

Leveraging liminality: how the interim manager's liminal position facilitates knowledge transfer to client organizations

Leveraging
liminality

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Abstract

Purpose – With the rise of the gig economy, management positions are increasingly staffed with flexible labor, so-called interim managers. They plunge into organizations for a limited period, operating in a liminal position as partly insider, partly outsider. Although several contributions to their client organizations are acknowledged, it is unknown how the interim manager's knowledge from previous assignments is made useful in the new context under these particular working conditions. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to increase the understanding of how the interim manager's knowledge is transferred to the client organization while operating from a liminal position.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper presents an interview-based multiple case study of six interim assignments where knowledge transfer is considered a social and context-dependent process.

Findings – The findings unveil the multifaceted nature of the liminal position, which consists of task orientation, time limitation, political detachment and cultural distance. These facets contribute to knowledge transfer in terms of new shared understandings and joint interests, which in turn might create new practices that augment continuous knowledge-sharing patterns.

Originality/value – The results contribute to the research on flexible work arrangements by shedding light on how the liminal position, predominantly depicted as an obstacle for the individual, might facilitate knowledge transfer. Through the process of knowledge generation, it is shown how a short-term engagement might enable the organization to increase its knowledge over time.

Keywords Interim management, Liminality, Knowledge transfer, Gig workers

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In the gig economy, where an increasing number of jobs are performed through nonstandard employment, even managerial positions are staffed with flexible labor: interim managers. An interim manager is a consultant who assumes a management role for about six months to a year (Institute of Interim Management, 2023) to implement changes, manage crises or cover vacancies (Woods, Diprose, Murphy-Diprose, & Thomas, 2020). They are sought after due to their extensive knowledge and previous experience (Goss & Bridson, 1998) and should preferably be overqualified for the appointed task to gain insights and

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solve problems swiftly (Vorst, 2009). However, once entering the organization, the interim manager has no knowledge of the internal conditions, such as employees, organizational culture or history, and is supposed to perform a particular task in a short time. Previous research indicates several contributions to their client organizations using experiences from earlier assignments in a new environment (Farrell, 2016; Jas, 2013; Vorst, 2009), although it is not explained how this knowledge becomes integrated and useful under these peculiar circumstances (Rubin & Ohlsson, 2022).

The interim manager's limited belonging and temporary contract are the most evident distinctions compared to a permanent manager (Bruns & Kabst, 2005; Vorst, 2009). These particular working conditions at the boundaries of the organization's social structures have previously been studied in terms of *liminality*, where the consultant or temporary worker perceives themselves as partly outsider, partly insider (e.g. Garsten, 1999; Söderlund & Borg, 2018). Nevertheless, research has mainly focused on the consultant coping with their own situation (e.g. Cross, 2017; Hartley, 2022; Johnsen & Sørensen, 2015), and little attention is paid to the impact on their client organizations. Against this backdrop, the aim of this study is to increase the understanding of how the interim manager's knowledge is transferred to the client organization while operating from a liminal position.

For this purpose, the study considers knowledge transfer as a social and context-dependent process where the actors' shared understanding and common interests are in focus (Carfile, 2004). This approach aligns with a growing research field directing focus toward collective interpretation (Bygdås, 2014; Waisberg & Nelson, 2018) as well as conflicting interests and commitments (Canonico et al., 2020; Engstrand & Enberg, 2020). This orientation contrasts to the conventional sender–receiver approach (e.g. Martinez, Ferreira, & Can, 2016), stresses the shortcomings in asynchronous transfer activities (Axelson & Richtnér, 2017; Prado & Sapsed, 2016) and sheds light on mundane daily work activities (Dixon, 2021; Hartmann & Dorée, 2015; Rose, Dee, & Leisyte, 2020). Hence, the contextualization of the knowledge in a new setting is considered vital (Argote & Fahrenkopf, 2016; Canonico et al., 2020), where the collective processes of creating meaning, integrating the knowledge and making use of it constitute the organization's absorptive capacity (Balle, Oliveira, Maria, & Curado, 2020; Cohen & Levinthal, 1990).

By adopting a “weak” process perspective (Van De Ven & Poole, 2005), this study allows a nuanced exploration of how a series of dynamic and intertwined events and phases unfold, making previously gained knowledge valuable in a new context. A multiple case study was conducted to grasp these interaction processes through six interim assignments. The findings are sequentially generated in two steps: first, the liminal position is analyzed, resulting in the division of four facets. Second, the facets are used to enable the exploration of how the liminal position creates conditions for knowledge transfer and how these processes unfold during the assignment. It is also found that these processes create new routines that might augment continuous knowledge-sharing patterns, leaving the organization in a more capable state. With these results, the study contributes to research on flexible work arrangements, suggesting a new understanding of the liminal position as a facilitator for knowledge transfer.

Background and previous research

Knowledge transfer in interim and consultant assignments

One of the reported contributions of interim managers is their ability to reuse insights and knowledge from diverse organizations in new settings, which enhances the value to new clients (Bencsik, Godany, & Mathe, 2019; Farrell, 2016; Vorst, 2009). Therefore, the transfer of knowledge is pointed out as a critical activity (Bencsik et al., 2019; Högman & Pontusson, 2015),

including participating in daily operations and exchanging experiences, as well as formal training and document preparation (Bencsik et al., 2019). In these processes, the reliability of the interim manager is portrayed as crucial (de Weerd, 2015; Jas, 2013; Ntumngia, 2017). This trust is developed by several factors, such as previous experience from similar organizations (de Weerd, 2015) and the first tangible achievement in their current assignment (Bencsik et al., 2019).

