



# Achieving Project Success in Organizations Operating Under Extreme Resource Scarcity

## An Exploration of the Use of Bricolage in Social Enterprises

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## Introduction and Executive Summary

The challenge of achieving successful project outcomes becomes especially formidable in environments marked by extreme resource scarcity. Project management methods such as the critical chain method have been developed to account for limited resources in the context of project scheduling, and this has been well researched (Anantatmula & Webb, 2016). However, while it is well known that organizations dealing with severe resource shortages, like social enterprises, often use the resource allocation approach of bricolage (Levi-Strauss, 1966), to make do with what is at hand (Di Domenico et al., 2010; Liu et al., 2021), bricolage has not been well researched, and it is unclear how organizations use this approach to manage projects. The knowledge gained through this study examining the use of bricolage in the management of projects in social enterprises and its impact on project performance, enriches our knowledge of bricolage as a resource-mobilization strategy, particularly in severely resource-constrained environments.

Bricolage has gained broad acceptance in management as a way of “making do by applying combinations of the resources at hand to new problems and opportunities” (Baker & Nelson, 2005, p. 333). Such actions include finding workable solutions to new challenges or opportunities on projects by combining existing resources originally intended for other purposes or

putting together workable solutions from existing resources. Bricolage holds particular significance for firms with limited access to external resources (Yu & Wang, 2021). Consequently, bricolage has found extensive application in the examination of social enterprises (Janssen et al., 2018), which not only contend with resource constraints but also confront unique challenges by choosing to operate where markets tend to be unfavorable (Di Domenico et al., 2010). In addition to resource scarcity driving bricolage, the concept is closely tied to the necessity for swift responses to specific situations.

Despite widespread interest in the importance of social enterprises there remains a research gap and a lack of guidance around the application of project management in these organizations. Through a survey of 63 project managers at social enterprises, we discovered that bricolage has a significant positive impact on project success.

We offer practical guidance for social enterprises and to new, emerging, and existing organizations operating under extreme resource constraints including the creation of a Roadmap for effective resource acquisition and utilization (p. 11). For more information on social enterprises, please refer to Box 1. We propose that these findings could apply to any organization facing extreme resource scarcity (e.g., charities, nongovernmental organizations, small- and medium-sized enterprises).

### Box 1. What Are Social Enterprises?

#### WHAT ARE SOCIAL ENTERPRISES?

Social enterprises are businesses that sell goods and services; embed a social, cultural, or environmental purpose into the business; and reinvest the majority of profits into their social mission. (Buy Social Canada, n.d.)

For example:

Grameen Bank, a microfinance institution founded in Bangladesh that extends small loans to rural individuals without the need for collateral

Greystone Bakery in the United States, which offers employment opportunities to individuals facing obstacles like homelessness or criminal records

## Research Questions and Objectives

While bricolage has been well studied in the management literature and is recognized as beneficial to mobilize existing resources in severe resource-constrained environments, establishing a clear relationship between bricolage and performance has proven elusive (Baker & Nelson, 2005; Ciborra, 1996; Guo et al., 2018; Senyard et al., 2014). This underscores the need for research on the specific conditions under which bricolage exerts a positive influence and the factors that may either enhance or diminish its impact on organizational or project outcomes.

Thus, this research was guided by the following research question:

### ***Under what conditions do bricolage capabilities enhance or diminish organizational project outcomes in social enterprises?***

In addition to examining the direct influence of bricolage on project performance, we examined the influence of two other conditions that may change the nature of this relationship:

1. We propose that the impact of bricolage on project success may depend on the presence of entrepreneurial leadership. Entrepreneurial leadership, which serves to inspire and mobilize individuals toward strategic goals (Leitch & Harrison, 2018; Pauceanu et al., 2021), has proven effective in uncertain and resource-scarce environments (Gupta et al., 2004; Leitch & Volery, 2017). However, there has been limited examination of entrepreneurial leadership in the project management literature (Latif et al., 2020; Martens et al., 2018).

While bricolage is often considered advantageous in resource-constrained environments, it can also place constraints on overall firm effectiveness (Ciborra, 1996). Therefore, we propose that rather than relying on bricolage as a long-term solution to dealing with resource scarcity on projects, organizations may want to enhance their entrepreneurial leadership. We propose that there is less need for a reliance on bricolage to access resources on projects when an organization has entrepreneurial leadership. With such an approach to leadership, the primary focus is on executing predetermined plans with efficiency

rather than relying on bricolage's "second-best solutions" or "tinkering" (Steffens et al., 2023, p. 1277).

