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GOAL ASSESSMENT DECISION JUDGEMENTS IN IS/IT PROJECTS

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Abstract

This development paper sets out proposals to examine how project management practitioners articulate their decision judgements (project goal assessment) of failure of information systems and information technology (IS/IT) projects. It is intended that to undertake the study, data from interviews with practitioners from seven countries will be employed. Data analysis will undertaken utilising NVivo (V10). The study is likely to find that while some project management practitioners perceive IS/IT project failures as measureable along a goal assessment continuum, others may consider failure categorically by explicitly conceptualising either its presence or absence.
Keywords: IS/IT, Project, Decisions

1.0   Introduction

This development paper proposes to examine how IS/IT project managers articulate their decision judgements (project goal assessment) of project failure. More specifically, this study will seek to explore the measurement-assessment criteria that IS/IT project managers may apply when making judgements on project goals. By doing so, we seek to extend earlier studies on project manager heterogeneity and how such heterogeneity impacts upon perception congruence relating to project failure goal attainment (Chipulu et al. 2014, 2015; Ojiako and Chipulu 2014; Ojiako et al. 2014). By undertaking such studies, we hope to contribute to the literature that discusses how IS/IT project decision judgements are framed. Such an understanding is likely to enhance our ability to optimise project decision making and facilitate an understanding of the structure of power relationships within project teams (Ojiako et al. 2014), thus contributing to team-wide project commitment and harmony (Ojiako et al. 2015).

We justify the need for such studies based on project management literature, which suggests that project goal assessment of failure is dynamic, multi-dimensional in nature, and socially constructed (Pinto and Prescott 1988; Shenhar et al. 1997, 2001; Smith-Doerr et al. 2004). Furthermore by examining decision judgements (project goal assessment) heterogeneity, our proposed study responds to existing calls for more research on the influence of heterogeneity on decision judgements (see Croson et al. 2013).

2.0   The study rationale

The justifications for this study are as follows. Firstly, the literature (Pinto and Prescott 1988; Shenhar et al. 1997, 2001; Smith-Doerr et al. 2004) ascertains that project decision judgements are not only multi-dimensional, but also socially constructed and dynamic. More specifically, Tucker (2004; p. 162) attests to the 'ambiguous nature" of such assessments. Secondly, project decision judgements are heterogeneous (Chipulu et al. 2014; Ojiako et al., 2014). That is, they are 'different' and these differences are dependent on assessments made by practitioners who influenced by demographic differences such as age, gender and project role, are likely to arrive at different decisions (see also Appelt et al. 2011). Noting that project teams are amorphous (Scott-Young and Samson 2008; Ollus et al. 2011) and ephemeral, much confusion is likely to exist within project teams due to such heterogeneity. It therefore becomes important to create awareness among practitioners about how project management practitioners articulate their decision judgements (project goal assessment) of failure. For one, such knowledge is likely to reduce uncertainty and resulting non-optimised decision-making.

3.0   Prior literature

Information Systems/Information Technology (IS/IT) is a core competitive, strategic and operational competency for organisations (Ojiako et al, 2012; Ojiako et al., 2013). The strategic importance of IS/IT to organisations. Although IS/IT is recognised as a core intellectual component of any organisation's resilient infrastructure, the implementation of IS/IT into the operations of organisations is not necessarily a characteristic of a technical endeavour; rather it is an endeavour that should focus on softer and more people-oriented organisational issues.

Project failure is a concept that features heavily within project management literature (Pinto and Prescott 1988; Alderman et al. 2005; Mahring and Keil 2008 and Bharadwaj et al. 2009; Patanakul et al. 2010). Project 'failure' is defined as occurring when projects are "both cancelled and completed with a very poor product or process quality"… and are likely to … deliver[s] something other than what was originally specified or expected (Jorgensen 2014, p157). Failure can also relate to an inability to reconcile not only implicitly- and explicitly-stated project objectives (Anand et al. 2010; Ojiako et al. 2014) but also technical and business specifications (Shenhar et al. 1997, 2001). High project failure rates have been reported within IS/IT (see Cecez-Kecmanovic et al., 2014) and take different forms.

A review of literature suggests that project failure is measured and defined in various statistical ways encompassing time, cost and quality (De Wit 1988; Atkinson 1999; Nelson 2005). The drivers of IS/IT project failure have therefore been well articulated and documented in the literature (Savolainen et al. 2012 and Dwivedi et al. 2013).

Our study builds on the previous works of Chipulu (see Chipulu et al. 2014, 2016) and Ojiako (Ojiako and Chipulu 2014; Ojiako et al. 2014). For example, Chipulu et al. (2014), Ojiako et al. (2014) and Ojiako and Chipulu (2014) found that over the lifecycle of projects, demographic variables such as project role, age, gender and national culture moderated not only the degree of importance that practitioners assigned to various project failure criteria, but also the formation and eventual revision of project-related decisions. Similarly, in recent studies undertaken by

Chipulu et al. (2016), heterogeneity has manifested in organisation-level decisions. Here, specific national cultural dimensions were found to be more salient than others in advertisements for project management positions.

Although it can be argued that the literature on impact of heterogeneity on project goal assessment judgements remains inconclusive, we can still contend that, based on the embryonic albeit burgeoning nature of the known literature, research is converging towards a recognition of the impact of heterogeneity in response to not the presence of competing project and organisational goals (see Bunduchi et al. 2008; Bhakoo and Choi 2013) but also the conceptual ambiguities of service operations projects (see Ojiako et al. 2013).

Figure 1 below depicts how this study is intended to be conceptualised.

