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Paradoxes and management approaches of competing for work in creative professional service firms

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ABSTRACT

Despite their business relevance, creative professional service firms are under-researched, in particular with regard to how they compete for work. Competing for work is key to survival, but also extremely challenging due to the complexity of the services offered. In this paper we use a paradox framework to investigate the opposing demands creative professional service firms experience when competing for work. Based on a set of semi-structured interviews in the context of architectural competitions, we show that creative professional service firms face two interwoven paradoxes, which relate to the strategic intent (why to compete) and the design intent (what to propose) of client propositions. We describe these paradoxes as well as how organizations manage and cope with them through both synthesis and separation management approaches. Contributions of this study can be found in theorizing paradoxes of competing for work from the professional service provider's perspective, and in fostering firms' paradoxical mind-set, which facilitates the acceptance and resolution of complexity and different competing demands.

KEYWORDS

Paradox; management approaches; creative professional service firms; architecture; architectural competitions; strategic goals, design proposal

INTRODUCTION

What do architecture, design consulting, advertising, media production, fashion and graphic design have in common? According to Von Nordenflycht (2010) they are all creative professional service firms. Creative professional service firms have a significant business relevance, playing a key role for the competitive growth of both mature and emerging markets (EU, 2014). Despite the significant changes going on in the profession which is shifting towards managerialism (Kornberger et al., 2011), they are under-researched compared to other professional service firms such as accounting, law and management consulting (Von Nordenflycht, 2010). Therefore, several scholars, such as Hill and Johnson (2003), Canavan et al. (2013) and Price and Newson (2003) argue that we need to further investigate these firms and their work practices.

This investigation is interesting as well as challenging because of several reasons connected to the specific character of creative professional service firms. Firstly, within these firms a professionalised workforce is both responsible for the employing organisation, as well as responsible for clients, peers, and often a professional association (Gotsi et al., 2010). Secondly, the service that is provided is mainly intangible and encoded with complex and customized knowledge (Greenwood et al., 2005): its value cannot be known before an actual exchange and, even after service delivery, it can be debated or not (Jones & Livne-Tarandach, 2008; Hill & Johnson, 2003). Finally, creativity is a distinctive competence on which these firms trade and a key features of their people and their work processes (Thornton et al., 2005; Winch & Schneider, 1993).

Because of this multi-fold nature creative professional service firms experience competing demands (DeFillippi, 2009). Previous studies identified, for example, competing demands between artistic and economic performance (Lampel et al., 2000), efficiency and aesthetics (Thornton et al., 2005), creative exploration and commercial exploitation (Gupta et al., 2006), creativity and control (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Brown et al., 2010), and professionalism and managerialism (Kornberger et al., 2011; Pinnington & Morris, 2002).

Research has proven that framing these competing demands as paradoxes helps organizations to recognize that these demands can and should coexist, and supports them to find ways to engage with them all (Gaim & Wahlin, 2016; Smith, 2014). A paradox is considered to be a set of contradictory yet interrelated elements (e.g. demands, perceptions, practices), logical in isolation but irrational when juxtaposed (Lewis, 2000). More and more scholars, such as Cameron and Lavine (2006), Gaim and Wahlin (2016) and O'Mahony and Bechky (2006), argue that only engaging simultaneously with these contradictory elements is associated with effective performance. For this reason, we use paradox as a framework to investigate the competing demands that creative professional service firms experience when competing for work, in order to contribute to improved organizational performance.

As new work is key to survival, competing for work is a very relevant topic (Jones et al., 2010). However, notwithstanding its business relevance, there is little research on how professional service firms compete on the market (Amonini et al., 2010). In current professional service literature, many of the paradoxes faced by professional service providers in acquiring new work are still underexplored or at least unmanaged. With the adoption of a paradox framework, this study aims at unfolding the specific paradoxes creative professional

service providers face when competing for work, and at offering a set of proposed management approaches to cope with them by fostering a paradoxical mind-set.

In line with Kreiner (2009) and Rönn (2009) we chose to focus on architectural design firms, which are “uneasy professionals riven by inner conflicts” (Kornberger et al., 2011: 141). For these firms, architectural competitions are one of the most common traditions to get new work. Yet, competitions are also a ‘curious gamble’ (Larson, 1994), where competing demands originate from the diverse roots of the architectural competition phenomenon (Strong, 1996). Since competitions are a regular phenomenon in other industries as well, we believe that the findings emerging from this context can be fruitfully generalised to other (creative) professional service firms that compete for work (Thompson et al., 2007).

The paper is structured as follows. First, we explain why paradox matters and we propose paradox theory as a framework for interpreting the contradictions of competing for work in the professional service industry. Secondly, we review how clients choose professional service providers, taking into account the changes affecting the profession. We show how competing for work presents a set of unmanaged contradictions from the suppliers’ perspective that can be framed as paradoxes. Thirdly, we illustrate the research methods and the research context. In the findings we identify two paradoxes of acquiring work within creative professional service firms that deal with the strategic intent and design intent of competition entries. We describe how organizations handle these paradoxes while applying synthesis and separation tactics. We conclude by suggesting contributions to research and practice and directions for future research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Coping with opposing demands by adopting a paradox framework

According to Lewis (2000: 760), “researchers use paradox to describe conflicting demands, opposing perspectives, or seemingly illogical findings”. A paradox concerns, for example, the competing demands between financial and social or artistic goals, and long and short-term orientations (Andriopoulos, 2003), but also workers’ desire for self-expression to see themselves as distinctive in their profession and push towards collective and organisational affiliation to support firm performance (Gotsi et al., 2010). Managers can also experience a paradox between managing and controlling, while leading and empowering their people (Parush & Koivunen, 2014), allowing for flexibility and innovation in the way people execute projects and tasks and ensuring enough coordination, monitoring and standardization at the same time (Gittell, 2004; Tatikonda & Rosenthal, 2000). All these contradictions are “inevitable and ubiquitous features that exist beyond management control” (Gaim & Wahlin, 2016: 33), challenging professionals in their everyday life.

Having to contend with opposing demands typically drives actors towards making a choice between two opposites, choosing the option where pros prevail over cons. A choice, however, does not ensure short and long-term sustainability. For example, pursuing financial goals ensures short-term incomes, but it requires exploiting existing capabilities and leveraging on the firm’s existing assets. In the long term this may cause ‘success traps’ (Gupta et al., 2006) since it often leads to early success, which in turn reinforces further exploitation along the same trajectory. Instead pursuing artistic and reputation-building goals ensures long-term

competitiveness, but it definitely drains resources in the short term. In fact, artistic performance requires exploration, which often implies failing several times before succeeding. Failure in turn promotes the search for even newer ideas and thus more exploration, originating the so called ‘failure trap’ as also identified by Gupta et al. (2006).

Given the fact that both opposites are equally important, research suggests to accept and foster the co-existence of competing extremes (Quinn, 1988; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Gaim & Wahlin, 2016), adopting a ‘both/and’ perspective rather than an ‘either/or’ one. This helps in capturing and explaining the complexity of reality, sustaining short-term and long-term performance at the same time, enabling learning and creativity, and fostering flexibility and resilience (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Following this line of reasoning, managing and coping with paradoxes means “acceptance” first and then “resolution” (Beech et al., 2004; Lewis, 2000; Gaim & Whalin, 2016). Acceptance requires a process of sensemaking, meaning learning to live with paradox by appreciating the contrasts between the extremes (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). Resolution appears to require a process of sensegiving (Luscher & Lewis, 2008), entailing the iteration of separation and synthesis tactics (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Resolution does not eliminate the paradox: the paradox as such remains but is dealt with in a satisfactory way through different managerial tactics. As DeFillippi (2009) noted, resolving a paradox is not about suppressing or denying it but finding a win-win situation where the best of both opposites is achieved.

