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Insights from Global Project Managers: Career Advice for Successful International Assignments

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Abstract

Qualitative analysis techniques were used to identify recurring themes from project manager interview summaries undertaken by 120 project management students. The themes and the resulting conceptual framework provide evidence for the factors that support the development of successful global project managers. Such factors were found to include taking the initiative to acquire an in-depth understand the local environment and to develop culture and language competence.

Keywords: PM global careers, PM advice, PM career progression, Global PM Challenges

1. Background

Organizations continue to be challenged in their ability to coordinate business on a global scale, integrate and manage business activities occurring in different countries, partly due to inexperienced project managers. To that purpose, international companies require project managers with a global perspective who understand their customers, governments and market requirement across different countries, who have an ability to leverage country and market differences to achieve organizational strategic objectives. As multinational corporations create knowledge networks of workers, suppliers, and partners across the globe, to collaborate in an effective means, the need for an effective global project manager is critical. Although the need for experienced and skilled global project managers has been established in previous studies, many organizations do not have a formal mechanism for training and equipping their global managers on how to successfully lead a global project. The aim of this study is the leverage the experiences and knowledge of practicing global project managers by interviewing them and learning from them based on their experiences on the core competencies that successful global project manager must possess to be successful.

2. Introduction

Although the literature provides extensive guidance on success factors for managing projects, it is suggested there is no substitute for actually asking successful project managers to relate their international experiences, lessons learned, and perceptions regarding the factors associated with successful international project assignments. For this reason, the researchers undertook a study using qualitative methods to analyze 120 interview summaries of international project managers.

Students in a graduate project management degree program were assigned to interview a professional project manager with global experience and pose questions associated with working in a foreign country, personal preparation, and advice for a project manager considering an international assignment. Although each interview included some general discussion and observations, the primary questions asked to each project manager were as follows:

- 1). What was the hardest part of working in another country?
- 2). Looking back, what would they have done differently to prepare themselves for that assignment?
- 3). What advice would he/ she give to someone considering an international PM assignment?

This current study will benefit any new entrants into the project management field, project managers considering a global assignment, mentors of project managers considering a global assignment, and the collective project management profession.

3. Brief Overview of the Literature

A project manager's primary responsibility is to use project management methods to ensure project execution is carried out in such a way that objectives and deliverables are achieved within the planned time and budget (Shtub, Bard, & Globerson, 1994). The International Project Management Association (IPMA, 2013) states that despite the project management standardization made possible by the compliance with IPMA policies and procedures that many projects continue to fail. Additionally, studies suggest that in spite of the increasing familiarity with and implementation of the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK), a high percentage of projects continue to fail (Bolin, 2012; Kerzner, 2012; Kippenberger, 2000). In fact, it has been suggested that project management methodologies, in general, seem to play a limited role in project success by filling gaps in knowledge and supporting senior management control of projects (Wells, 2012).

Today's project managers are crucial to organization's success given the fierce competitive environment and the cost associated with project failure. According to IPMA (2012), effective project managers are those that act as leaders with clear vision of the project outcome aligned with the overall organizational strategy. Project managers are the focal point of the project, an intermediary between the project team and external stakeholders and a source of communication to all project stakeholders (Bauer, 2005; Harvard Business Essential, 2004).

The expectations and competencies required of today's project manager are so demanding that most employers believe it difficult for one single person to be completely proficient (Rodriquez & Al-Ashaab, 2005). Since projects are fundamental to implementing organizational strategic initiatives, project managers must continually develop their skills in term of their technical, human, financial, organizational and cultural knowledge (Randolph & Posner, 2002). Further, to be effective today, project managers have to adapt their management style to the immediate project and specific situation (George, 2003). Management is challenged in trying to encourage project managers' development by helping them to find the appropriate projects matching their talents (Wagner & Harter, 2006). The project manager is personally accountable for the project success or failures; therefore, the project manager is a critical element in an organization.

Not all projects fail, however, and studies examining the factors associated with successful projects point to the importance of the project manager's skillset and capability. The PMBOK itself may point to this indirectly by including a high degree of emphasis on the planning, and monitoring & controlling process groups rather than on execution (Koskela & Howell, 2002). This may suggest that the activities related to actual execution are linked to individual experience, training, capabilities and personal style.

