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Public perspectives on project success – influenced by national culture?

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Abstract

Project success, both the determination and the achievement, is a widely discussed subject. Literature seems to agree on one thing: whether a project is considered a success depends on the perspective taken to judge it. But how the *public project manager* determines the success of his project is not clearly discussed in literature. In 2013 we conducted a research using Q-methodology to reveal which success criteria are important to Dutch public project managers who are in charge of construction projects. In the follow up research, described in this paper, we will extend the research to several European countries. Within the European Union national governments are the largest initiators and clients of large infrastructure projects, which are put up for tender in an international market. In this international context it is essential for private companies, consultancies or contractors, to better understand their public client, in order to come up with internationally competitive bids, successfully collaborate and complete complex projects. The objective of this follow up research is to expose managerial viewpoints on project success in different European countries. The respondents in the research performed early 2014 are governmental project managers, who are responsible for the execution of an internal assignment and who are the representative of the client to the contractor. The position of the respondents in the government organization is similar to the research already carried out in the Netherlands. Based on the research (Hofstede, 2001) into differences in the national culture of countries variations between these countries can be expected. This paper describes the set-up of the study and hypotheses, based on literature, influences of culture on the perception of project success.

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1. Introduction

Project success, both the determination and the achievement, is a widely discussed subject in literature (Ogunlana & Toor, 2010; J.K. Pinto & Slevin, 1988; Van Loenhout, 2013; Wit, 1988). A number of studies have tried to gain insight in the key success criteria used by different parties (Bryde & Robinson, 2005; Frodell, Josephson, & Lindahl, 2008; R. J. Turner, 2007), but these studies only very limitedly relate to the public sector. The role of the client within (construction) projects has also been discussed thoroughly (Shenhar, Dvir, Levy, & Maltz, 2001; Thompson, 1991), but not as much in an active role concerning project success. Which is especially notable since literature seems to agree on one thing: whether a project is considered a success depends on the perspective taken to judge it. But how the *public project manager* determines the success of his project is not clearly discussed in literature.

Recent research on a Dutch level (Van Loenhout, 2013) revealed three different viewpoints or *perspectives* on project success taken by the public managers, acting at the same position in a construction project in which public and private parties were involved. This research used Q-methodology, which is particularly useful when researchers wish to understand and describe the variety of subjective viewpoints on an issue. It was concluded that the first perspective was intrinsic, the second partly intrinsic and partly caused by its environment and the third perspective stemmed mainly from the organizational environment.

Within the European Union national governments are the largest initiators and clients of large infrastructural projects, which are put up for tender in an international market. In this international context it is essential for private companies, consultants or contractors, to better understand their public client, in order to come up with internationally competitive bids, collaborate successfully and complete complex projects. However, there is limited literature available on what success criteria are considered essential by the public client/manager, leading to mismatch of expectations and other related issues. Differences in business culture among countries amplify the potential mismatch, so we need to incorporate cultural insights in this specific context (Jackson & Aycan, 2006). Better understanding of possible foreign clients will increase the chances of private companies to come up with competitive bids and increase their portfolio of international assignments.

1.1 Objectives and Limitations

The objective of this follow up research is to expose managerial viewpoints on project success in different European countries. The research is limited to public project managers acting at the intersection of their own public organization and the private partner in their project. These project managers are the representative of the public organization to the market and within their own organization they are executing an internal assignment. They are responsible for the preparation and execution of the project. The research includes public project managers from Belgium, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and the UK. The countries are selected from the NETLIPSE network. This a network for the dissemination of knowledge on the management and organization of large infrastructure projects in Europe. The main objective of NETLIPSE is to have a positive influence on Europe's economy and sustainability by improving the successful development, delivery and operation of Large Infrastructure Projects (LIPs). This research aims to indicate how cultural differences affect manager's perspectives on project success, in order to contribute to the understanding of the public side of public private collaboration in the increasingly international construction industry. From this new insights we expect to be able to indicate learning opportunities.

In this paper we present the first part of the research. By combining the public success criteria of Van Loenhout (2013) with the cultural theory of Hofstede (1980, 2005) we determine possible cultural influences on public project success criteria. These insights are then used in subsequent research to find public project management perspectives on an European level (results expected later in 2014).

