govern reality, but in practice project managers need to obtain skills that allow them to let reality govern how the project plan is formed and used.

Anantatmula (2010) suggest that standardized evaluation is crucial for a projects success. The importance of standardization is also supported by our findings in that it has proven important to have a standardized follow-up process, especially for larger organizations and reoccurring projects. The importance lies in that standardization enables follow-up to be present in different hierarchical levels of an organization (PD1). It may be easy to ensure that upper management is executing a rigid follow-up process in projects. This stands in stark contrast to follow-up in lower levels in the hierarchy, where employees tend to work more informally and rely on intuition and experience rather than on a standardized process. Management should consider customizing and adapting to different hierarchical levels when implementing standardized tools for following up in projects, and organizations in general.

When analyzing the findings we see that risk assessment and the follow-up process are highly interrelated. In some cases (Case A; Case C) the frequency of the meetings where follow-up took place in a project was solely dependent on the estimated risk for that particular project. If a project is estimated as high risk, follow-up will take place to a larger degree than if rated low risk. Risk assessment illustrates how organizations work with follow-up in order to cope with risk through the exertion of control. It is important for project managers to be cautious when letting risk assessment determine the follow-up process. As shown earlier, when projects are going well, parts of the follow-up process such as documentation suffered, which in its turn may damage the project.

Managerial Implications

The overall impression that was given by the interviewed project managers when introducing the topic of follow-up was the lack of a unified model of what the follow-up process should look like and its role in projects. Each and every project manager had their own way of dealing with follow-up and it was usually comprised a mixture of different techniques from past workplaces. This became more evident for every interview held. Most interviewed project managers were eager for us to share our results in order to better understand the follow-up process. We interpret this interest for more empirically grounded theory on the subject as a confirmation of the deficiencies in current literature. The second common
impression was that project managers were convinced, without us implying it, that follow-up was indeed an important part in successful project management. Most project managers followed this statement by admitting that they do not practice follow-up to the extent they should or put sufficient resources in establishing a rigid follow-up process.

Our findings suggest that to improve the follow-up process in projects the first step is to explicitly address the process of follow-up. In this step we urge project managers to investigate where follow-up takes place and what role it has in their project. When made explicitly codified, the second step for project managers is to standardize the process. The process may be standardized by setting up standards for how documentation should be handled, to what degree and at what times project members should document their decisions and activities. Documentation as we can see plays a fundamental role in the process of standardizing follow-up.

The third step is reuse knowledge from previous projects. Several project managers, even those working with an explicit and standardized follow-up process admitted to not applying the lessons learned from previous projects into future projects. The praxis at the end of a project is to formally end the project and move on to the next. By doing so, a lot of valuable information is lost. In order to improve the follow-up process, managers must start to use the knowledge gained from previous projects by having a final follow-up session in the end of each project. At this session common pitfalls and lessons can be shared among the project members. By doing so the managers will be able to transfer this knowledge into future projects and prevent the project team from making the same mistakes repeatedly.

**Implications for Research**

We hope that our findings will help the research community better understand the follow-up process in projects. This paper may be used as a starting point for further research on follow-up process. By acknowledging the importance of the follow-up process, scholars can take up the task of expanding and further exploring the follow-up process in order to get a more complete picture of this complex, yet highly practical phenomenon. We argue that this phenomenon has not yet received the attention it deserves from the research community and that there are many ways in which research can approach the subject from here on.

**Further Research**

We now know that project managers and organizations want to follow-up more in their work and we have provided ways in which they may improve and standardize their follow-up process. The natural next step after understanding the role of the follow-up process is to see
and measure its implications on an organization or project’s performance. To isolate the follow-up process and find sound ways of measuring it will prove challenging but is necessary to see if and how it correlates with variables such as project performance, leadership and job satisfaction.

**Limitations**

Although the study has provided interesting findings there are limitations to the conclusions that can be drawn from the material. The extent to how widely the results can be generalized are questionable, thus generalizations beyond project management and other organizational context and industries should be done with caution. However, the study has been designed to promote and focus on the understanding of a process, rather than to make predictions and generalizations.

With follow-up being multifaceted in its nature this paper will not be able to provide the same theoretical depth as that with more singular focus would. However, since the purpose has been to understand the role of the follow-up process we consider this approach to be preferable. It has furthermore allowed the borrowing of knowledge from several theoretical fields to provide explanation and understanding when studying the follow-up process.

