

EFFECT OF EMPLOYEES' SOFT SKILLS ON PERFORMANCE OF PUBLIC ENERGY SECTOR PROJECTS IN KENYA

Annastacia Katumbi Kavita Musembi

PhD in Project Management, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, Kenya

Dr. Wario Guyo

Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, Kenya

Dr. Dorothy Ndunge Kyalo

University of Nairobi, Kenya

Dr. Aflonia Mbuthia

Kenyatta University, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The purpose for this study was to establish the effect of employees' soft skills on project performance in the sector. In line with these objectives, one hypothesis was developed and pragmatic paradigm adopted to support a mixed method research design. In particular the study employed both cross-sectional and correlation design. Purposive sampling technique was employed to select the projects that were studied. The population comprised all the project supervisors who led the project teams in the ongoing projects in the energy sector ending between January 2016 to December 2018. In particular the study focused on the transmission projects, the generation projects, nuclear projects and the distribution projects. A total of 85 ongoing projects were selected. Out of these 9 were used in the pilot study. Therefore 76 projects were chosen for the study. A Questionnaire comprised of closed and open-ended research questions taking the format of five-point Likert-type interval scale was used to assemble primary data from project supervisors. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program version 23 was utilized to conduct regression analysis, its results used to determine coefficients of multiple regression models, test hypotheses, evaluate reliability of estimated relationship and establish sample regression model. The investigation also found out that the combined employees soft skills positively affect project performance in the energy sector in Kenya ($R^2=0.633$, $P=0.00$). The study highlights the essential components of employees' soft skills that would inform effective project performance. The study

differed from other studies by empirically showing how comprehensive integration of soft skills can affect project performance and also offers the possibility of contributing to change the way projects are planned, designed and implemented. On the basis of findings, the study recommends that both transactional and transformational leadership styles should be used in the management of projects with a greater emphasis on transformational leadership style. It also advocates for the establishment of clear communication plans with simple and collaborative channels for effective communication. In addition, there should be proper feedback systems, regular communication and free access to information. Communication channels should be chosen depending on the target audience. The research also proposes good stakeholder management in projects. It recommends stakeholder involvement at every stage of the project life cycle. Furthermore, it suggests prompt and adequate compensation of stakeholders, timely completion of projects, innovativeness and proper redress of stakeholder concerns. On the organizational environment, the study advises on the need for improvement on management practices, provision of the appropriate materials and equipment, provision of adequate and timely funding. It also proposes that the challenges in the physical environment should be dealt with besides providing adequate staff with the right skills. The study also suggests that further studies should be carried out in other sectors and countries and that they should involve more soft skills.

Key Words: *leadership skills, management, project performance communication skills, stakeholder*

INTRODUCTION

Projects are as old as mankind. Project management as a formal discipline dates back 60 years ago from the application by the military (Miranda & Ghimire, 2007). However, the modern concepts in project management began between 1900s and 1950s, during which project schedules were shortened by technology advancements that allowed efficient resource allocation and mobility (Carayannis, Kwak & Anbari, 2003) and Telecommunication system increased the speed of communication. Back then, automation was utilized to replace repetitive tasks thereby necessity for constant changes became more evident and need for effective employees for managing projects increased instantaneously (Verzuh, 2005).

There exists a link between projects' life cycles and soft skills (Belzer, 2004). Project failure is associated with inability of project employees to effectively employ soft skills in the day to day running of the project. Successful project implementation is linked to the effective and efficient working relations and communication of the project team throughout the project life cycle (Ackel, Kidombo & Gakuu, 2012). A study on IT projects' failure rates in the USA between 1994 and 2002 revealed a letdown rate of 40% in 1996 and 15% in 2002. In Saudi Arabia, only 30% of construction projects are completed within schedule, with a standard time overrun of between 10% and 30% (Assaf & Al-Hejji, 2009). According to Odeyinka and Yusif (2010), about 70% of projects in Nigeria suffer delayed execution. A study on large engineering projects all over the world shows that the projects experienced serious performance problems with an average cost of \$985 million (Miller & Lessard, 2011). A research done by Shanmugapriya and Subramanian (2013) demonstrates that up to 60% of Indian construction projects are overwhelmed by cost and time overruns. In Kenya, projects have been experiencing cost and time overruns as well as quality issues. This happens even with high quality training of project professionals (Muguchu, 2012). Teams are disassembled and reassembled with different team leaders and /or project managers (Gwaya, et al., 2014). According to Kariungi (2014) energy sector projects in Kenya have not performed to their expectations in terms of completion on time, on budget and quality. This is partly due to transmission losses which stood at 3.55% in 2009/2010 and 3.5% in 2010/2011 (KPLC, 2012-2016). In 2010/2011 distribution loses stood at 16.2%. The KPLC Master plan (2011) records that the electrification process is very slow with only 20% of the population being reached. According to KAM (2012), Kenya ranks position 115 out of 183 with regard to time electricity takes to reach the final consumer. A research on world bank funded projects in Kenya revealed that soft skills such as communication are important for the project to run from design, through to implementation (Ackel, Kidombo & Gakuu, 2012). Increased use of soft skills by employees leads to improved cost performance and improved feedback within project teams (Langer, et al., 2008).

