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Relationship Between Interpersonal Skills in Project Success

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ABSTRACT

The most asset to any project, regardless of the industry is the project manager. Research has shown whether the project fails or succeeds depends on the project manager, and the skills they bring to the table. The research problem in this study is the lack of research regarding the relationship between the interpersonal skills of the project manager and the success and / or failure of large-scale IT systems development projects. The existing literature indicated a strong positive relationship between the interpersonal skills and leadership traits of senior managers who manage with a passive leadership style and the primary IT systems development project success factor of cost. There was also a strong positive relationship between the interpersonal skills and leadership traits of senior managers who manage with leadership outcomes and the primary IT systems development project success factor of scheduling.

Keywords: Leadership; Information Technology; Project Management; Interpersonal Skills

INTRODUCTION

In any industry, the project manager's performance is vital to the project's success and / or failure. Pant and Baroudi (2008) discuss that whether the project fails or succeeds depends on the project manager, and what they bring to the table. While certifications and technical skills are important in the role of a project manager, they garner little reasoning to how successful a project ultimately is (Pant & Baroudi, 2008). As anyone can possess such certifications and technical skills that qualify them to be a project manager; Pant and Baroudi (2008) found that more focus must be waged upon the individual traits of the project manager, and how they intricately interact with every aspect of the project, and how that interaction equates to such success and / or failure of the overall project.

The Information Technology (IT) industry continues to be one of the most advancing industries across the world (Bloch, Blumberg, & Laartz, 2012). From telecommunications and software development to hardware manufacturing and systems development and implementation, Coombs (2009) notes that the IT industry features dynamic processes and activities requiring even more dynamic leadership and oversight. As projected by Bloch et al., (2012) by 2015, global IT spending will top $4 trillion USD, based on 3 percent spending growth in 2012, compared to 2011, where global IT spending was clocked at $3.5 trillion USD. A key factor in this growth remains the sustainability and management of these IT processes and activities (Bloch et al., 2012; Sarwar et al., 2020).

Stevenson and Starkweather (2010) note that IT project success and / or failure is presumably reliant upon a project manager's ability to use soft skills, including communicating effectively, fostering organizational culture, motivating the entire team, managing the expectations of stakeholders, understanding business objectives and outcomes, effectively solving problems, and making precise and informed timely decisions. Stevenson and Starkweather (2010) follow that these soft skills are not ones that are typically taught, but ones that are inherently learned, and further developed; thus, requiring further investigation pertaining to any relationship that may exist between the project managers individual traits, and overall project success and / or failure.

Knowing that growth in the IT industry is based on the success of future projects, more focus must be garnered towards how these projects are being managed, even on the most intricate levels, and how the human interaction in these projects equates to success and / or failure (Malach-Pines, Dvir, & Sadeh, 2009). Napier, Keil, & Tan (2009) discuss that human characteristics in managing IT projects are necessary to achieve overall project success, and ultimately determine the difference between success and / or failure. This topic is of general interest as on the surface, projects succeed and / or fail, regularly, with no deeper rationale as to why there is success or failure. Patanakul (2011) discusses that people manage projects, schedules, budgets and resources, which all ultimately lead to success and / or failure, based on how these elements are managed. Patanakul (2011) notes that the interest around this topic surrounds how this human interaction equates to the success and / or failure of the IT project. Scholar practitioners are interested in this research study, as there are still many outstanding questions, as it pertains to how the project manager and their human interactions on the project equates to the overall success and / or failure of the project (Khan et al. 2013; Stevenson & Starkweather, 2010). Pant and Baroudi (2008) discuss that project leadership, and the successful management of projects in general necessitates more than technical competence. It is furthered by Pant and Baroudi (2008) that the skills necessary to handle relationships across the project are even more essential to achieve stakeholder satisfaction through the entire life of the project. These authors, like many others further that research must be conducted to understand these relationships, if they at all exist, to truly understand the balance of both technical competence and interpersonal traits, as it pertains to project success and / or failure. Scholar practitioners would be able to benefit from this research by applying the results of this study as future projects are analyzed, and more consideration can be given to other elements besides the technical aspects of the project (Stevenson & Starkweather, 2010).