The IPMA states that global projects and the technologies used to carry them out change at a rapid pace, which means current good practices are not good enough (IPMA, 2014). Project plans and their executions are only as successful as the manager and team who implement them. Building an effective team requires consideration of each person's technical skills and the critical roles and chemistry that must exist between and among the project manager and team members (Wysocki, 2009). In order to understand the human factors involved in a new project, an international project manager should familiarize him/herself with cultural and religious customs. How, when and who to communicate with, be curious and inquisitive, seek to understand the qualifications and expertise of the team and what welfare arrangement and safe work system is put in place to ensure protection of lives and property (IPMA, 2014).

Literature reviews suggests that there is a noticeable difference in practice and perception between the United States (U.S.) project managers and their international counterparts in the area of project leadership. Yasin, Zimmerer, and Wafa (1997) concluded that cultural differences influencing practice and perception differences may be attributed to educational and training backgrounds of the U.S. based project management. While in the U.S., training stresses the human side of project management, it does not adequately address cultural differences. This conclusion supports Kerzner's (2004) finding that project managers working in an international context requires more cultural sensitivity training than domestic project managers. According to Jung and Avolio (1999), there has been considerable interest with regards to attitudes, behavior, and motivation of managers and employees across cultural assignments and how project outcomes are shaped by these orientations. Hofstede (1980) argues that these differences in individual motivation and leadership styles can be linked to differences in cultural orientation. Globalization has also increased the awareness of organizational leaders to the importance of understanding, addressing, and meeting the needs of culturally diverse work groups, not doing so has led to negative project outcomes (Hostede, 1994). Wagner (1995) argued that cultural orientation may affect an individual's preferred way of working in a team or leading a project team and other researchers including. Erez & Earley (1993) have challenged the appropriateness of assuming that United States-centric leadership theories can be generalized to other countries.

According to Ng, Dyne, and Ang (2009), effective international project managers are an essential asset for international business expansion. Muenjohn (2009) argues that project managers competent to function effectively in an international market environment with diverse culture are valuable in providing multi-national corporations with competitive advantage—they are likely to manage diverse human resources and manage both political and social risks.

As globalization matures allowing companies to operate freely in different countries, the requirements for cross-cultural sensitivity and awareness have become more relevant. According to Yooyanyong and Muenjohn (2010), the need for cross-cultural understanding and adjustment came from an acknowledgment that cultural misunderstandings led to feelings of separation and aggravation with international clients, the failure to adjust to the clients' cultures ultimately leads to costly mistakes by project managers.

Mistakes made by international project managers were originally defined in terms of the quantifiable monetary costs, unanticipated project manager replacement, loss of market share, loss of business opportunities, or interruption of international program business activities (Yooyanyong & Muenjohn, 2010). Other, less readily quantifiable, monetary costs incurred by international project managers include damaged relationships with the international clients, loss of confidence in the multinational company, and loss of market share within the business products. Individual mistakes and failures also include the incalculable emotional costs for the program manager through failure to adjust to business opportunities and difficulties for the company's recruitment of future project managers (Yooyanyong & Muenjohn).

Since it is the project manager and project team who execute the project, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the project manager must play a significant role in converting project plans into execution. This discussion begs the question, "What factors lead to, or are associated with successful project managers, in a global setting?" Some studies conclude that the individual project manager's capability, training, and experience are all factors that contribute to success and are likely to carry more weight than simply following guidelines or template (Fisher, 2011; Kerzner, 2013; Wells, 2012). This study seeks to better understand what successful project managers, with global experience, describe as the challenges of working in a foreign country, preparation advice, and general advice to project managers aspiring to take an international assignment.

4. Methodology

This research analyzed 120 interview summaries encapsulated in over 250 pages of text documenting successful global professional project managers discussing their careers and giving advice to the novice. Such a base of interview data lends itself to the research question, "What are the factors that tend to produce successful global project managers?" To begin answering this question, each interview summary was examined twice, and themes began to emerge. The interviews were imported independently into the qualitative coding software, nVivo. nVivo is software that aids with the organization and analysis of unstructured data (QSR, 2010).

