

The Topic of Success in the Project Management Literature

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Abstract

In a context where projects are used in all fields, project managers worldwide are interested in achieving project success. On the other side, researchers want to understand success, identify relevant success criteria and factors. Although this topic is frequently approached in literature, there is a need for further research since it involves complex and multi-dimensional concepts, influenced by stakeholders' perception, that require clarifications. The current research aims to identify the trends regarding the topic of success in the project management literature, to analyse and discuss the most relevant and actual publications. The research is based on qualitative methods, namely on a literature review, and presents characteristics of the most cited articles from the last decade, indexed in Web of Science.

Keywords: *project, success, factors, criteria, project management.*

JEL classification: M10, M20

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1. Introduction

Projects are frequent in contemporary society. Regardless of the economic sector, we are surrounded by projects. Projects are used by all organisations as a way of organising their activity in a goal-oriented way. Although better project performance is aimed both by researchers and practitioners, researchers identified in their studies low levels of efficiency and poor performance in project-based organizations in general (Marnewick et al., 2018; Borgstein et al., 2018; Liu, 2015; Năstase et al., 2010; Nistor et al., 2010). At the international level, there are concerns to estimate the costs of failed projects. Unfortunately, trillions of dollars are spent annually on projects that have high failure rates (Serrador, Pinto, 2015). In this context, the topic of project success attracts great interest both from practitioners and researchers.

Increasing projects' success chances and reducing the losses caused by projects' failures represent a target for every organisation. But, although projects' success is frequently studied, this research topic still has a great attractiveness and importance caused by the complexity of the subject. It is universally accepted today that project success is no longer determined by the "golden triangle", that its complexity is influenced by the different perceptions key stakeholders have on

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projects' success. As Shenhar et al. (2001) stated, success means different things to different people.

Ika (2009) conducted an analysis of the articles that focus on project success between 1986 and 2004 in two of the most relevant journals for the project management literature, the *Project Management Journal* and the *International Journal of Project Management*. The current research aims to complement and update this research, focusing on articles that approach the topic of project success in the project management literature, emphasising the studies that were conducted in recent years. The article describes in the next section the research methodology and presents the main research questions answered, followed by a section focused on findings and discussions. The article ends with a set of conclusions and future research directions.

2. Research methodology

The main objective of the research is to analyse the trend in project management literature regarding the topic of project success. To achieve this objective several research questions were set:

RQ1: How did the interest in project success evolve in the literature?

RQ2: What are the main journals interested in articles focused on project success?

RQ3: Which are the most cited articles focused on project success in the last decade? And how do they approach this topic?

The questions are answered through qualitative research based on a literature review. For the analysis, articles published in Web of Science (WOS) that mention "success" and "projects" in the title were analysed. This database was selected since is considered to include articles of the highest quality. For the first two research questions, the entire available period (1976-2020) was considered, while for the third question the time lag was reduced to the last ten years. The last decade is relevant for analysing the most cited articles since in these years the topic of project success in the literature expanded tremendously. The search was performed in October 2020 and the number of articles that fit the searching criteria was 1,036.

3. Findings and discussions

Although project success is mentioned in the title of the articles published in WOS since 1976, it was only in 2010 when the number of articles that fit this criterion exceeded 30 per year. Since then, the number of articles continued to increase and reach 100 in 2017, 105 in 2018, and 104 in 2020 (over 10% of the analysed articles). More than 70% of the analysed articles were published in the last decade. This trend proves the actuality of the topic and the high interest concerning success in the project management literature, especially in recent years. On the other hand, this trend can be

caused by the increasing number of organisations that use project management and by the high number of projects that fail to reach the desired success.

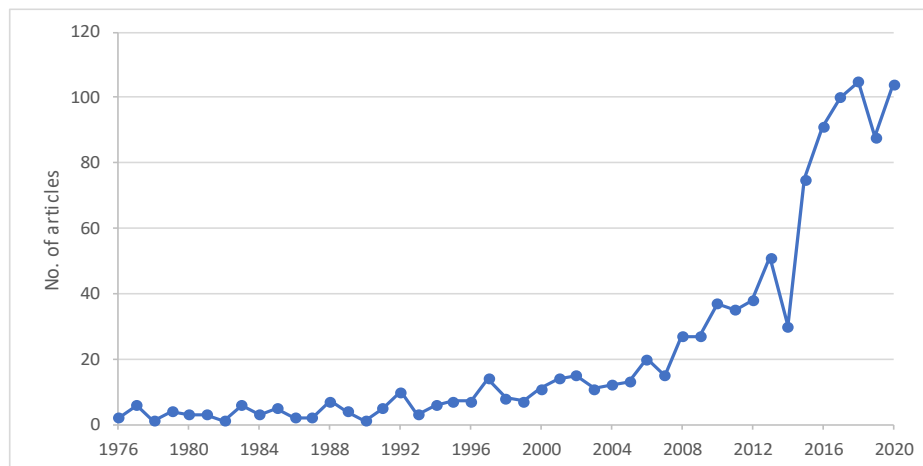


Figure 1. The evolutions of articles focused on project success

Source: WOS, 2020

Two of the most frequent WOS categories that the articles fit in are management (345 articles) and business (118 articles), but also engineering is at the top. Concerning the journals that published the analysed articles, it was observed that the International journal of project management is by far the one with the highest number of articles published (61), proving a high interest in the topic of project success. The next two journals that published articles that focus on project success are Project management journal and International journal of managing projects in business. These journals are worldwide recognised to have an important contribution to the development of project management literature. But, as you can see in table 1, other journals consider this topic relevant too.

