

# THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MANAGING THROUGH TRUST THE MIDDLE MANAGEMENT LAYER OF A CONSTRUCTION COMPANY: PROPOSED ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

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Managers are regularly identified as the key differentiating factors between competing organisations in the construction industry. The main occupant of the middle management layer of an Irish construction firm is the project manager. The continually important role project manager's play in the success of the construction company requires the maximisation of their potential. The importance of trust and its most appropriate form of adoption to the management in construction companies of maximising middle manager's potential is the subject of this paper. It particularly explores the suitability of ethnographic research in this undertaking. The researcher in this instance is employed as a project manager in a construction firm and the added nuances this introduces are reviewed, together with the literature relevant to both the topic of trust in the construction industry and ethnographic research.

Keywords: middle management, trust, ethnographic research

## INTRODUCTION

In 1998 Sir John Egan introduced a key principle for the need to have respect for people, under the title of *Rethinking Construction*. The importance of this concept has increased as large construction companies have evolved into managers of the construction process, as opposed to, direct employing agents of the majority of construction industry participants in recent years. 'The competence of a construction company to effectively manage people has traditionally been viewed as deficient and remains a poorly understood industry, particularly in relation to its people management practices' Dainty and Loosemore (2012). A number of literature sources have identified the lack of studies carried out on management within the construction sector (Akhavan Tabassi and Hassan Abu Bakar, 2010) and the resultant need for further research within this area where '... the variables that are associated with leadership styles and which dictate the success of an organisation ... are crucial areas for research in the construction industry' Naoum (Barassi). The aim of the research being undertaken is, from a construction project manager's perspective, to obtain the importance of the role which trust plays in most effectively managing the construction project manager and to confirm the belief that the project manager is a very crucial component in the success of an Irish construction company.

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## RESEARCH CONTEXT

The full time employment position of the researcher conducting this research is considered a very important and unique perspective in the research undertaking. The researcher is in full time employment within BAM Contractors in Ireland, an operating company of the international Royal BAM Group, which is among the top three large construction companies within Ireland, (Foley, 2015, Bam, 2016). Bam Contractors are operating primarily within the Irish construction sector, which has experienced severe contraction, from €38.631 billion in 2006, to €9.12 billion in 2011. (CIF, 2013) reflecting the overall Irish economic recession. This has resulted in the 8no. companies classified as large (CSO, 2014) employing 4% of those employed within the industry, yet yielding a higher turnover per person than the 96% employed within the small to medium enterprises. The BAM Group potential with regard to a number of operating companies worldwide is considered a unique opportunity to establish a broader research findings validation process which can be applied to the Irish construction industry context. The potential resultant cross cultural comparisons have been identified (Tillmar, 2012) as allowing a combination of distance and familiarity which results in the discovery of dynamics which would not be apparent otherwise. This is an ideal opportunity for enhancing the volume and validation of the data collected with regard to the significance of trust in managing the construction project manager.

### Construction project manager

A large construction company generates its turnover and residual profit through the completion of construction projects (vanWingerden, 2016). The literature reflects a chronological development of the recognition of the importance of the construction project manager as summarised below. The project managers, being the construction site manager occupies a position within middle management of a construction company and are, 'becoming the key human resource for the modern contracting organisation' (Dainty *et al.*, 2004), positioned at the heart of the success or the failure of the project for the contractor (Styhre and Josephson, 2006) They are experiencing an increase in responsibility, authority and decision making control (Parris *et al.*, 2008). This results in the project manager being the one who plans and is responsible for maintaining day to day production and ultimately achieving all the construction project goals and targets (Syben, 2008). These projects are decentralised from the main office typically resulting in the development of a decentralised decision making structure (Gluch, 2009) and therefore they achieve this by pulling together the work of different teams and functional specialities (Dainty and Loosemore, 2012). The role therefore of the construction project manager is recognised as a very important and central resource for large construction companies (vanWingerden, 2016). The project manager's importance has been quantified and the research findings of Hyvari has shown that a project managers leadership ability accounts for approximately 76% of a projects success and 67% of a projects failure Zuppa *et al.*, (2016). The project manager has an overwhelming influence on the success of a construction company.

The literature overwhelmingly identifies the very important role the project manager plays within a construction company, yet their correct management is a fine line which if incorrectly executed can have negative consequences.

