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Summary of doctoral thesis

PROJECT SUCCESS IN NGOS

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Key words

project success, success criteria, critical success factors, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), project life cycle

1. Introduction

One important topic in the project management literature is project success. Regarding project success, there are two important concepts: success criteria and critical success factors (CSFs). The two concepts can be defined as follows: success criteria are the measurement of the achieved success, while success factors are the elements that can influence it. The literature on success criteria and CSFs continues to be fragmented, as there are plenty of lists for both topics. For example, there is a plethora of lists with CSFs, some of which are too general, while others are specific to a certain type of project or organization. The starting point for CSFs is considered to be the research done by (Pinto and Slevin, 1987) who proposed a list of ten CSFs. Since then, lists consisting of different numbers of CSFs were proposed in the literature. Because of the numerous numbers of existing CSFs, some researchers tried to group them into categories. Starting with three categories (e.g. (Satar and John, 2016)) and going up to eight categories (e.g. (Khan et al., 2013)), the research on this topic is varied as well. At the opposite pole, there are researchers that decided to focus on the effect of only one CSF. A new approach regarding success criteria and CSFs consists of project success frameworks, that links success criteria and CSFs one to another, in some cases, or links CSFs to other aspects of project management.

2. Literature review

As many researchers stated, the literature on NGOs is way behind the literature on the for-profit organizations. This issue is responsible for adopting theories, methodologies, concepts, instruments, tools and others meant for businesses by NGOs. This is also the case for project management literature. Though, neither scholars and researchers, nor practitioners are convinced of the effectiveness of using project management instruments by NGOs, because of NGOs particularities when it comes to measuring success of goal achievement on one hand, and the costs and effort required to implement the instruments (AbouAssi and Makhoul, 2018). One example can be the study of (Rusare and Jay, 2015) in which the researchers applied the Project Implementation Profile (PIP) to a project implemented by an NGO. In brief, PIP is a tool proposed by (Pinto, 1990) in order to offer managers the opportunity to check if the 10 critical success factors

exists on a certain project. Although the model was meant to be applied by for-profit organizations, it was successfully applied in the study, but some changes and improvements are needed. In this case, there is a need to take into account that unlike the for-profit organizations, NGOs have two different types of clients, the one who pays for the goods or services (donors) and the one that actually benefits from services or goods. In conclusion, it is not impossible to apply tools designed for businesses, but certainly they cannot be applied as they are to NGOs projects without taking into account their particularities. Moreover, for-profit organizations have a lot more resources, both financial and human, than NGOs, so the effort will be greater in the case of the latter. Regarding the financial aspect of NGOs, this might be their greatest particularity and biggest challenge. The majority of them are resource dependent, regardless of whether they have a private donor or governmental funding or another financial stream. This challenge can be overcome by adopting a diversification of funding streams strategy (Kearns et al., 2014).

The literature review on NGOs revealed a gap in research about NGOs project success. Moreover, the studies on success criteria and CSFs for NGOs are even fewer. Although there are plenty of studies about project success in general, including topics as success criteria or CSFs, the particularities of NGOs cannot be ignored, therefore one cannot expect that the existing research will fit them. The present research aims to cover, at least in a certain measure, the existing gap.

3. Research questions

The principal research questions of this thesis are as follows:

Research Question 1: Which are the success criteria for NGOs projects?

Research Question 2: Which are the CSFs for NGOs projects?

After reviewing the literature about project success and NGOs some ideas and conclusions emerged. Firstly, as previously mentioned, the literature regarding success criteria and CSFs for NGOs' projects is almost inexistent. So, there is definitely a gap in the literature. Secondly, some authors (e.g. Pinto and Prescott, 1988) tried to link CSFs to the stages of the Project Life Cycle (PLC), and this is why a third research question emerged:

Research Question 3: Which are the CSFs for each stage of the PLC of NGOs projects?

Fourthly, also considering the literature review, it was noticed that there is no agreement regarding CSFs categories. As it will be presented in the literature review section, some authors tried to group CSFs into different categories, but those categories differ from one author to another. Furthermore, as there is not much research on CSFs for NGOs projects, there are not any categories of CSFs for NGOs projects. So, the last research question is:

Research question 4: What are the categories in which the CSFs of NGO projects can be grouped?

