

Stakeholder Complexity and the impact on the perceptions of project success

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Abstract

Traditionally, a project was considered successful if it achieved time, cost and quality objectives. More recently, success criterion has been extended to the perception of project stakeholders. This paper explores the impact of client complexity on project success, with the aim to develop greater understanding of project success from the perspective of varied stakeholder groups. Drawing on the findings from a three-stage investigation, the paper presents a model of project success explaining how different stakeholder groups, forming the client, measure project success; how their requirements are managed in organizations; and how varied stakeholder groups influence the success of a project.

Keywords: Client complexity, Project success, Stakeholders

Introduction

Although, project success has been highly debated within the project management literature, the concept remains, both, subjective and ambiguous. Traditionally, a project was considered successful if it achieved time, cost and quality objectives (Oisen 1971). More recently, the notion of success has been extended to the perception of stakeholders as key success criterion (De Wit 1988, Toor and Ogunlana 2010). Despite this, research has yet to sufficiently consider the criterion of individual stakeholder groups and their perceptions of success, rather literature tends to view the client as a single, unified body.

Newcombe (2003) argues that the concept of the client as a single entity is obsolete and does not reflect the reality of stakeholder configurations for most projects. In the public sector the project client consists of a multi-stakeholder body, which may include sponsors, end users and members of staff from different organizational departments. More recently, attention has been given to inter-organizational projects where the client is formed from varied organisations engaging in a single project (Sydow and Braun 2018) (Haniff) Client complexity therefore, has implications for the success of projects. Within any given project there exists a variation of influential stakeholders, from different parts of the client organisation(s) that are interested in the result of the project, or can be affected by its outcomes (Remington, Zolin and Turner 2009). Consequently, projects can involve a highly complex client base, consisting of stakeholders who pursue to either use the outcome of the project or gain capital assets (Hartmann, Reymen and Van Oosterom 2008). As a result of distinct stakeholder needs and interests, there will be varied

perceptions of success, across diverse stakeholder groups (Bryde and Brown 2004). Diversity of perceptions are likely to increase with the diversity of stakeholder groups and therefore with the complexity of the client.

The aim this paper is to report the findings of a qualitative study designed to explore the impact of client complexity on the perception of project success, with the objective of developing a greater understanding of client complexity and the impact of project success criteria from the perspective of varied stakeholder groups. In pursuit of this aim, the paper seeks to answer two research questions:

- *RQ1: How different stakeholders perceive project success?*
- *RQ2: What is the impact of client complexity on the project?*

The paper begins with a discussion of project stakeholders and client complexity, before revisiting the literature on project success. The description of the methodology employed to address the research questions are then presented. The paper concludes with an implication of the findings and presentation of a model of project success that attempts to explain how: 1) different stakeholder groups measure project success, 2) their requirements are managed in organizations, and 3) how varied stakeholder groups influence the success of a project. The paper concludes with discussion of the implication of the findings and the contribution this makes to our understanding of the impact of client complexity on project success.

Project Stakeholders

Freeman (1984: 46) defines stakeholders as “*any group or individual who can effect or is affected by the achievement of the organisations objectives*”. Stakeholders are considered inherent elements of the organisational system and in order to solve system-wide problems, participation of stakeholders is required (Ackoff 1970). Within the project management domain, stakeholders are defined as “*...people or groups that have, or believe they have, legitimate claims against the substantive aspects of the project*” (Cleland 1998: 55).

Whereas, the traditional perspective of stakeholders has tended to focused more towards the project sponsor and suppliers (Cleland 1998, Dinsmore 1990), social and economic changes has seen interest from stakeholders outside of the sponsoring organisation has become more prevalent. These include funding from various mechanisms, such as bank loans, financial markets or equity subscribed by stakeholder investors (Winch 2007). Also, regulatory bodies such as governments, environmental organisations and other legitimate bodies, whose impact on the project can be highly disruptive and a principal source of budget overruns (Merrow, Phillips and Myers 1981).

Consequently, Abbas and Haniff (2016) distinguish between internal and external project stakeholders. They define internal stakeholders as those stakeholders within the temporary organisation who play an active role in the development and implementation of the project, and external stakeholders as the groups and individuals who may not actively participate in the project but may influence the project outcome in either a negative or positive way. Therefore, an external stakeholder may be part of the sponsoring organisation (eg. end users, employees), but not necessarily involved in the decision-making process, depending on the complexity of the client organisation.