A very significant factor in consideration of managing the construction project manager is that through an ever increasing scope of responsibility on the project manager, within a decentralised structure it can result in the project manager often

being a marginal figure, stressed and burnt out (Styhre and Josephson, 2006) within one of the most difficult industries within which to manage people and relationships (Dainty and Loosemore, 2012). This is further borne out through research studies which have shown that absence of top management support for a project is often a key factor in the failure of the project, (Naoum, 2011). In addition to the direct management of the main turnover source of the company, it is with the project managers that the main interaction at the organisations boundary occurs, placing the project manager in a 'gatekeeper' role also (Pemsel and Widén, 2011). This further increases the importance of the construction project manager's responsibility in contributing to the success of their construction company.

### **Managing the project manager**

To ensure these project managers are carrying out their role and responsibilities competently without the negative consequences, they in turn require proficient management by top tier managers. The top tier management level within the large construction companies predominantly consists of members of the engineering profession. This in itself is a handicap, as engineers often pride themselves in not knowing anything about people and managing people (Druker, 1999). Placing such responsibility on these project managers' shoulders carries a significant degree of risk, on behalf of the construction company. By default, these project managers through the hierarchical structure, operate with a lot of trust placed in them by their managers and by reverse, the project manager places a degree of trust in their line manager.

Remarkable work outcomes from employees is always the goal (Akhavan Tabassi and Hassan Abu Bakar, 2010) and should also be the goal in managing the construction project manager. However, the understanding of the management of the middle management tier, remains one of the most marginalised fields of interest in research studies Styhre and Josephson (2006) which is mirrored within the construction industry (Akhavan Tabassi and Hassan Abu Bakar, 2010).

The deficit in research with regard to the management of the construction project manager is opposed to the importance of their role within the construction company and it is an aim of this research to contribute to this area of knowledge. The construction sector contextually is fraught with uncertainty. Differing projects offer differing unique problems and constantly changing parameters, which results in many small but complex decisions to be made daily (Dainty and Loosemore, 2012) and under uncertainty people need trust (Nooteboom, 2013). This is underlined by those research studies which were carried out in a construction industry context, Rowlinson *et al.*, Thomas (1993) and Akhavan *et al.*, (2010) through it was revealed that high 'relationship attitude' is a very relevant and appropriate leadership style. Immediately, therefore with the construction industry context applied, trust is a prerequisite to a successful relationship between project managers and their respective top tier managers.

### **Trust**

The definition of trust has experienced a convergence over the past number of years, resting almost exclusively now with that of (Mayer *et al.*, 1995) 'the willingness to be vulnerable to the actions of another party' and (Rousseau *et al.*, 1998) 'trust is a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of another. Gillespie (2012) rightly points out that the three key dynamics to these definitions is that of

vulnerability, risk and interdependence. This interdependence, is therefore the two way relationship between the project manager and their manager.

The construction industry, is largely recognised and stereotyped as one of a highly fragmented industry (Ribeiro and Fernandes, 2010), in a distrusting environment (Cheung *et al.*, 2011), with an orientation towards conflict and imperfect information (Lau and Rowlinson, 2009) and where risk management and standalone projects is the normal working environment for project managers to operate in. If actions could be undertaken without any risk, then trust would not be a requirement (Dahl Rendtorff and Jagd, 2010). This is not the case in construction and construction management research lags behind other fields of research in the affect trust building skills have on the success of construction projects (Zuppa *et al.*, 2016). This research aims to bridge this gap in the specific application of trust in relation to managing a construction project manager. Trust has been identified and accepted as one of, 'if not the key sources of success in business relationships' (Bachmann and Zaheer, 2013), offering significant benefits to organisations (Searle, 2013) and being at the centre of building long-term relationships in project teams (P.M.Group, 2016). Trust encourages the sharing and positive acceptance of information (Dainty and Loosemore, 2012), with knowledge as a resource becoming increasingly recognised (Vanhala *et al.*, 2011), with better working environments resulting from high trust relationships between supervisors and workers.

It is not organisations as a whole however, but rather, individual managers that trust others (Vlaar, 2013). This all indicates the suitability and criticality that the development and incorporation of trust into the relationship between construction project managers and their manager exists. Yet the perceived reality that trust is built up over a long period of time (Cooper, 2004) originating through phrases such as 'it takes twenty years to build trust but five minutes to ruin it' (Chow *et al.*, 2012) does not lend itself to the cyclical, often transient nature of construction project teams. More recently, it has been established that the structural design of a construction company is highly influenced by the managerial view on the level of autonomy that every individual in their own department of work should have (Naoum, 2011). The construction industry, structurally designed around standalone projects, would indicate that there is a high level of autonomy afforded to project managers and in so doing, a considerable level of trust.

