

How do we get There Together? Making Sense of and Exploring Ecosystem Orchestration as Practice

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Abstract: An ecosystem perspective recognizes how a complex set of independent, yet interdependent actors collaborate to co-create value toward a shared goal. Such ecosystems are often actively facilitated by an 'orchestrator' who, in many cases, is an individual who has been allocated the task of coordinating an emerging or ongoing ecosystem. In this study, we focus on individuals in a third-party organization performing orchestration duties, alongside a team, helping to build and coordinate innovation ecosystems. Previous literature indicates that ecosystem orchestration involves mobilizing, coordinating, and integrating resources (often knowledge) and actors to achieve the ecosystem's goal(s). Nonetheless, it is still unclear *how individuals make sense of ecosystem orchestration as a practice*. Incorporating evidence from interviews, non-participant observations, and archival documents, we conduct a narrative analysis of the sensemaking of individuals performing ecosystem orchestration as a third-party actor. From an instrumental single case, we explore individual and organization level narratives making sense of ecosystems and ecosystem orchestration. We found that some take an embodied meaning of ecosystems, resonating more deeply with the concept, meanwhile others have a more ambiguous interpretation. Through the narrative accounts of our participants, our findings reveal the highly relational and social nature of ecosystem orchestration, complemented by frameworks and models. As a result, we suggest that ecosystem orchestration emerges from a set of intersubjective cognitive, social, and material practices, rather than from any individual capability or traits. First, we contribute to the orchestration literature, providing more nuanced insight into how individuals make sense of this role and how it unfolds from a practice perspective. Second, our study provides a methodological contribution to the literature on ecosystem orchestration by exploring the individual level through narrative inquiry. Third, this study offers practical insights for managers and third-party organizations on the knowledge and skill development that can be supported, particularly for developing ecosystem orchestration services.

Keywords: Innovation ecosystems, Orchestration, Third-party orchestrators, Sensemaking, Practice

1. Introduction

Knowledge and innovation are increasingly needed to help solve complex global challenges, driving the need for organizations to renew and grow collaboratively alongside stakeholders and actors. This has led to the popular adoption of the ecosystem concept, framed as a complex set of independent yet interdependent actors collaborating to co-create value toward a shared goal, to help conceive collaboration in such a dynamic context (Jacobides et al., 2018).

Similarly, to manage increasingly dynamic environments such as innovation ecosystems, often characterized by voluntary contributions from complementors and other stakeholders, the orchestration approach has emerged as an important and relevant role (Dhanaraj & Parkhe, 2006). Orchestration can be seen as a contemporary mode of coordination that is increasingly needed to complement the classic contractual R&D and innovation networks. Most recent definitions remark orchestration as *"a set of activities and roles performed by a hub actor (individual, team, or organization) to coordinate independent network members' interactions within a loosely coupled context"* (Ritala et al., 2023, p. 1143). Significantly, scholars have indicated that this topic is a 'new frontier' to be further investigated and understood as it becomes increasingly relevant for today's R&D issues (Ferrigno et al., 2023). Yet, at present, we do not fully understand how organizations and individuals make sense of these concepts and how it emerges in their practice.

In this study, we address the following question: *How do individuals make sense of ecosystem orchestration as a practice in third-party orchestrator organizations?* In particular, we are interested in exploring the narrative accounts of those involved in this practice to gain deeper understanding of the meaning(s), from their experience, of ecosystem orchestration and how the organizational context shapes it. Deviating from most existing research, we do not concentrate on the actions of the orchestrators (see e.g., Dhanaraj & Parkhe, 2006) or focus so much on the capabilities of orchestrating actors (see e.g. Hurmelinna-Laukkanen & Nätti, 2018). Rather, we build on this knowledge and approach the topic from a narrative inquiry to understand how we can make sense of this phenomena and the practices that encompass it.

We next discuss the literature on sensemaking and orchestrating innovation ecosystems, with an as-practice approach, then introduce our methodology, and present our exploration of making sense of ecosystem orchestration as practice.

