Success Lies in the Eye of the Beholder: The Mismatch Between Perceived and Real IT Project Management Performance

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Abstract

This study explores the divergence between traditional IT project management performance criteria such as adherence to functionality, schedule and cost, and perceived project management performance. Based on a literature survey, five propositions are derived and subsequently used to guide in-depth interviews with 12 senior IT executives with exposure to this possible mismatch. The results demonstrate that mismatches between 'real' and perceived project management performance indeed occur. We found different levels of support for our propositions that the quality of expectation management, the client/contractor relationship, organizational politics, senior sponsor commitment and the occurrence of "project fatigue" all play a role in this mismatch. A discussion of the findings and limitations, as well as suggestions for future research conclude the article.

1. Introduction

Despite the extensive literature that exists aiming to understand the factors that influence success and failure of IT projects, the quest for the dependent variable -how to define project performance itself- is as elusive and alive today as it was decades ago [1]–[4]. Traditionally, a project team is evaluated based on meeting approved quality (also functionality or scope), time (schedule) and cost baselines. Widely adopted project management methods enforce this view: meeting all three criteria implies success, missing all of them implies failure, and some arbitrary middle ground classifies a project as “challenged” [5], [6]. However, not only is this three-factor success model overly simplistic, it also incorrectly assumes that project management performance criteria are set, measured and interpreted objectively, and remain constant over time, while in practice the “eye of the beholder” has a very significant influence on what constitutes success or failure.

The purpose of this paper is to explore why IT projects (the term is used here to also include what some refer to as IS projects) that objectively meet all of the pre-agreed success criteria (say, adherence to planned functionality, schedule and cost) can still be regarded at project-delivery as failures, or conversely, why IT projects that significantly fall short on these criteria can still be considered a success. For this study we will call the adherence to pre-agreed performance criteria “real” performance, while the overall sentiment that describes whether a project is considered successful or not will be referred to as “perceived” performance. Given the intrinsic complexity of many IT projects, it is important to note that the perception of project performance in practice may be more relevant than the real project performance, as this may be difficult to observe, measure or isolate. We define perception as "the process by which people translate sensory impressions into a coherent and unified view of the world around them. Though necessarily based on incomplete and unverified (or unreliable) information, perception is equated with reality for most practical purposes and guides human behavior in general" [7].

The motivation for this study comes both from the experience of two of the authors as managing directors in a large international IT consulting firm, as well as from the literature, where this issue has been raised by various authors [8]. Our aim is to ground this question in the available literature, and to empirically explore this from the perspective of senior IT executives who have first-hand experience of this mismatch. This study accordingly consists of:

- Literature review, aimed at deriving propositions that identify different factors that may contribute to the potential mismatch between real and perceived IT project management performance;
- An empirical exploration of these propositions, using interviews, coding and analysis.

Our objective is to generate new insights that can help the various stakeholders to better assess, understand and manage IT projects. The contribution of
this paper is both in the derivation and formulation of the propositions as well as in the empirical exploration that helps to inform practitioners why project performance may be perceived different from how it “should”, as well as in a contribution to the academic debate and identification of future areas of research.

2. Literature and Theoretical Background

2.1. Challenges to Measuring Performance

IT project success is usually viewed as distinct from IT/IS “product” success [9], with the latter sometimes referred to as IT/IS implementation success [10]. While the first (“project success”) typically revolves around adherence to planned quality, time and costs, the “iron triangle” or “triple constraint” that forms the cornerstone of prescriptive project management methods, IT/IS product success is more linked to long-term quality, business value, or client satisfaction [10]–[13]. On-time and within-budget criteria top the list of project management performance criteria, used by over 75% of 154 organizations surveyed in 2011 by Gartner [14].

For both project as well as product performance, a large number of complementary success criteria have been suggested in the literature, including specific project objectives or expectations, the rate of improvements, better relationships, new business opportunities, improved team work, organizational efficiency and effectiveness, enjoyment, improved trust, attitudes towards technology, actual system use, and individual as well as organizational impact [10], [15]–[18].

