Politechnika Częstochowska
Wydział Zarządzania

Zeszyty Naukowe Politechniki Częstochowskiej. Zarządzanie
Research Reviews of Czestochowa University of Technology. Management

No. 63 (2026), pp. 45-58, ISSN: 2083-1560, e-ISSN: 3071-9259
DOI: 10.17512/znpcz.2026.3.04, http://znz.pcz.pl

Received: 27.07.2026; Revised: 27.08.2026;
Accepted: 01.09.2026; Published: 30.09.2026.

TEMPORARY COLLABORATIVE NETWORKS AS A MANAGEMENT PROBLEM: A REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to conceptualize Temporary Collaborative Networks (TCNs) as a distinct management problem and to develop a framework for analysing how such networks become actionable under time pressure, distributed authority and incomplete goal clarity. The article treats TCNs as a practical and theoretical puzzle: how actors who do not share one hierarchy can organize joint action before stable routines, authority and trust have time to form. The argument is that time-bounded, multi-actor arrangements cannot be reduced either to temporary organizations, project networks or general collaborative networks, because their central challenge is temporary stabilization: the limited but sufficient stabilization of coordination, roles, goals, knowledge flows and performance criteria before durable routines or settled authority can emerge. The study is based on a systematizing literature review combined with a conceptual synthesis. Searches in Scopus and EBSCOhost identified 296 records. After deduplication, title-abstract screening and selective full-text retrieval, 66 full texts were coded, and 36 publications formed the detailed analytical core. The resulting framework organizes TCNs around 10 dimensions: temporariness, networked multi-actor structure, governance architecture, coordination, goal and value alignment, knowledge integration, quality and performance assurance, adaptive reconfiguration, relational conditions and embeddedness. The article contributes to management studies by showing what has to be stabilized, and what must remain open, for temporary collaboration to become actionable while remaining able to adapt, dissolve or reconfigure.

Keywords: network governance, project networks, quality management, temporary collaborative networks, temporary organizing

JEL Classification: M10, M19, L14, O31

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Introduction

A growing share of management work happens between organizations rather than inside one of them. Public programmes, infrastructure projects, innovation clusters, emergency arrangements, digital projects and inter-organizational initiatives often require actors to collaborate for a limited time around a task that is urgent, complex or difficult to define fully in advance. They look project-like, but not every one of them is a project; they look collaborative, but collaboration is often fragile, negotiated and time-bound.

Temporary organization theory made time, task, team and transition visible as analytical categories (Lundin & Söderholm, 1995). Temporary organizing research then shifted attention from temporary form to process, practice and tension (Braun & Lampel, 2020). Project network research added the inter-organizational dimension and showed that projects frequently depend on relations among legally autonomous but functionally interdependent actors (DeFillippi & Sydow, 2016; Sydow & Braun, 2018). Studies of ad hoc, virtual and collaborative networks have shown that collaboration may also be assembled outside classic project governance (Bendkowski, 2017; Cherry & Robillard, 2008; Liebert & Trzeciak, 2019). The difficulty is that these vocabularies often pass one another rather than speak to one another.

The article does not start from a blank spot in the literature, but from a crowded and poorly connected one. Temporary organization studies clarify the boundedness but do not always foreground network plurality. Project network studies clarify governance but often remain tied to formal project settings. Collaborative network studies clarify joint action but do not always address time pressure and temporary closure. Quality-management studies address performance and assurance, but quality is rarely conceptualized as an inter-organizational and temporary management problem (Lu et al., 2019; Shah et al., 2022).

The article therefore asks: how can temporary collaborative networks be conceptualized as a distinct management problem, and which dimensions organize this problem? The aim is to integrate selected literature streams and propose a framework of Temporary Collaborative Networks (TCNs). In a working sense, a TCN is understood here as a time-bounded, multi-actor arrangement formed around a task, problem or opportunity that requires coordinated action across organizational, professional or institutional boundaries before stable routines, settled authority and durable trust can fully develop. The argument is deliberately modest: TCNs name a recurring management problem rather than a newly discovered organizational species. They capture the managerial work of making temporary, multi-actor collaboration actionable.

