Client and consultant engagement in public sector IS projects

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A B S T R A C T

Engagement between clients and consultants has been identified as important in public sector IT projects. However, current literature is not clear what constitutes engagement, and how this is related to other concepts such as cooperation and collaboration. This study proposes a model of engagement based on a range of related extant literature. Five case studies of IT projects in the public sector in the UK are analysed in order to empirically validate and extend the proposed model. The validated model suggests that engagement can be understood as three conditions (environment, participants, expertise) and three behaviours (sharing, sense-making and adapting) that dynamically interact in self-reinforcing cycles. The model represents a starting point for academics interested in the future development of a theory of engagement and is of value to practising managers and consultants in either a diagnostic or prescriptive mode to increase the effectiveness of their joint IT endeavours.

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1. Introduction

"*A critical element of consulting projects is therefore engagement – both of the people who work in the organisation that hires the consultants (the client) and among the consultants themselves.*" *Comptroller & Auditor General* (NAO, 2006a)

IS projects are important to the public sector since they are a key means of implementing government policy and represent a major area of expenditure (Horrocks, 2009). This results in public projects in all countries being under intense scrutiny and failure of such projects being highly publicised (Craig & Brooks, 2006; Craig, 2005, 2008; House of Commons, 2003–04 2005–06, 2008–09). One frequently adopted approach to delivering public sector IS projects is the use of external consultants (Bronte-Stewart, 2005; House of Commons, 2003–4; Lupson & Partington, 2005; Parliamentary Office of Science & Technology, 2003). Due to the importance of such projects, there continues to be much interest, both by practising managers and by academics, in the role of consultants in public sector IT projects (Czerniawska, 2002, 2006b; Czerniawska & May, 2006; NAO, 2006c; OECD, 2001; OGC, 2002a, 2002b, 2003a, 2003b; OGC, 2007, 2008; Roodhooft & Van den Abbeele, 2006; Stumpf & Longman, 2000; Yu, Shen, Kelly, & Hunter, 2005).

The term engagement is frequently used in both the academic and practice literature to describe how organisations and their consultants should work together (Block, 2000; Czerniawska, 2006b;

NAO, 2006a, 2006b). However, despite the frequent use of this term, it is not clear what engagement consists of and how it can be realised in an IS project.

The aim of this study is to address this gap in knowledge by drawing on relevant extant literature to develop a conceptual model of engagement. This model is then validated by means of five empirical case studies of IT projects in the public sector. In particular, the research sought to determine if the conditions and behaviours that afford engagement could be identified in practice, and how these conditions and behaviours interact to allow engagement.

The paper begins with a review of the literature on engagement and related concepts. This is used to propose a conceptual model of engagement (Fig. 1). The methodology adopted for the empirical stage of this work is then described. Due to the richness of the findings produced by the study, only one of the five case studies undertaken is presented in detail. A final section discusses the significance of the study for both theory and practice, its limitations and implications for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Engagement

Engagement is often conflated with other phenomena such as involvement, participation, commitment and collaboration. Table 1 sets out how this study positions engagement in relation to these other concepts. The later rows of the table suggest an increase in the depth and significance of the relationships between the parties involved in the project or other shared activity.

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Table 1
Phenomena related to engagement.

Increasing depth and significance of relationship	Description	Extant studies
Participation ↓	Increased user participation contributes to satisfaction and usage	Aubert, Barki, Patry, and Roy (2008), Butler and Fitzgerald (2001), and Smythe (2007)
Involvement ↓	Responsibility causes a move beyond participation to involvement	(Barki & Hartwick, 1994)
Engagement	Engagement involves both 'hearts and minds' – it goes beyond fulfilment of the activities required, to expending both emotional and rational energy and expertise. Client–consultant organisations with shared goals.	Czerniawska (2006b), Bowers and Degler (1999), Handley et al. (2007), and Wenger (1998)
or Collaboration/Cooperation	Partner organisations working together with complementary goals.	Huxham (1993a), Kanter (1994), and Lacity and Willcocks (2000)
Commitment ↓	Empirical study showed increased engagement in projects resulted in increased commitment	McCormick (1999)

Considering the first row of Table 1, whilst the term user participation in an IT project may span a wide range of levels of involvement, it is often used to describe activities that are primarily led by members of the IT function, such as eliciting user requirements and system testing, but which require some participation from system users. User participation in IS projects has been widely studied (e.g. Barki & Hartwick, 1989; Butler & Fitzgerald, 2001; Smythe, 2007; Aubert et al., 2008) with the overall recommendation that increased user participation contributes to satisfaction and usage of IT systems.

