

Project performance and the effects of human activity: a case study of the University of Salford

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Abstract

Conflict is common in the project management industry. Project performance may be impacted negatively or favourably by human activities such as competing interests among stakeholders, project team members, and project managers, as well as by the intimidating methodology and structure of the project management process. This case study at the University of Salford looked into how human activity affects project management and performance.

The mixed methodology used in this study allowed for a deeper understanding of the real-world experiences of the subjects and project teams. Project management students and professionals from the University of Salford provided the data, which was collected. The survey generated a sample size of 40 responses, of which 37 were reliable enough for analysis.

At the University of Salford, it was discovered that relationships among team members were a crucial human activity that promoted cooperation, trust, and the extension of trust to others, thereby reducing conflict and ties of trust between stakeholders and project managers. However, positive team dynamics and strong group cohesion are required to actively and purposefully encourage conflict in order to achieve the project's aim, goals, and deliverables. Conflict in project performance and project management productivity, for example, may be reversed.

Therefore, to achieve high performance and productivity, the project management process needs strong communication, positive team dynamics, and an understanding of scope. Conflict can have a negative effect on the process, lowering productivity and performance. Project managers should develop their communication skills to avoid this because it is a soft skill that can be learned and enhanced. This guarantees proper coordination, awareness of all stakeholders, and a decrease in conflict.

Keywords: Human activities, conflict, management, productivity, project managers

1. Introduction

The university is one of many organizations that has been working for years to increase the general effectiveness of projects and project teams. A project is deemed unsuccessful if it is not finished on schedule, within scope, and within budget. Therefore, bad project management is a big worry for businesses, especially when big sums of money are involved. On the other hand, the argument over how human behaviour affects a project's performance focuses on the social dynamics and behavioural traits of a productive team. Human actions that affect project teams and management that can have a broad impact on project performance and outcome are frequently disregarded in today's process-driven world. Most

managers are adept at creating communication, controlling schedules, and collaborating with stakeholders (Huemann et al., 2007, Imran et. al., 2016).

To ensure that a project is delivered according to specification and meets performance goals, all of these activities, however, frequently do not imply that human elements or activities are being assessed. The project manager must comprehend and understand the implications of any changes to the processes or human input throughout the project cycle in order to guarantee the project's success. Evidence in the literature supports the idea that there are crucial factors, or crucial components, for project management and performance (Müller & Jugdev, 2012). According to Critical Success Factors in Projects, ten components were essential to a project's success. However, there is no advice on how to use these essential success factors to reduce the numerous problems that project management encounters in the real world. A significant portion of management effort is devoted to managing human activities to ensure project performance because of the significant influence that human activities have on the project cycle, which results in the dynamic and frequently unpredictable structure of the projects (Alias et. al., 2014).

Projects in the 21st-century project industry are becoming more complex with more technical tools, cross-border resource collaboration, faster delivery to market, high-quality standards, proper resource management, and so on. To manage all of these, we need proper and enhanced human activity otherwise the project is doomed to fail, which will have an impact on overall project performance. It is still very challenging for project teams to complete projects on demand, despite improvements in information technology, communication, and a wealth of knowledge about how to complete projects in many sectors. People's work is done as an activity, which is a collection of human interactions, the things they work on, how they communicate, and the methods they employ to complete a project and deliver it successfully. It is crucial that organizations and project teams adopt new ideas and methods for project management as a result. (Wilemon, 1984).

A group of people who collaborate to accomplish a single goal or objective is commonly referred to as a team (Oluikpe, 2015). Team dynamics: What exactly are they? The individual unconscious psychological factors that have an impact on team performance and behaviour are the focus of the study of team dynamics. Team dynamics are influenced by interpersonal relationships, team member personalities, interpersonal team dynamics, and the environment in which the team works. The team aspect delves deeper into the processes and frameworks that teams use to complete a project in order to examine how they work as a whole. A project charter, a list of stakeholders, and a project management plan with scope, cost, schedule, and risk that is to be managed by the team are all components of traditional project management. On the other hand, the relevant human activity is frequently disregarded (Georgiadis, 2015).

Conflict is inevitable in a project environment where there are multiple human activities, just as it seems that change is necessary during project delivery. When members of a project team interact while performing their duties, there is always a chance of conflict. People with different skill sets and cultural norms find it challenging to work together, make decisions, and try to accomplish project goals and objectives without conflict. Project performance need not suffer as a result of conflict. The impact on project delivery and performance, however, will depend on how project managers find, evaluate, and measure both amicable and unpleasant conflicts (Deutsch 2006). As a result, this study makes use of the University of Salford to examine the impact of human behaviour such as conflict on project management and performance.

1.2. Study objective

The purpose of this research is to examine how specific human behaviour's, such as conflict, affect project performance in a case study of the University of Salford.

1.3.1 Study Hypothesis

- Can human action such as conflict have a significant impact on the effectiveness of a project?
- What is the relationship between conflict and other factors that affect the performance of a project?
- Is it extremely difficult to achieve the required outcomes without proper human management?