Project Success

According to Nicholas (2004) the traditional focus on the within the *'iron triangle'* of time, cost and quality (Oisen 1971), often overlooks the challenges of client stakeholder complexity. Yet, authors recognise that the concept of project success is now perceived to involve broader objectives from the viewpoint of stakeholders throughout the project life cycle (De Wit 1988, Toor and Ogunlana 2010). However, the concept of success is both subjective and ambiguous, as such, there will little agreement concerning the criteria by which success of a project should be measured (Freeman and Beale 1992, Pinto and Slevin 1988). Varied stakeholders involved in a project will have different opinions on what constitutes success and will, therefore, make assessment on varied success criteria (Davis 2014).

In an attempt to clarify the ambiguity, a number of authors began to draw distinction between the efficiency in the implementation of the project and the perceived value to the organisation as a result of implementing the project. Cooke-Davies (2002) also differentiated between 'project management success', as being measured against the accomplishment of cost, time, and quality objectives, and 'project success' as being measured against the strategic objectives of the project. Whereas, Lim and Mohamed (1999) drew a distinction between micro and macro success dimensions. Within their framework, they suggest that the micro viewpoint considers the measurable project management objectives of time, cost, quality and performance. In contrast, the macro perspective addresses the question of whether the original project concept has been achieved. Jugdev and Muller (2005) argue that the narrow focus on achieving the time, cost and quality criteria results in project management only providing operational value to the organisation and calls for need for further investigation into owners attitude towards project success. Also, in revisiting De wit (1988), Cooke-Davies (2007) argues that a project is successful only if it delivers the benefits that were envisaged by the stakeholders that agreed to undertake the project in the first instance. The difficulty arises when the stakeholder body have multiple perceptions of what is expected from the project.

Client Complexity

In many types of project, such as IT, engineering and construction, the client is rarely a unitary concept. For Cherns and Bryant (1984: 181) the client represents a "*complex system*" consisting of both, congruent and competing, influential interest groups. Newcombe (2003) also recognises the complexity of the client, describing the project organisation as "*coalitions of powerful individuals or individuals or interest groups which pursue multiple goals*" (1996: 76), where the client is only one influential stakeholder out of many. The difficulty arises for project managers who are unlikely to deliver project success without paying attention to the expectations and needs of the diverse range of project stakeholders (Walker et al., 2008). Moreover, when the client stakeholder is particularly diverse, the capability to execute the project sponsor's role appropriately is questioned (Liu and Walker 1998).

This complexity is further magnified when considering that stakeholders interact with a project in two primary arenas (Newcombe (2003); (1) the cultural arena, characterized by shared values and ideologies, becomes a force for co-operation between different stakeholders; and (2) the political arena where powerful stakeholders exercise their authority to achieve the objectives. As a result of stakeholder complexity, there is likely to be an increase in the diversity of perceptions and exercising of power to influence a project. Thomson (2011) also proposes that the pluralistic nature of a multi-stakeholder client body often leads to conflict between client stakeholders. In defining the pluralism of the client, Thomson (2011) draws on a definition outside of construction, that "*...organisation are more or less heterogeneous assemblages of actors, interests and*

inclinations where conflicts of interests are inescapable” (Alvesson et al. 2009: 253). In his pilot study into the client complexity within an office refurbishment project for a public sector client, Thomson (2011) explores the consequences of ambiguous stakeholder perceptions of project success. His findings support the proposition that a single project sponsor cannot reconcile the varied perceptions of success held by a multi-stakeholder client body.

Methodology

The methodology employed to address the research questions of the study comprises of three stages of qualitative investigation. The first stage of investigation used social media, as a platform, to elicit the main themes for the study. This involved the collection of responses and perspectives to an online questionnaire from 83 members of two online project management discussion forums. Drawing on themes developed from the first stage of data collection, a second questionnaire was developed to provide initial answers to the research questions. 74 responses from were collected from project management professionals. The final stage of the research involved in-depth interviews with 7 participants selected from the population from the previous two stages. Table 1 below provides summary details of the participants.

Table 1 – Summary of Interview Participants

Participant	Project Role
P1	Principal/Programme Director
P2	Programme Team Leader
P3	Director/ Consultant Senior Business Analyst
P4	Project Manager PMO
P5	Export Manager
P6	Senior Project Manager
P7	Associate Director

Respondents were selected based on the same occupational profile and knowledge about project management, but they were representing different geographic areas, gender, age and position within their organisation. The author intended to choose the sample to be as representative as possible. The qualitative nature of the research also ensured that the study was focused not on generalising trends within the population, but exploring different views and perspectives on the matter.

