

Article

‘Serving the Public in the Post Pandemic World’: A Study of Project Management in the Public Sector

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ABSTRACT

The public sector has been severely affected by the pandemic, resulting in major changes to operating conditions and expectations. The requirements for public sector projects have similarly changed, with the nature and scope of such enterprises being severely affected. The pandemic has led to excessive public expenditure on health matters and supporting the economy through the restrictions to activities. This paper proposes that there has been a major change to project management in the public sector. Priorities have altered and the available resources have been drastically reduced. Current projects have been cancelled or reduced in scope and new projects have been commissioned for different priorities, shaped by the pandemic. The approach to project management has also been amended, due to the effects of the pandemic. This has led to generally higher levels of urgency, reduced budgets and shorter timescales for implementation.

Public sector projects are vital to the global economy, in terms of delivering services and stimulating private sector demand. Public sector projects are, therefore, of vital importance and require further study to help to understand the prevailing operating conditions and demand. Research can also assist in comprehending the actions required of the project manager, in directing such enterprises.

This paper examines key literatures, discerning the major themes in this sphere. A model of learning is adapted to categorise these themes. An interview has been held with a senior manager from a UK public sector organisation, with a job remit spanning health, education and social services, and the main themes are also selected from the interview text. This enables the academic and practitioner perspectives to be considered.

A summary of implications for practice is presented, comprising a ‘rich picture’ of key areas to be addressed in respect of public sector projects, utilising the soft systems methodology techniques.

Keywords: Public Sector, Public Sector Projects, Soft Systems Methodology, ‘Triple-Loop’ Learning, Stakeholders, Responsible Innovation, Value



Introduction

The public sector can be defined as the part of the economy that delivers services to the general public and is controlled, regulated or influenced by the state. A formal definition has been provided by Needle (2015:592),¹ namely the public sector is, “a broad area that includes central and local government, hospitals, universities, schools and nationalized industries.” This, therefore, includes national and regional or state government together with health and education organisations and also industries run by the state.

Service delivery can occur utilising several mechanisms. The latter can comprise public, private and charity sector organisations or a combination of these entities. The common objective is to deliver services to the public. The public sector is vital to the economies of most countries, in terms of stimulating demand, providing private sector business and social benefits.

The global pandemic has increased the importance of the public sector in most countries, due to the requirement to protect public health. Investment in public health has been an urgent demand of this period, leading to government regulation of behaviour and investment in health services, via public, private and charity organisations. The importance of public sector projects was thus heightened, in the effort to protect public health and stop health services from being overwhelmed. The strongly interventionist approach needed and period of global trauma has potentially changed the nature of the public sector and its projects for a world emerging from this crisis.

Methodology

A review of key literatures was performed and the principal themes extracted in an inductive analysis.² The ‘triple-loop’ model of project learning was then used to organise these themes.³ The levels of knowledge, comprising project, process and organisation, were thus utilised to analyse these themes, which were extracted from literature that focussed on public sector projects. A further layer, that of ‘society’ was added, based on the findings of this research. The latter represents the highest level of learning, which enables and influences the organisation in respect of culture. The other layers and major groups of themes in the literature are: project; process; organisation. The learning associated with the ‘project’ level is focussed on meeting the prescribed targets. The ‘process’ level comprises the resourcing of the projects. The ‘organisation’ level constitutes the culture and includes the commissioning, cancellation and scope-setting of projects.

The premise is that experiential learning is enacted at each of these levels, which interact to affect the others, for example improving processes to assist in delivering project outcomes.

A semi-structured interview with a senior manager from the public sector was held, in order to glean a practitioner perspective. The manager was responsible for projects in education, health and social services. These included projects that were critical to service delivery. The main themes were then extracted from this research, in order to provide advice for practice and supplement the literature review. The themes were, thus, discerned from the literature and empirical study using an inductive approach. These were then categorised into the broad themes of the project learning model, as cited above.

The findings from this research were summarised in a ‘rich picture’ (after Checkland and Scholes⁴). This should provide an initial position for future research as well as key points for application to practice.⁵

Literature Review

A review of the literature was enacted, considering key journals. The premise was that public sector projects need learning to occur at several levels, in order to be successful.

Society Level

The level of ‘society’ represents the highest strata of learning, with cultural changes here shaping the organisations, the nature of their projects and environment for success.

