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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring temporal dimensions of benefits realisation management in agile IT environments

Julie Delisle

Université du Québec à Montréal
(ESG UQAM),
Department of Management
315 Sainte-Catherine Street East,
Montreal, QC H2X 3X2
delisle.julie@uqam.ca

Carl Marnewick

University of Johannesburg
Department of Applied Information
Systems
1 Bunting Road, Auckland Park,
Johannesburg, 2000, South Africa
cmarnewick@uj.ac.za

Alejandro Romero-Torres

Université du Québec à Montréal
(ESG UQAM),
Department of Management
315 Sainte-Catherine Street East,
Montreal, QC H2X 3X2
romero-torres.alejandro@uqam.ca

Abstract

This study explored the temporal dimensions of benefits realisation management (BRM) in agile IT project management environments. BRM, focused on aligning strategy with project execution, is inherently temporal, requiring the consideration of past, present, and future outcomes, as well as both short- and long-term benefits. This research explored BRM in agile IT project management through a temporal lens. Adopting a 'time as process' lens, our interest was in how actors collectively negotiate, enact, and interconnect the present, past, and future. Through qualitative interviews and a focus group, we examined how agile methods, specifically Scrum and SAFe, interact with BRM processes across different time perspectives. The findings identify challenges such as (1) limited availability of past project data, (2) neglect of long-term benefits, and (3) lack of harmonisation between past, present, and future considerations in benefits realisation. The paper contributes to project management literature by emphasising the importance of temporal leadership in navigating these challenges and improving the harmonisation of past, present, and future actions in BRM.

1. Introduction

Time and temporality play a crucial role in strategy and strategic management, yet little is known about how people engage practically with these dimensions in project environments (Bansal et al., 2022). Benefits realisation management (BRM), which is defined as the process of identifying, defining, planning, tracking, and realising organisational benefits (Association for Project Management, 2019), serves as a critical link between strategy and projects (Musawir et al., 2017). Benefits, by definition, are the positive outcomes resulting from a project's deliverables, which are aligned with strategic objectives. Given its emphasis on short- and long-term benefits, BRM inherently involves temporal considerations. However, despite its strategic importance, BRM's relationship with time remains underexplored, particularly in agile IT environments where project timelines and rhythms differ significantly from traditional project management approaches.

Existing literature acknowledges the significance of time in projects and strategy. Time is fundamental to project success: it is a defining characteristic of projects given their limited duration (Burke & Morley, 2016; Lundin & Söderholm, 1995). Agile project management, with its iterative cycles, introduces unique temporal challenges and opportunities. Frameworks like Scrum and Scaled Agile Framework (SAFe) structure project execution around short-term sprints, necessitating continuous adaptation and stakeholder alignment (Khoza & Marnewick, 2021).

A recent review on the theorisation of time in temporary organisations highlights that more research is needed to understand the role of time in the delivery of project success and benefits realisation (Ika et al., 2025). Theorising time is important, but "research on time within an applied discipline needs to ultimately inform, or be informed by, practice" (Bansal et al., 2025, p. 16). Calls have also been made to understand project management in practice (e.g. Clegg et al., 2018; Martinsuo, 2013) and to explore how temporality unfolds in projects (Brunet et al., 2021). This inquiry is especially relevant for the topic of benefits management, as it is gaining increasing attention while its definition and what people really do in practice remain unclear (Aubry et al., 2021). This is what we intend to do by exploring concretely what people do to manage benefits in relation to temporality.

In this paper, we adopt a temporal lens, defined as "a conceptual mechanism that assumes time as a central dimension of management, highlights specific management domains in which time matters, and focuses research on the use of time-based concepts that explain how time matters" (Blagoev et al., 2024, p. 2153). We adopt a "time as process" perspective (Blagoev et al., 2024) and define time as an "indivisible flow of interconnected events, an enacted relation between past-present-future" (p. 2158). As such, our interest is in "how actors collectively negotiate, enact, and interconnect the present, past, and future" (p. 2169). The research question guiding this work was: How do stakeholders accomplish agile benefits realisation management through a temporal lens? And more specifically: What are the practices related to temporal dimensions (past-present-future)?

This research contributes to the academic literature by advancing our understanding of BRM through a temporal lens. By illustrating the interconnections between past project learnings, present execution, and future strategic alignment, we highlight how BRM contributes to bridge the gap between temporary and permanent organisations and the critical role of temporal leadership in agile BRM. From a practical perspective, this study provides actionable insights for organisations seeking to improve BRM in agile settings. It identifies three key challenges: (1) limited availability of past project data, (2) neglect of long-term benefits, and (3) lack of harmonisation between past, present, and future considerations in benefits realisation—and offers insights into better harmonising past, present, and future considerations in agile BRM.

The paper is structured as follows: We review the literature on time for projects and strategy, agile methods and BRM. Then, we present our research strategy by describing our data collection and analysis methods. Our results regarding temporal dimensions in agile BRM in practice are then presented. Finally, we discuss our results by highlighting our theoretical and practical contributions.