2. Conceptual Background

2.1 Sensemaking in Organizations

Sensemaking is a central concept in organization studies, referring to the process through which individuals and groups construct meaning in response to novel, equivocal, or confusing events. The roots of sensemaking date back many years, but it was not until the late 1960s when it became a topic of study (Garfinkel, 1967; Weick, 1969), then really took a hold with the classic text *'Sensemaking in Organizations'* by Karl Weick (1995). This burgeoned empirical research on the topic for it to evolve into a multidisciplinary field that explores how people create order and enable action in complex organizational environments (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

Earlier work adopted a cognitive perspective, focusing on the internal mental processes of individuals, and suggesting that sensemaking is primarily an individual cognitive activity where people notice and interpret cues based on pre-existing mental structures (see Louis 1980; Hill and Levenhagen, 1995). Later perspectives argue that these processes are much more interpersonal and discursive, arguing that sensemaking is a fundamentally social process, constructed through dialogues, narratives, and shared experiences which shape organizational reality (see Weick, 1995; Gephart, 1993; Maitlis, 2005). To understand the latter perspective of sensemaking, it is useful to understand Weick's view of organizations; his ideas are built on the principle that organizations act as sensemaking machines, not as static structures, and that they are messy, complex, dynamic, adaptive, open systems that can shape their environment (not just be shaped by the environment) through specific forms of communication.

Most scholars concur that sensemaking is not a rational process, but an embodied, cognitive and affective process. Weick (1995, pp. 14) explained that *"to engage in sensemaking is to construct, filter, frame, create facticity... and render the subjective into something more tangible"*. From this constructionist perspective, sensemaking is understood to be characterized by retrospectivity (making sense of events after they occur), plausibility (favoring coherent narrative over objective truth), socially constructed (meaning is co-created through interaction), and grounded in identity construction (who we think we are shapes what we notice and how we interpret it) (c.f. Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006).

In a simplified explanation of the process, sensemaking happens through triggers that prompt sensemaking, meaning being constructed through dialogue and narrative, then leading to action which in turn informs future sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Triggers can include crises, identity threats, and planned organizational changes (such as seizing opportunities and shaping new business services). At present, sensemaking theory has generally been studied in silo, other than some connections with e.g. identity theory (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006), yet presents fruitful opportunity to bridge with broader organizational and sociological frameworks, such as practice theory.

2.2 Orchestrating Innovation Ecosystems: Introducing an "As-Practice" Approach

Since the 1990's the business ecosystem concept has emerged to perceive and conduct business collaborations, using ecological metaphors to consider how firms are embedded in their environment and co-evolve over time (Moore, 1993). More recently, scholars have utilized the concept of *innovation ecosystem* to discuss a variety of interdependent and collective groups of individuals and organizations that aim to reach shared innovation-related goals (e.g., Ritala & Almpantopoulou, 2017). In this study, we use the innovation ecosystem concept to describe loosely coupled collectives of organizations and individuals who are bound together via joint goals and project contexts, and who are orchestrated by a third-party actor (in this study, our case organization).

This study focuses on *ecosystem* orchestration, but we draw specifically from the better-established network orchestration literature where ecosystems are often and increasingly the context (e.g. Zucchella and Previtali, 2018; Zaoual and Lecocq, 2018; see also Wang and He, 2024). In management and organization studies, some fields have taken pivoted to praxis theoretical perspectives, with what is known as an "as-practice" approach; originating with strategy-as-practice and extending to other fields such as entrepreneurship, marketing, and most recently leadership (see Iszatt-White, 2011; Raelin, 2016). The commonalities of this approach, in their respective fields, are an interest in an in-depth analysis of what actually takes place (i.e. the 'sayings' and 'doings') rather than focus on an entity or person exhibiting traits and behaviors. Despite some of the original

works on orchestration focusing on actions (Dhanaraj & Parkhe, 2006) and being defined as “a set of activities...” (Ritala et al., 2023), orchestration rarely adopts an as-practice perspective and tends to focus on the orchestrating entity or role.