2. Literature overview

2.1 Public project success

Success criteria need to be separated from success factors, as both appear often in literature. Criteria are the measures by which projects can be judged in terms of failure or success (Cooke-Davis, 2002). In the early years of project management it was said that projects were successful if delivered on time, within budget and satisfied the set quality measures (Atkinson, 1999; Jha, 2011; Lim & Mohamed, 1999; Mantel & Meredith, 2009; Morris, Pinto, & Söderlund, 2010). De Wit (1988) showed that these measures alone are not sufficient to determine the project's success. The increase in scope and complexity of contracts and projects lead to an increase in criteria (Bryde & Robinson, 2005), like safety, quality of the set requirements or the effect on the contracting organization, amongst others (Cox, Issa, & Ahrens, 2003; Mantel & Meredith, 2009; Winch, 2010). Sometimes a distinction is made between project success, as to the success of the outcome or benefits of the project (Shenhar et al., 2001) and project management success, related to the controllability of the process up to project delivery and handover (Munns & Bjeirmi, 1996). This paper refers to both 'project management success' and 'project success'.

Although some studies tried to approach project success from different perspectives (Bryde & Robinson, 2005; Frodell et al., 2008; Lim & Mohamed, 1999; R. J. Turner, 2007), most focus on the success criteria relevant for the executing party, represented by the commercial project manager (Cooke-Davis, 2002; Munns & Bjeirmi, 1996; Jeffrey K Pinto, Slevin, & English, 2009; Wit, 1988). If encountered, the client organization means usually a private sector client (Shenhar et al., 2001; Thompson, 1991) and not the public (governmental) party that is commissioning the large infrastructure works. The client is often viewed from an external perspective –how is he perceived by the private commissioner or by other roles, and its main task seems the involvement and provision of management support. Literature can be found on relationship, cooperation and information exchange between private managers and clients (Chan, Chan, Fan, Lam, & Yeung, 2006; Jeffrey K Pinto et al., 2009; Thompson, 1991; J. R. Turner & Müller, 2004; Webber & Klimoski, 2004), but with little emphasis on the clients view on success criteria. Even if some public success criteria are mentioned, supposedly important aspects for the public side like political influence or sustainability, are left unmentioned (Bryde & Robinson, 2005; Toor & Ogunlana, 2010). Recently, public actors tend to copy the well-developed private success indicators, with the risk of inadequacy. There is a lack of project management literature with relation to the goals and success criteria, as perceived by the public project manager, who is situated between the influencers of his own political oriented organization and the commercial contractors. The knowledge gap on the success criteria of this public project manager adds to the incomprehension and lack of communication between public and private parties when executing a project together.

Table 1. Concourse of 19 success criteria extracted from Van Loenhout (2013)

Criteria		
1.	Continuation of client organization	11. Project specific political or social factors
2.	Delivered on time	12. Quality
3.	Effect on the professional image of client organization	13. Right process is followed
4.	Efficient use of the available resources	14. Safety
5.	Fit for purpose	15. Satisfies needs of project team
6.	Good working relationship with contracting partners	16. Satisfies needs of shareholders
7.	Impact on the environment, sustainability	17. Satisfies needs of stakeholders
8.	Learning opportunities for client organization	18. Satisfies needs of users
9.	Personal growth and development	19. Within budget
10.	Profitability for contractor	

To cover up the lack of literature on success views of the public project manager, a first step was taken by Van Loenhout (2013) who conducted a research on public project success in The Netherlands. Based on extensive literature and some test interviews a concourse of 19 criteria was used to frame the success criteria of public project managers (Table 1). The same concourse will be used to frame the views on public project success in Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Belgium and the United Kingdom, to see if cultural aspects influence the perspectives on public project success and thus the view on public project success differs per country.

2.2 Cultural dimensions

Among all its various definitions, culture is seen as the representation of the shared values of a community. Cross-cultural studies seek to extract these shared values. The shared values reveal parts of the mental programming of a person, which defines attitude and behavior. Values are seen as "*broad tendency to prefer certain states of affairs over others*"(Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2005, p. 10). Kluckhohn (1951), cited by Hofstede (2001, p.5), defined culture as "*patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artefacts; the essential core of culture consist of traditional ideas and especially their attached values.*".

