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Project management failure: Causes and remedial measures

Dickson Shacholi
Department of Business and Management Studies, Texila American University, Guyana

Abstract
The study assesses the causes of project management failures and the remedial measures to addressing the phenomenon in Zambia**.** A descriptive cross-sectional survey was employed. The study's population comprised of project managers and project team members involved in implementation of the organizational projects in Zambia public sector organizations. With a purposive sampling technique, data was collected from 94 respondents using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) [14] formula. Findings of the study revealed ineffective communication, budget constraints, unforeseen changes in scope, team conflict, impractical project deadlines as the causes of project implementation failures in Zambia public sector organizations. It was also found that effective communication skill, adequate budget, well defined scope, good relationships among team members, achievable deadlines were the imperative measures to curb project implementation project management failures in public sector organizations of Zambia Recommends, limitations and directions for future studies were discussed.

Keywords: Project management, public sector organizations, Zambia

Introduction

In today's business, it is in the best interest of organization to have project managers. Overall, all projects are doing something that may possibly be new or yet a onetime endeavor but have explicit requirements which include; time, price, and performance. "Project management deals with tools, people, and systems" (Harold, 2021) [7]. According to Okolie & Edo (2022) project management is the application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities in order to meet or exceed stakeholder needs and expectations from a project. The temporary nature of projects makes it have the characteristic of having a definite beginning and an end which is sharply contrasted by operations which are repetitive, permanent or semi-permanent functional work to produce products or services (Ika & Pinto, 2022) [10]. The primary challenge of project management is to achieve all of the project goals and objectives whilst meeting the demands of project constraints. Rauscher (2024) [21] outlines typical project constraints as scope, time, cost and quality. A secondary objective is to optimize the allocation and integration of inputs to meet pre-defined objectives. In the views of Rauscher (2024) [21], these challenges ran through project management practices in several industries and become a hindrance to achieving most objectives and results required from the execution of projects. The purpose of this study is to assessing the project management practices of the public sector organizations in Zambia. All projects, large and small, IT or non-IT, have limits on three golden constituents: schedule, quality, and budget. A project manager constantly makes tradeoff decisions among these three constituents. According to Rajapakse & Thushara (2023) [20], a poor control of any of these three constituents poses threats to the success of a project. Although some may argue that longer schedule, more accommodative specification, and larger budget can help meet any challenge, a 2004 Government Accountability Office report on 199 data-mining projects shows that the magnitude of these constituents has little to do with the success of a project. Instead, the lack of oversight on any of these constituents is the major cause of project failures

Cases of project failures are rife among Zambia public organizations. Funds earmarked for project implementation and execution are expected to achieve the intended purpose given the scope and time schedule. However, a myriad of these projects fails to live up to expectations. It is believed that the failure of these projects implementation and execution is largely due to poor project implementation practices. This is buttressed by Daniel & Ugochuku (2020) who shared that wrongful application of project management practices will result in failure. Extant literature (Ipas as cited in Anyango, 2018; Reddins, 2020) also posit that a well-defined scope, budget, expertise and right application of project principles are required ingredient for a successful implementation. Hence, effective application of project management principles is deemed essential to curtail implementation failures. Previous findings on the subject had found varied causes to project implementation failures. However, these studies are carried out in jurisdictions with different cultural setting from that of Zambia presenting a gap in knowledge. The study address this gap by investigating the causes of project implementations failures in the context of Zambia public organizations and, to proffer measure to help curtail the phenomenon

Results of the study should expose project managers, project officers and stakeholders to the causes of project implementation failures in Zambia public organizations. Additionally, recommendations of the study should assist project managers and project officers formulate appropriate measures to address the phenomenon

Objectives of the study

1. To identify the causes of project implementation failures in Zambia public organizations
2. To proffer remedial measures to curb project implementation failures in Zambia public organizations

Literature review

Project management defined

Project management is the systematic modelling of possible factors (cost, time, resources, and quality) from initiation of project, planning, controlling to closing of the project in order to delight stakeholders (Crawford, 2020). Htoo *et al.* (2023) [9] define it as "a discipline of planning, controlling, securing and organizing resources to attain specific objectives". Ezeigweneme *et al.* (2023) [5] view it as a unique endeavour to produce a set of deliverables within clearly specified time, cost and quality constraints". A project can be perceived as an impermanent endeavour with a defined starting and end, undertaken to convene unique objectives and goals, normally to bring about useful change (Wideman, 2022) [24]. However, the impermanent nature of projects differs from business to business. In some cases it can be permanent, or semi-permanent, repetitive functional actions to produce services or products (Hillson & Simon, 2020) [8]. Project Management as a distinctive management idea has been applied by organisations across all sector industries as an effective management tool for achieving organisational goals (Morcov, 2020) [17]. It is management technique to effectively handle types of project such as construction, I.T, health, engineer, as well as the financial services.