2. We propose that project management capabilities may influence the impact of bricolage on project success. Project capabilities equip project managers with the requisite knowledge and skills to accomplish project objectives and drive project success (Leiringer & Zhang, 2021). However, this line of research has primarily assumed access to ample resources (Leybourne, 2009). We propose that the presence of project capabilities may strengthen the impact that bricolage has on project performance because when unexpected challenges arise, the project teams can readily and effectively incorporate bricolage to fulfill project goals.

In summary, the objectives of this research were to:

- Examine the impact of bricolage on project performance.
- Examine the impact that entrepreneurial leadership has on the relationship between bricolage and project performance.
- Examine the impact that project management capabilities have on the relationship between bricolage and project performance.

## Research Frame: Concepts and Brief Literature Review

There are three key concepts used in this study: bricolage, entrepreneurial leadership, and project management capabilities. In the following section, we discuss each of these in turn.

### ***Bricolage Capability***

Improvisation in project management has received increased attention in the academic and practitioner literature. However, despite their similarities, bricolage and improvisation are distinct organizational concepts that should not be confused with one another (Baker, 2007). Whereas improvisation assumes access to sufficient resources (Leybourne, 2009), bricolage is a specific type of improvisation that occurs in resource-constrained environments and is closely tied to the necessity for swift responses to specific situations

(Di Domenico et al., 2010). Bricolage serves as an overarching term encompassing a range of capabilities that enable enterprises to navigate resource scarcity by leveraging available resources, improvising through resource recombination, and engaging in collaborations with external partners (Witell et al., 2017).

When applied to project management, *bricolage* means “the reconfiguration of resources to respond to current challenge[s]” (Geraldi et al., 2010, p. 555). Projects frequently require quick actions (Leybourne, 2009), and bricolage enables rapid responses to resource scarcity by repurposing overlooked or underutilized human, financial, or physical resources and creatively using local resources (i.e., human, financial, or physical). For example, when one social enterprise in our sample was faced with problems scheduling a contractor to perform building repairs in a timely way on a project, management intervened and arrived on-site with friends to perform the required maintenance. Another social enterprise that was constructing a playground decided to reuse existing elements rather than install all new equipment. Bricolage capabilities have been largely overlooked in the project management literature despite their pivotal role in resource-limited settings. We proposed that bricolage capabilities empower project managers to secure the resources essential for successful project completion by innovatively combining existing resources in novel ways, thereby creating new value required for project execution.

### **Entrepreneurial Leadership**

Organizations with entrepreneurial leadership thrive in environments with high dynamism, volatility, risk, ambiguity, and uncertainty because these conditions require individuals to act entrepreneurially and take calculated risks (Miao et al., 2019). Such leadership is especially effective in organizations with scarce resources (Gupta et al., 2004) as it fosters organizational innovation and enhances adaptability to changing environments (Renko et al., 2015). Given that social enterprises are often located in volatile environments with limited resources, their long-term viability necessitates an entrepreneurial approach to their operations (Chell, 2007).

Furthermore, leadership is becoming more important in project management research, particularly in relation to human processes (Kolltveit et al., 2007). Therefore, while entrepreneurial leadership has yet to be thoroughly investigated in the management of projects in social enterprises, or in organizations with extreme resource

scarcity, it has been shown to have a positive impact on project success (Martens et al., 2018; Latif et al., 2020). We proposed that it has a role to play in achieving project success.

### **Project Management Capabilities**

Successful projects depend on the knowledge, skills, and capabilities (i.e., project management capabilities) of organizations, teams, and individuals (Morris, 1994, 2013). Project management capabilities are “the distinctive managerial knowledge, experience, and skills, which are located within a single organization and required to establish, coordinate, and execute projects” (Davies & Brady, 2016, p. 314). They comprise routine tasks performed on projects—such as developing and updating project plans, gathering project data, and monitoring the project environment—and offer organizations “economies of repetition” (Davis & Brady, 2000, p. 932).

Typically, when organizational project management capabilities involve robust routines, there is evidence of a well-defined project plan, clear objectives, a structured task-execution approach, and effective monitoring and control mechanisms. We propose that this degree of organization and control may increase the impact that bricolage has on project performance because bricolage serves as a valuable capability available to use.