The concept of ‘Grand Societal Challenges’ is defined as complex problems, needing a concerted effort to solve.⁶ The global pandemic provides an example of such a phenomenon, requiring contributions from both public and private sectors in order to attain solutions for the public health issues. The mix of outcomes for global sustainability objectives is highlighted, for instance the positive effects on the climate and pollution, with the restrictions on travel, and negative in terms of economic growth, hunger and poverty, as the economic consequences of measures to combat the virus became evident.

Initiatives to promote ‘Responsible Innovation’ are suggested as a means to address such societal challenges. These should be promoted internationally to maximise impact. Responsible Innovation can be encouraged via a framework for governance and evaluation of innovations, in respect of harmful consequences and positive contributions to such complex problems. These initiatives should encourage reflection on performance and reconfiguration, as needed. Reconciliation of differences should be via deliberation that includes the relevant parties, in order to establish solutions.⁷

The phenomenon of an economic ‘driving force’ was discussed.⁸ The need to consider shareholder value, by increasing share price, was viewed as being problematic. The premise that companies maximise social welfare by maximising share price is challenged, with obesity and

pollution cited as two examples of the antisocial effects of pursuing corporate profit. The notion that public limited companies mean wider ownership of shares and, hence, more accountable organisations is contradicted. The move to 'networking organisations', connecting customers and suppliers in 'asset light' companies, like Nike and Netflix, has reduced the need to raise capital via shares in a public limited company format. The concentration of company ownership, for example 5 companies are quoted as currently owning around 22% of the value of the US share index. The solution is proposed as using employees to drive change via social value, for example. This could extend to appointing worker-directors, perhaps encouraged by government, using 'bailouts' to apply leverage in this respect.

The institutional environment is examined.⁹ The proposition is that informal institutions combine with formal institutions in order to formulate contractual rules and agreements. Informal institutions comprise cultural systems, including such entities as customs, norms and religion. Formal institutions are laws, including regulations and rights. These create the environment that forms the contract parameters, both formal and informal for projects. Negotiations will occur using this framework. The framework will evolve and adapt over time, via formal and informal measures that affect the rules and institutions. This creates the environment for projects in society, which varies depending on the local, national and international contexts.

The premise that social problems can all be solved by entrepreneurs is challenged by Chalmers.¹⁰ The underlying belief that the state cannot solve social and economic problems is viewed as being flawed. There are said to be power issues with social entrepreneurs, as they, typically, dominate their market. This may lead to exclusion, in terms of proposed solutions. There is also an element of business risk present, so the potential for failure exists. This could have negative effects on the service users who benefit from this social entrepreneurship. The requirement to evaluate the situation is thus stated, in order to determine whether social entrepreneurship, public policy or a combination of both comprises the optimum approach.

Organisation Level

The organisation's culture determines project selection, resourcing and termination.

The structure in the organisation is viewed as a significant determinant of project success.¹¹ This should promote the performance of key activities to organise, resource and execute projects. The organisational strategy will determine project selection and prioritisation.¹² The formulation of a business case, required outcomes and benefit realisation scheme are vital activities in this area. The management of related projects in programmes and contracts are also an

important aspect, with the establishment of governance procedures, accompanying resourcing and systems, which comprise a critical requirement of project performance. The creation of a suitable decision-making structure is, hence, needed in order to evaluate, select and execute projects, with the objective of delivering public service outcomes.

Organisational design and governance are viewed as being of primary importance in enabling project delivery.¹³ The principal element is to understand the organisation, in terms of demands and resources. The distribution of power, including degrees of autonomy and teamwork, needs to be considered and the decision structures implemented to facilitate operations. The time aspect should be accommodated with temporary projects and more permanent organisational structures given attention. The prevailing technology¹⁴ must be embodied in this design, allowing the human and technical elements to be combined to deliver the service outcomes. The suggestion is that managers' perception is utilised, harnessing current thinking to define the organisational structures. The requirement is to comprehend the individual and group views in order to create these arrangements.

The use of hybrid contexts in projects is discussed,¹⁵ employing a study of UK private and public care homes. This is defined as the project having both social and economic outcomes. The rationale comes from governments imposing a private sector rationale on public sector organisations, in terms of commercial orientation (regarding budget-setting and income generation, for example) and using both private and not-for-profit organisations to deliver public service outcomes. The nature of the hybrid context was said to be determined by two factors: the amount of competition in the market; and type of control of the organisation (for example, public or private). It was stated that companies that had low contextual constraints, enabling organisational operations to proceed without restrictions or interference from outside the organisation, contributed to high organisational performance. Good management practices were defined as: target-setting; creating incentives; use of operations and monitoring; improved management of people. These were viewed as being key contributors to high performance.

