

EMPOWERING THE CLIENT IN THE BRIEFING PROCESS

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Accurately identifying the client's requirements is essential for project success. They form part of the project charter and ultimately determine the project scope. However, in the construction industry the process of identifying client requirements, called client briefing, has not been particularly successful. In seeking a solution for the construction industry, Barrett and Stanley (1999) suggest empowering the client is one of the main areas for improving the briefing process. The aim of this paper is to assess both the current level of client empowerment in the briefing process and the extent to which project managers are assisting their clients to be more empowered. Literature from the areas of construction, health and general management has been reviewed to establish a list of empowering qualities and a survey undertaken of project managers to obtain their rating of client empowerment and levels of assistance being offered. Findings of the survey indicate that levels of client empowerment are low particularly in understanding the need for and setting project objectives, assertiveness and confidence and in understanding roles and responsibility in briefing. Whilst project managers are clearly offering assistance to their clients, the generally low level of client empowerment may be a significant contributor to the lack of success in client briefing.

Keywords: Client briefing, Empowerment, Project success

INTRODUCTION

One of the most critical processes contributing to project success occurs at the beginning of a project, when the client communicates their requirements to the project manager in order to establish the scope of the project and create the project charter. This process of defining the scope, often called briefing, requires considerable skill and understanding on the part of both parties (Castell 2002) and a high level of collaboration (Turner and Muller 2004). Both parties need to understand not only the project itself but the business context for the project. This is not always the case. A naïve client (one who undertakes projects infrequently) may be unfamiliar with the briefing process and the expectations of the project team. Conversely, the project manager may be contracted to manage a project in an unfamiliar industry and hence have much less knowledge about the context of the project than the client which can lead to production of an inadequate brief. Disparities in the level of knowledge, if left unresolved, can lead to confusion, mismanagement and mistrust in the process. Client briefing relies on the client having confidence and trust that the team are working towards delivering a successful project. The need for improvement in client briefing is well documented in reports such as Latham (1994) and Egan (1998) and in other research including the SPICE project Haigh and Sarshar (1998) and Barrett, Stanley and Sexton (1999).

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Research by Barrett and Stanley (1999) into the briefing process in construction projects lead them to suggest five key areas for improvement in the briefing process; empowering the client, managing the project dynamics, appropriate user involvement, appropriate team building and appropriate visualization techniques. This paper focuses on the first of these areas; *empowering a client*. It establishes a set of empowering qualities that can be used to measure the level of client empowerment in the briefing process and through a survey of project managers identifies both the current level of client empowerment and the amount of assistance project managers are giving their clients in becoming more empowered.

DEFINITION OF EMPOWERMENT

The general theory of empowerment has been investigated at length by various authors who define empowerment variously as “a motivational construct – meaning to enable rather than simply to delegate” (Conger and Kanungo 1988: 474), “a concept, a philosophy, a set of organizational behavioral practices and an organizational programme” (Ripley and Ripley 1992: 21), “a form of employee involvement, designed by management and intended to generate commitment and enhance employee contributions to the organization” (Wilkinson 1998: 43) and the “involvement of employees in the decision-making process” (Pardo Del Val and Lloyd 2003: 102). As Hammuda and Dulaimi (1997) explain, however, it is difficult to integrate these models into one unified model. Whilst there are similarities in the concepts of empowerment put forward by each author, each definition suites a particular industry or organizational environment. Discussion more specifically about empowerment in the context of construction and project management can be found in texts by various authors including Lovell (1993) Tampeo and Thurloway (1993), Johns (1995), Newcombe (1996), Hammuda and Dulaimi (1997), Williams (1997), Barrett and Stanley (1999), Caru, Cova and Pace (2004) and Turner and Muller (2004). However, most of the discussion focuses on empowerment in a downward direction. For instance, Lovell (1993: 76) describes empowerment as being a downward power from the project manager, “giving subordinates the resources, both psychological and technical, to discover the varieties of power they themselves have and/or accumulate, and therefore which they can use on another’s behalf”. Johns (1995: 36) suggests that empowerment is “motivating team members toward the attainment of the customer’s needs” and Turner and Muller (2004: 328) suggest the project owner should be empowering the project manager.