Figure 1 Basic Conceptualisation of the Research Context
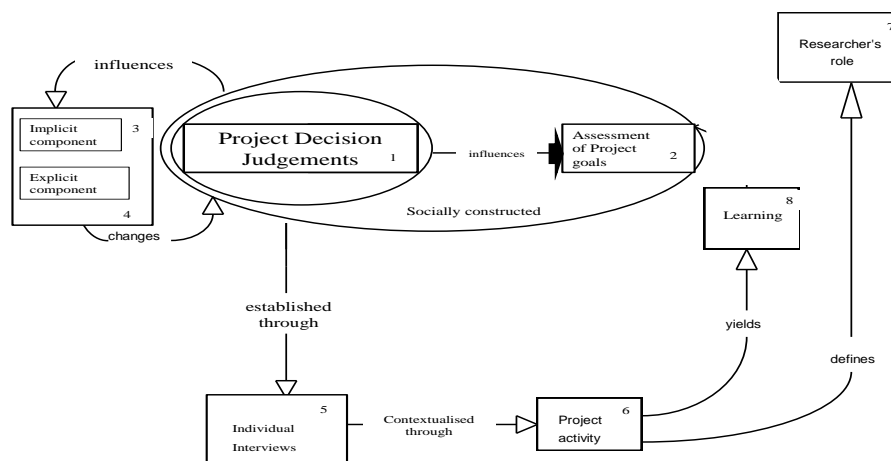
4.0 Research method

4.1 Development of survey and research questions

The data-gathering instruments will be developed from earlier studies by Shenhar et al. (1997, 2011). The interview schedule consisting of three questions, based on the following drivers and rationale. For the first research question, we are interested in exploring the ambiguity behind the notions of 'failure''. For example, what does it actually mean to judge a project as having failed? Does failure have different grades; that is, could failure be differentiated based on level of severity? The leads to the proposed first research question: Research Question 1 (RQ1) - Do project managers assess decision judgements (project goal assessment) of project 'failure' as independent concepts?

For the second research question, we are interested in understanding whether when faced with specific incidents in their project environments, managers will make decisions that reflect, amongst others, their socio-cultural expectations. This leads us to the proposed second research question; Research Question 2 (RQ2): When are decision judgements (project goal assessment) of failure formed by project managers and do these assessments change with time? Our rationale for this question concerns

reaching an understanding of when final 'reliable' or 'stable' decision judgements (project goal assessment) of failure are formed by project managers.

We propose the third research question (RQ3): How are explicit decision judgements (project goal assessment) of failure assessed and measured by project managers?) based on our interest in understanding how explicit decision judgements (project goal assessment) of failure are assessed and measured.

The proposed research framework is shown in Table 1, below.

Table 1. Proposed five-staged research framework

Stage	Purpose	Phenomenon/Issue	Details
1	Articulates the phenomenon being explored.	The viability of current project failure measures in the project manager decision judgements (project goal assessment).	Literature suggests an element of heterogeneity in project failure decision judgements (project goal assessment).
2	Research questions developed.	Framing of the research questions is informed by earlier literature of Stuart *et al*. (2002, p.422) focusing on theory testing.	Three research questions developed from the literature are presented.
3	The study structure.	Interviews.	Reference is made to earlier works of Handfield and Melnyk (1998, p.324), Stuart *et al*. (2002, p. 422) and Voss *et al*. (2002, p 198) in order to glean data from interviews. The data-gathering instrument was developed from Shenhar *et al*. (1997, 2001).
4	Data analysis.	NVivo.	Three-staged approach.
5	What are the lessons gleaned from the study?	Project failure	The importance of context in explicit decision judgements (project goal assessment) of project failure is emphasised.

4.2   Obtaining data

Data will be obtained from interviews earlier undertaken as part of a wider study sponsored by the Project Management Institute (PMI), first reported in Ojiako et al. (2012). Data analysis is currently being undertaken using NVivo (Ver 10) with some preliminary output. For brevity (the output from the NVivo analysis) is not shown in the paper as the significance of the relationship strings from NVivo are still being analysed, thus its significance is yet to be ascertained.

5.0   Conclusions

Answers to the three research questions are likely to be of significance. In terms of the first research question (RQ1: Do project managers assess decision judgements (project goal assessment) of project 'failure' as independent concepts?), its

significance is in its ability to confirm whether judgements (project goal assessment) of failure of IS/IT projects affirm the general tendency of project management practitioners to discern 'failure' as primarily different in terms of consequences (see Mahring and Keil 2008, Bharadwaj et al. 2009). We observe that both Shenhar et al. (2001) and Pereira et al. (2008) point to a number of reasons why it may not been easy to establish precise conceptual boundaries between them. For example, 'failure' is a subjective notion.

In terms of the second research question (RQ2: When are decision judgements (project goal assessment) of failure formed by project managers and do these assessments change with time?), the literature currently suggest (see Ojiako et al. 2013) that the true output of projects may never really known until after the project has been completed or commissioned. It is thus important to explore this notion within the context of IS/IT projects. The literature tells us that IS/IT projects are sometimes conceptualised years prior to implementation. Thus it is important to understand whether the timelessness of IS/IT conceptualisation is also 'transferred' to the decision judgements of those responsible for its implementation.

Finally, the third (and last) research question (RQ3: How are explicit decision judgements (project goal assessment) of failure assessed and measured by project managers?), sought to understand how explicit decision judgements of failure are assessed and measured by project managers. Our proposition is that in addressing this question, we will be able to understand how specific sources of ambiguity, in order words, interpretative spaces emanating from low information clarity may serve as a platform for project managers to alternate their interpretations of the 'failure' phenomenon of projects. This research question is being driven by our review of extant literature on ambiguity in decision-making (Pich et al. 2002; Abdallah and Langley, 2014). This literature alludes to the fact that differences in perspectives of project failure may lead to task uncertainty.

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