For instance, the orchestration literature has many ways to describe ‘orchestrators’, being carried out by many different entities (e.g. large corporations, universities, start-ups, etc). Few studies explore third-party actors as orchestrators (c.f. Zacharia et al., 2011; Pinnington et al., 2021). A third-party orchestrator is an external entity that facilitates and coordinates collaboration and integration among multiple independent parties, without being directly involved in the value exchange between them, and therefore they act as a neutral role (Pinnington et al., 2021).

We conduct our study through this “neutral actor” to gain a better understanding of how such entities make sense of ecosystem orchestration. However, we do not focus on the entity itself but rather the ‘sayings’ and meanings individuals attach to this work in their organizational context. Through these narratives, we explore the different dimensions of sensemaking as well as concurrent practices. Next, we explain our methodological choices.

3. Method

3.1 Research Strategy and Case Selection

We started with an instrumental single case study design in mind (Stake, 1995). At the time, we felt that Spinverse as a case could allow us to gain a richer understanding of ecosystem orchestration as a practice. Initially, the aim was to get a better understanding of how the concept of ecosystems and how to orchestrate them worked in practice, how Spinverse as an organization offer this as a service, and how this came to be. Our focus on individuals, orchestration as practice, and sensemaking were not predefined but occurred during our in-situ immersion and interactions with individuals at Spinverse and later when examining the data in more detail (see 3.3, 3.4 for more details on data collection and analysis). In other words, our research design developed gradually (Stake, 1981).

We realized that orchestration is not simply something organizations at the aggregate do, but it is an activity individuals and teams perform on behalf of their organization (cf. Grimm and Reinecke, 2024). At this stage, we felt that focusing on individuals was necessary to understand the nuances of ecosystem orchestration practice. Therefore, we redesigned our study as a narrative inquiry and reformulated our research question. Narrative methodology allowed us to take a closer look into the individuals stories, and their sensemaking (Riessman, 1993, 2008; Brown et al., 2008), and focus on what it means to conduct ecosystem orchestration. Moreover, as-practice scholars endorse approaches such as narrative inquiry to capture concurrent social practices in the context at play (Raelin, 2020).

3.2 The Organization in Brief

Spinverse is a Nordic innovation consultancy, headquartered in Espoo (Finland), that helps customers to grow and solve global challenges through ecosystem projects. Spinverse has extensive experience in EU funding instruments and company-led innovation ecosystem projects to help European innovators reach their growth and sustainability targets. Their core services include exploring opportunities for publicly fundable innovation and ecosystems, planning and applying for public and private funding for ecosystem projects, and managing complex innovation projects, ecosystem relationships, and communication.

3.3 Data Collection

Our data was collected from unique access to the study organization, through a 10-week secondment at the Spinverse headquarters, conducted by the first author between February and May 2023. Prior to the secondment, a contextual understanding was gained through reading publicly available materials by or about Spinverse. Semi-structured exploratory interviews with key informants (n=21) were conducted, alongside observations at the workplace. The first author took on the role of observer and enquirer, where the presence and intentions were known and explained to participants. Furthermore, we were given access to internal and archival materials. See Table 1 below for description of the data.