This study contributes to the knowledge base across many fields, including: Information Technology, Organizational Behavior, Project Management, Team Development, Project Success and Team Structure. In conducting this research study, the results may provide a foundation for the investigation of any association between interpersonal skills and project success rates in the IT industry (Stevenson & Starkweather, 2010). This research study provides a more definitive understanding to the importance and value that project managers, their work styles and personal characteristics play on the success and / or failure of large scale IT projects.

As it pertains to scholarly literature, this research may definitively enhance practices in the IT field, and provide a new medium for furthering research pertaining to project management going forward (Ramsing, 2009). As there are always advances made from the literature, this

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research would allow for the IT field and other industries assigning project managers in general to ensure that there is future consideration given to project manager's perceptions and behaviors and how the use of these traits benefit the organization and the goals of the project moving forward (Joseph, Soon, Chang, & Slaughter, 2010). The research could easily become a seminal work in which additional works may be developed and drawn upon.

The purpose of this study is to determine whether a relationship exists between the interpersonal skills of a project manager and the success and / or failure of large scale IT systems development projects. Stevenson and Starkweather (2010) note that even though project managers tend to be armed with vast skillsets, planning tools, templates, risk evaluation techniques and other methodologies which can assist them in achieving success, there is no critical understanding of how their soft skills align with these technical skills equating to the overall success or failure of the project. Across the IT sector, Stevenson and Starkweather (2010) found that IT projects continue to exceed budgets, miss milestone, or deliver late, ultimately equating to project failure, with no underlying explanation as to the role the project manager plays.

The knowledge created by this study is currently missing in the literature and filling this void may bridge the gap of knowledge and research between project manager and project management attributes and project success; by determining whether any relationship exists between a project manager's interpersonal skills and the success and / or failure of large-scale IT systems development projects. The research may produce more concrete evidence identifying project success factors; and evidence that the project manager, and the development of team structures may in any way impact overall project success. This study will enhance the ability of leadership to understand its people and how people work. Henderson and Stackman (2010) note that as leadership is directly responsible for IT projects, the people and IT processes in the organization, they should have a more accurate picture of how their decisions impact the overall and long-term operations of the organization.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Acquiring valuable project management talent, specifically Information Technology (IT) project management talent, is a challenge among many organizations in today's marketplace (Bloch et al., 2012). Bloch et al., (2012) discuss that as IT is among the largest growing professions in the world, there is a significant lag within organizations to hire, retain and maintain the skillsets of talented IT project management professionals. As noted by Nagesh (2009), organizations are experiencing technical challenges in retaining qualified IT project management professionals, due to a lack of challenging workload opportunities, a lack of the use of cutting-edge technology, a lack of understanding project manager traits and working styles, and a core misunderstanding of the training and skillsets required for IT project managers.

Project Management History

The Project Management Institute (PMI) (2013) defines project management as the application of knowledge, tools, techniques and skills to project tasks to meet desired project goals and outcomes. The PMI (2013) defines a project as a sequence of interrelated activities focused on a common outcome, with a specific start and finish. Projects are not considered an ongoing activity. As defined by the PMI (2013) a project manager is a change agent adapting the goals of the project as their personal goals, applying not only expertise but a dynamic skillset to lead

a project team with a shared purpose. Project managers undertake an unsaid expectation to maintain focus, thriving under pressure, while maintaining an ability to perform in complex, dynamic environments accordingly. PMI (2013) furthers project managers have dual responsibilities, in not only cultivating people skills, but also fostering flawless communication among all project participants; using their flexible and broad toolkit of techniques to resolve complex tasks and problems and see projects to success.

In its earliest form, Gaddis (1959) notes that the concept of project management can be traced back to the 1950's. At that time, as discussed by Gaddis (1959), there was no formal process of project management and no concept of the importance of having a structure around successfully managing a project. There were no formal project managers, and no real project management skills and techniques that were known or taught to successfully manage a project. Gaddis (1959) furthers that there was simply a person in charge of making sure that project tasks were executed, with no emphasis placed on resources, timelines, and the overall end goal of the project. Project management essentially existed as everyone searching for the magic bullet to remove frustration from the work to get it done, regardless of what it took (Green, 1989).