In particular, separation is a tactic focusing on one of the two extremes. It can be spatial when opposite forces are allocated to separate individuals, teams, organisational units or even physical spaces, or temporal when attention is shifted from one pole to another ensuring attention to both alternatives over time (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). For example, according to Gotsi et al. (2010), designers switch between their artist and consultant roles in different phases of a project, depending on whichever is more salient, but they can also adopt a more art or business-oriented approach depending on the type of project and client. In the same study it was found that designers’ different identities also find an expression in the physical space they operate in: the ‘artist identity’ can be expressed in war rooms where people fight for creative ideas, while conference rooms facilitate more ‘consultant identity’.

Synthesis accommodates opposite poles and encourages interdependences among them. This implies thinking paradoxically, reframing assumptions and developing a more complicated understanding of complexities (Beech et al., 2004; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Gaim & Wahlin, 2016). In Gotsi et al. (2010)’s research on design firms, synthesis entails the creation and diffusion of a ‘practical artists’ identity. Designers are invited to see themselves as professionals being able to apply their art in something more practical, rather than just pure graphics. Professional service organizations also use synthesis to develop their corporate strategy: several scholars suggest that they apply paradoxical thinking when they decide on their overall specific direction, while accepting emerging client opportunities within a broad strategic perimeter (Greenwood et al., 2005; Winch & Schneider, 1993).

Given this, in the next section we show how the professional service domain, and in particular the practice of competing for creative professional service work, are embedded with features we can purposefully framed as paradoxical and managed accordingly.

Competing for work in the creative professional service industry

Creative professional service firms are organizations that provide creative services to other companies or to the public. In doing this they often experience opposing demands (DeFillippi, 2009) due to their multi-fold nature. Lampel et al. (2000) and Eikhof and Haunschild (2007) for example, described competing demands between artistic values and economic goals, while Andriopolous (2003) between profits and staff morale. Thornton et al. (2005) identified tensions between efficiency and aesthetics, DeFillippi (2009) and Brown et al. (2010) between creativity and control. Finally Gupta et al. (2006) and Andriopolous and Lewis (2009) explored the opposition between exploration and exploitation. Creative professionals have always considered themselves as “artists” as well as “managers” (Thornton et al., 2005), investing in the reputation among peers and critics, while being pressured on providing clients with an efficient service delivery (Bos – de Vos et al., 2016).

However, since creative professional service firms were used to tip the scales in favour of the artistic dimension (Thornton et al., 2005; Blau, 1984), in the past these tensions were not considered so problematic. In recent years, creative professional service firms have been affected by a still ongoing shift towards a more managerial self-understanding and approach to the professions (Kornberger et al., 2011; Pinnington & Morris, 2002; Løwendahl, 2000). This change has been caused by several external factors, such as the deregulation of the professional markets and increased competition, more demanding clients operating at an international level, financial constraints and cost pressures due to changing positions in the supply chain, and technological changes (Brock, 2006). At the organizational level, this shift has involved the adoption of an efficiency logic (Thornton et al., 2005), more formalized strategic, marketing, financial and operating systems (Cooper et al., 1996; Pinnington & Morris, 2002), and an increased emphasis on clients (Amonimi et al., 2010; Fosstenlökken et al., 2003).

In order to cope with these exacerbated tensions and to perform well from an artistic and business point of view, creative professional service firms need to regularly secure new work. Therefore, winning client engagements is a constant challenge for them (Jones et al., 2010). Either they get direct commissions, or they need to compete for work in a competition-based environment. This second option is becoming the predominant one (Sudjic, 2006) not only among public clients, who are subject to the use of specific procurement procedures for the tendering of public contracts above a certain threshold amount, but also among private ones, who tend to use hybrid forms of competitions, similar to public ones, as a means of procuring quality outcomes and ensuring a fair process.

In fact, competitions theoretically guarantee non-discrimination, fairness and transparency, and it allows the client to compare different proposals and choose the best one (Sudjic, 2006). However, “selecting a professional service provider can be [...] potentially one of the costliest mistakes a client firm can make” (Day & Barksdale, 1994: 44) if the competitive procedure is not well structured and suited for the goal. This is even more true for the competing professionals who invest resources in submitting a proposal with no certainty about the result.

Given this, exploring how a competition-based selection procedure works is relevant for both the client and the professional service providers. From the literature, the things we know about buying and selling services are mainly from the buyer’s perspective instead of the

service provider's one (Day & Barksdale, 2003; van der Valk & Rozemeijer, 2009). Existing research describes the professional service selection and evaluation process across several industries (management consultancy, advertising, engineering and architecture), examining the decision processes and the reasoning behind their choices in particular. This suggests that clients choose by taking into account professional service firms' experience, their understanding of the client needs, their organizational capabilities, the 'chemistry', and the costs of the service (e.g. Day & Barksdale, 1994 and 2003; Sporrang, 2011; West, 1997; Roodhooft & Van den Abbeele, 2006).

In the context of the selection of a supplier experience relates to quality of perceived expertise and previous projects, and to the firm's reputation and its references from past clients. The understanding of client's needs and interests is often associated with creativity and knowledge, which translates into the service offered and the quality of the proposal. With regard to this, Corcoran & McLean (1998) specifically note that, when examining the submissions, clients search for tailor made, well-thought and specific solutions. The organizational capability concerns the likelihood of the provider conforming to contractual and administrative requirements such as meeting the schedule, showing commitment and efficiency. 'Chemistry' relates to likeability, cooperative attitude, listening and communicating skills, shared values, trusting, feeling comfortable and compatible, which could translate in a good working relationship (Day & Barksdale, 2003). Finally, price is the competitive fee which is, not surprisingly given the complexity and delicate nature of service procurement in the creative industry, the least important decision making criterion (Soonmez & Moorhaus, 2010).

Knowing the reasons why clients choose to work with certain firms, could inform creative professional service firms on their approach to compete for new work. Yet, these reasons present a series of paradoxes for professional service providers, and make incorporating them in proposals for clients extremely challenging. Firstly, with regard to experience, skills are needed to land jobs, but first jobs are needed to learn new skills. This has been named as career progression paradox (O'Mahony & Bechky, 2010). Secondly, what clients want has to be clearly expressed in the call for proposals, because little or no direct client-provider interaction is possible (Stang Våland, 2009). Yet, many times the call is confusing and contradictory. Providers have to interpret it as both prescriptive and leaving freedom of interpretation for the competitors to operate (Rönn, 2009). The jury then has to choose an entry that satisfies the call for both 'security' and 'innovation' (Rönn, 2009), balancing emotional affective responses to proposals as well as rational argumentations (Kreiner, 2012; Van Wezemaal et al., 2011; Volker, 2012). Thirdly, when it comes to organizational capability, clients often shortlist taking into account the provider's financial status, organization and reference projects (Day & Barksdale, 2003). This can be considered as relevant information, yet it inevitably limits a wide range access to the competition (Volker & van Meel, 2010). Fourth, with regard to chemistry, the issue is that in most cases competing is 'shadow dancing' with an absent partner (Kreiner, 2009 and 2013). Anonymity is in fact the best way to select a proposal since it ensures decisions without biases about who is the potential supplier (Rönn, 2009). Yet, dialogues at different stages of the process are useful to clarify the assignment, target efforts, build a relationship and facilitate the jury's assessment (Kreiner et al., 2011; Stang Våland, 2009). Finally, there is always a trade-off between

quality, time and cost (Shenhar et al., 2001). In the context of competing for work, service providers often try to balance all of these aspects, but time and cost overruns often occur when trying to privilege quality.