Although the knowledge contribution is seen as a great value, research on interim management has not yet identified the process and required conditions for transferring knowledge to the client organization. In studies of other consulting professions where the consultant is more of an advisor than a manager, several aspects that might be relevant for interim assignments have been reported. First, the tension between the consultant's general knowledge and the unique context is problematized (Pantic-Dragisic & Söderlund, 2018; Waisberg & Nelson, 2018). Second, access to forums for information and complex problem-solving is declared crucial for the consultant to contribute with their full knowledge (Augustsson, 2016). Moreover, the importance of building a mutual understanding between the consultant and organizational members is highlighted (Augustsson, 2016; Sankowska & Söderlund, 2015), as well as a positive emotional relationship (Ko, 2010). Thus, several social and interpersonal aspects can be expected to contribute to knowledge transfer, even in interim assignments.

Liminality in flexible work arrangements

The concept of liminality originates from anthropology, originally used to describe the ambiguousness a person experiences in the transition from one state to another (Turner, 1969). During the past decades, this notion has gained increased interest in work-life settings (e.g. Garsten, 1999; Söderlund & Borg, 2018), where several studies have been conducted to grasp liminality as an individual experience in a social setting. In their review of 61 published papers from 1983 to 2016, Söderlund & Borg (2018) identified three overarching themes by which liminality has been approached in management and organization studies: process, position and place. Position is the most frequent application of the construct, defined as a constant state of "being in-between two identity positions for prolonged periods of time" (Söderlund & Borg, 2018, p. 888), which is also the definition applied in this study.

In temporary roles such as management consultants and temporary agency workers, the liminal position is relatively well-researched from the perspective of the liminal worker dealing with multiple belonging (Hartley, 2022), conflicts between commitments (Cross, 2017) and a permanent liminal career (Budtz-Jørgensen, Johnsen, & Sørensen, 2019; Johnsen & Sørensen, 2015). It has also been studied in terms of a particular liminality competence that helps the consultant cope with their liminal position in work-related situations (Borg & Söderlund, 2015). Thus, the majority of the studies on liminality in temporary work positions are focused on the individual experience of the liminal. One exception is the study of Iszatt-White & Lenney (2020) which shows how a management consultant plays with liminality in microsituations. By using his communication style, such as varying between the use of "you" and "we," the consultant moves between an internal and external position to affect the client's decision-making. This result accentuates the power of this unique position, which calls for a better understanding of the impact of the liminal position in an organizational context.

In research on interim managers, a recurring description of the interim manager is someone who does not fully belong to the organization (Rubin & Ohlsson, 2022); however, the concept of liminality is not explicitly used. Inkson, Heising, & Rousseau (2001) mean that

their ambiguous position results from the psychological contract between the interim manager and the organization characterized by short-term membership and weak social ties, but still with full responsibility for the daily work and permanent employees. In this state, being less aware of previous routines and the absence of tight bonds makes tough situations and decisions easier to handle (Dźwigoł, 2020; Farrell, 2016; Jas, 2013), although too much distance might weaken the perception of the interim manager's loyalty and commitment (Jas, 2013).

Taken together, the unique position on the perimeter of the organization seems to have several implications for the interim manager's perceived status, relations and work performance. Therefore, the liminal position can be seen as a condition for knowledge transfer. Moreover, knowledge transfer in consultant assignments has been reported to depend considerably on social interactions, although it has not been explored how the liminal position affects the transfer of knowledge to the client organization. These circumstances call for studying the interim assignments from a process perspective, allowing the unpacking of interrelated events and interplay that jointly contribute to knowledge transfer. With this background, these research questions constitute the basis for this study:

- RQ1. How is the interim manager's liminal position perceived by the involved actors?
- RQ2. In what way does the liminal position create conditions for knowledge transfer?
- RQ3. How do the knowledge transfer processes unfold in the organization?

Theoretical points of departure

This study views knowledge transfer as a social and context-dependent process where the actors' development of shared understanding and common interests are in focus (Carlile, 2004). With this approach, I propose three distinctions of knowledge to be fundamental. First, knowledge is far from neutral, always including a particular context and perspective (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Second, it can only be perceived as valuable to a specific end, requiring a purpose or action connected to it (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Third, the interplay between tacit and explicit knowledge is significant, described by Polanyi (2009) as two mutually dependent parts of a whole. This interplay is elaborated by Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995), who emphasize the externalization of tacit knowledge as the most vital step in creating new knowledge. Argyris & Schön (1978) describe tacit knowledge as constituting a frame by which organizational members understand their environment. Introducing different perspectives is a way to make them see themselves from outside the frame, which is a way to externalize tacit knowledge and potentially modify their understanding.

When the new knowledge originates from another context, introducing these ideas might entail several difficulties due to its "stickiness" (Szulanski, 1996). The framework of Carlile (2004) contributes to the theoretical understanding of these obstacles by shedding light on the interpretive and pragmatic aspects of knowledge transfer. With a "weak" process perspective, the framework allows a nuanced exploration of how a series of dynamic and intertwined events and phases unfold, making it possible to frame certain temporal, delimited conditions and their underlying mechanisms (Van De Ven & Poole, 2005).

Carlile (2004) begins with a foundation in three prerequisites, all necessary but challenging, for knowledge transfer to occur: There must be *a difference* in the amount or type of knowledge between actors from different backgrounds, and the actors must *depend*

on each other. However, it is not until a *novelty* occurs or is required that existing common knowledge is considered insufficient to handle the new situation.

With these points of departure, [Carlile \(2004\)](#) suggests a framework for knowledge transfer at three levels with increasing complexity. In the first and the least complex level in this framework, knowledge is managed as an object that is transferred from a sender to a receiver simply by establishing a common lexicon. Of more interest for this study is the next level, where the lexicon is insufficient for making the knowledge usable in the new environment. Here, interpretation is needed to reach a new shared understanding, meaning that knowledge must be *translated*. Knowledge translation demands more profound interactions between the involved actors, and in this process, tacit or contextualized knowledge needs to be externalized, interpreted and adapted to specific circumstances. Thus, making tacit knowledge explicit is pointed out as a significant challenge at this level.