## **Methods**

We designed a survey to gather information from project managers in Canadian social enterprises based on our review of the literature and 16 semistructured interviews of social enterprise project managers. A pilot version of the survey was trialed for clarity with a small group of managers in social enterprises and researchers in this area. The survey was developed using *Qualtrics* software, composed of closed and open-ended questions, and took approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete.

In order to target informed individuals, we reached out to the social enterprises that were in the network formed by a Canadian organization with a mandate to support social enterprises. We received 213 responses and, after data cleaning, analyzed 63 completed surveys. The sample profile was similar to that of a Canada-wide survey of 1,350 social enterprises (Elson et al., 2016), and reasonably represented the target population—85% had 50 or fewer employees, and all relied on volunteers. Figure 1 shows the characteristics of our sample:

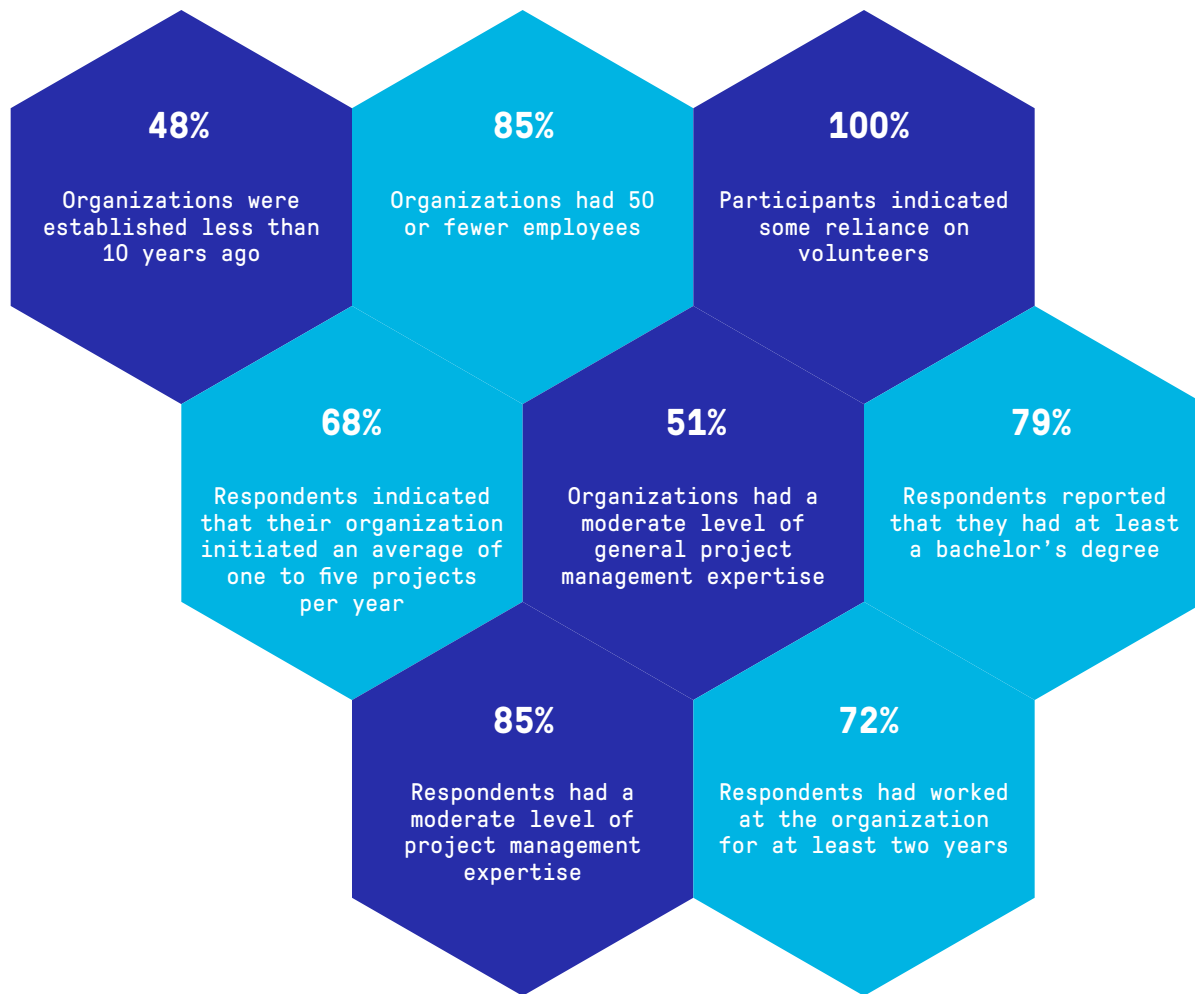


Figure 1. Characteristics of the survey respondents.