While many studies propose normative success criteria or aim to identify causal links between “success factors” and some measure of project performance, a few studies have investigated which performance criteria are actually used by different stakeholders:
- Project managers: based on a survey among 150 Australian project managers Collins and Baccarini [19] found that they view project management success and product success as two intertwined concepts, with quality, time and cost as well as user and sponsor/client satisfaction being key performance criteria. A next group of somewhat less important criteria include cooperation, organizational goals and stakeholder satisfaction.
- Users: Thakurta [20] looked at the actual users of the system, using multivariate analysis with survey results from 183 Indian users, resulting in a four dimensional representation of IT project success: a combined “scope and schedule” dimension being the most important determinant explaining over 35% of the total variance, followed by a dimension related to various project management activities (8%), a third related to relationship management (5%) and a last factor representing budget considerations (apparently hardly a concern as this factor explained only 3% of the total variance).
- Liu et al. [21] compared perceptions of risk between senior executives and project managers involved in the same project, and found that each group tends to focus on different aspects of risk: senior executives focus more on higher-level risks such as those involving politics, organization structure, process and culture, whereas project managers focus more on lower-level risks such as those related to requirements and user involvement.
- Bryde and Robinson [22] compared project performance criteria set by contractors (who emphasize lowering costs and shortening duration) versus clients (who focus on satisfying the needs of other stakeholders), while noting that in the actual project management practice this greater emphasis on satisfying stakeholder needs did not exist.
- Other studies have looked at the supplier's perspective [23], and at how different dimensions mean different things to different stakeholders at different times for different projects [24], or at how performance criteria are influenced by stakeholder culture, background and motivational factors as well as stakeholder personality [25], [26].

Beyond success criteria, contingencies and stakeholder perspectives, it is important to note that projects themselves are changing in nature. As Weiss et al. point out [27], projects are increasingly spanning functional and organizational boundaries, underlining not only the importance of the stakeholder perspective but also today's project-interdependence, making stand-alone projects (and stand-alone performance evaluation) a thing of the past. In addition, innovative (IT) projects increasingly involve “unknowable” problem parameters and cause-effect relationships, rendering project management in part “best guesswork” which naturally has consequences for performance evaluation [28].

The resulting picture is one of increasing complexity where project management performance evaluation cannot realistically be reduced to adherence to quality, time and cost baselines. Instead, project management performance is a multi-dimensional construct varying across stakeholders and over time, and influenced by project and environment characteristics as well as organizational and social dynamics. It is therefore not surprising that those involved in IT project management (as users, team members, project managers, sponsors, senior management, contractors or in any other role) find their own way to assess performance and align their views with the official goals of the project - or not. As De Wit states, in a rather sobering conclusion: “Measuring success is complex and a project is hardly ever a disaster or failure for all stakeholders during all
phases in the project life cycle. A project can be a success for one party and a disaster for another, [...] a success one day and a failure the next. Therefore, to think that one can objectively measure the success of a project is an illusion" [29].

2.2. Research Propositions

While a large body of literature exists that is dealing with “real” project management success criteria (where projects are evaluated with criteria that were agreed at the start), the number of publications exploring perception-based criteria is limited. Largely it is simply assumed that these are identical. Our review of the literature since 1990, comprising the Senior IS Scholars’ Basket of Journals, supplemented with the leading (IT) project management journals and (IT) project management tracks in the major conferences (and the related references this review generated) led only to the identification of 41 papers and books covering specific (and sometimes limited) aspects of perception. All texts were collected and loaded into a Mendeley 1.12.4 database [30].

Figure 1 depicts an overview of our research propositions - P0 through P5 - and the research scope of this paper. Our first and basic proposition deals with the very existence of the mismatch between “reality” and perception - labeled P0 - There is a potential mismatch between perceived and real IT project management success.