At the third level, labeled *knowledge transformation*, the novelty generates consequences for the involved actors, which might impede the use of the new knowledge because the perceived costs of utilizing the knowledge exceed the value of the estimated outcomes. At this level, the focus is on the actual adaptation to the practical consequences of the new knowledge, requiring a political approach dependent on the actor's willingness to find a common interpretation. Thus, the transformation process also includes negotiation of interests, highlighting pragmatic and political differences.

Method

This multiple case study includes six interim assignments strategically selected from different sectors in Sweden. A qualitative method has been applied where each case provides a detailed insight into a concrete and limited situation where the context is crucial for understanding the phenomenon ([Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000](#)). Two data collection approaches have been applied with the intention to contribute in different ways: In the first approach, three of the cases were studied retrospectively, grasping experiences from several organizational members and thereby allowing multiple voices from the client organizations. In the second approach, the other three cases were studied longitudinally to provide a deeper view of how the knowledge transfer processes unfolded during the engagement.

The study's aim and character guided the selection criteria of the cases: First, the assignments were to include an implementation or change project, where the interim manager was expected to contribute to a concrete transformation of the organization's work practices, where new knowledge was needed. Methodologically, a tangible change project also allowed the respondents to focus their accounts around one or a few specific events, allowing a common focal point for the interviews. Another argument for this criterion is that this type of assignment is the most typical deployment of an interim manager ([International Network of Interim Manager Associations, 2023](#)). Second, the interim managers were to be senior managers with experience from previous interim assignments. Third, the assignments were to be a maximum length of 15 months to resemble the character of a typical interim assignment and to be possible for the respondents to overview. Hence, the criteria above served as a point of departure to reduce variation in relation to interim management as a phenomenon. Within this circled scope, a number of selection criteria were also set to maximize the variation ([Flyvbjerg, 2006](#)) concerning the circumstances in the client organization in terms of its sector, type of assigned position and organizational function. Thus, the final selection aimed at grasping a wide range of qualities in the different cases but still within the frame for the study's purpose.

A total of 32 semistructured interviews (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009) were performed, lasting an average of 47 min and were transcribed *verbatim*. Table 1 describes the arrangement of the data collection.

The analysis was performed in three steps. First, a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) addressed research question one: How is the interim manager's liminal position perceived by the involved actors? The applied definition of liminality as "being in-between two identity positions for prolonged periods of time" created the outer frame for the coding. Within this frame, the coded utterances were interpreted and merged into four themes, *the liminal facets*, without further theoretical guidance. These facets are delineated in the first part of the analysis.

Second, a new thematic analysis was performed with the four liminal facets as points of departure, addressing research question two: In what way does the liminal position create conditions for knowledge transfer? I returned to the initial codes of each facet to start a new perusal related to how the informants described the situation where the liminal position was mentioned. Here, it was necessary to return to the full transcriptions since the shorter codes did not always give the complete picture of the described situation. In this step, I started a new coding and subsequent thematization of all utterances that explicitly or implicitly related to knowledge transfer.

Third, I switched focus from aggregating smaller parts to a more comprehensive approach, performing a narrative-inspired analysis aiming to grasp the overall pictures being created by the respondents through their accounts (Riessman, 1993). Thus, the analysis emerged through interweaving ambiguous and unanimous stories from each case, generating several recurring subplots that could be compared between the cases. In this part of the analysis, the theoretical framework of knowledge transfer was used to answer research question three: How do the knowledge transfer processes unfold in the organization?

The findings from the second and third analytical steps are reported in the two sections "the vignettes" and "the emergent processes of knowledge transfer." Given the narrative nature of the analysis, the two vignettes are constructed to illustrate representative examples of the six cases, providing the reader an understanding of the context-dependent, rich empirical material. Retaining the "thick" constructions in the reporting aims to add transparency to the research process and enables the reader to better understand how the interpretations were made (McAlpine, 2016; Ponterotto, 2006).

Findings

The findings are presented in three sections. First, the liminal position in terms of four facets is delineated, constituting a tool for further analysis of the collected data. Second, two vignettes are presented, making up representative examples of the analysis being made of all six cases. These narrative-inspired vignettes are created for the reader to grasp how the facets operate in practice and, at the same time, gain an understanding of some of the events and contexts that emerged in the studied cases. The third part elaborates on how the liminal facets serve as conditions for knowledge transfer and how these processes unfold during the assignment.

The four facets of liminality

In this section, I will answer research question one by delineating the four facets of the liminal position constructed in the interactions between the organizational members and the interim manager. All four facets provide different conditions for the interplay between

| Approach | Organization | Managerial position Duration of assignment | Respondents | Main undertakings |
|---|------------------------------|--|---|--|
| <i>Longitudinal</i> Several occasions with intervals of 1–2 months | Business development company | Communications manager 11 months | Solely the interim manager, interviewed six times | The recently recruited CEO sought assistance in implementing several swift and unpopular measures. During the assignment, the interim manager managed to gain some understanding of the new order and to sow the seeds of new collaboration patterns within the organization The interim manager was employed to take control of a dysfunctional team. This was accomplished by making the dominant team leader redundant and establishing new routines and a more secure work environment The objective was to oversee the day-to-day operations in two units and ready them for an imminent restructuring. The interim manager encountered a culture with authoritarian leadership and no trust in the employees, requiring her to address persistent conflicts and disrespect |
| | Authority | Unit manager for specialists 6 months | Solely the interim manager, interviewed three times | |
| | Real estate rental company | Area manager for maintenance staff 6 months | Solely the interim manager, interviewed six times | |
| <i>Retrospective</i> One single occasion two weeks to four months after the assignment ended | Municipal government | Business development manager 12 months | The hiring manager A colleague A subordinate The successor The interim manager | The recently established unit required an interim solution to assess its competency needs and tackle internal issues related to trust and collaboration, preparing a clean slate for the eventual successor. The interim manager also added value to the management team, pointing out dilemmas and challenging their habits The execution of a restructuring initiative was anticipated to encounter significant opposition, necessitating an external resource to navigate the alterations and withstand the resistance. Despite the employees' unyielding stances, the interim manager garnered some trust and acceptance through his amicable conduct and quiet confidence |
| | Metal factory | Supply chain manager 12 months | The hiring manager A colleague Two subordinates, of which one was interviewed twice The successor The interim manager | |
| | Waste company | Sales manager 10 months | Two succeeding hiring managers HR manager A subordinate The interim manager | An unexpected vacancy provided the opportunity to engage an interim manager in executing a long-awaited restructuring project. The task also involved remedying a disorderly work environment by tackling the team's internal collaboration challenges and managing the delineation with other departments |

