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ScienceDirect

International Journal of Project Management 32 (2014) 189–201

International Journal of Project Management

www.elsevier.com/locate/ijproman

Different stakeholder groups and their perceptions of project success

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Received 13 November 2012; received in revised form 20 February 2013; accepted 26 February 2013

Abstract

This is a theoretical paper using the Web of Science search engine and Bibexcel analysis functions to determine key literature related to 'project success'. The paper firstly provides background to the development of project success since the 1970s. Then, an inductive thematic analysis investigates which factors stakeholders, involved in projects, perceived as key to project success.

It provides a better understanding of project success and identifies perceptions by senior management, project core team and project recipient stakeholder groups. The main issue highlighted by the research was that, for some groups, there were no common success factors. This suggests a lack of agreement in perceptions of project success factors between these three groups, highlighting discontinuity between them and provides a case for empirical research into multiple stakeholder groups' perceptions of project success. The approach selected employed a combination of a systematic integrative literature review, coding framework and thematic analysis.

Keywords: Project success and strategy; Managing stakeholders; Project success factors; Perception of project success factors; Multiple stakeholders

1. Introduction

1.1. Purpose of the research

The literature recognises that there is insufficient coverage of project management as a research field, both in business schools and top management journals. Kloppenborg and Opfer's (2002) survey noted that only 3% of 3000 project management studies were published in top management journals. Shenhar and Dvir (2007) recognise the need to provide case studies for projects as "only 2% of the 7000 Harvard Business School case study collection mention projects and only a few dozen are actually dealing with project management issues" (p. 96). The debate whether 'project management' research fits into practice or academia is long standing. Kwak and Anbari (2009) suggest that the project management industry finds it difficult to convey their message outside the field, as business does not regard it as a 'real' discipline ("when it comes to the business and management field, scholars often appear puzzled and unconvinced of the notion project management", p. 435). Blomquist et al. (2010) add that project management is 'immature' as a research field.

Literature reviews have been shown comprehensively to define project success (Jugdev and Müller, 2005; Turner and Zolin, 2012). However, evidence of perceived project failures in industry suggests a need to investigate the subject further to inform practice. There is literature suggesting that stakeholders can have different perceptions of what constitutes project success, both in terms of the importance of criteria and project performance, against the criteria (Dalcher and Drevin, 2003; Turner et al., 2009). This paper determines that the perception of project success by different stakeholders is poor, suggesting that current theories are not translating into practice.

It was concluded that perceptions of success by stakeholders are significant, as are the perceptions of important criteria and actual performance. This paper interprets this to include the perception of important success factors, as these make up the criteria. An example is that participants are asked which factors they perceive constitute the criteria of finishing the project on

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0263-7863/$36.00
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2013.02.006

time. Factors could include having a capable project manager to create a time schedule and having a detailed plan with milestones. The scope of this paper focuses mainly on project success factors; however, the author considers criteria, factors and performance equally important. Further research will be suggested to examine how different stakeholders judge success (the different criteria), the different factors they think are important for achieving success and the different perceptions they have of how the project is performing.

This research stems from a lack of coverage within the project management field. This paper discusses project success, but the author notes that project management processes must be in place for a project to be successful. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to investigate success factors which stakeholders, involved in projects, perceive as important in regard to the concept of 'project success'. The resulting research questions follow:

Research Question 1: What is the nature of project success as it is described in the literature?
Research Question 2: Which stakeholder groups have been identified by the literature as having an interest in project success, taking a view on how to judge project success (criteria) and which factors will contribute to project success?
Research Question 3: What are the different perceptions of project success factors between different stakeholders which have been identified in the literature?

1.2. Methodology

1.2.1. Systematic integrative literature review

The literature review for this paper used a combination of an integrative literature review (Levy and Ellis, 2006), a coding framework (Bryman and Bell, 2007) and thematic analysis (Ritchie and Lewis, 2010) to ensure a rigorous search process. These are valid methods, according to the literature, to perform a systematic integrative literature review (Levy and Ellis, 2006).

Webster and Watson (2002, p. 16) highlighted that "a systematic search should ensure that you accumulate a relatively complete census of relevant literature". The literature notes three types of systematic literature review; traditional, extended and integrative. Hemingway and Brereton (2009) note that a systematic review differs from a traditional review in that it is peer-reviewed and the findings explicitly documented to permit replication. They note the potential disadvantage of the reviewer being too focussed in the search, leading to selection bias to fit research questions. Victor (2008, p. 1) states that a systematic review is used within social sciences as a method to "identify and synthesise all the available research evidence of sufficient quality concerning a specific subject". She states that this must be accompanied by a transparent method to increase validity and reliability of the study. Hemingway and Brereton (2009) note that a systematic review aids in formulation of the research design when an identified problem has not been addressed "when a map of evidence in a topic area is required to determine whether there is any existing evidence and to direct future research" (p. 5). Whittemore and Knafl (2005, p. 546) define an integrative review as "a specific review method that summarizes past empirical or theoretical literature to provide a more comprehensive understanding of a particular phenomenon".

A system will be applied to the integrative review to provide evidence of key identified literature selected for review. According to Levy and Ellis (2006, p. 181), applying the stages of a data processing model to conduct a systematic literature review results in a more "effective literature review". They identified stages in the systematic approach as inputs (literature collection), processing (analysing the literature) and outputs (writing the literature review). This process was crucial to identify key themes in the literature for the author, as it provides a theoretical foundation to inform future empirical work.

1.2.2. Web of Science

Web of Science was used to search for appropriate literature, as it allows for bibliographic data results to be output and analysed using Bibexcel (Gourlay, 2010). It was noted that the use of online databases confines searches to sources linked to Web of Science, which could introduce bias. However, this database has "index and abstract in total over 9500 of the leading journals" (Web of Science, 2011). Also, in the search conducted, it was noted that 708 results were in 368 sources. These included "scholarly literature in the sciences, social sciences, arts, and humanities and examine proceedings of international conferences, symposia, seminars, colloquia, workshops, and conventions" (Web of Science, 2011). This minimises the issue of access to limited resources.

Herther (2008) adds that Web of Science is seen as a "worthwhile, fast, and reliable" database and is used to rank researchers' work using citation data. This has increased the value of citation analysis, as in-depth analysis can be performed using database search results. Cobo et al. (2011, p. 1382) add that "undoubtedly, the most important bibliographic databases are ISI Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar and NLM's MEDLINE". However, they further note that each database will return different results and Google Scholar has difficulties when exporting complete dataset results.

Web of Science measures impact factors, calculating the "average number of times articles from the journal have been cited in the past" two or five years (Web of Science, 2011). However, this is mainly used to compare journals from multiple disciplines and is inappropriate, as the focus of this research is to compare authors in the project management discipline. When the initial search was run, the citation report was not available as a Web of Science feature. The search results were exported into Notepad and the citation analysis was run using Bibexcel. It is proposed that future research is undertaken to repeat the search using the Web of Science built in feature to compare the results against Bibexcel results.

1.2.3. Search criteria

A search containing the keyword 'project success' (25th October 2010) returned 708 results in 368 sources. Two additional searches were performed on 6th June 2011 using the keywords