Findings

Stage I - Questionnaire I & Discussion Forum

The first stage of the research identified the most frequent themes within the project success area. Respondents were asked to answer questions about potential project success criteria and their importance for the project outcome. The majority of respondents agreed that project can be considered as success when organisation can obtain the benefits and increase the value (89.02%) and when all the stakeholders involved in the project are satisfied (80.72%). Third most popular answer was the ‘*iron triangle*’. A total of 74.70% of respondents agreed that the iron triangle is still a success measure. However, it was considered no longer the only method of defining the success of the project, but a tool for controlling and monitoring the budget and the schedule.

A significant amount of the practitioners (81.92%) admitted that prior starting the project, all the requirements (success factors, KPIs etc.) were usually discussed between project team and project sponsor. However, only 65.44% respondents agreed that the

same requirements were discussed and agreed by all stakeholders that may be involved in the project

Respondents expressed their personal views on the project success criteria that are important to them and their organisations. Stakeholder Satisfaction was considered more important than achieving time, cost quality objectives, and occurred when the business was realised. Other themes included adherence to project scope, lessons learnt from the project, risk management, change Management, and health and safety.

Stage II – Questionnaire II

From the themes emerging from Stage 1, findings of the second stage of the study suggested that the participants did perceive that stakeholders had sufficient power to influence the success of the project and the organisational dynamics. It was reported that client stakeholders judge success in response to the project fulfilment of agreed criteria. Stakeholders measure the success of the project and personal specific merits. However, some stakeholders would consider a project as successful when completed within time and cost constraints, whereas the majority will make judgement on the basis of customer experience and relationship quality, and some on the quality of the outputs.

According to the respondents, client complexity can have a significant impact on the project. Consequently, project teams prior to starting the project need to make sure that all the stakeholders communicated clearly their expectations and those were incorporated into the project plan. However, only 41% of respondents believed that clients always know what their requirements are, with 26% of participants believing that clients do not always fully understand their own requirements and expectations.

Participants recognise the consequences of client complexity. The findings suggest that perceptions of project success is actually influenced through stakeholder interaction. Participants also raised concerned that client stakeholders can help or create the barriers to the project progression. The respondents suggested that it is crucial for project managers to understand all influential stakeholders, in terms of who interacts with who in order to assimilate all the diverse opinions and avoid disappointments in the end.

Stage III – Interviews

Drawing on themes from the previous stages, in-depth interviews focused on the topic of project success and client complexity in answering research questions.

Research Question I: How different stakeholders perceive project success?

According to the responses collected through the interviews, stakeholders have a great amount of power to influence the success of the project. Respondents believed that, they decide on what it is important to them, what do they want to achieve with the project, and what agreed criteria they will measure the success on (P4). All the participants agreed that, *'everyone wants something different'* and stakeholders groups seek varied results. However, the majority of the respondents agreed that beside stakeholder satisfaction, the most important success criteria are benefits that the stakeholders and organisation can achieve by means of the project (P1). Success is not achievable without paying attention to the needs and expectations of project stakeholders that may cumulatively exert a significant impact on the perception of project success. A summary of the varied perceptions of success are summarised in Table 2 of the Appendix.

Research Question II: What is the impact of client complexity on project?

Interviews found that most client organisations did have a complex range of stakeholders, and all should be included in stakeholder management and communication plan of any project design (P1). Although, it is difficult to engage all of the stakeholders, it becomes

a necessity if projects are to be successful. According to the findings, client complexity impacts the on the project duration and the success of the project. It forces organisations and project managers to put more emphasis on stakeholder and business analysis. However, significant time needs to be devoted to stakeholder management, and capturing what each stakeholder group wants and needs (P3). Consequently, project managers need to assess stakeholders, find their allies, find their champions, and work on more consistent, agile approach to managing stakeholders rather than communicating with them only at the outset of the project. Thus, taking on a change management role

Participants agreed that to avoid the misunderstandings and minimise the negative impact that a complex client could have on the project it is crucial to set proper communication channels and establish what the client’s expectations really are. The influence that the stakeholders hold can be very powerful. The findings confirm that the “key to knowing what stakeholders want and being able to predict their potential claim is to have in place a proper stakeholder management plan” (P1). It was also suggested that some of the benefits that the organisation is seeking may not come from the most obvious stakeholders. Although, the need for the support of client stakeholders was recognised, participants warned that one individual stakeholder can influence the whole project and lead it’s to the failure. Although expectations varied between the stakeholder groups, there was agreement that the project success in modern projects is highly influenced by the complexity of the stakeholders involved in the project.