While over time the concept of project management has drastically changed from something intangible to something very tangible, becoming more and more formalized, Schlick (1988) notes that each future iteration of the concept of formalized project management stemmed from an expansion of the three key concepts of defining the business problem for the project, designing the components of the project, and anticipating the support requirements for the project. As it pertains to project management today, Alam, Gale, Brown, & Khan (2010) note that the early three key concepts of defining the business problem for the project, designing the components of the project, and anticipating the support requirements for the project, very much remain the core intricacies of successful project management, regardless of the industry. Jiang, Klein, & Margulis (1998) discuss as it pertains to IT systems development, the three generic project management concepts of: defining the business problem for the project, designing the components of the project, and anticipating the support requirements for the project expanded in scope to account for the complexities that managing an IT project brings to the table. As noted by Jiang et al., (1998), the early key concepts of IT project management became: defining the IT systems requirements, planning the IT systems tasks and successfully implementing the overall IT system. Jiang et al., (1998) discuss that defining the IT systems requirements was the most critical aspect of managing the IT systems development.

Jiang et al., (1998) further that this phase begins with a project statement that focuses on the overall IT systems development project goal, including project objectives and details of the project's reason for being. This first step enabled the IT project manager an understanding of the essentials to develop project plans, and begin to evaluate implementation and success criteria. The second major step in planning the IT systems tasks allowed focus to determine how to allocate the project resources and time (Jiang et al., 1998). This crucial second step of planning was very essential as any lack in effectively managing time and resources ultimately determined the outcome of the project.

Patanakul (2011) discusses that project management is a cyclical process for thoroughly managing a correlated group of tasks, to include: planning, design, implementation, and

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measuring progress and performance. A clear understanding and documentation of each of these task groups is essential as it pertains to successful project management. Each of these task groups focus on a specific phase of project management, in which careful detail and consideration must be given in strategically documenting the project to reach expected outcomes. Expanding these task groups from the early three key concepts of project management, Patanakul (2011) furthers that in modern organizations, project management encompasses five distinct phases: project conception and initiation, project definition and planning, project launch or execution, project performance and control and project close. These distinct phases allow for specific allocation of time and resources to ensure the project and its plans are documented as accurately as possible in working towards the end goals of the project.

Project Manage and Skills

In understanding the importance of the project manager role, Ramsing (2009) discusses that as the project manager's role is defined, consideration be given to personality and communication, as these skills are a necessity in project management. While many focus on the project management role as it pertains to actual project tasks, there is a large responsibility for people in project management. Standing, Guilfoyle, Lin, & Love (2006) further that in order for the project and the individuals maintaining the project to have success, there has to be a common understanding of how to communicate, and how to relate to each other not only on a project level, but a personal level, to ensure that there is a common level of understanding as it pertains to managing the project. The successful project manager will have a balanced skillset of intricate people skills, as well as technical skills, which complement each other in accomplishing the total work of the project. Stevenson and Starkweather (2010) note that not enough importance is placed on understanding soft-skills and further research must be done to understand the importance of these soft skills, and how that equates to project success or project failure.

Dalcher and Benediktsson (2006) discuss that a lack of communication causes almost ninety-five percent of all project problems, as there is a lack of understanding the importance of managing communication, particularly when presenting details, facts, and status in project management. Too often in project management, the focus is placed on the technical aspects and not the interpersonal, non-technical aspects that foster the technical skillsets. Dolfi and Andrews (2007) note that although the project managers in today's workforce come from varying educational backgrounds, there is still a lack of knowledge existing pertaining the successful management of communications and people skills. Over time, not enough focus has truly been placed on the role of soft skills in project management. Dolfi and Andrews (2007) follow that to foster talent and successfully lead people and projects, a project manager must display unique but coordinated responses to attain project objectives and goals, while sticking to timelines, budget, and performance parameters.

