

Intrapreneurship: outside the project box and into the unknown

Anna Feldmann and Frank Teuteberg

In May 2017, Fiducia & GAD IT AG, an IT service provider in the banking sector, published a call on its intranet: “Speedboat seeks Crew.” The aim was to create an intrapreneurship program that would combine the advantages of a large company with the speed of start-ups. From then on, the IT service provider is called “tanker” and the agile working method of a start-up is called “speedboat.” Interested employees were invited to apply for participation in this one-year intrapreneurship program. From among the applicants, three teams with eight-to-nine members each were formed. The employees of the Fiducia & GAD responded very differently to the call. Some welcomed the fact that the company was breaking new ground and adopting new problem-solving concepts while others were rather skeptical. And of course the question arose what the difference was between a traditional project and intrapreneurship. However, as this question requires comprehensive consideration and also some theoretical definitions, our study aims to shed light on the topic and highlight the differences of project and intrapreneurship.

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In the literature, the word “intrapreneurship” was established as a blend of “intra-corporate” and “entrepreneurship.” The concept of “intrapreneurship” is about employees being able to independently develop new ideas. To do this, a company provides conditions that enable and promote intrapreneurship. In this way, the benefits of large companies should be linked to those of entrepreneurs (especially the speed of implementation of ideas).

Although an intrapreneurship program can be compared to a traditional project, there are significant differences. While the organization itself is the driving force behind projects, in traditional entrepreneurship, this role is held by individuals. However, as this distinction is far from sufficient, we will take a deeper look at the differences in this article. And even though the term intrapreneurship has existed for 34 years, there is still no clear distinction from a traditional project. This is what drives us to take up this topic.

Therefore, we first examine related management concepts and discuss similarities and differences of the two concepts. We then examine the intrapreneurship program of Fiducia & GAD IT AG by means of a case study to establish a comprehensible practical relevance. Subsequently, we develop an explanatory model based on 12 qualitative interviews with intrapreneurs to illustrate the differences and similarities between traditional projects and intrapreneurship.

Intrapreneurship in relation to other management concepts

In 1985, Gifford Pinchot coined the term “intrapreneur” in his book *Intrapreneuring. Why You Don't Have to Leave the Corporation to Become an Entrepreneur* after already having reported on the concept in his paper *Intra-Corporate Entrepreneurship* in 1978 (Pinchot, 1985). Intrapreneurs are employees who act as if they were entrepreneurs within the companies they

“The biggest difference between organizational innovation and intrapreneurship is that intrapreneurship also deals with creating new ventures, which in turn is not the case with organizational innovation.”

work for (Antoncic and Hisrich, 2003). They can be found in established companies that have the necessary framework conditions and corporate value systems to support the work of intrapreneurs (Kuckertz, 2017). While there is currently no universal definition of the term intrapreneurship, one working definition is: “the ability of employees/volunteers to create new ideas and be self-independent” (El Ebrashi, 2018). Intrapreneurship is characterized by a multidimensional structure; the dimensions of risk-taking, innovativeness and proactivity are often part of the concept as used in the literature (Antoncic and Hisrich, 2003). Pinchot (2017) defines the role of the intrapreneur in four sentences:

1. Intrapreneurs are employees who do for corporate innovation what an entrepreneur does for his or her start-up[. . .].
2. Intrapreneurs are the dreamers that do[. . .].
3. Intrapreneurs are self-appointed general managers of a new idea[. . .].
4. Intrapreneurs are drivers of change to make business a force for good.

According to the literature, intrapreneurship lies at the intersection between innovation management in the organizational context and the entrepreneurship approach, which is equally concerned with innovative work (Stevenson and Jarillo, 1990). In companies, it is usually the organization itself that drives its (innovation management) projects, whereas in entrepreneurship endeavors, the actions toward innovation management are advanced by the entrepreneurs.