Method

The study uses a systematizing literature review combined with conceptual synthesis. The review was designed to integrate the literature streams needed to conceptualize TCNs as a management problem rather than to produce an exhaustive

inventory of every publication on projects, networks or collaboration. For this reason, the procedure combined transparent corpus construction with selective full-text coding oriented toward conceptual relevance and gap closure.

Searches were conducted in Scopus and EBSCOhost on 25 June 2026. The search strategy used two blocks. The core block identified records close to the target concept of temporary collaborative networks. The bridge block captured adjacent literature on temporary organizing, temporary organizations, project networks and inter-organizational projects when they addressed governance, coordination, knowledge integration, goal alignment, role allocation or quality management. In Scopus, the core search used title and abstract fields, while the bridge search combined title terms with title-abstract-keyword fields. In EBSCOhost, the searches used title and abstract fields.

The Scopus core string was: TITLE("temporary collaborative network" OR "temporary collaboration network" OR "temporary network*" OR "ad hoc collaboration network*" OR "ad-hoc collaboration network*" OR "virtual temporary collaboration network*") OR ABS("temporary collaborative network*" OR "temporary collaboration network*" OR "ad hoc collaboration network*" OR "ad-hoc collaboration network*" OR "virtual temporary collaboration network*"). The EBSCOhost core string was: TI("temporary collaborative network*" OR "temporary collaboration network*" OR "temporary network*" OR "ad hoc collaboration network*" OR "ad-hoc collaboration network*" OR "virtual temporary collaboration network*") OR AB("temporary collaborative network*" OR "temporary collaboration network*" OR "ad hoc collaboration network*" OR "ad-hoc collaboration network*" OR "virtual temporary collaboration network*").**

The Scopus bridge string was the following: TITLE("temporary organizing" OR "temporary organization" OR "temporary organisation" OR "project network*" OR "inter-organizational project*" OR "interorganizational project*") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(govern* OR coordinat* OR "network governance" OR "coordination mechanism*" OR "governance mechanism*" OR "knowledge integration" OR "goal alignment" OR "goal ambiguity" OR "role allocation" OR "quality management" OR "inter-organizational collaboration" OR "interorganizational collaboration"). The EBSCOhost bridge string was as follows: TI ("temporary organizing" OR "temporary organization*" OR "temporary organisation*" OR "project network*" OR "inter-organizational project*" OR "interorganizational project*") AND (TI(govern* OR coordinat* OR "network governance" OR "coordination mechanism*" OR "governance mechanism*" OR "knowledge integration" OR "goal alignment" OR "goal ambiguity" OR "role allocation" OR "quality management" OR "inter-organizational collaboration" OR "interorganizational collaboration") OR AB(govern* OR coordinat* OR "network governance" OR "coordination mechanism*" OR "governance mechanism*" OR "knowledge integration" OR "goal alignment" OR "goal ambiguity" OR "role allocation" OR "quality management" OR "inter-organizational collaboration" OR "interorganizational collaboration")).**

Records were included when they helped explain temporary, ad hoc, project-based or otherwise time-bounded collaboration as a management issue. Inclusion required a multi-actor, inter-organizational, networked or distributed arrangement

and a clear connection to governance, coordination, role allocation, goal alignment, knowledge integration, quality assurance, relational governance, performance or adaptation. Records were excluded when they used temporary network terminology in a purely technical, computational, biological, telecommunication or natural--science sense, or when they lacked an organizational and management-relevant dimension. The review prioritized English-language scholarly publications in management, organization studies, project studies, quality management and adjacent social science fields; one Polish management article was retained as a terminological anchor because it directly addressed temporary networks of cooperation.

