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Innovation Champions in Infrastructure Megaprojects in the United Kingdom

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Introduction to Research

Megaprojects are temporary organizations characterized by a large investment commitment, vast complexity in organizational terms, and long-lasting impact on the economy, the environment, and society. Innovation is increasingly recognized as an integral part of major British infrastructure megaprojects—from Heathrow Terminal 5, via the Olympic Park and Crossrail toward Thames Tideway Tunnel and High Speed Two (HS2) Limited. The management of innovation in megaprojects is increasingly recognized as an important area for successful delivery and impact on policy making and the economy. Megaprojects tend to launch innovation strategies, which identify, develop, and implement innovative ideas from every corner of organizations. Innovation managers and their teams of champions are responsible for constructing and implementing an innovation strategy and promoting innovation to wider audiences. Innovation leadership is at the heart of project organizing. There are different types of innovation champions such as sustainability champions, digital innovation champions, and integration champions. There is also an emerging informal role of innovation agents. Surprisingly, innovation agency in temporary organizations is an underexplored area of research. Better understanding of the nature and role of innovation champions and agents, and other related informal roles, and their motivations to innovate, has direct implications for megaproject performance. This report discusses a network of innovation champions within infrastructure megaprojects in the United Kingdom. Value shall be gained from demonstrating how successfully innovation champions are able to operate within a megaproject.

Research Question

This research project seeks to address the innovation paradox in megaprojects: On the one hand, megaprojects offer a one-off opportunity to invest in innovations and cutting-edge technologies; on the other hand, innovation champions have limited time to innovate in the process of continuous changes, leaving leadership weak. The research question is: *What are the nature and role of innovation champions in the settings of megaprojects?* This question is of interest and value to the project management field as they address the literary gaps in innovation leadership at program levels highlighted by Davies et al. (2009), Gil et al. (2012), and Winch (2014). The practical benefits of the proposed research for PMI and the project management community is in better understanding of innovation championship, and its nature, role, and evolvement at a program level.

Research Aims

To address the research question, this research project aims to explore: (1) the role of innovation champions and their narratives of innovation in infrastructure megaprojects in the United Kingdom; (2) the network of innovation champions across the completed and ongoing infrastructure megaprojects in the United Kingdom; and (3) how innovation champions change their informal roles and what are the new roles emerging (innovation agents).

Research Frame

Innovation Management in Megaprojects

"The interest in megaproject management has probably never been greater" (Söderlund, 2017, p. 132). Megaprojects are an important area of project studies (Geraldi & Söderlund, 2018). There is a growing interest in innovation management in megaprojects (Davies et al., 2014; Gann et al., 2017), yet much to be explored in this area of research. Large-scale infrastructure assets, such as water facilities, airports, roads, and railways, are complex systems that require a large investment commitment, take many years to develop and build, involve multiple public and private stakeholders, and have long-lasting impacts on the economy, the environment, and society (Flyvbjerg et al., 2003; Lundin & Söderholm, 1995; Söderlund, 2004). Innovation is increasingly recognized as an integral part of major British infrastructure megaprojects—from Heathrow Terminal 5, via the Olympic Park and Crossrail toward Thames Tideway Tunnel and HS2 High-Speed rail link. Megaproject history demonstrates the transformation from fixed-price contracts, lowest-cost tendering, and adversarial relationships to relationship-based procurement, collaboration, innovation, and leadership, placing Britain in a unique position of global influence (Davies et al., 2009; Davies & Mackenzie, 2014). While megaprojects may possess some repetitive features and some degree of permanency, they are essentially

unique, temporal endeavors, where stakeholders involved tend to change their positions regularly across megaprojects. Often programs are led by planners and program managers who change throughout the long program cycles, leaving leadership weak (Flyvbjerg, 2014). The innovation potential for megaprojects is subjected to a fundamental tension: On the one hand, they offer a one-off opportunity to invest in cutting-edge technologies and innovative systems; on the other hand, project leaders have limited time to develop competencies to absorb and adapt technologies and innovate through various activities (Gil et al., 2012). The majority of megaprojects operate in a context of collaborative work, meaning that they move away from coordinating via formal, more rigid organizational structures (e.g., rules, schedules, division of labor) toward an emphasis on interpersonal coordination and informal communication mechanisms. The formal innovation manager job role has been created, and informal innovation groups in megaprojects comprise the team of innovation champions who actively engage in promoting an innovation (Sergeeva, 2016, 2017). Megaprojects tend to publish an innovation strategy, which identifies, develops, and implements innovative ideas from every corner of organizations. The management of innovation in megaprojects is increasingly recognized as an important area for successful delivery and impact on policy making, the economy, and society, yet remains underexplored in the literature.

