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# The nature and development of liminality competence

## Narratives from a study of mobile project workers

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to present findings from an interpretative study documenting how mobile project workers develop their conceptions of work performed in liminal (in-between) positions. The overall purpose of the paper is to elucidate how people in time-limited and ambiguous work positions develop competences to manage their dynamic work conditions.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This research relies on two narratives of mobile project workers drawn from a larger longitudinal study. The empirical material includes diaries and multiple interviews. The analysis takes a narrative approach and identifies how and when the mobile project workers enhance their level of liminality competence.

**Findings** – Three processes were identified as significant in developing higher liminality competence: understanding the value of in-betweenness, embracing the role as an inside-outsider and translating the liminal experience through reflexivity.

**Practical implications** – The paper demonstrates the need for employers to support individuals in passing through the three processes and to support thoughtful mobility across different project settings to improve the liminality competence of their employees.

**Originality/value** – In the dual ambition of offering insights based on interpretative research on competence and putting greater emphasis on people working in in-between positions, this study enhances the understanding of how individuals develop their conceptions of work in general, and their conceptions of liminality at work in particular.

**Keywords** Project management, Employee relations, Flexibility, Knowledge transfer, Workplace learning, Engineers

**Paper type** Research paper



### Introduction

This study shows how engineers working on contingent contracts learn to cope with their transitional work conditions and how they develop competences to navigate through their mobile working life, thus providing a more comprehensive picture, including positive aspects and developmental learning, of nonstandard work arrangements (Cappelli and Keller, 2013). The paper contributes to the emerging literature on liminality at work, as well as to that of non-standard workplace learning.

Working in a liminal position means being “betwixt and between” traditional organizational structures (Tempest and Starkey, 2004). Liminality at work arises when a person is temporarily engaged in a specific work to which (s)he has an ambiguous organizational belonging. This is typically the case for temporary workers (Garsten, 1999), consultants (Sturdy *et al.*, 2006), network managers (Ellis and Ybema, 2010) and freelancers (Tempest and Starkey, 2004). Zabusky and Barley (1997, p. 396) also argue that liminality plays “a critical role in most R&D settings, as successful R&D often depends on linking disciplines and groups with different knowledge and political interest.” Likewise, Sturdy *et al.* (2009) underline that liminality often surfaces in project-based work. Thus, for many people, liminality has become a significant part of working life (Garsten, 1999).

The lack of belonging to the organization could allow the liminars to move more freely among different teams, organizations and communities. Liminars may, therefore, broaden their knowledge repertoire and benefit from external impressions (Tempest and Starkey, 2004). Furthermore, this “betwixt” position may lead to innovative behavior and development of unique abilities (Howard-Grenville *et al.*, 2011; Zabusky and Barley, 1997). Garsten (1999) suggests that liminal positions entail a sense of freedom permitting people to reject commitment to a specific team or organization. At the same time, holding a liminal position could affect how people perceive themselves, which can be a demanding process involving the creation and re-creation of identity (Beech, 2011). Sturdy *et al.* (2006, pp. 932-933) argue:

[...] the ambiguity between organizational boundaries has [...] been interpreted as liminal space where many of the stable rules and identities are suspended, creating double-edged possibilities of increased creativity with increased insecurity.

Previous studies show that liminality is a key element of team-oriented engineering work (Borg and Söderlund, 2014). Due to its transient and contingent nature, individuals face ambiguities relating to the social and task elements of their work. Hence, research has distinguished between technical and social liminality (Borg and Söderlund, 2014). Social liminality appears in socially ambiguous situations. It is linked to concerns such as the liminar’s social role in the organization as well as the level of participation in social events. Technical liminality occurs where the problem-solving context is new and/or unclear, which is often the case for technical consultants. Technical liminality arises because engineers must continuously untangle assignment specifications and solve technical problems occurring in the project.

### Developing liminality competence

Previous studies have emphasized that liminality requires specific competences and skills (Garsten, 1999). This type of competence – “liminality competence” – is tightly coupled with how liminars perceive their work (Borg and Söderlund, 2015). The present study addresses liminality competence based on an interpretative approach, which posits that workers’ perceptions of work and their performance are closely interrelated, as the perceptions delimit the attributes people will apply in performing their work (Chen and Partington, 2006; Partington *et al.*, 2005; Sandberg and Pinnington, 2009). Borg and Söderlund (2015) identified three different levels of liminality competence connected to three distinct perceptions of work (“assignment handling”, “learning

platform” and “knowledge transfer”). Moreover, they distinguished five core attributes of work:

- (1) “analyzing needs”;
- (2) “dealing with change”;
- (3) “interpreting contracts”;
- (4) “creating trust”; and
- (5) “developing, using and transferring knowledge”.