Project management performance is not so much right or wrong, but rather good or bad, and on this continuous scale, expectations play a central role. These expectations are usually set at the beginning, both relatively objectively as scope/time/cost but also much more subjective such as expected benefits. Getting a project launched may require many promises that will set high expectations. Staples et al. [31] examined whether it is important that expectations of information systems benefits match received benefits. They found that unrealistically high expectations result in lower levels of perceived benefit than those associated with realistic expectations (i.e. where prior expectations match the actual experience).

Specifically, they found that it was critical to create and maintain realistic expectations on system usefulness, ease of use, and information quality. Related works are from Brown et al. [32], who looked at the relationship between IS expectations, experiences and use - drawing on the technology acceptance model, and Bhattacharjee [33] as well as Petter [34]. This leads to proposition P1 - The potential mismatch between perceived and real IT project management success is influenced by the quality of expectation management.

Client satisfaction is not only critical on the client side, but is also the key determinant for perceived success on the side of the project manager, as Pankratz and Loebbecke's study [35] points out. With many IT projects carried out partly or totally by IT consulting companies, project managers will also need to deal with IT consultant objectives and align these with client performance criteria [36]. This leads to P2 - The potential mismatch between perceived and real IT project management success is influenced by the quality of the client/contractor relationship.

In determining IT project success, power and politics also play a major role [37]. Politics in organizations are “the process by which decisions are made by people”
studies which have selected the longitudinal dimension of a project that is considered a success as well as a failure, how subjective/political perspectives can reframe IS project performance, and that this performance is not "out there" as a rational objective reality but rather constructed by different stakeholders, changing over time, politically motivated, subjective and arbitrary. This "performative perspective" is also visible in other case studies where the dynamics of (inter-) organizational politics are seen as major determinants in explaining the failure of IT projects (often objective as well as perceived failure), such as the Nevada Department of Motor Vehicles [41].

It is also likely that individuals and organizations are reluctant to acknowledge project failure, both to avoid blame and to conceal the waste of resources [42]. Organizational politics are also likely to play a role at the start of a project, making a possible mismatch between real and perceived performance more likely. As Joosten et al. [43] state: "estimates and plans are often affected by political actions and are exploited in negotiations [15], [44]. Therefore, project success assessments that rely on plans and/or estimates are not only expected to evaluate the project itself, but also reflect the quality of planning and estimating." This leads us to P3 - The potential mismatch between perceived and real IT project management success is influenced by organizational politics.

The importance of senior management commitment, sponsorship and support (these terms are related and sometimes used interchangeably) in ensuring project success has been documented in many studies [45], [46]. Not only is this factor of central importance when launching the project, but also at critical points during the project and at project completion, when success is announced or blame is assigned and performance perceptions will very likely be influenced. Hence P4 - The potential mismatch between perceived and real IT project management success is influenced by senior sponsorship commitment.

As projects take longer, particularly when longer than anticipated, the motivation of those involved tends to suffer [47], and "project fatigue" [48] sets in. This will likely impact the perceived performance, regardless of the real performance, leading to P5 - The potential mismatch between perceived and real IT project management success is influenced by project fatigue.

3. Research Approach

Based on the propositions derived from the literature, we developed semi-structured interview guidelines with eight open-ended questions. We first explored our interview partner’s conceptualization and operationalization of IT project management performance (what is a successful/failed project, what is perceived performance and how can it be measured) and then probed for and subsequently focused on projects where they had experienced mismatches between objective criteria for success/failure and stakeholder perceptions. This gave us an opportunity to explore the reasons for the mismatch and allowed the participants to add details beyond our questions. Sometimes respondents were reluctant to identify specific projects and answered in more general terms. To avoid theorization on their part while respecting their desire to hide details we reminded them repeatedly in our questions to ‘think about a specific project’.