Source: Author's own work

Table 1.
Arrangement of the
data collection

the interim manager and the organizational members in terms of attitudes toward each other and the present situation, their expectations and ways of acting.

Task orientation. The task orientation focuses on the formal client–supplier relationship and the interim manager’s loyalty to the defined scope of the assignment. In several cases, the interim managers’ tasks seem well-defined for themselves and other organizational members, guiding their interactions from the start. When plunging into the organization’s daily practices with expectations to start acting directly, the hiring manager’s guidelines and instructions serve as a handrail for the interim manager to direct attention to a limited number of issues. The sharper focus is also seen as a prerequisite to obtaining desired results in such a short time. With the assigned tasks as the primary focus, the personal interests and opinions of both the interim manager and the organizational members become secondary in the execution of the assignment.

Time limitation. The time limitation is a highly tangible circumstance for both the interim managers and the organizational members. It narrows the focus to short-term planning, speeds up the activities connected to the interim manager’s assignment and also contributes to sharpening the priorities. For the interim manager, the limited time frame makes it easier to endure situations that are stressful or not in line with how they would have approached a particular issue. Despite the potential for implementation and fast change, the time limitation is potentially the liminal facet that entails the most apparent obstacles in terms of establishing interpersonal relations.

Political detachment. The political detachment derives from the interim manager’s unique position of not having the same status as the permanent organizational members, both in terms of independency for their future career, the lack of previous relationships and ignorance of past events. This status makes it easier to challenge established routines and ideas and act more freely. Behaving in this straightforward manner also tends to be accepted by the organizational members because they know that the interim manager is unaware of all organizational circumstances and is not “one of them,” contributing to a more open-minded attitude among the employees. It is also understood as less meaningful for the interim manager to establish a personal agenda to protect their own interests.

Cultural distance. The fourth liminal facet refers to the state of not being integrated into the organizational culture and, therefore, being able to see things that appear invisible to the organizational members. Although several of the interim manager’s contributions can be related to already identified challenges or planned projects, the cultural distance fosters the detection of new problems that the organizational members are unaware of or have ignored for different reasons. In contrast to political detachment, which refers to a certain quality of interpersonal relations, this facet refers to a distance to cultural expressions, such as routines, thought patterns and taken-for-granted assumptions.

Table 2 provides details about the thematization of the liminal position.

The vignettes

This section presents the two vignettes selected to illustrate the different qualities in the liminal position and the knowledge transfer processes. The vignettes are built on parts of the narratives that emerged in the third step of the analysis, illustrating opposing and unanimous experiences connected to the interim assignment. Thus, the vignettes serve as representative examples of the narrative analyses made from the whole empirical material of six cases. The two vignettes were retrieved from the municipal government and the metal factory and were selected for several reasons. First, they are both taken from the retrospective cases with multiple respondents to illustrate the complexities of the

| Facet | Subthemes | Quotes that illustrate each facet |
|----------------------|--|---|
| Task orientation | <p>Focus on the assigned mission for the benefit of the organization – for no personal gain</p> <p>A business-like loyalty to the hiring manager</p> <p>The hiring manager tends to act in a more straightforward manner against the interim manager compared to a regular employee</p> | <p><i>Interim manager at the authority</i></p> <p>One of the reasons for . . . them needing an interim manager was that it was good for them to bring in an outsider who, in some way, takes charge of this. I myself felt like a tool, now I will make sure to solve this (laughter) . . . I saw it as my task to step into this storm</p> |
| Time limitation | <p>Put the focus on short-time planning and delivery</p> <p>The interim manager does not have to live with their decisions, no future relations to take into account</p> <p>The limited period makes a tough situation manageable for the interim manager</p> <p>The short time span set expectations for productivity</p> | <p><i>Employee at the waste company</i></p> <p>We wanted change, and I believe that if a permanent position had been offered, everything might have taken a bit longer. Here, after all, there was a specific date when things would, well, truly come to an end</p> |
| Political detachment | <p>The interim manager becomes less threatening to others, does not compete for the same power or positions.</p> <p>Handles difficult matters unpretentiously when not personally connected to them</p> <p>Dares to challenge and address issues in a direct manner</p> <p>Independent in relation to the hiring manager for the future salary or next career step; provides more room to maneuver</p> | <p><i>Interim manager at the authority</i></p> <p>If you're an outsider, external, then I can have opinions and thoughts, and come up with suggestions. I can do things without being . . . political, I can't find a good word for it . . . and my boss appreciated that. An employee wouldn't have come to the boss and said the things I did, but I was clear from day one that I would be completely transparent and deliver to you</p> |
| Cultural distance | <p>Limited knowledge of the people, social norms, and historical events</p> <p>Detects flaws that permanent organizational members are blind to</p> <p>New ideas and methods are valued by organizational members; assimilation is not expected</p> | <p><i>Interim manager at the real estate rental company</i></p> <p>Many have been with the company for a long time, so they've been steeped in this existing jargon. And then it's not as easy to see. It's not easy to break. For me, coming in from the outside, it's super easy. It's just to say: "I don't like this. This isn't in line with the company's core values." It's so darn easy</p> |

Table 2.
The four facets of the liminal position, constructed in the interactions between the interim manager and organizational members and mirrored in attitudes, expectations and ways of acting

Source: Author's own work

multivoiced accounts. Moreover, they exhibit apparent differences in organizational contexts and how the organizational members appreciated the interim managers. Despite these variances, they also demonstrate many similarities analytically.