Innovation is defined in the context of megaprojects as a new product, process, or service that has a step change and creates value, for example, financial value, environmental value, societal value, job creation, and so forth. It may be new to a megaproject, but not necessarily new to the world. The innovation potential for megaprojects is subjected to a fundamental tension: On the one hand, they offer a one-off opportunity to invest in cutting-edge innovative solutions; on the other hand, innovations are risky and, in some cases, could lead to failure and budget and time loss (Davies et al., 2009; Gil et al., 2012). In these settings, the leadership of innovation is increasingly recognized as important for successful delivery of megaprojects, impacting policy making, the economy, and society as a whole. Surprisingly, this area of research remains underexplored in the megaproject management literature.

Owners Stimulating Innovation in the Supply Chain

Within the infrastructure sector in the United Kingdom, a strong emphasis on the need to innovate came from the Latham (1994), Egan (1998), and Wolstenholme (2009) reports, which stressed the importance of capturing successful practices from other industries and reinforcing the weak relationships of a fragmented supply chain. As a response, the construction project management literature has since devoted great attention to the role of clients in stimulating innovation throughout the supply chain (Bossink, 2004; Nam & Tatum, 1997; Orstavik et al., 2016). Winch (1998) was among the first who provided two frameworks to support managers' understanding of innovation management in the construction and infrastructure sector. The first explained the institutional context in which firms innovate and the types of actors involved, whereas the second illustrates the four innovation processes carried out at the intrafirm level. The author argued that gainsharing, partnering, and reward systems can help shift people's attention from business-as-usual to innovative practices. He also emphasized the role of innovation champions and systems integrators in managing ideas into good currency, and the role of clients in exerting institutional leadership and shaping the context within which innovation can flourish. The fundamental role owners play in organizing the institutional context of projects is further highlighted by Winch and Leiringer (2015) and Winch et al. (2022) in their argument about the dynamic innovation capabilities of strong owners in delivering major infrastructure projects. These studies provide a starting point to understand the ways innovation is driven by owners in stimulating the supply chain.

Innovation Champions in Megaprojects

The role of innovation champions has been recognized in construction project management research. Nam and Tatum (1997) are among the first who emphasized the role of leadership in construction innovation. They demonstrated the role of innovation champions in designers, contractors, and owner organizations as key individuals who lead the innovation process. Winch (1998) highlighted the role of champions in the system of the construction sector:

> Innovations need champions. Ideas are carried by people, and ideas are the rallying point around which collective action mobilized. Unless the

> 'system integrator' is convinced of the merits of the new idea, and has the skills to incorporate it into the system as a whole, change is likely to be slow. (p. 151)

Bossink (2002) also recognized that innovation processes are initiated by innovation leaders and champions who are responsible for managing innovation projects. They were seen as acting roles of stimulators and facilitators of the innovation process. According to Blayse and Manley (2004), the role of champions is to overcome uncertainty of construction innovation and resistance to innovation. Of further relevance is Leiringer and Cardellino's (2008) study of the way innovation champions mobilize rhetorical strategies retrospectively to interpret and legitimize the diffusion of innovations.

Broader organization studies include Rogers (2003, p. 414) who defines an innovation champion as "a charismatic individual who throws his or her weight behind an innovation, thus overcoming indifference or resistance that the new idea may provoke in an organization." Innovation champions are seen as those actors who take an innovation on board, modify, and "fit" it into a context, in comparison to "innovators" who are seen as actors who first come up with an idea. Day (1994) provided an integrative view on top-down and bottom-up champions in developing innovative ventures; their functions and roles are differentiated.