2. Background

2.1. Time for projects and strategy

If time is crucial in organisations in general, it is especially so for strategy and projects. The significance of time for strategy is clear given the importance of the future for its realisation. Strategy is also about timing given the need for speedy strategic decisions on firm performance (Baum & Wally, 2003). Finally, time is also at the core of strategic change, although the literature focuses mainly on clock or calendar time (Kunisch et al., 2017).

There have been calls to take time seriously in project management research, and some studies have honoured that call, for example in theorising temporary organisations (Ika et al., 2025) and areas such as project governance (Ika et al., 2024). However, despite the relevance of combining the topics of time and benefits in project management research, very few studies have attempted to do so. The notable exception is Svejvig et al. (2019), who examined acceleration of time to impact within project initiatives aimed at accelerating the realisation of project benefits. This, despite the fact that project success is inherently multifaceted and closely tied to varying time horizons (Varajão et al., 2022).

Time is a broad and multidimensional concept. Its dimensions include tempo, timing, focus/perspective (past-present-future), and rhythm (duration, sequence, transitions, etc.), among others (Adam, 2000). Based on an extensive review of time in strategic change (Kunisch et al., 2017), three perceptual dimensions have been identified as particularly relevant to this topic: urgency, temporal focus, and temporal depth. Firstly, urgency can be a characteristic of events or of individuals concerned with the passage of time and feeling generally hurried across situations (Shipp & Cole, 2015). Secondly, temporal focus refers to the extent to which individuals, groups, and organisations direct their attention to the past, present, and/or future, and as such, it is concerned with the direction(s) of temporal attention (Kunisch et al., 2017). This concept is very similar to that of time perspective, defined as "patterns of focusing on the past, present, and future" (Waller et al., 2020, p. 263). Finally, temporal depth is defined as "the temporal distances into the past and future that individuals and collectivities typically consider when contemplating events that have happened, may have happened, or may happen" (Bluedorn & Waller, 2006, p. 366). This concept is very similar to time horizon, defined as the "temporal distance into the future (e.g., short-term versus long-term)" (Chen et al., 2021, p. 3). Temporal depth, concerned with the length of the horizon (Kunisch et al., 2017), is considered as a dimension that varies greatly between individuals and even whole societies (Bluedorn & Ferris, 2004). Short and long term can be considered as a way to measure temporal depth. Figure 1 illustrates these two concepts and how they are related to time.
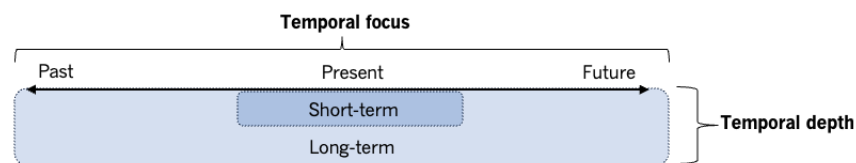

Fig. 1. Temporal dimensions

Time is key for project organising in several ways. As evoked by Söderlund (2013), we operate in times in which "the need for speed, the difficulties of timing, the challenges of synchronizing cross-functional teams, and the development of absorptive capacity as a dynamic phenomenon" (p. 125) are key topics for practitioners. As such, he proposes a research agenda that pays more attention to temporal concepts (as timing and temporary relationships).

Time and temporality, and their relevant dimensions for strategy and projects, are manifold. In the next sections, we will delve more specifically into the topic of benefits and success, and then agile methods and BRM in this context.

2.2. Agile methods

While the use of agile methods has increased in recent years, a deeper understanding of their practical implementation and broader implications for project management is still needed (Xia et al., 2024).

Agile methods are iterative approaches to delivering artefacts—primarily IT and digital deliverables—that enable adaptive strategy execution by incorporating continuous customer feedback and insights from previous iterations, ensuring ongoing improvement before the final project's completion. Formulated as an alternative to traditional methods (i.e. waterfall) and based on the agile principles, agile projects are performed by a small collaborative work team, generally fewer than 15 people (Kruchten, 2011) or even less (e.g. maximum 9 people in the Scrum framework). Scrum is an agile framework that emphasises iterative development, team collaboration, and adaptability, using time-boxed sprints to deliver incremental value (Vallon et al., 2018). Teams can respond quickly to change because they develop artefacts incrementally, in short time-boxed development cycles or "sprints", and they focus on developing the highest priority features in one to six-week delivery increments (Hobbs & Petit, 2017).

Organisations begin to transfer agile principles and approaches to large levels for distributed teams, large projects, and critical systems (Hobbs & Petit, 2017) in order to reap the benefits of agile methods at organisational level. These advantages can be summarised as increased collaboration, better alignment with business needs and a better work environment, among others (Digital.ai, 2023). Various scaling agile frameworks do exist. SAFe is the most widespread and expands agile principles to enterprise-level organisations, allowing multiple teams to work together on large-scale projects through a structured approach that combines lean, agile, and DevOps practices (Remta & Buchalcevova, 2021).