2. Literature Review

Performance is frequently regarded as the ultimate dependent variable in the literature on organisations. Currently, it is a hot topic in the project management literature. The idea that companies won't use project management unless it can be shown to be valuable appears to be the driving force behind the issue's current emphasis. Even after more than 50 years of development, project management's contribution to performance is still not acknowledged outside of the group of experts who support it (Deutsch 2006; Huemann et al., 2007).

Early conflict researchers defined conflict as the belief, whether assumed or real, that someone else is impeding one's goals and ambitions. The intensity of the conflict is based on how strictly the person adheres to their goals (Deutsch 2006; Wallensteen 1995). Furthermore, all conflicts were regarded as belonging to the same category by historical and social scholars. In other studies, conflict was defined and categorized as having a range of positive and negative traits in social, political, and economic organizations. Conflicts were classified as beneficial or harmful as conflict studies on the topic grew (Deutsch 2006).

A conflict in nature can either be beneficial or harmful. Conflict is unhealthy or harmful when it endangers a project, performance, or ability to accomplish goals and objectives. Whether a conflict is good or bad will depend on how it affects the organization and goal-setting.

According to project management literature, effective human resource management practices have a positive impact on project outcomes (Huemann et al., 2007). Many research scholars, including Belout and Gauvreau (2004), Fabi and Pettersen (1992), and Huemann et al. (2007), have looked into how human activities and practices can help project implementation in meeting project performance goals. This is similar to Pinto and Slevin's (1988) claim that human activity is a critical determinant of project performance. Tasks are completed by organizations to achieve success. Although the two may overlap, the work typically entails either operations or projects. To understand how projects must be managed properly, it is essential to understand how they differ from operational endeavours.

Therefore, competition for hegemony, different leadership philosophies, and a lack of project resources are the causes of conflicts within a project. In addition to lowering team members' job satisfaction, this also lowers productivity and project performance. As a result, it's critical to identify the dispute as soon as possible and pay close attention to the disputing parties. The best way to resolve conflicts is through negotiations between the parties, and violence must never be used (Deutsch 2006; Wallensteen 1995).

Organizations must continuously increase the effectiveness of project management procedures in the modern project industry. On the basis of the literature review and its applicability, this research emphasizes the significance of employing a human- and people-oriented project management approach.

3. Research Methodology

The mixed methodology used in this study allowed for a deeper understanding of the real-world experiences of the subjects and project teams. 40 project management students and professionals from the University of Salford provided the data, which was collected. Additionally, the qualitative research approach was used in the study because it emphasizes data collection and analysis techniques based on words rather than numbers and incorporates the idea of social reality as an ever-changing emergent aspect of people. (2012) Bryman. According to the subject matter, a deductive approach was used, primarily because it is suitable for the study's objectives and research interests.

4. Results

The gender distribution of the study's participants showed that 42.5% of the chosen respondents were men, while 57.5% were women as shown in Figure 1.

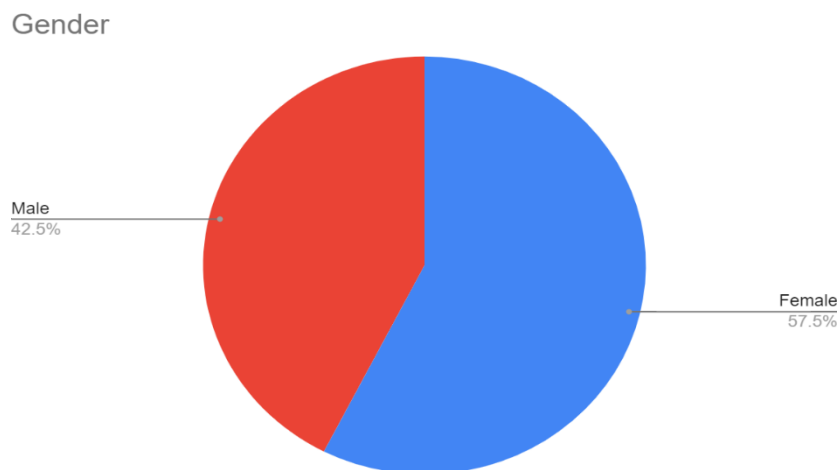


Figure 1 Gender distribution of study participants (Source: Survey question 2022)

Research Participants' Age Demographic are shown in Figure 2. Majority (75%) of the participants are between ages 26 – 34 years.