These attributes signify important elements that engineers must cope with when facing liminality. The continuous mobility implies that they need to establish themselves in new work settings to be able to contribute value to the client organization. They must also address a special kind of duality in their work; at the same time, as they perform work in the client firm, they need to contribute to their employer – the consulting firm. [Table I](#) presents the attributes, qualities and activities the individual utilizes when coping with liminality at work.

The consultants’ perceptions were categorized into three different conceptions of work corresponding to different hierarchical levels of liminality competence. The lowest level of liminality competence was connected to the conception of “work as assignment handling”, the middle level was associated with the conception of “work as learning platform” and the highest level corresponded to the conception of “work as knowledge transfer”.

Individuals with higher liminality competence perceive liminality as a positive element of work. These individuals take action to trigger liminality by opting for a project-oriented career and participating in development and experimental projects ([Arthur and Rousseau, 1996](#)). Mobile engineers holding the conception of “work as knowledge transfer” make deliberate use of liminality. To a great extent, they experience positive effects of liminality through increased freedom ([Garsten, 1999](#)), and they take advantage of learning opportunities ([Tempest and Starkey, 2004](#)). Similar to the inter-organizational managers studied by [Ellis and Ybema \(2010\)](#), they are able to shift between belonging and not belonging to different contexts, such as the project, the client and the consultancy.

Workers holding the conception of “work as assignment handling” try to reduce liminality. They look for stability and clarity and feel that their positions are weakened as a result of not belonging to a traditional structure. These workers focus their efforts on current projects and many would prefer work in the client firm if possible. However, due to the nature of their technical expertise or the nature of demand in general, they were unable to find a “traditional” engineering job.

Interestingly, the number of years involved in liminality at work did not appear to determine the level of liminality competence, meaning that the individuals in the category of lower liminality competence had approximately the same range of work experience as mobile project workers with high liminality competence. In this paper, we address how individuals develop high levels of liminality competence and how, over time, they learn to address their liminality at work. We are also interested in the processes that are essential in developing higher levels of liminality competence.

Attribute	Conception 1: work as assignment handling	Conception 2: work as learning platform	Conception 3: work as knowledge transfer
Analyze needs	Analyzes the needs of the closest project team, what (s)he needs to do to contribute to and achieve the team's objectives	Analyzes the needs of the overall project, to reach the project goal effectively	Analyzes the needs of the client organization as a whole (views the sequence of projects—what needs to be done to improve in future projects), as well as the project in which (s)he is working. Simultaneously analyzes the need for AE, how AE needs to develop and how (s)he can contribute
Initiate change	Participates in changes that are initiated by others; can also contribute in change efforts if requested by management	Can propose change initiatives within the project and can manage it if specifically requested by management	Actively looks for aspects to develop in the project and for possible improvements in the client organization as a whole. Independently raises such concerns with the client and usually participates in managing the change
Interpret contracts	Views contracts as job description and role specification	Realizes that some tasks need to be outside of the contract and that the job demands the flexibility necessary to adapt to changes	Acts as an ambassador for AE. Views the assignment as fluid rather than static. Takes advantage of this to lead the role toward interesting tasks
Create trust	Focuses on doing his/her assigned task as well as possible to create trust from project managers and, by extension, also from AE managers	Focuses on performing tasks both within and outside of the role description that move the team forward to gain the team members trust and, secondarily, to gain trust from project management and AE managers	Takes independent and active initiative to perform tasks that are outside the role description with the intention to swiftly increase trust from team members, project management and AE managers—and also with the intention of improving their reputation and trust from colleagues
Build, use, and transfer knowledge	Uses task-specific knowledge and focuses on building knowledge necessary for the current project	Builds and uses knowledge primarily in the current assignment. Also uses AE activities such as technology development teams and networks to develop	Considers one of the major missions in work to use knowledge from other firms and contexts in the current assignment. Seizes (or creates) new opportunities to acquire new knowledge to build on the existing repertoire

**Source:** Borg and Söderlund (2014, p. 11)

## Research methodology

While research on workplace learning enhances our understanding of subjects (learners) in their environment (the workplace), there are hitherto few accounts that allow the learners' voices to be adequately heard and analyzed. Lee and Roth (2006, p. 217) argue:

Only when we give due attention to participants' accounts, then can we better realize a form of inquiry that repositions situated practices at the center of our research and treats research participants as the true practitioners that they are.