There is much less discussion, however, about an upward direction for empowerment; that is the project manager helping empower their client. Lovell (1993) describes a process of *upward influence*, but this involves a challenge to the project champion (or client) rather than nurturing a mutual understanding. The process of empowering suggested by Barrett and Stanley (1999) has a more upward focus in that it looks to support and encourage clients to be effective in their briefing processes. Due to the limited amount of discussion in project management about empowering upwards, literature has been sourced and reviewed from three alternative areas known to facilitate empowerment, namely construction, mental health and general management in order to establish a set of qualities that empowered clients should possess and, as a result, define a generic list that could be used to assess the current levels of empowerment in clients in a project management environment.

In the area of construction Barrett and Stanley (1999) identify activities that clients could undertake to increase levels of empowerment and improve briefing processes (See Table 1)

Table 1: List of empowering activities (Barrett and Stanley 1999)

Being knowledgeable about their own organizations
Being aware of the project constraints
Understanding the basics of the construction process
Understanding their roles and responsibilities
Maintaining participation in projects
Gaining the support of senior managers for projects
Appointing internal project managers to manage projects
Integrating business strategy and building requirements

In the mental health area Chamberlin (1997) places great emphasis on empowering clients to self-help and undertook an extensive research project for the Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, the first part of which establishes a description of empowering qualities (See Table 2).

Table 2: Description of empowering qualities (Chamberlin 1997)

Having decision-making power
Having access to information and resources
Having a range of options from which to make choices (not just yes/no)
Assertiveness
A feeling that the individual can make a difference (being hopeful)
Learning to think critically; learning the conditioning; seeing things differently
Learning about and expressing anger
Not feeling alone; feeling part of a group
Understanding that people have rights
Effecting change in one's life and one's community
Learning skills (e.g., communication) that the individual defines as important
Changing others' perceptions of one's competency and capacity to act
Coming out of the closet
Growth and change that is never ending and self-initiated
Increasing one's positive self-image and overcoming stigma

From a general management perspective Conger and Kanungo (1988) undertook a detailed analysis of empowerment which, although focusing more on the processes of empowering downwards, produced a list of empowering qualities (See Table 3)

Table 3: List of empowering qualities (Conger and Kanungo 1988)

Expressing confidence in subordinates
Fostering opportunities for team members to participate in decision making
Providing autonomy from bureaucratic constraint
Observing others' effectiveness
Setting inspirational and/or meaningful goals, and
Establishing a trusting and cooperative culture

Not all qualities listed in the above tables will be pertinent to empowering upwards in the client briefing process and hence a condensed list of empowering qualities appropriate for clients in the briefing process (see Table 4) has been created from the above lists. This list has been grouped into five main areas for empowerment in a client briefing context. Due to the complexity of the concept of empowerment it is acknowledged that there are other empowering qualities that could have been

included in the list. However the list has been restricted to qualities that are pertinent to project management and the client briefing process.

Table 4: Condensed list of empowering qualities

Main areas for empowerment	Empowering Qualities
Extent of knowledge	Knowing the business of the organization
	Knowing the organizational structure
	Knowing the project's strategic focus
Understanding about the project	Understanding what is wanted from the project
	Understanding project objectives
	Understanding the need to prioritise objectives
Decision-making capability	Having the required authority
	Having the ability to choose project options
	Having skill in prioritizing objectives
Administration and process skills	Understanding the purpose of briefing
	Understanding the production processes of a brief
	Understanding the roles & responsibilities in briefing
	Maintaining participation in projects
	Being able to gain senior manager support
	Being able to resolve conflicts in requirements
	Appointing appropriate client reps
	Ability to integrate business and project objectives
	Having access to relevant info
	Personal characteristics
Having confidence in the actions taken	
Thinking critically	
Being able to converse in unfamiliar topics	
Having competence in the area of a project's product	
Being able to communicate ideas	
Maintaining interest in the briefing process	
Having skill to make decisions about the brief	

