

Investigating Critical Factors for Project Success and the Impact of Certification/Training: The United Nations Context

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates via a survey methodology, project critical success factors (CSFs) of a UN organization as perceived by computer and information technology trained and certified professionals. James Wan and Raafat Saade adopt their CSFs from three seminal studies done at different times. They provide a critical analysis of those factors for the 21st century United Nations context facing today an increasing need for agility in a fast-changing global environment. The authors investigate project CSFs in this study with two goals in mind: Firstly, to test the applicability of well-studied CSFs in the United Nations context, and secondly, to assess the influence of certification/training on these factors. Results show that 5 out of 13 factors differ in the United Nations context and that certification is not perceived as important while training is. Results are discussed bringing forth insights into the nature of UN-type organization project management. Results have shown that close to 40% of the CSFs previously studied do not apply to the United Nations context. At the same time, correlation analysis shows that training in project management knowledge areas are more important than actual certification.

KEYWORDS

Critical Success Factors, Project Management, Project Management Certification, Training, United Nations

INTRODUCTION

In today's rapidly changing world, the project management approach continues to be adopted by commercial and not-for-profit organizations. These organizations have increasingly been restructuring their work into programs, projects and products using various project management methodologies, frameworks and practices. They do so because of the project management promise to realize business objectives and strategies, keeping them in-line with overall business vision and goals.

This is not only true in the commercial sector, but in the United Nations (UN) system where agencies are pressured to engage in commercial businesses (extra-budgetary activities) to ensure total funding of their programmes. As a result, their Information Technology (IT) departments have

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widely deployed project management certification training programs, mainly PRINCE2® thereby starting the process of integrating a project management culture into their day to day business and by extension, culture. Today, they continue to increase the level of integration of the project management culture into their existing management frameworks and increasingly customize tools to monitor and control key performance indicator in order (1) to meet business expectations, and (2) to cope with the changing global economics needs in a complex politically driven environment.

It is accepted today, across all work sectors, that proper management of projects results in desired economic outcomes, thereby constituting one of the most important organization developments (Svejvig, & Andersen, 2015) – a trend that is now clearly evident in the UN system. Ever since the 1980's, research in project management has continued to be active, however the conceptual base has remained static with a technical perspective and focus (Morris et al., 2011). This classical view of project management has been challenged by many, viewing it as a technical tool to manage project schedule (time, money and scope). Since Jugdev, Thomas, and Delisle (2001), a new perspective of project management seems to be emerging as a holistic discipline where the real project is that the organization is temporary and is engaged in a continuous evolutionary spiral towards increasing levels of efficiencies and effectiveness. This is a clear demarcation from the classical view and takes the notion of project management into the complex terrain of organizational transition and change. The UN system has always been a pluralistic type of organization and this new view of project management is a perfect fit.

The United Nation is not-for-profit, engaged in primarily international development projects mostly financed with member states' development aid. These projects may be internal to the organization for building capacity (as an example) and external for the socioeconomic development process of developing countries. Considering the financial commitments and the associated activities worldwide, very little research has been done on project management in the UN system of organizations. To that effect, we strongly agree with Khang and Moe (2008) that the success of the not-for-profit projects, and of course its efficient and effective management, in the UN system of organizations determines on the one hand the socioeconomic progress in the recipient countries, and on the other, the contribution of the donor countries and agencies.

With the proliferation of project management throughout all sectors of industry, the maturation of project management as an academic discipline, and the desired certification requirements, PRINCE2® has successfully been introduced in the UN agencies, including the one studied herein, which we will refer to as UNO. Since 2009, the UNO as one of the UN specialized agencies started to implement PRINCE2® training within the section of information and communications technologies (ICT) as the standard methodology and daily practice for project management. To date, over 200 people have been trained in PRINCE2® with over 170 who have achieved certification at the Foundation and/or Practitioner level.

Evidently from the foregoing that understanding the critical factors for project success within the present context is essential. From an operational perspective, this kind on knowledge would help the UNO to plan more effectively for higher project management maturity and cultural change. From a strategic viewpoint, having a deeper understanding of how to manage these CSFs would enhance the ability of donors and implementing agencies to increase the probability of achieving an acceptable level of the desired outcomes, as well as provide a fertile platform for project monitoring, control and future project forecasting and funding (Aubry & Hobbs, 2011).

Consequently, after 3 years of implementation of the project management, we assess in this article the factors for successful project management and their relationships from the project manager perspective (certified, trained or both), with the primary aim to better understand and validate those that apply within the UN type of agencies.

We therefore present in this article, the context of this training/certification initiative in the UNO followed by the results of an evaluation of this initiative with two primary aims: (1) To update previously established (in an industry/commercial context) project management critical success factors

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