Table 1: Description of data collected

Data items	Description of the data	Purpose
21 interviews (main data)	Transcription of semi-structured exploratory interviews with 21 informants from across the organization (including Ecosystem Leader, Director, Vice President, Team Leader, Analyst, Consultant) lasting between 41 minutes and 1 hour 9 minutes with an average of 49 minutes. Labelled I-1 to I-21 from anonymity purposes.	In-depth understanding of individual narratives.
Archival public materials	Spinverse website: https://spinverse.com/ White papers: https://spinverse.com/insights/?category=white-papers#insights-grid Ecosystem Handbook (co-authored by Spinverse CEO, Ecosystem Leader, and external colleagues): Kola, S., Koivukoski, U., Koponen, L., & Heino, M. (2020). <i>Ecosystem Handbook: The ART of Leading and Creating IMPACT</i> . Alma Insights. https://ecosystemhandbook.com/the-book/ Book Chapter (authored by Spinverse Ecosystem Leader): Launonen, P. (2015). 'Determinants for Orchestrating Open Innovation Networks'. In Lappalainen, P., Markkula, M., & Kune, H (Eds). <i>Orchestrating Regional Innovation Ecosystems – Espoo Innovation Garden</i> . Finland: Aalto University, pp.199-208.	Enriched understanding of the context and organizational narrative, supporting analysis of the interview data.
Internal materials	Given access to organizational chart (png) and workshop templates (ppt, n=6) for the ecosystem building sessions they run with clients.	Enriched interview data.
Observations	33 pages of notes and reflections from the office space, impromptu conversations at the office, and weekly company-wide 'powwow' (meetings) - stored in a word document, 11 pt font single-spaced.	Complemented sensemaking of the organization and documented study reflections.

3.4 Data Analysis

Our analytical approach applied a thematic narrative analysis (Reissman, 2004) which allowed us to analyze the research participants' different narrative accounts of the phenomenon under study and compare thematic similarities and differences. Following the guidelines of Reissman (2004), we selected purposeful narratives, keeping stories intact rather than fragmenting into categories or codes, looking for recurring ideas, experiences, or values emerging from data. Our unit of analysis focuses on the individual, embedded within the context and case.

The preliminary analysis began with re-familiarizing with the data i.e. revisiting field notes, reading interview transcripts, and reading secondary materials. When revisiting the data, the initial aim was to understand how the organization conducts ecosystem orchestration as a service, and what this means in and for the organization. We realized to understand this practice, we needed to understand what ecosystems mean to individuals and they made sense of orchestration as an activity.

Detailed analysis of the interviews was conducted to draw out the narratives being told by individuals. Through these narratives we were able to gain a deeper understanding as to the framing of the organization, and how the individuals internalized this framing and made sense of it. This was discussed with both authors and peers to clarify our findings and observations. Since the second author is a Spinverse employee, this supported our observations with detailed insight and feedback on interpretations. To ensure a neutral perspective on the analysis, the second author did not have access to the data, only the interpreted findings were discussed, acting as a consultant to the findings rather than a direct participant in the analysis process. When recognizing organizational references in the narratives we also referred to the archival and secondary materials to further enrich our understanding and insights.

In the Findings, we present insights using illustrative excerpts and direct quotes maintaining richness and avoiding reducing to bullet points; congruent with narrative inquiry and practice approaches, staying grounded to the participants telling of their experiences embedded in their context and meanings (Reissman, 2004; Raelin, 2020).

4. Findings

The findings of this study will be presented in the following sections: *Section 4.1* demonstrates a single narrative account of how Spinverse as an organization has evolved alongside the business environment it is situated. This account is constructed by the authors, from multiple ‘tellings’ of the story, through interviews and archival public materials (see Table 1) with any direct quotations cited. Then, *Section 4.2* presents the parallel narratives that emerged during the analysis of the interviews. To preserve the anonymity of participants, we constructed 2 narrative accounts of embodied vs. ambiguous meanings to represent thematically the sensemaking of individuals, providing direct quotations and paraphrasing with citations where appropriate. We would like to point out that these are representative and not substantive, meaning that the sensemaking processes are much more nuanced, yet we found some overarching similarities to induce these parallels and glean understanding. Finally, in *Section 4.3*, we present the narratives that emerged as recurring ideas core to carrying out ecosystem orchestration from their perspectives.