EMPOWERING THE CLIENT IN THE BRIEFING PROCESS

Empowering is about "helping people to help themselves" (Colin 2003: 1). Whilst the client is likely to be knowledgeable in their own field or industry they may not be so familiar with the processes required in briefing a project. Yet they need to be able to manage the interaction with the project manager in order to obtain the outcome they are expecting. According to Barrett and Stanley (1999) clients' needs differ and empowering them by assisting with technical knowledge, support and encouragement will make them more effective in the briefing process. The client not only needs knowledge and skill in their own area, but also requires an ability to communicate and resolve issues and to make the decisions, involve themselves in the discussions and direct the team when and where necessary. To be fully effective, practical and achievable, empowerment must start at the top (Ripley and Ripley 1992). The manner in which a project manager interacts with and/or assists the client may also be dependent on whether the client is an internal or an external client. An external client can be defined as anyone from outside the organisation who pays for and uses the organisation's services and an internal client as anyone from within the organisation who uses the organisation's services (Sisco 2002). The questionnaire for this paper asks respondents to identify whether their clients are internal or external so that comparisons can be made between the levels of

empowerment and the amount of assistance offered in each group. Sisco (2002: 1) believes they should be treated the same, but suggests that whilst it is easy to “respect external clients because they are a source of revenue”, internal clients are too often “treated as a captive audience that can be dictated to and shown less respect”.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire was chosen as the research instrument to obtain data from a large sample population. Whilst a qualitative approach (using interviews) may have produced a greater depth to the responses, this was considered unnecessary for an initial investigation of the topic. The sample population comprised students studying on the Project Management postgraduate degree course at Curtin University. This is a generic course and attracts mature age students from a wide range of industries including construction, health, defence, education, information technology and resources. The sample population was chosen because the majority of students are involved in projects and project management in their own organizations or for outside clients and are therefore able to relate their responses to practical examples of project team/client interaction. Students from each of the three years on the course were asked to complete a questionnaire. Out of a possible 69 students, 43 answered the questionnaire which represents a 62% response rate.

The questionnaire comprised three parts. The first asked respondents demographic questions about their main type of industry (ie health, defence, construction/property etc) and type of client (internal or external). The second part asked respondents to rate the level of empowerment demonstrated by their clients in relation to each of the empowering qualities listed in Table 4. The third part asked respondents to rate the amount of assistance they provide for their clients in relation to the empowering qualities listed in Table 4. Respondents were asked to give a rating from the range: “never”, “rarely”, “sometimes”, “frequently”, “and always”. For the purposes of analysis these ratings have been given a numeric value as follows: never 0, rarely 1, sometimes 2, frequently 3 and always 4. Where overall ratings are displayed for individual qualities (ie Figure 4) the score for each quality has been obtained by multiplying the frequency of responses for that quality by its numeric value. Where ratings have been combined into the five main empowering areas (ie Figures 1, 2 and 3) the individual scores for empowering qualities have been aggregated to give a total score for each of the five main empowering areas. This total is then divided by the total score possible for that same area in order to show the value as a *‘proportion of possible score’* which gives a measure by which areas can be compared.

The main limitation of the research is the inability to analyse results in detail. Without interviewing respondents it is only possible to speculate on the cause of any discrepancies in data. Future research in the form of follow-up interviews will be required to give a more detailed explanation for any anomalies and/or underlying trends. It should also be noted that there were only two respondents from each of the defence and health areas and hence responses about those areas may not be representative. It is also acknowledged that results may be affected by the respondents’ desire to show they are providing levels of assistance to meet or exceed their clients’ needs. However, this effect is likely to be minimal since the level of assistance in empowering the client is not generally covered by a formal

agreement and would not therefore reflect detrimentally in any performance appraisal.