The searches returned 296 raw records: 169 from Scopus and 127 from EBSCOhost. Deduplication was conducted through DOI matching, normalized title matching and cautious fuzzy-title checking. This removed 87 duplicate records and left 209 records for title-abstract screening. Screening classified the records into four categories: include after abstract, full-text needed, maybe discuss and exclude after abstract. Sixty-four records were excluded at this stage, mainly because they referred to technical or non-organizational meanings of temporary networks, or because their link with management, organization or collaboration was too weak. The remaining 145 records formed the potentially relevant eligibility and retrieval pool.

Not all 145 potentially relevant records were coded in full text, because the aim was conceptual synthesis rather than exhaustive evidence aggregation. Full-text retrieval proceeded in two waves. First, 52 records classified as initial core contributions were prioritized because they directly addressed temporary organizing, project networks, inter-organizational projects, collaborative networks, governance or coordination. Second, 18 additional records were selectively retrieved to close conceptual gaps in the emerging framework, especially in relation to quality management, goal alignment, knowledge integration, network orchestration and collaborative networks beyond formal project governance. In total, 70 full texts were prioritized for retrieval and coding. Four records were unavailable or removed at the full-text stage: two targeted records were unavailable, one initial core-contribution record was unavailable, and one initial record was merged as a duplicate. This left 66 coded full texts. Of these, 36 publications formed the detailed analytical core: 20 initial analytical sources and 16 targeted gap-closing sources. Publications were assigned to the detailed analytical core when they directly shaped at least one dimension of the TCN framework or clarified a boundary between TCNs and adjacent concepts such as temporary organizations, project networks, collaborative networks or inter-organizational projects. The remaining 30 full texts were used as supporting, background or eligibility-check sources when they confirmed relevance, provided contextual support or helped assess a neighbouring literature stream without directly shaping the final framework. The flow is summarized in Figure 1.

