



# The role of the project manager in relationship management

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## Abstract

Relationship management is recognized as a focus of the next generation of project management. As a major sector, the construction industry has increasingly embraced the concept of project-based relationship management. On the other hand, project managers have grown steadily in prominence. This research explores the contribution of construction project managers to relationship management through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Project-based relationship management can be either internal or external. This research identifies 18 roles of project managers in internal relationship management (IRM) and 18 roles in external relationship management (ERM). As a result of data analysis, they are categorized into six internal role groups and five external role groups, respectively. In addition to role identification and categorization, this research provides evidence for the change in construction from traditional project management that concentrates on planning and control to new project management that highlights the importance of people and working relationships.

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## 1. Introduction

Many industry sectors, such as information technology, management consulting and construction, are increasingly project-based, among which construction is probably the largest and most complex one (Sydow et al., 2004; Cheng et al., 2005; Whitley, 2006). The importance of project managers has been widely recognized in project-based industry sectors, especially in construction (Cheng et al., 2005; Turner and Müller, 2005; Papke-Shields et al., 2010). As a result, a large amount of research effort has been made to investigate project managers. Existing studies on project managers fall into five categories: (1) studies on the competency/competence of project managers, such as Crawford (2000) in general and Cheng et al. (2005) in construction; (2) studies on the selection of project managers,

such as Ahsan et al. (2013) in general and Mohammadi et al. (2014) in construction; (3) studies on the leadership of project managers, such as Turner and Müller (2005) in general and Bossink (2004) in construction; (4) studies on the personality and emotional intelligence (EI) of project managers, such as Dolfi and Andrews (2007) and Zhang and Fan (2013) in construction; and (5) studies on the role of project managers, such as Ammeter and Dukerich (2002) in general and Sommerville et al. (2010) in construction. These studies as a whole contribute to an up-to-date understanding of existing knowledge of project managers as well as wider project management.

The role of project managers has been studied by a number of researchers and practitioners with different focuses. For example, Ireland (1992) examined the role of project managers in ensuring customer satisfaction. Ammeter and Dukerich (2002) addressed the role of project managers in project team building. Liebowitz and Megbolugbe (2003) looked at the role of project managers in implementing knowledge management. Blindenbach-Driessen and Ende (2006) recognized project

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managers as the champion of innovation management in project-based firms. Crawford and Nahmias (2010) emphasized the role of project managers in managing changes. Although relationship management is identified by Davis and Pharro (2003) as the next generation of project management, few studies to date have systematically investigated the role of project managers in project-based relationship management. As a result, there is a knowledge gap in this particular field. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, relationship refers to the way in which two or more people or groups feel about and behave towards each other. Bourne and Walker (2008) described project-based relationship management, simply project relationship management, as the way for a project manager and his/her team to build and maintain relationships with the right stakeholders at the right time. Similarly, Veal (2011) defined project relationship management as the active development, cultivation, and maintenance of project-associated relationships.

In recent years, there has been increasing research evidence for relationship management in construction projects. For example, Walker and Hampson (2003) developed relationship-based procurement strategies for construction projects. Pryke and Smyth (2006) provided a relationship approach for managing complex construction projects. Davis and Walker (2009) illustrated how a construction project can be delivered through developing social relationship capital. Yeung et al. (2009) created a performance index for relationship-based construction project management. Davis and Love (2011) presented a structured way of relationship development to add value for construction projects. Meng (2012) demonstrated the significant effect of relationship management on project performance in construction. Jelodar et al. (2016) proposed a framework of relationship quality in construction project management. All these studies make a joint effort to describe project relationship management as a new research direction.

Construction is generally regarded as a traditional industry sector (Miozzo and Dewick, 2004; Bennett, 2011). Traditionally, relationship management is a business issue at the corporate level and meanwhile project management focuses on planning and control, resulting in the prevalence of ‘hard’ management approaches in construction. Traditional approaches often lead to various problems in construction projects, such as adversarial culture and poor performance (Meng, 2012). Unlike project planning and control, relationship management highlights the importance of people in project management processes. For this reason, it is usually described as a ‘soft’ management approach. It can be further divided into intra-organizational relationship management and inter-organizational relationship management (Pinto et al., 2009; Pemsal and Müller, 2012). According to Mazur and Pisarski (2015), intra-organizational relationships, namely internal relationships, include the relationship between a project manager and his/her team, the relationship between different members in the project team, and the relationship between the project manager and his/her company. On the other hand, inter-organizational relationships, namely external relationships, refer to those between the project team led by its manager and external project stakeholders. Relationship-based

approaches try to address traditional problems in construction projects through boosting good collaborative working within and between project organizations (Smyth, 2015).

This research attempts to bridge the gap in knowledge. It targets building construction and civil engineering projects in the United Kingdom (UK). It pays particular attention to relationship management in project environments. It aims to explore how construction project managers perform in relationship management internally and externally. The objectives of this research include (1) investigating the awareness and knowledge of project managers about relationship management; (2) measuring the extent of project managers’ effort for relationship management; (3) analyzing the impact of IRM and ERM on project performance in terms of time, cost, quality and client satisfaction; and (4) identifying the role of project managers in IRM and ERM. This research mirrors the shift in construction from planning and control-based project management in hard to relationship-oriented project management in soft, which implies that the construction industry is replacing traditional management philosophies with new management paradigms. It provides researchers and practitioners with deeper insights gained from construction practice today. Although it is based on construction projects, its findings may also be useful for project management in other industry sectors.

## 2. Literature review

The literature review categorizes existing studies on project managers in terms of their competency/competence, selection, leadership, personality, and role. Among the studies on project managers, competency/competence has attracted the most research attention. For example, Crawford (2000) in general created a profile of competent project managers. Clarke (2010) in general grouped 24 competence elements selected from the Project Manager Competency Development Framework of the Project Management Institute into four competence measures: communication, teamwork, attentiveness, and conflict management. Bredillet et al. (2015) in general provided definition and assessment approaches to look at “what is a competent project manager?” from the Aristotelian perspective, and believed that the project manager should be ‘wise’ and act ‘rightly’ or do ‘good’ action in order to become competent. On the other hand, Cheng et al. (2005) in construction presented a competency-based model for the performance of project managers to answer “what makes a good project manager?” in the UK, in which twelve competencies are achievement orientation, initiative, information seeking, focus on client’s needs, impact and influence, directiveness, teamwork and cooperation, team leadership, analytical thinking, conceptual thinking, self-control, and flexibility. Ahadzie et al. (2008) in construction developed competence-based measures for the performance of construction project managers in developing countries, encompassing four task competencies (cognitive ability, job knowledge, task proficiency, and experience) and two contextual competencies (job dedication, and interpersonal facilitation).

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