In contrast to previous studies which have selected project managers as study participants [30, 31] we selected senior business and IT leadership (C-level and their direct reports) representatives to gather more insight into the organizational context and soft factors, e.g. corporate culture and politics, quality of relationships, and project-induced pressure on participants. Stakeholders at this level are also more likely to recognize a potential mismatch between perceived and real IT project management performance as they are exposed and have access to many stakeholders and possess sufficient IT as well business knowledge to understand the issues. Naturally they also have their own biases and perceptions, and we cannot assume that their reflections are omniscient.

We also explored the longitudinal dimension of objective and perceived project performance both during the project as well as after the implementation. The interview transcripts were coded for a better analysis (count and proximity) of phrases related to the six research propositions - particularly to propositions P1 through P5. For the initial data gathering we conducted a set of twelve face-to-face semi-structured interviews over a six-month time period - from fall 2014 until spring 2015. On average the interviews lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours. The participants were recruited from the business network of one of the authors and exhibited the following characteristics (n=12):

- Business and IT corporate experiences ranged from 14 to 35 years with an average of 24 years;
- All interview partners had personal experience with at least five major IT projects/initiatives at various stages in their careers;
Six of the interviewed executives had dealt with projects within an international multicultural context;
- Nine had worked for IT providers at least once during their employment history;
- Seven had “business side” experiences dealing with IT projects in a regular line function;
- Three were (once) CIOs and two were (once) CEOs;
- Nine were Brazilians, two Argentinians and one Venezuelan;
- The interview participants had experiences across a range of industries incl. utilities, telecom, chemicals, packaged consumer goods, government, professional services, engineering, media, and high tech.

The interviews were transcribed and categorized according to the a-priori defined concepts that are central to the research propositions. Quotes that fell outside but were still deemed interesting were treated separately. All three authors worked with the shared transcript file, and minor changes were discussed and implemented in the coding and interpretation as the analysis proceeded.

4. Research Results

Our interview data show that the overwhelming majority of our respondents have (in some cases often) experienced the mismatch between “real” and “perceived” performance. Respondent A: “This [SAP implementation] project lasted for several years and blew away any original timeline and effort estimates - but is regarded as a major success in our company”. Success in this case did not seem to be grounded in isolated beliefs of individual stakeholders but had become a corporate-wide consensus even though two classic and measurable success criteria - schedule and budget - had clearly been missed. [A] explained: “The client usually buys a transformation or the change of something as a project. The project is a means to achieve a strategic institution goal.” Respondent F echoed this and added that “when projects end, organizations do not typically revisit the original business case to determine success.”

While these quotes show that a challenged/failing project could have a positive and successful perception, not all respondents shared this view. Respondent E: “If a project does not respect schedule and budget, it is clearly a failure - but respecting both factors does not make a project successful!” He added that “client satisfaction, time to stabilize after the go-live, and sufficient systems usage” were deemed as more important than success criteria from the “iron triangle” of project management, and these can only be measured some time after the delivery of the project.

Success did not only lie in the eye of the corporate stakeholder; external recognition was also seen as an important determinant. Respondent C: “[Successful projects] also achieve market recognition. In other words, other companies believe that the [IT project] was a success and want to do the same.” The findings from our first twelve exploratory interviews indicate support for P0 - that there is a potential mismatch between perceived and real IT project success factors.

4.1. Expectation Management

The interview partners stated the importance to manage expectations in a way that stakeholders understand, and that they do not experience cognitive dissonances or disappointments after the rollout. They stressed almost unanimously that stakeholders (including the client and contractor) have heterogeneous expectations that might be complementary, overlapping, or even contradictory; not each affected party will gain something in return for their support.

Respondent F, a senior business executive with 25 years of experience: “Each person looks at the project based on a particular logic of evaluation. For example, the CFO tends to assess whether the project achieved the expected financial returns. If [the IT initiative] fails on delivering it, the project is a failure to the CFO. The COO tends to look for operational benefits. If there is none, the project failed to him/her.” Respondent B, a senior IT consultant added that “the variables to measure such success also depend on who measures it. If cost and timeline are critical, they are critical mainly for those who are measuring it, while others may actually not care about it.”

