

## **From art to project: diffusing social innovation through blurring professional identities and field boundaries**

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In Belgium in the late nineties, a small mutual nonprofit organization named Smart developed a new employment scheme designed to provide a better income security to member artists. Smart plays an intermediary role between members performing an artistic activity and their clients or principals. In a bit more than ten years, Smart has largely expanded and has now more than 50.000 members. Throughout the years, Smart has broadened the scope of its audience and now targets all the “creative professionals” whose activity is characterized by intermittent and project-based work.

Our paper describes the transformation of this local innovative scheme into a global (i.e. at the national, then European, level) social innovation. This scheme relies on a new organizational form (Miles and Snow 1986; Romanelli 1991; Daft and Lewin 1993; Pettigrew, Whittington et al. 2003) enacting a triangular employment relationship (Davidov 2004; Regalia 2006; Havard, Rorive et al. 2009). It is widely accepted that new organizational forms are manifestations of institutional logics (Greenwood, Diaz et al. 2010), and the question of their creation in relation to these institutional logics is now gaining a growing attention (Rao, Morrill et al. 2000; Tracey, Phillips et al. 2011). However, the opposite question, i.e. how the development of new organizational forms participate in shaping institutional logics, has received comparatively little attention from institutional researchers.

On the basis of the empirical data provided by the Smart case, this paper provides two theoretical contributions to the study of institutionalization processes of social innovation. While most literature on institutional work examines the diffusion processes within a single and clearly defined field, we argue, on the basis of the Smart case study, that such institutionalization can happen through a diffusion work across (sub)field boundaries.

The first particular interest of the Smart case is to demonstrate how the diffusion of a locally experienced innovation (in this case a new employment scheme for artists) to a broader arena has involved theorization through deliberate blurring. Such blurring work has applied to (1) the very definition of the professional identities targeted by the innovation, from “artistic” to “creative” and now “project-based” work; and, hence, (2) the subfield borders around the social innovation, from the particular subfield in which it was experimented (cultural sector) to a much broader array of fields in which project-based employment can apply. This case thus broadens our understanding of institutionalization processes across professional identities and field boundaries.

Such cross-border diffusion is examined, in a second theoretical contribution, as an indicator of the “irreversibility” of the social innovation. In other words, the new rules and practices are theorized at a macro-level (project-based employment) in order to simultaneously apply to a variety of subfields while escaping power contingencies (Levy and Scully 2007) of each particular subfield.

## **Methodology**

Our contribution is based on an indepth case study of the Belgian nonprofit organization named Smart, carried out in the framework of a multidisciplinary research project about Flexicurity (Wilthagen and Tros 2004), or how to secure individual transitions on the labour market.

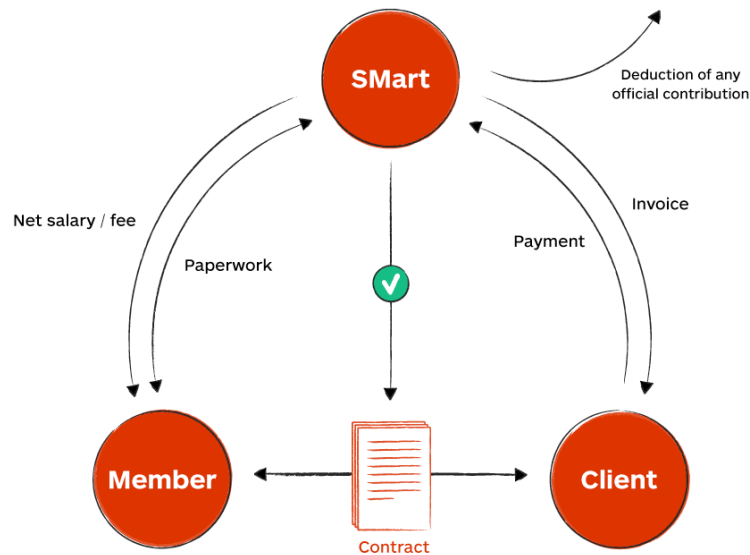
As far as data collection is concerned, we carried out, between August and December 2012, 19 semistructured interviews with key informants, including 7 internal stakeholders (1 founder, 5 managers, 1 member of the research department) and 10 external stakeholders such as members (2 artists and 2 creative professionals), clients (1 theatre producer), worker union representatives (2), “competitors (1 interview with 2 employees of the temporary work federation), politicians (1 interview with 2 of them) and public authorities (1 member of the National Employment Office). The interviewed focused on the history of Smart, the services offered to members, and the relationships of Smart with members and external stakeholders All interviews were transcribed.

In addition, we had access to a range of internal documents, notably the numerous reports and publications produced by the research department of the organization. We collected also all position papers written by Smart with the aim of disseminating its vision and arguments about securing the careers of creative professionals.