RESULTS

Demographic information

Respondents were asked to describe the type of projects they undertake and whether their clients are predominantly internal or external. Results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Demographic information about the sample population

Main type of client	Type of project							Totals
	Construction	Defence	Education	Health	IT	Resources	Other	
Internal	5	0	1	1	6	4	2	19
External	9	2	3	1	1	3	5	24
Total	14	2	4	2	7	7	7	43

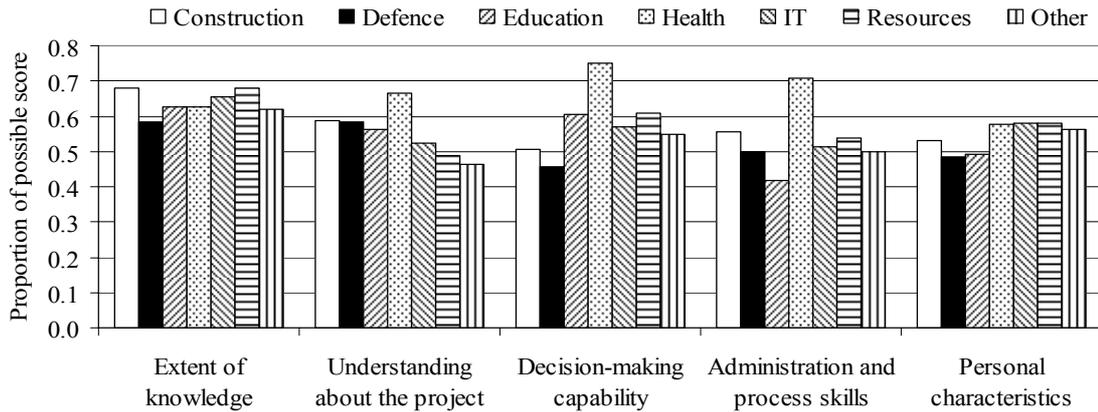
The results show that respondents come from a broad range of industries with construction being the most common. Forty four percent of all respondents dealt primarily with internal clients whilst fifty six percent dealt with external clients.

Current level of client empowerment

Respondents were asked to rate current levels of client empowerment in the briefing process. Based on the proportion of possible score for each industry the results were: Health 0.66, Resources 0.57, Construction 0.56, Information technology 0.56, Defence 0.53, Other 0.53 and Education 0.50. These results indicate a low overall level of client empowerment, with only Health scoring above 0.6. This reinforces the view of Barrett and Stanley (1999) that client empowerment is one of the key areas for improvement. If the client does not feel empowered in the briefing process they will find it more difficult to communicate their requirements and to interact adequately and appropriately with the project team.

The level of client empowerment was also assessed across all industries for the five main empowering areas. Based on the proportion of possible score for each area the results were: Extent of knowledge 0.65, Decision-making capability 0.56, Personal characteristics 0.55, Understanding about the project 0.54 and Administration and process skills 0.53. This indicates that clients have a reasonable knowledge of their organization, structure and strategic purpose for the project but are lacking in an understanding about the project and in the administration and process skills to adequately carry out briefing. Figure 1 graphically represents the levels of client empowerment in each industry and across each of the main areas of empowerment