DOI: 10.17512/znpcz.2026.3.04

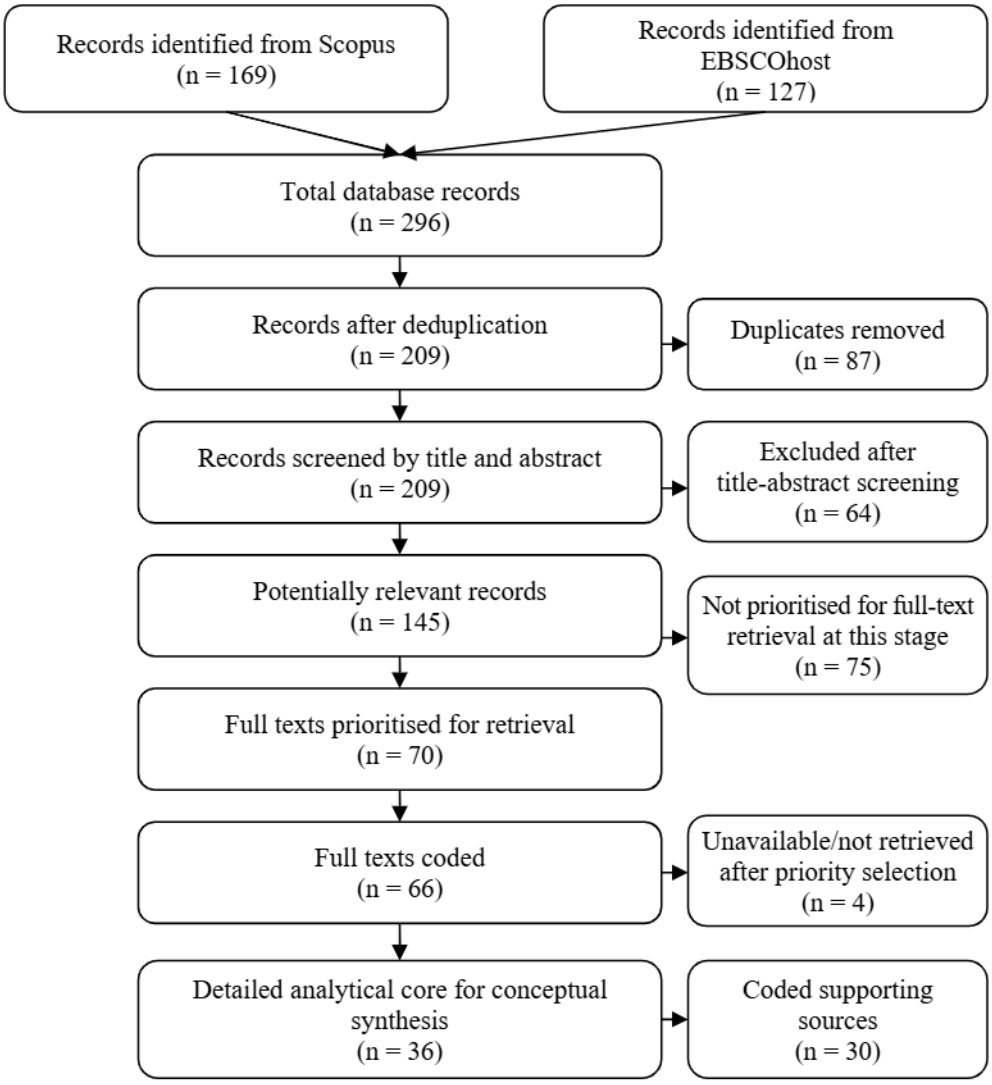


Figure 1. PRISMA-informed flow of corpus construction

Source: Own elaboration

Coding was iterative and conceptual. Each full text was coded for the type of arrangement studied, the level of analysis, the management problem addressed and its contribution to the emerging TCN framework. The coding scheme included ten dimensions: temporariness, networked multi-actor structure, governance architecture, coordination, goal and value alignment, knowledge integration, quality and performance assurance, adaptive reconfiguration, relational conditions and embeddedness. The initial categories came from the review question and the search strategy, while the final set was refined through repeated reading of the full-text corpus. The synthesis compared how the adjacent literatures explained these dimensions,

where they overlapped and where their explanatory limits appeared. The coding was used for concept development, not for effect-size aggregation or statistical comparison.

The first building block is temporary organization theory. Lundin and Söderholm (1995) shifted attention from permanence to bounded action. Later studies showed that temporary organizing relies on role systems, deadlines, sequencing and interaction patterns that allow actors to coordinate despite limited time and incomplete familiarity (Bechky, 2006; Fernandes et al., 2018; Peters & Pressey, 2016). The project-ecology perspective adds that temporary organizing is also embedded in wider relational and institutional contexts (Grabher & Ibert, 2011). For the present argument, the key lesson is that temporariness is not just duration. It changes what can be stabilized and what must remain provisional.

Project network research brings in the actors outside a single hierarchy. Project networks are not simply projects with more stakeholders. They involve multiple organizations, overlapping boundaries, partial authority, differentiated responsibilities and recurrent tensions between project goals and organizational interests (DeFillippi & Sydow, 2016; Jones & Lichtenstein, 2009; Sydow & Braun, 2018). Governance studies show that responsibilities, routines, roles, relations, monitoring, decision-making and capability building become central when project action crosses organizational boundaries (Kujala et al., 2021; Müller et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2023). Integration and orchestration studies add that such mechanisms must be actively assembled and maintained across the network, rather than assumed as background conditions (Roehrich et al., 2023; Saukko et al., 2019).

The third set of studies keeps TCNs from collapsing into project-network theory. It points to collaborative, ad hoc, temporary and virtual arrangements that may be assembled outside formal project governance. Temporary networks can be useful when organizations need rapid access to resources under time limits (Pérez--Nordtvedt et al., 2013), while collaboration can be assembled around software problems, innovation clusters, government-industry initiatives, humanitarian operations or virtual arrangements (Calamel et al., 2012; Cherry & Robillard, 2008; Liebert & Trzeciak, 2019; Pellegrin-Romeggio & Vega, 2014; Tiwari, 2015; Vega, 2019). Bendkowski's work on temporary networks of cooperation is especially useful terminologically because it shows that similar phenomena have already been noticed in the Polish management literature, even if the conceptual vocabulary remains unsettled (Bendkowski, 2017).

