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2002

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Jose Manuel Esteves
Universitat Politenica de Catalunya, jesteves@lsi.upc.es

Joan A. Pastor-Collado
Universitat Internacional de Catalunya, jap@unica.edu

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UNDERSTANDING THE ERP PROJECT CHAMPION ROLE AND ITS CRITICALITY

José Manuel Esteves

Departament de Llenguatges i Sistemes Informàtics
Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain
jesteves@lsi.upc.es

Joan Antoni Pastor

Universidat Internacional de Catalunya, Barcelona Spain
jap@unica.edu

ABSTRACT

Existence of an adequate project champion role has been identified as a critical success factor in ERP implementation projects. However, the figure of the project champion is not yet quite well understood. Some authors relate it with the project sponsor figure while others relate it with the project manager figure. This paper tries to clarify these concepts. Our research framework has been based upon an extensive ERP literature review and a web survey. The findings of this survey show that the adequate project champion role is that of the project sponsor; respondents also think that both project manager and project sponsor are critical to the success of an ERP implementation project and not merely the project champion figure. We also show the interdependence between project sponsor role, project manager role and ERP project success, for which we present an interdependence model.

INTRODUCTION

Several authors have acknowledged the importance of strong project leadership in the form of project champions, executive sponsors, project managers and steering committees (e.g., Beath 1991, Morris 1996). The concepts of Chief Project Officer (CPO), project champion, project sponsor, project leader and project manager are commonly used in Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) implementation projects and there is still confusion about their similarities and differences. Researchers such as Sumner (1999) and Parr et al. (1999) have identified the project champion role as a critical success factor (CSF) in ERP implementations, while Bancroft et al (1998) defined as a CSF that the project manager should be capable. We have unified this and other CSFs in a unified model for ERP implementation projects (Esteves and Pastor 2000). Then, we have studied the relevance of each CSF along the phases of SAP implementation projects (Esteves and Pastor 2001). Esteves and Pastor (2001) show that the adequate project champion role CSF has the highest relevance along the phases of a SAP implementation project except for the third phase (realization phase), since this phase is dedicated to configuration tasks, when the merely champion amounts to guarantee that everything goes according to the plan.

This ongoing research paper tries to clarify the concepts around ERP project championship and to analyze their criticality in an ERP implementation. We followed a qualitative research approach to

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address the arising research questions. The paper is structured as follows. First, we explain the research questions and framework. Next, we describe the project champion, project sponsor and project manager figures based upon our literature review. Then, we explain the results of the web survey, which has been our main research instrument. Finally, we provide two working definitions of project sponsor and project manager and we propose an interdependence model stating the relationships between these roles and ERP project success. We present some conclusions and further work at the end.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND FRAMEWORK

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

a) Who is the project champion in an ERP implementation, the project sponsor or the project manager?

b) Who is more critical in an ERP implementation project, the project sponsor, the project manager or both?

Thus, we also attempt to clarify the above functions and roles in an ERP implementation project. We followed a qualitative research approach to answer these questions. This kind of research provides the understanding of a problem through research instruments that are oriented towards searching /determining/finding/analyzing the facts in a temporal and geographic mark, giving significance to the context and usage. The reason to choose qualitative research is due to the fact that the main concerns of this research are organizational rather than technological. We started the research by reviewing the related literature and then we created a web survey based in the research questions and our preliminary analysis. The reasons for the web survey choice were the low cost of this technique and the fact that it was the easiest way for us to access experts in the field and gather responses fast. A number of Internet links for ERP mailing lists, groups and forums were collected and evaluated. Then, the web survey was spread in all the main forums and mailing lists related with ERP systems that we considered relevant. The web survey was answered on-line, and the responses were sent to our email. The types of respondents are shown in figure 1. The number of respondents was 23 and most of them were implementation consultants. We think the main reason for this relies in the fact that implementation consultants use more forums and mailing lists to share information.
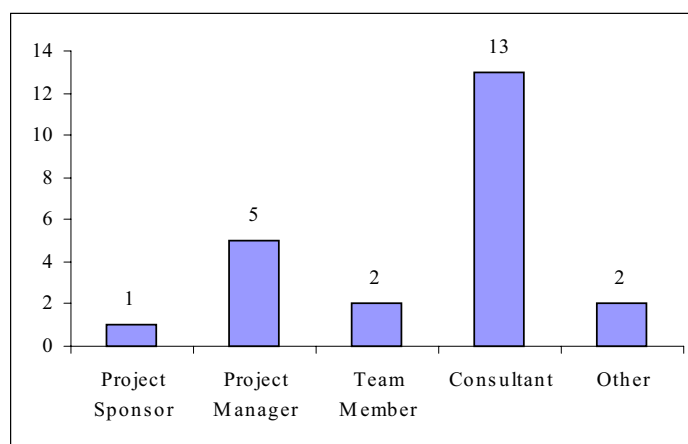