Innovation champions play a crucial role in stimulating and promoting innovations in megaprojects (Sergeeva & Zanello, 2018). In their informal roles, innovation champions can be anyone in a megaproject who is "willing to take risks by enthusiastically promoting the development and/or implementation of an innovation inside a corporation through a resource acquisition process without regard to the resources currently controlled." (Jenssen & Jörgensen, 2004, p. 65). Capable owners and suppliers need champions who enthusiastically promote innovations through different communication channels.

Key actors who bring interests, professions, and organizations together are driving innovation in temporary organizations (Söderlund, 2004). They build interpersonal and intergroup relations in the context of temporary organizations. Applying the concept of innovation network orchestration to analyze the roles and positions of different kinds of champions in innovation networks, this research project unravels the interaction between champions and what this entails in terms of complementary and conflicting narratives (Enninga & van der Lugt, 2016; Klerkx & Aarts, 2013; Sergeeva, 2016). Furthermore, prior studies offer limited empirical insights into the roles of innovation champions in driving innovation in temporary settings and the ways organizational and industry performance may be improved.

Methodology

Research Design

This research uses insights and methods borrowed from narratology to obtain a better understanding of innovation narrative interaction. Narratology is the theory and study of narratives (Czarniawska, 1997). In recent years, narrative research has been increasingly produced and analyzed in social sciences. Narrative inquiry methodology adopted in this research is guided by the narrative approach adopted. Building upon the work of Vaara et al. (2016), this research uses elements of interpretive and poststructuralist/postmodernist approaches to narrative inquiry. This research also aims to unpack the complexity, fragmentation, and evolution of narratives constructed by innovation champions. The taken-for-granted narratives are problematized in the search for emergent narratives of innovation.

Although narrative inquiry has made significant advances in organizational and management studies, scholars have not yet unleashed its full potential. This research uses more systematic forms of narrative analysis that can deal with a large amount of different types of data. The main methods in narrative data are open-ended and unstructured interviewing techniques, which allow the narrator to produce narratives. Paying attention to narratives in ethnographic work may prove to be difficult, as counter-narratives may not be publicly voiced or even well-articulated among the organizational members (Frandsen et al., 2017). Posing direct questions about conflicting views would rarely bring any relevant empirical materials forward. Hence, interviews and observations provide cues and nuances on narratives of innovation constructed by innovation champions.

Methods of Procedure

The pilot work has been conducted with four narrative interviews with innovation champions in the Thames Tideway megaproject (head of innovation and innovation manager) and the High Speed Two megaproject (head of innovation and head of design). The interviewees have indicated that the researcher could conduct further interviews with the innovation champions who are involved in the delivery of these megaprojects (internally and from the supply chain), and is invited to participate in future innovation events. The interviewees indicated that there is much to be explored in the area of innovation leadership in megaprojects: their nature and role, network, behaviors, and changes in the teams. The researcher has also participated in a number of industry events.

The empirical data were collected from narrative interviews with innovation champions working in infrastructure megaprojects in the United Kingdom. Some of them have previously worked in the Crossrail, some are currently working in the Thames Tideway and High Speed Two. In total, 30 narrative interviews were conducted with innovation champions. Additionally, the researcher participated in the events organized by these megaprojects on innovation to better understand how innovation events are organized and managed. The events included champions and innovation workshops, campaigns, Dragon Den's Days, and other relevant innovation events. The researcher has used the established contacts, who see themselves or are recognized by others as innovation champions, and will expand the network of relationships.

Launched in October 2016, the Infrastructure Industry Innovation Platform (i3P) creates an opportunity for the industry to embrace and push forward technological advances made through major programs. The group is formed by major clients, contractors, and industry representative bodies, including the Construction Leadership Council and the Civil Engineering Contractors Association. The researcher has engaged with innovation leaders who are part of the i3P, has participated in their meetings, and has conducted face-to-face narrative interviews with innovation champions. By attending PMI events, the researcher aimed to extend the network and engage with key players of the infrastructure megaprojects in the UK. This allowed for a focus on whole networks of innovation champions in the settings of the infrastructure sector.