In current professional service literature it remains largely unknown how the paradoxes as described above can be managed. Despite studies on tenders for different kinds projects and services (e.g. Watt et al., 2009; Roodhooft et al., 2006) and on architectural competitions (e.g. Rönn, 2012; Kreiner, 2009; Kreiner et al., 2011), little research explores how creative professional service firms compete for new work from a managerial perspective (Amonini et al., 2010; Manzoni, 2011). This study fills this gap, highlighting some paradoxes that creative professional service providers face when competing for work, and suggesting managerial approaches to deal with them.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND APPROACH

Architectural design firms and architectural competitions

We focus on architectural design firms as an example of creative professional service firms and on architectural competitions as a way to compete for work. Architectural design firms are inherently paradoxical, being “torn between conformance to market pressure and an inner drive for creative expression” (Kornberger et al., 2011: 141). Architectural competitions are the most diffused tradition for competing for new work in architecture, yet the most contested ones (Kazemian & Rönn, 2009; Strong, 1996). They are responsible for many institutional buildings, housing projects and museums, and for opening a public dialogue on architecture and fostering experimentation (Chupin, 2011). At the same time, they are condemned for their lack of dialogue between architect and client (Kreiner et al., 2011), for exploiting architect’s work, and for resulting in un-built projects (Sudjic, 2006).

In an architectural competition, several architects submit design ideas or proposals in response to a design problem explained by a client in a call for proposals. Next to details regarding the procedure, the schedule, the jury, the budget, the prizes and the logistics, this call includes a competition brief which informs the architectural firms competing on the expected design proposal and the jury making the decision on the winner. The competition brief is particularly critical, being a prominent cause of failed competitions or abandoned projects when inadequate (Strong, 1996). The brief provides information about the nature of the design problem, a site description and the design expectations in terms of architectural expression and technical requirements. Given the brief, architectural design firms structure their work in three phases, which include the delimitation of a solution space, the search for and the definition of a theme for the design proposal, and the production of the entry in text, pictures and sketches (Kreiner, 2013). A jury evaluates all the submitted entries against the brief in order to select a winner. For both parties – architects and juries – the brief has to read as both instruction and inspiration, being both unambiguous and non-constraining (Kreiner, 2013; Rönn, 2009).

Several types of competitions exist depending on the type of procedure (open vs. restricted) and the services requested (project vs. ideas) (Strong, 1996). In open competitions professionals can participate without restrictions. This implies that there can be hundreds of competition entries among which the client and its jury have to choose. The case of the

competition for the extension of Stockholm City Library in 2007 is exemplary in this context with its 1,170 entries, as a result of about 6,000 architects registered for participation. Strikingly, the library never got built, which is unfortunately sometimes the fate of competition objects. In restricted competitions, contracting authorities restrict participation to professionals (usually 3 to 5 firms) having a certain expertise or experience, a specific origin or meeting certain financial standards (Volker, 2012). In project competitions the winner is commissioned to realize the building, which makes these contexts more ‘commercially promising’ (Andriopoulos, 2003), whereas ideas competition do not guarantee the client’s intention to build. Hence, they tend to be more explorative and ‘creatively promising’ (Andriopoulos, 2003).

Data collection and analysis

In this study we adopted an inductive qualitative research approach as explained by Miles and Huberman (1994), consisting of conducting case-based interviews, while simultaneously reflecting on constructs and theories found in the literature. A qualitative approach enables more nuanced insights, when dealing with paradoxes (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Beech et al., 2012).

Similarly to O'Mahony and Bechky (2006), we combined data from two separate studies on architectural competitions, and we analysed the integrated dataset with a paradox framework. In both original studies, firms were selected on the basis of their (regular) participation in competitions and willingness to participate in a research. In the context of this study we only used interviews with managing partners and senior projects architects, being these roles an expression of the organizational viewpoint. The integrated dataset included 38 semi-structured interviews: 13 in Italy (interviews 1-13), 9 in the Netherlands (interviews 14-22) and 16 in the UK (interviews 23-38). Interviewees originate from eight internationally active large and mid-sized architectural design firms operating in these countries. Italy, Great Britain and the Netherlands were chosen for their similarities and accessibility of data due to the authors’ backgrounds. National construction and architecture industries are ‘distinct milieus’ (Skaates et al., 2002). Yet, EU regulations set common rules for competitions, to the point that architects from different European countries work within the same legal and procedural context.

We analysed and coded the transcripts of the interviews individually and separately. Then, we compared the codes and the analyses, and resolved disagreements through discussion. A series of online weekly meetings for a period of two months sustained the analysis and were useful to exchange memos and commentaries. The interview transcripts were searched for descriptions of competing demands using language indicators (e.g. ‘tension’, ‘contradiction’, ‘yet’, ‘but’, ‘one the one hand ... on the other hand’, and so on), as well as contradictory statements within the same interviews, similarly to Andriopoulos and Lewis (2009). We found paradoxes within the same interview, across interviews with the same person and across interviews with different people. Management approaches were identified in a similar manner. References to tensions were identified in all the interviews; differences occurred with regard to frequency and to the sizes of texts coded (between a sentence and a few paragraphs).

Initially, interview transcripts went through an open coding using a concept representing the idea below the statement. This open coding resembled the concept of Gioia et al.'s (2013) first-order terms, which are more informant-centric, while the second-order themes are more researcher-centred and suggest concepts able to describe and explain phenomena. We both used self-made thematic tables, in order to keep a perspective on all of the data without losing closeness to its original context and then we converged on matrix displays including direct quotes from the written-up field notes, as well as constructs and explanations.

Despite the fact that we searched for paradoxes in the transcripts, none of the two studies actually addressed paradoxes in the interview protocol. This is frequent in paradox research: El-Sawad et al. (2004), for example, planned to explore career accounts within a multinational blue-chip corporation. However, instances of paradoxes (e.g. political vs. apolitical, loyal to company vs. not loyal, self-managed career vs. manager-managed career) were found embedded within organisational career accounts, and emerged through analysis of the transcripts becoming the core of the paper. Brady and Maylor (2010) also made sense of their data through paradox, after having tried to approach them using several unsatisfactory theoretical lenses.

In our analysis systematic and iterative comparisons of data, emerging categories, and extant literature about architectural competitions, creative professional service firms, buying and selling services and paradoxes concurred with the development of cohesive constructs (Miles & Huberman, 1994). At the end of the data analysis period, we shared the findings within participating firms to reveal the appropriateness of the paradox lens from the informants' perspective. This resulted in, for example, such observations as: *'it is also useful for me to rationalize what we do unconsciously. [...] We face contradictions when competing, but we tend to refuse them. Now I recognize that I present contradictory statements when talking about the process of competing'* (project architect - 7).

Through the analysis we found that architectural design firms face two major interconnected paradoxes in competing for work: a strategic intent and a design intent paradox. In the following section we define each paradox and show how firms experience them. Additionally, we identified several management approaches to cope with these paradoxes in competing for work, distinguishing among synthesis and separation tactics and looking at the interplay between them.

RESULTS: PARADOXES AND MANAGEMENT APPROACHES IN COMPETING FOR WORK

Strategic intent paradox: Aiming at winning while investing in other strategic goals

'You always want to win a competition [...] The reason why you do competitions from the architect point of view is not to win the competition but to explore in design terms' (project architect - 26).

Competing demands

The paradox of aiming at winning while investing in other strategic goals shows the tensions which exist between competing to win and acquire new jobs, versus competing for many other reasons which find fulfilment under conditions that are seemingly incompatible with maximising winning chances. This reveals alignment with the previously mentioned tensions between artistic and economic goals (Eikhof & Haunschild, 2007; Lampel et al., 2000) or profits and staff morale (Andriopolous, 2003).

Across the interviews, entering competitions appears to be essential to acquire new and challenging jobs. For five firms in our sample an architectural competition was responsible for the first significant job acquisition. Interviewees note that most large high profile jobs just come through competitions. Yet, winning competitions is not overriding if opportunities for exploration, reputation building or enjoyment are present (see Table 1). All eight firms value these goals –exploration in design terms, diversification, reputation building and enjoyment – as much as acquiring new work.