In line with previous research findings [50], several interviewees pointed out the need to reach an early alignment of expectations before a project is started - otherwise resistance and disappointments might be the result. Respondent A: “A project may fulfill [all formal] goals but be a failure; if this happens it usually means that the initial expectations were wrongly identified or measured.” [B] discussed the importance of ‘formadores de opinião’ (opinion leaders) who can make or break perceptions about a project. “The billing leader was the key opinion maker. If he was ok with something, the project was ok, if not, no matter how good something was done, the actual general perception was bad. Actively managing his expectations and perceptions was crucial for the project.”

Several respondents mentioned the need to be close to senior stakeholders and to frequently monitor expectations. [K]: “[this] increases the probability of success because a closer commitment with the project improves the perception of success. People tend to be defensive or see things in brighter ways when they are
directly involved. Even if the financial benefits are not achieved people will likely have a more positive perception if they are closely involved. If they are distant, they tend to be cold and feel no commitment”.

All respondents agreed that expectations change over time, during the project and afterwards throughout the adoption phases, a dynamic that influences perceived performance. [B]: “If things [almost fail but still end up] well, the feeling of relief is also good and affects the final perception of results. Like, if you expect a disaster and it does not happen, then the world is beautiful.” It appears that proper and continued expectation management can mask objective failure as a Band-Aid solution, but it does not amplify perceptions of success. Expectation management is not a one-off activity [A]: “The key factor is to balance the expectations and perceptions with reality. It is an ‘action and reaction’, constant process.” Several respondents expressed the need to integrate formal project stage gates and milestones with revalidations of stakeholder perceptions.

In summary, we have found support for P1 - that the potential mismatch between perceived and objective IT project success and failure is influenced by the quality of expectation management.

4.2. Client/Contractor Relationship

In our interviews we found limited support for P2 - the perception of IT project success is influenced by the quality of the client/contractor relationship. A few interview partners remarked that joint interests - or at least a balance of interests - would contribute to positive perceptions. [I]: “A successful project is a project that fulfills the expectation of the client and of the implementer and that reaches the financial estimations and deadlines.” When both parties benefit from the successful delivery of IT projects/initiatives they are more likely to engage in perception-building positive marketing. [B], speaking about a large customer billing implementation project, remarked that “since the implementation the client recursively recognizes the good work done by asking for other projects”, a point that came up when we asked him for his ‘definition’ of a successful project.

The fact that the respondents did not talk at length about the client/contractor relationship may well be influenced by the professional (IT consulting) background of the interviewer. What did come up repeatedly was the need to continuously align the interests of both sides to ensure a long-term healthy relationship. [B]: “It is important to measure the "relationship" health through time as a way to monitor the perception of success.” Of course trust, professionalism and predictable behaviors, as well as mutual respect have the potential to influence perceptions. [F]: “The way you deal with people […] may damage the relationship and the trust [which] negatively affects the perception of project results”.

4.3. Organizational Politics

The interview results indicate that organizational politics have a clear impact on perceptions of IT project success and failure. All interviewees mentioned anecdotes or provided evidence for situations where organizational politics have been present; they seem to be a natural part of any IT initiative that adopts innovative ways of working or inflicts organizational change. [E]: "Conflicts of interests’ in the organization often make a project […] not succeeding. Many business processes are cross area/organizations and that generates conflicts between those involved.”

Organizational politics may also clearly influence perceived performance. In discussing a specific on-site billing project, [E] remarked that “some participants want to see the actual results promised in the original ‘business case’ presented to the top management. Others [prefer to present better-looking] operational indicators.”