2.3. Benefits realisation management

Benefits, in the context of project management, refer to the positive outcomes derived from a project's deliverables, aligned with an organisation's strategic objectives. These benefits can be classified as either tangible or intangible. Tangible benefits are measurable and can be assessed using key performance indicators (KPIs) such as return on investment (ROI), cost savings, customer satisfaction, operational efficiency, and stakeholder value (Ward & Daniel, 2012). Intangible benefits, on the other hand, are more subjective and often depend on stakeholders' perceptions, making them harder to quantify (Breese et al., 2015). The relationship between benefits and project or product success operates on different time scales. At project level, benefits contribute to success by ensuring that objectives are met within the defined scope, schedule, and budget. However, true value realisation often extends beyond project completion, as benefits linked to the project determine whether the delivered outcomes generate long-term value for stakeholders (Martinsuo, 2020). This distinction highlights the importance of BRM in bridging short-term project success with long-term product and business success.

BRM encompasses the entire process of identifying, defining, planning, and ultimately realising these benefits, from their initial inclusion in the business case to their actualisation at the project's conclusion. Various authors present their own BRM processes (Ashurst, 2011; Bradley, 2016; Project Management Institute, 2019; Ward & Daniel, 2012). According to the Association for Project Management (APM, 2019), BRM consists of three key steps: 1) benefit definition involves identifying and articulating the expected benefits of a project, ensures alignment with strategic objectives, and provides a foundation for decision-making; 2) benefit planning defines how benefits will be realised, specifying necessary actions, responsibilities, and measurement criteria; and 3) benefit measurement focuses on tracking, evaluating, and ensuring that the planned benefits are actually achieved, often requiring post-project reviews and data analysis. These BRM processes follow a more traditional waterfall project management approach and are thus not necessarily appropriate for an agile environment where an iterative approach is followed.

Many organisations integrate benefits definition and planning into their project selection and strategic decision-making processes, as these steps help justify project investments (Aubry et al., 2021). However, research suggests that benefits management practices are often superficial, with benefits being framed primarily as a persuasive tool rather than a rigorous management discipline (Aubry et al., 2021). Furthermore, benefits measurement presents challenges due to data availability, uncertainty, and the complexity of attributing benefits directly to a single project (Breese et al., 2015).

Marnewick and Marnewick (2022) identify an agile BRM process that operates across three levels. At portfolio level, organisational strategy is translated into value streams, ensuring alignment with business objectives. The planning and prioritisation level focuses on identifying, planning, transitioning, and sustaining benefits. Here, past benefits realisation performance informs current decisions on project adjustments, with a forward-looking approach aimed at maximising long-term benefits. Re-evaluation and reprioritisation occur frequently, often within programme increment (PI) cycles. The implementation level is where agile activities, typically governed by Scrum, take place. At this stage, decisions focus primarily on creating artefacts that meet product owner requirements, rather than directly addressing benefits realisation. However, past performance in artefact creation influences present decisions and the organisation of future work. These decisions tend to be short term, shaped by iterative cycles rather than long-term strategic benefits. This brief introduction to the topic foreshadows the richness of the temporal dimensions related to BRM, and even more so in an agile IT context, which will be explored in this paper. In order to shed light on this matter, we will now present our methods.

3. Methods

To answer our research question (how do stakeholders accomplish agile BRM through a temporal lens?), two sets of data were analysed. The first phase involved individual interviews with people whose organisations had implemented scaled agile in their IT environment in South Africa. The second phase was a focus group in Canada involving four participants. These participants were involved in agile IT projects and their organisations were in the process of scaling agile. A decision was made to start with interviews to gather information on agile benefits realisation due the topic's exploratory nature (Yin, 2018). The focus group allowed participants from different organisations to discuss BRM processes and compare this with what was identified in the first phase. Participants (three) came from two large financial organisations, and one was a consultant with a great deal of experience in various organisations and working in a para-public organisation at the time of the focus group.

The interview guide of phase 1 consisted of four sections; one section that focused on value and benefits realisation within a scaled agile environment applies to this article. The focus of this section was to determine whether an agile benefits realisation process exists or not and what the associated challenges are. The interviews were conducted virtually by two researchers via Microsoft Teams and recorded for analysis purposes. As shown in Table 1, nine interviews ranging between 33 minutes and 1½ hours were conducted. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where the two South African researchers deliberately selected the participants based on their specific involvement in the scaled agile journey. Purposive sampling is useful when studying specialised populations, ensuring that participants have the necessary experience or knowledge to provide meaningful data. To reduce the inherent bias of purposive sampling, the Canadian focus group was used to verify the results of the South African participants and no differences emerged in the data from the two different countries. Despite differences in geographic location, both South African and Canadian participants worked in large-scale IT projects using SAFe, which likely contributed to the consistency of their responses.

The focus group involved four Canadian participants and took 1½ hours (see Table 2). These participants were also identified using purposive sampling due to their involvement in the scaled agile journey of their respective organisations. This session was chaired by one of the South African researchers to ensure consistency. The focus was also on how benefits are realised in an agile environment.