The notion of business objectives embracing both social and economic objectives, thus creating projects with dual aims, was proposed by Battilana et al.¹⁶ The potential tension between these two objectives was also highlighted. This could be addressed by designing an appropriate organisational structure to reconcile these conflicts and promote successful delivery of outcomes. The importance of the leadership setting an example in terms of behaviour and the recruitment and training of personnel to deliver the required outcomes was stated.

The need for the commitment of managers and staff to the dual organisational aims was emphasised.

The use of 'high-impact coalitions' was highlighted.¹⁷ This literature proposed that the private sector should lead the response to societal issues. The result is the formation of coalitions between public and private organisations, in order to run projects to address these issues. The suggestion is that these are voluntarily collaborations that only last as long as the specific project. Members give time and resources by means and interests in an essentially altruistic endeavour. They can also enter and leave easily, thus reducing potential dissent. The structure to address the project is deemed to be emergent, shaped by the task and the relationships between participants.

Success for such coalitions is attributed to the exercise of 'moral leadership', as this collaboration is voluntary on the part of the private sector organisations. The need for participants to want to engage with the project, attracted by the desire to contribute to addressing the social issues, is stated. The participating organisations should regulate their commitment, in order to maintain their normal work. The coalitions should, ideally, be inclusive and be focussed on developing solutions to the social issues. This scenario should encourage the practice of leadership, in order to reconcile any competing aims to concentrate collective efforts on creating solutions.¹⁷

Process Level

The learning required at the level of organisational processes is to be considered. These processes should facilitate project resourcing and monitoring, in order to optimise the required outcomes.

The case of project issues with 'non-human' actors impacting negatively on outcomes is recounted.¹⁸ The approach led by senior management failed, incurring costs and delays. The major project was the construction of a new terminal at Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam. These delays were caused by a lack of knowledge of the site configuration underground. Those personnel possessing this knowledge were excluded from the decision-making process. The artefacts, or 'boundary objects' that could have assisted this process were not available to the project team and, hence, were ineffective. There was a deficit of proper documentation to assist this aspect of the project. The action of outsourcing the project management to an external party led to issues, due to lack of knowledge and collaboration, in respect of the project. The requirement for ongoing cooperation throughout the project, leveraging local knowledge, was discerned as the principal requirement. The importance of the project governance structure was, hence, emphasised, allowing the different personnel to communicate effectively. This would have ensured that the

required knowledge of the 'non-human' agent, comprising the underground site, was shared with the relevant parties, thus permitting effective project decisions to be enacted.

A study of a large public sector infrastructure project in Holland emphasised the need for trust to facilitate governance and lead to successful outcomes.¹⁹ Trust is defined here as the acceptance of uncertainty of arrangements, together with the sharing of norms and values for the project. One device that could be used was the exchange of equivalent resources, to be performed at the same time by parties involved in the project. Two types of trust are specified: 'calculative trust' is rationally based on a system, containing mechanisms, rules and penalties; 'normative trust' is based on personal relationships, influenced by parties' shared history. Attempts to define strict rules of project governance are criticised for trying to anticipate future events and, thus, embrace all of the possible alternative actions. This is viewed as being problematic, in the case of application to very large projects (termed 'Megaprojects'), due to issues of scale and complexity. It is, thus, very difficult to accommodate all operating conditions. Contract arrangements should, though, provide a framework for collaboration. A series of workshops were successfully used to develop trust, in the case of this project.

The use of an organisational change model to implement and embed projects was studied by Pollack and Pollack.²⁰ This employed action research to reflect on the utilisation of Kotter's eight-step change model to structure a knowledge-retention project in a large organisation. The issue to be addressed was an ageing workforce, so transference of tacit and explicit knowledge was required in order to sustain organisational performance over time. This research revealed that the change model was used in a linear mode, however the steps occurred over different timelines in different parts of the organisation. There were also different actions needed to make these individual steps successful in different sections of the company. The ultimate aim was to enact the change and then embed the resultant processes in the organisational culture. Reflection on this project showed a general level of success with the model, although the final step still required full completion after the research had been published. The complexity encountered in this large-scale study should assist in the research of large public sector projects, which are usually complicated entities.