Antoncic and Hisrich (2003) distinguish intrapreneurship from the management concept of organizational learning and organizational innovation. Although organizational learning and intrapreneurship are interrelated concepts, they can be clearly distinguished from each other (Haase et al., 2015). While organizational learning is a dynamic process that supports the development and expansion of knowledge bases within an organization (Haase et al., 2015), intrapreneurship focuses on the uncertain and aims at creating something new. Thus, it is the starting point of the two approaches that differ (Antoncic and Hisrich, 2003). Organizational learning promotes intrapreneurship, because it improves knowledge sharing but also focuses on transparent communication (Haase et al., 2015).

Organizational innovations, as the name suggests, refer to new practices in organizational environments, such as management, business strategies or marketing (Battisti and Stoneman, 2010). Thereby, intrapreneurship enables a faster implementation of innovations (Pinchot, 1985). Recent literature describes intrapreneurial activities as a competitive advantage and important driver of innovation (Marques et al., 2018). Thus, the concepts of innovation and organizational innovation are closely linked and focus on creating something new (Antoncic and Hisrich, 2003). The biggest difference between organizational innovation and intrapreneurship is that intrapreneurship also deals with creating new ventures, which in turn is not the case with organizational innovation.

Projects in relation to other concepts

The term “project” is used in many different ways. Consequently, the respective definitions are versatile and differ significantly, depending on who defines “project”. Since the 20th

century at the latest, the term has been used more frequently. But which project is justifiably called “project?” In the following there are some approaches to definitions from the literature.

For instance, [Jakoby \(2015\)](#) distinguishes the different concepts of a project by delimiting its *task*, *problem* and *problem-solving process* ([Table I](#)). According to Jakoby, a task is characterized by a start and a target state ([Jakoby, 2015](#)). If there is an obstacle between the two states, the task becomes a problem. The problem-solving process encompasses multiple operations that are mutually dependent. A variety of definitions is given by official standardization bodies (e.g. ISO, EN, DIN, ANSI), governmental institutions (e.g. OCG in the UK) and globally recognized project management standards (e.g. PMI, PRINCE2, IPMA). The ISO 21500:2012(E) provides the following definition: “A project consists of a unique set of processes consisting of coordinated and controlled activities, with start and end dates, performed to achieve project activities.”

However, not only the distinction among *task*, *problem*, *problem-solving process* and *project* is relevant for the correct conceptual definition, but the classification implies the characteristics of a project. According to our estimation, the majority of projects are launched in a corporate context. And despite the fact that the number of cross-company projects is steadily increasing, we opt for a simplified presentation in our model. The framework conditions that either promote or inhibit a project are determined by the company ([Kuckertz, 2017](#)). The project goals to be achieved by means of the project activities (scope and tasks) are defined by the client ([Westerveld, 2003](#)). The results achieved in this way then correspond at best to the previously defined project objectives. In the literature, this is often referred to as the golden triangle of project goals (budget, schedule, quality) ([Westerveld, 2003](#)). The start and end of the project are defined by the project plan ([Ahlemann, 2009](#)). The project team consists of company employees where each is able to assume one or more specific roles within the project. In addition, the project is characterized by its resource limitations, such as limited time or budget ([Jakoby, 2015](#)).

There are two process models that can be differentiated: the traditional and the agile. In a traditional project, costs and schedule are estimated ([Leffingwell, 2010](#)). In an agile project, however, the costs and timeframe are determined and the functions are estimated initially and adjusted in the course of the project. [Leffingwell \(2010\)](#) depicts these differences in a triangle model.

The fact that, despite their similarity and the various definition approaches, there is still no clear demarcation between intrapreneurship and traditional projects motivates us to further delve into the issue.

Methodical approach

After a comprehensive literature review, we conducted interviews as part of a case study, using findings from existing scientific contributions. Although there are no contributions that

Table I Differences between task, problem, problem-solving process, and project

Criteria	Task	Problem	Problem-solving process	Project
Clear targets	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Uniqueness		Yes	Yes	Yes
Difficulty		Yes	Yes	Yes
Process character			Yes	Yes
Termination				Yes
Team building				Yes
Resource limitation				Yes

Source: Translated; based on [Jakoby \(2015\)](#)

specifically highlight the differences between projects and intrapreneurship programs, we used existing studies on the clarification of the concept of intrapreneurship. Qualitative methods such as interviews are very suitable data sources.