The coding process is a review of each interview and linking the interviews' individual comments relating them to the themes and begin a cataloging method. To ensure that all instances of each key word or phrase was captured, keyword queries were run in nVivo to identify and code any theme initially missed in the first two rounds of review and coding. After the coding was complete, the themes were collected and the frequency in which each theme appeared in interviews was noted. A word frequency analysis was performed against each segment of coded text in order to gain an understanding of how closely each identified theme was related to others in terms of common words and expressions (QSR, 2010). Relationships between themes were then established, and finally, all themes were classified into major groups. Finally, the conceptual framework was created from the themes, classifications, and relationships and then the rationale for each step of the analysis was supported by excerpts from sample interview summaries.

5. Analysis

An inductive approach to developing theory begins with the data (interviews), seeks patterns in the data (themes), and then seeks to build up a larger picture of the phenomena under study (conceptual framework) (Creswell, 2013). The codes were identified by a process of closely reading the text and constant comparison with other thoughts found in the interview summaries. In this research, the frequency of occurrence of the identified code, and the relationship between the codes will be used as the basis of themes that in turn build up a clearer picture of the phenomena under study.

An analysis of the coded interview summaries revealed recurring words, phrases, and themes. The codes revealed factors that project manager interviewees described as being linked to, or supportive of, the success that each experienced in his/her career. Table 1 represents all the codes observed at least ten times or more.

Table 1. Codes appearing ten or more times

Codes	Frequency
Learn about the culture before going	91
Culture differences	64
Language issues	64
Communication	47
Trust	44
Client or Stakeholder expectations	39
Project Management Essentials	33
Work ethic or motivation	31
Be open minded or flexible	28
Government involvement	26
Organizational decision making challenges	25
Experience the culture	24
Be social or Get to know the locals or Make friends	23
Ethnocentrism	22
Family and friends	21
Infrastructure challenges logistics (electricity, internet, roads, distribution and supplies)	20
Look for an in-country mentor	17
Opportunities for the future	17
Meals as a social part of business	16

The cataloged codes were sorted according to frequency, then organized into higher level themes that captured common threads. The higher level themes were translated into a conceptual framework.

6. Theme Frequencies

Each code identified in the interview summaries was used to develop higher level themes. The frequency of each theme is illustrated in Table 2. Note the emphasis in the interview summaries on commitment.

Table 2. Theme frequency

Name	References
Commitment	178
Attitude	150
Willingness	142
Personal development	132
Well-being	132
Acceptance	116
Leadership	103
Ethics	95
Credibility	93
Relationships	77

The themes, interview excerpts, related codes, and resulting conceptual framework are summarized as follows:

International theme: Commitment (178 references)

“It took years of proving myself, I found this extremely frustrating and honestly never really did find a solution – just time.”

“Most importantly, he has learned to invest a little extra time getting to know the culture before touching down on foreign land. “The more you know about the culture before you get there, the less the culture shock will hit you and have your head spinning”.

Codes:

Be social / Get to know the locals / make friends;

Language issues;

Learn about the culture before going;

Managing international projects is a significant undertaking. Successful project managers suggest that it requires serious attention to detail and dedication to learn to function well within a different culture.

International theme: Attitude (150 references)

“Don’t be arrogant and act like you know everything or have better way to do things. Take the time to learn and understand practices that may seem different to you but are standards in the country you will be working in.”

“...getting over the initial prejudices I had toward that society in general and culture”.

Codes:

Language issues;

Ethnocentrism;

Culture differences;

Successful international project managers understand that the local way of doing things in an international culture is not necessarily better or worse—but rather different. It is therefore recommended that project managers accept the different local practices rather than assume that their own practice is in some way superior.

International theme: Willingness (142 references)

“Get to know the people. They are the most important part of the equation. Understand their culture and ways of doing business. Do not assume anything, such as the limitations of their equipment or their previous training. Make an effort to educate your team ahead of time on people issues.”

Codes:

Learn about the culture before going;

Be open minded/flexible;

Be social/Get to know the locals / make friends;

The theme of “willingness” suggests that an active approach to adaptation in the international arena is a preferred avenue for achieving project success. The implication is that project managers should take action and truly attempt to connect with the local culture.

International theme: Personal development (132 references)

“Early in his career, he did not understand the significance of understanding another country’s culture, but quickly found out. He would have studied more before entering into the country and took it a little more seriously.”

“One way to overcome these challenges is to educate ones-self on the host country’s cultural, social, religion, business ethics, etc., way of life.”

“Prepare yourself by trying to understand as much as you can about the people and culture in the area of operation/international project location.