Project Level

The knowledge at the project level is embodied in all of the techniques and tools required to successfully deliver the prescribed outcomes, within the stated parameters of time, budget and quality, for example.

The notion that projects drive performance and value

creation in the economy is proposed.²¹ This research cites pre-pandemic sources that state project activity will increase in value by over 65% in the ten years up to 2027.²¹

The suggestion is that leaders should have an appropriate mix of skills to manage projects and teams, including virtual teams.^{22,23} The requirement for project sponsors to create a safe working environment and suitable code of ethics is stated. A template has been formulated in order to assist the project management process. This is termed 'the project canvas' and comprises three elements to be defined via workshops: Foundation, containing the purpose, investment and potential benefits; People, itemising the sponsors, project staff and other stakeholders; Creation, detailing the deliverables, plan and required change, including risks and tactics. This template can be used to assist in comprehending the project by attempting to provide the required information to manage this enterprise.

The learning from complex projects is also summarised, for transference of knowledge in training project managers.²⁴ A sample of such projects were studied, focussing on leadership. The central role of communications, developing power sources to manage resistance and liaising with stakeholders, for instance in order to negotiate their definition of success, were emphasised. The use of 'best practice' was also suggested to resolve issues via judgement. This type of project is relevant to large public sector projects which tend to be complex, due to resourcing, stakeholder and governance issues.

Different levels of project value have been discerned, using research into a UK public infrastructure case.²⁵ This work identifies three levels: Local, providing a service and a stimulus to the local economy; Sector, optimising travel in urban areas as well as enhancing sector value; User, improving the user experience. The premise is that public sector projects can, thus, have these three levels of value identified. This can be translated into a benefit realisation programme, in order to ensure that this potential value is delivered at each level.

The need to define a business case to encourage the process of value creation is suggested²⁶ in a study of an Information Systems project, located in the Danish public sector. This states that the benefits, costs and risks should be identified. Benefits should then be further evaluated to state the type of change with potential value and costs, including required personnel. The need for a social commitment is stated, utilising the organisational change agents. Dynamic adjustment should be enacted so that the project is aligned with the prevailing conditions and requirements. The business case is, therefore, used to aid value creation and should be revised to accommodate changes over the duration of the project. This should ensure that the project outcomes are still relevant to the demands of the sector.

A study of major public projects²⁷ examined key issues in selection and commissioning. The problem of cost and benefit analyses being ignored in favour of other criteria, such as politically-motivated reasons, was stated. The requirement was discerned as obtaining a clear definition of success, in terms of tactical and strategic measures. The need to examine different solutions and ensure planning has a long-term horizon with appropriate consideration of risk and realistic aims,²⁸ rather than mainly short-term objectives, was stated. It was noted that public pressure for projects to be enacted carried no financial obligations for the lobbyists, other than their normal tax bills. The problem of cost estimates being significantly under the final figure was highlighted. The tendency for management to focus on the beginning of the project was noted, with final outcomes being regarded as of secondary importance.

Findings

A senior manager in the public sector was interviewed and the main themes from the responses were discerned from the text. The parallels with the key literatures were then examined. The findings from this empirical work also, potentially, constitute useful information for practitioners, in respect of such projects.

The Pace of Change has Accelerated

The change in circumstances was reflected, as the '*pandemic has accelerated the change model and move to virtual working*'. The respondent noted that the '*pace of change has increased – you are expected to deliver outcomes in 90 days that previously took 6 months*'. This was primarily due to the urgency of delivering public sector services. The accompanying trend towards virtual working came as the government imposed restrictions on movement in order to limit the spread of the virus and, hence, attempt to reduce pressure on health services. The movement towards using web communications for many professional activities was, therefore, reinforced.

The need to address urgent societal challenges is discussed,⁶ with different approaches suggested^{7,8,10} for example.

The Requirements for Projects have Changed

A new order for projects was acknowledged, as the respondent noted that '*the world changes - what was right yesterday needs to change tomorrow*'. The public sector environment required urgent change to accommodate the demands of the pandemic. The post-pandemic era has also demanded rapid change, including innovative solutions to accommodate blended working, both virtual and co-located, and financial constraints, due to the high expenditure in the pandemic.

These themes are reflected in the literature,^{22,12} looking at the post-pandemic project environment.