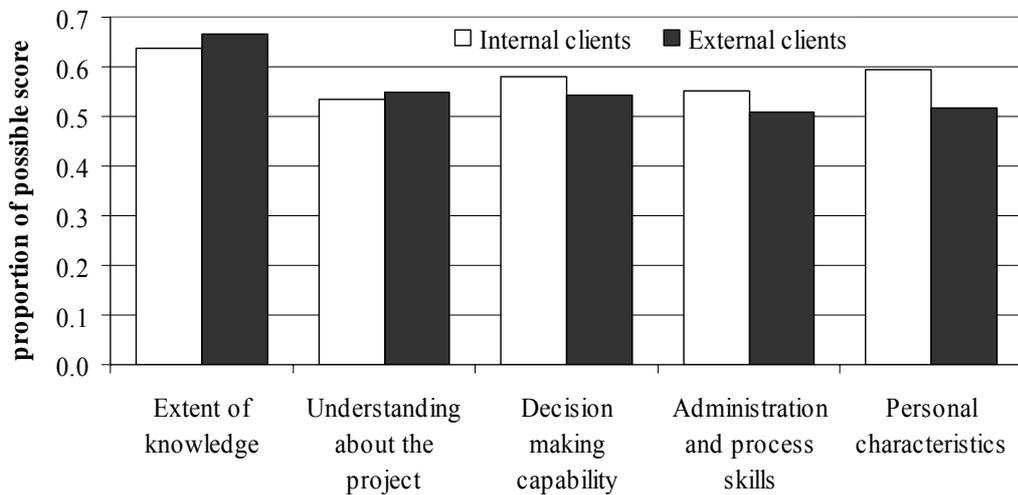
Figure 1: Comparison of current levels of empowerment across different industries



Considering these scores it is no wonder that discrepancies arise between client expectations and the requirements that are actually communicated to the project team. If the client is unfamiliar with the concept of setting and controlling project objectives (ie. time, cost and quality) then it is not surprising that discrepancies can occur between client expectations and delivered outcomes from the project.

In the demographic questions respondents were asked to describe their main type of client (internal or external). There is little overall difference in the scores for levels of empowerment between internal clients (scoring 0.58) and external clients (scoring 0.54). Figure 2 shows the scores for each type of client across the five main empowering areas. Internal clients scored only marginally higher than external clients in the areas of decision-making, administration and process skills and personal characteristics.

Figure 2: Comparison of levels of empowerment between internal and external clients



Combining the scores for all clients irrespective of type or industry indicates an overall score for client empowerment in the briefing process of 0.56 which is surprisingly low, but reinforces the findings of Barrett and Stanley (1999) that clients need to be more empowered in the briefing process. The higher score indicated for the level of empowerment for internal clients may be due to the fact that organisations employing project managers (in this case, the respondents) are more likely to be familiar with project management processes including client briefing and hence more empowered in the briefing process. Organisations with internal clients may also feel more empowered to communicate their requirements

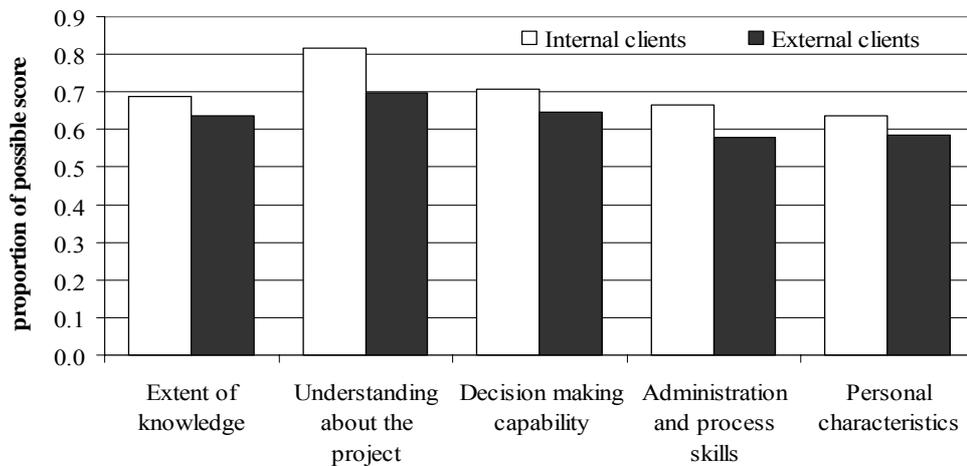
to the project team than their external counterparts. The fact that they are potentially more familiar with other members of their organization may also explain why the internal clients demonstrate greater empowerment in the area of personal characteristics.