Project management implementation failures

Anecdotal evidence reported in practitioner-oriented publications suggests that the failure rate of project management implementations is very high (Stanleigh, 2018). There appear to be myriad of factors that weigh heavily upon the success of project management implementation. Some of the challenges shared by Santosus (2018) are as follows

Poor communication skill: Poor or ineffective communication is one of the biggest risks to any project. Without strong communication skills, project managers would find it incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to effectively manage their teams and coordinate efforts in order to bring about a project's successful resolution (Setiawan, Hansen & Fujiono, 2021). The job is about coordinating the efforts of everyone involved in a project so that shared goals can be achieved. This requires that a project manager is skilled in gathering information and in sharing it with the right people on their team (Setiawan *et al*., 2021).

Budget constraints: Even though budget is only one aspect that determines the success of a project, it is undoubtedly an important one. According to (Safaeian, Fathollahi- Fard, Kabirifar, Yazdani & Shapouri, 2022), about 60% of project failures are attributed to inaccurate cost estimates. It takes skill and experience to forecast the cost of a project correctly and, even skilled project managers typically need software to support their efforts, this is because, the project budgeting process is ongoing, and something project managers should be consistently working on, not just a one-time cost estimation. Costs fluctuate, circumstances change, and project elements get derailed. Accounting for these aspects throughout the life of a project is all part and parcel of effective budget management.

Scope creep: Scope creep occurs when unforeseen changes in scope alter the project plan without a formal request (Nasri *et al*., 2022). It is common for stakeholders to add or alter project goals after the project has been defined, increasing the likelihood of scope creep. Budget issues, missed deadlines, and increased stress are commonly associated with scope creep

Team conflict: Project work teams are by definition comprised of members that work interdependently and count on one another to make task, goals and outcome-related progress (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 20017). Given that conflict is inevitable wherever interdependencies occur (Deutsch, 2018), conflict in teamwork is a regular occurrence. Because these conflicts have powerful implications for team functioning and effectiveness (DeChurch, Mesmer-Magnus, & Doty, 2013), the project manager must anticipate the types of conflicts among team members and work to resolve them for the good of the project

Impractical project deadline: A project deadline is the latest date by which a project should be completed. By definition, a project deadline should be a single date that, ideally, marks the end of the project (Mésároš, Mandičák, Spišáková, Behúnová, & Behún, 2021). However, people also use the word deadline to refer to any date throughout the project by which a certain chunk of the work is to be completed. Having an impossible deadline is a major project management challenge that can severely affect the quality of the end product. Any effective project manager knows the capability of the project team and negotiates the project timelines by prioritizing deadlines and project tasks.

Remedial Measure to address Project implementation challenge

Project management implementation challenges are unavoidable as curbing it is also a tall order as suggested by (Pace, 2019). According to the author, a project manager should stay up-to-date on the latest project management tactics, techniques, and best practices. Effective communication plan is vital and foundation for the success of the implementation. This communication plan essentially provides project teams with a governance system and outlines which communication methods, such as email, meetings, phone calls, memos, and so on will be used to communicate specific areas or milestones during the project life cycle (Chen, *et al*., 2019). According to Setiawan, Hansen & Fujiono (2021), project managers can also adopt and implement project management software to help keep project team members and stakeholders up-todate on project updates, increase transparency, and also provide a centralized location for all correspondence, discussions, and feedback related to project tasks and milestones. Nasir *et al*. (2021) shared the need for project managers to get input from team members and stakeholders on how long it will take to complete a specific task, or how long it will take to review and approve a particular deliverable. This can be incredibly time-consuming; however, the authors posit that the effort is likely to pay off when there is a realistic timeline for the entire team to follow. Nasir *et al*. (2021) further intimated that the project manager should work with stakeholders to collect information, gather requirements, draft specifications, clearly identify goals as these help to avoid scope creep.