However, the importance of employees' soft skills has not been well researched and clearly explained in Kenya, creating a gap in the soft skill project performance relationship. Therefore, the study was carried out in order to investigate the knowledge gap in employees' soft skills in the running of projects in Kenya. It particularly examined the effect of employees' soft skills on project management in the Kenyan public energy sector.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

There exists a link between projects' life cycles and soft skills (Belzer, 2004). Project failure is associated with inability of project employees to effectively employ soft skills in the day to day running of the project. Successful project implementation is linked to the effective and efficient working relations and communication of the project team throughout the project life cycle (Ackel, et al, 2012). A study on IT projects' failure rates in the USA between 1994 and 2002 revealed a letdown rate of 40% in 1996 and 15% in 2002. In Saudi Arabia, only 30% of construction projects are completed within schedule, with a standard time overrun of between 10% and 30% (Assaf & Al-Hejji, 2009). According to Odeyinka and Yusif (2010), about 70% of projects in Nigeria suffer delayed execution. A study on large engineering projects all over the world shows that the projects experienced serious performance problems with an average cost of \$985 million (Miller & Lessard, 2011). A research done by Shanmugapriya and Subramanian (2013) demonstrates that up to 60% of Indian construction projects are overwhelmed by cost and time overruns. In Kenya, projects have been experiencing cost and time overruns as well as quality issues. This happens even with high quality training of project professionals (Muguchu, 2012). Teams are disassembled and reassembled with different team leaders and /or project managers (Gwaya et al., 2014). According to Kariungi (2014) energy sector projects in Kenya have not performed to their expectations in terms of completion on time, on budget and quality. This is partly due to transmission losses which stood at 3.55% in 2009/2010 and 3.5% in 2010/2011 (KPLC, 2012-2016). In 2010/2011 distribution loses stood at 16.2%. The KPLC Master plan (2011) records that the electrification process is very slow with only 20% of the population being reached. According to KAM (2012), Kenya ranks position 115 out of 183 with regard to time electricity takes to reach the final consumer. A research on world bank funded projects in Kenya revealed that soft skills such as communication are important for the project to run from design, through to implementation (Ackel, Kidombo & Gakuu, 2012). Increased use of soft skills by employees leads to improved cost performance and improved feedback within project teams (Langer, et al., 2008). However, the importance of employees' soft skills has not been well researched and clearly explained in Kenya, creating a gap in the soft skill project performance relationship. Therefore, the study was carried out in order to investigate the knowledge gap in employees' soft skills in the running of projects in Kenya. It particularly examined the effect of employees' soft skills on project management in the Kenyan public energy sector.

GENERAL OBJECTIVE

The study's general objective was to establish the effect of employee's soft skills on the performance of public energy sector projects in Kenya.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Contingency Theories and Leadership

The contingency theories were proposed by Fred Fiedler in 1958. The contingency theories state that the success of a leader is linked to the connection between his/her characteristics, behaviour and the situation in which he/she is operating (Charkrabarti, 2014). According to the Fieldler (1958) contingency model, the performance of a group of people is dependent on the leader's leadership style, and how favourable the situation is. Different styles of leadership work better in different situations. For example, task-oriented leaders perform better in extremely favorable and exceedingly unfavourable conditions while association –oriented leaders do well in modest conditions. Fiedler's contingency theory is a contingency theory that claims that effective leadership depends on leadership style and control of that leadership over prevailing situations. According to the theory, there needs to be good relationship between the project leaders and the project employees, tasks with lucid procedures and goals, and leader's ability to offer rewards and punishments. Lack of these three in the right blend and background results in leadership failure. This theory is important for this study because it talks about the importance of the leadership style which is one of the factors being researched on.