The municipal government. In the first vignette, we will look into the municipal government, which employed interim manager Jane as a business development manager. When the previous manager resigned, the employer made the decision to hire an interim manager for nearly a year. The task was twofold: first, to address the internal trust and collaboration problems within the unit, and second, to assess their competency and staffing

requirements, including potential recruitments and dismissals. By these measures, it was the hiring manager Sarah's idea to let the interim manager do a lot of restructuring work, ensuring a fresh start for the new permanent manager.

Initially, the team received Jane with skepticism; the members were used to a very absent manager or coping without any managerial guidance at all, and now they were faced with another unsettled solution. However, Jane brought with her a wealth of experience in navigating team dynamics and knew it was possible to achieve good results swiftly if they worked hard. In this way, the unit's internal development became a stimulating challenge for her:

Jane, the interim manager:

I am driven by delivering, seeing the results of what I am doing [. . .]. So I really wanted to see results while I was still there, and I know that group development can advance rapidly if you do the right things.

One of the team members described how Jane started up by performing interviews with each person to understand their expectations of her and the team's achievements. These dialogues provided Jane with a picture of a team with capable individuals but without appropriate working routines, collaboration culture or any common understanding of their mission. With this background, she introduced several recurring forums for the whole team, such as daily check-in routines and a longer weekly meeting. At first, the team members perceived the new practices as encroaching upon their work time, but Jane meant it was necessary to start acting as a group. By agreeing on joint approaches and priorities and taking responsibility for all duties together, they were supposed to get away from focusing solely on individual tasks.

Quite soon, Jane experienced curiosity and hope from the team. One aspect that contributed to the team members' trust was her temporal assignment; it was seen as a guarantee for them to obtain the best solutions for the unit and their mission, knowing that Jane was not driven by a personal agenda:

A subordinate:

I believe it has been significant that she wasn't permanent because then she would have created an organization for herself that suits, has suited her [. . .]. Instead, it has been good that she has been able to, she has been able to create an organization that has suited the operation here well.

However, being less integrated into the relational web also implicated difficulties for Jane in understanding informal practices and power alliances. At one point, a few months into the assignment, she was close to giving up; no matter how much she struggled, many issues never came to a solution, and she did not understand how decisions were actually made. She told Sarah about her concerns and gave an ultimatum; she needed more information on what was going on behind the scenes; otherwise, she could not fulfill her assignment. From there on, they established weekly meetings where Sara continuously informed Jane about the internal politics connected to the ongoing projects, who to involve first, who to listen to and other tactical elements.

When she finally knew how to navigate strategically, Jane's temporary position made it easier to gain support for her issues and tasks. As she did not compete with the others regarding career development or power positions, she was not perceived as a threat. This perceived neutrality fostered legitimacy for Jane's judgments and initiatives, which facilitated the establishment of the agenda for the business development unit.

Another context where Jane's outsider status became tangible was in the management team. From the beginning, it was not apparent that Jane would be

integrated into the team as she appeared from one day to another and would only stay for a short period. However, as all team members were relatively new to each other and were currently facing challenges that Jane was used to tackling, a mutual engagement between Jane and her colleagues developed. A colleague also pointed out that Sarah showed a lot of trust in Jane's experiences in these situations, which encouraged the others to follow.

This emergent status enabled Jane to add value to the team by pointing out dilemmas and challenging their habits. For example, Jane noticed that their recurring meetings always got straight to business without space for small talk or personal recognition. Jane pointed this out and proposed a new meeting routine where they started every session by letting one person at the time tell the others how they were doing and what was currently on top of their mind. This change created a calmer and safer atmosphere when they could see each other's personal sides and not only their formal roles. Challenging their manager's routines this way was perceived impossible for the rest of the team members since they needed to prove their loyalty to their superior to secure future career opportunities and upcoming salary increases. From her independent position, Jane's observations highlighted problems and opportunities that the whole management team was able to benefit from:

A colleague in the management team:

I feel that Jane could be honest in a completely different way than I perceive that I might be able to be [. . .]. She had both the self-confidence, the security, the competence, and also the situation that she would not have a salary negotiation with my manager. She will perform this assignment for ten months, and then she says thank you very much, and then she leaves. So, she doesn't have this [. . .]. There is a freedom in not having the loyalty if I say so, a degree of freedom that I am missing.

In other situations, Jane's sharp-sighted observations were not welcomed in the same way. Sarah described that the business-oriented relationship between her and Jane made her decisions less delicate than they would be in the interaction with a permanent employee: Sarah did not have to show support for Jane's personal thoughts, ideas and frustrations just to be viewed as a sympathetic leader. With this distance, Sarah found it much easier to delimit the scope toward Jane without much discussion, which made Sarah's work easier and helped her stick to the initial plans for the assignment.