The fourth stream concerns strategic alignment, knowledge integration and quality. Temporary networks face goal plurality because participants pursue both common and organization-specific objectives. Haniff and Galloway (2022) show that project networks operate under overlapping organizational boundaries and multiple strategic aspirations. Lind (2015) similarly links goal diversity with resource development in an inter-organizational project. Knowledge integration studies add that resources and expertise are distributed and must be identified, combined and mobilized rather than simply transferred (Majuri, 2022; Tiwari, 2015). Quality studies indicate that performance assurance in inter-organizational projects depends not only on internal practices but also on governance and communication across organizations (Lu et al., 2019; Shah et al., 2022).

The point of putting these streams next to one another is not to rename them, but to show the management problem that sits across them. A TCN is not merely a temporary organization, because it is structured by multiple actors and boundary-spanning dependencies. It is not only a project network, because temporary networks and dynamically assembled collaboration can appear outside formal project settings (Pellegrin-Romeggio & Vega, 2014; Pérez-Nordtvedt et al., 2013; van Fenema et al., 2016; Vega, 2019). It is not a collaborative network, because time pressure, temporary closure and limited routinization alter the conditions of collaboration.

Analytical implications of the reviewed streams

Across the reviewed literature, one practical problem keeps returning: temporary collaboration becomes actionable only when selected elements are stabilized without closing the network too early. Permanent organizations may stabilize routines, authority and membership over time; TCNs usually cannot. They therefore rely on provisional devices such as milestones, decision forums, interface roles, contracts, information platforms and escalation paths. These devices create enough temporary order for actors to coordinate, allocate authority, align tasks and keep divergent goals workable.

Three implications follow. First, authority in TCNs is usually incomplete and distributed among clients, lead organizations, boards, experts and stakeholders, so decisions must be sorted between centralization, local negotiation and temporary openness. Second, knowledge has to be made usable across boundaries through interfaces, shared platforms, workshops or boundary-spanning roles. Third, quality cannot be reduced to the internal system of one organization: the network must provisionally define what counts as reliable information, acceptable handover, legitimate decision-making and sufficient performance evidence.

Conceptual framework

Building on the working definition introduced in the Introduction, this section develops TCNs as a management framework organized around temporary stabilization: making collaboration sufficiently stable to act while keeping it temporary enough to adapt, dissolve or reconfigure. Figure 2 presents the framework as four layers: constitutive conditions, management architecture, integration capacities, and assurance and outcome logic. Table 1 summarizes the ten analytical dimensions and the core management question attached to each of them.

The dimensions specify what must be stabilized in practice. Temporariness and networked structure define the setting; governance, coordination and goal alignment make joint action workable; knowledge integration, relational conditions, embeddedness and adaptation support integration across boundaries; quality and performance assurance define how acceptable joint outcomes are assessed.

The framework is also useful because it draws boundaries. First, not every collaboration is a TCN. A stable partnership with routine governance lacks the temporal problem at the centre of the concept. Second, not every temporary project is a TCN.

A project conducted inside one organization may be temporary but not networked in the relevant sense. Third, TCNs do not eliminate power, conflict or ambiguity. They become stable enough to act despite them.

Table 1. Analytical dimensions and core management questions of temporary collaborative networks

Dimension	Core management question
Temporariness	How is action bounded, paced and closed?
Networked multi-actor structure	Who contributes resources, authority and knowledge across boundaries?
Governance architecture	How are decision rights, accountability and rules distributed?
Coordination	How are tasks, interfaces and timing aligned?
Goal and value alignment	How are divergent objectives made workable?
Knowledge integration	How is distributed expertise combined?
Quality/performance assurance	How is acceptable performance defined and monitored?
Adaptive reconfiguration	How does the network adjust when assumptions change?
Relational conditions	How are trust, conflict and communication handled?
Embeddedness	How do prior ties, institutions and future expectations shape the network?