Consistent with Beech's (2011) study on liminality and identity reconstruction, we selected two empirical examples out of a larger sample of 13 individuals. From the sample of four individuals with high liminality competence, Harry and John (code names) had shortest and longest tenures, respectively, in the industry and both demonstrated a high level of liminality competence but had developed it at different stages in their careers. Thus, methodologically, our main idea was to select two similar, yet polar types to discern patterns and identify similarities in the development of liminality competence over time.

We first met John in 2009 when performing an interview study about consultants engaged in project-based work. This study addressed what technical consultants do, their roles, their assignments, how they enter new assignments and how they leave assignments behind. This study spurred our interest in the nature of liminality competence (Borg and Söderlund, 2014). A subsequent study comprised a combination diaries, interviews and workshops addressing how technical consultants cope with liminality at work (Borg and Söderlund, 2015).

The diary was a hybrid between narrative reporting and a detailed log of activities (Czarniawska, 2008), and as such, it was both time-based and event-based (Bolger *et al.*, 2003). The participants were asked to describe their work and work conditions. When certain problems occurred at work, we asked them to write about their experiences in their diaries. The diary consisted of questions about their work, how they acted upon the challenges they faced and what they perceived as particularly important in their daily work. The consultants made entries at least once a week and as well on occasions they considered important. The diaries also served as a foundation for the interviews that were carried out before, during and after the diary reporting. Most importantly, statements from the diaries could be elaborated further in the interview, which gave us more details and contextual information (cf. Plowman, 2010).

Approximately three years after John and Harry completed writing their diaries, we conducted follow-up interviews and asked about their careers since our initial study. In these interviews, Harry and John talked us through their work experience in greater depth and added details to their narratives. Tables II and III give an overview of the data collected for this study.

The present study relies on a narrative approach with the idea to capture "the unfolding of a story of events and experiences over time" (Rhodes and Brown, 2005, p. 177). The focus on time targets the development of liminality competence in the career of technical consultants. We conducted by a structural narrative analysis (Czarniawska, 2004) and searched for changes in the equilibrium of the narratives, changes in the participants' stories in terms of how they perceived their work, and how they started to take different approaches to addressing problems they faced in their work. Initially, we relied on the core attributes of work to sort out what the participants in our study did,

how they perceived their work and how these perceptions changed during their careers. We then coded the data to detect changes over time. Through a process of iterative coding, three processes emerged as central for gaining higher levels of liminality competence. The processes centered on how the participants perceived their work, role, relationship with consultancy and client and competence development. In the final stage of data collection, we checked to ensure that these three processes represented accurate descriptions of how liminality competence had been developed. During the analysis, we also made sure to allow for variation and differences across cases. Hence, when writing up the narratives, we decided to present two separate life stories with quotes and details that provided the reader with a good sense of the professional life of John and Harry.

### Two narratives illustrating liminality competence

The narratives of John and Harry presented below tell the career stories of John and Harry after finishing their university education.

#### *John*

John had been working as a technical consultant for 13 years in the same company when we met him for our last interview. He felt much like a rookie when he started as a young technical consultant at Advanced Engineering (henceforth, AE), which was his first job after receiving his master's degree in engineering in the late 1990s. Starting at AE was a strategic choice he made to broaden his knowledge about software programming and to get the opportunity to work in different organizations in a time when "the job market flourished."

When John describes his first assignment, he speaks of a project in crisis. Because this was early in his career, he did not feel completely confident about his programming abilities, so he focused on performing his assigned duties as well as he could. The project

Method	Length	Date	
Interview	2 hours	June 2009	
Introductory meeting	2 hours	March 2010	
Diary study	3 months	March-June 2010	
Follow-up talk/informal interview	30 minutes	March 2010	
Interview	1.5 hours	June 2010	
Interview	1 hour	September 2013	Table II. Overview of data set for John
Analytical interview	30 minutes	September 2013	

Method	Length	Date	
Introductory meeting	2 hours	March 2010	
Diary study	3 months	March-June 2010	
Follow-up talk/informal interview	45 minutes	April 2010	
Interview	1 hour	June 2010	
Interview	1 hour	September 2013	Table III. Overview of data set for Harry
Analytical interview	30 minutes	September 2013	

ended abruptly when the client decided to abandon the project due to the lack of business opportunities. In his second assignment, John entered a project located in-house at one of AE's offices. The project involved approximately 50 AE consultants and was led by a project manager from the client. John claims he really enjoyed working on this project, as he worked with new tools and model-based development that involved a great deal of creative work. Moreover, he describes this project as well organized with a clear process. To John, this was an exceptionally good experience. John enjoyed working collaboratively with his AE colleagues; it made him feel more like an AE employee. However, the client abandoned the project, and John was assigned to work for one of AE's major clients. Since then, John has been working for the same client for approximately 10 years, although on different assignments, projects and for different departments.