Have an idea of the work norms, like work days and weeks.”

Codes:

Learn about the culture before going;

Experience the culture;

Look for an in-country mentor;

Project managers with experience in the international arena who succeeded in international projects adequately prepared themselves for the role. An active approach was taken with respect to learning the details of the way life is lived in the target culture.

International theme: Well-being (132 references)

“Be prepared for living outside your comfort zone. For me I enjoyed the experience and challenge of it but I can see it would not be the most desirable situation for others. Since it was already mentioned, do some homework of the local area before you leave. I can tell you it will definitely pay off, you won’t have as many surprises.”

“Expect things to be different and adapt where you can. Don’t expect projects to be delivered in the same way they were in your home country.”

Codes:

Family/friends;

Communication;

Language issues;

Setting expectations to experience a fundamentally different way of life is considered to be essential to successful international project managers. The consensus view in this theme is that life in the international project arena is by no means easy, but it is best experienced when one is prepared for the differences.

International theme: Acceptance (116 references)

“Looking back, he said that he would have embraced the culture and immersed himself into it more than he did. Accepting the culture and learning about it could have given him a different perspective on different issues on various projects that he managed.”

“He stated that the hardest part about working in another country is getting used to the culture norms of the country that you are in—a different way of thinking is required for most overseas projects...”

Codes:

Be open minded/flexible;

Culture differences;

Experience the culture;

It is interesting to note that successful international project managers seek to change their own respective outlooks rather than to attempt to change members of a local culture. This sentiment is reminiscent of Covey’s “Seek first to understand, then be understood” (1989).

International theme: Leadership (103 references)

“...would advise someone who is considering an International Project Manager assignment to make sure that they possess the strong leadership skills that are necessary, and he or she has to truly be passionate about it.”

“With many different cultural expectations, we must be sensitive to all of the stakeholder needs and learn to cater to their specific demands.”

Codes:

Trust;

Be open minded / flexible;

Work ethic / motivation;

The additional complexity involved in international project management requires a high level of leadership skills. Such skills are recognized as being essential in this observed interview theme.

International theme: Ethics (95 references)

“He says that the hardest part of working in another country is adjusting to how the country conducts business and the social norms that are accepted as part of doing business when they are different from what someone is used to.”

“...no matter how ‘unethical’ it is, bribes are a way of life in other countries. That extra money has to be built into your budget. That’s reality. I don’t care who you are, if you are working in another country people expect to be paid off. If you don’t, you are not going to be working there. Plain and simple...”

Codes:

Government involvement;

Trust;

Organizational decision making challenges;

What is considered ethical and “normal” in one culture is likely to be completely different in another. Project managers in these interview excerpt highlight the importance of have adequate judgment and understanding in order to appreciate such differences.

International theme: Credibility (93 references)

“It is very hard to back up and repair the damage that can be inflicted through ignorant actions that are offensive or worse to the people of another country.”

“Many times distance will prevent meeting in person, so effective communication is behind many obstacles, but earning a reputation of being trustworthy and reliable will prove very valuable.”

Codes:

Experience the culture;

Ethnocentrism;

Communication;

Ignorance of international culture and norms is not an excuse. As noted in this theme, cultural mistakes have the potential to damage individual credibility. Project managers in the international arena point to the need to enhance credibility where possible.

International theme: Relationships (77 references)

“The necessity to build trusting relationships is the key to successful international ventures. Many times distance will prevent meeting in person, so effective communication is behind many obstacles, but earning a reputation of being trustworthy and reliable will prove very valuable.”

“My experience with International PM is that the relationships you form with your customers or partners are VERY VERY important. You must cultivate the relationships you have with them very carefully and be sure to live up to your word. My customers and partners will go WAY out of their way to solve problems with me because I have shown them respect and shown them that I am reliable and honest”.

Codes:

Look for an in-country mentor;

Trust;

Meals as a social part of business;

The essence of this theme is that although the barriers associated with cultural differences may well be great, trust goes a long way toward overcoming such differences. When familiar cultural cues and norms are missing, trust and relationships aids in bridging the gap.