The survey respondents indicated a high level of resource scarcity. As shown in Figure 2, the resource scarcity posed challenges to successful management of projects due to a lack of financial resources, lack of human resources, and lack of sufficient time to dedicate to project completion. These challenges aligned with the key attributes of when bricolage is used—a lack of resources and an urgent need for rapid action.

We analyzed the initial qualitative data obtained from the interviews using *NVivo (Version 14)* software and identified higher-order themes after coding the transcripts. We conducted confirmatory factor analysis based on the maximum likelihood method and used *SPSS AMOS 26* software to analyze the quantitative data obtained from the survey. An iterative process was followed to ensure a good model fit.

To test the direct effect of bricolage on project performance, we ran a simple linear regression.

The moderating effects of entrepreneurial leadership and project management capabilities were tested using the Hayes (2022) process macro (Version 4.2) in *SPSS (Version 29.0.0.0)* to compute regression analysis with two independent moderators (process model two).

## Results and Discussion of Findings

Significantly, and all together, the constructs of bricolage, project management capabilities, and entrepreneurial leadership accounted for 36% of the variance in explaining organizational project performance.

The use of bricolage can help to achieve project outcomes in severe resource-constrained organizations. Furthermore, the presence of high levels of project management capabilities can help to enhance this relationship. Conversely, the presence of high levels of

The percentage of respondents who agree or agree strongly that to complete projects successfully, our organizations need more:

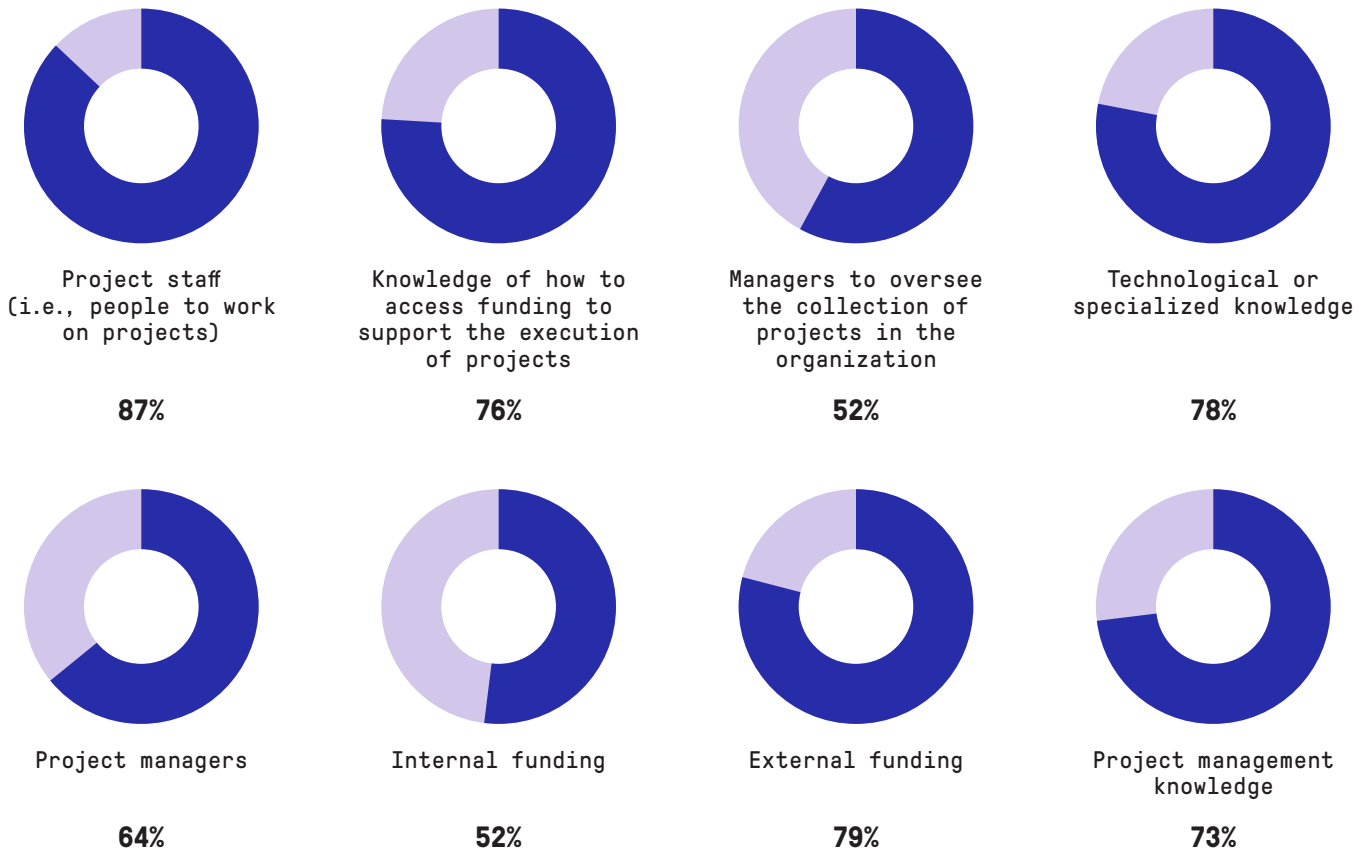



Figure 2. Indicators of a high level of resource scarcity.

entrepreneurial leadership in the organization attenuates the impact of bricolage on project performance. In the presence of entrepreneurial leaders, there may be less need to rely on bricolage to access resources to accomplish project goals. Figure 3 provides a summary of our key findings.

**Bricolage Can Help Improve Likelihood of Project Success**



Our findings confirmed that the practice of bricolage generally results in improved project performance in a social enterprise. Bricolage demonstrates the ability to transform limited resources into results. We demonstrated the validity of this concept in the context of project performance outcomes in our study.

Social enterprises tend to be small organizations with limited resources at their disposal. Their activities are frequently associated with entrepreneurial characteristics, which are typically characterized by a strong element of improvisation.

Bricolage provides social enterprises with the transformative power to turn resource scarcity into an opportunity by allowing managers to harness the untapped potential of available resources (Cunha et al., 2014).

**Bricolage capabilities empower project managers to acquire the resources required for successful project completion by creatively combining existing resources in novel ways, resulting in the creation of new value required for project execution.**





Figure 3. Summary of key findings.

### ***Influence of Entrepreneurial Leadership and Project Capabilities***

We found a crossover interaction effect of entrepreneurial leadership and project capabilities on the relationship between bricolage and project performance. This means that the impact of those constructs on the relationship between bricolage and project performance was different at high versus low levels.

At high levels of entrepreneurial leadership, the relationship between bricolage capabilities and organizational performance decreased. Whereas at low levels, bricolage was positively related to project performance.

The reverse was true for project capabilities. At high levels of project management capabilities, the relationship between bricolage capabilities and organizational project performance increased. Whereas at low levels, bricolage was negatively related to project performance.

These findings are consistent with some studies where bricolage was argued to act as a double-edged sword with both positive and negative impacts (Baker & Nelson, 2005; Ciborra, 1996; Guo et al., 2018; Steffens et al., 2023).

In line with the literature (e.g., Martens et al., 2018; Renko et al., 2015; Steffens et al., 2023), we theorize that entrepreneurial leaders proactively address and fulfill resource needs for projects, thereby diminishing the influence of bricolage on project performance. This is important for resource-constrained organizations because while there may be a tendency to rely on bricolage to “make do” on projects, there is evidence that bricolage can negatively affect performance with extensive use over time. This suggests that organizations may not want to rely on bricolage for extended periods; rather, they may want to recognize the importance of entrepreneurial leadership in accessing resources needed to achieve project goals and work to nurture this leadership orientation in the organization.

Conversely, we found that as project capabilities increase, the impact of bricolage on project outcomes increases. This is important because, again, it shows that organizations may not rely solely on bricolage to achieve project outcomes, as stronger project capabilities can enhance this relationship. One could perhaps suggest that tensions exist between project capabilities and bricolage because project capabilities represent a more structured and routinized approach to managing a project, and bricolage depicts a more “make do” attitude. However, these seemingly opposite perspectives appear to work

## Box 2. Research Contributions

### RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS

**Contributes empirically to the scarce body of research on bricolage and project management.**

- Other than the studies that examined bricolage as a component of improvisation on the project, to our knowledge this is the first empirical study to specifically focus on bricolage in the project context.

**Contributes theoretically by clarifying the sometimes-conflicting findings in the existing literature regarding how bricolage influences outcomes.**

- Our research reveals that the impact of bricolage on project outcomes is shaped by the extent of entrepreneurial leadership and project management capabilities.