In our exploratory interview study, we interviewed the participants of the intrapreneurship program of the Fiducia & GAD IT AG, a German IT-service provider in the banking sector. A detailed description of the structure and content of the intrapreneurship program is given in the section “Case Study.” To prepare the individual semi-structured interviews, we designed a guide and asked the participants about the tasks of and the cooperation within their teams. We were particularly interested in how the participants would answer our key question of differentiating between a project and the intrapreneurship program. This then led to discussions about the success factors and barriers of such a program.

As it is considered decisive to check the comprehensibility and clarity of interview questions in advance, we conducted a pre-test with the assistance of Fiducia & GAD employees, who were informed of but not directly involved in the intrapreneurship program. The findings of the pre-test provided constructive feedback that helped us formulate our questions more precisely and comprehensively.

As a second data source, we used the guidelines of the intrapreneurs from Fiducia & GAD IT AG. These had already been developed and presented in a study by [Mikusz et al. \(2018\)](#).

Case study: Intrapreneurship in Fiducia & GAD

The Fiducia & GAD IT AG, headquartered in Münster and Karlsruhe, is an IT service provider, data center and software house belonging to the Genossenschaftliche FinanzGruppe Volksbanken Raiffeisenbanken, Germany's Cooperative Financial Network ([Fiducia & GAD IT AG, 2018](#)). Among Fiducia & GAD's customers are the approximately 900 banks of the Volksbanken and Raiffeisenbanken in Germany, companies from the Genossenschaftliche FinanzGruppe, as well as numerous private banks and companies from other business segments. In terms of numbers, the company manages more than 169,000 banking workstations and nearly 82 million banking accounts in addition to providing about 34,000 self-service terminals for bank customers. The group of companies currently has more than 6,500 employees. In addition to providing hardware, the development and operation of banking-specific applications is one of the company's main responsibilities.

By means of the speedboat tender mentioned at the beginning of our contribution, Fiducia & GAD IT AG launched an intrapreneurship program in mid-2017, which aimed at developing entrepreneurial behavior and creating innovation-promoting structures ([Mikusz et al., 2018](#)). The company provided for the program participants to work on innovative IT topics of the banking sector with 80 per cent of their working hours for one year. Three teams with different foci were formed after the participants had been selected from all applicants: The Karlsruhe team was to develop a “customer advisor,” a so-called chatbot

“Fiducia & GAD IT AG launched an intrapreneurship program in mid-2017, which aimed at developing entrepreneurial behavior and creating innovation-promoting structures (Mikusz et al., 2018).”

for support requests. The team in Munich focused on the creation of “kiu,” a banking system with voice control. The third team was located at Münster and dealt with the creation of new business models in the context of digitization.

We interviewed four participants per team: the respective product owner (project role), the scrum master (project role) and two other team members. In June and July 2018, we conducted 12 interviews, which provided valuable feedback from each of the three intrapreneurship initiatives (Münster [I01a-I01d], Karlsruhe [I01b-I04b] and Munich [I01c-I04c]). The individual interviews lasted 20 to 45 min and were recorded and transcribed.

Discussion

Based on the project criteria and the results of our interview study, we explain the differences and similarities between intrapreneurship and projects. [Table II](#) lists the statements made by the intrapreneurs on the individual criteria in the one-to-one interviews.

Usually, projects are characterized by clear goals and explicit target formulations. In intrapreneurship programs, however, the goals change rather frequently and must be adapted by the team accordingly during the course of the project. Thereby it is possible that ideas are rejected so that the result is not clear at the beginning of the program.

The biggest difference lies in the ways of thinking. For the 14-day sprints (agile project methodology) we set ourselves goals, but have no guidelines. However, we were aware of these circumstances right from the beginning and know that our ways of thinking are constantly put to the test. That is why we reflect through biweekly meetings. There is a lot of room for learning and we have to frequently adapt our goals. That’s fun and motivating (translated, I02b).

Motivation plays an essential role in achieving good results, which is also highlighted by the following guideline: “Steer your motivation to reach your goal (your vision) and contribute actively to the result” ([Mikusz et al., 2018](#)).