4. Methodology

First of all, qualitative research was considered to be appropriate for this research, due to the need of having in-depth exploration of the topic, and not a need to test some hypothesis or analyze some correlations. This research aim is to discover the factors that have an impact on project success in NGOs by studying specific cases of project success. Further, two research methods seemed to be appropriate: grounded theory and case study. For both methods, the interview is considered the primary form of data collection. Regarding the grounded theory, it is recommended to be used when there is no research in the literature on a certain topic and a theory is needed to explain a process or an action, while case study research consists of identifying, describing and analyzing the chosen case or cases (Creswell and Poth, 2017).

The case selection was made based on four criteria: the NGO should activate in the social services sector, it should have experience and at least 10 employees and volunteers, and it should have a finished project to discussed about. The organizations were contacted through common acquaintances and 18 were meeting the criteria and willing to participate. From those organizations, nine are from Romania, seven are from different countries in Europe, one is from Armenia (Asia) and one in from the USA (North America).

Data collection started with a pilot study, with two pilot interviews, but only after designing the interview guide, in agreement with the reviewed literature. Afterwards, the interview guide went through some changes until getting to its final form. Data collection took nine months. The interview guide has two main sections, one contains questions about the chosen project and the other one contains questions about general information regarding the organization. The first section encompasses four subsections, among which the second and the third one are considered the main ones, consisting of questions about overall project success and then questions for each

stage of the PLC. The interviews varied a lot in terms of length, with the shortest one of 37 minutes and the lengthiest one of 1 hour and 51 minutes.

Data analysis was realized using Nvivo software. It consisted of several steps, starting with the elaboration of a list of codes was created in agreement with the literature, as well. Then the interview guide's sections were correlated with the codes and the list was introduced in the software, as well as all the 18 interviews. All information from the interviews was assigned to one or more codes, if the existing one were suitable, otherwise new codes were created.

After data analysis stage was completed, a list with more than 120 factors resulted. In order to make the list more readable, the factors were grouped into three categories: *1st order categories*, *2nd order themes* and *aggregate dimensions*. The list with success criteria was analyzed separately there were not as many as CSFs and the focus of this research were the CSFs.

5. Results

The research outcomes will address the lack of studies from the literature, with the following results:

1. A list of success criteria for NGOs was discovered, following the interviews and afterwards they were grouped into five dimensions, according to the ones in the literature. The five dimensions are: project efficiency, impact on the target group, impact on the team, impact on the organization and impact on the external environment.

2. The most relevant CSFs over the PLC were identified, based on the information collected during interviews. The interview guide structure consisted of questions for each phase, so it allowed to collect CSFs and challenges/barriers for each phase, and also for the overall project. Another analysis presents the most cited CSFs, meaning that those factors have the strongest impact on projects. The most cited CSFs are: team involvement, difficult collaboration with authorities, lack of resources/ lack of financial stability/ lack of constant funding, uncooperative behavior/ difficult collaboration with beneficiaries/ bad communication with people from target group, project's idea, strict laws and regulations (bureaucracy), employee's resignation, lack of flexibility of the funder and bureaucracy.

3. Due to the fact that more than 120 factors were identified, consisting of both success factors and challenges/barriers to success, it was possible and necessary to group them into

categories. This approach was also in accordance with the studies in the literature, where after the CSFs list period, the period of CSFs categorization flourished. The factors were grouped into three major categories, as follows: factors related to the external environment, organizational factors and project related factors.

4. During the previous stage, an idea emerged: to look simultaneously at the CSFs and at the organization's characteristics. While doing this, it was noticed that the organizations with the same financing nature and project's strategic logic have some factors in common.

5. Also, in accordance with the research in the project success literature, a framework proposal was made. The framework presents in a visual way the main categories of CSFs that project managers are advised to look at if they want to increase the chances to obtain their project success.

6. Moreover, a new interpretation for the CSFs is presented in the last sub-chapter of the findings. It is part of a research published together with other researchers. It shows an interpretation of CSFs in terms of contingencies, resources and strategies, and how the three concepts combine to influence project success.

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