Source: Own elaboration

The dimensions in Table 1 are analytical distinctions rather than isolated variables. Their theoretical anchors come from the literature streams synthesized above: temporary organization and temporary organizing research support the temporariness dimension; project network and inter-organizational project research support the networked structure, governance and coordination dimensions; strategic alignment and knowledge-integration studies support the goal, value and knowledge dimensions; quality-management studies support the assurance dimension; and project-ecology, relational-governance and temporary-network studies support the relational, embeddedness and adaptive dimensions. The purpose of the table is therefore not to separate the dimensions mechanically, but to identify the main management question that each dimension makes visible.

Some dimensions necessarily overlap in practice, but they do not perform the same analytical role. Governance concerns who has the right to decide, define rules and bear accountability, whereas coordination concerns how tasks, interfaces and timing are connected in action. Relational conditions refer to the current quality of interaction, including trust, conflict and communication, whereas embeddedness refers to prior ties, institutional settings and future expectations that shape the temporary network before and beyond its immediate operation. Quality and performance assurance refers to the criteria and evidence through which joint action is assessed; performance monitoring is one mechanism within this broader assurance logic.

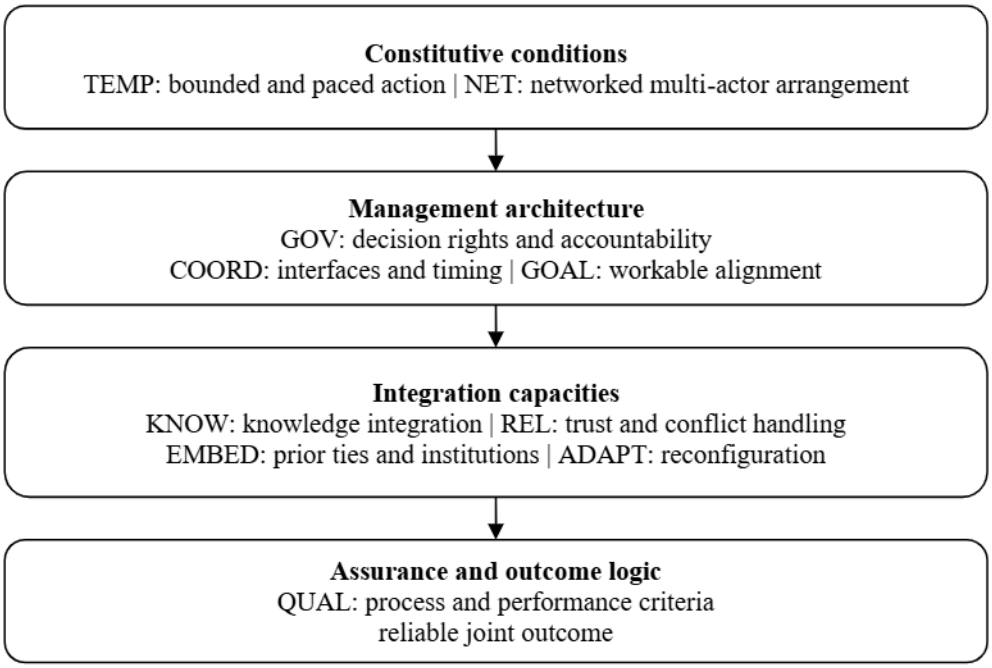


Figure 2. Four-layer conceptual framework of Temporary Collaborative Networks

Source: Own elaboration

Figure 2 should be read from top to bottom. TCNs first require temporary and networked conditions, then a provisional management architecture, then capacities for integrating goals, knowledge, relations and adaptation, and finally criteria for assuring a reliable joint outcome. The propositions below translate this layered logic into conceptual claims for further theory development and empirical testing.

Propositions for theory development

The framework leads to four propositions.

P1: The stronger the time pressure and task uncertainty in a temporary collaborative network, the more important the provisional governance devices become to enable action. This proposition does not imply that formalization solves uncertainty. It implies that temporary rules, decision forums and escalation paths make uncertainty collectively manageable.

