CULTURAL DIFFERENCE AND IT PROJECT SUCCESS, A FALLACY OR REALITY ON THE SOUTH AFRICAN ICT SECTOR

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ABSTRACT

With high incidences of IT project failure in South Africa and globally. The paper aims to raise awareness of the impacts that cultural differences can have on IT project success, if not appropriately incorporated in project risk planning for practitioners and academics. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews on 15 IT project managers. The research demonstrates that most IT project managers do not regard cultural differences as a risk to project success, and do not regard the impacts that cultural differences of project stakeholders could have on a project as necessary for inclusion in project risk planning. The paper suggests that IT project managers and project team members should be culturally aware and sensitive and that one of the ways to address the impacts of cultural differences in IT projects is to promote trust, collectivism with a team identity in multicultural project settings thereby enhancing project success.

Keywords: IT Project, Multicultural Project Setting, Project Success

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The information age in which we live in has heralded a new change in which Information Technology (IT) has become indispensable for the way organisations conduct business. Fast always connected 5G internet, smart connected devices, cheaper and smaller mobile processors, and cheap storage means that computers can be accessed anywhere and at any time. The by-product of this is that IT can generate vast amounts of data from which valuable information can be gleaned. Data mined from multiple sources, including social networking activity can be used to build models to predict and interpret customer behaviour thereby enabling businesses to provide customers with uniquely tailored experiences, in the process, giving them more value.

IT is therefore an integral component in an organisation's long-term strategic set of tools and an enabler of unlocking value. It is against this backdrop of IT strategic importance that the high incidence of IT project failure gives a cause for concern. According to Portman [1] failure rates of IT projects stand at 69% within the United States of America. From an African perspective, the picture is also gloomy. In a study where IT projects comprised 73% of the sample, Teklemariam [2] found that 71% of IT projects failed due to time constraints while 40% of IT projects exceeded their allocated budgets. South Africa's IT project success rate is higher than the US figures at just above 40% (Khoza and Marnewick [3] Sonnekus & Labuschagne [4]. In South Africa, there have been notable IT project failures such as the Administrative Adjudication of Road Traffic Offences (Aarto) and eNATIS systems (Nicola [5] Comins [6]. Other failures include the Gauteng IT tender project which was R25 Million over budget [7].

Given these alarming figures of IT project failure, what then are the criteria for project success? The most common definition of IT project success is what is commonly known as the 'Iron Triangle' (Mkoba & Marnewick [8]. According to this definition, a project is deemed successful if it meets the criteria of scheduling, budgeting, and quality. That is, a project is successful if it is delivered on time, within budget and meeting stakeholder requirements. Harwardt's [9] definition is slightly different in that IT project success is defined according to four high-level dimensions, which are planning success, implementation success, perception success and result success.

Lehtinen's et al., [10] view of the causes of software projects failure includes issues with people, methods, tasks and the environment, people-centric issues such as social interaction, the project team composition, cooperation, organisational structures. In addition, Nyasiro et al., [11] established the top six causes of IT project failure as inadequate system requirements engineering, inadequate project management, missing or incomplete features, inadequate project planning, integration failure and insufficient top management support. These issues touch on organisational behaviour and may have an impact on project success.

1.2 Problem Statement

According to Eberlein [12], despite IT projects continually taking on a global nature, empirical research on culture and project management continues to be limited and that most research with regards to the field is mostly concerned with tools, techniques, and processes. Henrie and Sousa-poza [13] state that several research has been done on outsourcing, global virtual teams, and international culture, with little being done on integrating these three aspects of the IT industry. According to Chipulu et al., [14], ignoring cultural complexity limits the ability to manage it. They further claim that the inconsistencies in IT project delivery and successes can be blamed on complexities related to culture. According to Avram [15], working on global projects presents cultural problems which may also present communication problems. Poor communication has been cited as one of the causes of IT project failure Ebad [16]. According to Mdontsane et al., [17], the way conflict is managed in a multicultural IT project can have

an impact on project success. Mdontsane et al., [17] stress that some conflict can stimulate work while others can derail it, and that this should be managed accordingly.

