

The role of monitoring and shirking in information systems project management

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Abstract

Agency theory offers a foundation for explaining the impact of project monitoring on project success. This study applied agency theory to survey 428 information systems project managers concerning their project monitoring, shirking by systems developers, and project success. Greater project monitoring via planning and meetings predicted less shirking, while greater monitoring via responsibilities and comparison did not. Less shirking via poor focus predicted increased project success, while less shirking via loafing did not. These findings have implications for project managers and project management researchers.

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1. Introduction

Completing projects on time, within budget, and with quality is a major challenge facing today's project managers. Project management is a risky endeavor, and too many projects are cancelled before completion while too many others exceed their budgets, are completed beyond their target dates, or lack the expected quality [1]. This problem is especially severe for information systems (IS) projects, perhaps because information technology changes so quickly that new projects are continually using little known technologies and perhaps because information systems providers and users have so much difficulty understanding each other's needs.

Agency theory offers a potential foundation to help explain why projects might be late, beyond budget, and of lower quality [2–4]. The theory asserts that a principle

(typically a manager, and in the current study, an information systems project manager) employs an agent (a subordinate, and in the current study, an information systems developer) to perform work. The theory further states that self-interest motivates the agent to work on tasks of his or her choice. One of the hypothesized relationships in the theory is that the principle monitors the agent to discourage the agent's shirking (i.e., the evading of work, duty, or responsibility) and thereby to encourage the agent to act in the principle's interest. Another is that by acting in the principle's interest, the agent will accomplish the principle's objectives.

The purpose of this paper is to explain the impact of monitoring on project success. It does so by presenting and testing two broad hypotheses. One asserts that greater monitoring results in less shirking. The other asserts that less shirking results in greater project success. By understanding the impact of monitoring, project managers might better use the tool to bring projects more successfully to completion. Fig. 1 shows the original research model; a refined model decomposes the two hypotheses into ten.

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Fig. 1. The original research model.

The following two sections define the constructs in the study and then justify the hypotheses. The methodology section describes the data collection and a data analysis section identifies the components of monitoring and shirking. After a refinement of the hypotheses, a section describes the data analysis testing them. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings and the implications for research and practice.

2. Constructs

2.1. Monitoring

To monitor is to keep track of something systematically in order to collect information about it. Monitoring implies watching, observing, or checking closely or continuously. In project management, the purpose of monitoring is to collect three main classes of information about the progress of a project against a baseline and the anticipated outcome of the project. The classes include information that (1) assures managers that the project is progressing within acceptable budget, schedule, and quality expectations; (2) supports decisions to approve the movement of the project through its stages, and (3) confirms subjective assessments that benefits will be realized [5]. Information about progress against budget, schedule, and quality constitutes feedback about project team members, and can be used to increase their accountability and motivate their behavior to perform more diligently or in some other manner in management's best interest [6,7]. The information can also be used to guide corrective action [8].

Several researchers have empirically tested the impact of monitoring. Using 102 students in a laboratory experiment, increased monitoring was shown to reduce project failure by reducing over-commitment [9]. In another lab experiment with 228 students, monitoring encouraged subordinates to act in the interests of their managers [10]. In a study of 110 boards of director members, monitoring increased actions that saved the organization money [11].

Other researchers have found monitoring effective under specific conditions. A lab experiment found it effective in high-growth environments [12]. In an experiment using 151 undergraduate business majors, less conscientious individuals appeared to increase effort through monitoring whereas conscientious ones did not [13].

On the other hand, some research about the impact of monitoring was inconclusive [14–16]. These inconclusive findings suggest that perhaps monitoring affects performance through a mediator or that some dimensions of monitoring might have an effect while others do not.

In one study, IS project managers described monitoring activities, i.e., how managers monitor IS projects [17]. The

subjects indicated that they monitored by tracking project progress and observing the work of the developers. They named many tools and techniques for doing so. They identified project management software as the most frequently used tool with Microsoft Project as the most popular example. They often named periodic progress reports with comparisons of results to schedules and periodic team meetings as two techniques. Others included a project plan, Gantt charts, and critical path analysis.

2.2. Shirking

Shirking is the evading of work, duty, or responsibility. According to agency theory, such evasion results from the self-interests of the agent in contrast to the interests of the principal [2,3,18]. Nearly every theory of behavior in the social and organizational sciences assumes that individuals act in accordance with their self-interests [19]. Moral reasoning level, however, can have a significant effect on the decision to shirk [20].

Researchers have studied shirking. They have found that individuals with responsibility to share information with their manager shirk by misrepresenting their private information for monetary gain [21,22]. In a lab experiment, subjects with an incentive to shirk tended to make poorer project continuation decisions [23]. Shirking may occur more frequently in a team setting when individual output cannot be precisely measured [24].

Shirking is viewed as deleterious, and it prompts organizations to reward employees based on performance rather than behavior [3]. However, avoidance of work is sometimes deemed beneficial as when workers take periodic breaks to remain fresh [25,26].

Information systems research has shown that an organization with a history of retribution against employees who report bad news provide an incentive to others to shirk by refraining from reporting such news even though doing so would be in the best interest of the organization [27,28]. In one study, national culture - individualistic vs. collectivist (as in the US vs. Singapore) - moderated the effect of organizational climate on the shirking of the responsibility to report bad IS project news [29].

In one study, IS project managers described shirking activities, i.e., developers' activities when not working on their assigned tasks [17]. The managers identified socializing, excessive breaks, surfing the web and playing computer games as the major culprits. Sometimes developers worked on the wrong tasks or reprioritized their assignments so they worked on enjoyable or challenging ones. Disorganization also represented shirking.

3. Project success

Project management is "the application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities to meet project requirements" [30], p. 8. Project management helps organizations develop new products by standardizing and

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