P2: Temporary collaborative networks perform better when goal alignment is treated as workable alignment rather than full consensus. Under multi-actor conditions, complete agreement may be unrealistic or even counterproductive. What is needed is a negotiated minimum that allows actors to coordinate while maintaining awareness of residual tensions.

P3: Knowledge integration in a TCN depends less on the amount of knowledge available in the network and more on the quality of interfaces through which

knowledge is made visible, translated and combined. This proposition directs attention from possession of expertise to the practices that make expertise usable across boundaries.

P4: Quality assurance in TCNs depends on the coupling of governance and coordination. Quality criteria remain fragile when they are defined by one organization but implemented through several actors. They become more robust when linked to shared monitoring, transparent communication and agreed decision rules. These propositions should be treated as conceptual claims for future empirical testing rather than as conclusions already verified by the review.

Discussion

The framework contributes to temporary organization research by moving from boundedness to boundary-spanning temporary action. Temporary organizing is not treated only as an internal process of a temporary system, but as a problem of coordinating actors whose commitments, identities and performance criteria remain anchored partly outside the network. This perspective extends the insight that temporary organizations depend on roles, deadlines and transitions by adding the problem of multi-actor plurality.

For project network research, the added value is not another label but a wider lens. Project network studies provide strong tools for analyzing governance, coordination, integration, orchestration and inter-organizational dependencies (DeFillippi & Sydow, 2016; Kujala et al., 2021; Oliveira & Lumineau, 2017; Roehrich et al., 2023; Saukko et al., 2019). The TCN concept uses these tools but does not reduce temporary collaboration to formal projects. It also foregrounds goal plurality, quality assurance and adaptive reconfiguration as recurring problems across different kinds of temporary networks.

For collaborative-network research, the article brings time pressure and closure into the foreground. Collaboration is not only a matter of connection, trust or information sharing. Research on temporary networks, reconstruction operations and dynamically assembled project networks shows that actors must mobilize resources quickly while still preserving adaptability (Pérez-Nordtvedt et al., 2013; van Fenema et al., 2016; Vega, 2019). In TCNs, actors must decide what to stabilize quickly and what to keep open. This is the point at which temporary stabilization becomes more than a summary phrase: it names the work of deciding what must hold, for now, so that joint action can proceed.

The quality-management implication is more tentative but important. Quality in TCNs cannot be understood only as compliance with internal procedures. It is also the quality of coordination, communication, decision criteria, role clarity, knowledge integration and performance monitoring across boundaries. Existing evidence on quality management in inter-organizational projects supports this direction (Lu et al., 2019; Shah et al., 2022), but the area remains less saturated than governance or coordination research. Future research should therefore examine how temporary networks define and assure quality when responsibility is distributed.

Limitations and future research

Two limits should be kept visible. First, the review was systematizing rather than exhaustive: it integrated streams relevant to TCNs rather than every publication on projects, networks or collaboration. Therefore, the framework should be read as a theory-building device, not a definitive map. Second, the analytical core is influenced by project-network and inter-organizational project research, which may narrow the concept toward formal projects. Future research should examine TCNs in settings where the project label is less dominant, such as public programmes, crisis response, humanitarian action, innovation ecosystems and digital work arrangements (van Fenema et al., 2016; Vega, 2019). Third, the quality-management dimension requires further development. The review identified relevant studies on quality management practices and inter-organizational project performance, but this stream is less mature than the governance and coordination literature. Future research should investigate how temporary networks define quality criteria, allocate responsibility for quality failures and produce evidence of performance when no single organization controls the whole process.

Fourth, the framework needs empirical testing. Case studies could examine how TCNs emerge, which stabilization devices are introduced, how goal ambiguity is handled and when temporary stabilization becomes either too weak to support action or too rigid to support adaptation. Comparative research could also test whether different sectors require different combinations of governance, coordination and relational mechanisms.