When John began working for this client, he was assigned to a "rather boring project". He updated existing documentation. However, he soon moved to a larger development project, an assignment that lasted nearly four years. After these years, he wanted to quit and work for another client. As he says, the project "was strictly regulated and it just kept going on, so I wanted to get away from [the client]".

At this point, John was offered the opportunity to work on a different project – Project Epsilon – with the same client. John found Project Epsilon to be technically interesting and challenging, as he was able to focus more on developing new products and features. However, he encountered problems concerning the management of the project, claiming there was a lack of detailed requirements for the software development. He also thought management had difficulties in making decisions and moving the project forward. Because of these problems, the project was put on hold, during which the project was restructured and the project team was reduced considerably. John was one of the few who were asked to remain on the project.

After approximately a year on Project Epsilon, John was transferred to Project Zeta. He explains:

I was transferred against my will, so to speak, to a project that was really in a state of crisis. The crisis was due to mismanagement if you ask me. Frankly, they didn't work according to their processes. Someone called it "rumor-based programming". There was no control, and they went into panic [...] they threw people on the project. But, again, this shows that you can't compensate for the lack of structure and order [...] no matter how much people you put in.

John worked on Project Zeta for approximately six months. This project taught him much, although he found it difficult to perform well because of the lack of prerequisites. John was flattered that he was asked to work on the project, but he still thinks this project was the worst he has ever worked on: "every time I made some corrections, a new problem would arise somewhere else – that project was doomed."

Following Project Zeta, John was transferred to the recently initiated Project Omega after specifically requesting this transfer. He was one of few consultants in the project, as the client wanted to involve mostly in-house personnel. John believes he got this opportunity because of his good reputation among managers and leading engineers in the client organization. John describes the project as exciting with many possibilities to be creative, but also as lacking clear instructions and processes. In our first interview, when John had worked on Project Omega for a few months, he compares Project Omega with his earlier projects:



John: I'm sure that the projects I have worked on previously lacked structure as well, but I didn't understand that then [...] I thought more like, "well, I'll do my thing". But the longer I've worked, the more interested I have become in the project's structure and function – how does it work?

Interviewer: Do you deal with your situation differently now because of that?

John: I've got more opinions now, and sometimes I try to speak up. However, at the same time, I've become more dejected. I really don't have the power to influence.

Because Project Omega lacked clear instructions, John drafted some suggestions and a set of directions regarding how he should tackle his tasks, but the project managers objected to his suggestions. John says:

I would like someone to start untangling the main idea and how this idea is supposed to work. I have asked on several occasions for someone to come and present the idea of the project to us, but that has not happened. It is too difficult to untangle [...]

However, during this project, the sub-project John was working on changed into a "work package". Thus, AE officially became responsible for managing and executing the sub-project at the client's site. John was appointed team leader for the sub-project. A few of months later, we held our second interview with John and he describes how his level of activity changed in this new project constellation:

When it became a work package, I became more active. Before then, I had quite passive, asking others how to do things. I was trying to untangle the tasks. I gave more directions to the team.

Nevertheless, John still referred to unclear hierarchies and decision-making processes in Project Omega that impeded progress. John dealt with this by contacting a selected group of stakeholders in the project to clarify the line of authority for various types of decisions. In his diary, John writes:

The quality of the document, design, and code was miserable. It needed to be re-done, according to me. The question was: who would decide if we should do the job? You would think the project manager would make the decision, but that is not how it works [at the client firm]. It has taken a couple of days to get answers from a number of superiors to make it clear who just had strong opinions and who actually had authority to make decisions. It turned out that was someone way up in the hierarchy. This is very inconvenient, but I am working on establishing a structure for decision making. We still have no decision on whether we should do the job, so we are taking the chance that it will be made.