Most of the interviewees comments seemed shallow when touching political grounds. The subject seems to be a taboo and talking about it can carry risks. [J], discussing a SAP implementation project that became object of an argument between two C-level executives and was canceled after only one month, cryptically remarked that “The top-management gives relevance to projects. Senior stakeholders form opinions or have pre-formed opinions that influence others.”

The authors could not determine whether organizational politics were more prevalent in certain industries or differed between private enterprises and public organizations. Only one interview partner [A] suggested that the public sector offered more fertile soil for organizational politics “because image and personal agendas are stronger than in the private sector.”

The “branding” of IT projects and its association with key players was deemed important for stakeholder perceptions. [F]: “The project ‘image’ is very important. If a project is seen as something negative or problematic, even when it delivers its promises, the perception tends to be less positive.” [L]: “there is the possibility that a project may be "contaminated" with external events and other business problems not directly linked to it. In such cases, the project or the system can be used as an excuse for problems (like, delays, operational problems, lacks of funds, lack of people, problems with productivity, etc.) and its perception will be negatively affected in the organization”.

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It appears that a tainted IT project reputation - or its association with key players - was difficult to change; once a certain perception had been created, it had the tendency to perpetuate itself. In conclusion, there is support for P3 - The potential mismatch between perceived and real IT project management success is influenced by organizational politics.

4.4. Senior Sponsor Commitment

All executive interview partners agreed that senior sponsor involvement and commitment had positive impacts on a project perception but for different and complementary reasons. First, having continued oversight and involvement from senior sponsors allowed for quicker project functionality changes and other major adjustments - if required. They also noted that they can “help to revise the project objectives and the organizational ‘pact’ if a change is needed” [G].

Second, in addition to those ‘corrective’ contributions they pointed out that key stakeholders, particularly project sponsors, have the ability to influence and form opinions - and to prioritize/position IT projects within a wider project portfolio and line activities through their backing: “senior management stakeholders help to show project relevance to the organization and to create project ‘respect’”. One interviewee believed that senior sponsor commitment increased the overall probability of perceived success since people tend to defend - or at least see things in a brighter light - when they were directly involved. This positive perception radiates throughout the organization.

Distance to day-to-day project matters was pointed out as one of the main challenges for IT projects/initiatives. [D] noted that “some ‘higher levels’ in organizations intentionally do not get involved directly with projects. It is a kind of ‘protection’ mechanism and a way to put pressure on the project team to find solutions on their own. The project has to be able to escalate and involve such high level executives to guarantee its success”, a remark echoed by several other respondents.

Most IT project sponsors are high-ranking corporate executives who are position-based opinion leaders. In some instances, sponsors can also be rank-and-file individuals who are well regarded in the organization and consequently serve as natural opinion leaders. Both position-based and natural opinion leaders may help to avoid surprises (i.e. disappoint stakeholder expectations) by noticing failure in advance, helping with directional changes and with rebalancing expectations. The findings support P4 - that the potential mismatch between perceived and real IT project management success is influenced by senior sponsorship commitment.

4.5. Project Fatigue

The authors’ discussions of project duration and complexity often triggered references to the emotional stress and toll IT initiatives are inflicting - on project teams and user groups after finished implementations. [K]: “You may deliver the project within schedule, functionality, cost, benefits but have half of the team resigning due to the work environment and stress. This cost of losing resources has to be reflected […]. What is the impact of this on the operation’s daily performance and associated labor costs or sales losses?” Those remarks were echoed by a senior business executive [L]: “Too much stress is bad. It causes attrition, wears out and puts a focus on ‘the missing things’.”

The majority of executive interview partners preferred shorter-term projects (up to a duration of one year) as this makes people matters easier to manage. They agreed that project duration affects perception. [A]: “More than one year usually interferes with the sense of satisfaction because it consumes too much time and lets people feel worn out. Also, what was designed today tends to change after one year. It is important to have delivery cycles [that] eliminate or minimize any dissatisfaction caused by [projects taking] such a long time”. Project delivery teams and stakeholders seemed to be united in their quest for quick results. According to the interviewees they tended to forget project history, changes, and often start having second thoughts about already finalized designs.