Table 1. Summary of interviewees

Type	Role	Identifier	Agile framework implemented	Agile experience (years)	Duration of interview
Financial institution (1)	Head of PMO	PMO-1	SAFe	11	00:53:30
	Head of Transformation	TRAN-1	SAFe	8	00:45:38
Consulting	Partner	PART-1	SAFe	11	01:23:49
Financial institution (2)	Business IT executive	IT-1	SAFe	10	00:57:45
Entertainment company	Change manager Business transformation Consultant	CHANGE-1 TRAN-2 CONS-1	SAFe	2 2 10	01:03:29
Financial institution (3)	Chief value officer	CVO-1	SAFe	7	00:39:18
IT outsourcing	Agile coach	COACH-1	SAFe	10	00:33:06

Table 2. Summary of focus group participants

Type	Role	Identifier	Agile framework implemented	Agile experience (years)
Financial institution (4)	Engineer train release	ETR-1	SAFe	5
	Scrum of scrum masters	SCRUM-1	SAFe	5
Consulting	Partner	PART-2	SAFe	15
Financial institution (5)	Portfolio manager	Port-1	SAFe	8

The transcriptions went through an iterative process of open coding which summarised the data into smaller meaningful units called codes and themes (Saldaña, 2021; Williams & Moser, 2019). ATLAS.ti was used to facilitate the coding process. Coding related to the temporality of benefits realisation, and was done by one of the authors and verified by the other two authors. The first round of coding ensured consistency in identifying themes, and the other two authors verified the results to enhance reliability, reduce bias, and ensure the accuracy of interpretations. During the first round, 85 quotations were coded across four themes (benefits identification, benefits planning, benefits tracking, and benefits harvesting); this resembles the agile benefits realisation process. During the second round of coding, three general themes (past, present, and future) were identified as per the research topic and were then refined through specific topics related to each perspective (e.g. retrospectives and reviews for past focus). The importance of temporality in the agile BRM process emerged from the data and the analysis was iterative since the data were considered with these new dimensions in mind. This resonates with the seminal work of Kaplan and Orkowski (2013) on temporal work in strategy-making. The focus while collecting data was not on time per se, but the authors found that temporality was crucial and led them to propose this concept. We will come back to this in the discussion, but first we delve into our results.

4. Results

Our results address the following research question: How do stakeholders accomplish agile BRM through a temporal lens? Based on interviews and the focus group, we present elements from our empirical investigation as they are related to the past, present, and future.

4.1. The past

Participants evoked the past through reviews, retrospectives (done either at project or organisational level), and data on past projects. Regarding this last point, the issue of the limited amount of data on past projects was mentioned. Despite holding retrospectives, benefits were seldom measured on past projects. The focus was rather on the present (actual projects) or the future. The lack of attention on the past is clear in the following quotation:

> They don't look back to the past. They did their postmortem, their retro action, and they have everything that they want to have, and they go to the next thing. So for the long-term, looking at the benefits, it's not in the scrum or the DevOps team that they're gonna do it. [Group Discussion]

The retrospectives were used by organisations to reflect on whether the product would still achieve the intended benefits. The focus was looking at what was wrong in the past with a view to the future.

> We do quite a number of these retrospectives where we look at what went wrong. Afterwards, in terms of the benefits were not realized and there were all sorts of issues with the software. Delivery hasn't happened. Now you go and you look at what went wrong. The what goes wrong often goes with strategic alignment. [PART-1].

The retrospectives were also used for alignment purposes, as stated by IT-1: "*So there's retrospectives. You kind of have the different levers to pull it, so to say if they represented on after production support, then next increments. Let's figure out how we do make slightly more, or let's make sure we get a chunk of that capacity available to invest.*" However, as we can see, the past is closely related to the future, as this participant projected himself into the future based on what had been assessed during the retrospective.

Reviews are an important aspect of agile, as stated in its principles (Agile Manifesto). These reviews are also incorporated into scaled agile. "*We actually sit every month with our retail executive and he's managing his eggs where we review the programming increment execution*" [IT-1]. COACH-1 felt that in order for reviews to be meaningful, "*the metrics and the process of setting that up is done from the onset*". Participants mentioned that for reviews to be successful, they must be done frequently to address issues of the past but must also be reviewed against predefined metrics. Here, the dimension of rhythm is also factored in as the frequency is deemed important.

4.2. The present

The present is evoked through the act of aligning all the visions and the product roadmap, in an ongoing effort, and the idea of going in the same direction. This also refers to rhythm and the sense of progression. Monitoring and reporting on the progress of initiatives is also done with a focus on the present. Participants mentioned data on what was happening in ongoing projects, which seemed to be more readily available and actionable than data on past projects.

Although alignment was focused on the present, it was done based on actions in the past and with an eye on the future. To illustrate this, CVO-1 mentioned that "*I think we sensed we were spending an enormous amount of money on change the bank with very little tangible work to show for it and what we've now done is focused more on the alignment of our change the bank works to the achievement of the outcomes aligned to our true north metrics.*" Alignment was a challenge. "*Because today I think one of the most complicated things is that our roadmaps are not always aligned between all departments. We are working on this, and you will be using our product there and, you will deliver this here.*" [Group Discussion]. This challenge might have a negative impact on the future if alignment is not achieved between different projects within an organisation.