4.1 Prologue – The Evolution of the Ecosystems Era

Beginning with a visionary founder, Spinverse was set up on the premise to bring together business and research; technology developed in research organizations and universities should see the light of day and become products. In 2004, commercialization was all the buzz. The bravado sounded great and looked achievable on paper, but the reality was a mess of bottlenecks and no such structures to implement this, so Spinverse wanted to create safer spaces and facilitate commercialization. This proved rather challenging.

“They come from different organizations ... They may be not so, I would say, direct or intimate ... you don’t know the external partners, ecosystem companies, and persons so well. So there is a bit of distance there.” [I-20]

Corporate accelerators, incubators, and the like were very popular, alas efforts went no further than these in attempts to commercialize research and technology. Meanwhile, the open innovation concept was gaining traction, gripping the interest of Spinverse. This initiated a moment when Spinverse shifted from technology commercialization to building spaces and platforms for corporates, startups, and research organizations to connect as a starting point and let them talk. Along with the support of national structures, these diverse actors could be brought to the same table. The next challenge was getting them to see eye to eye, first - additionally challenging via online platforms.

“How do you make sure the people participate? How do you make sure you get that activity going for everybody? It’s quite stressful for the person who runs it over Teams to try to activate them because you can’t see them. You can’t see 15 people at once in the screen.” [I-13]

With hidden agendas aloof, bringing these actors together can become an uncomfortable environment for all parties involved. One wants ownership, the other wants intellectual property rights, another wants money, and someone else is just trying to figure out what is going on. This is when Spinverse’s EU business begins.

“When you bring the European Commission into equation, they become a referee, because then no one is supposed to own anything or steal anything from anyone and everyone is supposed to openly share the results of their work and research and whatnot and commercialize it together.” [I-8]

Bringing these events together is what led Spinverse to ecosystems thinking; a desire to create spaces for collaboration, open innovation, and having the public funder as referee. This is how it picked up in Finland around 10 years ago, and ecosystems have become a regular part of business collaboration and innovation.

4.2 Making Sense of Ecosystems: Embodied vs. Ambiguous Meanings

During interviews, participants were prompted to reflect on what ecosystems mean to them, and in relation to their work. It emerged that there were differing levels of sensemaking, and thus different meanings, which is to be expected. Given the commitment from Spinverse dedicating business to this concept, as well as general external acceptance in Finland, it was interesting to learn the difference in experience and values narrating the sensemaking.

Embodied meaning comes from the resonance people feel with the ecosystems concept. Essentially, whether they feel it expresses what their work involves and connect deeply with this thinking. Some felt that ecosystems have been a way of working, even before becoming popularized, and the concept gave a name to this work. When reflecting on their work history and meaning of ecosystems, I-9 states *“I think that I’ve been always working in an ecosystem model or building or leading smaller or bigger ecosystems in a way.”* Through previous

experience people understand that purpose is the underlying premise bringing an ecosystem together, there needs to be a bottom-up aspiration to get commitment and motivation. Through their own values, they see that ecosystems can create a sense of belonging and connection which can be a driving force for collaboration beyond traditional means. For example, the ecosystem perspective has really consolidated for I-8 *“that’s how we see it now, that’s what we see now. And now everyone has an ecosystem around them.”*

Ambiguous meaning refers to those that do not feel so connected with ecosystems concept, for them the meaning is simply that – a concept. Some felt ecosystems are a bit too complex to work with day-to-day, so prefer to break down the concept through the frame of projects instead – a concept much more familiar and embedded in day-to-day business life. The sensemaking process could still be evolving, as I-5 shares *“I did think about it two or three weeks ago, because I was thinking is there a difference between project consortiums and ecosystems, and it was clear that the ecosystem is kind of bigger. It’s a sort of disparate group of different types of organisations, but with similar interests. And then, possibly from that group comes a project which is a subset of those organisations together focused on certain topics for a period of time. I was just trying to figure that out a little bit.”* They acknowledge the paradox that they work in ecosystems regardless but struggle paradigmatically to find this a functional concept without working through existing or more traditional boundaries (such as project management). I-5 further indicates the collective sensemaking is still processing *“when I think of ecosystems, I always think of [colleague name], and he’s a sort of the role model in my mind.”*