When John left the project for parental leave, there were several conflicts in the team. John wanted to create a clear structure for the project, but the project manager disagreed. John writes:

It was like they had built a fancy western backdrop, and there I was suggesting that we should lay the concrete foundation. It was not appreciated [...] At the end, I worked together with the guy who was responsible for the technical decisions, but the project manager didn't want to accept that there was a better, and necessary, way of working. We had managers higher up in the hierarchy on our side, but this was just before I was going on parental leave [...] I heard afterwards that all the members of the team quit after I left.

When John came back to work, he entered another, smaller, ongoing project with the same client firm. John indicates that although the teams discussed how to perform the

work, what they were supposed to do was never questioned. At this point, John reflects on how he has changed his way of working since he first started as a consultant:

In the beginning, it was more about trying to understand what to do for the day. However, after a while, I have learned to understand the projects more, the project phases and the structures. I now consider what is done and what is not done, and where we are in comparison to where we are going. It is a very different approach really.

John also explains that he has taken more active steps in changing projects in later stages of his career, trying to enter projects where he can both use and develop his professional skills. He describes that entering a project requires humbly getting to know the people and the project by asking questions – and at later stages, asking more specific questions and offering constructive suggestions.

When we discuss why he has chosen to remain as consultant, John describes how he wishes to take part in the positive learning culture in AE. Despite working for the same client for a long time, he says he receives valued input and benefits from AE, for example, learning about new technologies and methods:

As a consultant, I receive more input, and I am influenced by the AE culture. I can use that influence in the client projects [...] and if they would change their way of working in the client firm, I would already be prepared because of AE and my previous assignments. That's how I contribute.

### *Harry*

Harry's first job after finishing his master's degree in engineering was as technical consultant at AE. At the time for our last interview, Harry had worked as a technical consultant for five years: three years at AE and two years in Software Consulting (SC, codename). In his first assignment, he worked as a software developer with one of AE's largest clients. In the beginning of his first assignment, Harry was frustrated and insecure because of the ambiguity he experienced in the project. However, after working on that assignment for some time, he experienced what he calls "role sliding":

To begin with, I was hired as a troubleshooter and programmer, so when the client had problems with the software, a technical problem, it was up to me to debug and correct the code. But I have been sliding a bit between different roles since then. While I've been doing a bit of everything, in particular I developed a tool they use every day to speed up their process and maintain higher standards in their documents.

When asked to further explain what he believes is the essence of role sliding, he says:

It is quite noteworthy, because every time you look at the paper and the role you are hired to take, after two or three months you will see that it is not really what you do, not entirely.

Harry explains that he soon perceived ambiguity as a central part of his work, and an aspect of that he enjoys. As he says: "I would probably die of boredom now if I would not get this chance to develop." After almost two years in his first assignment, Harry wanted to move on to new challenges and try a new assignment. During the time of the diary study, Harry had begun working as a scrum master on a client project with specific deliverables kept in-house in AE premises. Harry was originally hired to work 25 per cent of his time as a scrum master and for the remaining time working as a tester and

programmer. However, he ended up assuming the role as project manager during the time outside of his scrum master duties. He elaborates:

As a consultant, you take part in designing your role to a certain extent, and at the time it was said that I would probably be a test manager or a programmer. But then, it developed in a different direction because I saw a need for that.

Harry describes this role shift as an effect of him taking the opportunity to “role slide”, but also of the client’s limited knowledge on scrum methods. Harry explained that he took responsibility for both satisfying the product owner by taking on scrum master responsibilities and serving the team with what he considered was important to propel the project forward. He discusses his dual, and sometimes conflicting, roles in this assignment as follows:

It was a bit tricky in the beginning. But, I don’t know, it’s just good to be aware of the situation, to understand that conflicts may arise, but also to recognize, “okay, what role I need to have in this meeting?” And sometimes it happens that I have to switch roles in the middle of a meeting.

When describing this assignment, Harry argues that being a consultant implies a responsibility to take part in designing one’s own role in a way that is suitable for the project and the client. This, according to Harry, means taking into consideration both the technical aspects, such as trying to develop tools and find technical solutions to facilitate the project work, and the social aspects, such as what the team currently needs to be able to move on and develop as a collaborating unit. After holding the conflicting roles for a while, Harry approached the product owners to suggest a re-design of the role structure in the assignment. Meanwhile, he started performing technical tasks that he did not consider to be in conflict with his original scrum master role.

The decision to engage in hands-on technical work was not only a way to progress while waiting for decisions, it was something Harry did to develop trust among his team members. In his diary, Harry notes:

I have been working with requirements and have familiarized myself with the code we have produced [...] Because the team consists solely of programmers; you get closer to them and their work instead of being an outsider. If my role changes, I will once again be somewhat alienated from the team. However, I hope that I will have stronger support from them from now on because of this.