Participants felt there was a need to ensure that everyone was pulling in the right direction. As with alignment, direction is based on the past. "*I think to me it's about aligning all the visions and roadmaps and going into the same direction*" [Group Discussion]. To facilitate direction, team members need to be close to each other and communicate regularly. "*At some point we managed to co-locate, you know, business product owners with teams and they could then like right there*

every day see what the teams are doing and get feedback, give direction. So I think that created a lot more visibility of how we're actually progressing." [IT-1].

The purpose of monitoring is to understand the current situation around all the projects and whether they will achieve the intended benefits. "*Uh, so those [the benefits] are definitely being monitored. When we say benefits realisation, so ideally what you'd like to see and to come to your question, then you know every project, every initiative that we run.*" [PMO1]. Again, this monitoring, done in a given time (present) is connected to both the past (metrics that have been defined) and the future (corrections deemed necessary to adjust).

4.3. The future

Finally, the future is evoked through the act of planning and the artefacts of vision and roadmap of all projects. It is also evoked through the presence of short- and long-term benefits. As seen in the next quotation, short-term benefits were related to the initial delivery (minimum viable product or MVP), and long-term benefits to the final product.

> That minimum viable product you are already harvesting some benefits from that MVP or, someone else and you mentioned earlier that the MVPs are only staggering and only afterwards you start getting the benefits and you only get benefits that like maybe 30% up front and only the long-term benefits so that they say is almost immediate benefit short-term benefits based on the MVP and then long-term benefits if the whole product is released. [IT-1]

The concept of minimum viable product (MVP) is specific to the agile context and corresponds to an earlier version of a product that aims to gather knowledge to improve the product further. The shortest temporal depth (short term) of BRM could therefore be a distinction from more traditional approaches, where the benefits will be harvested later on, when the final product is delivered.

The focus of planning is, of course, in the future. But since the future is unpredictable, planning is also subject to change. "*So what we find in our model is what you'll find in our three-year planning you've got now benefits and things are linked to it and people have baked into the business case. But when you respond to change within agile environment, things move.*" [IT-1]. The importance of planning lies in linking the anticipated future benefits to the strategy and vice versa. "*Because in the PI planning, you start to link all those objectives maybe to strategy and benefits.*" [TRAN-1]. In conclusion, "*the whole benefits process is about identifying the benefits, planning prioritization around it, and then the delivery of it, and then the long-term sustainment of those benefits.*" [Group Discussion].

Other issues related to BRM have to do with planning:

> So if you then look at business benefits, and I mean you must reliably be able to predict the costs involved or the cash flows. Plus then the outcome. And when you build for yourself, it's probably more difficult to predict those, but in saying that when you go into a process where you acquire, the blind spot is often that you need to change the organization to fit what you buy. Your culture can't stay the same, so there are a lot of these qualitative trade-offs that are not account for in [benefits realisation management]. [PART-1]

Here, the difficulty to grasp or connect in some way with the future was deemed problematic.

In a scaled agile environment, the roadmap is scheduled for deliverables looking at a planned horizon. It creates a linkage between the vision and operations. "*So, this group of people are owning the vision of what we are doing and the long-term, like three years roadmap, of all our products.*" [Group Discussion]. In the roadmap lies the long term; hence a deeper temporal depth (in the future).

The vision and strategies are future focused. IT-1 mentioned that they were "*really making sure that we actually harvest benefits out of that, and I think in terms of the purpose of the organization and where we want to go and driving our strategy was important for us to make sure we can only kind of sign up for the right kind of initiatives*". This was supported

by CHANGE-1 with the focus of the product alignment to deliver on the strategy. "*I want to [realise] certain products, but it would be going further to say OK, how does that actually deliver on my objectives for the business unit? So that's where that link to strategy comes up and then the levers and actions would be what we would do to actually deliver that?*" [CHANGE-1]

4.4. The interrelationship nature of temporal focus for benefits realisation management

Although the concepts presented may be related to a different temporal focus, either one of the past, present or future, a key element that emerged from the data is the interrelated nature, as participants frequently referenced many temporal elements at the same time. In the following example, strategic alignment is closely related to retrospective (past) and checking if the benefits have been realised:

> You see, I've put it first because when we actually conduct a retrospective, that's where we can really identify key issues. We do quite a number of these retrospectives to examine what went wrong. Later, when benefits haven't been realized and there are various issues with the software—such as failed delivery—we go back and analyze what went wrong. More often than not, these issues are tied to strategic alignment. So, if I think about ultimately realizing my benefits, ensuring strategic alignment must be the first priority. [PART-1]

Past, present, and future actions can be integrated effectively by continuously assessing the present, reflecting on the past, and planning for the future. This relationship, for instance, is observed during retrospectives or the ceremonies related to inspect and adapt processes. Effective BRM requires a structured approach that integrates past project learnings, real-time execution, and long-term planning. Our findings indicate that when organisations fail to systematically connect these temporal dimensions, BRM efforts become fragmented.

