



Project management self-efficacy as a predictor of project performance: Constructing and validating a domain-specific scale

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Abstract

Measures of self-efficacy beliefs have been shown to be the best predictor of individual performance in many disciplines over 30 years. This makes measures of perceived self-efficacy a good indicator for those interested in hiring for, or improving specific skill sets. In project management, measuring the skill level of project managers is an important practical and academic question. Practically, hiring managers and program managers, needs an indicator of performance to help select the most appropriate project managers for each project. Academically, a common, established scale to measure project management self-efficacy would provide a tool for improving project management training and education, and increasing the comparability of research results across samples, industries and project results. This paper presents the construction and validation of a set of domain-specific, project management self-efficacy scales and provides evidence of its ability to predict project performance.

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1. Introduction

There is little question that project managers are important for the performance of project-oriented organizations (Bredin and Söderlund, 2013) and projects in general (Müller and Turner, 2007; Turner and Müller, 2005). Much work has been done to identify the competencies of successful project managers (Crawford, 2005; Geoghegan and Dulewicz, 2008; Müller and Turner, 2010) and seeks to tie these competencies to project success (Malach-Pines et al., 2009). All of this work suggests that there is a need for project manager training that develops the competencies that support project success (Ramazani and Jergeas, 2015).

This comes at the same time that many are trying to understand how to manage the human resource function in

project based firms in particular (Bredin and Söderlund, 2011; Keegan et al., 2012; Pournader et al., 2015) and the role of human resources in project success in other types of firms. The development of project managers as human resources in all industries has become increasingly important (Huemann, 2010). The question that arises is how to effectively select project managers that will successfully manage projects to completion. Answering this question depends on our ability to predict project manager performance and to evaluate the success of project manager training programs.

In the general management literature, a positive relationship between self-efficacy and performance has been shown to exist (Judge and Bono, 2001; Stajkovic and Luthans, 1998) and is used in research and practice to address the above mentioned questions. In the project management literature, self-efficacy is sometimes identified as a potential influence on performance (Dainty et al., 2003) or knowledge sharing (Lin and Huang, 2010); or commitment to the project (Jani, 2011) but it is rarely

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measured. On the rare occasions it is used as a measured variable, the scale used to measure self-efficacy is not fully described or published for future use (e.g. [Chiocchio et al., 2015](#)).

An individual's self-efficacy beliefs are the best predictor for their future performance available to us. This is especially true when the task is challenging and has a moderate to high level of difficulty ([Locke et al., 1984](#)). Thus, a domain specific measure of self-efficacy in the project management context could provide an alternative approach to evaluate the competencies and skills of project managers. Measuring self-efficacy instead of actual competencies would be a more efficient strategy for organizations. However, reliance on such a strategy requires having a valid and reliable scale upon which to measure project management self-efficacy. The lack of a theory-based, systematically tested, and validated scale for the important variable of self-efficacy is a clear gap in the PM literature. Having a domain-specific self-efficacy scale would assist us to compare measures of project management self-efficacy across studies and would give us an effective tool for use in the practical business of hiring, training and evaluation.

To build a self-efficacy scale, it is essential to articulate the underlying construct by having a comprehensive theoretical framework in order to clarify the nature and range of the content ([Clark and Watson, 1995](#)). Self-efficacy is usually understood as being either task specific or domain specific ([Luszczynska et al., 2005](#)). Therefore, any attempt to develop a project management self-efficacy should start with a comprehensive examination of the accumulated body of knowledge in the field.

This study first introduces what is known about the important concept of self-efficacy and its use in management. Then, we elaborate and advance our understanding of project management self-efficacy and its effect on project performance by developing an instrument to measure self-efficacy in the context of project management. The measure's reliability and validity are tested using an international sample of project managers. The relationship of self-efficacy and project performance is then examined and results discussed. The primary contribution of this paper is twofold. First, we build and test a scale for measuring Project Management Self-Efficacy (PMSE) that can be used in practice and future research to provide a common and comparable measure. Second, we test the relationship of this concept to self-reported project success and demonstrate that self-efficacy explains about 10% of the variation in project success across our sample.

2. Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is defined as “belief in one's capability to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to meet given situational demands” ([Wood and Bandura, 1989:408](#)). Self-efficacy is an individual's judgment about how well one can perform in a particular task situation. Further, self-efficacy is thought to determine behavior by influencing the activities individuals undertake, the resources they expend in the effort and how long they persist in the face of obstacles or difficulties ([Bandura, 1986, 1997](#)). If a person

believes they are capable of attaining a valued outcome, he/she will be more likely to repeat or engage in the behavior.

Sources of self-efficacy include actual past performance, vicarious experiences and social learning, forms of social persuasion and psychological and emotional state ([Bandura, 1993](#)). Self-efficacy is thought to play a key role in motivation (choice, effort, persistence), learning, self-regulation and achievement ([Schunk and DiBenedetto, 2016](#)). A strong sense of self-efficacy leads individuals to set higher goals and have firmer commitment toward achieving them ([Wood and Bandura, 1989; Locke and Latham, 1990](#)). [Locke \(2009\)](#) asserts that human behavior is significantly motivated and controlled through self-influence, and that self-efficacy is a significant mechanism for self-influence. The more confidence an individual has in their ability to perform a particular task, the more likely that individual is to participate in the activity, set higher goals than normal, persist through difficulties and ultimately be successful ([Miles and Maurer, 2012](#)). [Locke \(2009:180\)](#) stated,

“Efficacy beliefs affect self-motivation and action through their impact on goals and aspirations. It is partly on the basis of efficacy beliefs that people choose what goal challenges to undertake, how much effort to invest in the endeavour, and how long to persevere in the face of difficulties. When faced with obstacles, setbacks and failures, those who doubt their capabilities slacken their efforts, give up prematurely, or settle for poorer solutions. Those who have a strong belief in their capabilities redouble their effort to master the challenges”.

[Bandura \(1997\)](#) also pointed out that because individuals have the capability to alter their own thinking, self-efficacy beliefs tend to influence physiological states including anxiety, stress and fatigue. [Mulki et al. \(2008\)](#) showed that people who are high in self-efficacy believe in their ability to handle their work well and are more likely to become successful in their careers. Self-efficacy enhances employees' willingness to invest additional effort and master a challenge, and thus plays a significant role in increasing work effectiveness, job satisfaction, and productivity. Ultimately, over 30 years of research asserts that increasing people's beliefs in their capabilities (self-efficacy) “fosters efficient self-regulation and enhances motivation, persistence in the face of difficulties, and performance attainments” ([Bandura, 2012](#)).

Self-efficacy has long been considered a particularly important antecedent to performance ([Bandura, 1982](#)). In general, research shows that individuals having higher self-efficacy outperform their counterparts of lower perceived efficacy at each level of ability ([Bouffard-Bouchard, 1990; Collins, 1982](#)). Self-efficacy has been found to predict important work related outcomes such as job attitudes ([Saks, 1995](#)), training proficiency ([Martocchio and Judge, 1997](#)) and job performance ([Stajkovic and Luthans, 1998](#)). Researchers from a broad range of disciplines have studied self-efficacy and performance across specific tasks, professions and contexts and frequently have reported the positive enhancing effect of self-efficacy (e.g. on employee service performance and customer relationship outcomes ([Liao and Chuang, 2007; Hartline and Ferrel, 1996](#)); on

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