The metal factory. In the second vignette, we will glimpse what happened in a traditional metal factory where the interim manager John was hired as supply chain manager to perform a larger restructuring project. The factory had a long history, and its organizational culture can be described as safe and stable. The employees were loyal to the employer and each other, had a caring attitude and performed overtime work without hesitation. This robust environment also implied an unfamiliarity and skepticism toward change, which proved very palpable at this time. As part of the factory's modernization, the company was gradually transitioning to a matrix organization, where a number of support functions were supposed to serve and manage demands for the operational activities in the production line. John was engaged by the hiring manager Margret to create a supply chain unit, which implied relocating the so-called planners from the different production departments and establishing common routines for the production planning, affecting a large part of the organization.

The factory had previously performed a similar restructuring with another support function where the responsible permanent manager gave up; he could not stand enforcing the changes to his subordinates, who were also his close friends. Therefore, the hiring

manager Margret needed an external person this time and clearly communicated her expectations. Before starting, she explained the situation to John, forewarning him to expect resistance and that he needed to keep going despite it.

Once in his new role, John quite rightly encountered much opposition, particularly from the production managers who lost control over their planners when John transferred them to his unit. All of a sudden, they had to rely on the planning that was made without them being personally involved. Consequently, the production managers still wanted their former employees to remain physically in the production premises until everyone felt confident that the new organization would work out. This hindered the planners from experiencing some of the intended benefits of the new organization, such as easily sharing knowledge and supporting each other. The planners were also critical for other reasons. Before John's arrival, the management never engaged in dialogue with them to explain the ideas behind the reorganization, and John was not capable of motivating the decisions taken:

A subordinate:

So there were some strange discussions because he [John] had been tasked with implementing things. But when a discussion arose to talk about the rationale behind different matters, there was no real discussion because he had nothing to fall back on, apart from doing what was instructed, so to speak.

Because the supply chain unit turned out to be a vital function connecting many departments, John quickly became a central actor. This also implied that it was easy for the other managers to put the blame on him and his unit when the factory encountered problems. In his own unit, his employees were doubtful and skeptical toward their temporary manager, who they felt was just there to execute the management's orders without any profound knowledge or personal interest in making it work in the long term. In these upset situations, it felt safe for John to know that he was there temporarily and had the full backing of Margret:

John, the interim manager:

It's actually a bit easier as an interim to know that I'm here for. . . from the beginning, it was six months, and here I step in and do something that the boss wants me to do, I get backing the whole time, so that, in the end, it becomes easier, easier to stand my ground. You don't really have to be here five years from now.

At the same time as John effectuated the unpopular decisions, he also constituted a form of mental airbag for the change. As a person, John was perceived as humble and pleasant to deal with, and sometimes even afraid of conflict. He used his sense of humor to create relationships and was able to distance himself from the windstorm, thanks to his previous experience in similar situations. In the management team, John was perceived as solution-oriented, while at the same time, he did not dismiss people's concerns.

Another vital aspect of the implementation was that John discussed his ideas with the other managers affected by the supply chain activities and who they would work closely with. The most significant difference from before was that the new ways of working contained much more structure regarding reports, analyses and trends that were followed up on regular meetings. It was new to the factory that someone engaged specifically in supply chain matters making it possible to work much more strategically. John took a deep dive into how the planners operated, and together, they reached an agreement on standardized measurements and reports:

A colleague:

They [John and his subordinates] have gone through in detail how they work [. . .]. And then they have jointly concluded that this is how we should do it, so it is not that he has bulldozed through something that cannot be used, but everyone should be involved in having viewpoints and opinions.

In the end, Margret was satisfied with John's achievements. He had carried out what they asked of him without too much upset or trouble along the way. One of the production managers admitted that the quality of the information to control his department had been better, and he also saw that the planners were more coordinated now with better internal dialogue. Although everything was far from set when John's assignment ended, they had at least some common ground to stand on:

Interviewer:

But do you think the production managers ever understood the idea of the new organization?

John, the interim manager:

I would say I believe they did. [. . .]. I still want to think they thought this was good.

Interviewer:

That it benefits them?

John, the interim manager:

Well, maybe not benefit. But at least it didn't get worse.

The emergent processes of knowledge transfer

In this section, the vignettes are used to demonstrate how the liminal facets serve as conditions for knowledge transfer and how these processes unfold during the assignment, responding to *RQ2* and *RQ3*.

During the interim assignments, knowledge transfer arises from different novel circumstances within the organization, either in terms of specific plans from the hiring manager or emerging problematic work practices discovered by the interim manager. For both novelties, knowledge transfer is primarily taking place in the already ongoing activities that the interim manager becomes an integrated part of, taking the point of departure from the interim manager's personal judgment of the current state. That means very little knowledge seems to be transferred through explicit talk about general principles of how something can be done or what the interim managers know. Instead, the interim manager's knowledge is more or less tacitly transferred through the practical implementation of new ways of acting in organizational activities. In these daily operations, it is possible to discern the processes of knowledge translation and transformation – and a third, knowledge generation, which will all be elaborated on in the following.

Knowledge translation for new shared understanding. The vignette from the municipal government illustrates how the interim manager detects counterproductive work routines in both the management team and the business development unit by experiencing them herself and being told about them, respectively. In her own team, knowledge translation starts by virtue of her mandate to make decisions; new routines are introduced that the team members are obliged to accept. Through these new action patterns, the team is able to create a revised awareness of their joint work.

In the management team, new collective meaning is created when the interim manager contributes with a different frame of reference, suggesting another way of commencing their meetings. Similarly to the business development unit, their shared experiences result in a

different, co-constructed perspective. Through these interventions, where the interim manager's previous experiences turn into concrete practices that the organizational members are able to experience, knowledge is *translated*.

In terms of liminality, *cultural distance* can be regarded as the most influential liminal facet in helping the interim manager to make taken-for-granted assumptions explicit, thereby making people aware of their own behavior. Moreover, the cultural distance can also strengthen the organizational members, experiencing that someone from the outside confirms something problematic that the employees have been aware of for a long time without gaining support. Although the cultural distance contributes to the detection of tacit knowledge, it is the *political detachment* that allows the interim manager to also express their findings without being afraid of disadvantageous consequences.