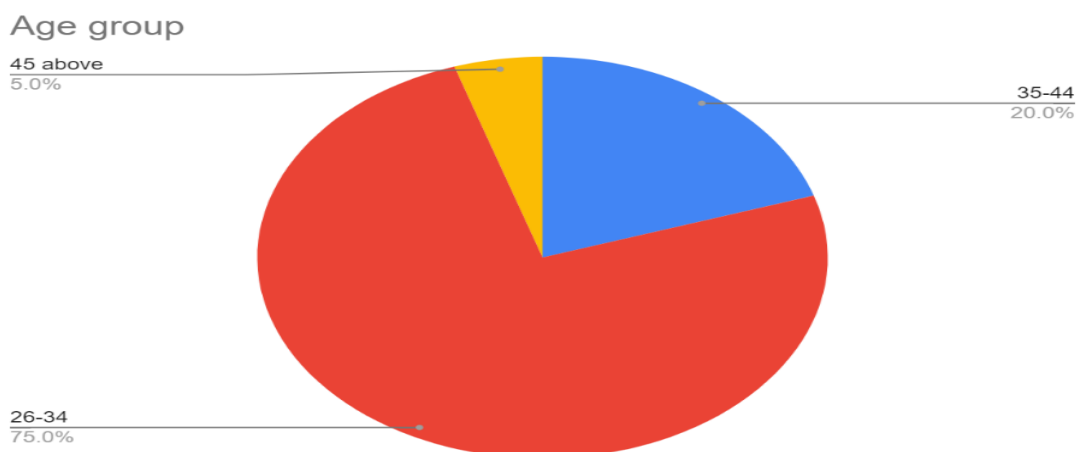


Figure 2 Age range of study participants (Source: Survey question 2022)

Research Participants' Expertise Level

Project team leaders (who have more specialised training or skills relevant to project management) and team members and students (who have specialised training or skills relevant to specific project management) were separated from the study participants into two groups based on their levels of expertise. Project managers made up 40% of the chosen individuals, while team members made up 60%. The suitable illustration is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Expertise of study participants (Source: Survey question 2022)

Level of project management expertise	Frequency	Percentage

Project Team leader	16	40%
Team member/Student	24	60%
Total	40	100%

Can human actions such as conflict have a substantial impact on project effectiveness?

The above research question, "Can human activities such as conflict have a significant impact on project effectiveness?" was what the researcher aimed to answer. The significance of the conflict was a crucial question to answer because it affected the main objective of the study, which was to encourage effective project management and project performance. Therefore, the theme's goal was to investigate research findings that showed whether conflict affected effective project management and project performance. Several scenario questions were provided so that respondents could express their experiences with regard to their participation in one or two projects.

Question one on the poll asked:

"In your opinion, what have you learned on any project you have undertaken?" The responses cited as appropriate by respondents are listed below.



Figure 3 Respondents' reflections on Project experiences. (Source : Survey question 2022)

The different experiences that project team members have acquired are measured by a number of indicators, including time management, the project's mission objectives, proper project planning, teamwork, team dynamics, and effective communication throughout the project's scope. In addition, it was evident from the responses that some respondents had similarly indexed subjects like the importance of teamwork, team dynamics, time management, and project mission clarity, among others.

- Teamwork

Collaborative project teams with a strong staff make for successful projects. The project plan outlines the methodologies and skill sets needed to complete the work, whereas the scope management document describes all functional areas that the project will affect. Pick the most talented people to join your project team. Internal candidates make excellent team members because they are already familiar with the organization's processes and technological infrastructure. Internal team members support a project's long-term success by acting as change agents and project champions. Increasing human activity is frequently the hardest challenge to overcome in terms of project success.

The ongoing application of quality standards is a fundamental goal of such efforts. The ultimate goal should be to improve human activity so that people embrace great practices and use new tools, even though the development of improved resources to promote excellent practices may take up a sizable portion of the project phase. In order to enhance project performance, question six of the survey seeks to gather respondents' opinions on which activity significantly affects project execution.

6. Which of the following human activities do you believe has the greatest influence on project performance?

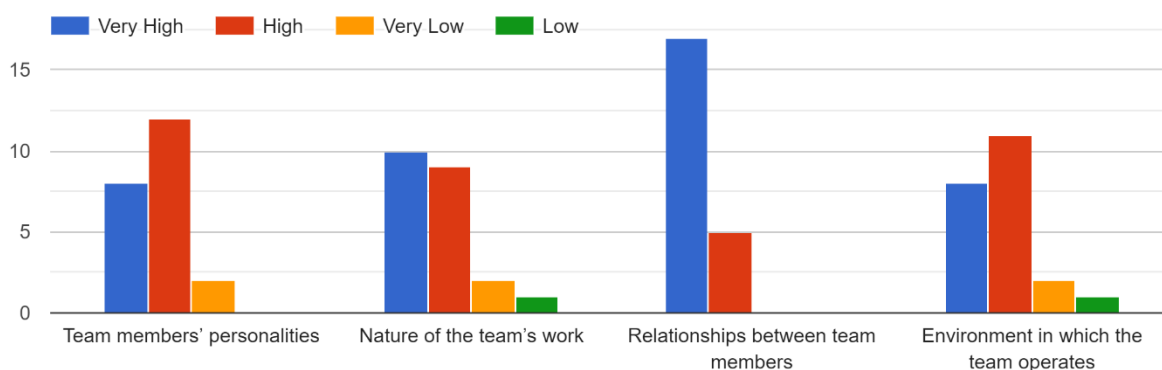


Figure 4 Respondent feedback on extreme human activity on project performance (Source: Survey 2022)

According to respondents, relationships between team members had the greatest impact on project execution and, as a result, improved project performance, according to the research results presented above.