National cultures were distinguished and described throughout the literature based on the measurement and classification of values. Cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 2001) are clusters of interdependent values bound by some similarity, or aspects of culture that can be measured along different cultures, as ways to respond to universal problems of society. This paradigm was founded by Hofstede in the 1980. Hofstede founded the cultural dimension paradigm, based on a large empirical study via a questionnaire, performed on IBM employees from 50 countries. He conceptualized the results of factor analysis by defining initially four cultural dimensions: Masculinity/ Femininity (emotional gender roles), Individualism/ Collectivism (linked to interpersonal relations), Power distance (linked to inequality) and Uncertainty avoidance (linked to dealing with uncertainty). In later versions, he added Long/short term orientation or Pragmatism (linked to gratification postponed), and, based on Minkov's study, he recently integrated Indulgence/Restraint (linked to the gratification of human drives). Succeeding his work, other scientists either introduced new cultural dimensions, or described the same reality using different paradigms (Michael Minkov, 2007). Many of these however are strongly correlated to Hofstede's dimensions (Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Michael Minkov, 2007; Schwartz, 1999; Stumpf, 2011). Although Hofstede's data can be criticized on its age and lack of national representativeness (only IBM employees), we have to admit his pioneering job in cross-cultural studies. He acknowledged that World Value Survey data, if existent at the time he stated his theory, would have been ideal for the scope of his research. However, his theory is widely spread and acknowledged, there are rich literature sources and, over time, the validity of these dimensions has been confirmed by many studies (Oudenhoven, Timmerman, & Zee, 2007).

3. Research methodology

3.1 Q-methodology to reveal perspectives

Q-methodology is a method that can be used for studying subjectivity; it is a method of impression. Respondents are asked to relatively rank a number of success criteria in the Q-sort – the main tool in Q-methodology. This prioritizing brings about their subjective view on the subject. The Q-sample relating to the criteria to judge project success was extracted from 22 literature sources discussing the topic of project success and a number of field-tests of the initial Q-sample (Table1). From the Q-sample analysis two important conclusions were drawn. Firstly, considerable number of criteria cannot be copied literally from private to public project managers; due to the focus of literature on the private sector, the corresponding criteria and definitions are commercially oriented. Secondly a number of criteria that has received only limited attention in literature do seem to be applicable to the public sector, whereas they are not appropriate for the private sector.

The results from the performed Q-sorts form the raw data for the subsequent analysis. The analysis of this data aims at identifying common perspectives between groups of interviewees. If there is a group of people who have a similar view on certain important and unimportant criteria, there would be a high correlation between the Q-sorts (perspectives) of the people within this group. The Q-sorts of people loading on the same *factor* or *perspective* are highly correlated with each other and only little correlated with variables belonging to other groups. During and after the Q-sorting process respondents are asked to explain their choices, especially related to the highest and lowest ranked criteria. Finally, after the sorting process some additional questions can be asked. These answers are used for the qualitative interpretation of the perspectives.

3.2 Possible cultural influence on public success criteria

When people are asked to give their view on a subject, their culture penetrates into the process as it shapes their internal frame of reference. Q-methodology is, as mentioned, a method for studying subjectivity. In this research we are particular interested in the influence of cultural factors on the ranking made during the Q-sort on success criteria. We need to look at cultural aspects to be able to better interpret the factors resulting for the Q-sorts, as the communication and decision making manner is culturally different. To account for cultural differences, we need measurable, comparable cultural indicators. The purpose is to include cultural aspects in the Q-sort, by adding to the aspects checked into the interview a set of questions leading to statements that could eventually explain the success factors via a cultural prism. Within our research we use Hofstede's theory; more specific the dimensions that show large variations among the target countries (Table 2). We do not use dimensions that score almost similar in the countries of our research, but focus on those that record more variations among the country scores as we expect these to provide us insight in the found differences. Four dimensions are hypothesized to be of influence in valuing projects success criteria: *power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity* and *pragmatism* (former long term orientation). They are briefly explained (retrieved from http://geert-hofstede.com/dimensions.html):