Figure 1 - Types of respondents in our web survey.

OVERVIEW OF EXECUTIVE PROJECT ROLES

Next, we present the results of the literature review that we made in order to clarify and analyze our research focus in relation to project champion, project sponsor and project manager roles.

PROJECT CHAMPIONS

Although the term "project champion" is widely used in research articles, it is often studied without a clear definition and rigorous identification process. Roure (1999) made a literature review (see table 1) related with project champion definitions.

Authors	Definition
Beath (1991, p. 355)	"Information technology champions are managers who actively and vigorously promote their personal vision for using information technology, pushing the project over or around approval and implementation hurdles."
Chakrabarti and Hauschildt (1989, p. 166)	"The Champion (process promoter) acts as a linkage. He has the knowledge of the organization and knows who should be concerned with the innovation, thus connecting the sponsor with the expert. His strength is the ability to translate the technical language of the innovation into one which is commonly used in the organization. By becoming a salesman of the new idea , the champion is able to develop a plan of action. His diplomatic talents provide access to different people within the organization"
Day (1994, p.149)	"The agent who helps the venture navigate the socio-political environment inside the corporation"
Fischer et al. (1986, p. 13)	"The key characteristic of the product champion is the tension between the individual and what the organization wants".
Howell and Higgins (1990, p. 40)	Champions "make a decisive contribution to the innovation process by actively and enthusiastically promoting the innovation, building support, overcoming resistance and ensuring that the innovation is implemented".
Maidique (1980, p. 64)	"A member of an organization who creates, defines or adopts an idea for a new technological innovation and who is willing to risk his or her position and prestige to make possible the innovation's successful implementation"
Markham and Griffin (1998, p.437)	"A person who takes an inordinate interest in seeing that a particular process or product is fully developed and marketed".
Markham et al. (1991, p. 219)	"A role where individuals are strong advocates for a project and generate positive behavioral support for an innovation during its development or work on behalf of the project in the face of organizational neutrality or opposition"
Roberts and Fusfeld (1981, p. 186)	"Recognizing, proposing, pushing and demonstrating a new (his or her own or someone else's) technical idea, approach or procedure for formal management approval".
Schon (1963, p. 84)	"Essentially the champion must be a man willing to put himself on the line for an idea of doubtful success. He is willing to fail. But he is capable of using any and every means of informal sales and pressure in order to succeed".
Smith et al. (1984, p. 25)	"Sells idea to obtain resources. The major salesman to management for accelerating progress toward commercialization".

Table 1. Some champion definitions found in literature (source Roure 1999).

Roure (1999) discovered that definitions of a project champion found in the literature reveal wide variations among researchers. None of these researchers mention clearly who represents the figure of the project champion: the project sponsor or the project manager. Based on the literature review, Roure (1999, p. 4) defined a project champion as "any individual who made a decisive contribution to the innovation by actively and enthusiastically promoting its progress through critical stages in order

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to obtain resources and/or active support from top management". Based in literature on organizational innovation and project champions, Beath (1991) refers that project champions operate using three types of resources: information to evaluate, choose and sell an innovation; material resources to obtain the necessary information and to test and make transitions; and political support to guarantee both the availability of the material resources and, eventually the rewards for successful innovations.

PROJECT SPONSORS

A project sponsor could also be a called product sponsor, product manager, product director, account manager or business unit manager (Whitten 1999, p. 12). According to Kale (2000, p. 230), "the sponsor point is a senior executive champion of change who by his or her actions and communications helps in maintaining project credibility, momentum, and committed support throughout the company". The author defines the figure of chief project officer as "a member of the project's steering committee that has enough responsibility and authority to manage day-to-day operational project-related issues and meet all project-related resource requirements". This figure is the project sponsor. Parr et al. (1999) evidence the confusion between project sponsor and project manager, when they write that "although they did not distinguish champions from sponsors, interviewees agreed that the presence of a champion had facilitated many successful projects. This person was the one who was unswerving in promoting the benefits of the new system, even when users lauded (as they frequently did) the advantages of the old system".

