Critical Success Factors (CSFs)
For Saudi Governmental Projects as Seen by Project Managers

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Abstract

This article aims to identify the most common critical success factors (CSFs) of governmental projects in Saudi Arabia. A total of 26 interviews have been conducted with experienced project managers from different public entities. Based on their experiences, the interviewees provided a detailed and insightful description about projects CSFs across various industries. According to findings, supportive leadership, prompt change management, strong communication, solid teamwork, and competent project managers are among the top five factors that helped projects to succeed. This paper suggests that project stakeholders should place a strong emphasis on the success factors mentioned above in order to realize Saudi Arabia's Vision.

***Keywords**: Critical success factors (CSFs); Project success; Project performance; and Project CSFs.*

Introduction

In 2015, the Saudi government introduced its ambitious reform plan known as Vision 2030. Aside from expanding the Saudi economy, the vision placed great emphasis on shifting from oil dependency to resource diversification such as investment, industry and others. The Saudi vision comprises 13 executive programs namely, Fiscal Balance, Housing, Quality of life, Privatization, National Transformation, National Industry Development & Logistics, National Character Enrichment, Financial Sector Development, Public Investment Fund, Strategic Partnership, Hajj & Omrah, National Companies Promotion and Human Capital Development, as stated through the vision 2030 document. Each of these programs puts in place projects that need to be managed with a professional expertise in order to achieve the pre-defined targets and objectives. The more these projects succeed, the sooner the vision will be realized. On those grounds, project management theories and practices are compelling to handle things in an appropriate manner (PMI, 2017).

Within the project management field, "success" varies in meaning among schools. This current study builds on the definition of Standish Group, which is considered to be one of the biggest Project Management research firms internationally. A project succeeds if it delivers the scope of its work within the agreed period and cost (Standish Group, 2018). The latest report issued by Standish Group indicated that the number of successful projects worldwide has decreased from 31% in 2013 to only 23% in 2018. The same report also showed that 58% of projects were accomplished, but faced some challenges in the scope, cost or time, while 19% completely failed. According to Besteiro, de Souza Pinto, and Novaski (2015), defining success is not an easy process, it is contingent on the perspective of the stakeholder, the project type, the temporal perspective as well as the whole organization process. The above studies prove the importance of project

management and its significance to any organizations. It is safe to say that it constitutes the arm that turns visions into actions and execute national strategies.

Throughout the project life cycle, project managers encounter many difficulties and challenges. Critical Success Factors are the key areas that lead to successful competitive performance for the organization, if they yield fruitful results. CSF are the few key areas where things must go right for the business to flourish (Forster & Rockart, 1989). Thus, in order to increase the chances of project success and overcome challenges, it is essential to work on the critical success factors. This paper will identify these factors in the context of the Saudigovernmental projects. by providing answers to the following question: What are the most critical success factors (CSFs) needed to effectively achieve Saudi governmental projects?

Literature Review

Project & Project Success

According to PMBOK Guide (PMI, 2017), "project is a temporary endeavor designed to produce a unique product, service or result", while "project management is the application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities to meet project requirements." As per PMBOK, the success of projects is measured by the following four factors: quality, on- time completion, estimated cost and customer satisfaction. On the other hand, Aubry (2015) establishes that the success of a project is dependent on different dimensions such as budget, time and quality of final deliverables.

Project Success Factors

According to Ika (2009), project critical success factors refer more specifically to conditions, events and circumstances that contribute to project results. Competitiveness is promoted by critical success factors, which are key areas for satisfactory results to any organization," the few key areas where things must go right for the business to flourish" (Forster & Rockart, 1989).