Thus, Harry returned to performing programming tasks in addition to his scrum master role. He says he wants to learn more about the technical side – about programming and coding. Harry describes that this enabled him to better allocate tasks to his team members, and that gaining more experience with the tasks enhanced the authority of his decisions. Harry also contends that staying close to technology is an important motivator in his job and one of the main reasons he went to engineering school in the first place.

To increase the variation in his work, Harry also took part in a number of internal AE activities during the time for his second assignment. For instance, he assumed customer service responsibilities and worked as an account manager at AE. Harry was also involved in two internal competence development groups at AE, working with AE colleagues on new technology in his free time. Notwithstanding these internal tasks, he was still working on his assignment full time.

During an interview, when discussing support from management, Harry explains that he has had little contact with his AE managers. Most of the contacts were initiated by Harry and addressed issues such as assignment shifts and future assignments:

When I was new as a consultant, I felt I got too little support, but as I got used to it, I realized that it was an advantage. That made it possible for me to make my own decisions - to me it is really perfect to operate on a loose leash. Then, I can manage things myself and have an influence, which is very important to me. If they had given me too much help from the beginning, it would have been good for the short term, but in the long run, I wouldn't have been able to develop as much.

Harry's third assignment was with yet another client. He describes his role in this assignment as "pretty straight forward" software development. After almost a year, he ended this assignment, moved to another city and, therefore, changed to another consulting firm (SC). At the time of our last interview, Harry had been working at SC for approximately 2.5 years and was working on his third assignment for them (sixth assignment in total). In his first assignment for SC, he had, as he calls it, a "pure" software development role. In his second assignment, however, he entered as lead developer for a new system. This project changed after a period of time. As Harry explains it:

I entered as a lead developer for a new system, so I did a pre-study and I realized that wasn't what the client really needed. Together with another consultant from a different consulting firm, we decided to do something completely different: we linked previous existing systems together rather than creating a new one.

Harry reflects on the differences between the two client firms and concludes that because the market is different in this new, larger city, the competition is greater. However, he enjoys this aspect as this makes him more conscientious, so he pushes himself even further to deliver extra quality in his assignments. Harry has become more involved in the new consulting firm, taking part of its activities and the networks CS supplies.

When Harry is asked why he has chosen to continue working as a consultant he says:

I don't get bored. As a regular employee, the curve of new discoveries and new knowledge starts losing steepness after a while. I want to learn new things and I want to contribute more. It is when you look at a problem with fresh eyes that you see most of the problem. When you've been at a place for too long, you begin seeing what everyone else sees.

Harry also reflects on the disadvantages of consulting. He contemplates that there is always a new threshold to pass when entering a new assignment and a new client site. He explains it in the following way:

We are never specialists in the clients' area; they are always the experts. And there is always a start-up period in every assignment. It becomes easier over the years, but it is always there. However, I now see the project's strengths and weaknesses more easily and more quickly.

### **Discussion**

The two narratives illustrate how higher level liminality competence is developed. Notably, there are differences as well as several similarities across them. In Harry's case, liminality competence was attained early in his career when realizing the advantages of

holding a betwixt position. He repeatedly mentions the opportunity to move more freely in his work role through the process of “role sliding”. Moreover, he states that he realized the possibility to engage in various organizational activities to broaden his skills and improve his chances of being involved in interesting projects at an early stage in his career. He thereby developed an awareness and ability to master both technical and social liminality. He applied his networking skills and assumed advisory responsibilities for clients while also helping his consulting colleagues. In his description of the willingness to take on new projects, he also demonstrates a level of comfort in the technical domain of his work.

In the case of John, the higher liminality competence was achieved considerably later in his career. He mentions how he initially focused on the narrow technical parts of his work, which he found ambiguous and challenging. In his first assignment, he struggled with the technical elements of his assignment. He says he spent considerable time trying to figure out what he was supposed to do. In his first four assignments he viewed himself as being “one of the employees”, thereby not differentiating himself from the rest of the people in the client organization. He expresses that it was only in Project Omega that he took on a new kind of role, after having been forced to move around and faced with various project structures, most of which were more or less problematic. In that process, he also seems to have changed his perception of work. In Project Omega, John clearly defined his role as an employee of the consulting firm. In this assignment, John found himself going through a kind of role sliding process. In this assignment, he entered the project and focused primarily on software programming but he soon began restructuring the project and creating new decision-making routines. He assumed a more active role in untangling and dealing with social liminality than he had taken in any of his previous assignments. The conception of work that John expresses in Project Omega is one that resembles “work as knowledge transfer”, while it previously had been one of “assignment handling”.