Table II Statements on the criteria of projects (translated)

Criteria	Interview	Statement
Clear targets	I04c	“The project is conceptually more-or-less finished, whereas the intrapreneurship program did not necessarily have such a goal”
	I03a	“Our goals are changing faster. In the projects that we normally do, there is requirement specification, which is determined far in advance”
Uniqueness	I02a	“We want to generate growth and earnings in the future, and we’re more a strategic project than one that focuses on short-term cash flow and low-hanging fruit”
Difficulty	I03a	“We are a kind of start-up, which means we are in entirely uncharted waters. A lot of things are new to us. We also have to change direction often”
Process character	I04b	“The biggest difference in my eyes is that the projects work very much in parallel – independent of each other project – and have little transparency because everything is controlled by a project manager and you do not know what the other subprojects are doing. And with us, it’s just transparent, everyone knows what everyone else is doing, everything runs in parallel and simultaneously, and there is no boss, no project manager who tells you what to do. Instead, the team decides”
Termination	I04a	“The biggest difference is that the result that came out after this year had not been clear before”
Team building	I02a	“We are a very heterogeneous team. In other words, we have very many different skills and many different types of employees and team members on our team, which of course makes things very exciting. That means we are a very agile team”
Resource limitation	I03c	“We work cross-functionally and are self-determined and self-organized. That means each of us can work on every task. We not only do product development but also market development, issues around law, the issue of branding, and piloting the solution. We do everything that a real start-up on the market would do. And that just requires that everyone think far outside of the box”

Uniqueness

Although there are no clearly defined requirements, there is a claim that projects should be unique. In intrapreneurship programs, this desirable uniqueness is fulfilled as there are no predefined solutions, and the necessary cooperation is based on the novelty, uniqueness and difficulty of the task. The guidelines for intrapreneurs state: “Find people who help you – both inside and outside the company,” “Seek out cooperation with other actors (such as financial technology companies and start-ups) to develop the best solutions for the customer,” and even “Regularly share your experiences with other members of the intrapreneurship program” (Mikusz *et al.*, 2018). In intrapreneurship programs, as in other endeavors, cooperation is indispensable.

Difficulty

Intrapreneurship participants agree that it is extremely difficult to develop completely new concepts, products or business models. Therefore, the program is supported by external companies and lives from the exchange with participants of the other locations. This is achieved by regular meetings and other channels.

Process character

As well as in traditional projects, intrapreneurship programs are characterized by a process nature that involves several steps, most of which can be parallelized. However, in traditional projects it is often the project leader who co-ordinates and organizes this parallelization, whereas in intrapreneurship programs, the entire team takes care of the execution and distribution of tasks.

Termination

As with traditional projects, intrapreneurship programs have a specified time frame, thus defined start and end dates. The intrapreneurship program at Fiducia & GAD is scheduled to run one year. Within this year, so-called “health checks” take place approximately every three months, during which the respective work status is presented to the sponsors (or the management). Theoretically, the sponsor could terminate the intrapreneurship program at any of the “health checks.” As with projects, there is a timeframe for intrapreneurship programs that envisages only a few milestones (such as the health checks). In intrapreneurship programs, however, there are no committees to whom current project states have to be reported regularly. It is rather the team who decides at what time and in what form management should be informed.

Team building

In traditional projects as well as in intrapreneurship programs, the tasks are performed through teamwork. Due to the high level of heterogeneity within their teams, intrapreneurship programs benefit from a broad spectrum of team skills. Further, the team works with agile methods and a working team is seen as the basis of creative collaboration.

Resource limitation

Resource limitations reflect the cross-functional nature of the teams in intrapreneurship programs. In cross-functional teams, each team member should be in a position to take on any task necessary. This becomes evident from the following guidelines for intrapreneurs: “Do any job needed to make your project work, regardless of your job description” and “Be part of a heterogeneous, cross-functional team that works face-to-face every day” (Mikusz *et al.*, 2018). But resource limitations also include financial aspects. To allow the respective teams a certain scope of action for project-related purchases and thus a certain

independence from the organization, each team received a credit card (with limit) at the beginning of the program (Table III).