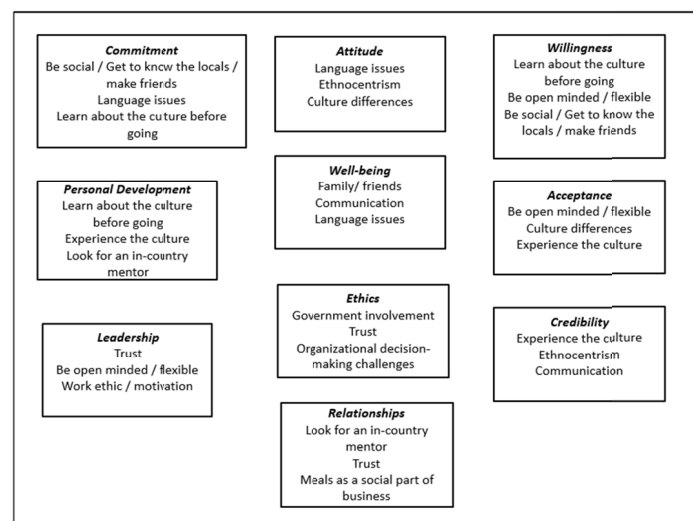


Figure 1. Themes and associated interview coding

7. Findings/Practical Implications

The themes developed from the analysis of the interview transcripts may be grouped together based upon the frequency of occurrence and the similarity between related themes.

The conceptual framework that results from the organizing and ordering of the themes provide suggest that successful international project managers take the initiative and commit to developing language and cultural competency. They also seek to develop an in-depth understanding of the local environment. These aspects of personal development are deemed essential to international project manager success given the very high frequency of appearance of this theme in the interview transcripts. This effort, combined with the right outlook or attitude can be observed to lead to greater acceptance, credibility, and trust. Once this state is reached, a greater state of well-being and resulting international project management effectiveness is said to result. The overall findings suggest that project managers who are willing put for the effort and discipline to learn and adapt will in turn earn respect and trust from global stakeholders. This further suggest that the focus on global project success should be “inward” in terms of personal development rather than “outward” in terms of seeking to change the views of global stakeholders.

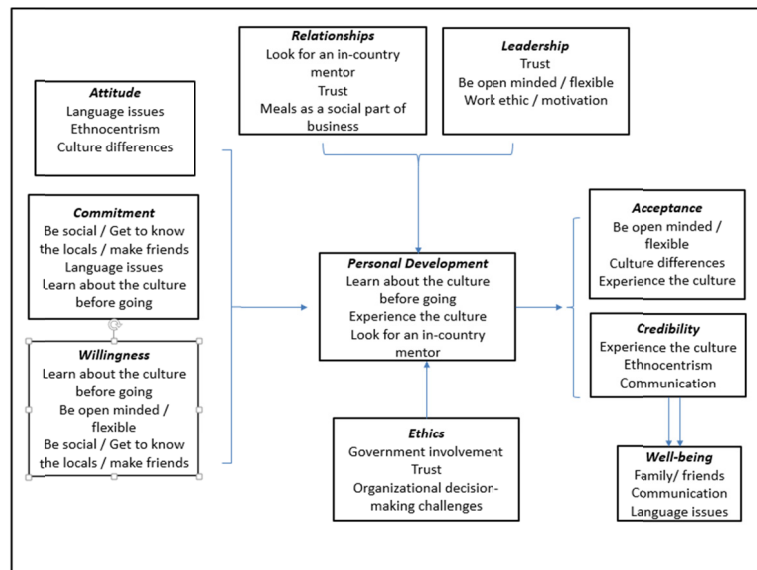


Figure 2. Conceptual framework from the qualitative data analysis

8. Limitations

The present study offers a glimpse into the realm of global project managers' experiences. This research sample data was collected by graduate students in seven separate sections an international project management course. Using the exact same interview instructions, and despite being taught by different professors, the results were consistent. The absence of 'interviewer training' for the many students performing the interviews and the authors' lack of contact with both the students and the interviewees contribute to the low external validity. A second limitation is through the lack of demographic information collected. These conclusions could be more generalizable if demographic data had been collected from the interview participants, including his/her industry, years of experience, and if he/she was a certified project management professional.

9. Future Research

Future studies could include demographic data and interview project managers in different countries and cultures to see if the results are consistent globally. The current research endeavor did not collect information on type of industry or years of experience, did not differentiate between domestic and global training, nor if the participants were certified project managers. Future studies could collect that demographic information and further explicate the themes proposed in this study.

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