Another interesting fact presented is related to our first proposition regarding expectation management. Interview partners referred to an inverse relationship between quality of expectation management and project fatigue; repetitive expectation swings negatively impacted project team morale. [I]: “Stakeholders have an implicit expectation that projects have to flow well throughout their timeline. If this is not the case, this will […] hurt the project”. In conclusion, our data support P5 - the potential mismatch between perceived and real IT project management success is influenced by project fatigue.

4.6. Other Results

Our semi-structured interviews led to many points being raised by respondents that were perhaps beyond our propositions but still relevant and interesting for the wider purpose of our research.

One such topic was the discussion of failure: in practically all interviews, when asked to define failure after having defined success, the respondents had to reflect, and in some case, complement their earlier propositions of success definitions to consider “other
important points” despite the initial temptation to consider and define failure as “just the contrary of success”. Half of the interviewees seem to define failure as “not achieving success” but tended to add case examples and several mitigating considerations related to the need and difficulty to properly define scope and therefore to precisely understand failure. Most of the failure cases discussed seem to have indicated different problems like, for example, failure to define properly scope, technical problems, project management issues, complexity underestimation, communication issues or expectation mismanagement.

A second observation is that the respondents for the most part seem to have a limited view regarding organizational impacts and actual results achieved after project team demobilization. Post-project (or post-mortem in the case of failure) follow up may be as relevant as project delivery itself but it seemed that this received little attention. Post-project is still subject to opinions change, and the organizational and business dynamics that affect a project remain active long after such project is considered finished. In fact, a new system implementation project may end after the go-live, or even after a long support phase, but the actual results may come after many years.

5. Discussion

This study explores the divergence between traditional IT project management performance criteria such as adherence to functionality, schedule and cost, and perceived project management performance, adding to our understanding of how IT project management performance is viewed differently by different stakeholders, and what causes those differences. The findings illustrate the complexities of defining and assessing performance and how this leaves space for stakeholders to use their own perspective or even push their own agenda. This helps to explain why so many companies fall back to using cost and time criteria to assess performance, despite acknowledging their serious shortcomings [14].

While earlier studies typically investigated a single stakeholder perspective, offering insights into subjective performance criteria, we explicitly sought to explore differences across stakeholders by comparing their assessments with "real" project management success. Our findings illustrate that this "real" success may well serve as an anchor for comparisons across perceptions, but success criteria that are formulated and agreed upon at the start of a project are hardly objective and change as the project progresses.

Our findings illustrate how project success strongly "lies in the eye of the beholder", and how expectation management and a strong sensitivity for the perceptions, interests and agendas of all stakeholders is a key requirement for project management success. This involves navigating organizational politics, ensuring senior sponsor commitment as well as avoiding "project fatigue". This has implications for the training and selection of project managers, beyond balancing the "iron triangle" that is still central to many project management approaches and practices.

Within the scope of our interviews, our respondents did not stress the need for ensuring a good client/contractor relationship as much as earlier studies [8], [35], [43], but this may be due to the small sample size as well as to the consultancy affiliation of the interviewer. The sample size, as well as the geographic background of the respondents (South America) also points to an obvious limitation of this study and suggestion for follow-up research. In addition, it should be noted that this study focused on traditional, large IT projects where a clear distinction exists between client and contractor, or business and IT (internal or external). Newer, 'agile' methods do not have this same separation and do not work in the same way with pre-agreed outcome criteria. As these methods are gaining more widespread acceptance, it will be particularly interesting to explore the same set of propositions in this setting.

Finally, our observations regarding failure and perceived failure as well as the lack of post-delivery assessment, demand a much closer look. Although they form a ‘by-product’ of our interviews outside the scope of our propositions, both observations are strongly related to real and perceived IT project management performance.

6. References