What do these two narratives tell us? How did John and Harry develop their liminality competence, and how did their conception of liminality of work change over time? To begin with, they show that the development of liminality competence may differ and that a high level of liminality competence implies coping with both technical and social liminality. More importantly, the narratives emphasize the importance of context in the development of liminality competence. Triggering events were important to initiate a switch to a different conception of work and thus, in our analysis, a higher level of competence (Sandberg, 2000). Previous studies have emphasized the importance of triggering events for competence to evolve and for change of perception of work to occur (Mitki *et al.*, 2008). Moreover, as argued by Fuller and Unwin (2003), moving across different contexts (both between different workplaces and between work and formal training) is important to facilitate deeper learning and reflection. Although John, after two or three projects, was confident about his technical skills and had proved his ability to address the technical liminality in his work, it was insufficient to increase his liminality competence. The triggering event was when he was assigned to a project that was explicitly “inside-outside” of the client organization, which emphasized his experience of social liminality. This seems to have implied a new perception of work, compelling him to engage in behavior and actions that he had not been involved with before. John explains that he had acquired the knowledge and skills needed for a higher level of liminality competence. However, he had not applied them in his work until the

context of work, the triggering event, cued the social liminality, which accentuated that he was now an inside-outsider in the client organization.

These findings strengthen the arguments presented in [Dall’Alba and Sandberg \(2006\)](#) as well as those of the interpretative studies on competence at work, i.e. arguments that oppose the traditional, rationalistic approach. The findings indicate that it is not only the development of skills and abilities that explain particular competent behavior, but more so the change in an individual’s perception of work. However, this does not imply that work conceptions are the only determining factor, as certain skill sets and knowledge must be acquired before an individual is able to establish a new conception of work.

Although the two narratives reveal differences, there are also striking similarities among them. We identified a set of processes that were critical for the development of liminality competence over time. Our analysis generated three central processes in developing higher liminality competence:

- (1) *understanding the value of in-betweenness*;
- (2) *embracing the role as inside-outsider*; and
- (3) *translating liminal experience through reflexivity*.

The first process, *understanding the value of in-betweenness*, is highly related to the separation from traditional norms of what employment is and what engineering work should be. From the onset, both John and Harry had positive attitudes about their work as consultants. Although the main differences between them and their fellow project workers in the early phase of their respective careers were more of an administrative nature, such as time reporting in different and dual systems and accessing information from multiple and parallel sources, both John and Harry emphasize that they made a deliberate decision to remain as consultants. They wanted to work as consultants because it gave them better chances of developing their technical skills. The consulting work would also provide them with greater opportunities to learn about new technologies and offer them better ways to stay current. From their perspective, this granted them the opportunity to more easily transition among different interesting projects than what they would have been afforded as “regular” employees. Thus, they actively chose to work, and later to remain, in a liminal position.

After some time, however, they began to reflect more on the transitional character of their work as well as the importance of their in-betweenness. In that respect, they engaged in our second identified process, namely, *embracing the role as inside-outsider*. This process indicates a conscious decision to remain an outsider at the client’s workplace, as being on the margin can entail more opportunities to learn and negotiate responsibilities ([Goh, 2014](#)). For instance, Harry describes how this process commenced already during his first assignment when he realized that he could slide into his role in the client organization, thus moving away from what was stated in his assignment specification to perform other types of work. He also speaks about the ambiguity as enjoyable and challenging, giving him the freedom to increase his learning opportunities even further. In addition, Harry describes how he established contacts with people within the client organization and gradually extended his social and professional network. The purpose seems not to have been to be more closely affiliated

with the client organization but rather to be able to make suggestions and thus influence the preconditions for his assignments. In that work, he also took on the role of an advisor to the client. In contrast, John's story is quite different. In his first project, he focused primarily on programming, sticking closely to the assignment specifications, even though he felt this was tiresome and that he lacked the challenges he was hoping for. However, after having worked on several projects that he thought were "poorly managed", John became increasingly interested in structuring and managing projects. He describes how he began acting more as an advisor and tried to develop a better structure in the client's organization by making use of knowledge acquired in previous assignments. He emphasizes the importance of the transitional character of his work and the role as an "inside-outsider" who can assist the client by presenting novel ideas he had acquired in different organizational contexts. In this process of acknowledging the role as inside-outsider, both Harry and John emphasize the relational character of their work. Instead of talking about the technical tasks, they focus on other elements of their work, such as networking, building relationships, influencing, advising and engaging more heavily in organizational activities in the client organization. In comparison to Barley and Kunda (2004, 2006), one might say that they transitioned from viewing their role as "warm bodies" to that of experts. Important here is the recognition that external consultants can offer something else that may be difficult for internal engineers to develop and that their abilities are not only purely technical but, to a great extent, related to the contextual and social elements of engineering work.

