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## Success Factors for Business Process Improvement Projects in Small and Medium Sized Enterprises – Empirical Evidence

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### Abstract

This paper uses an innovative research method for identifying success factors of project management projects. It reports the empirical results of a world café workshop conducted with 31 practitioners in Business Process Management (BPM) projects from small and medium sized enterprises (SME). Informed by the existing studies on critical success factors in BPM and projects in general, the authors planned and conducted a practitioner workshop and were able to identify 117 single impact factor items that were subsequently summarized to 64 success factors and mapped along 9 project management knowledge areas. The most important issue areas were found to be project integration, project controlling and stakeholder management, followed by factors of risk management, HR-management and organizational culture. The identified factors provide a preliminary insight into what enables the success of BPM-projects in SMEs and they may serve as a starting point for further.

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## 1. Problem Statement

Small and medium sized enterprises (SME) in Germany are often characterized by a strong product orientation, technical expertise and an underexposure of process orientation and project management capabilities. Problem solving often occurs by focusing on technical aspects of the product, not by assessing the process or projects behind these products.

This is problematic because most often the reason for product failure, be it in product development or process improvement, lies within the softer factors such as communication, stakeholder or customer engagement.<sup>3, 19, 20, 21</sup> Due to larger knowledge gaps these softer factors become more important for companies offering technically advanced products or solutions. This study therefore examines success factors of business process improvement projects in SMEs.

The research question for this study is therefore: Which factors impact the success of business process improvement projects in small and medium sized enterprises?

For answering this question, the following section will shortly review the existing knowledge in the concerned areas, before the subsequent section 3 shall outline the methodology that was used for the empirical part of the study. Section 4 will present and discuss the empirical findings and the final section aims at summarizing the results and delivering an outlook on potential further research.

## 2. Theoretical Background

The theory for the question at hand originates in three scientific areas. Project management (PM) and its success factors, Business Process Management (BPM) and its success factors, and the management of SMEs. The following will therefore review recent contributions to these areas.

### Project Management and Success Factors:

The Project Management Institute (PMI) defines project management as “... the application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities to meet the project requirements” and, in continuation, that it is “...accomplished through the appropriate application and integration of 47 logically grouped project management processes, which are categorized into five Process Groups”.<sup>1</sup> This definition is complemented by Kerzner’s definition of project management, which emphasizes the company perspective. Project management, in this context is “... planning, organizing, directing and controlling of company resources for a relatively short-term objective that has been established to complete specific goals and objectives.”<sup>2</sup> In summary, project management shall therefore be defined as applying skills and methods to planning organizing, directing, and controlling of company resources to meet the projects objectives.

Success factors in project management have been subject to many publications. Most famously Cooke-Davis (2002) identified 12 ‘real’ success factors for project success listed in Table 1.<sup>3</sup> These success factors aim at providing a guiding framework for project managers in general. They are not specific to BPM projects or to projects in SMEs. In order to identify impact factors for BPM and BPM projects the following paragraph will review existing factors in this area.

### Business Process Management and Success Factors:

According to Hammer (2015) BPM gradually emerged from the two approaches Business Process Reengineering (BPR) and Statistical Process Control (SPC). He defines BPM as “... an integrated system for managing business performance by managing end-to-end business processes”<sup>4</sup>

Critical Elements to BPM, and hence essential success factors, are strategic alignment and governance of BPM projects, modelling and management methods, information technology, human factors (skills, knowledge, education, collaboration), and cultural aspects.<sup>5</sup> This list can be complemented with a list of critical success factors that Trkmann (2010) elaborated and tested in a case study publication.<sup>6</sup> This longer listing of success factors is represented in Table 1.

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