Insert Table 1 here

We found several reasons for this phenomenon. Firstly, exploration means both trying out new architectural solutions, techniques and materials and diversifying the range of services and sectors. All firms are interested in competitions that aim for unusual, challenging or complex solutions. Competitions that mix different uses and overlap programmes are so appealing that most firms say that it is not worth entering a competition if it does not allow the firm the opportunity to challenge itself. Competitions also allow enlarging the areas in which the firm operates. *'I think early on we wanted to get a range of projects and not get specialized. That's the point of winning a school competition and then a health competition. We knew this was the only way to make your practice expand'* (project architect - 28). Even lost competition projects become part of the practice portfolio: almost all firms show competition entries on their website. This is also a way to reassure clients about the firm's ability to work on different kinds of projects and to contribute lessening the career progression paradox. This indicates that architects experience similar paradoxes as identified by O'Mahony & Bechky (2010): experience is needed to get jobs, but jobs are needed to consolidate experience.

Secondly, key competitions are published in the architectural press and are important showcases. In addition to Larson (1994), we found that competitions serve for identity affirmation and reputation building, with long-term effects allowing for translating prestige into projects that clients will commission. As an example, for an Italian firm doing a competition is about *'leaving a signature in the architecture world'*; for a British one it is about being part of a *'stellar cast list'*. However, interviewees recognize that in these high-profile contexts the chances of winning are almost non-existent because of the numerous submissions.

Finally, firms never enter competitions that the partners are not interested in. Interviewees describe competitions as *'refreshing'*, *'challenging'*, *'enthusiastic'*, *'energetic'*, *'enjoyable'*, *'complex'* and *'motivating'* short breaks from the routine of long on-site construction projects. Interviewees highlight the importance of *'falling in love with a competition'* in terms of visioning an *'amazing context'* in which to do something *'fantastic'* contributing to a *'prestigious project'*. One British firm, for example, enters some competitions with the predominant goal of fulfilling people's creative ambitions, while the two Italian firms use competitions as a sort of unconventional people reward: *'for the team and the individuals it is an interesting and important experience. You work on an important project, full time, for a short period and closely in touch with prestigious consultants'* (partner - 10). Two Dutch firms create specific ateliers with trainees that are supervised by different partners when they enter important competitions in order to keep sharpen their minds and expand their design routines. This is a strategic goal which is very specific of a professional context, where professionals cannot be easily allocated to projects 'unless they themselves see that project as the most interesting option available to them at that moment and appropriate for their expertise' (Løwendahl, 2000: 49). Fulfilling individual identities is as key as reaching organizational goals for creative professional service firms.

Despite seemingly different reasons for doing competitions, these organizational goals represent competing demands: they are equally important to the point that pursuing exclusively one or the other is dangerous, either being short term or long term oriented only. Pursuing them together seems, however, also impossible because they ask for different contextual conditions and strategic and operational choices. Interviewees recognise that, in the majority of the competitions, winning a competition (or at least radically increasing winning chances) requires leveraging similar prior projects.

Four out of eight firms recognise the advantage of having clear positioning by focusing on a particular type of project, because clients tend to privilege continuity with past projects when selecting an architect. As an example, one of the Italian interviewees notes that the firm could go on procuring work solely through competitions if it entered hotel interior design competitions only. Being specialized gives access to restricted competitions where winning chances are higher. In the long run, however, it prevents the firm from offering diverse assignments to employees and from developing touch points with new markets. The fact that in procurement situations selection is done more and more based on past experience strengthens this effect. The danger is also eroding the resources upon which creativity depends. In fact, we found that exploitation engenders the 'success traps' that Gupta et al. (2006) identified, because exploitation fuels additional cycles of further exploitation.

Exploring new design solutions, new services or new markets was found to be also risky, because exploration often implies not succeeding in the competition in terms of final result. As Gupta et al. (2006) explained, failing asks for further exploration to recover from it and this fuels failure traps. While contributing to long-term competence or specific client expertise, these kinds of investments drain resources in the short term and rarely drive towards client acquisition directly. Interviewees often display a sense of frustration for the administrative burden any competition requires: *'You have to do a lot of work to join a competition. Ridiculously much, does not make sense at all. Why do we have to hand in this*

shit? We feel not amused to be part of this tombola' (project architect - 19). Diversifying too much also entails the risk of the portfolio being perceived as incoherent. One of the British firms even strongly perceives the risk of being unable to keep the same design quality when projects within different sectors are entered. Interviewees note that the most promising competitions in point of creativity, diversification opportunities and fun, are open ones where there is no limit to the number of entries. Hence, the most promising competitions in point of client acquisition are restricted ones, where previous similar experience is often mandatory. Then, inevitably, aiming at winning the competition while pursuing the other goals is almost impossible within the same competition.

Management approaches

We found two main management approaches that were common in the eight firms to deal with this paradox. The first one – cultivating an embedded paradoxical vision of competitions and supporting practices – deals with synthesis; the second – targeting different competitions at different goals – deals with separation (see Table 2). We also identified examples of how these two approaches act as complementary approaches.

Insert Table 2 here

The embedded paradoxical vision has to deal with a rather strategic mind-set and emerges from statements such as a *'explicit twofold interest in profits and good design'* in two Dutch firms, or a *'unifying superior architectural quality accommodating commercial and aesthetic success'* in one Italian firm. This suggests how organizations foster the coexistence of the extremes – financial results and design quality – pushing them to be constantly seen as the two sides of the same coin in their mental template, complementing one each other and contributing together to the full success of a project. Fostering their coexistence is at the core of synthesis. With regard to this approach, the findings reveal alignment with Smith and Tushman (2005)'s paradoxical mind-set for managing exploration and exploitation and Andriopoulos and Lewis (2009)'s paradoxical vision for fostering the synergy between profit and breakthroughs. Interviewees recognize that this vision – when made explicit – increases the breadth of attention towards different elements and forces all architects within the office to adopt new 'mental templates'. *'We always try to merge the design exploration ambition and the winning goal. Usefulness and pleasure coexist. [...] We don't tip the scale in favour of one side or another. We hold the balance of power'* (project architect - 7).

Our findings reveal that in all firms this vision of cultivating an embedded paradoxical vision on competitions is repeatedly communicated and shared within the office, which makes it more practical and really embedded within the organizational culture. *'When joining design reviews, the partners' contribution is often in the direction of challenging us towards finding ways to do the best project ever, always keeping in mind we have a limited time that we can invest on it, and reminding us about the economics'* (project architect – 9). In a professional context this is also beneficial because it helps 'herding cats' as Løwendahl (2000) describes,

trying to organize architects who see themselves as autonomous professionals alongside employees.

While all firms recognize the importance of spreading this paradoxical vision on competitions through effective communication, the ways of communication differ across the firms. In the five largest firms, partners and senior staff discuss potential upcoming competitions together with reviewing on-going projects and resource staffing in formal weekly meetings. In the other three firms this occurs less officially but more frequently in day-to-day conversations and project reviews.

As a result of this communication, staff is often also asked for making business informed decisions about creative outputs. In three firms we found that people are invited to suggest competitions in which they are personally interested, but which could also meet the firm's business concerns. This sensitizes people towards aligning creative work aspirations with organisational work requirements, which is in line with the findings of DeFillippi (2009). Staff members preselect something they would like to work on, but are also consciously aware of what they could propose in terms of whether it is in line with the practice business. This also fulfils the individual's tendency towards the instrumental use of organisational affiliation to realise one's own creative aspirations.