The project has been ethically approved by the university where the researcher is based. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed to participants. Informed consents were obtained from informants and organizations in advance of research participation and documented in accordance with the university policies and regulations. The participants have had a right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Data Analyses

The collected data from participation in the events and meetings were analyzed by reading the notes several times over and identifying the common patterns; the time frames of critical innovation events in the program were prepared in the form of a diagram. The narrative interviews were recorded and fully transcribed by the researcher. The analysis method comprised repeated, detailed reading of the transcripts, with a focus on identifying narratives. The data were coded, codes being derived from the theoretical framework as well as emerging during the analysis, and focusing on issues such as championing roles taken, coordination within the innovation network, and the innovation community in relation to orchestration roles, conflicts between actors in the network, functions in the network, and function overlaps.

The narratives were distinguished on the basis of a framework developed by Pentland and Feldman (2007). The plot is a crucial part of a narrative that ensures meaningfulness and coherence. During the narration, there should be an identifiable voice. Voiced narratives may contain a sequence of events or discursive representations that embody coherence or unity of purpose. Other properties of narratives are repetition and performative intent. The narratives were further identified on the basis of their more generic content, and the way in which they relate to the level of the organization. Different types of narratives were identified and compared: voiced, symbolic, and textual; and dominant, common, and conflicting, as articulated by participants and in documentation.

Primary Results and Discussion of Findings

The participants have emphasized that innovation champions and their networks play an important role in driving and stimulating innovation process in the infrastructure industry. The i3P platform was seen as an opportunity for a network of innovation champions:

> I3P will be good for the network of innovation champions. These champions [are] across multiple projects, multiple contractors. But also with the help of Knowledge Transfer Network (KTN), multiple academia, industries. The key to make the i3P to work for construction is to mix different industries together. (group head of innovation, diverse construction company)

The above quotation articulates that the i3P platform enables the collaboration of innovation champions across multiple firms and industries. Innovation champions are seen as anyone in any job role who enables the expression of innovative ideas and taking them forward for implementation. Innovation platforms, such as i3P, are seen to allow collaboration to deliver infrastructure for the future. In particular, it allows sharing ideas among innovation managers and agents in different industrial sectors; helps transform ideas into opportunities and practical solutions; and promotes a collaborative culture of innovation across clients and suppliers. The i3P is seen to provide a mechanism for strategically directing innovation to address the challenges:

> All of those people in i3P have an innovation manager, often an innovation director, quite a senior level, somebody who is identified at that level. Once you go down to the supply chain, I do not think that has the same benefit. One of the things we did in Knowledge Transfer Network (KTN) was actually looking at how do you identify companies that will be good to work for, you identify those which have an innovation in their agenda. These are the companies that we will target. One of the criteria we looked at was [if] there a board member who has responsibility for innovation? This disappears once you go down from Tier 1 quite quickly. They might have R&D if they have research paths, but actually innovation is something that gets lost, the few steps down the supply chain and it is lost. (knowledge transfer manager, knowledge transfer network)

It is evident from the above quotation that the members of the i3P are firms that have innovation in their agenda. Only a few companies in the infrastructure have professional roles associated with innovation (e.g., research and development manager, business improvement manager, innovation knowledge manager). Most interviewees expressed their excitement about opportunities innovation platforms could provide:

> I think i3P is very exciting. If Project 13 is about innovation in the process, and i3P then is about innovation in the product, in all of the elements that make up the product, and the two things continue and keep on coming together, and I think, as you probably know from your research, innovation is not something that happens on a day, it's something that happens every day, in every moment of every day, because some things can be really small little innovations and other things can be those bigger or more apparent innovations, and I think i3P and the role that I'm fulfilling within it, by working with others, is to encourage . . .
>
> The everyday innovations to be properly captured, recognized, shared, socialized across company boundaries and across contractual boundaries, so that they're not just something happened great on [name of a program] and then it's never done again. They are repeated through sharing. And there's then a second layer, which is looking at how you collect some of those things together but also look at things in a more profound way. (delivery director, airport infrastructure megaproject)