- **Power Distance Index** *"The fundamental issue here is how a society handles inequalities among people. People in societies exhibiting a large degree of power distance accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place and which needs no further justification. In societies with low power distance, people strive to equalize the distribution of power and demand justification for inequalities of power."*
- **Uncertainty Avoidance Index** "*The uncertainty avoidance dimension expresses the degree to which the members of a society feel uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity. The fundamental issue here is how a society deals with the fact that the future can never be known: should we try to control the future or just let it happen? Countries exhibiting strong UAI maintain rigid codes of belief and behavior and are intolerant of unorthodox behavior and ideas. Weak UAI societies maintain a more relaxed attitude in which practice counts more than principles.*"
- **Masculinity Index** *"The masculinity side of this dimension represents a preference in society for achievement, heroism, assertiveness and material rewards for success. Society at large is more competitive. Its opposite, femininity, stands for a preference for cooperation, modesty, caring for the weak and quality of life. Society at large is more consensus-oriented."*
- **Pragmatic Index** – previously Long Term Orientation Index *"This dimension describes how people relate to the fact that so much that happens around us cannot be explained. In societies with a normative orientation most people have a strong desire to explain as much as possible. In societies with a pragmatic orientation, most people don't have a need to explain everything, as they believe that it is impossible to understand fully the complexity of life. People living in societies with a pragmatic orientation show an ability to accept contradictions, adapt according to the circumstances, a strong propensity to save and invest, thriftiness and perseverance in achieving results."*

Table 2. Target country scores on cultural dimensions of Hofstede (derived from http://geert-hofstede.com/countries.html

Cultural dimension	Scores on dimension						
	Belgium	Netherlands	Denmark	Finland	Norway	Sweden	UK
Power distance	*58*	*29*	*8*	*24*	*22*	*31*	*26*
Individualism vs Collectivism	81	87	80	67	74	71	98
Masculinity vs Femininity	*54*	*10*	*12*	*23*	*3*	*5*	*68*
Uncertainty avoidance	*83*	*43*	*14*	*49*	*40*	*29*	*26*
Pragmatic vs normative	*87*	*53*	*34*	*38*	*34*	*53*	*52*
Indulgence restraint	57	68	70	57	55	78	69

4. Research setup

4.1 Brief overview of the Dutch results

The Q-sorts conducted by 26 Dutch public project managers show the respondents' internal perspectives on project success. Based on the Q-sorts of the Dutch respondents three perspectives were extracted: the holistic and cooperative leader, the socially engaged, ambiguous manager and the executor of a top down assignment. The complete results of this research are submitted for publication (Koops, Loenhout, Hertogh, & Bakker, 2014 (expected)). Each perspective has its own view on which criteria determine project success. It was either 'in time' or 'within budget' that was prioritized, whereas 'quality' is a relatively unimportant success criterion to them. The criteria 'Profitability for contractor', 'Right process followed' (which were only sporadically mentioned in existing literature) and 'project specific political or social factors' (added) proved to be valuable in this context. Despite the differences in viewpoint, all public project managers seem to be very client-oriented; though differences in opinion exist in whom the most important client is and how this client is to be served well.

4.2 Setup of the international study

To gain insight in the project success perception of public project managers in European countries the research is extended to Finland, Sweden, Belgium, Denmark and the United Kingdom. The public organization that is responsible for infrastructure in these countries participate in the NETLIPSE network. In each country 6 to 8 public project managers, who match the conditions of the original P-set, are presented the list of the 19 criteria and asked to rank them from -3 (least important to determining project success) to +3 (most important to determining project success). The criteria, printed on cards, and the ranking sheet are presented. For those interviews which are held using the internet (Skype , Lync) an Excel-sheet is developed to sort the criteria by digital 'cards'. After the sorting is finished and the respondent is satisfied that the Q-sort represents his perspective, he is interviewed about the decisions made - the respondent is asked to explain the statements that scored high and those that scored low. After the actual Q-sorting process additional questions are asked to collect information that can be used to explain similarities or dissimilarities between respondents. For the research on European level additional questions are developed which relate to cultural aspects that might influence the success perception of the public project manager.