Methodology

Research design

In this study, a descriptive cross-sectional survey was chosen as the research design. According to Sekaran & Bougie (2010) [22], a research design serves as a plan or framework for conducting research, outlining key aspects such as participants, research setting, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures. This design was deemed suitable for the study's objectives

Population of the study

Best & Khan (2007) [1] refer to a target population as the totality of all the subjects who conform to a set of stipulations or specification that make up the whole group of people that are of interest to the researchers. The study's population comprised of project managers and project team members involved in implementation of the organizational projects in Lusaka

Sampling technique

Sampling techniques are population reduction methods used to restrict data collection to a subgroup of a population since it is almost impossible to collect data from every single individual or units within a population in most cases (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010) [22]. The purposive sampling technique was used in the study to seek out relevant information from project managers and project team members of public sector organizations in Lusaka

Sample size

Sample refers a proportion of the population that is a representative of the entire population (Kock & Hadaya, 2018) [13]. The study's sample size was determined using the following formula proposed by Krejcie & Morgan (1970) [14] as follows:

$n= N/ (A+N(e)^2$

Where:

n=sample size

N=population size

e=margin of error

Using the above formula, the sample size was calculated as follows:

$n= 1567/1+1567(0.1)^2$

n=94.02

Since the calculated sample size was less than 10% of the population size, it was considered adequate for this study (Hair *et al.*, 2011) [6].

Sources of data

The main source of data for the study was the field survey. Secondary data came from journals, periodicals and manuals

Data analysis

In this study, the collection and examination of quantitative data were conducted using descriptive statistics, with Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 21. Prior to processing, rigorous proofreading of returned questionnaires ensured accuracy and consistency. Through careful coding, data was categorized into distinct sets, facilitating comprehensive analysis accompanied with concise commentary

Reliability and validity

Creswell *et al.* (2004) [2] defines validity as the extent to which the research truly measures what it is intended to measure and how truthful the research is known. In social science research, two main concerns about validity occur. To ascertain the study's validity, the questionnaire was pre-tested using 10 experts in the field of project management. No substantial modification was suggested after the pretest. The reliability of the study was equally ascertained by testing the internal consistency of the responses with the use of Cronbach's alpha coefficient analysis

Ethical consideration

The researcher informed respondents about the aim of the research and how their personal data will be used, as well as their full consent was sought. Respondents' confidentiality and anonymity was ensured to avoid respondents' names appearing in the study. Furthermore, all the respondents well allowed to participate at will, under conducive and friendly atmosphere.

Results and discussions

Demography characteristics of respondents

Based on the result obtained, 36(38.3%) of the respondents were females and 58(61.7%) were males. In terms of age bracket, 2(2.1%) of the respondents were below the age of 20, 18(19.1%) were in the age bracket of 20-29 years, 34(36.2%) were in the age bracket of 30-39, whilst 40(40.6%) were in the age bracket of 40 years and above

In terms of the highest educational level of the respondents 10(10.6%) were diploma holders, 20(20.10%) certificate holders, 29(30.90%) were professional qualification holders, and 35(37.20%) were bachelor degree holders. The results is an admission of varied level of education by respondents with bachelor degree holders being fairly majority. Also, the result showed that majority of the respondents sampled have tertiary educational qualification.

Regarding years of service which respondents, 6(6.4%) of the respondents have at most one year experience, 15(15.9%) of the respondents have 1-3 years of experience, 40(42.5%) of the respondents have 4-6 years of experience, 33(35.2%) of the respondents of the respondents have above 7 years of experience.