Freedom in the way of working

In the interviews, many intrapreneurs emphasized that the free working conditions, independent of corporate guidelines and standard procedures, constituted a major success factor for intrapreneurship programs. This working autonomy is generally regarded as an outstanding difference to traditional projects. This equally includes the acceptance of failures that may occur.

Entrepreneurial spirit

Although the general guidelines stipulate that the involved parties are obliged to act respectfully, prudently and sustainably at any time, the intrapreneurs of Fiducia & GAD are supposed to make their decisions as if they were acting for their own business. Therefore, they can use credit cards with a self-defined limit.

Development of a meta-model

At this point, we refer to Table I again, which we expanded by the column “Intrapreneurship.” The main difference lies in the clear definition of goals (Table IV). We also added the criteria “freedom and failure allowed” and “entrepreneurial spirit.” Most respondents pointed out that corporate rules can be bypassed, new paths can be taken and things can be tried out, which may lead to changes of direction. Further, the participants in intrapreneurship programs must question their decisions from the point of view of whether they would also have made them owners of the company (entrepreneurial

Table III Statements on the supplementary criteria (translated)

Freedom and failure allowed	I01b	“The biggest difference to the traditional project is the freedom that we now have to do what we think is right and not get the order from the top of what exactly we have to do”
	I02c	“We are a small team with little dependency on others. We make decisions, and we carry the responsibility for those decisions. We can fail, and we can also say if something doesn’t make any sense and end it at any time”
	I04c	“The intrapreneurship program is successful, even if it fails. The same is true of the product. For me, that means that you can be successful in several ways. Your product could be totally awesome, but that’s not what it’s about. It’s about trying new approaches to a product and working differently”
Entrepreneurial spirit	I04a	“We want people in our company to act like entrepreneurs, and then you have to set up formats in which they can work freer than they normally could in their traditional job”
	I02c	“I do not need a strict set of rules, but I need people who want to take responsibility and not just go through the motions”

Table IV Differences between projects and intrapreneurship

Criteria	Project	Intrapreneurship
Clear targets	Yes	No
Uniqueness	Yes	Yes
Difficulty	Yes	Yes
Process character	Yes	Yes
Termination	Yes	Yes
Team building	Yes	Yes
Resource limitation	Yes	Yes
Freedom, failure allowed		Yes
Entrepreneurial spirit		Yes

Source: Based Jakoby (2015)

spirit). Intrapreneurship programs are not merely about completing a series of tasks but identifying with the tasks and decisions and thus assuming responsibility.

In an attempt to clarify the terminology, we extended [Jakoby's \(2015\)](#) model by these findings ([Figure 1](#)).

Our UML (Unified Modeling Language) model ([Figure 2](#)) highlights the differences (marked in color) between a project and intrapreneurship. This diagram illustrates the much greater scope of action of intrapreneurs in comparison to that of traditional project team members ([Figure 2](#)). There is no traditional distribution of roles in intrapreneurship, but each team member has the same rights and obligations and can take on any of the tasks. The intrapreneur is thus both entrepreneur and manager ([Kuckertz, 2017](#)). Further, in intrapreneurship there is no traditional customer but a sponsor who gives the team a rough direction but no clear target. In contrast to