Instead of referring to the project sponsor figure, Welti (1999) explains the role of the steering committee chairman. The characteristics of this chairman are: ownership and leadership of the steering committee, respected and accepted authority, identification with the project and full support demonstration and close cooperation with the project manager. Rosario (2000) mentions that project sponsor commitment is critical to drive consensus and to oversee the entire life cycle of implementation. Whitten (1999, p. 12) refers that "it is important for every project or product to have a sponsor who will champion its cause from a business perspective, and help remove obstacles that might harm its overall success".

PROJECT MANAGERS

Bancroft et al. (1998, p. 137) mention that "the successful project manager integrates concerns that would otherwise fall between the cracks, and communicates with all those involved. These apolitical issues require a sensitivity to the three perspectives - technical, business, and change management. Unless the project leader is sensitive to the impact of each of these elements on the project as a whole, he or she is likely to get caught by the sometimes conflicting requirements". In their work these authors relate project manager with the project leader figure.

Jurison (1999, p. 22) quotes that project manager's "responsibility is to direct and coordinate all activities to meet the objectives of the project within budget and schedule". Some authors (Thamhain 1991, Pettersen 1991, Einsiedel 1987) show that, apart from generic project management skills and knowledge, project managers, to be effective, need knowledge and understanding of: the technology of the project, the project application area, the organization or organizations in which the project is located and the market in which the organization or organizations are operating.

Welti (1999) mentions that the project manager is the overall leader of the project: "their main task is managing, leading and coaching. They have to make the implementation as easy as possible, and

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create a pleasant atmosphere and environment for the project members to work in". According to Welti (1999) the skills of a good project manager are: leadership, business management know-how, coaching, flexibility, acceptance, analytical abilities and stress resistance. The project manager reports directly to the steering committee the project status and seeks advice from the committee on a variety of project issues including direction, scope and funding (Purba et al. 1995).

WEB SURVEY ANALYSIS

In this section we analyze the two web survey questions in detail. Note that we did not provide any definition of project sponsor or project manager before the questions, to avoid conditioning the opinions of respondents.

P1 - Who do you think is the ERP project champion, the project sponsor or the project manager? And why?

Most of the respondents answered that the project sponsor is the champion (see figure 2). The main reasons for that choice were:

– Because usually s/he has authority to bring the required resources to the project. Most of the respondents focused on financial resources.

– To control costs and time of the project rather than to manage them.

– To convey the right message to the organization and choose the right people to run the system after the implementers have left.

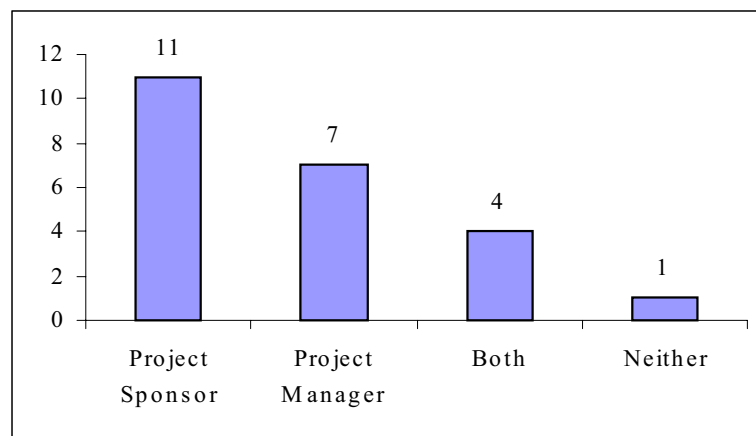– Because s/he is in a position to influence the people and business processes.

Figure 2 - Identification of project champion figure.

We analyzed the answers by respondent type (see table 2) and all types confirmed that the project champion is the project sponsor, except for two project team members that opted by the project manager figure. In our opinion, this is because the leader of the project team is in fact the project manager, the figure that is in permanent contact with team members and helps and controls their work. One of the consultants answered that neither project sponsor nor manager are the figure of project champion. His comments were: "the project champion is an operational manager, responsible for ´championing´ the project at senior management level".