6. **Conclusion**

The follow-up process in project management is largely practiced in organizations but has not as of yet been studied by the research community. This leaves an apparent gap in currently available literature on what the follow-up process actually is and which role it plays in projects. The research presented in this paper attempts to help fill this gap by exploring the role of the follow-up process in project management. We have attempted to fill this gap through the means of a multiple-case study with a case sample of organizational units in different industrial sectors practicing follow-up in project management. Several noteworthy findings have been presented in this paper that position the follow-up process role in projects and may help project manager in the quest for successful project execution. In the pursuit of understanding the role of the follow-up process we have found that there is a risk that projects that are performing well tend not to get the necessary attention to keep performing. This can be avoided by simple measures such as standardizing a projects follow-up process.

Another finding focuses on that establishing accountability in the members of the project group can reduce costs associated with the follow-up process. If project managers can instill accountability in the individual members of his project team they would not need to rely on
the control that would otherwise come from following up. We hope that these among other findings presented in this paper will challenge the way project managers view the role of the follow-up process and think about how to achieve successful project execution.
Appendix I
Visual representation of the follow-up process in Cases A, B, C and D.

Case A

Case B
Case C

Project Life

Planning

Stage 1

Delivery

Stage 2

Delivery

Stage 3

Delivery

Stage 4

Delivery

Benefit Tracking

• Follow-up Completed

Implemen-
tation

• Handover to Deployment

Validation/Test

• Ready for Deployment

Development

• Ready for Pilot

Specification Design

• Specification

Gauge of Requirements

• Requirements

Definition and Diagnostics

• Scope

Pre-study

• Project Approval

Case D

Phase:

Decision items before passing

gate:
Appendix II

Questionnaire

Uppföljning av beslut

- Vad klassas som ett projekt från ditt perspektiv?
- Följs tagna beslut i projektgenomförandet upp?
- Vad är ert syfte med denna uppföljning?
- Finns det svårigheter att gå från beslut till verkställande?

Uppföljningsprocessen

- Sker uppföljningen efter ett bestämt format?
- Hur anser du att en förutbestämd och strukturerad uppföljningsprocess av tagna beslut påverkar utfallet av besluteten?
- Kan du beskriva hur er uppföljningsprocess ser ut?
- Hur mäts uppföljningen?
- Finns det förbestämda parametrar som utvärderas?

Uppföljningsmötet/uppföljningsmål

- Vilka är närvarande vid ett uppföljningsmöte?
- Vad är det officiella syftet/vad säger din organisationen att syftet med uppföljningsmötet är?
- Vad är din syn på uppföljning av beslut?
- Vilka punkter granskas i uppföljningsprocessen?
- Vilka parametrar utvärderas?
- Hur varierar parametrarna/variablena vid olika projekt?
- Sätter ni upp mål vid beslutets fattande?
- Följs målen upp vid uppföljningen?
- Vad finns det för flexibilitet gällande målen (acceptansnivå för avvikelser)?
- Hur tas beslut om uppföljning?
- Sker uppföljningen efter en tidsbestämd period, efter att beslutet tagits, eller bestäms tidpunkt för uppföljningen efter det att beslutet verkställts?
- Vid vilka tidpunkter sker uppföljning?
- Finns det en målram över hur långt efter beslutet tagits uppföljning skall ske?
- Vad diskuteras vid uppföljningsmötet?
- Vid uppföljningsmöten, vad följs mötena upp mot?
- Är fokus på resultatet eller på arbetsmetoden som resultatet uppnåts genom?
- Vilka deltar vid uppföljningsmötena?
- Vem har påverkats av målet?
- Vad händer om det uppstår invändningar mot beslut som tas i uppföljningen?
- Hur hanteras dessa invändningar?
- Vilka resurser används för uppföljningsprocessen?
- Hur följs tagna beslut vid uppföljningsmötet upp?
- Vilken åtgärd tas om uppföljningsmötet visar på oönskade resultat?
- Vilken åtgärd tas om uppföljningsmötet visar på goda resultat?
- Hur långt är ett uppföljningsmöte?
- Hur dokumenteras uppföljningsprocessen?
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