- Team dynamics

When teams disagree on important decisions, conflict results, which is caused by team dynamics. The project's intended use as well as the project scope document need to be brought to the project team's attention. This is continued in order to keep the project in focus by excluding personal matters and emotions. On the other hand, prioritization can be difficult for project teams, particularly those that heavily rely on the strengths of functional teams. In the absence of complete conflict removal and improved team dynamics, managing project operations and external expectations could prove difficult.

5. Do you believe that team dynamics, a critical human activity involving unconscious psychological team behaviour, have an impact on project performance?

37 responses

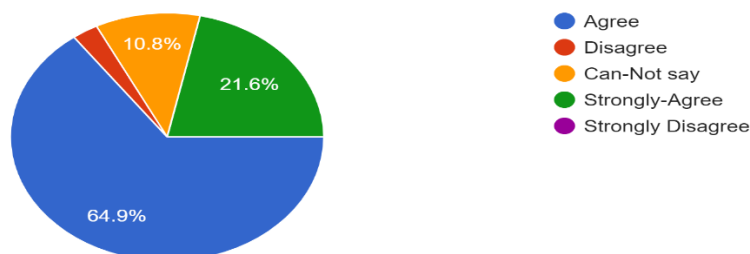


Figure 5 Respondent feedback on Team dynamics as a vital human activity (Source: Survey 2022)

Figure 5 shows that of the 37 respondents, 21.6% agree, 64.9% strongly agree, and 10.8% disagree that team dynamics, a crucial human activity, have an impact on project performance.

- Time management and project mission

Assuming the strategy and team are in place, the respondents said it is essential for project teams to maintain focus with a project mission and adequate time management to keep the overall goal in mind and work within the scope management throughout the project's life cycle. Project teams frequently discover a chance to achieve the goal once a project is under way and current techniques and tools have been examined. This served as the inspiration for the third survey question in figure 6, which aims to elicit respondents' opinions on the influence that particular people or project team members have on project success.

3. The “project management processes are not the only entity which ensures project success”. rather, it is emphasized that the people involved are the key drivers.
36 responses

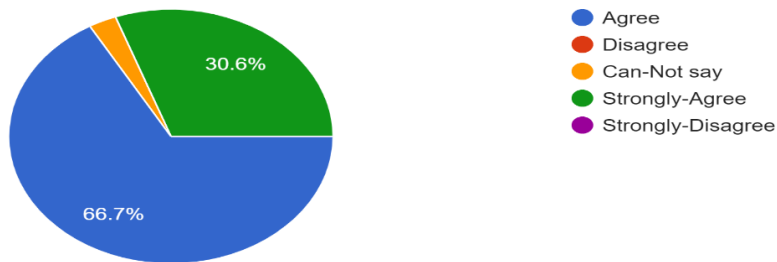


Figure 6 People as keys drivers in project management (Source: Survey question 2022)

Human behaviours, however, could endanger the project's success, as stated in the project scope. It should be acknowledged that the main forces behind any project or process are the people involved. This demonstrates that people are the key determinants of project success rather than pre-established project management procedures. The data in Figure 6 show that of the 36 respondents, 30.6% strongly agree, 66.7% agree, and 2.8% are unsure.

However, since the project management plan is frequently a tightly woven framework of interconnected tasks involving multiple people, conflict is unavoidable. Conflict could therefore be seen as an adverse force preventing a project from being completed successfully. "While conflict can have negative effects, depending on how it is viewed and resolved, it can also have positive effects. The project team was asked for feedback on conflict in the research. The purpose of this project is to demonstrate conflict as a natural human activity, including its structure, profitability, and applications, as well as the significance of conflict as a human activity. Question seven of the poll focuses on this topic by displaying the level of conflict in project management and project performance, as well as other criteria like cost and time.

7. How would you rate the following activities in terms of their potential impact on project performance?

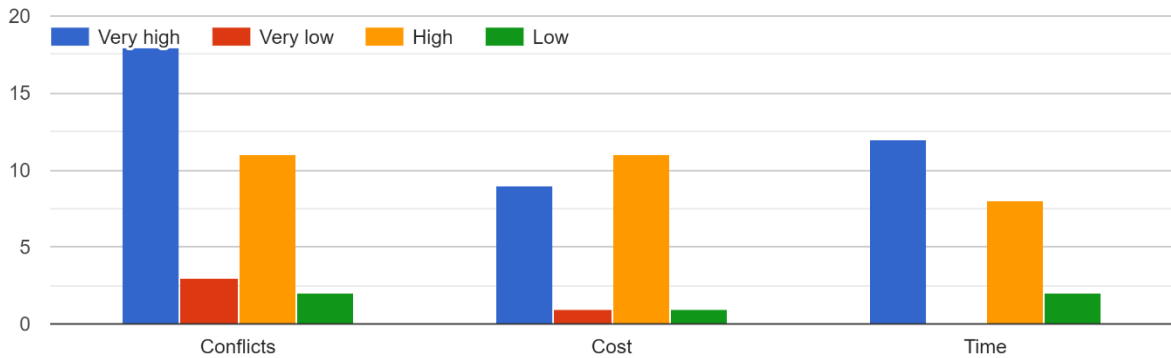


Figure 7 Conflict impact in project management (Source: Survey question 2022)