Venter [18] points out that different cultures may have different perceptions of time and therefore manage time differently. Some cultures prefer to have more space. For some cultures performance of the individuals is more important than that of the collective. While for others, for example, most African cultures, collectivism is the norm. Certain project methods or methodologies may not be applicable to them. Mistrust across cultures can cause cultural distances which can hamper performance. Hofstede et al., [19] mentions that different cultures have different predilections towards uncertainty, which he terms uncertainty avoidance and could have impact on IT project success. Culture can lead to differences in perceptions of risky outcomes (Chipulu et al., [14], which could be impactful in the context of IT project. Given that culture has different elements as outlined above, this study aims to establish if cultural differences impact on IT project success.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Organisational Culture

Organisational culture is a social construct [19] [20] based on the observation that organisations mirror societies: they are characterised by a relatively coherent and bounded system, display various social structures and norms, members undergo socialisation processes and there is the possibility of dispensing sanctions Jung et al., [21]. It is the key driver of organisational effectiveness and performance Trompenaars and Hampden-turner [20] and a source of sustained competitive advantage Barney [22].

2.2 Culture and Leadership

The culture within an organisation flows from the values, aspirations, and mission of its leaders. According to Grobler [23] through the process of attraction-selection-attrition and as explained by P-O theory, people are then attracted to an organisation because they also wish to be associated with that leader or with the positive attributes of the organisation [24] [23]. Over time, these values, beliefs, and practices are aggregated.

Organisational climates are comprised of psychological contracts between employees and their employers. When these psychological contracts are breached, it can lead to a negative climate in the organisation, the psychological contract is broken and there is no Person-Environment (P-O) fit [24]. As stated earlier, climate is the subjective, experiential observed culture. There is a causal relationship that runs from culture to climate. The prevailing culture also affects the behaviour of management. It affects the way they make decisions, how they solve problems and how they formulate strategy [25].

2.3 Culture and IT Projects

Globalisation and the breaking down of economic barriers mean that business organisations are no longer confined to their geographic locations. This results in different expatriate national cultures being imported into a country, bringing with them their unique way of doing business, that is, their (business and organisational) cultures [26].

2.4 Impact of Culture on Project Success

The criteria generally used to evaluate IT project success is the triple constraint of project management, which is time, cost, and quality [26]. Project success means different things to different stakeholders [27] [28]. For example, other definitions also add meeting project requirements as set by stakeholders and before project commencement. According to Bannerman [29], a project can be a success if it meets set criteria beforehand in terms of process, project management, product, business, and strategic factors. “This approach enables success to be determined and periodically re-determined as benefits accrue from the project over time. It also enables stakeholders to progressively map success to perceptions of

higher derived value from the project as benefits accrue" [29]. Gomes and Romão [30] state that an IT project is said to be a success if it achieves predefined business objectives and if it leads to both stakeholder and customer satisfaction. Gomes and Romão [30] indicate that predefined critical success factors (CSF) and project success factors (PSFs) together drive business change. Gomes and Romão [30] contend that there are enablers to those CSFs including proper training, which we can argue should include intercultural training, and managing these CSF can improve PSFs.

According to Gomes and Romão [30] the application of a benefits management process on the pre-identified critical success factors such as ensuring harmonious relationships in multicultural settings can improve project management practices and guarantee an effective impact on a project success. However, the chances of project success are diminished because according to Louw & Rwelamila [26], most curricula are too technically focused and ignore the "soft aspects" of project management such working in a changing, multicultural environment as well as social, political aspects in a project and organisational settings. De Carvalho et al., [31] indicate that, how project management is practised including making provision for environmental factors and culture, can have an impact on project success.

