A Preliminary Investigation of Exploration-Oriented, Learning Behaviors for Managing Project Quality

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ABSTRACT

Customers are typically dissatisfied when projects fail to meet requirements and/or expectations. While effectively managing projects requires balancing competing constraints, quality is one aspect of project management that has not been widely explored. To address this issue, this research investigated the characteristics of learning/exploration used to support managing project quality. This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews with information technology (IT) project managers to identify learning/exploration-oriented approaches currently used in project-based environments. Analysis of the data obtained through interviews identified characteristics of learning/exploration used in projects and these findings were validated through a focus group with additional IT project managers. Based on this research, an approach is proposed that provides specific insights for project managers about using exploratory practices. When coupled with traditional project quality management processes, these learning/exploratory activities may help to enhance ambidexterity within project-based organizations and improve project quality outcomes.

Keywords: Ambidexterity Theory, Exploitation, Exploration, Information Technology, Learning, Managing Project Quality, Opportunity Management, Project Management Processes

INTRODUCTION

It is well known that project success is typically linked to organizational success (Crawford, 2011; Peslak, 2012). Effectively managing projects requires balancing competing constraints that include scope, schedule, budget, resources, risk, and quality (Barnes, 1988; PMI, 2013). In addition, prior research suggests that project performance is largely controlled by the knowledge and experience of the manager leading the project (Easton & Rosenzweig, 2012; Kotnour, 2000; Mir & Pinnington, 2014; Rozenes, 2011). However, “…in the field of
In prior discussions regarding project quality, Winter et al. (2006) proposed shifting away from thinking of projects as product creation mechanisms and moving towards viewing projects as vehicles for value creation. In addition to typically producing tangible products, projects also provide a valuable service, management of the project (Geraldi et al., 2011). From the client’s perspective, project quality additionally involves many intangible attributes (Wright & Basu, 2008). Therefore, service models of quality that emphasize both output (i.e., what is delivered) and process (i.e., how it is delivered) may be applicable within project-based environments (Gronroos, 1984; Lehtinen & Lehtinen, 1991; Wild, 2002). Along these lines, Basu (2010) defined project quality as quality of 1) the design of the product, 2) management processes, and 3) the organization (i.e., leadership, skills, and communication).

Methods for improving quality in repetitive, production/service operations, such as Total Quality Management (Ahire, Landeros, & Golhar, 1995), Lean (Shah & Ward, 2007), and Six Sigma (Schroeder, Linderman, Liedtke, & Choo, 2008), are well known. In fact, Geraldi et al. (2011) conceptualized a typology for practitioners’ views of quality in IT projects and found that the attributes emphasized highly in interviews with project managers were rooted in the classic rhetoric of traditional approaches for managing quality. However, given the uniqueness and uncertainty associated with projects (De Meyer et al., 2002), the currently accepted processes for managing project quality (APM, 2007; ISO, 2003; PMI, 2013) may be inappropriate and/or detrimental to achieving quality project outcomes. Because these processes draw upon traditional quality improvement methods that mainly focus on control/standardization (i.e., exploiting existing knowledge in order to manage quality), they may not be compat-
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