Crawford, Pollack, & England (2006) discuss that as project communication goes beyond meetings, project managers are often faced with the dynamic complexity of finding resolution pertaining to the general management of knowledge, as well as IT systems management. The successful project manager can divide themselves successfully, in dealing with technical issues, people issues, communication issues, and the like, without there being a void where one of these areas is neglected. Crawford et al., (2006) follow that as the project manager is the heart of project communication, and his or her personal ability to communicate ultimately both

dictates and determines project success or project failure. This highlights the importance of not only verbal communication, but nonverbal communication and cues, ensuring that there is no significant lag of information across the project, at any time.

As noted by Patanakul (2011), as project managers pose the greatest influence to the outcome of the project, the assignment of the correct project manager is a crucial management decision. Project managers should not be assigned solely on experience and past successes. As every project is different, and every project team is different, there needs to be additional focus on how the project manager can effectively interact with the team to produce successful outcomes as it pertains to project tasks. Nagesh (2009) concludes that while basic project management processes and tools are essentially the same regardless of the industry, the organization and its IT project managers must understand that IT systems development and IT project management bring a specified need for a heightened skillset beyond typical project management. As organizations do not focus on the importance of this heightened skillset, IT projects continue to fail, regardless of technical problems, as objectives are not understood, technology can't be mastered, and business needs were not fostered.

Posner (2010) concludes that many organizations and project managers still attempt to manage IT projects in the same manner, too absorbed in the technical details of IT implementation and unfortunately ignore the human factors and the organizational learning that must occur. The IT project manager must first be a general project manager, and then be a technical liaison. Successful IT systems development projects and successful IT project managers depend on a thorough understanding and usage of the complete toolkit of skills that the IT project manager is required to have for success.

Interpersonal Skills

Laura (2011) notes that at the heart of the success of any individual are their core skills and traits that make them contribute to how their technical skills are conveyed. The outputs that are produced by any individual depend on their interpersonal skills, and those skills allow technical outputs to be conveyed. As of recent, the IT industry has had an increasing demand of soft skills, over technical skills (Fortenberry, 2011). To understand the success of an individual's technical skills, focus has to be placed on the individuals interpersonal skills (Ashiem et al., 2009). Anonymous (1999) notes that interpersonal skills will either make or break the success of the project manager's career. Without understanding the intrinsic soft skills of the project manager, there is no way to truly understand their working style, what they need to succeed, how they work with other people, how they operate in a team setting and the like.

Aasheim et al., (2009) discuss that interpersonal skills need to be given the same rate and merit as technical skills when examining the overall credentials of a project manager and what they can bring to the table. As multiple organizations solely focus on technical skills only in evaluating a project manager, and their competency to manage a certain project, Laura (2011) notes that a deeper look has to happen as it pertains to interpersonal skills, and how a mismatch in interpersonal skills can ultimately determine the success or failure of the overall project and the overall project team. Without a strong foundation of interpersonal skills and clearly examining how an individual thinks, reacts and what they bring to the table, technical skills are not useful to the organization, as they will yield unpromising results.

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Furthered by Aasheim et al., (2009), interpersonal skills need to be given the same rate and merit as technical skills when examining the overall credentials of a project manager and what they can bring to the table. Laura (2011) focused that organizational leaders tend to underestimate interpersonal skills when assigning a project manager to effectively manage a project. As most organizations focus on the technical skillset match, not enough consideration is given to how an individual communicates, how they handle conflict and how they interact with other individuals. In underestimating these skills, Laura (2011) furthers that the organization creates a disservice for the project manager, as unsaid expectations are placed on a project manager to oversee a project, or a team in which there is no potential cohesion, placing the project manager in an uphill battle to lead the project and the team to success. A project manager is setup for failure if there is no match or commonality between their personal traits, and the personal traits of those they will most intimately work with in completing specific tasks on a project, as the project manager will not understand how to effectively work with their resources.