Respondent type	Project champion figure				
	Project sponsor	Project manager	Both	Neither	Total
Project sponsor	1				1
Project manager	3	1	1		5
Consultant	6	3	3	1	13
Team member		2			2
Other	1	1			2
Total	11	7	4	1	23

Table 2 – Identification of project champion by respondent type.

P2- Who do you think is more critical, project sponsor, project manager, or both?

To this question, 14 respondents mentioned that both functions are critical to the ERP implementation project success (see figure 3).
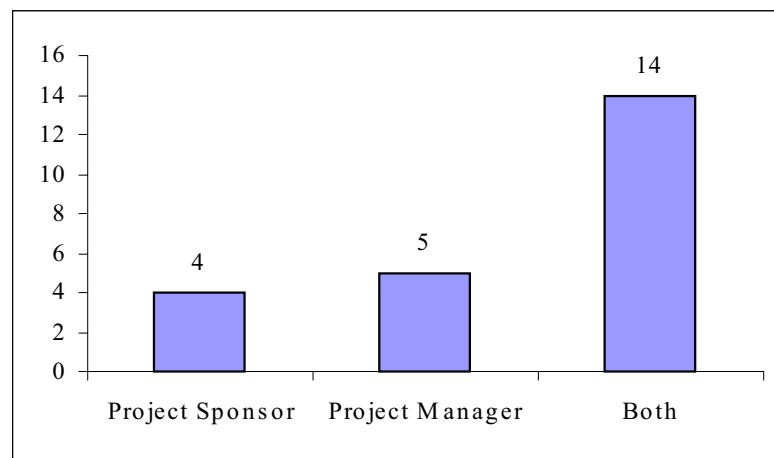

Figure 3 - Identification of the most critical figure in an ERP implementation.

The second most mentioned was the project manager figure. The argumentation for project sponsor choice was that:

– The project sponsor is the critical link in the whole process. The seriousness of the management or the business is required at all times and s/he must make sure all are involved.

– The project sponsor always has more authority and power. Typically s/he is the CEO.

– The project sponsor is the one that has the financial responsibility and the project ownership.

The reasons for project manager choice were:

– The project manager has the responsibility to perform the commission of the sponsor and to report to the sponsor those key factors which keep the project alive. It is not the responsibility of the project manager to make decisions on whether or not a project is completed but to report concerns of the project and cost performances that are necessary for the fiscal intermediary (sponsor) to base their decisions on.

– Operational management of the project is critical to its success; a project cannot succeed with a poor manager, while it can succeed with a poor sponsor.

– The project manager must have a complete understanding of the entire ERP package and the business processes within the company. S/he must look at the entire organization in order to make sure that all business processes can be accounted for. The project sponsor only needs to be able to discuss the advantages of the ERP project on an extremely high level.

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The reasons for the choice of both roles as equally critical were:

– A good project manager brings all the pieces of the implementation together in a timely, effective manner, which builds and keeps team company morale high on the new system. A good project sponsor keeps the company and its managers focused on the new system, keeps distractions out of the way, and leads the company into the new system. Both complement and may help each other. Both are key to a successful system. Each person separately can be successful but will not deliver a fully useful system. During the implementation you definitely need project sponsor support. The sponsor has the authority to allocate resources to the project. The project manager assigns tasks to those resources based on the project plan.

– The project manager is critical because of his/her responsibilities mentioned above. The sponsor has the resources or can provide the resources, like people or money and something very important which is the motivation for everyone else.

PROPOSED WORKING DEFINITIONS

Based in the literature review and the web survey answers, we propose a definition for both the project sponsor and the project manager figure:

– The ERP project sponsor is the person devoted to promote the ERP project, who has the ownership and responsibility of obtain the project resources. He must control and monitor the project, helping remove obstacles in order to facilitate the success of the ERP project. Usually this figure is a senior executive of the company.

– The ERP project manager is the person devoted to plan, lead and control the project on the run in its several tasks. He is also responsible for ensuring the scope is properly and realistically defined, and communicating it to the whole company. One of his/her most important tasks is to promote good working relationships across the project.