A Structure to Implement Change is Important

The respondent stressed the importance of having a structure to guide change. The perspective was that '*Kotter's change model is my life*'. This was seen as being part of his working routine, which was the driving of the change agenda in public service, using Kotter's eight step model as a delivery vehicle. The requirement for this 'management-led' structured approach to change, initiated on a daily basis, was stated.

The application of a suitable change model was analysed by Pollack and Pollack.²⁰

The Workforce need to be Comfortable in a Virtual Environment

A principal requirement was stated as a need for '*autonomous thinkers, to be comfortable in a virtual work environment*'. The requirement to work virtually changes the recruitment specification to emphasise new criteria. The candidates now need to be motivated to work alone or as part of virtual teams. The removal of the support networks provided by co-located teams means that workers need to be more independent and have the requisite skills and motivation to work online.

This team and virtual team aspect is cited by several sources.^{22,23}

There will be a Shortage of Personnel with the required Skills

This situation was defined as the '*problem in future is the paucity of experts in change*'. The requirement is for managers to implement projects to deliver the required changes in the public sector. The demand for good project managers is high and the private sector can provide more lucrative contracts for these personnel. The need to find alternative methods to hiring these personnel was thus indicated.

The respondent suggested that '*it is necessary to develop your own staff*'. The aim was to select suitable personnel from the current public sector workforce and develop them into project managers in the organisation. This means that the staff will be 'hybrid' in that they will be professionals in their subject area as well as project managers. This has the potential advantage of these managers possessing a good understanding of the context for the projects as well as, possibly, a heightened sense of loyalty to the organisation. The training for these project managers can be tailored to the organisational needs, thus fulfilling prescribed aims.

The learning from leading complex projects is identified for staff development by Floris and Cuganesan.²⁴

The Priority is the Right 'Value Set' for Personnel

The respondents emphasised the importance of the

candidates' values, in respect of the recruitment process for the organisational 'change agents'. '*Value set is the priority - do the candidates care about the stakeholders?*' was seen as the key criteria. The interviews and tests were thus designed to obtain this information. The candidates' responses were required to '*put the stakeholders at the centre*' of their responses, rather than emphasise more functional answers, based on recommended project management practice.

The importance of defining success²⁷ and leveraging stakeholder knowledge^{18,24} are also emphasised in the literature.

A Mix of Skills is Required

The need for project managers and team members to possess a '*mix of soft and hard skills*' was noted. The ability to manage themselves and their professional relationships as well as possessing technical skills in project management and their area of expertise, such as health, education and social services, was viewed as being essential. Training will be needed to develop the organisation's staff to the requisite standards. This blend of skills should facilitate problem-solving and performance of routine tasks to deliver the necessary change in the public sector.

This requirement is also considered to be an essential element of project leadership and execution by Nieto-Rodriguez.²¹

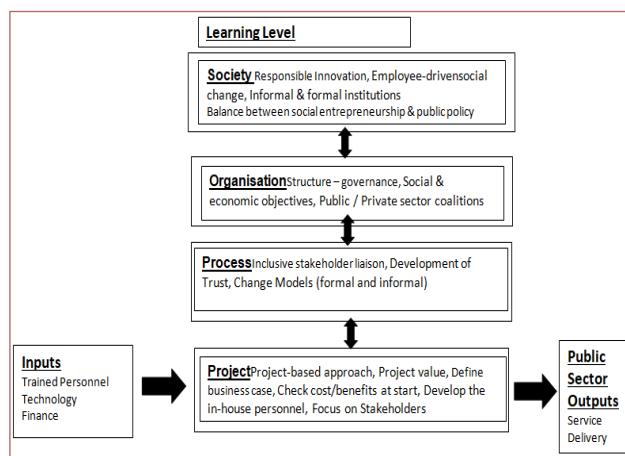


Figure 1. Key Factors for Implementing Public Sector Projects

Discussion

Soft Systems Methodology was used to create a 'rich picture', summarising the principal themes of the research [4], illustrated in Figure 1. The levels of learning are represented, namely society; organisation; process; project.

The key factors constitute the individual and collective areas of learning that this research has identified as critical to successfully implementing public sector projects. This

summarises the findings of the research and, potentially, provides a useful position to initiate further work. The knowledge gathered may also assist practitioners in implementing projects in a public sector environment and beyond this sphere.

Conclusion

This exploratory research has provided an insight into public sector projects. The objective is to increase understanding in the vital area of public project management. This work could be extended by further empirical research into other public sector organisations, accessing a range of respondents in various service sectors.

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