Knowledge transformation as negotiation of interests. One aspect, particularly evident at the factory, is the competing interests that become obstacles to knowledge transfer. These challenges result in skepticism and inertia toward the interim managers' appointed tasks of introducing new knowledge in the organization that is initiated internally by the hiring manager. At the factory, the restructuring of control and responsibilities implicates new territories and power balances that are hard to accept for many affected actors. Through the engagement of the interim manager, the organization secures the first person to automatically accept the presumed costs connected to the use of the new knowledge. In this way, the interim manager serves as a tool for representing novelty, persevering negotiations and resistance. By enduring this exposed situation, knowing how to act strategically, acting humbly and focusing on building relationships, the interim manager manages to transform knowledge despite competing interests. This process results in a new acceptance and altered understanding of the modified spheres of influence. However, being dependent on people outside of his own span of control is undoubtedly an aggravating circumstance.

In this knowledge transformation process, three of the liminal facets operate at the same time. First, *task orientation* helps the interim manager stand firm while being backed up by the hiring manager and focusing on a particular assigned task. Second, the *time limitation* is crucial; knowing the assignment only lasts for a limited period of time allows the interim manager to find himself in this rather vulnerable situation. Third, the *political detachment* not only helps the interim manager to personally not worry about the future consequences, but it also makes the organizational members more open-minded toward the interim manager who is not perceived as a threat. This aspect of political detachment is also represented in the municipal government, where the interim manager's ability to maneuver power positionings is based on her distance from the internal competition.

Knowledge generation through new routines. In the analysis so far, we have seen examples of how knowledge translation and transformation unfold during the interim assignment. However, an additional observation is that much of the new knowledge is released indirectly by introducing new routines and ways of cooperating. Through these altered action patterns, the organizational members also make available knowledge already existing within the organization. At the factory, this involves bringing together professionals who have previously worked separately and creating a new cohesive function that coordinates the company's shared production activities. In the municipal government, this aspect is reflected in the increased understanding of how members of existing groups can better utilize each other to achieve better results.

In these instances, the interim manager contributes to knowledge on knowledge-sharing patterns and collaboration methods that enable the organizational members' internal knowledge to be made explicit and thereby accessible to colleagues. This means that the transferred knowledge primarily concerns the actual procedures that help the organization

generate new knowledge on its own further on, creating an additional knowledge transfer process; *knowledge generation*. This process not only generates knowledge at the time of the assignment but also implies a new way of acting that *continuously exposes* the involved actors to new knowledge already existing within the organization.

Regarding challenges and resistance, the knowledge translation process demands externalizing of knowledge through interactions and interpretation to achieve shared understanding, and the knowledge transformation process requires negotiation of interests. Knowledge generation presupposes new shared understanding and, in some cases, also new common interests, which accordingly include the same challenges. This implies that the same liminal facets come into play for facilitating knowledge generation. Above that, knowledge generation contains further resistance and perceived costs in two additional ways. First, the perceived value of the new knowledge might be delayed since the introduced routine is just a prerequisite for allowing further knowledge generation in the next step. This changeover makes the potential gains less direct or evident when introduced in the first place. Second, to maintain continuous knowledge creation, the routines must be maintained over time, which puts high demands on the establishment and integration of novel action patterns before the responsible and knowledgeable promoter vanishes for good.

These challenges pinpoint the central role of two liminal facets: time limitation and task orientation. They have previously been pointed out as facilitators for knowledge translation and transformation, highlighting the urgency of introducing new routines and making questioned initiatives less personally attached to the interim manager. However, in pursuit of preserving the practices for the continuous generation of new knowledge, these benefits of the liminal position might easily turn into question marks. When introducing an unpopular initiative, it is easier to dismiss or take it less seriously when the initiator will not be a part of it in the long run. This is illustrated at the factory, where the subordinates found it hard to trust someone who was not supposed to be a part of the new organization in the long run. This dilemma puts the finger on the delicacy of the liminal position, making it visible that the facilitating functions of the liminal facets might also turn into obstacles.

Thus, the analysis has shown how the liminal position in terms of the four facets contributes to knowledge transfer, which primarily develops new common understandings and interests. However, through these processes, continuous knowledge generation could also arise. [Figure 1](#) summarizes these results.

Discussion

This study was set out to increase the understanding of how the interim manager's knowledge is transferred to the client organization while operating from a liminal position. Through a multiple case study, the results advance the concept of liminality as a condition for knowledge transfer. A common denominator of knowledge transfer as a concept departs from the transition between contexts ([Argote & Fahrenkopf, 2016](#); [Ren, Yan, Wang, & He, 2020](#)), which means that the knowledge transfer literature mainly portrays the contextual boundaries as obstacles that should be overcome ([Canonico et al., 2020](#); [Szulanski, 1996](#)). The present study indicates that the interim manager's liminal position at the organizational boundary has the potential to bridge the obstacles and promote the transfer of knowledge originating from experiences in previous assignments. This conceptualization expands the current understanding of liminality in work-life settings as a precarious situation only affecting the liminal (e.g. [Budtz-Jørgensen et al., 2019](#); [Hartley, 2022](#)). Thus, the liminal position should also be understood as an asset to be taken advantage of in the interaction between the interim manager and the client organization, further developing the pioneering findings from [Iszatt-White and Lenney \(2020\)](#). However, this extended definition does not

authors have proposed similar expressions to problematize how knowledge is not only transferred but created (Bygdås, 2014), generated (Waisberg & Nelson, 2018), or integrated (Axelson & Richtner, 2017). However, these concepts still focus on a single event or project, while “knowledge generation” in this study should be understood as a process starting up, feeding new knowledge, but not necessarily ending.