Of some concern, however, is the client’s extent of knowledge which ranged from only 0.64 (internal clients) to 0.67 (external clients). If clients have limited overall knowledge of their own business area, organization and project’s strategic focus then their ability to brief others about the project and achieve a successful outcome for the organization seems unlikely. Barrett and Stanley (1999) identify the need to improving the client’s knowledge about their own organization as one of the major areas for improvement in client briefing.

Amount of assistance being offered for client empowerment

Figure 3 shows the varying amounts of assistance being offered to clients to help empower them in the briefing process. Results are shown for each type of client across the five main empowering areas. The overall level of assistance is quite low scoring only 0.64 across all clients. Internal clients are consistently offered more assistance than external clients across all five areas with the average level of assistance to internal clients being 0.68 and to external clients only 0.61. Project managers may find it easier to assist the internal client rather than an external client from another organization due to the internal client being more accessible and/or amenable to being assisted.

Figure 3: Comparison of amount of assistance offered to internal and external clients



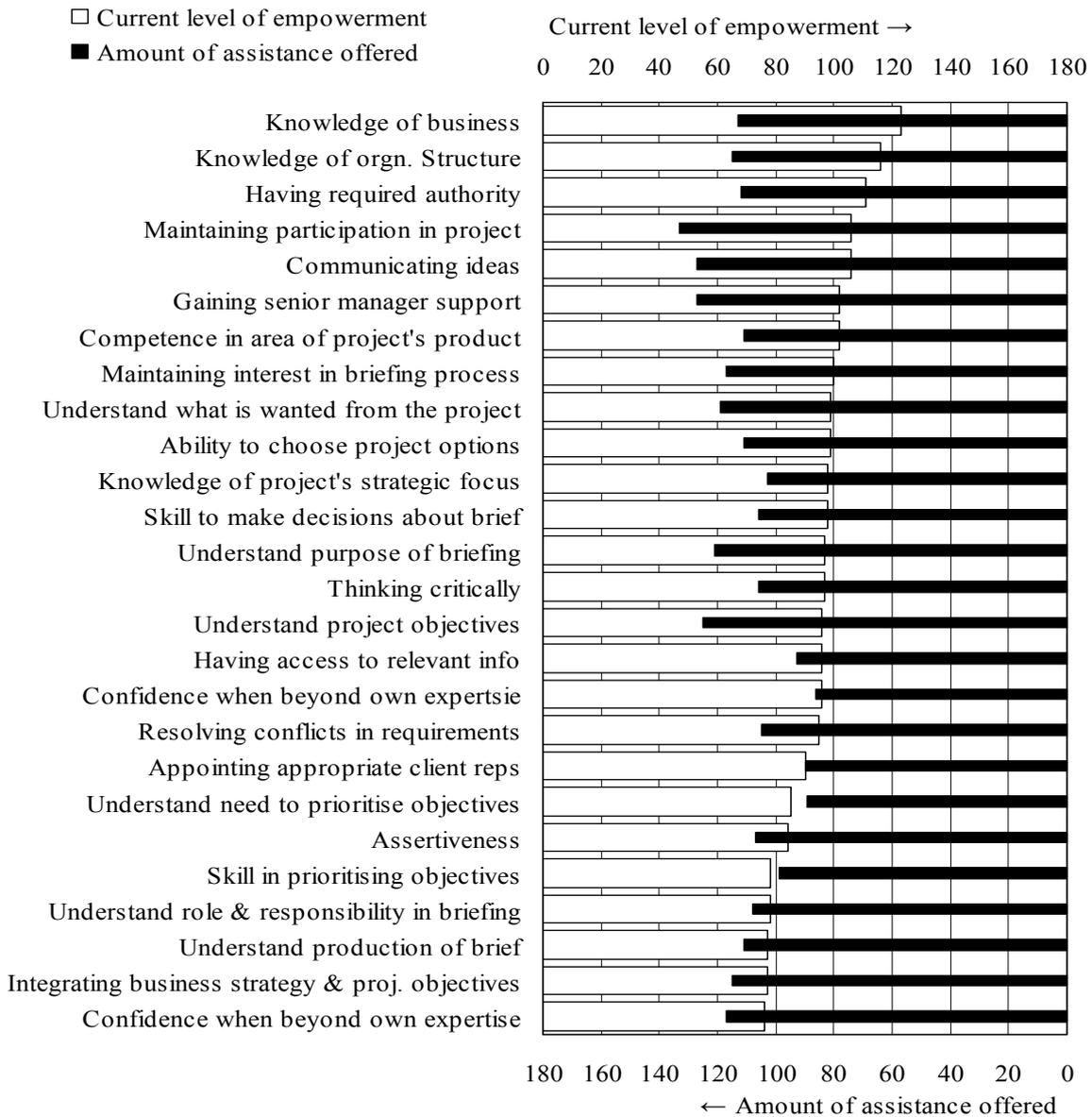
The area where greatest assistance is given to both types of client is in helping the client understand the project and identifying and prioritizing project objectives (scoring 0.76). This is understandable given that these areas can contribute significantly to achieving project success. The empowering area of *personal characteristics* received the least amount of assistance which is perhaps due to it being one of the more intangible areas for project managers to empower their client. Realistically, from a project manager’s perspective it could be difficult to help a client be more assertive or confident in the briefing process.

