



An exploration of the extent to which project management tools and techniques can be applied across creative industries through a study of their application in the fashion industry in the North East of Scotland

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Abstract

This exploratory research took the form of a qualitative study that aims to investigate the extent to which project management tools and techniques can be effectively applied across the creative industries through a study of their application in the fashion industry in the North East of Scotland.

The research uncovered challenges which could influence the transferability of project management tools and techniques in more creative industries and these include: a need to be flexible and reactive; the importance of reflecting on success and lessons learnt; and a tension between the creative and analytical mindsets.

Conclusions are drawn as to the pan industry value of project management tools and techniques and it is believed that these could be adapted and their value demonstrated better in the creative industries.

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1. Introduction

This paper presents the results of an exploratory research study which sought to determine the extent to which the philosophy, tools and techniques of project management are, or might be, of value to individuals managing projects in the fashion industry and took the North East of Scotland as a test case for that preliminary investigation.

Whilst the concept of the “project” as a tool to support the achievement of strategic objectives has been increasingly recognised (British Fashion Council, 2012), the fashion industry has tended to recruit young people from an Arts rather than Social Sciences background, leading to ‘a well documented skills gap within the industry in areas such as manufacturing and business

management’ (British Fashion Council, 2010, p. 83). Yet fashion is a business, requiring entrepreneurial and management skills for companies to thrive. The industry is also one where projects are a key component of the business paradigm and can come in a myriad of guises, from a collection launch, through engagement at trade events to the redesign of lines and outlets. Despite the importance of projects, techniques for their management are little referenced in the scholarly or practitioner literature. The authors hypothesised that, as a number of parallels can be drawn between project management and fashion management, in terms of the importance of planning and control of a continuously changing environment (Arghavani, 2011), fashion managers might be particularly responsive to the value of project management tools and techniques.

Conscious efforts to codify and systematise project management tools and techniques began in the 1950s in the defense, engineering and construction industries (Kwak, 2003) and it remains the case that in areas of innovative technological and

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scientific development, project management is considered a valuable tool. The popularity of project management techniques has arguably proven more attractive in disciplines with an analytical, qualitative and empirical base, such as the STEM subjects. However in the last few decades the “projectification” of many sectors has emerged where projects are seen as the key mechanisms for strategic delivery (Söderlund and Maylor, 2012, Winter et al., 2006). Project management is no longer “a sub-discipline of engineering ... it is now the dominant model for strategy implementation” (Winter et al., 2006). Although project management is arguably applicable in any context (Meredith and Mantel, 2011), much of the existing research remains focused on its role in large organisations in engineering, IT, construction and manufacturing.

Typically the fashion industry, like the broader creative industries, draws largely on non-STEM and management skills in its workforce and consists largely of SMEs (Lee and Rodríguez-Pose, 2013), acknowledged to have an important role in helping to rebalance the UK economy (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2012).

The aim of this research was to explore the extent to which project management tools and techniques might be effectively applied across the creative industries through an investigation of their application in SMEs in the fashion industry in the North East of Scotland. As part of the creative industries, it was hypothesised that fashion will present particular challenges but also opportunities to maximise benefit, as it is an industry in which projects form a core component of delivery. The research seeks to determine whether there are variables relating to the sector which render it more or less likely to benefit from the application of project management.

This paper:

- (i) draws on the literature to establish relevant theory from project management, the creative industries and SMEs in order to inform a study of the applicability of project management to the fashion industry;
- (ii) reflects on the methodological approach taken;
- (iii) describes approaches taken by managers in measuring project success, planning and control, people, continuous improvement, the role of creativity and analysis and barriers to the application of project management in the fashion industry;
- (iv) discusses themes emerging from the data collection including the need for flexibility and responsiveness, how management is conceptualised in the fashion industry, the difficulties encountered in measuring success and the role of creativity in business and project success.

2. Literature review

2.1. Management in the fashion industry

All this fabulousness depends on creative spirits, who can be erratic.

[The Economist (2011, np)]

The fashion industry is characterised as an uncertain environment, subject to continuous evolution and change, where planning and control are particularly important (Burack, 2010). Yet research into management techniques in the fashion industry is sporadic and most prevalent in areas such as marketing and events management, supply chain management and communication, whilst Wigley and Provelengiou (2011) identify key competencies which are required in the fashion industry in marketing, branding and retail management.

One project management tool considered to have potential for the fashion industry is the concept of the project lifecycle, which helps control a project through a sequence of structured strategic phases, including risk management (Ward and Chapman, 1995, p. 145). The term “fashion lifecycle management” is becoming more prevalent and companies are encouraged to utilise the approach as a means of managing their operations more effectively, with benefits including decreased development lead-ins, reduced costs and improved processes and communication with key stakeholders (Gerber Technology, 2006). It could be argued that a convergence between the project management lifecycle and fashion lifecycle is required; where “ideation” would represent the project concept stage and “end of life” would be the handover and close-out stage. This would enable projects to be managed and controlled with consideration of industry specific risk and uncertainty.

Excellent communication with stakeholders has always been acknowledged as significant in the fashion industry. Zhang (2010) argues that the advent of new stakeholders in the fashion industry, such as fashion bloggers and opinion leaders, means that a renewed emphasis on stakeholder management is required. Hauge (2006) considers the importance of the knowledge pipeline and the fact that fashion managers rely on this but also that consumers themselves, as followers of fashion, have a level of dependence on various forms of communication. Entwistle and Rocamora's (2006) research focuses on a study of London Fashion Week (LFW); an event which they feel embodies fashion as a broader sector, bringing together influential voices within the industry.

In the fashion industry identifying indicators of success can be challenging and it is arguably much harder to determine the success of a fashion event (Bourdieu, 1993, 1996). Whilst there may be pragmatic outcomes, such as sales, which the organisers wish to achieve, there are typically also less measurable gains, such as cultural and reputational value, and so stakeholder management is considered to be a key performance indicator.

2.2. Project management in the creative industries

It is a concern that the creative industries often lack adequate general business skills.

[The Stationers' Company (2010, np)]

Given the extent to which in the creative industries there has been a reluctance to fully engage with and utilise the techniques of business management, it is not surprising that project management as a field of study has an even lower profile.

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