4.5. Benefits realisation management and temporal challenges

Three key challenges related to time and benefits were uncovered. The first is the limited data available on past projects and benefits. People seem to be prone to move forward, but benefits on past projects are not always well measured and followed up. The second challenge has to do with long-term alignment and long-term benefits realisation. In some cases, agile seems to bring a slight focus on the present, resulting in a neglect of the long term. As mentioned by this participant: "*What about those long-term benefits? Two years, three years from now? Do you actually care about it or not? Do you hope that it will happen eventually?*" The lack of continuity regarding the people in charge of benefits was mentioned as an element contributing to this issue. Finally, a third and more global challenge is the lack of harmonisation between the past, present, and future, as evoked in this quotation: "*I would say the biggest challenge is a lack of harmonised process*" [Group Discussion]. The following figure illustrates these key temporal challenges in relation to temporal dimensions.
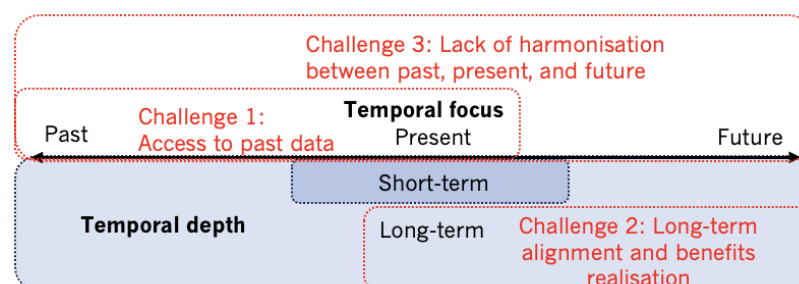

Fig. 2. Key challenges related to temporal dimensions

5. Discussion

This study offers three key contributions, each of which is detailed in the following sections.

5.1. Advancing the theoretical understanding of time in benefits realisation management

Temporal focus (the degree to which individuals attend to the past, present, and future) influences how people "incorporate perceptions about past experiences, current situations, and future expectations into their attitudes, cognitions, and behavior" (Shipp et al., 2009, p. 1). It has been identified as a critical predictor for strategic outcomes (Back et al., 2020). High levels of past and future focus by CEOs have been recognised as helping to promote strategic change, especially in highly dynamic environments, and a predominance of either focus negatively affecting its implementation (Back et al., 2020). In a similar way, our paper highlights that a lack of focus on the past (lack of past data) or future (not thinking enough about the long term) have both been identified as issues. Temporal focus is often studied in isolation and very little research has examined how they are related (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013; Slawinski & Bansal, 2017).

Temporal work is closely related to the relationship between past, present, and future (what represents temporal focus). Kaplan and Orlikowski (2013) have proposed the concept of temporal work in strategy-making to depict how actors resolve differences and link their interpretations of the past, present, and future in order to construct a strategic account enabling concrete strategic choice and action. Temporal work can be defined as "any individual, collective, or organizational effort to influence, sustain or redirect the temporal assumptions and patterns that shape strategic action" (Bansal et al., 2022, p. 7). It has also been used to study more specifically how individuals influence temporal structures as the ones at the interface between temporary and permanent organisations (Geraldi et al., 2020).

Since BRM is about aligning the vision of the past, present, and future, we argue that it represents an illustrative example of temporal work in action. In this paper, we explore which facets of BRM are related to the past, present, future, as well as temporal depth (short and long term). We highlight that actions linking the past, present, and future are key for BRM, and we underline the lack of harmonisation as a key issue, along with the neglect of the long term and the limited data available on past projects and benefits. Monitoring is a specific example highlighting the importance of integrating the past, present, and future, since it is done in a given time (present) and must be connected to both the past (metrics that have been defined) and the future (corrections deemed necessary to adjust). The lack of connection to the past or future would be detrimental, as monitoring cannot be done in temporal isolation and must be related to what has been defined as the objectives (past) and bring changes (to the future) to allow improvements. The retrospective is another specific example of the value of integrating different focus points, since not combining the past and future here would be pointless. Looking only at what was wrong (in the past) without aiming to improve (in the future) would be a useless exercise. Figure 3 illustrates the relationships between the dimensions of temporal focus and depth, as well as rhythm, which has been mentioned as a key element.
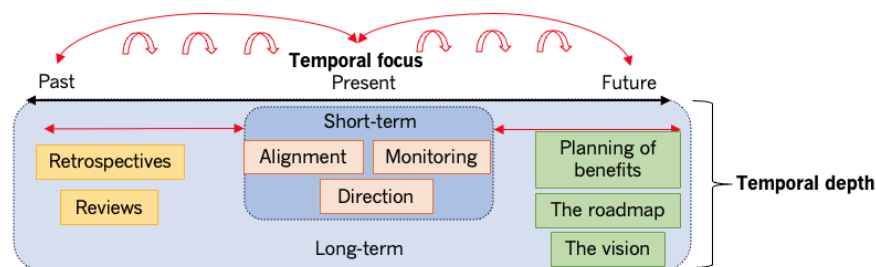

Fig. 3. Relationships between dimensions and rhythm

5.2. Bridging the gap between temporary and permanent organisations through BRM

Research indicates that benefits management practices are often lacking in depth, with benefits frequently presented as a persuasive mechanism rather than being treated as a structured and rigorous management discipline (Aubry et al., 2021). The realisation of value often continues beyond project completion, as the benefits associated with the product ultimately determine whether the delivered outcomes create lasting value for stakeholders (Martinsuo, 2020). This distinction underscores the critical role of benefits management in linking short-term project achievements with long-term product impact and overall business success.