Table 1. Top 10 journals that published the analysed articles

Journal title	No. of articles
International journal of project management	61
Project management journal	34
International journal of managing projects in business	18
Journal of management in engineering	17
Journal of construction engineering and management	15
Engineering construction and architectural management	14
IEEE transactions on engineering management	13
International journal of information technology project management	13
Sustainability	13

Source: WOS, 2020

The citation report provided by WOS facilitates the identification of the authors and articles that had the greatest impact on the literature. The most cited article (651 WOS citations), in the entire period 1976-2020, was published by Hoegl and Gemuenden (2001) and analysis the influence of teamwork on the success of innovative projects. By analysing the evolution of the citations per year, it can be observed that the number of citations increased in the last ten years, as the interest for the topic of project success and the number of articles that approach it. Table 2 presents the details regarding the top ten most cited articles in the last decade. Six of these articles empirically approach project success, while four of them are theoretical. The empirical articles apply quantitative research method to perform the analysis and test hypothesis (Mir, Pinnington, 2014, Yang et al., 2011, Ika et al., 2012, Papke-Shields et al., 2010, Turner, Zolin, 2012, Brooks et al., 2012), while the theoretical articles are based on qualitative methods for developing conceptual frameworks (Hegger et al., 2012, Davis, 2014) or models (Meskendahl, 2010) and clarifying certain terms (de Bakker et al., 2010).

Table 2. Most cited articles in the last decade

Author	WOS citations	Article type	Research method	Subject
Mir, Pinnington, 2014	178	Empirical	Quantitative	Analysis of the relationship between project management performance and project success, based on answers received from project management professionals working in UAE organisations.
Hegger et al., 2012	165	Theoretical	Qualitative	Develops a conceptual framework for analysing the success of joint knowledge production projects.
Davis, 2014	162	Theoretical	Qualitative	Presents the development of project success in literature and identifies the key success factors based on an inductive thematic analysis.
Meskendahl, 2010	145	Theoretical	Qualitative	Develops a conceptual model focused on strategic orientation, project portfolio structuring, project portfolio success, and business success.
Yang et al., 2011	140	Empirical	Quantitative	Studies the relationships between the project manager's leadership style, teamwork, and project success.
Ika et al., 2012	127	Empirical	Quantitative	Analysis of the relationship between critical success factors and project success in the case of World Bank projects.

Author	WOS citations	Article type	Research method	Subject
Papke-Shields et al., 2010	123	Empirical	Quantitative	Analysis of the use of different PM practices and their relationship to success.
Turner, Zolin, 2012	118	Empirical	Quantitative	Identifies success factors for large projects, and a set of performance indicators to forecast stakeholders' perception regarding success.
Brooks et al., 2012	116	Empirical	Quantitative	Analysis factors such as context, project design, and local community characteristics that influence success in community-based conservation projects.
de Bakker et al., 2010	115	Theoretical	Qualitative	Analysis of whether risk management contributes to IT project success.

Regardless of the research subject, it can be observed that most studies that focus on project success approach the definition of success, the success criteria, and the success factors. In general, authors agree that project success is a complex and multi-dimensional concept (Mir, Pinnington, 2014), that involves both efficiency and effectiveness and that is influenced by stakeholders' perspective (Ika et al., 2012, Hegger et al., 2012). Key stakeholders might perceive differently what is important about the project. So, even if the project fits the cost, calendar, and reaches the scope, if the key stakeholders are not satisfied with the results or the process, the project might still be considered unsuccessful. The success criteria represent a set of principles used to determine success, while success factors are contributing to project success (Ika et al., 2012). Since projects are unique, it is unlikely to determine a set of criteria that is generally applicable, being available numerous alternative frameworks for measuring project success (Mir, Pinnington, 2014).

On the other hand, there are several lists of critical success factors mentioned in the project management literature. These factors can impact differently projects' success and are the focus of many studies. Based on a comprehensive systematic literature review, Davis (2014) argues that different stakeholder groups perceive the list of critical success factors differently. Mir and Pinnington (2014) prove that variables from the project environment, which employees can relate directly to, have a higher impact on project success. Yang et al. (2011) provide empirical evidence that leadership styles can have a positive impact on teamwork and project success. While Papke-Shields et al. (2010) demonstrate that applying project management standards and guidelines (usually developed by international professional organisations) increase the success chances. Since the topic is mostly influenced by perceptions, the generalisation, in this case, is extremely difficult, the reason why Meskendahl (2010) highlights that most of the researches are focused on single project level and the need for analysing the project portfolio success.

4. Conclusions

The article presents the evolution of project success as a research topic in the literature, the main journals interested in publishing studies related to this, and analysis the articles with the highest impact in the field, from the last decade. Thus, this research creates an overview of the topic of project success in the literature that is useful especially for researchers interested in this subject. It can be observed that the number of articles approaching project success increased in the last period, and the trend will probably continue due to the large number of projects implemented in all fields and the importance of achieving success for all of them. As a future research direction, a systematic literature review that clarifies both theoretical concepts and analysis the project cases can be useful for determining generally accepted success criteria and factors. Also, more empirical research always provides useful insights from the practice and helps update the theoretical concepts.

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