**Extends findings from the entrepreneurship literature to the project management domain regarding the role of entrepreneurial leadership in resource-constrained environments.**

- With the growing emphasis on improvisation in project management, there is a need to explore the impact that entrepreneurial leadership can have in enabling innovative behavior on projects.

**Provides evidence of project management capabilities as a moderator of the relationship between bricolage capabilities and organizational project outcomes.**

- Previous studies mainly focused on the direct relationship between project capabilities and project outcomes, thereby missing the importance of project capabilities as an important intervening mechanism in the relationship between bricolage and project outcomes. Our finding highlights the power of project capabilities in resource-constrained environments when there is a reliance on bricolage.

together to strengthen the impact that bricolage can have on project outcomes. Bricolage and project management are capabilities. Capabilities reflect abilities, skills, and knowledge to get things done. Perhaps having the project management capabilities helps managers to know where, how, and when to use bricolage.

### **Summary of Results**

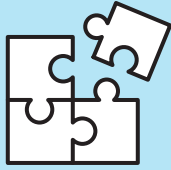
In summary, this study provides insights into the conditions under which bricolage capabilities influence project outcomes in social enterprises. We contribute to the understanding of the interplay between bricolage, entrepreneurial leadership, project management capabilities, and organizational project outcomes through a survey of social enterprises. We show that the understanding of project management in resource-constrained organizations, such as social enterprises, can be deepened by examining these concepts in the project management domain. For an overview of the contributions of this research, please see Box 2.

### **Practical Application of Findings**

The insights gleaned from this study offer a roadmap for effective resource acquisition and utilization in organizations facing extreme resource scarcity, ultimately enhancing project management effectiveness in resource-constrained environments. Figure 4 provides a summary of how organizations can apply these findings to enhance their project outcomes.

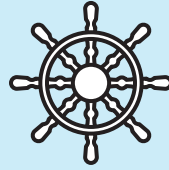
### **Conclusion**

This study addresses the critical challenge of achieving successful project outcomes in resource-constrained environments, thereby filling a significant gap in understanding. While this study focused on the use of bricolage in social enterprises, we propose that our findings could apply to any organization facing extreme resource scarcity (e.g., charities, nongovernmental organizations, small- and medium-sized enterprises).



#### Acknowledge importance of bricolage in achieving project success

- Bricolage can play a key role in helping to overcome severe resource constraints on projects.
- Projects may use bricolage to:
  - Put together workable solutions from existing resources.
  - Access resources at low or no cost and combine them with what they already have.
- Organizational leaders should acknowledge the important role of bricolage in achieving project goals and provide oversight and support for its use.



#### Cultivate entrepreneurial leadership to alleviate the long-term reliance on bricolage

- To avoid potential negative impacts from the long-term use of bricolage on projects, organizational leaders may benefit from cultivating a more entrepreneurial leadership orientation within their organization.
- Increased presence of entrepreneurial leaders results in less reliance on bricolage as leaders proactively address and fulfill resource needs of projects.
- To cultivate entrepreneurial leadership, organizations can offer workshops, training, mentoring, or coaching for top managers to support behaviors such as taking risks, offering creative solutions, challenging and pushing others to act innovatively, and challenging the current ways of operating.



#### Align project management capabilities to support the use of bricolage

- Organizations can achieve positive project outcomes by aligning project capabilities to support bricolage capabilities.
- Project management capabilities may include:
  - Identification and management of risks
  - Definition and control of project scope
  - Definition, resourcing, and scheduling of project activities
  - Planning, estimating, and controlling costs.
  - Organizing and managing project teams effectively
- Organizations should endorse and facilitate the development of project management capabilities that recognize bricolage as an accepted capability.

Figure 4. Roadmap for effective resource acquisition and utilization.

Additionally, bricolage is used in all organizations to some degree, even those with more access to resources (Baker, 2007); therefore, the findings may be useful to these organizations as well. Further empirical work is needed to confirm the generalizability of our findings.

This study highlights bricolage as an effective approach for overcoming resource constraints and improving project performance, an aspect that has received little attention in conventional project management research. Furthermore, our research illuminates how entrepreneurial leadership and project management capabilities influence the relationship between bricolage and project performance. We provide a nuanced view of

these interactions by incorporating insights from the literature on social enterprise, entrepreneurship, and project management.