Conflict had a significant potential to affect project performance, including enhancing legitimate engagement in decision-making, stimulating discussion participation, fostering group cohesion, extending project time, and/or increasing project cost, among other things, according to respondents' project-based observations.

What is the relationship between conflict and the other factors in determining project performance?

The researchers were able to investigate the prevalence and applicability of conflict mechanisms in projects at the University of Salford thanks to their understanding of the relationship between conflicts and other factors in project delivery and performance. Three different viewpoints on conflicts in organizations have emerged over time. Typical conflict scenarios include: This viewpoint, which was popular from the late 1800s to the middle of the 1940s, contends that conflict is bad, always has a negative outcome, and lowers performance as it grows in intensity. According to this perspective, conflicts are closely related to ideas like violence, destruction, and absurdity. According to the conventional view, the best way to handle conflict is to lessen, hide, or even end it. Conflict resolution within the project is the project leader's responsibility, and this is frequently done in an authoritarian manner. Even though it occasionally provided assistance, it did so infrequently. When they are repressed, the conflict's fundamental causes and its potentially constructive aspects cannot be revealed.

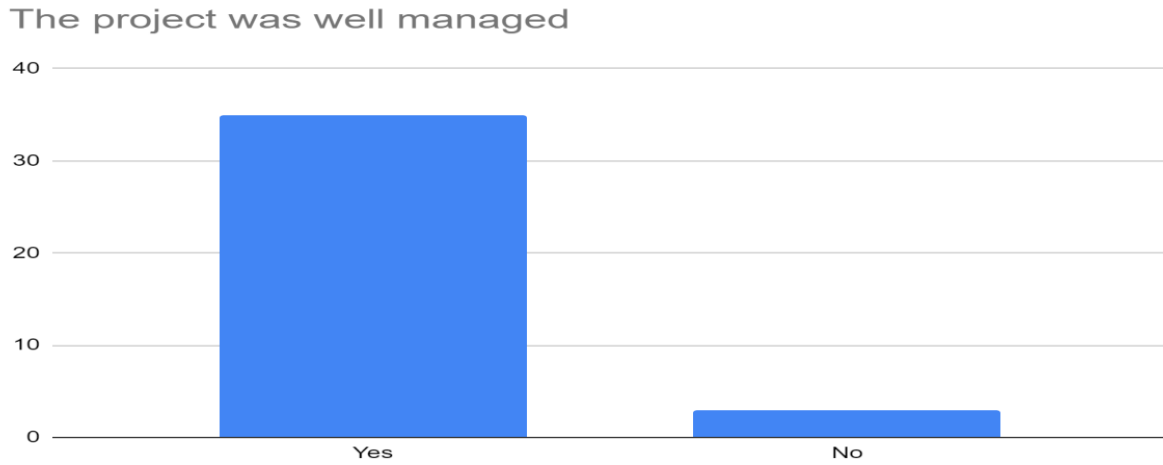


Figure 8 conflict and the other factors determining project performance (Source: Survey 2022)

The effectiveness with which conflict is managed within the project may have an impact on project performance, according to the research findings from respondents (see figure 8 above), which show that 92.1 percent of respondents from 37 project teams at the University of Salford concur. Conflict generally causes performance to increase up to a certain point before declining if it is allowed to intensify or remains unresolved.

The project's delivery schedule is another element whose impact on project management efficiency may be felt. The order of tasks or activities may affect participants' perspectives on the deliverables. This entails variations as well as inconsistent goals in long-term vs short-term viewpoints.