The data from the web survey also evidences the relationship and the interdependencies between project sponsor and project manager, and between these roles and ERP project success (see figure 4).
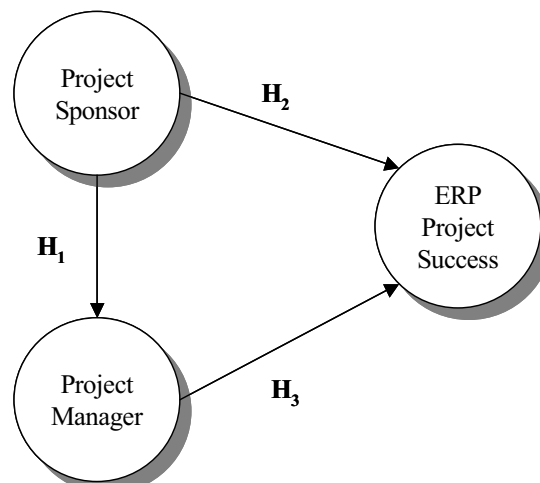

Figure 4 -.An interdependence model proposal

Based on these interdependencies, we define three hypotheses for further research:

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H1 - there is a positive relationship between project sponsor role and project manager role

H2 - there is a positive relationship between project sponsor role and the success of the ERP implementation project.

H3 - there is a positive relationship between project manager role and the success of the ERP implementation project.

Currently, we are collecting data with a new survey to verify these hypotheses and then, we attempt to use the partial least squares method to analyze the model proposed. Partial least squares (PLS) is a "second generation regression model that combines a factor analysis with linear regressions, making only minimal distribution assumptions" (Gefen et al. 2000). PLS is an exploratory rather than confirmatory technique. In that sense, this technique is the most appropriate for our exploratory study. According to Chin (1998) and Thompson et al. (1995) PLS does not require strong theory and can be used as a theory-building method. The other main reason to choose the PLS method deals with the fact that PLS is suited for small samples. A PLS overview and explanation on how we intend to apply the technique with the correspondent survey can be found in Esteves et al. (2002).

With regard to the hypotheses defined above, the first one seems an obvious relationship since the project sponsor is the responsible for the resources of the ERP project and the project manager manages these resources. However, this relationship goes beyond the resources management view, because this is very important for the organizational change that occurs in the organization and that should be carefully be controlled and managed by top managers. The project sponsor is the linkage between the project manager and senior managers. The second reason to define explicitly this hypothesis is due to the fact of PLS model fit. The model must be as complete as possible with the definition of all the relationships that conceptually explain the data obtained through the survey. An important task will be the assessment of PLS model fit using a set of fit indices currently available (Gefen et al. 2000).

CONCLUSIONS

This ongoing research study provides the preliminary findings of a web survey based upon a prior literature review that attempts to clarify the roles of project champion, project sponsor and project manager in ERP implementation projects, and to define their criticality. Although the number of answers is not statistically significant, these exploratory findings can be useful for further work. Qualitatively, the survey shows that the project champion is definitively the project sponsor. Second, the survey evidences that both project sponsor and project manager are equally critical in an ERP implementation project. Both have important roles to play during the ERP implementation project, the success of which is facilitated by the adequate combination of both roles. While the project sponsor is devoted to promote the ERP project and has the ownership and responsibility of obtain the project resources, the project manager is devoted to plan, lead and control the project on the run in its several tasks. The usage of both roles depends on the size of the ERP project and the resources the organization dedicates to it. This issue is especially important in ERP projects related with small and medium enterprises (SMEs) due to the limited number of human resources available.

An important question that arises from this study is how project sponsors and managers can be found within organizations? Another aspect upon which some interviewees focused was that sometimes project sponsors and managers are people external to the organization, which may difficult the apprehension and diffusion of ERP knowledge within the organization. Further research should focus on these aspects and on the resources needed to help both roles in the accomplishment of their work. This study helps to clarify the confusion related with the definition in a flat homogeneous manner of an adequate project champion role as a CSF. Based on this study we pretend to adapt our CSF unified model for ERP implementations in order to consider these findings. Thus, instead of referring to

adequate project champion role as a CSF, we will refine it into adequate project sponsor and project manager specific roles. We also pretend to validate our proposed interdependence model using a new survey for this purpose.

ACKNWOLEDGEMENTS

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