The co-creation of value requires the management of tensions at the temporary-permanent boundary (Kier et al., 2023). We contribute to the notion of moving beyond the traditional view of permanent and temporary organisations as merely opposing structures (Goetz & Wald, 2022) by proposing that BRM serves as a bridge between the two. Through its focus on the future, BRM establishes a crucial link between projects and their long-term impact on the organisation. Our work highlights an area where projects are not seen simply as time-bound endeavours but as contributors to an ongoing cycle of value creation. Rather than ending with project completion, BRM builds on past achievements and ensures that the value generated continues to shape the organisation's future.

The view of projects as time bound has been recognised as limited, particularly in cases such as serial or never-ending projects, as well as those deeply embedded in ongoing interorganisational partnerships (Sydow & Braun, 2018). Agile IT projects provide another example that illustrates this perspective. The iterative nature of agile enables a shift away from a linear view of the project. The importance of frequency and continuous updates has been highlighted in the results, illustrating these aspects related to rhythm. As such, this topic contributes to expanding our view of projects and, more specifically, how we understand them from a temporal point of view. This is in line with other studies (e.g. Brookes et al., 2017; Stjerne & Svejenova, 2016; Whyte & Nussbaum, 2020) that have started in recent years to highlight continuity, transitions, long-term, and multiple temporalities of projects in relation to permanent organisations – two entities that are seen as less and less distinct one from each other. However, the absence of a clear project end point may pose challenges to evaluating project success as it is typically conceived (Varajão et al., 2022), hence calling for a deeper examination of how such non-linear and ongoing temporalities affect practices and conceptualizations of project work, success and value creation.

5.3. Introducing temporal leadership as a key capability for agile BRM

Ancona et al. (2001) coined the term 'temporal leadership' as a way for senior teams to operate simultaneously in the present and the future.

> Teams enact temporal leadership as they entrain their organizations to technology and competitive cycles, manage across multiple time frames, and create temporal architectures for their organizations (p. 656).

Temporal leadership determines whether time pressure enhances performance or hinders it (Maruping et al., 2015). It has been applied to team level and defined as "leader behaviors that aid in structuring, coordinating, and managing the pacing of task accomplishment in a team", such as "scheduling (e.g., reminding team members of deadlines, setting interim milestones), synchronizing (e.g., coordinating the team so that work is finished on time), and allocating temporal resources (e.g., building in time for contingencies and problems)" (Mohammed & Nadkarni, 2011, p. 492).

Even though it has been studied in project teams or high-level management (Waller et al., 2020), we know less about continuous agile IT teams as our context. Given the nature of BRM and the necessary articulation of the past, present, and future, we propose the concept of temporal leadership as a key capability for agile BRM.

In an agile environment, teams can leverage temporal leadership to manage value creation effectively throughout project iterations. The existing definition of temporal leadership focuses primarily on the present and future; however, we propose

an expansion of this definition to also encompass the past. This is particularly relevant, as two of the three key challenges identified in our study are directly linked to the past—either through the lack of historical data or the difficulty of integrating past, present, and future considerations in BRM.

Furthermore, since the responsibility for BRM is often unclear, an important area for future research is shared temporal leadership—examining who can contribute to integrating the past, present, and future in BRM processes, and how. This is particularly relevant in agile environments, where autonomy plays a central role. In such contexts, teams themselves could take on part of this responsibility, actively shaping the temporal alignment of benefits realisation.

6. Conclusion

This study explored the temporal dimensions of benefits realisation management (BRM) in agile IT project environments. By adopting a temporal lens, we provide insights into how stakeholders navigate past, present, and future considerations in benefits realisation. Our research identifies three critical challenges in agile BRM: 1) limited availability of past project data, which hinders learning from previous initiatives and impairs future decision-making, 2) neglect of long-term benefits, as agile environments tend to prioritise immediate outcomes over sustained strategic value, and 3) lack of harmonisation between past, present, and future considerations.

Benefits management continues to gain increasing interest, both in practice and in academic literature, while we know little about its actual practice (Aubry et al., 2021). This study aimed to contribute to "opening the black box of benefits management in the context of projects" (Aubry et al., 2021, p. 434). It does so by uncovering an important dimension for project studies, which is temporality, through investigating how people accomplish agile BRM through a temporal lens.