Involvement is considered to arise when users are given responsibility, which includes leadership and accountability, for IS projects (Barki & Hartwick, 1994). Consistent with the notion of increased significance of involvement, user involvement was found to be more important that user participation in explaining system use.

Handley, Clark, Fincham, and Sturdy (2007) differentiate between participation and engagement, by describing the latter as involving both 'hearts and minds'. That is, they view engagement as going beyond fulfilment of the activities required, to expending both emotional and rational energy and expertise. Similarly, the community of practice literature views engagement as an activity that involves aspects of community building, social energy and, as participants learn and develop, engagement includes emergent knowledgeability (Wenger, 1998) as well. Other elements that have been identified as contributing to engagement include interest, professionalism, building confidence between the individuals involved, relevant prior experience, expectations and physical presences (Czerniawska, 2006b; Bowers & Degler, 1999).

The terms commitment and engagement are used interchangeably, particularly in practitioner literature. For example, the UK National Audit Office developed a framework for developing commitment between clients and consultants, which included recommendations to improve engagement, suggesting these terms were being viewed as synonymous (NAO, 2006a). We follow the work of McCormick (1999) who viewed commitment as the outcome of engagement, and found from an empirical study of large-scale projects, that increased engagement led to increased commitment.

Collaboration describes organisations working closely together and is related to cooperation (Huxham, 1993b). The NAO examined how experienced practitioners achieved significant improvements in the successful delivery of projects by developing collaborative relationships, concluding "*strong collaborative relationships go hand in hand with good project performance*" (NAO, 2006d: 5). Whilst this suggests that the NAO equates collaboration with engagement, theories of collaboration focus on cooperative relationships between partner organisations that have complementary goals and not between consultants and clients (Huxham, 1993a, 1993b; Lacity & Willcocks, 2000). Public sector organisations require their consultants to share the client's goals for the IT project. There is this overlap between the concepts of collaboration and engagement, but they are considered as distinct activities in this study.

Other phenomena that are relevant to the consideration of individuals working together on joint endeavours are trust and social capital. Block (2000) identifies trust as an element of the affective side of the client–consultant relationship (Block, 2000: 14). Czerniawska (2006a) agrees that trust is fundamental to consulting, and Wenger lists it as a characteristic of complex mutual relationships (Wenger, 1998). The concept of social capital has been used to understand a wide range of social phenomena. The root of the concept lies in the idea that people can access things of value because they have entered into relationships with others (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 1993). Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) propose a model of the components of social capital that shows how these components interact to produce intellectual capital.

Whilst the concepts of trust and social capital are both valuable in understanding relationships where the participants have had sufficient interaction to develop them, they are not helpful in situations where the participants must come together without prior experience of each other. In many projects, members represent different specialties "*with little time to coproduce communal knowledge*" (Lindkvist, 2005: 1200) who need to co-evolve, share and exchange their existing intellectual capital. This research therefore seeks to propose a model that reflects how diverse project members can develop sufficient trusting relationships to co-evolve,
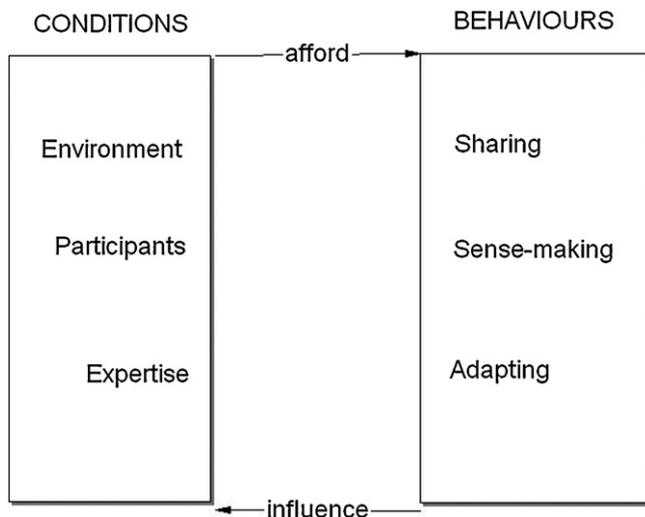

Fig. 1. Initial conceptual model of engagement.