General management research consistently highlights that professional employees want autonomy and job freedom, not wanting to be controlled and directed (Naoum, 2011). Logically, one would assume that in large, complex organisations, top managers have a large demand on their time for external factors and high level tasks, resulting in facilitating an increase in delegation and less close involvement in details and supervision. This should increase the opportunity for project managers to achieve their aspirations for autonomy. The importance of top management attitudinal approach to how they manage the project manager gains greater significance in this context.

Trust, however is something that cannot be requested, only given (Cooper, 2004) and because of the characteristics of the construction industry, lack of trust is highlighted as one of the most critical issues (Phelps and Horman, 2010). It is important to recognise that the existence of trust is two way and that the project manager is extremely unlikely to perform exceptionally if they do not trust the top tier of management (Cooper, 2004). Dainty and Loosemore (2012) identify that the main

factor linked to positive commitment for all occupations is employee trust in management. Trust within an organisation has a multi-dimensional approach (Chen *et al.*, 2011), therefore the importance of mutual trust between the project manager and their immediate manager is paramount for the organisation in achieving their goals.

### Trust types

There are two very pertinent main streams of consideration which become relevant at this stage which this paper summarises and which the planned research will investigate further, with regard to trust and its importance to managing the construction project manager within the Irish construction sector. The first is the existence of a level of understanding beyond the employment contract between the project manager and their top tier manager introducing the concept of the psychological contract. The psychological contract represents the concept of trust or understanding that can exist, which is distinct from a physical piece of paper or contract (Banerjee *et al.*, 2012). This psychological contract can set the dynamics of the relationship and the behaviour of those involved and is playing an important role in developing the understanding of contemporary employment relationships.

Beyond the relationship with their manager, the project manager will also invariably be influenced by the organisations culture (Lau and Rowlinson, 2009). Impersonal trust refers to the trust in impersonal company factors, such as top management, company's goals, structures, roles and vision or strategy (Vanhala *et al.*, 2011). Organisational trust in the context of the traditional construction project team would be vertical trust between the project manager and the senior manager. However, this construct becomes less relevant when the decentralised nature of construction projects and the increased use of virtual technology such as email communication and collaborative databases for communication are becoming commonplace. The social interaction involved in nurturing the traditional vertical relationship trust is limited. This impersonal trust is nurtured and developed by the organisation rather than the individual manager. Perceived good treatment by the organisation can incite employee's obligation to reciprocate the organisation and thus provide the foundation for trust to develop.

Although the construction industry is one where working within teams is common place and personal relationships are inherently important, those who work within the industry are frequently disconnected from management (Dainty and Loosemore, 2012). In the context of the Irish construction industry, companies have an increasing management shortfall (Beesley, 2016), so the maximisation of the talents of those project managers already employed is of great importance. Due to the shortfall, there is a real possibility of opportunism and employee exit to another company. Where the possibility of defection and exit is real, trust becomes a significant factor as it has been identified as one of the most effective means to prevent defections (Chow *et al.*, 2012) and an important tool in retaining and motivating employees (Donoghue and Wickham, 2008). This research will investigate and progressively narrow the trust literature to significantly focus on the project manager management, from both the organisation and top tier direct manager relevance. As it has been summarised, managing the project manager through trust, is a multi-dimensional concept, not solely restricted to the relationship between the project manager and their direct top tier manager.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Good management of people has been identified as a mix of theory with practice and that the study of this subject area should reflect that experiential learning (Naoum, 2011). Various research methodologies, from experimental investigations to field studies have been undertaken and show the benefits of trust (Kramer, 2012). The perceived difficulty to derive measurable evidence required to support a hypothesis or theory within this industry (Bernold and Lee, 2010) requires a flexible methodology. Past research, has shown that participant observation is one of the most flexible research and data collection techniques (Williamson, 2006). It identifies that it has the flexibility to concentrate more on some techniques than on others in a non-linear fashion, the design of which is often developed during and as part of the process rather than being completely developed as the first phase (O'Reilly, 2012). This will allow for data from one technique to compliment or enhance data from another technique to create a 'rich description of the technical and social processes that occur within the project team' (Phelps and Horman, 2010).

### **Ethnographic research approach**

As a result, the primary methodology proposed following the literature review for this particular study is an ethnographic research approach. The ethnographic research approach can be traced back through many years, with Aristotle setting out the need for observations as the basis for knowing (Bernold and Lee, 2010). This approach was introduced into construction research in the late 1960's, however since then has been rarely used within the construction industry context, although, it can reveal rich insights (Sarah Pink, 2010) nevertheless it has been utilised in the study of management in many top journals (Phelps and Horman, 2010). This will therefore afford the opportunity in learning of the adaptability of an ethnographic research approach in a construction industry application, with the added distinguishing layer of the researcher being a long term participant in the research category with both the beneficial nuances and potential impediments which this will introduce.