Temporary organisations have been characterised as evolving in a bubble "decoupled from other past, contemporary, or even future sequence of activities" (Lundin & Söderholm, 1995, p. 446). By illustrating temporal work, we uncover other dimensions of time in addition to the objective one that dominates project management rationale (Delisle, 2019; Söderlund, 2013).

The paper makes three key theoretical contributions. Firstly, it shows how BRM is about aligning the vision of the past, present, and future and, as such, how it represents an illustrative example of temporal work. Secondly, it illustrates how BRM is an area connecting both temporary and permanent organisations, contributing to a vision of projects that are not finite and decoupled from their organisations. Thirdly, it introduces the concept of temporal leadership as a key capability for BRM.

Unlike prior studies that focused primarily on benefits realisation within structured governance models (Ward & Daniel, 2012), our study reveals that the temporal dimension is an underexplored yet critical factor in BRM. We extend the literature by demonstrating how agile's iterative nature introduces a distinct challenge: organisations often optimise for short-term benefits at the expense of long-term value realisation. This finding contrasts with traditional project management environments, where benefits realisation is often more linear and structured (Project Management Institute, 2019). Our findings expand the current understanding of BRM by emphasising the importance of temporal alignment—ensuring that past learnings, present execution, and future planning are integrated.

This article also has practical contributions, since it highlights three challenges that people face while managing benefits in an agile context and consequently areas for improvement are suggested, such as better access to past data, a long-term alignment, and harmonisation between the past, present, and future.

This is an emergent work building on a relatively small amount of data, from a limited number of organisations. This raises issues of validity, and the work is not meant to be generalisable to other industries. However, we see pursuing this inquiry and collecting more data to enrich the understanding of these topics as a potential research avenue. Concerning reliability, the methodology relies on interviews and a focus group, which inherently involve subjective interpretations from

participants. While steps were taken to enhance reliability, such as coding verification by multiple researchers and the use of a focus group to cross-check findings, qualitative research remains interpretative in nature. Differences in individual perspectives, organisational cultures, and maturity levels of agile adoption may influence how temporal aspects of BRM are perceived and enacted.

A longitudinal research design would be useful to gain a more nuanced understanding of temporality in BRM. An example of a temporal dimension that has not been investigated here is urgency, defined as a characteristic of events or of individuals concerned with the passage of time and feeling generally hurried across situations (Shipp & Cole, 2015), and one of the three key temporal dimensions relevant for the topic of strategic change (Kunisch et al., 2017). For example, how does urgency influence BRM in its different processes (identification, planning, execution, and sustainment) and through the different levels (strategy, planning and prioritisation, and implementation)?

Finally, benefits measurement represents a relevant topic that could be further explored through the lens of temporal dimensions. A quantitative approach could provide deeper insights into how benefits evolve over time, assessing the long-term impact of agile projects, and identifying patterns in benefits realisation across different time horizons. Future studies could also examine the relationship between short-term iterative gains and sustained strategic value, offering empirical validation for the temporal dynamics of BRM.

This study was conducted in an agile context, but comparing both traditional and agile project environments would provide valuable insights. One potential avenue for future research is examining whether the emphasis on the present that we identified is inherently linked to the fast-paced nature of agile methodologies. The short-term perspective—such as the benefits derived from a minimum viable product—may be a defining characteristic of agile settings. Therefore, it would be beneficial to compare temporal depth in agile versus traditional project management approaches and analyse its impact in each context. Additionally, while this study highlights the importance of temporal focus in BRM, further research with a dedicated research design is needed to explore this aspect in greater depth.

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Biographical notes

Julie Delisle is a professor in the Department of Management at the School of Management (ESG), Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM). She teaches at the undergraduate, master's, and PhD levels and is the creator of a graduate microprogram in agile project management. She co-leads the research stream on organizational flexibility and agility within the Project Management Chair at ESG UQAM. Her research focuses on tensions, paradoxes, and practices in organizations, with particular interest in temporality, project organizing, and agility. Her current work examines these dynamics in public sector contexts.

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4115-9873

Carl Marnewick is currently a professor at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa. His research focuses on the strategic alignment of IT projects with organisational vision, aiming to realise benefits through IT/IS system implementation. His research identifies obstacles in benefits realisation, recognising it as part of a complex system. He leads the Information Technology Project Management Knowledge and Wisdom Research Cluster, which explores IT project management, including governance, auditing and assurance, complexity, IT project success, benefits management, sustainability and Agile project management.

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2340-8215

Alejandro Romero-Torres holds a Ph.D. in Industrial Engineering and is a Full Professor in the Department of Management at the School of Management (ESG), Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM). He is the Chairholder of the UQAM Project Management Chair and Director of the Lab for Innovative Practices in Project Contexts. His research focuses primarily on the governance and management of infrastructure and digital projects, with particular attention to stakeholder engagement, decision-making processes, and value creation. In recognition of his outstanding contributions to education, he received the PMI Linn Stuckenbruck Teaching Excellence Award in 2020. In recent years, he has also served as an external advisor on public project management for various ministries and public organizations in the province of Quebec.

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3147-1836