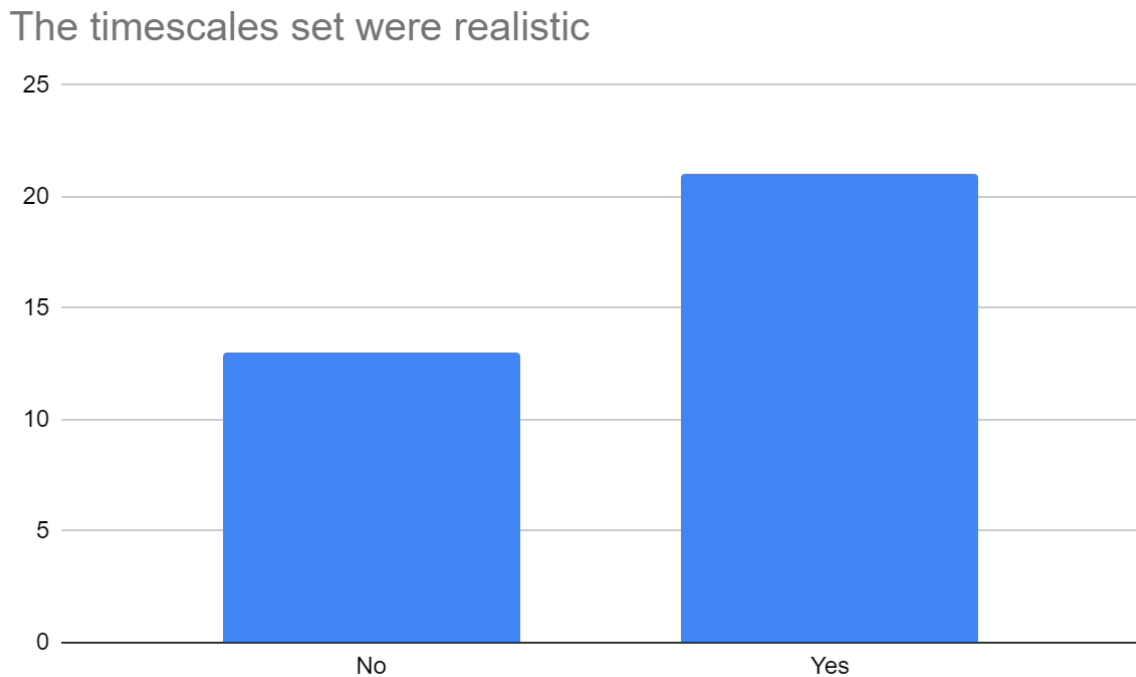


Figure 9 Respondent feedbacks on Conflict within project timescale (Source: Survey 2022)

The results of the survey are shown in figure 9 above. Of the 37 project teams that responded, 65.1% agreed, while 38.5% disagreed that a disagreement over project priorities might affect the timeline for project completion. Project-related job timeliness, scheduling, and work schedules, as well as the communications system used to establish and manage project plans, can all cause conflicts. Project performance will also be

enhanced by developing a comprehensive schedule that takes into account staff, subproject schedules, and other project scope.

Conflicts can have a variety of causes, including schedules, strategies, human resource management, logistical difficulties, management issues, and project stages (in terms of duration, scope, and cost). As a result, the focus of conflict will change depending on the team's attributes and the project's goals. Industrial and corporate organizations, which have a significant impact on modern society, continue to hold the outdated perspective that conflict is inherently bad and should be avoided. The root of conflict in a productive team is the team itself. The team and team leaders, the project manager and the stakeholders, or even both, will almost certainly be at odds when the project goals are vague and poorly defined. This negative perception of conflict affects some project teams, according to research.

10. Did you have a firm grasp on the following at the start of the project?

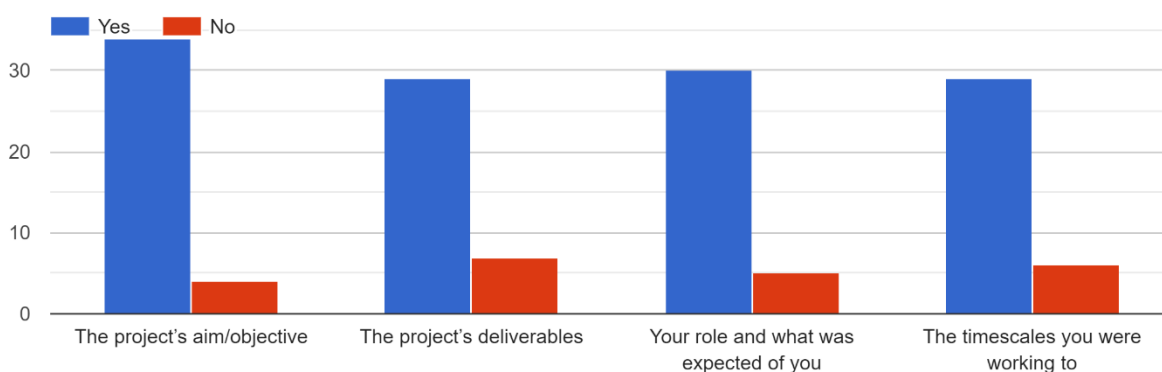


Figure 10 Respondent feedbacks on link between conflict within other project deliverables

According to the study's findings, 85% of 37 respondents concur that having a clear project aim and objectives, 77.5 percent agreeing on a well-defined project deliverable, 82.5 percent agreeing on a work breakdown structure for each role, and 82.5 percent agreeing on an achievable timeframe prevented conflict from worsening project performance.