Finally, temporary networks rarely disappear without leaving traces. They often leave routines, expectations, partner memories, reputational effects, data infrastructures and future collaboration options. Project-ecology research suggests that temporary action is rarely isolated from prior and subsequent relational settings (Grabher & Ibert, 2011). Research should therefore examine not only how TCNs form and operate, but also how they dissolve, transform or become embedded in later networks.

Conclusions

This article asked how Temporary Collaborative Networks can be conceptualized as a distinct management problem and which dimensions organize this problem. Its aim was to integrate selected streams of literature and develop a conceptual framework for analysing temporary, multi-actor collaboration under time pressure, distributed authority and incomplete goal clarity. The answer proposed here is that TCNs are worth naming because they make visible a recurring management problem: how temporary, multi-actor arrangements become stable enough to act before durable routines, settled authority and stable trust can emerge. By integrating literatures on temporary organizations, temporary organizing, project networks, inter-organizational projects, collaborative networks, governance, coordination, knowledge integration and quality management, the article developed a ten-dimensional framework organized around the idea of temporary stabilization. The framework is best read as

an analytical device rather than a finished theory. It is a way of seeing the problem more clearly, not a final theory of it. It helps distinguish TCNs from adjacent concepts and indicates where future empirical work is needed. Particularly important are studies on quality assurance in temporary networks, the management of ambiguous or competing goals, and the conditions under which temporary stabilization supports adaptability rather than creating premature closure.

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Authors' Contribution: Rafał Kołaciak – 100%.

Acknowledgements and Financial Disclosure: The author declares no external funding.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Ethics Declaration: Ethical approval of this work was not required for this research as it did not involve human participants or animal subjects.

AI Declaration: During the preparation of this work, the author used Gemini solely to support translation and language editing. The author reviewed and edited the generated content as needed and takes full responsibility for the conceptual framework, research design, data analysis, and final conclusions.

TYMCZASOWE SIECI WSPÓŁDZIAŁANIA JAKO PROBLEM ZARZĄDCZY: PRZEGLĄD LITERATURY I RAMY KONCEPTUALNE

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest konceptualizacja tymczasowych sieci współdziałania jako odrębnego problemu zarządczego oraz opracowanie ramy analitycznej pozwalającej wyjaśnić, w jaki sposób takie sieci stają się zdolne do działania w warunkach presji czasu, rozproszonego autorytetu i niepełnej jasności celów. W artykule potraktowano tymczasowe sieci współdziałania jako praktyczny i teoretyczny problem: jak aktorzy, którzy nie podlegają jednej hierarchii, mogą organizować wspólne działanie, zanim zdążą powstać stabilne rutyny, trwały autorytet i zaufanie. Zastosowano przegląd systematyzujący połączony z syntezą konceptualną. Wyszukiwania w bazach Scopus i EBSCOhost pozwoliły zidentyfikować 296 rekordów. Po usunięciu duplikatów, selekcji na podstawie tytułów i abstraktów oraz selektywnym pozyskiwaniu pełnych tekstów zakodowano 66 pełnych tekstów, z których 36 publikacji utworzyło szczegółowy rdzeń analityczny. Wynikiem jest rama konceptualna obejmująca 10 wymiarów: tymczasowość, wielopodmiotową strukturę sieciową, architekturę zarządzania, koordynację, uzgadnianie celów i wartości, integrację wiedzy, zapewnianie jakości i wyników, adaptacyjną rekonfigurację, warunki relacyjne oraz osadzenie. W artykule pokazano, że kluczowym zadaniem zarządczym w tymczasowych sieciach współdziałania jest tymczasowa stabilizacja: wystarczające ustabilizowanie koordynacji, ról, celów, przepływów wiedzy i kryteriów jakości przy jednoczesnym zachowaniu zdolności sieci do adaptacji, rozwiązania lub rekonfiguracji.

Słowa kluczowe: zarządzanie sieciowe, sieci projektowe, zarządzanie jakością, tymczasowe sieci współdziałania, organizowanie tymczasowe

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