2.5 Cultural Impact on Project Success - Selected Studies

Research by Wiewiora and Coffey [32], on project-based organisations (PBOs) in Australia, shows that culture can have an impact on knowledge sharing in projects. Knowledge transfer and project requirements elicitation from users can be affected by a reluctance to operate from organisational subcultures. Wiewiora and Coffey [32] further suggest that depending on the project environment, different organisational cultures may require different knowledge management strategies. A study in India by Sharma & Gupta [33] states that the emphasis on technical aspects at the expense of soft issues impacts projects. The work of Sharma & Gupta [33] reveals that in project management the trend is to focus on the technical issues of the project including the timeline, the project plan, the resources, and the budget. Also in most instances, possible project pitfalls lie in leadership, lack of teamwork, and in other "soft" or cultural issues [33]. According to Sharma & Gupta [33], organisational culture has an impact on the motivation, job satisfaction and overall performance of the software developers and on a project's outcome.

In a study published in MIS Quarterly conducted on offshore IT projects involving an Indian IT vendor and using social embeddedness (how individuals relate to elements of their environment including social relationships and culture etc.) rather than agency theory as a basis, Rai et al., [34] found a relationship between cultural differences at the organizational and team level, and offshore IT project success. Some of the revelations by Rai et al. [34] are that when people have a vested interest in a project, they become more willing participants and information is exchanged more readily. This is also evidenced by Lückmann and Färber [35] who state that in IT projects, cultural factors in projects can lead to lack of stakeholder engagement because of lack of trust in an intercultural setting and insufficient communication which is also echoed by Bizjak and Faganel [36]. Lückmann and Färber [35] have revealed that cultural differences can have an impact on stakeholder engagement and that these impacts can be caused by differences between cultures in areas of trust, competitive behaviour, context related issues, perceptions of vertical relationships and philosophical differences.

A study by Chipulu et al., [14] which utilised success/failure indicators (PSFIs) measured using Hofstede's et al., [19] cultural dimensions, found that these (cultural dimensions) can have an impact on project success and can reduce/increase project success/failure factors (PSFFs). To support the importance of the need to take culture seriously as having an impact on projects, Ika [37] indicates that one of the reasons that projects have failed in Africa, has been the failure to tailor projects to African cultures. The outcomes of research by Mayer et al., [38] on intercultural collaboration between Chinese and Tanzanian IT projects and the perceptions of the cultures, revealed that there are differences between the way the two

cultures view their organisations. Mayer et al. [38] found that the two groups' stereotypes of one another persisted through time while at the same time both cultures views on the self were favourable. Mayer et al., [38] also established that perceptions of cultures regarding their own organisations in intercultural settings can impede progress in projects especially if negative. This is an example of environmental factors and the context in which a project occurs being critical to success [39].

In South Africa and other parts of Africa, Aranda-Jan et al., [40] established that sociocultural factors have a role to play in IT mobile health (mHealth) projects and may lead the intended users of technologies not accepting them thereby affecting project successes. In such socio technology transfer projects Lin and Berg [41] note that culture may have a role in the impeding the technology transfer taking place. Lending credence to this is a study by Leidner et al., [42], which found that there can even be conflicts between culture and information technology known as system conflict. It is a conflict that emerges between the implementation of a system and the perceived violation of the culture of a people.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

An interpretivism philosophy in the form of a qualitative research approach was used in the study. The was based on what Creswell and Creswell [43] indicates as the goal of qualitative research, which is to understand things and further knowledge about a subject, bring attention to things, spark debate, and to change how reality is perceived. The researchers desired to understand the phenomena from the perspective of the subject, wished to raise awareness and to explore new territory.

3.2 Study Population and Sampling

This research focused on 15 out of a possible 200 ICT certified project managers (PMSA, PMP®, PgMP®, PfMP®, CAPM®, PMI-PBA®, PMI-ACP®, Prince2® Foundation, Prince2® Professional, Prince2® Agile, Professional Scrum Master™, Professional Scrum Product Owner™, APM etc.) based mainly in South Africa who had been purposely targeted using various methods including referrals, introductions and business social media platforms such as LinkedIn. This was aligned to Cooper and Schindler [44] who recommend a sample size of between four and 15 respondents for exploratory qualitative studies.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected through structured interviews conducted either face to face, telephonically or with the aid of commercial video conferencing tools WhatsApp, Microsoft Skype / Teams, or Apple FaceTime and Google Hangouts. The interviews were recorded after which the data was transcribed verbatim. Data was thematically analysed through the six-phase framework promulgated by Braun and Clarke [45] and further explained through a step-by-step approach by Maguire and Delahunt [46]. This process allowed for themes and patterns to be established from the data, interpreted, and helped to address the research [46].