The crucial role of bricolage capabilities in securing necessary resources for effective project management within resource-constrained social enterprises cannot be ignored. When faced with severe resource constraints on projects, bricolage can be an effective tool. Managers should acknowledge these practices and consider using project management capabilities to enhance the positive impact of bricolage, or perhaps cultivating entrepreneurial leadership within the organization to eliminate long-term reliance on bricolage.

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## Appendix A: List of Outputs

### Journal Publication

#### Conceptual paper

- Jewer, J., Jugdev, K., & Amini, M. F. (2023). Advancing research on project management in hybrid organizations: Insights from the social enterprise literature. *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*, 16(3), 429–447. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMPB-08-2022-0185>

#### Empirical paper

- Our manuscript of this study's findings is currently under review at a project management publication.

### Conference Presentations

- Jewer, J., & Amini, M. F. (June 4–7, 2022). *Project management capabilities in social enterprises: A conceptual model* [conference presentation]. Administrative Sciences Association of Canada (ASAC), Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.
- Jewer, J., Browne, M., Amini, M. F., & Pourasgari, P. (June 3–5, 2023). *Working with what you have—An examination of bricolage in social enterprise projects* [conference presentation]. Administrative Sciences Association of Canada (ASAC), Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

### Infographic of the Study Findings

- Shared with survey respondents and to members of Buy Social Canada. Also available to the public on their website:

<https://www.buysocialcanada.com/wp-content/uploads/Project-Management-in-Social-Enterprises-Survey-Infographic-2023.pdf>

### Webinar

- A webinar will be scheduled with the Project Management Institute (PMI).

## Author Biographies

**Jennifer Jewer**, PhD, PMP is an associate professor in the Faculty of Business Administration at Memorial University of Newfoundland. She has been teaching project management for over 10 years at the undergraduate and graduate levels. She has published in top journals and conferences such as the *Journal of the Association of Information Systems*, the *European Journal of Information Systems*, and the *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*. Before joining

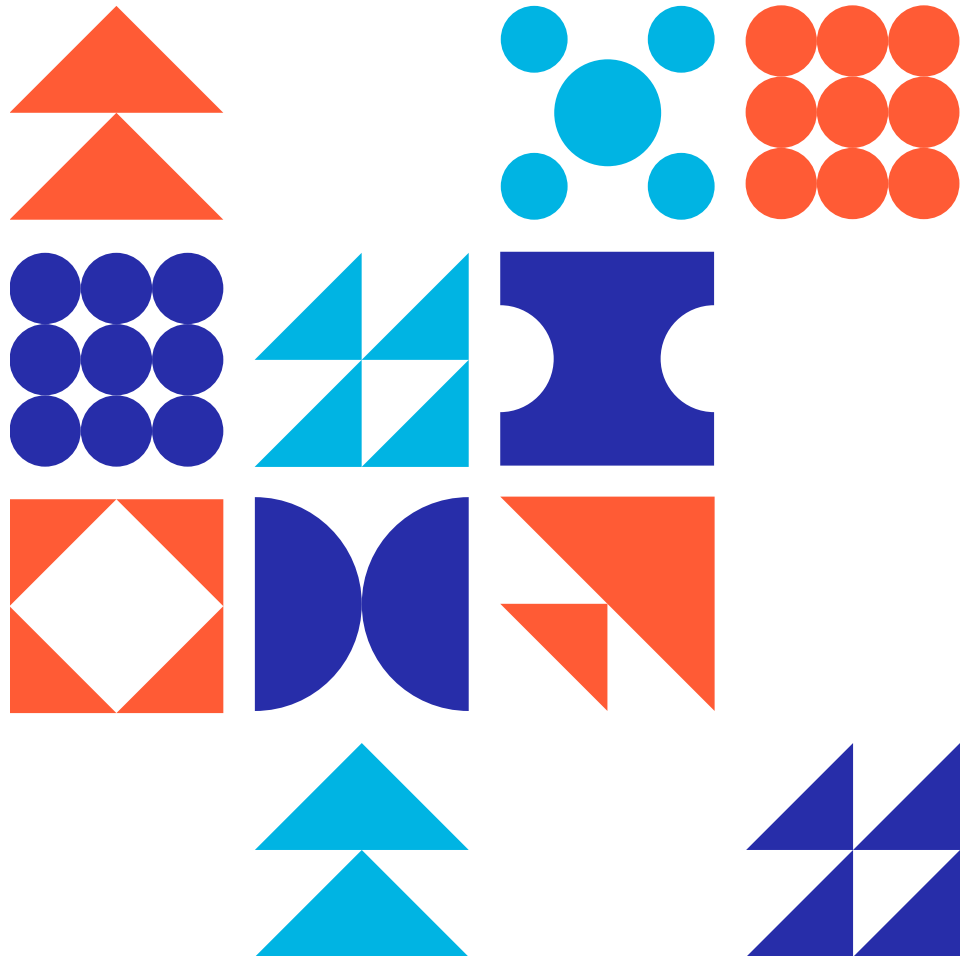
academia, Dr. Jewer gained experience leading and working on projects in Canada, France, and the United States. She can be contacted at [jenniferj@mun.ca](mailto:jenniferj@mun.ca)