Of particular note is the continuous process of innovating on a day-to-day basis, and the ways innovation should be captured, shared, and socialized across company and contractual boundaries. The process of sharing, sustaining, and repeating innovations is seen as valuable, and the innovation platform is recognized as a potential mechanism for making this happen. The i3P is seen as enabling a platform for encouraging innovation in the construction industry:

> My personal role is to be a bit of a leader in that and to get people sometimes to think outside of just the technical detail of this. It's to think back and, okay, so if another industry, the aerospace or the automotive, has done something similar to this before, what can we learn from them so that we're not just reinventing that wheel, even if the wheel is slightly different. And secondly, what benefit, what wider benefit, because quantity surveyors in our industry have, I think, sadly, tragically, killed a lot of innovation over the years because, through numbers, you can probably always demonstrate that the first time you do anything that's different, it's more effective to do it the old way than it is to do it the new way. It's by the time you're doing the fifth, sixth, tenth time that actually the real benefits can come through and quantity surveyors have had a way of showing that innovation often doesn't make apparent cost sense, and therefore, as an industry, we've been trapped in not innovating as well as we could and I'd like to think that my job is to try and encourage that innovation to really happen and keep that going through i3P as well. (delivery director, airport infrastructure megaproject)

In rail infrastructure megaprojects there have been some recent changes to share the innovation portal with the supply chain, which encouraged innovative ideas. They organized a "Dragon's Den" style event, where the best ideas that came from a supply chain got pitched at a live event. A panel of senior people from across the program, with support from crowd voting on the day, were able to select the ideas they wanted to develop further and hopefully get implemented on the program. That was seen as "quite a nice way" of bringing the innovation narrative to life and getting more people engaged. They had 870 ideas submitted from all over the supply chain, which was seen as a "pretty nice thing that they did, over and above the usual activity."

> But now it's very much a turning handle of getting innovative ideas further developed and pushed into the program. And we've also been doing a lot of work at the industry level with i3P, the innovation platform, where we've tried to get a lot more galvanization around where we should focus innovation at an industry level to make the biggest improvements in productivity. And with some work that I've done, we've sort of identified that the biggest opportunities, we believe, are in going after some inefficiencies in the core process of the construction industry. So, how we actually do things right from material extraction through to, sort of, final assembly fit-out and then through life considerations . . .
>
> And that's really helped the industry focus on some areas, which perhaps historically it's not focused on, and where it's not getting distracted by, sort of, the latest technology, but really doing things that will make a significant impact a, sort of, productivity across the sector. (head of innovation, rail infrastructure megaproject)

In a water megaproject, people are encouraged to put forward innovative ideas that respond to the strategic goals set by the industry such as reducing carbon emissions:

> Yeah, so all the ideas we put forward, so it was a bit like the Dragon's Den, it was a specific campaign with a deadline and that was encouraging. People were putting ideas forward for reducing carbon. So, we've done that, and then on an industry level, we're obviously working as part of i3P and aligning with their strategic goals. I'm a member of the delivery leadership group at i3P and we are working toward getting projects ready, I think, for next summer to be eligible to apply for funding from the industrial strategy challenge fund, so that's another side of trying to do that. Trying to work to company [Name]'s agenda, also keeping in mind industry goals, for example, I mean, increasing productivity is obviously something that will always have helped [Name of the company] as well, and all of these things are really, really good, but I think we are also doing it at an industry level by being really active members of i3P, so yeah. (head of innovation, water infrastructure megaproject)

In the construction industry there is a new funding opportunity (industrial challenge fund) to encourage industry partners to innovate.

The role of innovation champions in the supply chain, who play key roles in engaging with the i3P, is highly emphasized by the interviewees.

> My vision for innovation would be that I have really engaged, key innovation champions in the supply chain. And our main works contractors, who really enjoy being part of timely animation, because I think that is such a key thing for us to have our, my, eyes out on-site the whole time basically, if they do. So that's that side of it, and for us to be really, sort of, significant members of i3P, I think, because there's just so much drive toward pushing the industry forward and meeting the challenges that everyone's really trying to meet, and we can't not be part of that. (head of innovation, water infrastructure megaproject)

Innovation champions are seen as playing crucial roles in the innovation process—people who are addressing the innovation agenda and targets set by industry and government.