In terms of the job position, 35(37.20%) of the respondents were project managers, 30(31.9%) of the respondents were project officers, 20(21.30%) of the respondents were support staff and 9(9.60%) were in the others category. Results from the dataset demonstrate substantial years of respondents' experience on the subject which is essentials to the study

Reliability statistics

The Cronbach alpha was used to ascertain the internal consistency and stability of the responses received, the Cronbach alpha reliability test was conducted. A Cronbach alpha of 0.7 is found reliable. From the study, the coefficient value of Cronbach alpha realized for the four variables is between. 0768 and. 0884 which is higher implying a high internal consistency. Table 1 presents the results obtained

Table 1: Reliability Test

Variables	Cronbach Alpha
Poor communication skill	.0842
Budget constraints	.0884
Scope Creep	.0808
Team conflict	.0784
Impractical project deadline	.0768

Source: Field work, 2024

Objective one: to examine the causes of project implementation failures of national water supply and sanitation council of Zambia

The opinion of the respondents were measured on a 5- point Likert scale rated as 1= Strongly disagree; 2= Disagree; 3=Neither agree nor disagree; 4=Agree and 5=Strongly agree. Descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation were used for the analysis of the responses. According to Dess, Lumpkin and Mefarlin (2005), on a scale of 1-5, the midpoint is 2.9, hence any mean score below 2.9 denotes disagreement and any mean score above 2.9 represents Agreement.

The respondents agreed that ineffective communication hinders project implementation (M=3.88; SD=1.12), budget constraints often affect project implementation (M=3.82; SD=1.15) unforeseen changes in scope have project implementation consequences (M=3.74; SD=1.57*)*, team conflict is inimical to project implementation (M=3.80; SD=1.27), impractical project deadlines can prevent implementation success (M=3.78; *SD*=1.39). The findings showed agreement to the causes of project implementation failures of National Water Supply and Sanitation Council of Zambia. This is because all the responses measured had a mean score above 3 showing agreement as Dess, Lumpkin & Mefarlin (2005) intimated.

The study's results are consistent with prior studies (Denicol *et al*., 2023; Mohammed, 2022). The study of Mohammed (2022) had found budget constraints, impractical deadlines, and ineffective communication as some of the causes of project implementation challenges. Sunderland & Silva (2020) [23] pointed to unforeseen changes in scope, inadequat training and lack of adequate budget as some of the causes of project implementation challenges. Marnada *et al*. (2022) also found team conflict, scope creep, lack of project knowledge as some of the causes of project implementation challenges. However, Setiawan *et al*. (2021) posit that the causes of project implementation failures differ among organizations and that project managers should be critical with the oversight responsibilities of ensuring project success. The findings are presented on Table 2

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of causes of project failures

Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation
ineffective communication hinders project implementation	3.88	1.12
Budget constraints often affect project implementation	3.82	1.15
unforeseen changes in scope have project implementation consequences	3.74	1.57
Team conflict is inimical to project implementation	3.80	1.27
Impractical project deadlines can prevent implementation success	3.78	1.39

Source: Fieldwork, 2024

Reliability statistics

In assessing the reliability of the survey instrument, the Cronbach's alpha, a coefficient that measures the internal consistency of items within a set was used. As noted by Taherdoost (2016), a scale with coefficient alpha values between 0.6 and 0.7 indicate fair reliability. However, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.7 or above is considered acceptable and adequate to determine reliability in most social science research situations. As can be observed, the study' reliability value ranges from 0.806 to. 0840 which is above 0.7 and hence considered acceptable and adequate. Table 3 presents the results

Table 3: Reliability test

Variables	Cronbach Alpha
Effective communication	.0840
Realistic budget	.0825
Consider scope creep	.0826
Foster good relationship among team members	0.806
Practical project deadlines	0.808

Source: Fieldwork, 2024

Objective two: To proffer measure to curb project implementation challenges

The second objective sought to proffer measure to curb project implementation challenges in National Water Supply and Sanitation Council of Zambia. The opinion of the respondents were measured on a 5- point Likert scale rated as 1= Strongly disagree; 2= Disagree; 3=Neither agree nor disagree; 4=Agree and 5=Strongly agree. Descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation were used for the analysis of the responses. According to Dess, Lumpkin and Mefarlin (2005), on a scale of 1-5, the midpoint is 2.9, hence any mean score below 2.9 denotes disagreement and any mean score above 2.9 represents Agreement. The findings showed agreement to the various measures to help curb project implementation challenges at National Water Supply and Sanitation Council of Zambia. This is because all the responses measured had a mean score above 3 showing agreement as asserted by Dess *et al*. (2005).