The third process identified in our study is labeled *translating liminal experience through reflexivity*. This process is linked to reflexivity with respect to what happens in mobile project workers' assignments, in their organizations and in the clients' organizations (Borg and Söderlund, 2015). The findings indicate that liminality competence is connected to the ability to reflect on the work situation and to engage in a meta-analysis of the individual's role in the work situation (c.f. Sandberg, 2000). Howard-Grenville *et al.* (2011, p. 2), for instance, argue that liminality invites people "to explore and experiment, and through this, they reflect on current conditions." It seems that when mobile project workers begin embracing their role as inside-outsiders, they also begin reflecting on their work role more broadly. This is a reflexive ability that demonstrates the capacity to alter perspectives on the project and the immediate environment, the entire client organization and the relation between the consulting firm and the client organization (c.f. Turner, 1986). In their journeys toward a higher liminality competence, we observe that John and Harry's liminal experiences and reflections associated with the development of liminality competence have a dual nature, a social as well as a technical liminality, and that there are several linkages between them. We note that John and Harry are engaged in reflexivity with regard to the task and the knowledge necessary for the project's completion (Swift and West, 1998) and that this involves altering and assimilating new perspectives connected to the re-examination of established assumptions (Hibbert *et al.*, 2010). This process involves questioning, reviewing, evaluating and examining assumptions, as well as considering other people's perspectives and creating a state of doxa (Bourdieu, 2013). Indeed, by trying to understand and investigate the problem from an altered perspective, the status quo must be overcome (Swift and West, 1998). Thus, reflexivity can change not only the individual's way of thinking, but also an individual's behaviors.

## Conclusions

This paper focuses on the process of learning to cope with a mobile and ambiguous working life. This research investigates specifically the nature and development of liminality competence and adds to the emerging literature on liminality at work and the development of liminality competence.

This research offers a different view on the previous suggested disadvantages and low levels of loyalty produced in the new capitalism (Sennett, 2006). In other words, the anxiety and ambiguity that are part of work in the new capitalism's preference for short-term labor and serial projects (Fenwick, 2013) are not necessarily negative and detrimental to learning. Instead, supporting Tempest and Starkey's (2004) assertion, this paper suggests that liminality can have a series of positive learning effects and thereby stimulate the expansion of the entire repertoire of learning.

The findings in this paper indicate that the development of high liminality competence is dependent on the individual's ability to actively address both social and technical ambiguities at work, which implies an active use of practices to deal with social as well as technical liminality. The individual's level of liminality competence is leveraged through three processes:

- (1) understanding the value of in-betweenness;
- (2) embracing the role as an inside-outsider; and
- (3) translating the liminal experience through reflexivity.

These processes signify the trajectory of change in the individual's perception of work and, thus, also an increased liminality competence. With increased liminality competence, they recognize the value of mobile project workers as different from regular employees and how they can contribute to and complement regular employees in problem-solving settings by distancing themselves from the regular employees in the client organization (Goh, 2014).

The context, and particularly the change of context, also appears as important for speeding up the three identified processes. Triggering events, such as entering a new type of project, seem to be necessary to produce a change in one's conception of work, which, in turn, drives the individual to apply a different set of attributes when performing the work. This study thereby adds to Sandberg's (2000) and Dall'Alba and Sandberg's (2006) research on competence by providing empirical illustrations of developing perceptions of and competences at work. However, compared to extant research, the present study demonstrates the competences outside the narrow technical confines and the broader skill sets required to work and develop one's competence in the borderland between assignments, projects and organizations.

It is important to further investigate how liminality competence is developed – for instance, the effects of on-the-job training and off-the-job training as well as the consequence that specific training programs have on the way the liminars engage in liminality at work and how they cope with different kinds of project-based work, both with regard to the consulting firm and the client organization. Moreover, liminality competence needs to be compared across contexts to better address its common and divergent features.



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