People tend to think that conflict is always bad and should be avoided when there are violent or disruptive disputes between the project manager and stakeholder management. The project manager should investigate the causes or sources of conflict and how they change as the project cycle progresses because the findings show a relationship between conflict and other project factors in determining project performance.

Is it nearly impossible to achieve project management performance without good human management?

A project manager's ability to manage conflict is one of the most important skills to have because of the significant impact that conflict can have on a project's success. A middle- and upper-level executive survey conducted by the American Management Association revealed that the typical manager devotes 20% of his or her time to personal issues like managing people and resolving conflicts. The importance of managing conflict within teams is supported by a study that looked at twenty-five skills and personality factors to see if any of them were related to managerial performance. Out of the twenty-five studied criteria, the ability to manage conflict had the strongest positive correlation with management effectiveness.

Project Key Mission	Project Indicators requiring human activity and management
Project Schedule	A thorough description of the various stages necessary for project performance.
Stakeholder Communication	Communication and consultation listening to all parties involved
Technical Tasks	The provision of the resources necessary and competence that carry out the detailed process necessary actions.
Evaluation and monitoring	At each stage of the project execution process, comprehensive project information is delivered on time.
Communication	All essential stakeholders provided with a suitable channel of communicating, and the details.
Troubleshooting	Capability to deal with unanticipated emergencies and departures from the plan
Management Support	Project manager willingness to give the project resources and oversight for project success
Personnel (recruitment, selection, and training)	The project team's must be recruited, selected, and trained.

Hill's (1977) research and recent research by Vaux and Kirk (2018) compared successful project managers to those of failed projects and discovered that effective project managers did the following:

- Personally absorbed animosity
- Successfully communicated and listened
- Counseled their project team members to optimize output
- Encouraged openness, emotional expression, and new ideas

I felt supported by the project manager and project team.

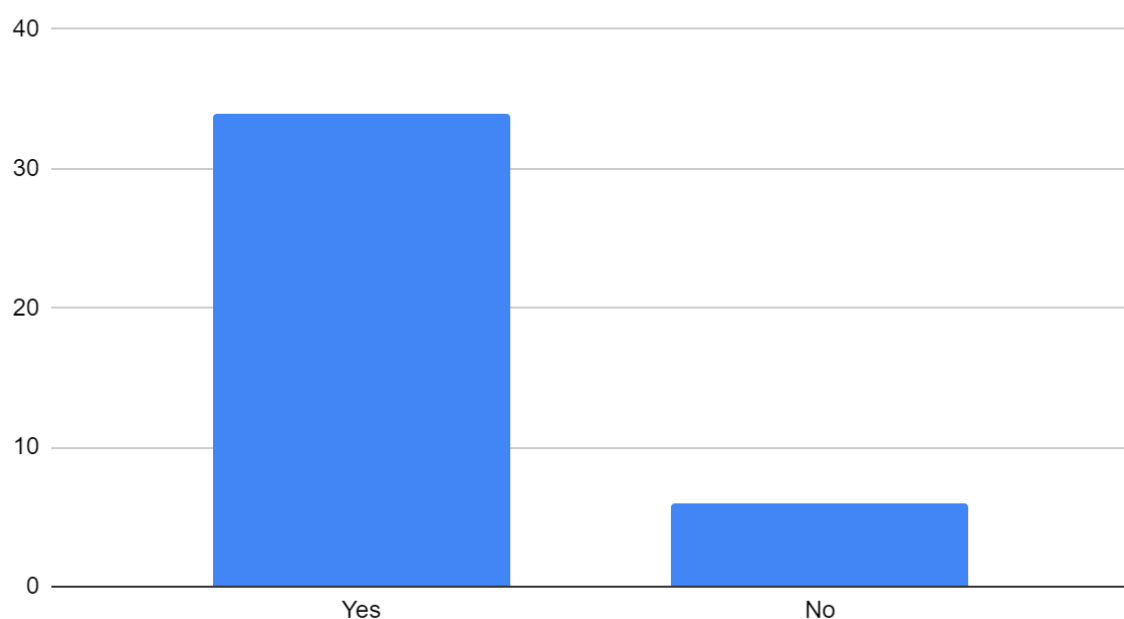


Figure 11 Respondent feedback on human resource management (Source: Survey 2022)

According to the study's findings, which are shown in figure 11 above, 85 percent of the 37 respondents concur that the project manager's role in project human resources management and coordination, as well as in team conflict resolution, is crucial. Therefore, in order to successfully complete any project, it is essential to manage human activity and team member conflict in accordance with the key project performance indices.

In addition, the idea of good human resource management and fostering conflict is difficult to accept because managing people is just as crucial as managing resources, and conflict does have a negative connotation. However, there are signs that, occasionally, a rise in conflicts leads to better project performance. On the other hand, good human resource management is focused on resolving conflict and is seen as a proactive strategy that demands quick action to prevent the impact of potential bad conflict and minimise patch-up workflow later in the project's lifecycle. Effective communication can accomplish the majority of this.

I was kept up-to-date with progress on the project.