From the statistics, respondents agreed to the adoption of effective communication skill to curb project implementation failures (M=3.72; SD=1.19), adequate budget can assist in curbing project implementation failures (M=3.66; SD=1.12), the scope of a project should be well defined and maintained to help forestall frequent alterations which are likely to cause implementation failures (M=3.45; SD=1.26), good relationships among team members and management should be fostered to enhance project implementation failures (M=3.50; SD=1.15), the project to be implemented should have achievable deadlines to meet (M=3.40; SD=1.27). The findings showed agreement to the various measures to help curb project implementation challenges at National Water Supply and Sanitation Council of Zambia.

The results of the study corroborate with some prior studies such as Nyandongo & Davids (2020) [18]. Nyandongo & Davids (2020) [18] found effective communication skill by a project manager as fundamental requirement for project success. This requires that a project manager is skilled in gathering information and in sharing it with the right people on their team. Effective communication is a fundamental concept in project management. Viable correspondence with regards to project conveyance alludes to the effective transmission of data, thoughts, and assumptions among project partners, including colleagues, government authorities, workers for hire, and the general population. The study of Xiu *et al*. (2024) [25] also shared that the project manager must anticipate the types of conflicts among team members and work to resolve them for the greater good of the project. Elsewhere, Midler & Alochet (2024) [15] found good scope definition as antecedent to project implementation success. According to the authors, project managers need to define the scope of the project; decide which activities are within the scope or out of scope of the project as this have a big impact on the amount of work which needs to be performed during the project.

The findings are presented on Table 4

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics on measure to curb project implementation challenges

Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation
Effective communication skill is regarded imperative to project implementation success	3.72	1.19
Adequate budget can assist in curbing project implementation failures	3.66	1.12
The scope of a project should be well defined and maintained to help forestall frequent alterations which are likely to cause implementation failures	3.45	1.26
Good relationships among team members and management should be fostered to enhance project implementation failures	3.50	1.15
The project to be implemented should have achievable deadlines to meet	3.40	1.27

Source: Fieldwork, 2024

Conclusion

The study assesses project management practices of the National Water Supply and Sanitation Council of Zambia**.** A descriptive cross-sectional survey was employed. The study's population comprised of project managers and project team members involved in implementation of the organizational projects in National Water Supply and Sanitation Council of Zambia, whilst the purposive sampling technique was. 94 sample size was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) [14] formula

Findings of the study showed preponderance of male respondents (61.7%) as against female respondents (38.3%) in Zambia public sector organizations. Majority of the respondents were 40(40.6%) were in the age bracket of 40 years and above

The results of the study revealed varied level of education respondents with bachelor degree holders being fairly majority. Also, the result showed that majority of the respondents sampled have tertiary educational qualification. The study further showed that majority of respondents has 4-6 years of experience in the public sector. Additionally, results from the dataset demonstrate substantial years of respondents' experience on the subject which is essentials to the study

Findings of the study revealed ineffective communication, budget constraints, unforeseen changes in scope), team, impractical project deadlines as the causes of project implementation failures in National Water Supply and Sanitation Council of Zambia. It was also found effective communication skill, adequate budget, well defined scope, good relationships among team members, achievable deadlines as imperative measures to curb project implementation challenges at National Water Supply and Sanitation Council of Zambia.

Recommendations

It was recommended that project managers should ensures timely and appropriate generation, collection, dissemination, storage, and disposition of project information. Project managers should also endeavour to ensure open and clear communications among planners, implementers, and all levels of the organization for project success. This should include having a communication plan, information distribution path, progress reporting, and information sharing system for management and customers. Project managers are encouraged to adopt the use of appropriate software to aid in forecasting the cost of a project correctly. This should be done in accordance with a well-defined scope vis-a-via setting of practical deadlines.

The study further recommends project managers to acquire conflict resolution skill to address team conflict during project implementation. This will also enable the project manager to anticipate the types of conflicts among team members and work to resolve them for the good of the project

Limitations and direction for future studies

Time was of essence in conducting the study. Considerable amount of time was spent in receiving responses from respondents which affected the timely completion of the study. The study assesses project management practices of the National Water Supply and Sanitation Council of Zambia. The study relied on quantitative techniques. Future studies could explore the subject qualitatively. Also, only a handful of factors leading to project failures were delineated. Future studies could consider the other factors

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