Figure 4 compares the current level of empowerment (white bars, read from the left) with the level of assistance being offered (black bars, read from the right) for each empowering quality. The optimum scenario would show all white bars reaching across to the right side of the graph, ie all clients being fully empowered in the

briefing process. However, in reality clients are not fully empowered and project managers are offering assistance to empower them in the briefing process. For maximum efficiency the level of assistance should compensate for the lack of client empowerment (indicated by the white bars and the black bars meeting at their respective tips). However, the overlapping white and black bars on the graph show that for many of the empowering qualities the amount of assistance offered is greater than the level of empowerment required. There are only two qualities (understanding the need to prioritise objectives and skill in prioritizing objectives) where levels of assistance could be increased to match levels of empowerment.

Not surprisingly, the qualities in which the client displays greatest empowerment are those for which the client can have easiest access to information (ie knowledge of their own organization, business area, etc). The empowering qualities that scored lowest are a combination of the personal characteristics (ie confidence, assertiveness, etc) and those that refer to the understanding and use of project objectives. Assistance from project managers needs to address the overall low level of client empowerment and in particular those qualities that have scored lowest in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Comparison of level of client empowerment and amount of assistance provided



CONCLUSION

The study has achieved its primary aim by ascertaining both the current levels of client empowerment in the client briefing process and the amount of assistance project managers are giving clients. Findings indicate that levels of client empowerment are highest in knowledge of their own organisation, their business processes and having authority but, more significantly, are lower in understanding the need for and setting project objectives, assertiveness and confidence and understanding their roles and responsibility in briefing. Project managers indicate that they are offering assistance to their clients in varying degrees as indicated in Figure 4. However, the generally low level of client empowerment recorded from the survey may be a significant contributor to the lack of success in client briefing. From the results it appears that the client’s level of empowerment needs to be raised to give them more confidence when undertaking briefing. It is recommended that further investigation using interviews be undertaken, perhaps in each separate

industry, to identify the causes for low empowerment levels and to source ways in which these levels can be raised. It would also be useful to survey the clients to record their view of empowerment levels and whether assistance is warranted and/or useful.

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