Finally, the adoption of a paradoxical vision translates in the way strategic decisions about competitions are made. Several firms adopted a 'inherent flexibility', that allows for emotionally visioning architecture while assessing the competition's characteristics rationally. In two firms (one British and one Italian) a checklist even supports the decision-making process. Yet, it is flexible in allowing for negotiating the weights of the different factors, such as the type of competition, the number of client's built projects after competitions, if available the other contesters, the clarity of the brief and many other factors of influence. Emotions and intuition are no longer seen as distractions but actually complement the assessment process. *'It is a difficult combination of strategic thinking and gut feeling'* (project architect - 26), as previously noted by Volker (2012) discussing the interplay between intuition and analysis in jury's room where competition entries get evaluated.

With regard to separation, it was found that firms occasionally diversify competitions targeting different goals. Instead of adopting a paradoxical vision, they explicitly choose to take part in a competition either for winning or for other reasons without aiming at doing both. *'The best competitions are not always the ones you might win [...] It is kind of balancing the ones that are really good opportunities with the ones where we have a chance'* (project architect - 24). For example, some firms distinguish 'easy' contests where to exploit consolidated expertise from contests in which to try something new, and developer and commercial competitions from design contests in faraway sectors. Others distinguish between 'routine' and 'exceptional' competitions, or 'exploitative' and 'explorative' ones. In line with Andriopoulos (2003) we found that some competitions are 'commercially promising', while others are 'creatively promising'. Commercially promising competitions are those where the chances of winning are higher and exploiting existing capabilities is useful. Creatively promising competitions are those that offer opportunities in terms of exploration, boosting the aesthetic reputation of the firm and individual fulfilment of employees, but also taking more risk of an inefficient investment in terms of financial returns. Price and Newson (2003)

indicated that commercially promising competitions pursue a strategic fit with regard to past projects, while creatively promising ones pursue a strategic stretch. This relates to the fact that interviewees tend to mention project and restricted competitions as examples of commercially promising projects, while open, ideas and one-stage competitions are considered examples of creatively promising options.

This diversification is purposefully searched in order to build a balanced portfolio. Across the data, the firms that are able to separate goals in a systematic way appear to be the largest ones across the three countries. Moreover, most firms stress the fact that targeting different competitions to different goals is easier if the multiple goals are clearly identified and decision makers are familiar with the idea that they are all equally relevant for a longer term perspective. This suggests that separation approaches are actually intertwined with synthesis approaches, because only by fostering a paradoxical vision of competitions firms can identify competing demands and act upon this.

Channels to get in touch with competitions appear to differ as well. Purposefully using different recruiting channels is therefore another approach related to separation. Commercially promising competitions are often the result of ‘passive selection’: the firm is invited to join the competition by clients or network-related consultants and professionals. Creatively promising projects rather tend to be the product of ‘active initiation’ that is determined by the personal aspirations of partners or employees. A partner in a British firm for example says: *‘we react when a competition comes along. We are not actively looking for a competition, but at the same time Jo on reception looks at journals and websites to intercept very creative opportunities’* (partner - 31).

Finally, decision-making criteria to join competitions appear to differ in relation to the type of competition. The decision to enter a commercially promising competition is mainly the result of a structured assessment made against a set of criteria, such as the brief alignment with the firm’s core business in terms of architectural and technical requirements, the process fairness, the client’s reputation and the project size. In contrast, creatively promising competitions are a matter of intuition and emotion. This gives concrete directions for the reasons why, for example, one of the two Italian firm’s history is marked by a series of ‘exceptions’, inexplicable against rational business criteria, but intuitively entered because inspiring. *‘If the competition is fascinating, even if you are busy, you take the opportunity. You can’t rule the heart’* (project architect - 2).

A design intent paradox: Selling an envisioning promise while remaining a credible service provider

‘In a competition you confront yourself with a brief and it is you deciding to what extent you strictly adhere to the brief and to what extent not. It is very important to both take the brief into account and to break with what the brief asks’ (project architect - 4).

Competing demands

This paradox exists given the intangible nature of a creative service, often complicated by the anonymity due to the rules of many competition procedures. Clients want to be inspired, but they also need to be reassured that the selected firm is going to be able to execute the project

(see Table 3). According to Rönn (2009) they therefore draw up a competition brief based on their ambitions but also leave room for being convinced on the added value of the service providers by delivering something extra. From the architectural design firm's viewpoint, this leads to a design intent paradox of selling an envisioning promise while remaining a credible service provider.

Insert Table 3

Interviewees note that fulfilling the competition brief is essential in order to convince the client to choose them instead of another firm. *'Architects are very conscious of the competition brief they are given. They follow it extremely determinedly. They struggle with the brief and are committed to give clients exactly what they want'* (project architect - 25). A credible promise is something that fulfils the brief, does not challenge it (too much) and is buildable and solid in terms of the proposal. *'What is written is written'* (partner - 10) and cannot be contested, being the expression of the client's needs. Relating to Kreiner (2009)'s work, in this context the brief appears to act as a source of instruction asking to be fulfilled. An Italian project architect suggests that the brief tells them what they cannot do on a building site. This 'tight coupling' with the brief entails loyalty to its requirements and it is often claimed that this would increase the chance of being hired because clients react better to proposals aligned to their sense of organisational identity, which is also addressed by Stang Våland (2009). Similarly, interviewees within four other firms observe that meeting the brief is about maximising the client's values and expectations and this implies 'listening' to the client and being 'responsive'.

A design responding to the brief presents the advantage that it gives the client and jury what they are expecting. Theoretically it cannot lead to a bad evaluation and assessment. However, according to the same interviewees, meeting the brief does not always ensure winning. In some cases, the client secretly wants to be surprised, as explained by this quote: *'what we were more concerned about was to meet the brief. [...] Actually, our starting point should have probably been creating something eye-catching and dramatic and unusual, even if the brief was very pragmatic. Ultimately they chose the building which was less compliant with the brief and more experimental and more landmark'* (project architect - 29). In some other cases, architectural firms believe that surprising the client is a sort of obligation they have: *'you never know to which extent they really want something ambitious. In this case it was a gamble to bring down three existing parts of the total building plot. You can expect critique on such a harsh decision'* (project architect - 22).

Moreover, in some cases challenging the brief may be the only way to avoid compromising with the firm's identity and its design approach. In line with Kreiner (2009) and Brown et al. (2010), four firms particularly stress this risk, questioning the opportunity to compromise their professional, ethical, economic and academic standards in favour of a winning submission. Two companies actually admit that they prefer losing a competition if winning implies compromising the firm's design principles. This is a long-run reputational issue as

well as an issue of creative integrity: *'even if we had been totally aware of what the client wanted, we would have remained loyal and devoted to our own approach, instead of opportunistically compromising to win the competition. [...] Our proposal to restore the existing building was not only driven by ethical or financial concerns. It was a statement of adherence to our design approach'* (project architect - 12). This refers to Kornberger et al. (2011)'s paradox of architectural style, which is visible in competitions where organisations need to carefully balance objective forces - the competition brief, rules and regulations - and subjective forces - the aesthetic creativity of the architects.

An envisioning promise is something that surprises the client, even going beyond the brief. As indicated by several interviewees challenging the brief is a way to differentiate the firm from the competitors and proposing it as a proactive design partner. Across the interviews these are recurrent statements: *'make a stand', 'push themselves', 'differentiate', 'show you are smart'* and *'be uncompromising'*. Challenging the brief always has an element of fascination. It is a sort of *'successful insubordination'*, "fuel[ing] the ambition of the competition participant to eclipse collective knowledge, as articulated by the public promoter in the competition brief, with allegedly better individual knowledge" (Chramosta, 2012: 294).