In terms of absorptive capacity, this expanded organizational aptitude entails implications for the final step in the organization’s endeavor to absorb new knowledge by making use of it (Balle et al., 2020; Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). Instead of only feeding directly into the organization’s products or services, the transferred knowledge can also work as an intermediary to spark new knowledge processes. This transfer of generic knowledge emphasizes knowledge on a meta-level, such as how to take advantage of internal and external resources by sharing their expertise. These aspects were already pointed out as a critical part of the organization’s knowledge by Cohen and Levinthal (1990), although it has gained less attention compared to more technical-oriented aspects of knowledge transfer (Dzhengiz & Niesten, 2020; Gao, Yeoh, Wong, & Scheepers, 2017). One of the exceptions is Swan, Scarbrough, and Newell (2010), showing the crucial role of knowledge transfer of generic project competencies between subsequent projects.

In all probability, one aspect that contributes to the emphasis on meta-knowledge is the character of the interim manager’s position with a focus on supervision and coordination (Woods et al., 2020). This implies that the interim manager’s facilitating and organizing practices become the most salient during the assignment and, therefore, subject to knowledge transfer. These somewhat more generic practices might play down the struggles to balance the general knowledge and the unique context, which is pointed out as a challenge among other types of consultants with more focus on technical and industry-specific expertise (Pantic-Dragisic & Söderlund, 2018; Waisberg & Nelson, 2018).

Conclusions

This article develops our comprehension of the interim manager’s contribution to client organizations, taking the departure from the liminal position on the perimeter of the organization. The paper reaches several significant conclusions. First, the findings unveil the multifaceted nature of liminality, consisting of task orientation, time limitation, political detachment and cultural distance, each with a specific significance for knowledge transfer. Second, the facets contribute to knowledge transfer in terms of new shared understandings and joint interests, which in turn might create new routines that augment knowledge-sharing patterns in the process of knowledge generation. These results advance the research on flexible work arrangements in the gig economy, where work on the boundary has mainly been portrayed as an obstacle for the individual. Contrarily, it is here illuminated how the liminal position might facilitate knowledge transfer in the organization, enabling the interim manager to leave the organization in a more capable state.

Contributions to theory

First, the paper furthers the concept of liminality as a condition for knowledge transfer. To date, the knowledge transfer literature have mainly portrayed the contextual boundaries as hindrances that should be overcome (Canonico et al., 2020; Szulanski, 1996). The present study indicates that the interim manager’s liminal position at the organizational boundary has the potential to bridge the obstacles and promote the transfer of knowledge originating from experiences in previous assignments. Second, the paper deepens the understanding of

knowledge transfer as an integrated part of the ongoing organizational activities. While knowledge translation and knowledge transformation are two processes incorporated in the framework of [Carlile \(2004\)](#), knowledge generation is here suggested as an addition to this framework as a process starting up, feeding new knowledge, but not necessarily ending.

Contributions to practice

In terms of contributions to practice, at least two practical implications might be valuable for organizations employing interim managers. First, the liminal position highlights the importance for the client organization to understand the circumstances under which an interim manager operates. There is a fine balance between accepting the outsider as a temporal guest operating at a certain distance and, at the same time, providing sufficient details about critical issues. Second, the identified knowledge transfer processes are depicted as collective and practical activities where the organizational members' ability and willingness play a vital role in the outcomes. Therefore, the organization cannot count on passively receiving knowledge from the interim manager – it takes internal efforts to implement and contextualize the knowledge. Consequently, knowledge transfer should be seen as a process of “doing” instead of merely “knowing.” This is particularly evident in the process of knowledge generation, which unceasingly requires active maintenance.

Limitations and implications for future research

Several limitations can be pointed out. In a qualitative study with a small sample, the applicability of the findings is very much dependent on the few studied contexts, where it is up to the reader to generalize to other contexts based on the characteristics of the sample ([Czarniawska, 2014](#)). Therefore, two particular attributes of the studied cases need to be highlighted. First, I want to highlight the appointed roles of the studied interim managers as middle and first-line managers. A study including higher managerial positions would potentially reveal other qualities regarding the liminal position and knowledge transfer processes. Second, the data is collected in Sweden, implicating a Scandinavian organizational culture and managerial style characterized by a democratic mentality with managers and employees working closely together ([Lindeberg, Månson, & Holt Larsen, 2013](#)). Consequently, these contextual circumstances are probably somewhat reflected in the results.

Thus, these limitations point to opportunities for future studies to explore different appointed roles in other cultural settings, particularly in terms of the four liminal facets. Another direction is to gain more understanding of how the newfound meta-knowledge is developed and maintained after the assignment has ended to explore further the challenges of the organization's absorptive capacity. A third avenue for future research is to analyze the increasing use of managers of liminal positions in the workplace. We need to understand more about what it means for organizations in the long run if they are to be more dependent on external actors who are politically and culturally detached from organizational life. This emergent practice for managing organizations seems to have implications for power relations, where the application of [Carlile's \(2004\)](#) framework has provided some initial insights.

Another avenue for future research is to address the conceptual clarity regarding the organization's improved capability through the transfer of meta-knowledge in relation to the concept of organizational learning, where notions such as deuterio-learning or meta-learning ([Visser, 2007](#)) describe how the organization increases its capacity to learn. The relationship between knowledge processes and learning is pointed out by several authors ([Brix, 2017](#); [de Sousa, de Castro, Gohr, & Barbosa, 2023](#); [Nakanishi, 2023](#)), including

Bygdås (2014), who proposes that in the process of knowledge creation, more is learned than transferred. This gray area is touched upon when knowledge transfer is studied from a process perspective with a focus on social interactions and becomes further salient when addressing meta-knowledge. The proximity between learning and knowledge transfer has the potential to enrich both research fields and, at the same time, calls for further precision and distinction.

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