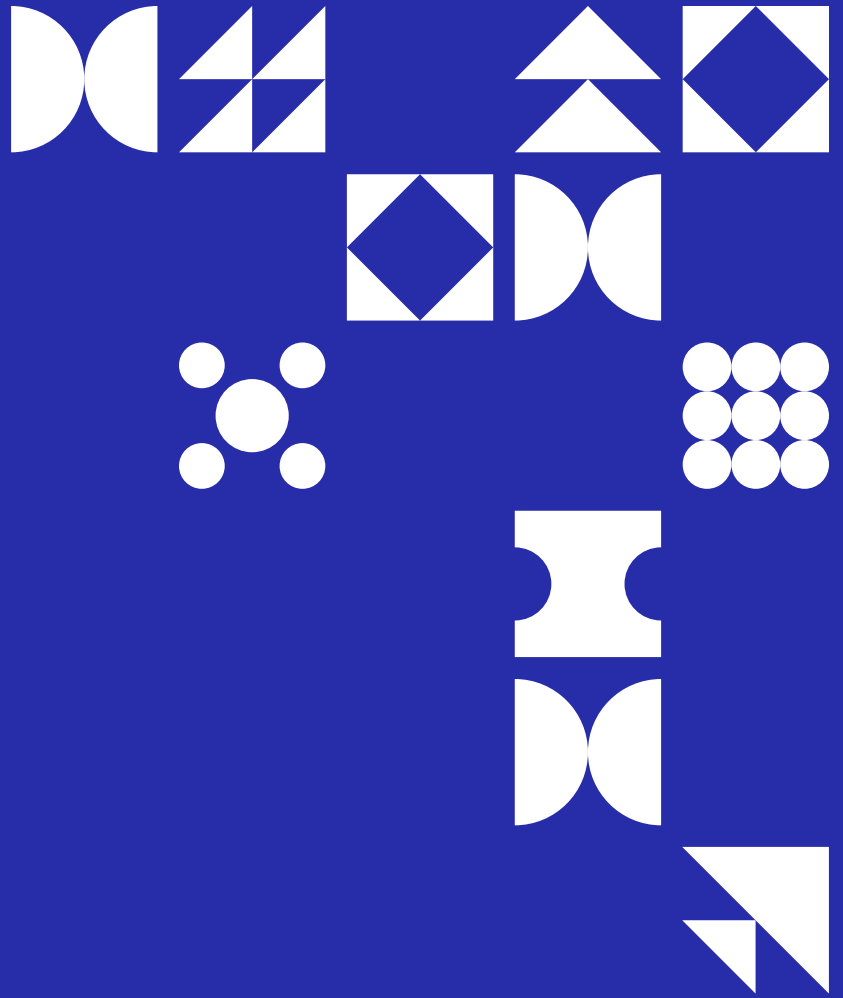
**Pedram Pourasgari** is a PhD student in management and organization studies at the Peter B. Gustavson School of Business at the University of Victoria. His research focuses on the role of entrepreneurial networks in social entrepreneurship and community-driven projects that lead to societal impact. He can be contacted at [ppourasgari@uvic.ca](mailto:ppourasgari@uvic.ca)

## About Project Management Institute (PMI)

PMI is the leading authority in project management, committed to advancing the project management profession to positively impact project success. We empower professionals to excel in project management practices through our growing global community, knowledge sharing, and best-in-class certifications—driving positive change in organizations and communities. Since 1969, our unwavering mission has been to advocate for the profession by offering life-long learning and connections to sharpen high-demand skills. Today, PMI provides professionals at every stage of their career journey with the globally recognized standards, online courses, thought leadership, events, and tools they need to succeed. With more than 300 chapters around the world, PMI members can network, find mentors, access career opportunities, and learn from peers, working together to drive greater impact.

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