The data analysis consisted in several stages, first of which consisted in writing the narrative of the creation and development of Smart. This case study was presented to key members from Smart and collectively validated. We structured then the set of data through a process of open coding. In a third step, we gathered the first-order categories in second-order conceptual issues (Strauss and Corbin 1990). This analytical process was iterative and connected to existing literature. We present the data structure in the paper, consistently organized with our theoretical dimensions, which will be illustrated by selected quotes supporting our findings.

## **The Smart case study**

In the nineties, the Belgian creative professionals struggled with the administrative complexity underlying the “statut d’artiste” (artist status), which was (and still is) the only legal scheme allowing them to keep their entitlement to the unemployment benefit during the creation work processes. In 1998, a band manager and an engineer coming from the energy industry teamed up with the aim of providing a practical answer to these artists and creative professionals. They created Smart, a small mutual nonprofit organization acting as an intermediary appointed to manage the contract concluded by the artists and the ordering parties or clients. As shown in the scheme below, Smart is in charge of contracting with the parties and invoicing the client. Thanks to the mutual guarantee fund, Smart is able to pay the artist’s wage, regardless of whether the client has paid the invoice. Beyond this service, Smart’s mission is to protect its members and to defend their interests while securing the surrounding legal framework.



From the outset, the membership of the mutual organization grew up at a very fast pace, including a large number of so-called « creative professionals » who were way off the artistic industry (teachers, beauticians, translators, masseurs, craftsmen, etc.) but were also concerned by intermittency and project-based activity.

Due to this growth, Smart became more visible and the tolerance that they enjoyed from the public authorities came to an end. This was mainly due to the pressures of other actors such as worker unions and temporary work industry who did not view the development of Smart in a positive way. The unions were afraid of a standardisation of such triangular employment schemes. The temporary work agencies federation considered the Smart system as unfair competition.

Facing these pressures and the strengthened controls from the authorities, Smart redefined its target, which now includes all creative professionals from all sectors, and boasts that its mission is to provide secured solutions to all workers concerned with project-based activity. Smart restructured its activities in order to clarify the nature of services provided, and set up an entity presented as “the association of creative professionals” (APMC – Association professionnelle des métiers de la création) and dedicated to the defence of its members’ interests. Smart also mocked the temporary work industry while creating its own temporary work agency, cynically named “The Interim Palace”.

### Preliminary analysis

The Smart case shows a diffusion strategy based on a blurring work of both professional identities targeted by the innovation and cultural subfield borders, in order to broaden the relevance of the innovative scheme at the level of labour market field as a best practice to secure project-based employment.

At the start, the innovation was designed for the subfield of the culture industry and was experimented in this subfield only. The scheme was presented as an alternative solution designed by artists for artists, with a philosophical foundation closely linked to the values of the culture sector. In order to increase its legitimacy among the artists, the

entrepreneurial organization positioned itself as a social economy initiative, and was even awarded a prize by the social economy sector. The initial project was, in the short term, to provide a concrete answer to urgent needs of artists. Then, once tested, improved and legitimated in the culture industry, the innovative scheme was offered to an enlarged group of “creative professionals”, but still using the welfare tools reserved for artists. The common feature of all Smart members was the fact that they were all victims of the flexibility required on the labour market. They were all concerned by project-based work.

The theorization progressed step by step: the arguments evolved from (1) “we provide a solution for artists” to (2) “we provide a solution for all creative professionals” and ultimately (3) “we provide a solution for all individuals working on a project basis”. The notion of “creative professionals” was redefined and formalized in the social mission of the organization, whose objective was henceforth the defence of the creative professionals. They lobbied with all stakeholders concerned to legitimate this new identity. In this way, the organization grew out of the cultural subfield and became relevant for all the creative professionals in other subfields. This explains the dramatic rise in membership. The next and current step was to link the notion of “creative professionals” with the feature “project-based work”. This theorization increased the relevancy of the innovation carried out by Smart in all subfields concerned with such employment practices. The latter professionals, operating in all sectors characterized by intermittent activity, are actually very numerous (education, consulting, translation, engineering, IT, market gardeners, etc.).

The redefined notions of “creative” and then “project-based work” can be seen as boundary objects (ref) capable of creating interaction between subfields which previously appeared as distinct. From the starting point of the cultural subfield, the innovative scheme has been abstracted from its specific context and does not rely anymore on specific artistic activities or on the social economy context. It has been established as a scheme opened to every insecure worker and offered by a service organization (and not anymore a social economy organization). The project is now to legitimate, at the macro level of the labour market field, a new employment scheme based on intermediary structures.

The behaviour of other actors on the labour market reveals the progress of the institutionalization degree of the Smart scheme. The most significant is the Belgian federation of temporary work agencies, which is, as Smart does, playing an intermediary role on the labour market. After years of lobbying with the aim of prohibiting the scheme set up by Smart, the Federation is now planning to advise all its members to use the same scheme, regardless of the potentially serious consequences for the welfare system in Belgium. We interpret this transformation of strategies and rules in the field of temporary work as an evident indicator of the irreversibility of the social innovation.

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