4.3 Possible influence of culture on success

Based on aspects relevant for our topic, additional questions are enounced to the Q-sort procedure for European public project managers. Though this research is set up to expose different views on project success held by public project managers in different countries, due to the personal approach it also contributes to the clarification of individual links to societal cultures (indicated as direction for further research by Peterson 2007). Hofstede's dimensions are characteristics of societies, not of individuals. According to Peterson (2007) these "characteristics mostly shape what people (…) find normal, but will have only a looser link to personal attitudes about what they

typically experience" (p.373-374). Table 3 shows Hofstede's cultural dimensions, and their hypothesized link with the possible public success criteria.

On each of the four differentiating dimensions several statements are formulated to establish if there is cultural influence on the respondents' rating of the success criteria. This part consists of a Likert scale-based questionnaire, a psychometric scale which has been commonly used in prior research on cross-cultural aspects. Respondents are asked if they (strongly) agree or (strongly) disagree with these statements. For example, respondents may avoid using extreme response categories (central tendency bias). Quite often, as in Hofstede's IBM questionnaire, odd response levels are chosen. Odd-number scales have a middle value – Neutral or Undecided. There might be response style bias issues with this type of scale. When presented with a 'safe' choice at the center of the scale, respondents are likely to select that, rather than reveal their 'true' opinion. This often happens when the questionnaire is administrated in English, and not in the mother tongue of the respondents (M Minkov, 2012) like in the present case. This bias is averted by using an even number of response levels (4) instead, which is actually a forced-choice scale. This approach encourages respondents to voice out. It is flanked by an additional option ('no opinion') for those respondents who truly cannot respond. The use of this option is discouraged by putting it aside.

Table 3 Possible connections between cultural dimensions and public success criteria

Cultural dimension	1.Continuation client organization	2.Delivered on time	3.Effect on image of client org.	4.Effect on use of resources	5.Fit for purpose	6.Good working relationship	7.Impact on environment	8.Learning opportunities for client	9.Personal growth t	10.Profitability for contractor	11.Project specific (…) factors	12.Quality	13.Right process followed	14.Safety	15.Satisfies needs of project team	16.Satisfies needs of shareholders	17.Satisfies needs of stakeholders	18.Satisfies needs of users	19.Within Budget
Power distance				X		X					X		X		X		X		
Uncertainty avoidance	X	X			X				X			X	X	X					X
Masculinity vs femininity						X	X		X		X				X	X	X	X	
Pragmatic vs normative	X		X	X		X		X	X						X		X		X

Power distance index

Power distance can be perceived especially in the subordination relationships surrounding the respondent. The project manager is the intermediate between his superiors at an organization and political level, his subordinates - the project team, and the contractors. The hierarchy between public manager and the private contractors may vary among different countries) as well as the hierarchy within the governmental organization. The hierarchy in the own organization is double edged – it can both refer to the relationship with their own superiors, and to the relationship of the project manager with his team leaders. In relation to political factors (11) and the project team (15) the aspect of centralization or decentralization is expected to manifest itself by either stricter steering and more detail level in the delegated task or delegating responsibilities as a whole and giving more room to manoeuvre. Practices like the influencing manner (if there is space for bargaining or authority is imposed in association with sanctions), and the information availability or constraints, can be seen in relation with project team, contractors and politics. Low power distance manifests also within the project organization, in the way supervisors relate to subordinates - the delegation of responsibilities along with decision making power, the level of autonomy for employees and the level of control over details on the side of supervisor (6, 15); overall more interdependency and less difference between hierarchical

levels

Uncertainty avoidance index (UAI)