Figure 1 From routine to innovation

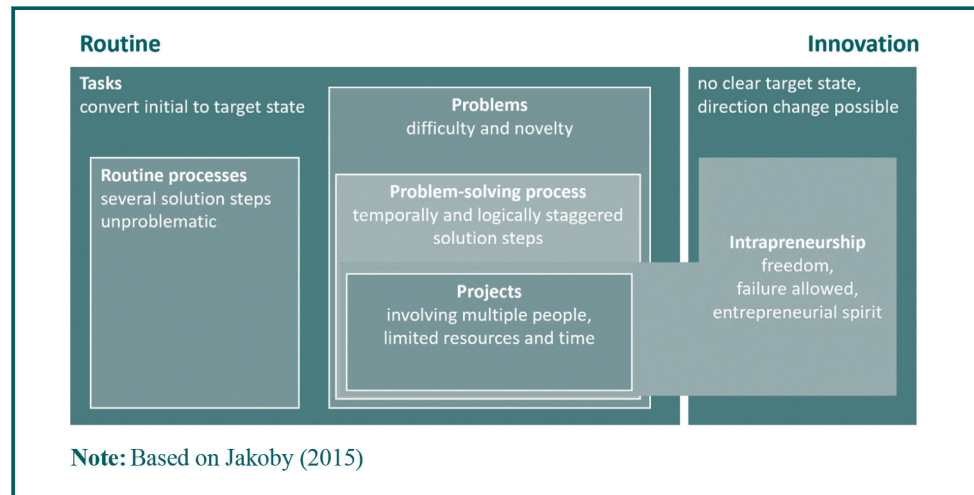
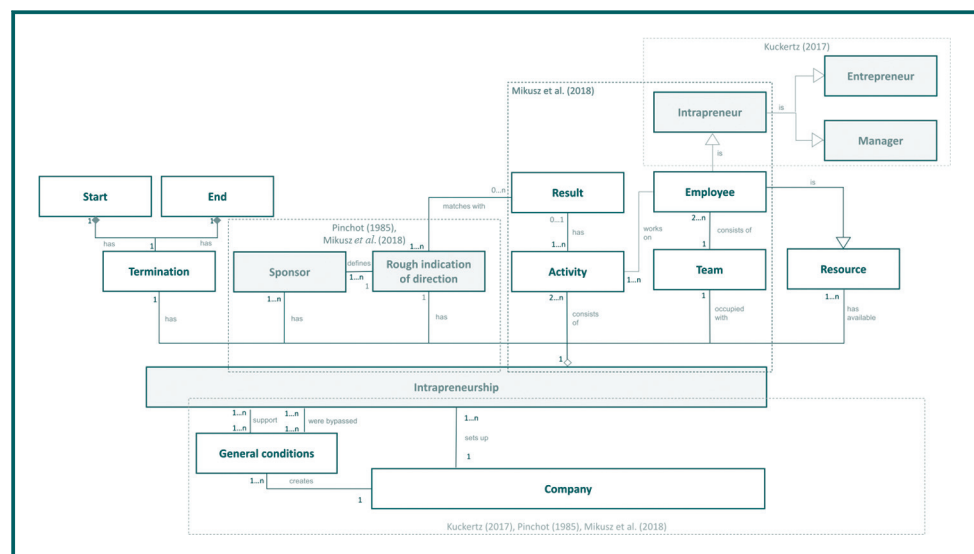


Figure 2 Meta-model intrapreneurship



a traditional project, an intrapreneurship program can fail, i.e. the processing of tasks does not necessarily lead to the result desired by the sponsor (innovative product or service).

The individual interviews revealed that agile methods were used in the intrapreneurship program. Intrapreneurship is neither plan- nor value-driven as the end result is open and can thus not be controlled. The term “entrepreneurial driven” seems to be most appropriate in this context, as the team members act as entrepreneurs (within the company) and generate the result. As there is only a rough idea of what the intrapreneurship program should achieve, the result remains unclear. A rough idea of the result, however, must be further refined by the team during the program. Just as in agile projects, the resources and data are set as framework conditions at the beginning of the intrapreneurship program.

To illustrate the differences between a traditional project, an agile project and an intrapreneurship approach, we extended the Triangle Model (Figure 3).

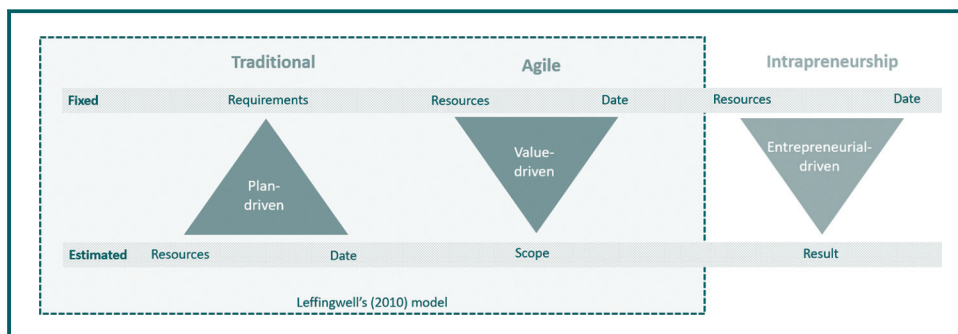
Previously, we extended Jakoby's model to classify intrapreneurship into the notions task, problem, problem-solving process and project. Based on this classification, we have gone into more detail on the items that distinguish intrapreneurship from traditional projects. Finally, we integrated intrapreneurship into Leffingwell's model to take into account the modern agile project management approach of our differentiation.