Practical Applications of Findings

Digitally enabled, new organizational forms, such as platforms, are increasingly changing the rules of games in many industries or fields. The industry innovation platform such as the i3P: (1) enables innovation collaboration and cocreation; (2) helps to achieve shared understanding about innovation; (3) is a novel way of innovation sharing and organizing; and (4) is a way of connecting and networking with innovation champions and people interested in innovation.

Digital platforms can be viewed as the vehicle of collective actions of organizations that want to share and drive innovations. Compared with individual efforts, collective actions have the potential to transform organizational structures, reshape demands, and even redefine shared rules and logics operating in the field. Digital platforms, as new organizational forms, can be viewed as a subfield within a field (e.g., Apple and Android within the mobile phone industry). Digital platforms also enable more loosely coupled forms of cross-field collaboration or emerge at the intersections of fields.

Innovation champions play an important role in driving and stimulating innovation in projects. They are motivating the team to innovate and take innovative ideas forward for their implementation. Innovation champions are key individuals who are promoting innovations, for example, through narratives about innovation achievements in projects and organizations. Innovation champions strategically address the wider innovation agenda set by industries and government. They connect innovation narratives at the project, industry, and international levels.

Conclusions

We live in the world where networks of innovation champions enable innovation collaboration and co-creation. Making a network into platforms for sharing innovations and innovative ideas across businesses is increasingly recognized as valuable. This report shows the nature and roles of innovation champions and their networks in a process of transforming the infrastructure sector. Organizing innovation through digital platforms at the sectoral level has become an important mechanism for sharing innovative ideas and innovations across businesses and people. Future innovations are possible with active engagement of innovation champions in the process.

Megaprojects are seen as innovative, temporary endeavors where there is a flow of innovative ideas and innovations happen. Communicating and sharing these ideas across digital platforms can enable cross-sectoral learning and enhance innovation capabilities of firms and projects. Megaprojects attract a lot of attention from the public, especially when narratives about innovations get shared and promoted (Sergeeva & Winch, 2021). Innovation champions drive innovations and create and communicate innovation narratives to address challenges and opportunities. There is a continuous process of innovation in the ecosystem of megaprojects.