High uncertainty avoidant societies show predilection for long-term employment within a company; therefore, the future of their organization is quintessential (1). This dimension also manifests itself by a predilection for work structure; rules and security are welcome and if lacking, it creates stress. There is a need for more formal and informal rules and procedures (although not always kept), in order to reduce ambiguity and anxiety to the unknown. Planning is favoured, some level of expertise is welcome, when change policies on the other hand are considered stressful. Certainty is often reached through more level of detail, context, and background –for example in scope definition. The rules and procedures system in place can be linked with project success criteria on process (13), quality (12) and safety (14). The focus of decision making also varies – from a good decision process (High UAI) to a good decision content-wise (Low UAI). The perception of time also varies among societies that score distinctively on this dimension. For High UAI there is a need to be busy with work, whatever the productivity level, while for Low UAI, time is money and one should work hard and efficient only when needed. In Low UAI societies, rules are viewed as restricting creativity and flexibility. In the work field there are less specialists and more reliance on common sense in decision making.

Masculinity Index

The management style and the approach to solving conflicts, based on this dimension's differentiation, will greatly determine the way work relations are conducted. This will have impact on the relations with contractors (6), the project team (15), and also with external parties that have influence on the project, like stakeholders, shareholders and users. It is expected that managers coming from societies that score low on masculinity will tend to cater to the needs of other parties and quickly reach consensus, whilst masculine societies will orient themselves towards achievement, and solving conflicts as they appear. Masculine societies reinforce assertiveness in decisions and competition; feminine societies show more concern for the relationships, and for reaching consensus among parties. Decision making has a participative character, and it is more likely that other actor's needs and opinions are considered more important as success criteria (15, 16, 17, and 18). Therefore, we can question the decision making style, to see the inclination of the respondents and thus the propensity to value more the above-mentioned criteria.

Pragmatism index

Pragmatic societies would put emphasis on perseverance and self-discipline (9), thrift (4, 19), preserving relations, cooperation and public accountability (6, 15-18), equality and a capacity to relativize and to adapt (8, 9), in order to achieve results in the highly changeable business environment. In comparison, normative societies would be more restrained by traditions and norms, less adaptive and focusing more on short-term decisions and bottom line results (2, 19) rather than on the long term quality, appropriateness and sustainability of the project (7, 12). Respect for tradition impedes innovation. The image is an important concept: for normative societies, it is humiliating for the ego to lose face in public, whilst in pragmatic societies; interrelatedness is supported by the shame of not having accomplished commitments.

After the performance of the Q-sort the respondents are asked if they (most) agree or (most) disagree with several statements that reflect the cultural dimensions. This results in scores that indicate the respondent's internal agreement with the cultural dimension. The answers are used in the qualitative interpretation process of the Q-sort data: the sense making of the quantitative found perspectives. The results of this part of the interview might explain differences in perspectives from national perspectives. The initial expectation is that, although the Saxon and Nordic cultures are similar in many aspects, their approach to success might differ in particular dimensions.

5. Discussion and concluding remarks

In Q-methodology the sample of persons that participate in the research is relatively small. With this methodology, the aim is to gain insight in the range of viewpoints. No claims are made about the frequency of their occurrence amongst the general population. A respondent group of 20 to 40 people is very reasonable in Q-

methodology and provides a good foundation for factor analysis. The total of respondents reaches this number, but the number of respondents per country is much lower. Because the participants per country do meet the preset conditions, these results can be used in the Q-methodology. Though more perspectives might be revealed when having more respondents per county.

Though the interviews are held in English (spoken and written), neither the interviewer nor the respondents in this research are native English speakers. Furthermore the interviewer was an international student from the Dutch Master program Construction Management and Engineering, from a European country not involved in the research. Several international researches indicate that if the interviewer is not their co-national, respondents are likely to give more positive presentations of themselves or their society (social bias). Finally, there is the issue of social desirability - image management or self-presentation bias, which may lead to biased information. This was taken into account in the design of the questionnaires by adding control questions and asking respondents to refer to specific situations.

In spring 2014, the actual data gathering takes place in several other European countries. Public project managers in the United Kingdom, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland and Belgium are interviewed and their Q-sorts are added to the existing database. The position of the respondents in the government organization is similar to the research already carried out in The Netherlands. We will investigate whether cultural influences result in different or more perspectives project success criteria. At the IPMA-world congress in the Autumn of 2014, we expect to present the first results of the data-analysis and discuss the outcomes.

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