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Towards identifying success factors for cross-cultural project customer engagement: A literature review

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Abstract

Cross-cultural project management remains an important challenge for project managers and project management scholars. Successful projects need to effectively engage project customers and the key question becomes how to adequately engage project customers from foreign cultural backgrounds. This paper presents the preliminary results of a literature review in cross-cultural project customer integration. The guiding question for the review is: Which success factors can be identified in scientific literature for the cross-cultural integration of customers in projects. The paper introduces the topic and shortly lays out the necessary definitions before presenting the reviewed literature that is relevant to the review question. The literature is categorized and analyzed on abstract and findings level. The preliminary analysis reveals that the cross-cultural integration of project customers is not well researched and that further investigation in these areas is necessary. Future research is going to deepen the analysis of the presented studies. The aim is to lay the groundwork for further empirical research into success factors for customer integration in intercultural projects.

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1. Introduction

This literature review aims at identifying scientific contributions in the area of cross-cultural customer engagement in projects. Intercultural problems can harm the customer relationship in projects, for example by allowing the customer to lose face or by misinterpreting the subliminal messages sent by either project manager or customer. The question of how to adequately and effectively engage project customers from other national cultures is important because ultimately it is the customer who accepts or rejects deliverables and defines project success. The Standish Group's Chaos Report frequently ranks customer related issues such as user involvement, clear requirements, and realistic expectations as key success factors in IT-projects (compare Chaos Reports 2010-2014). Agile project management approaches such as Scrum, Lean/Kanban, Dynamic Systems Development Framework, or Adaptive Project Framework are gaining popularity because they offer a framework for deeper customer involvement in projects.¹

At the same time the ongoing internationalization of companies and projects imposes a significant intercultural challenge to project management. Today it is not unrealistic for a project manager to work in Brussels with American, French, Nigerian and Portuguese team members at different locations, developing a product or service for customers in the UK, Finland, France and Singapore. Managing culturally diverse project teams is a complex endeavor and has been studied by a number of authors.^{2 3 4 5 6 7} Ultimately it is the customer however who has to accept the deliverables, and managing intercultural challenges with the project customer has only scarcely been addressed in international project management publications.

The following sections of this paper will present the preliminary findings on what is known in project management literature about adequately engaging or managing customers from other national cultures. The results remain preliminary because the review mainly includes articles from English-speaking peer reviewed articles in the project management field. It includes search results of relevant combinations of the terms "Intercultural" and "Project Management" and "Customer/Client Involvement" and their synonyms. An exhaustive search for transferable knowledge from areas such as Intercultural Marketing or Communication is an ongoing concern and will complement the results of the study as soon as available. The review question underlying this literature review can therefore be formulated as follows:

Q: How does the existing scientific literature help to understand success factors for the cross-cultural project customer integration?

The following sections will shortly describe the conceptual framework and define the relevant key terms before starting to present and summarize the results of the literature review in section three. The fourth section will draw conclusions and indicate areas that need further research before the last section critically assesses the results of this contribution.

2. Definitions

Project and Project Management:

In the area of project management there are a number of international institutions that define tools, processes and capabilities in order to successfully manage projects. The most important of these organizations are "Projects in Controlled Environments" (Prince 2), "International Project Management Association" (IPMA) and the "Project Management Institute" (PMI).

For the purpose of this work the PMI Standard appears to be the most relevant international standard since this paper aims at analyzing intercultural problems in projects and PMI offers the largest number of certified professionals with more than 412.000 members in 207 countries.⁸ PMI defines a project as a "...temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service, or result" and explains further that projects are non-repetitive ongoing work and therefore "...there may be uncertainties or differences in the products, services, or results that the project creates" (PMI, p. 3).⁹

Project Management is defined by PMI as "...the application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities to meet the project requirements" and they continue with the PMI specific description that "[P]roject

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