Model Development

The model in Figure 1, developed from results of the study, shows that while project scope is controlled by time and cost which define project boundaries, it is client complexity that needs to be recognized in order to achieve organizational ‘business benefits’, ‘performance’ and ‘stakeholder satisfaction’.

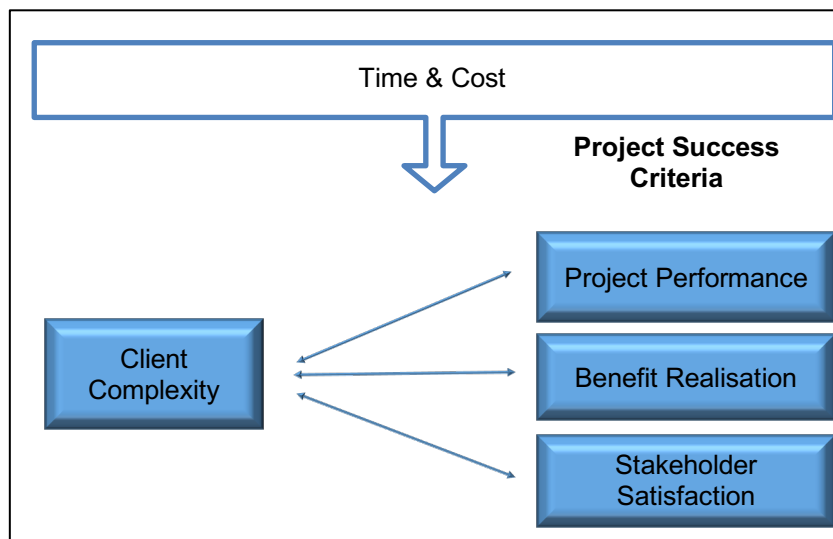


Figure 1- Model of project success criteria

Time & Cost

The model draws on Cookie-Davies’ (2002) distinction between ‘project management success’ and ‘project success’. While time and cost create the boundaries and project management controls, the project success is measured against performance, process and general objectives and therefore closely influenced by client complexity.

Within the study, time and cost dimensions were cited by the majority of respondents. Though, the research suggests that time and budget, are not measurements of project

success, rather mechanisms that enable project managers to control progress and create tangible boundaries to the project delivery. Thus, the two dimensions can be adjusted during the project in order to deliver the project up to the scope, quality and requirements of involved stakeholders. However, stakeholders expectations (and consequently, scope) can change during the project.

Project success is judged on the overall project, which includes other factors besides time and cost. In acknowledging the relevance of budget and time on the perception of project success, more important is whether the benefits expected by the complex client are realised, and all stakeholder groups are satisfied with the outcome of the project.

Client Complexity

The findings suggest that client complexity needs to be recognized in order to achieve project success. The study develops strong foundations for a fresh perspective that suggests project success involves delivering organisational benefits, realising strategic objectives of the business, and improving the business performance. This requires the assimilation of views of all the stakeholders, in order to satisfy their needs and requirements. The complexity of the client impacts on how the three dimensions of project success interact. Different stakeholders will have different perceptions of the 'project performance, 'business benefits' and 'stakeholder satisfaction', which are closely interrelated, as shown in Figure 1.

However, the study also highlights positive impacts of the stakeholder complexity. Multiple stakeholder environments equate to greater communication channels. Additionally, in return for realising benefits expected from the project, stakeholders are more likely to offer expertise and project support. Consistent across responses, stakeholders are also able to influence the project requirements, often impacting on project management processes, and time, cost and quality objectives. The qualitative results yielded from the data show that, although, time and cost are important dimensions in the discussion of project success, they are viewed more as controls for managing a project, rather than measures to assess its success. Findings reveal that stakeholders recognize that meeting measurable success criteria is not sufficient to guarantee the achievement of the organizational objectives. Instead, success criteria are focused on the long-term strategic goals of the organization.

Project Performance

Project performance is achieved not only when the project is complete on schedule and on budget, but also when the project strategy is realised. Besides time and cost, respondents also referred to scope and quality as a success measure. Within the study, quality referred to efficiency of execution, functionality for end-users, improvement of business performance, and satisfaction of stakeholders. Moreover, it is also extremely important to ensure that quality is achieved at each stage of the project life-cycle.