4 FINDINGS

Having carried out thematic analysis the following themes were established with results presented in the table:

- Organisational function
- Cultural diversity
- Communication
- Project competencies.

Table 1: Theme, Category and Findings

	Theme	Category	Findings
1.	Organisational functions	Internal departments; External departments; Project planning challenges; Training	a. Participants mentioned getting consensus during project planning when working on IT projects that sometimes-involved functions such as finance, human resources, sales, and other organisational functions is a challenge. b. IT departments were often compartmentalised and that projects drew different members from those compartments e.g., business analysts, developers, testers, and quality assurers. These kinds of teams usually operate autonomously with their own leadership structures and have their own cultures which impacts on project planning. c. Resources from outside an organisation would bring their own different culture and sometimes even different national cultures, thereby impacting on IT project planning. d. Participants stated that they were challenged on IT project planning due to different cultures and that they had difficulty expressing themselves creatively in new settings. e. Most participants mentioned that they received no training at all on dealing with different cultures. f. Most participants agree that cultural differences, diversity, and cultural sensitivity awareness should be part of project management training and not project planning.
2.	Cultural diversity	Cultural differences; Positivity; Opportunity; Lessons learnt reports; Leadership, Cultural accommodation	a. Most participants mentioned that cultural differences alone will not make an IT project fail, however, an accommodative positive attitude will make an IT project success inevitable. b. Participants indicated that diversity of cultures in IT projects has assisted by bringing a diversity of ideas. c. Diversity of people “brought positive competition to the project, with each group of people attempting to prove its greatness”. d. View cultural differences as opportunities to widen one’s perspective and broaden minds to what is possible in an IT project. e. Most participants indicated that they document lessons learnt when closing IT projects which is helpful for future project’s success”, that is, they can reap rewards whilst organisational and generative learning are enhanced. f. Participants stated that project managers who tended to micro-manage, hamper project success, as the project team gets “frustrated throughout the project”. g. Avoiding uncertainty by over controlling resources stifles the creativity and innovation of project team members.

		h. Lack of cultural accommodation as project team members tend to group themselves into camps, thus clinging to familiarity.
3. Communication	Project requirements; Productivity; Projects environment, Project risk	a. Communication problems make the task of eliciting IT project requirements from people very difficult (resulting in failure to understand the project requirements) which in turn affects project deliverables. b. Miscommunication resulting in the recipient interpreting the information incorrectly, causing some deliverables not to function as intended. c. Participants indicated that they were not effective at the beginning of culturally diverse projects but became more productive and thrived as the project progressed. d. Most participants indicated that they were concerned about the nature of the work and outcomes rather than their environment. e. Incorrect interpretation of IT project requirements due to misconception of the IT project. f. Project leaders are interested in those aspects that are risky to an IT project and this forms part of project risk management, but they are not specifically interested in cultural differences.
4. Project Competencies	Project methodology; Conflict management	a. Difference in project methodology influence management of diversity on international projects. b. Varying degrees of knowledge, competency levels, talent, and experience influence the degree of project success. c. Conflict arising in terms of the role one would play in the project, as the project was dominated by the SCRUM approach. d. Different team members interpreting project objectives differently.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Theme 1: Organisational Functions

Organisational functions hamper the consideration of culture during project planning. Cultural training is not undertaken, in preparation for IT projects thus project stakeholders are exposed to cultural shock that lies ahead. This is supported by Low et al., [25] who state that the global technology market tends to be client driven and very competitive thus to please clients, providers must react quickly through IT product development projects and thus often not leaving enough time for cultural preparations.

