

Exploratory findings on the influence of physical distance on six competencies in an international project



Olivier Mesly *

*University of Québec in Outaouais, Department of Administrative Sciences, 2nd floor, 101 Saint Jean Bosco Street, Gatineau, Québec J8X 3X7, Canada
Université Ste-Anne, 1695 Route 1, Pointe-de-l'Église, Nova Scotia, B0W 1M0, Canada*

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of physical distance between offices located in different countries working on the same international project, within an exploratory scope rather than a confirmatory perspective. Qualitative and quantitative investigations were conducted that show that physical distance impacts six competencies of the international project under investigation, including ability to instill trust and to cooperate. However, this impact can be positive or negative depending on circumstances, as physical distance acts as a moderating variable most particularly between trust and cooperation. A ratio between control and transparency, two of the six competencies, appears to be in line with past research on the importance of ensuring sound management.

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1. Introduction

More and more, projects involve teams that are far part from each other. Often, the notion of physical distance is combined with cultural, technological and/or temporal distance¹ (Ruuska et al., 2009), so that communication can be uneasy between team members (Adenfelt, 2010; Verburg et al., 2013). This represents challenges in a world where respect of delivery times, of planned cost and of the initial scope of the project is critical. This is particularly relevant because physical distance has been shown to be negatively correlated to group conformity (Brucks et al., 2007), because “distance in international business remains an integral part of empirical studies and theoretical discussions” (Brock et al., 2011, p. 384) and because group work is correlated to project performance (Yang et al., 2011).

The present paper seeks to examine the influence of physical distance on six competencies found in project management. We

rely on a database obtained from a Canada-based consulting firm² that asked us to run statistical analyses to see if some findings could be identified that would help improve managerial skills within the framework of the international project they were associated with. By international projects, we refer to projects that expand in at least two different countries and that involve teams that come from at least two different cultural backgrounds.

This exploratory paper shows that physical distance indeed plays a role in the dynamic between team members. By choice, the consulting firm used a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) with 24 project managers to collect verbal comments which helped them and us to confirm the appropriateness of using a questionnaire that measures different competencies needed for proper project management³ (see its latest version in Mesly, 2015). The questionnaire was then sent by the

* Tel.: +1 819 595 3900x1728.

E-mail address: olivier.mesly@uqo.ca.

¹ We include time distance as part of physical distance in the context of international projects, recognizing that time zones do impact project outcome (Lee-Kelley and Sankey, 2008).

² This firm has authorized us to divulge results. It specializes in consulting for international marketing of pet products. The project consisted in the building of a manufacturing plant of some of these products in a foreign country.

³ Such methods have been used in past project management-related research (e.g. Dulaimi et al., 2003). Other papers or doctoral theses have used one or the other (e.g. Noble and Mokwa, 1999; Pandit, 1996;). Generally, an anthropologist approach is becoming more and more popular (van Marrewijk, 2007).

consulting firm to 102 participants distributed in four different offices spread in four countries. These respondents, all using a common language, originated from 13 different countries.

It was reported to us that during discussions, the 24 experienced project managers focused on six competencies, as follows. For project managers themselves⁴: 1) capacity to control (leadership); 2) capacity of the organization to be transparent; 3) capacity to be fair. For team members⁵: 4) capacity to instill trust; 5) capacity to cooperate and share and; 6) commitment.

Section one of the present paper discusses how the consulting firm that ran the discussion group went about collecting information using grounded theory principles. Section two discusses the appropriateness of using the selected questionnaire. The subsequent section provides information on the project and the participants as well as details as to how the questionnaire was distributed. Section four outlines the key findings while section five discusses same. We conclude with a comment on the limits of the present exploratory research and offer some managerial recommendations to improve international project management.

2. Grounded theory and the initial identification of the six competencies of international project management

Grounded theory was employed by a Canada-based consulting firm in an effort to gain practical insight on project issues for its client, a large Canada-based pet product provider with various outsourcing locations around the world intending to build a manufacturing plant in a foreign country in the near future.

Grounded theory is an approach developed in the 60s in the health sector (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). It consists in emerging oneself in the field *before* constructing a model or doing an extensive literature review. The consulting firm decided to proceed through loops of investigations by going in the field first, and then by using our expertise to check literature thereafter and conduct quantitative studies as a follow up. In grounded theory, the researcher's viewpoint is an integral part of the research process and cannot be discounted (Greene, 2007). This methodology seems particularly well adapted to understand human behavior (Goulding, 2005) and is believed to help providing a clearer picture of reality, which otherwise would be somewhat reduced or segmented (Badot et al., 2009). Additionally, grounded theory is built in such a way that "[...] laymen involved in the area to which the theory applies will usually be able to understand it [...]" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 3). According to Perry (1998), grounded theory and a hypothetico-deductive are indeed not so far apart.

Six competencies were highlighted as a result of the use of grounded theory by the consulting firm which immersed itself in day-to-day operations at its client's local, Canada-based operation; it also ran a focus group. None of the 24 experts in

project management that took part in the focus group organized by the consulting firm had PMI certification or a degree in project management, but they shared extensive experience in the field and had been long-time employees of the pet product firm. They all recognized that interpersonal skills are crucial to the success of a project (see Belout and Gauvreau, 2004; Martin-Alcazar et al., 2011; Sartorius et al., 2011). The discussions took place during six meetings that spread from January to April 2014. Because these managers had dealings with foreign suppliers on a daily basis, the role of physical distance was thoroughly discussed.

The six competencies influenced by physical distance that were discussed were as follows⁶: 1) capacity to control (leadership) – control mechanisms, such as employee reward programs and financial diligence, as well as a “guiding” leadership (one that is not overly bureaucratic) were believed by the group members to be fundamental in the success of the project, especially when managerial control is operated at “a distance” –; 2) transparency of the leader/organization – the group thought that project directors had to be transparent so that employees could trust them and understand the project's goal, their expectations and work-related instructions in full –; 3) capacity to instill trust – the reasoning was that one must be able to rely on others day in and day out; this appeared especially true within teams and across teams located in different countries –; 4) capacity to be fair: fairness was thought to be important especially in the areas of pay, vacation time, special benefits and resource allocation; 5) capacity to cooperate and share — this refers to a wide concept that implies capacity to exchange information, production systems, as well as key formal documentation, and; 6) commitment — the focus group unanimously agreed that commitment was an ingredient of their international project. Proactiveness was initially considered to be a key competency, but after discussion, it was decided it would be included as part of ‘commitment’. Trust was discussed at length (see Lampel, 2001) and found to be well captured in the selected questionnaire.

After intense discussions, the group agreed that capacity to share, a theme that was raised on a few occasions, would be part of a larger construct called cooperation. Indeed, cooperation has been described in the literature as capturing “...the level of coordinated and complementary actions between exchange partners in their efforts to achieve mutual goals” (Palmatier et al., 2006, p. 140).

Also, the discussion group thought that control was to be intimately related to transparency. Indeed, when an organization is transparent – it was proposed –, the need for control diminishes. Yet, too much transparency could create upheavals (e.g. disclosing industrial secrets) while not enough of it could lead to distrust and anger. Similarly, too much control can be detrimental (Turner, 2004). Hence, control (leadership) was assumed to exist in the context of transparency.

⁴ Which can also be interpreted as strategic capabilities (Davies and Brady, 2000).

⁵ Which we could also interpret as functional psychodynamic capabilities.

⁶ The six competencies were linked to the 4 P's (Power, People, Process, Plan) of Project Management terminology as commonly used in some PM teams in Canada, with, for Power (control, transparency, and fairness) and for People (trust, collaboration and commitment).

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