There are a number of considerations which the adoption of an ethnographic approach in this context introduces. Phelps and Horman (2010), identify demonstrating the validity and reliability of the data from a single site, such as a single construction project, being a major challenge. In this instance, this is interpreted as referring to a single Irish construction company. As a result, as outlined previously, the company within which the researcher is employed, is an operating company of a larger group of companies. This larger group and the other operating companies will be utilised to validate or otherwise the data obtained within the Irish construction company, and in so doing addressing this issue.

The second consideration is that of the researcher being an employee within the construction company which will form the axis of the ethnographic research. This introduces the difficulty, as identified by Phelps and Horman (2010), of maintaining consistency and rigour. Undertaking an ethnographic study, involves taking an 'apprenticeship' type role in the research setting and observing and participating to a changing level of involvement. However, in this instance, the ethnographer is also in the role of a project manager within the research setting, so it is recognised that this academic, emotional and professional interface will need to be monitored to ensure consistent, reliable and valid data is obtained. This constant mixture of academic life, personal life and fieldwork through everyday employment and job responsibilities however, has been identified in helping the avoidance of impulsive interpretations

which could be developed following academic findings on one side, or entirely on research findings on the other hand (O'Reilly, 2012). The perspective of a researcher employing ethnography, with a history of long term professional employment within the field of research in the private sector has been neglected in the ethnographic literature which is heavily weighted towards researchers from academia experiencing a period of familiarisation and estrangement (Atkinson *et al.*, 2003) and their entry into the culture of the research field requiring an often lengthy trust building process.

The position of the researcher, while offering potential insights and personnel access, may also introduce significant obstacles, such as over familiarity, and 'over identifying with particular individuals, cliques or interest groups' where the insider who is deeply immersed may find it hard to 'gain analytic purchase on phenomena that are so thoroughly habituated as to prove immune to research orientated scrutiny' (Atkinson *et al.*, 2003). The unique contextual standpoint at the outset of this proposed ethnographic research approach and the subsequent challenges to effectively overcome will contribute to the ethnographic research methodology literature. The participants selected and approached for data collection is a very important consideration (Naoum, 2007) as 'errors, miscalculations and poor judgement in human relations can be as devastating to the research effort as any notional or statistical error (Fetterman, 1989). The researcher in this instance is firmly an active participant rather than an uninvolved observer in a number of relationships within the research field. These relationships will involve participants suitable as candidates for data collection, such as interviews.

The concept of auto ethnography due to the deep immersion within the research field was considered. This approach is one which seeks to describe and analyse personal experience to understand cultural experience (Ellis *et al.*, 2011). There are many viewpoints, both supporting and criticising the benefits of the incorporation of 'self' in the auto ethnographic methodology (Doloriert and Sambrook, 2012). This brings different ethical considerations, which in this context, primarily being, protecting the participants during the research and publication and the relational ethics of work colleagues talked about in the auto. While there will be a degree of these issues present within an ethnographic approach, the degree to which these issues would exist are considered less and coupled with intended to the company of employment, should be more acceptable. It has been identified that the majority of research on trust, to date has been conducted through surveys and some experiments (Goodall, 2012). It is not considered in this instance that experiments are appropriate or beneficial. A representative cross section of project managers and top tier managers will be selected and approached for participation. This will also be further underpinned by the selection and approach to a number of similar hierarchical managers within the broader BAM Group to add validity to the findings within the Irish construction sector employees.

## **CONCLUSION**

The primary middle manager within the large construction company, is the project manager. This project manager is critically linked to the success of the construction company and the management of the project manager is therefore critical. Yet the construction industry is one within which relationships and people management has not been to the forefront. The industry is a fast paced, dynamic and often adversarial in nature, throughout every level of project deliverance. Typically the hierarchy of the

large construction company is populated by engineers, to whom the relational management of project managers does not come instinctively.

There is a degree of risk therefore in the project manager managing a construction project, which through default initiates trust in the project manager. Trust is therefore crucial, both to and from top tier manager, but also from the organisation itself. Through an ethnographic based methodology of research, the most relevant approach will be adopted, to garner as much tacit information relating to the appropriateness of trust as a primary component in successfully managing a project manager within a large Irish construction firm. Much of the literature on management within construction, contributes from a management and leadership theoretical standpoint, and then some construction sector associations are added. This research aims to reverse this, utilising the researcher unique position in researching the unique management project managers in the construction industry, and then the broader management theory applied.

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