In-between these meanings there are multiple interpretations of ecosystems, and perhaps people even use different terms altogether with the same meanings. I-10 reflects *“...people can call things whatever they want, but if they want to really do something that is useful, to me ecosystems means intensive collaboration networks with a common target. So, there should be a purpose.”* The embodied vs. ambiguous meanings highlight the overarching parallel narratives being told, yet there is suggestion of a deeper intersubjectivity that allows people working with this label to engage with practices, despite the constellation of meanings and range of relation with the concept.

4.3 Making Sense of Ecosystem Orchestration

The interviewed individuals were active participants enabling us to see their subjective frames – them making sense of what ecosystem orchestration was about. While we asked them directly what ecosystems meant to them, we did not directly use the term ‘orchestration’ and instead focused on asking questions about the being and doing of their work. By first considering the individual interview accounts as separate narratives and then collectively as a broader narrative, we observed that while individual characteristics, values, and approaches co-exist and create some divergence, their overall ideas converged in themes:

Leading without authority, or without traditional hierarchical authority, is realized as a key skill to their practice. For example, I-20 explains *“I think it’s important for the project manager to have facilitation skills, how do you interact with people, how you lead without authority.”* It is reflected that this practice is different to conventional leading or managing, requiring to be more creative even: *“That you cannot say do this, because you’re not in the hierarchical position. And that’s why it is more interesting, because you don’t lead by authority, but rather by perhaps selling, negotiating.”* (I-15).

Another example, **facilitating trust-building**, is known to be important in the beginning of collaborative relationships, and Spinverse consultants understand this well. Reflecting on their approach to bringing partners together, I-15 acknowledges *“I would say, and have been commented on, to be very outward going, positive, encouraging, so try to create the trust, good will among people and in the meetings. At least take time to try to be an energetic person. So try to get people engaged and in speed.”* It is evident to them that their personal conduct and the social conditions they help to create has an influence on how the ecosystem might play out. Echoing this relational importance, I-13 reiterates this narration but also connects it to being embedded in a model, not just a person *“You have to go with that personal relationship building and trust. It is about leading people, in a sense. When you are building those. It’s very much a people thing. Give room, try to treat people and companies as equals. We do that in the operative model.”*

Spinverse’s sensemaking of ecosystem orchestration (as a service) has led them to a **team-based configuration**: where there are divergences in practices or approaches of individuals, they lean into this by using team configuration and role-switching complementarities to build the practice. As highlighted by I-9 *“For some people it is very much systematic and maybe Excel-oriented and things like that, but I run things more based on my own feeling and intuition”*. The overall narration of Spinverse tells us that they have understood ecosystems orchestration to be comprised of highly relational and social practices, while leveraging this through developed

frameworks and models. To create order and action from this, their solution is to configure teams to conduct these practices reflexively.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Through narrative inquiry our study provides a nuanced understanding of what it means to do ‘ecosystem orchestration’. Through understanding how individuals make sense of ecosystem orchestration, we were able to make sense of ecosystem orchestration happening as concurrent cognitive, social, and material practices in their unique contexts.

First, the advent of open innovation and innovation ecosystems emerging in the Finnish and EU business context did not necessarily trigger sensemaking; the discrepancy between the adoption of the terminology in innovation policy and funding (at national and international level) and Spinverse’s mission to bring together science and business became great enough for the organization to figure out what this meant and whether they should develop their business toward such a concept. This discrepancy is subjective and is known to be influenced by its impact on professional and organizational identity (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006).

Second, it has been understood that group norms or the organizational culture may mitigate against sensemaking being triggered, even when discrepant cues substantially disrupt identity or goals (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Our study reveals parallel narratives, and acknowledges the in-between, of how individuals interpret embodied and/either/or ambiguous meanings of ecosystems. While some deeply resonate with the terminology and way of work, for others it is more practical to work with other ideas under the guise of ecosystems, yet both meanings work together no matter their interpretations. This reflects arguments about leadership-as-practice, being a practice in everyday life rather than existing in the behaviors of individuals (Raelin, 2020).