Producing an envisioning promise by only challenging the brief is however not free of risks. Interviewees observe that they risk appearing too *'self-referential', 'uncompromising', or 'far from the client expectations'*. Taken to its extreme, challenging the brief leads to controversial proposals and possibly even to disqualification, or at least being seen as impractical or too visionary. *'Architects are really great at saying 'maybe we want this, maybe we want that...' and sort of adding a lot of extras which seem to make, and often do make, a lot of sense, but in a practical consideration don't. I worked in a competition where we basically added areas to a building in a cheap way. But in the end it wasn't very well received'* (project architect - 28). In fact, as noted by Rönn (2009), the jury should select an entry which satisfies not only the call for innovation, but also the one for security, meaning that the project and the firm behind it provides enough guarantees about its feasibility. This finding aligns with research on buying and selling services, which suggests that clients search for tailor made solutions (Corcoran & McLean, 1998) as well as experienced providers with the right organizational capabilities (Day & Barksdale, 1994).

Management approaches

The need for engaging with both an envisioning promise and a credible proposal is well exemplified in this quote of a British project architect: *'in particular in large competitions you compromise: there is something you really want to do, but you moderate your design and you do take into account how it would be perceived by the client'* (project architect - 24). To do so, architectural firms generally adopt similar tactics that have to do with either synthesis or separation (see Table 4), sometimes informed by each other. Especially the separation approaches appear to be more operational than strategic, compared to synthesis ones, as also found in the strategic intent paradox.

Insert Table 4

With regard to synthesis, most firms try to be as clear as possible about their proposed design strategy. This management approach entails communicating clearly on the firm's interpretation of the brief, allowing for taking some risks in terms of design envisioning while at the same time ensuring consistency among design elements. Rönn (2009) also explained this search for extreme clarity as a way to counterbalance the frequent confusion of clients' briefs.

The results indicated that firms often use briefing sessions or presentations – when available during the procedure such as in the dialogue based competitions or when end user participation is allowed – to persuade the client that what is relevant is that the design strategy reflects analyses and understandings. This is consistent with Kreiner et al. (2011)'s study of architect-client dialogue and Stang Våland (2009)'s study of end user participation in competitions. One British interviewee explains that they try to '*bring the client on board*' with sharing '*the practice's way*' of proposing design approaches, without imposing concrete solutions. This means shifting the clients' focus from a delivered fixed solution to an adopted flexible approach by applying a strategic mind-set from the service provider. This explained by the following quote: '*you are not saying to the client: 'this is a set of plans, these are the interiors'. What you say is: 'this is how we understood your brief; this is how we represent it back to you; this is what we think about the site opportunities. We are really not trying to say what you think in this conversation''*' (partner - 23). By doing so, whatever interpretation the architect makes of the brief is not the issue, because the client is convinced about the 'how', trusting the service provider to deliver the 'what'. This can also be used as a tactic to create the basis for a potential 'good chemistry' with the client, as also identified by Day and Barksdale (2003).

Another synthesis tactic is cultivating a paradoxical vision of the brief's possibilities and constraints when reading the brief and incorporating it in the design. Possibilities inspire, constraints inform. Interviewees explain that the project's contextual dimensions embedded described in the brief are '*the best start you can have in a design process*' (project architect - 15). This is about innovating 'within manageable bounds' as Eikhof and Haunschild (2007) called it. Similarly to the processes described by Boland et al. (2008) and O'Donnell (2013), embracing constraints not only makes the design process more interesting, but also allows for serendipitously inventing new and valuable elements in the design. Kreiner (2009) mentions either calibrating solutions against client preferences and playing with what is given, or starting with some tangible clue and designing a world in which that clue makes sense. According to him, "reading richness into vague and contradictory messages in the brief created some delimitation of a solution space for the design efforts" (Kreiner, 2013: 232). In three firms, architects indicate this process by typically visualizing alternative options into the boards and prioritize these according to the space given in the boards; in four other firms they offer several options if they are convinced that the client might have decided on the wrong grounds on a particular requirement.

With regard to separation, firms choose whether to follow the brief or challenge it depending on the kind of competition. We found that firms tend to adhere to the brief under the following conditions: restricted competitions, higher chances of winning, a fit between the

brief and the practice's design approach, normative and prescriptive briefs, and the perception that all the client's needs are included in the brief. Conversely, they tend to challenge the brief in open contests, when they perceive misalignment between the brief and the firm's approach, and or in case of a non-prescriptive brief. In some firms it also appears to be a matter of the type of client and the composition of the evaluating jury. *'Sometimes competitions are ambiguous, suggestive and not very specific. In these cases it is incredibly important and successful if you just give an idea saying it is something to be developed and built upon. Other times, we have really slick presentations saying this is exactly what you are going to get, because [...] they are simply looking to test what the architects think is important in the project and if they agree or not.'* (project architect - 26).

Interviewees also mention a temporal splitting across different phases of the same competition. This depicts a sort of iterative process in which architects focus on brief constraints to set the project boundaries, but also go beyond them to get inspired and produce a creative idea and then again take constraints into account to make this creative idea feasible within the specific context. During the interviews a British architect referred to a football stadium competition which is a rather exemplary situation for a design process: *'At the beginning it is common that you try to engage with the brief and your initial design proposal reflects this, but [...] even if at the end they [the clients] won't be able to afford it, they want to see a vision. That's why you go back to your project and change it'* (project architect - 27). All firms go back and forth in the brief following clearly separate phases. They read the brief for the first time, supplemented by site visits, and then return to the brief every time they needed to focus on details, or as also noted by Kreiner (2009), when they were stuck in the design work, or required for internal evaluations of the proposal. As Kreiner (2013) observed, a rich reading of a brief allows the team to prioritize between multiple and often competing needs and requirements.

Another separation tactic mentioned by all firms is to address only a few selected issues in depth, while suggesting that analogous conscious and elaborated responses could be provided at a later stage for all the other issues: *'You can't solve everything and you have to select. [...] You emphasize a few selected issues as the really important ones and you give the confidence that if you can do them in such a really interesting, innovative, imaginative way that means you will be able to solve the others as well'* (project architect - 26). To do so some firms have two separate teams in charge of either the general design overview or the technical specifications. These two teams work in parallel on the same competition.

A separate team may also exist to take care of the communication aspects. With the help of non-architects most of the firms look for a comprehensible way to engage the client and sell the competition idea. A Dutch project architect illustrated how their competition idea was 'sold' through a video-clip: *'We were looking for a trick to inform the client about the inner part of their new building. The nephew of our partner created a short movie. And that was just very entertaining.'* (project architect - 14). Finding the right approach in dealing with the clients will improve their mental receptiveness of the proposal despite a possibly high-perceived complexity. Or as an interviewee explains: *'You have to explain yourself well, especially with a design like ours which gets across quite abstract. [...] The more people understand, the more appraisal in general'* (project architect - 22).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Strategic intent and design intent at work

We began this research by asking which paradoxes creative professional firms experience in competing for work and how firms manage these competing demands. Both are important issues for the existence of (creative) professional service firms, because paradox management is associated with more effective performance at the organizational, team and individual level (Schad et al., 2016).

We experienced that evidence of paradoxes can emerge within the same interview, across different interviews with the same actor and across different interviews with different people, convincing us of the fact that adopting a paradox framework provides an interesting starting point to study the topic of competing for work within a creative professional service domain.

Our findings showed that creative professional service firms in the field of architecture face two interwoven paradoxes that relate to the strategic intent and the design intent of acquiring work through competitions (see Figure 1). The ‘strategic intent’ paradox relates to the reasons why a firm competes for work; the ‘design intent’ paradox deals with how competing in competitions translates into the proposal made to the client. We argue that strategic goals behind the decision to compete, inform the way a firm decides to develop a proposal. But we also show that the opportunities and the constraints offered by the brief influence the reasons for entering a competition or not.