Project Success

The skillsets required for project success in all organizations have dramatically changed over time (Alam et al., 2010). Alamet al., (2010) discuss that as it pertains to project success, most organizations expect project managers to exhibit a distinct combination of leadership traits, technical project management competencies, interpersonal skills and cognitive aptitude, in addition to formal project management training. While it is a fair suggestion for every organization to have an ideal of what project success means and looks like to that organization, it is much more important to ensure the correct elements are in place that will aide project success at all times and not hinder it. Alam et al., (2010) further that the importance of interpersonal skills in project management and project success requires a greater exploration in general.

Malach-Pines et al., (2009) discuss that as the IT industry remains among the most competitive industries globally, with a consistent work environment demand, but an ever-changing workload, IT project managers must possess a depth of interpersonal skills; complementing technical skills while maintaining focus on project goals necessary to achieve said goals with any available and given resources. There is no way to ensure project success, but failure is ensured when focus is not given to the composite of the project team.

Giving consideration to the complexity of the relationship between the project manager, the core project team and the project tasks, Coombs (2009) furthers that the role of the project manager must be expounded upon, accounting for interpersonal skills, rather than just the sole management of the project processes. Project managers in modern day organizations must be more than stewards of processes and information; they must have an understanding of the importance of skillsets and project outcomes. To ensure project success, Havelka and Merhout (2009) follow that the project manager must withstand an ability to deal with the challenge presented by anything from conflict arising from constraints surrounding budget and schedule, to managing a project crossing functional boundaries, and complexities associated with unrelated project tasks.

This means that regardless of what occurs on the project, the project manager must be proactive and defensive, ensuring control over project success is maintained, and at no point is

it jeopardized based on a lack of skillset on the project manager's behalf. The only way to ensure the project manager can sustain this propensity, naturally, is to ensure the interpersonal skillset supersedes the technical skillset to account for anything that could happen over the life of the project, being prepared for everything personal and technical that could potentially happen (Havelka & Merhout, 2009). Coombs (2009) presents that on average; IT organizations anecdotally indicate that almost ninety percent of their documented performance issues annually surround soft skills, including leadership, teamwork, management and communication, where the remaining ten percent surrounds technical project processes. This is due to a lack of formality of interpersonal skills in managing the overall project. As furthered by Coombs (2009), in managing a project successfully the project manager requires soft skills including interpersonal ability, technical competencies, and cognitive aptitude, along with the capability to understand the situation and people and then dynamically integrate appropriate leadership. This gives way to the resolution of all issues, even the ones not directly associated with project tasks.

Pertaining to overall project success, Bloch et al., (2012) discuss that the role of project manager involves fifty percent strategy and understanding of dynamic environment, forty percent management and only ten percent technical applications; where the major ninety percent of this application stresses the importance of soft skills. If the project manager cannot talk to and intricately interact with the people, there is no hope for the overall project in general as issues arise. Petter and Vaishnavi (2008) note that technical skills are easier to teach in comparison to the soft skills, presenting a major challenge for project managers to manage people and projects requiring an intense use of relationship management skills, that may or may not be inherently learned.

Brown et al., (2007) note that in order to have and understand project success, the human skills of project managers must be considered, as they have the greatest influence on project manager's day to day practices, where technical skills play the least effect. Organizations have continuously placed the project manager at a disadvantage in making the focal point of project management skills, technical skills, where more emphasis was needed on interpersonal skills. Brown et al., (2007) further that this is due to more focus being placed on project management education, and not on human skills, and how human skills equate to project success. Without human skills, projects don't exist, project management has no focus and project success is ultimately never attained. Historically, Tesch, Kloppenborg & Frolick (2007) discuss that project cost constitutes one of the triple constraints—schedule, cost, quality—in project management and is often the most critical in terms of measuring project success. With the financial investments that organizations make on IT project constantly increasing, more clarity is needed to understand where the line between success and failure is drawn, and what the organization must maintain to stay on the path to success for every financial investment made on a project.