As for Jitpaiboon et al. (2019) consider project management tools, project management best practices and support equally important for a successful implementation. Another study done by Pinto and Slevin (1988) and with 600 project managers from around the world, ten critical success factors were discovered:

- Project mission: Initial clarity of goals and general directions;
- Top management support: Willingness of top management to provide the necessary resources and authority/power for a project success;
- Project schedule/plans: A detailed specification of the individual action steps required for project implementation;
- Client consultation: Communication, consultation and active listening to all impacted parties;
- Personnel: Recruitment, selection and training of the needed personnel for the project team;
- Technical tasks: Availability of the required technology and expertise to accomplish the specific technical action steps;
- Client acceptance: The act of "selling" the final project to its ultimate intended users; Monitoring and feedback: Timely provision of comprehensive control information at each phase in the implementation process;
- Communication: The provision of an appropriate network and necessary data to all key factors in the project implementation;
- Troubleshooting: Ability to handle unexpected crises and deviations from plan.

As per Hyvräri (2006) research, communication is regarded as the most relevant factor to implement the project. The other critical success factors found varied between upper management support, project schedule, client consultation, client acceptance, project mission, project execution, troubleshooting, staff management, monitoring and control. Following the analysis of this study's results, project managers would be able to identify and eliminate the factors that negatively impact their performance. Ika (2009) says that "critical success factors are the levers that a project manager employs to drive the project's odds at success," it begins by focusing on the different aspects of project control.

With reference to a research done by Pacagnella Jr et al. (2019), some CSFs influence success in more than one dimension such as team integration (efficiency and impact on team); project management office (PMO) (impact on team and preparation for the future); risk identification (efficiency, impact on the team and impact on consumers); time and money reserves (efficiency and impact on consumers); lessons learned register (efficiency and preparation for the future); and use of previous technologies (efficiency and future preparation). Therefore, the research concluded that the influence of CSFs on the success of projects is highly diverse in project manufacturing environments.

Other researchers categorized project success factors under main categories as specified by Chan et al. (2004). It specified categorizes them in five with each related CSFs, coming up with the following categories: project-related factors, procurement-related factors, project management factors, project participant-related factors and external factors.

Research Methodology

According to the website of Saudi Vision 2030 (https://vision2030.gov.sa), on April 25, 2016, the Saudi Council of Ministers, chaired by King Salman, approved the vision of Saudi Arabia 2030, based on a recommendation by the Council of Economic and Development Affairs (CEDA). CEDA is the main driver of the vision through its office of strategy management (OSM) that launched 13 programs as a first patch toward achieving the vision. The main concern of this study is to identify the main critical factors of these projects, resulting in their success.

Research Setting

The research setting refers to the physical, social and cultural setting in which the researcher conducts the study. For this purpose, data were collected from the vision 2030 programs premises in Riyadh. For each of the 13 programs (aforementioned in the introduction section), I interviewed a senior project manager as well as a junior project manager designated by him. This approach allowed me to cover the managerial aspect of these projects in addition to the delivery phase.

Data Collection

This article identified the main project critical success factors through an exploratory study conducted alongside a restricted number of project managers (participants). The interviews used as a qualitative method instrument contributed in determining the project CSFs. Considering the limited number of project managers of the 13 programs (ranging from 4 to 5 project managers in each program) and the failure to access them all, the article built upon 26 interviews (two project managers from each program) to come up with series of critical factors required for the success of a project.

To ensure the quality of the interviews, I allowed interviewees to tell their stories in their own words and I wrote the questions in a generic and non-directive manner or what is called by "Grand-Tour Question". Moreover, I sent an email invitation to each interviewee after a brief introduction through a phone call and started all interviews by insisting on information sensitivity and confidentiality.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed based on a grounded theory through three main stages: First, "open coding" that focused on exploring concepts and categories from the interviews transcripts; second, "axial coding" that concentrated on building a relation between concepts, categories and sub-categories; and third "selective coding" referring to the overarching phenomenon and designed through a selected concept of project critical success factors. Another important subject in data analysis is quality in which I endeavored the most to achieve high degree of reliability by comparing the study findings with literatures and ran the relevant analysis needed. After conducting all interviews and collecting the CSF from the project managers' perspectives, I noticed that some factors were accentuated more than others and recurred all along the interviews, the reason why I added CSF's dimensions (High, Medium, Low) for each factor. Answering the introductory question on the main critical success factors for an effective Saudi governmental project, it is safe to say that the high impact CFSs are the answer of the study question.