Insert Figure 1

Both paradoxes can be managed by applying synthesis and separation approaches. Synthesis approaches include cultivating an embedded synthesizing vision of competitions within the office, developing a design approach rather than a design proposal, and seeing the brief’s constraints as source of possibilities. Separation approaches include targeting different types of competitions for different goals, adhering or not to the brief depending on the type of clients, the requirements and the phase of the competition.

Based on our findings we conclude that synthesis has to deal with a strategic mind-set and a mental template, while separation usually relates to operational actions. Due to these different characteristics, paradox resolution is much more effective when synthesis and separation are combined and act as powerful complementary approaches, as also stated by Andriopolous and Lewis (2009). Our results add to this notion the contribution that separation can be adopted in a more convincing way when informed by synthesis. In fact, synthesis allows to acquire consciousness with regard to the existence of competing demands and fosters a mind-set that takes them all into account when making decisions.

Contributions

This paper contributes to both research and practice. From a research point of view, we used paradox as a tool for theorizing the contradictions of competing for work from the

professional service provider's perspective as suggested by Brady and Maylor (2010) and Smith and Lewis, (2011). Depicting the strategic and design intent paradoxes, we clarify how the unresolved contradictions, which are embedded in the selection criteria and in the decision-making process clients use to select a professional service provider, can be framed as paradoxical and then managed accordingly. Therefore we expand existing research on buying and selling professional services with a focus on creative services, and we offer a framework to clarify the dynamics of competing for work where the client-provider relationship cannot be the main driver.

We also contribute to paradox studies at the level of organizations and collective management approaches, in line with Schad et al. (2016)'s recent categorization of possible paradox research focuses. According to this categorization, paradoxes surface at different levels - field, organizations, teams, individuals and multi-level - and ask for collective organizational approaches - practices, processes and structures - or individual approaches - actors' cognitive, emotional and behavioural reactions - to be managed. In particular, with regard to collective approaches, we suggest that while synthesis is more strategic, separation is more operational. The two are, however, interconnected and complementary, separation being particularly effective when informed by synthesis.

Moreover, we use paradox as a research framework. This framework became a guide into our research journey in explaining the competing demands experienced in the context of competing for work. According to Lewis and Kelemen (2002) and Lewis and Grimes (1999) this facilitates the role of researchers as 'interpreters' and encourages reflexivity, a point of view we endorse based on our experience with the firms in our research sample and which could be expanded in the field of management studies.

From a practice point of view, we foster the adoption of a paradoxical mind-set, both at the organizational and at the individual level. We note that, as in many situations, the problem might not be the problem in itself, but the way we frame and think about it. This indicates that, for creative professional service firms competing for work, the contradictory complexity of the competition procedure is not the actual problem; the problem is the way professionals look at it. On the one hand, they tend to believe that the source of complexity relies within the external and normative characteristics of the competition procedure, ignoring or underestimating the role of how they act and manage their professional activity. On the other hand, they try to eliminate this complexity, choosing either one extreme or another by evaluating pros and cons, while actually only by accepting its existence we can cope with its contradictory nature. This is the basic concept behind the notion of paradox and therefore of great value to practice.

A paradoxical mind-set can be the first step to acquire a deeper and more profound understanding of the professional life, and to force creative professional service firms and individuals to take into account and find a simultaneous balance between economic and market pressures as well as symbolic and prestige ambitions. A paradoxical mind-set is useful because it allows to identify the presence of conflicting tensions in the practice of competing for work and to accept that they need to coexist. Without recognition of paradox existence and acceptance, resolution in the sense of 'coping with' is not possible (Smith & Lewis, 2011). A paradoxical mind-set also offers a source of relief in the sense that it justifies the co-presence

of contradictory elements. Frustration would otherwise be the most common reaction in front of an apparently unresolvable complexity. This implies that only by making sense of existing paradoxes, professionals can manage them and act upon the managerial shift that is aimed for the sector in professional service literature. Finally, our contribution to this shift also lies in suggesting a set of management approaches that leads organizational practices and processes in the creative industry to handle and cope with paradoxes of competing for work.

Directions for future research

We conclude by suggesting three areas for future research based on the limitations of this study. First, the retrospective use of paradox made data analysis challenging. Both original studies did not initially aim to deal with paradox. Despite this approach being frequent in paradox research, future research could explicitly ask professionals to interpret their own work practice as paradoxical. This would probably allow paradoxes and tactics to emerge more explicitly from the data and therefore permit expansion and reinforcement of the findings of this work, for example into the relationships among different levels – institutional, organizational and individual as previously done by for example Hackman (2003) and Smith and Tracey (2016). In particular Schad et al. (2016) and Bévort and Suddaby (2015) recently recognized the individual level as a promising and underexplored site of investigation.

Secondly, our observations are limited to eight firms within the architecture industry in three different countries. Despite the fact that common paradoxes and management approaches across our dataset convinced us that our observations are generalizable, future research could be extended to other types of creative professional service firms such as advertising, media and software development as shown by Thornton et al. (2005), or similar firms in the same and or in other countries.

Finally, concepts proposed here and in future qualitative studies could be tested empirically by surveying the use of management approaches across different firms. Once ‘winning’ management tactics leading to superior performance are identified, future research could investigate how creative service professionals can be trained to better recognize and manage paradoxes in order to improve their performance.

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Figure 1. Interwoven paradoxes of competing for work