Tesch et al., (2007) further that managing project cost is a fundamental responsibility of project managers, and it is one aspect to which project managers are held accountable. Tools and thresholds must inherently exist to examine if what is being spent is worth what is being returned. Rivard and Dupré (2009), discuss that control over monetary resources such as project cost has different gender implications for women and men in the workplace, however, the importance remains in understanding that there is value for what is being paid for.

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Notwithstanding the overall state of gender inequity in managing monetary resources, Napier et al., (2009) note that project cost can entail several sub processes that have implications for project success, including: estimating, budgeting, accounting, monitoring and tracking, controlling variances, taking corrective actions, and generating overall performance metrics of earned value and/or return on investment.

Regardless of gender, these sub processes are indeed important to project success, and must exist if there is to be a true understanding of what has happened, what can happen, and what will happen financially, by the conclusion of the project. Napier et al., (2009) conclude that managing overall project success requires an intense focus on project cost, by a project manager with a complex understanding of all aspects of the project, the project team, and the intricacies of the work to be done. Without this intense focus of the project manager, the organization can bank on failure or compromised successes every single time.

IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSION

This study exposed several implications for senior leaders and project managers of large scale IT projects. Consideration has been given to the fact that each project manager and each leader presents a different leadership style. While the leadership and interpersonal traits and characteristics can be similar, no two IT senior leaders or project managers are alike. In giving consideration to leadership style, consideration must also be given to what primary success values does a senior leader or project manager on an IT project hold true to in evaluating their success and the success of their project. While schedule, cost, technical objectives, mission/strategy alignment, and value are the primary success factors of an IT project, in some senior leader/project managers eyes, these factors are everything, while to some they mean nothing.

To this point, not enough detailed focus has been placed on staffing projects when assigning a project manager to an IT project. There was no true understanding that certain leadership skills only appreciated and focused on certain elements of the project as it pertains to success. Projects were staffed based on the best technical fit, and just with a general knowledge of project management, in managing a schedule, budget and resources. This study showed that leadership type and interpersonal skills are important as it pertains to staffing a project and managing each of the primary areas of an IT project to make sure no one area is managed or given more attention than another, and to ensure that the project manager will be responsive to the entire project equally, and not just the parts they favor based on preference or experience.

This study shed some light on why some aspects of the project fail and others don't. If a project manager or senior leader has a specific leadership type, and they in turn are only focused on one area of the project, when things go wrong, it's hard to get them to see the rest of the project, or hard to get them to be proactive to get every aspect of the project back on track. A dedicated project manager must manage all aspects of the project at all time, and not just sit back and wait for an order or for things to get really bad, before they step in and get the project back on track. In the future, projects must be staffed fully understanding the project manager's leadership style and how they view the entire project. Organizations need to know what their people are capable of, and how their people will respond under pressure. To date, many organizations may stress that one element of the project is more important than the others, but this study showed

that more work must be done in training project managers, and getting them to embrace every aspect of the project. Project management is not just what your strong suit is, but it is the management of the every aspect of the entire project from start to finish, with no breaks in the middle. Organizations must get back to shedding the emphasis on the entire project and its elements for success, and ensure there are competent project managers that can handle and balance every aspect to lead the project to success.

This argument is validated by the literature review in that each of the authors present that there will be variances in what is important to the project and its success, or how to actually manage the project's progress, and success. But the one key factor is there are still individual human traits that manage these tangible measurable project traits that matter in determine the outcomes of project success or failure. According to the results of the study, only passive/avoidant senior leaders and project managers and senior leaders that focus on outcomes of leadership such as extra effort, only focus on cost, schedule. These two leadership types are a very small representation of all the leadership types that run projects in many varying organizations. And their focus on three of the five elements of primary IT project success are very limiting based on what is believed to be important in really gauging project outcomes.

It should be noted that there was some small relationships between many of the interpersonal skills and leadership categories compared to the five primary IT project success factors. While the research suggested only two leadership types and 3 project success factors, there is more investigation to be done to understand what else is happening with certain leadership types, and how they are viewing project success outcomes. There also has to be more investigation as to why certain project manager's harp on certain elements of the project for success, and not look at the entire project and every aspect for success.

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