Results and Analysis

As a result of the extensive and open interviews conducted with project managers, the researcher was able to reach seven critical success factors that have contributed the most to the governmental project success. They are described hereunder from the most important one to the least:

CSF #1: Leadership Buy-in and Support

Leaders can play an instrumental role in project success. Project leaders are ministers, governors or their vices. They are tasked with the responsibility of creating a coherent frame for the project and harnessing inspiration, motivation and collective spirit among projects managers. Furthermore, they are responsible for ensuring that project scope and objectives are clearly defined as key factors to drive the successful implementation of projects. On the other hand, they need to create a balanced system between centralization and decentralization processes, having due regard to the role of project managers in contributive decision-making. Their support includes, but not limited to, project budget approval, making effective and quick decisions related to the project, and facilitating external and cross ministries tasks.

CSF #2: Develop a Clear and Detailed Project Plan

A project plan, as most of the interviewed project managers called it, constitutes the backbone of any projects. It does not solely entail the timeline of the project, but also important plans such as the scope, the risk, an effective communication, project quality, among others. It is worth noting, that interviewees mainly focused on two constraints, the scope and time. Infact, a clear-cut project scope planning must be detailed to all stakeholders including vendors, if any, with all technical and non-technical requirements that should be signed and agreed upon prior to execution. Another project constraint is the time, or project schedule, which should be communicated by project managers with precise forecast and estimation of each activity with intended start and finish dates. Team members are tasked with the developing of this schedule, which should be explained to all stakeholders and approved by relevant parties prior to any execution.

CSF #3: Effective Communication and Coordination

In order to ensure smooth implementation of a project, communication in itself is not enough, as indicated in CSF #2. It takes special skills and specific tools to be able to use effective communication mechanisms. As part of this process, coordination is key between units, teams and entities to ensure task com-

pletion to avoid any overrun. Almost all project managers agreed on the fact that project management office contributes significantly in setting and implementing clear communication standards and protocols.

CSF #4: Reducing Governmental Bureaucracy

Not a few project managers conformed that government rules, regulations and processes are very complicated. Therefore, limiting bureaucracy processes will greatly help in raising success rate of government projects. Also, during the interview, project managers insisted that the regulation on government procurement as well as the competition are causing the delay of projects.

CSF #5: Competent and Firm Project Managers and Team Members

Interviews clearly showed that having competent team members and project managers is challenging given that they can cause, for the most part, project failure. This challenge requires entities to further focus on staff development, from one hand, to be highly selective in recruiting, on the other hand. CSF also comprises long-term stability of resources. It seems that government entities are suffering from the staff rotation between entities, resulting occasionally in an unstable work environment and task interruptions.

CSF #6: Effective Change Management

As defined by Prosci (https://www.prosci.com), change management includes the process, tools and techniques for an effective organizational change to deliver the required business outcome. It includes providing the needed awareness and alignment of all project stakeholders on the project, its objectives and benefits. In fact, informing involved people in the entity of the project and sensitize them to it is amongst project success indicators.

CSF #7: Effective Project Management Governance & Methodology

A project management governance framework, which clearly defines the authority in it as well as responsibilities, is a key factor for project success. Moreover, a clear and approved project management methodology is much-needed for all entities, being as a guideline to all project stakeholders. The methodology should emphasize on project management governance and process as well as procedures, checklists, forma and templates.

Conclusion

The results of this qualitative study provide a clear understanding of the critical success factors (CSF) for Saudi government projects. Therefore, the research question now has an answer and we can conclude that there are seven critical factors in order for these projects to Succeed, which are as follows: Leadership buy-in and support, develop a clear and detailed project plan, effective communication and coordination, Reducing governmental bureaucracy, Competent and firm project managers and team members, Effective change management, and Effective project management governance & methodology.

This study encourages all Saudi government entities that are concerned with Vision 2030 to give a thought to the above seven CSFs and apply them to their projects in order to increase project's probability of success and ultimately achieve Saudi Vision 2030.

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