Conclusion

Like any study, ours has its limitations. As our results are based on only one case study, they need to be quantitatively supported by further research to be universally valid. Nevertheless, this study provides a first definition and uses a delimitation approach for the concept of intrapreneurship, which we accomplished via a mixed-methods approach including a comprehensive literature analysis, an interview study with 12 intrapreneurs from the Fiducia & GAD IT AG, as well as developed guidelines. This work shows that there are differences between projects, both traditional and agile, and intrapreneurship programs. Due to the focus of the study, the findings do not allow any verifiable conclusions to be drawn as to whether intrapreneurs really contribute to promoting innovation in companies. Nor does this study provide any evidence as to whether intrapreneurship programs can actually succeed in combining the respective advantages of the two approaches (start-ups/speedboat and corporation/tanker). Our aim was rather to sharpen the conceptual understanding of the term intrapreneurship.

The Jakoby model (Figure 1) shows the traditional path from routine to innovation. We expanded this model to clearly differentiate the terms *task*, *problem*, *problem-solving process*, *project* and *intrapreneurship*. Our differentiation reveals that intrapreneurship differs from a traditional project, especially in that it is not possible to define a concrete outcome at the beginning. In addition, we created a UML model (Figure 2) to illustrate the

Figure 3 Traditional and agile project compared with the intrapreneurship approach



“Many intrapreneurs emphasized that the free working conditions, independent of corporate guidelines and standard procedures, constituted a major success factor for intrapreneurship programs.”

differences between a project and the intrapreneurship program. This model shows that the team determines the final result and can unfold free of corporate guidelines. Moreover, the team can discard ideas and approaches, which may result in the failure of the project. Besides, the team is supposed to always act as if it owned the company. The extension of Leffingwell's model reveals that the agile approaches can also be found in the intrapreneurship program. Intrapreneurship could be defined as the next level on the ladder (traditional project, agile project, intrapreneurship) as such teams have more responsibility and creative freedom. In intrapreneurship, it is only the framework conditions (time and resources) that are fixed.

From these findings it becomes clear that intrapreneurship endeavors need their own management approach. Management needs to be aware of and take into account the differences from a traditional project. And equally the intrapreneurship participants must be aware of what they are getting involved with. After all, not everyone likes working freely and without clear goals. But a new management approach alone is not enough. Given the many challenges that companies face nowadays, new forms of work – such as intrapreneurship – have arisen. This study helps to improve the understanding of the intrapreneurship concept. Nevertheless, it is necessary to critically question whether intrapreneurship is the right approach for one's own company or application (such as innovation work). Our case study shows how intrapreneurship was used in the German company Fiducia & GAD IT AG and how it differed from traditional projects.

By distinguishing between projects and intrapreneurship and by clearly defining the characteristics of intrapreneurship programs, we contribute significantly to the current state of knowledge. We further support companies considering such endeavors. Moreover, our model can help managers to find suitable employees for an intrapreneurship program, as our model shows that a good project team member is not necessarily a good intrapreneur. Rather, an intrapreneur must be able to work efficiently and yield innovation despite rather harsh conditions and without defined goals.

We have therefore extended both the Jakoby and the Leffingwell model by adding intrapreneurship. In addition, we have developed our own model that illustrates the concept of intrapreneurship based on a meta-model of the term *project*, which helps to clarify the differences in concepts and the term *intrapreneurship* in general.

Keywords:
Case study,
Innovation,
Banking sector,
Intrapreneurship,
Project,
Intrapreneur,
Meta-model

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