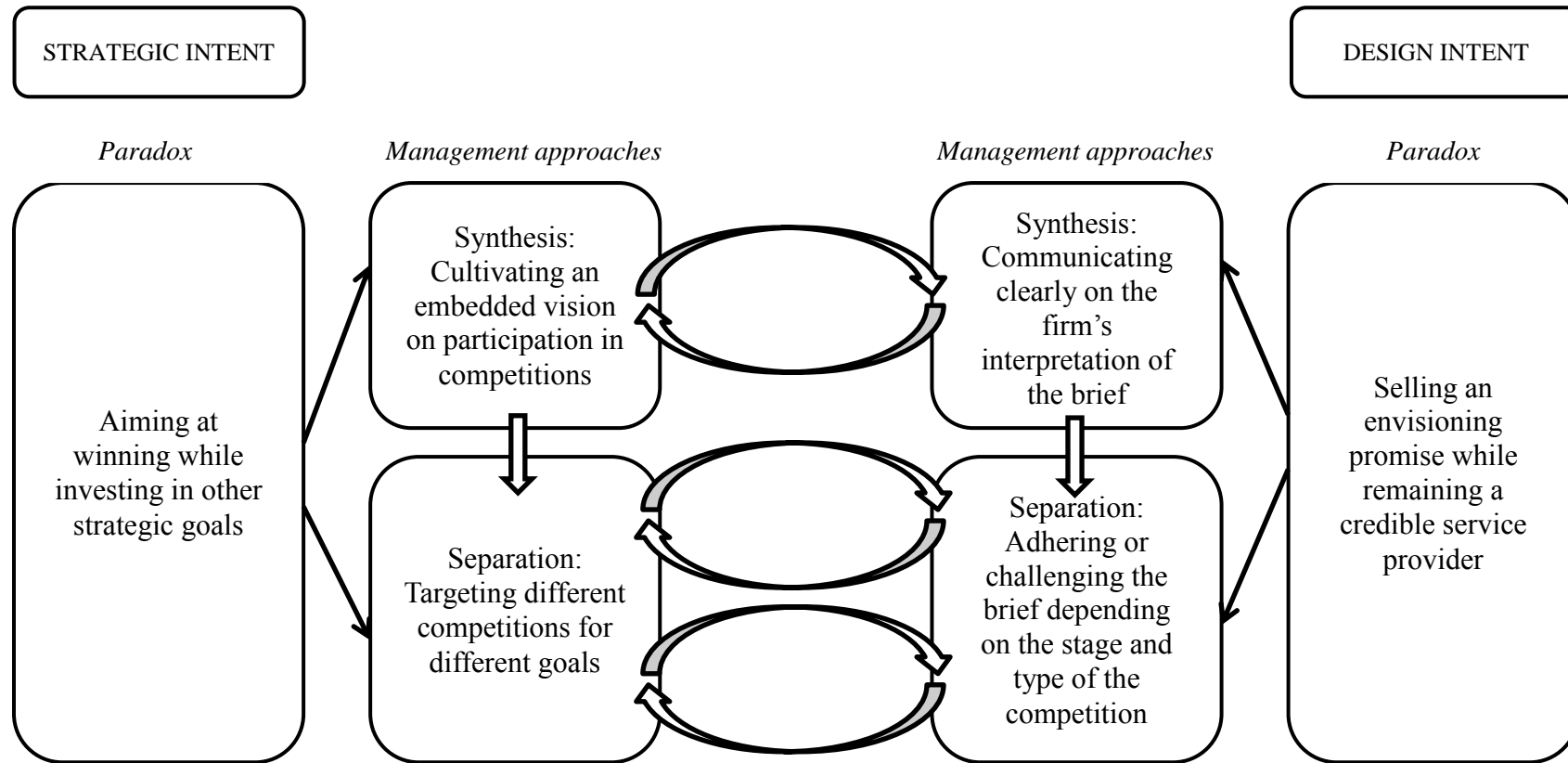


Table 1. Aiming at winning while investing in other strategic goals – Competing demands

Competing demands	Representative quotes
Aiming at winning	<p>‘We do competitions to win them’ (partner - 8).</p> <p>‘Competitions are the way to acquire major national and international public jobs’ (partner - 1).</p> <p>‘It is important to get some prize money’ (project architect - 17).</p>
Investing in other strategic goals	<p>Exploration in design terms</p> <p>‘By doing competitions you force yourself in doing research on new materials and new ways of designing which permeate all projects in everyday life’ (project architect - 32).</p> <p>‘Within a competition you invent particular solutions [...] and develop a different design thinking that is essential to design something new in the future [...] You understand research trends’ (partner - 10).</p> <p>‘We are particularly interested in participating if we get paid, but also to do a more extensive study on something’ (project architect - 20).</p> <p>Diversification</p> <p>‘Competitions help you expand your business and experience outside your traditional sectors and expertise’ (project architect - 32).</p> <p>‘Competitions let us make choices about something, somewhere, someone we might be interested in working with’ (partner - 23).</p> <p>‘I always do my best, even if the chances of building it are low. In the worst scenario, it is a project which nurtures my portfolio’ (partner - 10).</p> <p>Reputation building</p> <p>‘We probably see some of the competitions as a little bit of PR. Actually it is not about making money’ (project architect - 35).</p> <p>‘Bellini is very selective in looking for clients. He could do many more projects but he wants to do only those of a certain prestige and reputation’ (project architect - 3).</p> <p>‘If we feel like it is a prestigious assignment, we participate’ (project architect - 19).</p> <p>Enjoyment</p>

	<p>‘Taking two weeks out for a competition is a fantastic change and relief. It motivates people and gives enthusiasm and energy’ (partner - 30).</p> <p>‘This is exciting and inspiring, keeping our minds sharp’ (project architect - 18).</p> <p>‘Even if you don’t win, they create a creative atmosphere in the office [...] are a way to keep people creative [...] people feel better, feel the value and enjoy themselves’ (project architect - 31).</p>
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Table 2. Aiming at winning while investing in other strategic goals – Management approaches

Management approaches	Representative quotes
Synthesis – Cultivating an embedded vision on competitions and their supporting practices	<p>‘Within a competition team, people are aware of the importance of keeping updated and breathing the ‘zeitgeist’; and of the fact that the competition’s goal is to pursue the maximum quality possible [...] we always try to merge the design exploration ambition and the winning goal’ (project architect - 2).</p> <p>‘We almost always join the bigger competitions, especially when it deals with a confrontation of history and modernity. [...] But only if there is some kind of financial compensation for joining’ (project architect - 20).</p> <p>‘We always lose money on competitions. [...] A decision about a competition is definitely made consciously. [...] We are an architectural firm, not a company. An architectural firm makes considerations instinctively’ (project architect - 19).</p>
Separation – Targeting different types of competitions for different goals	<p>‘We react when a competition comes along, we are not actively looking for a competition’ (partner - 33) but also: ‘Jo on reception looks at journals and websites searching for competitions’ (project architect - 31).</p> <p>‘There are competitions where we think we have an expertise (residential projects and hotels) and something to offer the client; and competitions which offer us something, open new routes different from any other projects we have done already’ (partner - 11).</p> <p>‘On the one side, if you do a tender you do it to win it. On the other side, in a design contest you also wish to win but the design component is preponderant and the consequent potential fulfilment of self-expression ambitions is greater’ (project architect - 7).</p>

Table 3. Selling an envisioning promise while remaining a credible provider – Competing demands

Competing demands	Representative quotes
Selling an envisioning promise by challenging the brief	<p>‘If you start compromising with your own decisions, you easily get to the point where the project loses its own identity and compromises too much. If you accept too many compromises the project loses its fascinating power and won’t be able to impress the jury anymore, not even being mentioned. When we tried to anticipate the jury’s thinking and to compromise with the brief we never reached the target goal. [...] It is up to you understanding how far away you can go from the brief’ (project architect - 7).</p> <p>‘You have to try to read between the lines. You have to bring an interpretation to the brief, which is as unique as possible to distinguish yourself from the others’ (partner - 11).</p> <p>‘Clients don’t really know what they want and we inform the brief and it is a more organic process’ (project architect - 34).</p>
Being a credible service provider by adhering to the brief	<p>‘It is never a fully sort of open creativity with clients. You have a brief and a budget, but in competition you have much more freedom to experiment’ (project architect - 32).</p> <p>‘I do think that people do competitions for the design and the project itself. This is the main thing. But obviously, in particular in large competitions, you might compromise: there is something you really want to do but you kind of moderate your design and you do take into account how it would perceived by the client’ (project architect - 26).</p> <p>‘There is a difference between a vision and a design: the design is serving the dish; the vision is describing the ingredients. We usually stand out best in serving the dish’ (partner - 16).</p>

Table 4. Selling an envisioning promise while remaining a credible provider – Management approaches

Management approaches	Representative quotes
Synthesis – Communicating clearly on the firm’s interpretation of the brief	<p>‘Our firm integrates the two sides: creativity is always inserted into the history of the project. It is never about the path-breaking extraordinary idea Nouvel or Koolhaas end up with. Creativity is also linked with the firm identity and design approach. We never turn upside down our profession’ (project architect - 9).</p> <p>‘Every aspect of the brief is double angled. Clients’ requirements can be seen as limits or opportunities. If you live them as limits it is painful, you can’t express yourself, feel boxed in with no exit strategies. If you see them as opportunities, you can do your best as a designer. You need to transform the limit into a resource</p>

	<p>you can leverage upon' (project architect - 7).</p> <p>'A project begins with a strategy, not a design solution. This strategy arises from understanding the fundamental drivers of a brief and the parameters, problems and opportunities it represents. It includes a richer definition of context. [...] And whilst this might involve a complexity of thought, it yields a simple, legible proposal' (partner - 23).</p>
<p>Separation – Adhering or challenging the brief depending on the stage and the kind of competition</p>	<p>In client-based and limited competitions you try to target your work to what you perceive the client wants. [...] In open competitions there might be hundreds of competitors. It is much more creative and less constrained. In limited competitions we might just confirm the client's ideas, putting some flashy elements in it' (partner - 33).</p> <p>'We showed different schemes on how to use the space' (project architect - 20).</p> <p>'Often in briefs there will be elements, which are obviously fixed; other things which you understand will be open for interpretations. [...] You try to see ways of responding to the brief which are innovative I suppose' (partner - 11).</p>