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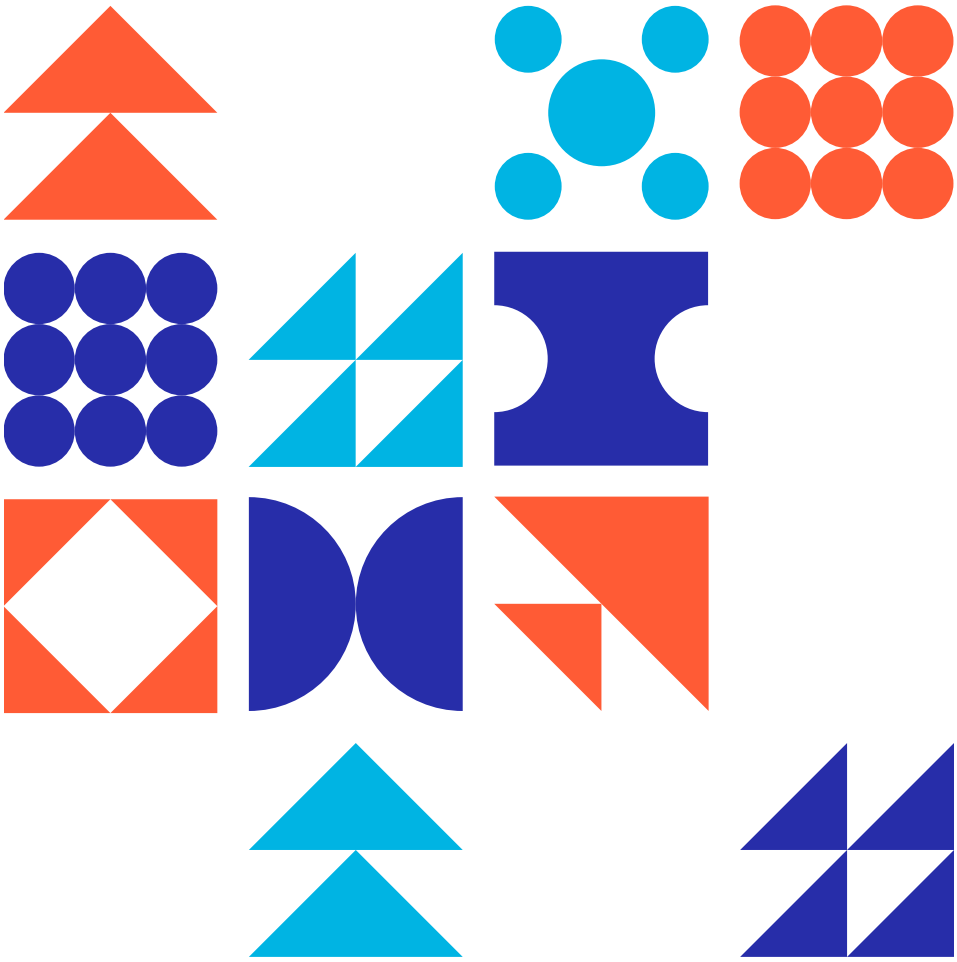
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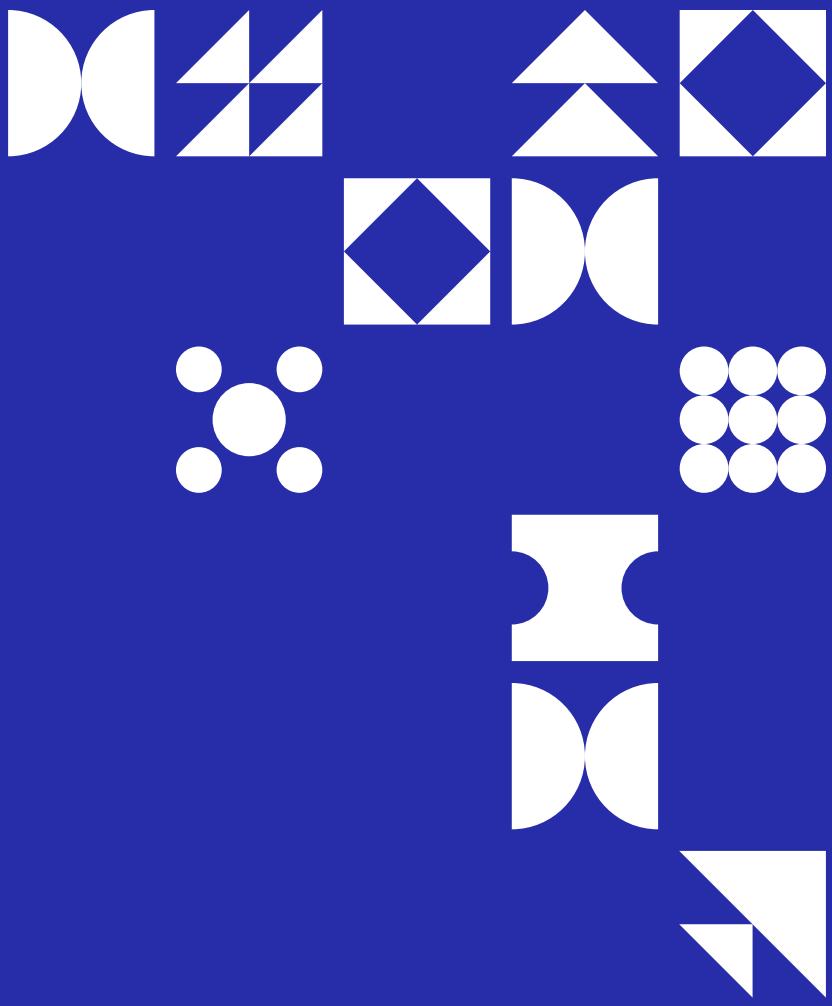
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