Another cultural issue which emerged in the research results which could impact on success is, participant's perception of having to raise their game in unfamiliar environments, "to make an impression" on other team members of different cultures". This could point to a latent problem of fear of being stereotyped as pointed out by Hofstede et al., [19]. Davis (2014) further adds that mistrust means there is less confidence in another's goodwill, integrity, and another's ability and credibility and that cultural clashes usually stem from the fact that neither party has the comprehensive management capability needed to complete the project individually. Even though trust links to psychological safety required by all project team, these

findings provide further context in that even project stakeholders from all cultures are confident in one another's competencies and abilities and appreciate the different perspectives and skill sets each brings to the table.

5.2 Theme 2: Cultural Diversity

The study established that cultural differences have little to no effect on project success with most participants indicating that "cultural differences alone will not make an IT project fail".

The study uncovered that there is also limited documentation of encounters or incidences related to multiculturism, that very few participants stated ever documenting their experiences in the lessons learnt repository. This finding reveals that culture and its possible impact on project success is still an ignored subject in the IT project management practice. These results are in consonance with what De Carvalho et al., [31] established in that cultural difference impacts in IT project management are receiving little attention in academic studies and surveys as well as being poorly managed in practice. In addition, this implies that organisations are not learning anything from the experience and that the same mistakes are likely to be repeated in the future.

5.3 Theme 3: Communication

Although miscommunication has many causes, this study established that it can occur resulting in the incorrect interpretation of requirements, and stakeholders also need to take cognisance of nonverbal communication. These findings are in line with what is stated by Hofstede et al., [19] as well as findings by Bizjak and Faganel [36] who state that understanding cultures and how they communicate including nonverbal communication before interaction can make a difference. This study established that most IT projects do not establish a communications strategy during the planning phase of the project, which is devoid of good project management practices.

5.4 Theme 4: Project Competencies

Participants mentioned different factions interpreting project objectives differently. This could be due to stakeholders not agreeing to objectives at the start of the project. It could also be due to not involving all stakeholders during project planning and but only in the middle of the project. As good project management practice and what this study established, there is need for agreeing to project objectives at the start of the IT project to reduce conflicts and misunderstandings in multicultural settings. Mayer et al., [38] posit that such an approach also increases performance during the project. To aid IT project successes, it is imperative to have collective agreement on the project plan and to also have clearly defined goals.

Although most participants stated there is little differences in project management competencies between cultures, they mentioned some organisations with which they have collaborated having preferences for certain project management methodologies. Most literature on the subject seems to suggest that different cultures interpret project management methodologies differently Lückmann and Färber [35]. This implies that teams from different from cultural backgrounds may struggle with one another's project methodology unless a deliberate effort is made to find a mediating solution such as finding a middle ground such as establishing standards from the onset or adopting the standards and practices of one of the parties.

6 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMENDATIONS

Project Executives, and Project Managers can make use of the following recommendations are generated from this study:

- Proper documentation of any cultural issues that are noted or experienced in the projects that "lessons learned" document and project management information system as part of organisational learning.

- Cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity training should be included in project management certification courses.
- The inclusion of cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity components in university and tertiary level project management curricula.
- Dealing with the issue of cultural differences proactively by making the necessary preparations and having contingency measures such ways to solve disputes and ways to discipline intolerant behaviour.
- Increase collectivism in IT projects, that is, create a culture where everyone is working for the team. Have the team practice Ubuntu and empathy in a project management context.
- In line with good project management practices is the need for establishment of proper communication channels, conflict resolution measures before the initiation of the project to address miscommunications and misunderstanding between stakeholders from different cultural backgrounds.

7 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study limitations included the following:

- Due to the availability of participants that fit the criteria particular to this study, participants did not all originate from the same organization.
- The researchers had no qualifications in anthropology, cultural anthropology or any qualifications specifically related to the study of cultures. This study only related to how culture affects software projects and was not a study about culture itself.

8 CONCLUSION

The study concludes that cultural differences though minimally impacting on IT projects, can be further magnified by the duration of the project and environmental factors. This however does not negate the fact that IT project managers and project team members should be culturally aware and sensitive. In addition, this study supports the view that promoting trust and collectivism with a team identity in multicultural project setting assist in addressing the impacts of cultural differences in IT projects thereby enhancing project success.

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