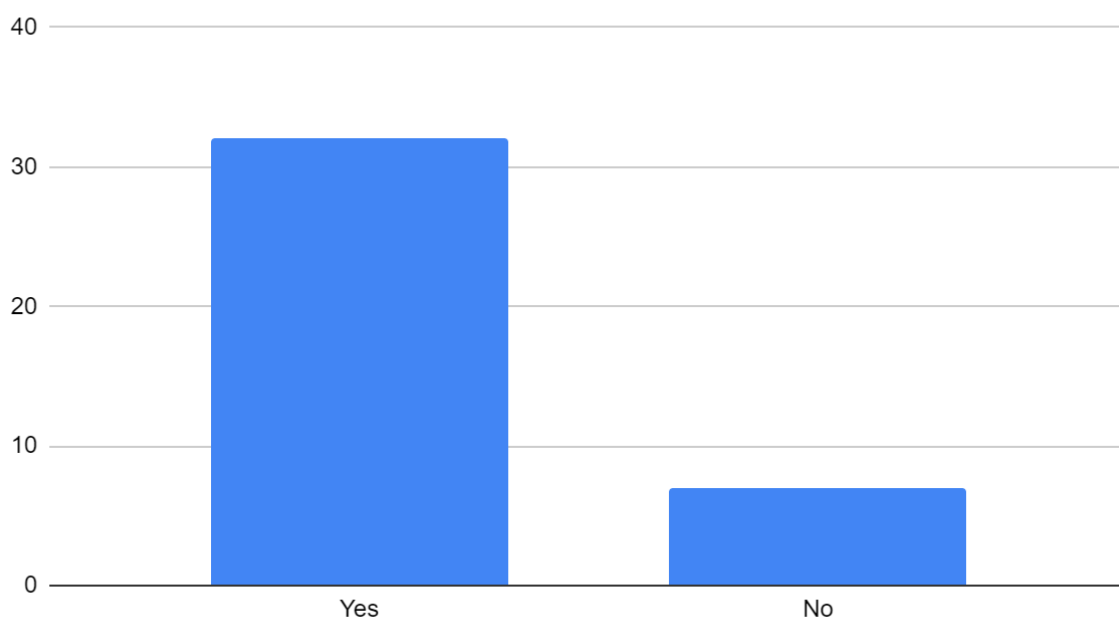


Figure 12 Respondent feedback on Communication plan (Source: Survey 2022)

Figure 12 from the study shows that 37 members of a project team from the University of Salford believe that effective communication is a crucial human activity in project management. In general, project managers can simulate conflict through effective communication. To reduce conflict and enhance project performance, for instance, specific procedures addressing project negotiations and conflict resolution should be handled appropriately and improved over the course of the project.

5. Discussion

The results of this study may be related to Oluikpe's (2015) investigation into team dynamics' literature review. By delving deeper into the team's structure and operations in the current project-driven environment, the study focuses on how project teams impact projects and how the team performs.

Conflict can be deterrent or beneficial, according to the concept of conflict. Project management thus presents a fantastic opportunity for knowledge expansion. All interactions involve conflict, which can be expressed through personal, interpersonal, or group dynamics (Obi, 2012). This is due to the fact that it is not always possible to expect two or more parties to agree. According to Hocker and Wilmot (2013), conflict

occurs when two or more people believe they have opposing goals, there are few resources available to them, and other people are interfering with their ability to accomplish those goals.

With a focus on conflict, this study sheds light on how human behaviour affects project management and performance literature. The results suggest that team dynamics brought on by culture and environment, team member personality, team member attitude, and project knowledge may lead to conflict. It demonstrates how the University of Salford project team's team dynamics affect team behaviour and project performance. Individual expertise, relationships among team members, and team dynamics should therefore be given priority.

The findings also demonstrate that disagreements over project priorities, program management practices, conceptual choices and optimization algorithms, people management issues, and project costs can all lead to conflict within the project management process. Additionally, there are personality conflicts and conflicts over project timelines, all of which the results show were successfully handled by the project manager and had no detrimental effects on the project's closeout or performance, contrary to earlier historical assumptions.

The research participants also concur that the project manager has a duty to manage the project by being aware of the strengths, weaknesses, and expertise of each project team as well as the numerous interpersonal conflicts that may arise, with the goal of fostering conflict to produce win-win strategies. In order to inspire self-evaluation, creativity, and innovation to improve project performance and outcome, it can occasionally be helpful to provoke conflict, according to the study's literature.

Finally, the study's findings showed how human behaviour (conflict) affects project management and performance. To further support effective project management performance, conflict should be stimulated to improve project results, project team activities, and human connection. The project team and project manager at the University of Salford should also work to strengthen communication and teamwork. In order to encourage consistency and coherence in project performance, conflict can and should be encouraged and maintained at a manageable level. To identify and close gaps, conflict areas and methods should be periodically evaluated. This will foster collaborations among those carrying out project scope.

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