Business Benefits

The strategic perspective of projects is becoming more common (Haniff and Fernie 2008). Strategic project management aims at the improvement of the alignment between the project implementation and businesses strategies at all levels. The majority of participants confirmed benefit realisation as a key success criterion. The benefits should be defined in the business case of the project and provides the rationale for investment.

Stakeholder Satisfaction

The final element in the model is stakeholder satisfaction. In support of the literature, the findings recognise a relationship between project success and stakeholder involvement. The study supports the literature that stakeholder satisfaction is one of the most important

success criteria. It also has influence on Project Performance and Business Realisation. Varied stakeholder groups, comprising the client, want different things out of the project because they are seeking different benefits and have different expectations. Consequently, success is primarily judged on the success of the project-based performance metrics. The study supports the notion of the client stakeholder as an important factor for achieving the project stakeholder, but also notes the role the active role the client plays in achieving the project success.

Conclusion

The study sought to explore the impact of stakeholder complexity on the project. Client complexity is still relatively new phenomena within the literature, but has become an issue in practice. The preliminary study identifies the challenges of pluralistic client complexity and the emergence of requirements during project delivery, which have been confirmed as important for project success. Project stakeholders influence the project throughout the project life cycle and need to be managed accordingly. The study also confirms that stakeholders have a significant influence over the success of the project. Increased stakeholder complexity results in an increased diversity of views and exercising of more points of leverage to influence a project. The greater the complexity of stakeholders, the greater the probability of conflict and uncertainty.

The study makes contribution to theory and practice by introducing a model that considers project success from the client perspective. Awareness of the impact of client complexity on the perception of success and how the project is influenced by the varied stakeholder groups should enable project managers to better prepare and plan for changes and variations throughout the project. Through understanding of stakeholder complexity, project managers are able to improve the decision-making process in delivery of projects, within the control measures of time, cost and quality.

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Appendix

Table 2 – Summary of Interviews

Stakeholder	Perception of the success:	Interviews (example)
Client organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Realising organisational benefits Assuring compliance with all relevant regulation Increasing the value Reducing risks reduced Increasing income 	<p>"Legislation has come out, technology has come out, society has changed (...) things will come out while you are doing the project, that you need to take pause and digest it" (P3)</p> <p>"In my head what is important is spending time to understand the business case, deliver benefits and keep an eye on those benefits" (P6)</p>
Employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not losing their job Not making job more difficult. Getting paid on time Being engaged by the project team Understanding the change 	<p>"If ten members of staff don't get paid then, that project is a failure because we said we will not miss a single person" (P6)</p> <p>"What we are trying to advice on this is not to put people into one set of changes, and another and another because you either become numb to the change or you start being negative about it" (P4)</p>
Users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Product/service being functional and user friendly Being engaged by the project team 	<p>"As we have talked we realised that there were certain requirements from certain functions that weren't taken into account and other people as we had a conversations have realised that they can get out of this a whole more than they first though" (P1)</p> <p>"There can be a big gap between business and technology people, in that way purely and</p>

		<i>simply because people did not check, did not clearly understand what the benefits would be, why are we doing this” (P1)</i>
Members of the public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All the concerns being addressed • Safety • Minimal disruption 	<i>“We rely on the public (...) so this is where our customers base must be really important, because if we miss a mark and deliver something that we think they want, but they come and say ‘that’s not good for us’ then we have wasted valuable money, resources (...)” (P2)</i>
Sponsor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finishing project up to the agreed standards, scope, and budget 	<i>“A sponsor doesn’t have to be a stakeholder, and vice versa. Stakeholder/sponsor information should be established from the initiation of the project so that communication to the right people remains clear” (P4)</i>
Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not exceeding the cost (government funds) • Meeting all the rules and regulations 	<i>“If you get a government grant, you have only got a million pounds to achieve the quality you can – the cost is the thing. (...) they give us money for stuff and we need to justify how we spent it” (P2)</i>
Project Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finishing project on time, up to the scope and everyone’s requirements • Providing a solution for s stakeholder 	<i>“If a project can come under the budget, on or before time, and within exceeding the overall project scope, those are all winning factors” (P4) “What the stakeholder sees as the working project, and what the team produces can be different” (P7)</i>
External Contractor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Getting things done’ • Making your client shine 	<i>“As a consultant (...) your job is to do what you have been asked to do and make your client shine (...) and if you just coming do what you have to do, and you walk away, you are not doing your job right, you are not adding value” (P3)</i>