Third, from the retrospective sensemaking of ecosystems more generally, individuals come to reflect on creating meanings of ecosystem orchestration (as per Weick, 1995). Here, we learn key ideas involved: leading without authority, facilitating trust-building, and having a team-based configuration, which are common in the orchestration literature (e.g. Dhanaraj & Parkhe, 2006; Autio, 2022). Framing ecosystem orchestration as practice, as we propose, draws attention to the cognitive (thinking who you are and your position), social (building and facilitating relationships), and material (working with frameworks, operating models) processes involved in this activity.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

Our contribution to the literature on *innovation ecosystem orchestration* is twofold. First, we gain a richer insight into what ecosystem orchestration is and how it happens, through individual and organizational sensemaking. As with the practice movement in leadership (e.g. Iszatt-White, 2011; Raelin, 2016), we have learnt that despite the similarities and differences in the characteristics or approaches to orchestration, and different levels of sensemaking, it has become clearer that it is the concurrent cognitive, social, and material practices embodying ecosystem orchestration rather than any individual thinking or doing. While the themes presented are not new to orchestration literature, this research provides a new light to our understanding of ecosystem orchestration, typically studied from the perspectives of roles, actions, types, and capabilities (see Dhanaraj & Parkhe, 2006; Hurmelinna-Laukkanen & Nätti, 2018).

Second, we make a methodological contribution. Past research on ecosystem orchestration has focused mostly on the organizational levels of analysis (Autio, 2022). We add to the field by studying the individuals’ sensemaking narratives (e.g. Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005; Brown et al., 2008). By bringing the individual perspective and narrative approach, we focus on perceptions and experiences and thus provide a novel way of seeing and understanding what ecosystem orchestration means.

5.2 Practical Implications

The findings have implications for individuals, teams, and organizations conducting orchestration. Given the two-fold sensemaking, the abilities to orchestrate innovation ecosystems and their innovation projects necessitate experience, skills to master the practice, and relational as well as social capital.

Individuals need to understand and grow into roles of orchestrating teams, through material, relational, and social practices. The organization can support this knowledge and skill development as well as shared growth and sensemaking between ambiguous and embodied meanings via e.g. providing different roles in the projects

and ecosystems, arranging training in the core skills (like facilitation, leadership, negotiation, and organizational selling) and providing mentoring and opportunities for on-the-job learning. Organizations can recognize, develop, and leverage existing frameworks and models for orchestration and promote such practices in their ecosystems. Importantly, though the role of a third-party orchestrator is often defined contractually, the position needs also to be earned, i.e. trust built via practices with the ecosystem, beyond one's organization.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

As with any exploratory qualitative research, this study has some inherent limitations related to generalizability. A longitudinal study could provide deeper insights as to how the sensemaking of this practice takes place over time, as well as more insight into how the organization supports individuals in this. Furthermore, since we focus on the perceptions of how individuals see their work, we have no comparison as to what their actual work is. Hence, further empirical studies observing ecosystem orchestration in practice could elucidate new insights, possibly with observation of external actors in the social practices. Finally, this paper has adopted a practice theory lens in the context of ecosystem orchestration, which may provide further interesting research avenues that this research has only begun to discuss i.e. deeper investigation of the cognitive, social, material, and even embodied practices.

6. Ethics and AI Declaration

Ethical clearance was not required for the research. All participants gave recorded informed consent to participate in the study. With regards to AI use, Copilot was used in the early stages of this study to support ideation of research framing and paper titles. These were ultimately iterated and improved with co-author discussion and deeper consultation of the literature and data, with the current title and research framing coming from the authors. For spelling and grammar purposes, Grammarly integration is used on the Word document, with any suggestions from the tool being checked and implemented manually by the author.

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