Theory of Self-interest and Communication

The theory of self interest was proposed by Monge and Contractor in 2003. This theory provides a framework within which to deal with communication networks, stakeholder involvement in the communication process, communication costs and team involvement in the communication process. The theory of self- interest is further divided into transaction cost economics and social capital theory. The social capital theory focuses on the properties of communication networks to which people are connected. The structure of the network provides people with opportunities to provide information, communication and other social resources with the hope of reaping benefits. This theory is relevant to the study in that it deals with stakeholder involvement and team involvement in the communication process which forms part of the study.

Systems Theory and Stakeholder Management

It was proposed by Freeman and McVea in 1948. It recommends the use of systems theory and organizational theory for stakeholder management. The segment of system's theory which is relevant to stakeholder management was first put forward by Ackoff and Churchman in 1947. The system's theory stresses the external links that are part of every organization. It emphasizes the identification of stakeholders and the interconnections between them. Systems theory focuses

on the development of collective strategies that optimize the network. The traditional organization theory was developed by Katz and Khan in 1966 (Freeman & McVea, 1948). In 1967 Thomson introduced the idea of 'clientele' which takes into account groups outside the conventional boundaries of the organization. The systems theory emphasizes the significance of expanding analysis of strategic problems to include all stakeholders. It is applicable to this study because it stresses on the need for organizations to have links with external stakeholders. It also puts emphasis on identification of stakeholders and the importance of stakeholder relationships which form part of the study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

The researcher utilized both correlational and cross-sectional designs. The cross-sectional design was preferred because the study focused on evaluating the link between two variables and one point in time without necessarily following participants (Oso & Onen, 2008; Kothari & Garg, 2014; Bachman & Schutt, 2003). Based on the study's focus, the design made it possible to obtain data from a sample of respondents who represented the target population within a short time. The ongoing Projects were the units of analysis and to avoid duplication the project supervisors were the units of observation. On the other hand, the choice of correlational design was as a result of the fact that the study sought to measure the degree of relationship between different variables; thus, inferential statistics were the most suitable ones (Osoo & Onen, 2008; Kothari & Garg, 2014). As a result, because the study investigated and determined the effect of each soft skill and their composite effect on project performance, correlational design was best design for the study. Overall, the two designs enabled the researcher to concurrently combine inferential, descriptive and qualitative method of analyzing data so as to determine the relationships among variables with the aim of elucidating the nature of the relationships (Leedy, 1997). Thus, the purpose of this study was achieved.

Population

The study's target population comprised of all employees in the ongoing projects in the energy sector. This is in accordance with Sommer and Sommer (1997) who define target population as all the members of a hypothetical or real set of people, events or subjects that researchers wish to generalize the results of their studies. According to the MOEP project implementation status report (march 2015-march 2016) projects in the energy sector in Kenya can be categorized into Generation projects, Transmission projects, Distribution projects, Oil and Gas projects, Renewable Energy Development Projects, and Nuclear Power Projects. The study targeted the ongoing transmission, generation, distribution and nuclear projects whose completion dates lie between January 2016 and December 2018.

Sample and Sampling Technique

It is an accurate representative of the total population to be studied (Hyndma, 2008; Marczyk, DeMatteo & Festinger, 2005). According to Adèr, Mellenbergh and Hand (2008), sampling ensures cost reduction, speed of data collection, accuracy of data collected and quality of the data. On the other hand, sampling is a process of selecting a pre-determined number of individuals from target population so that knowledge about the entire population can be generated from those individuals on the basis of statistical inference (Black & William, 2004). As a result, a good sample should be: representative of entire population; reduce sampling error; feasible, cost-effective, and efficient, whose outcomes can be generalized to target population with a logical level of confidence (Kothari, 2011). This study employed both probabilistic and non-probabilistic sampling techniques. In stage one; stratified sampling was applied to group the projects which form the unit of analysis. The projects are broken down into 20 Transmission projects, 60 distribution projects, 10 Generation projects and 4 nuclear projects. A total of 94 ongoing projects whose completion dates lie between January 2016 and December 2018 were identified. The execution teams were composed of project managers, project supervisors, engineers, land economists, surveyors, financial experts, socio-economists, legal experts and environmental experts. A total of 282 employees were working on the ongoing projects. To avoid duplication of information and to ensure representation, the project supervisors who are in charge of the project teams in the 94 ongoing transmission, distribution, generation and nuclear projects were the units of observation.

The respondents were the project supervisors of the sampled projects. The sample was arrived at using the Yamane's (1989) formula for categorical data as cited by Kinyili *et al* (2015).

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(\hat{\alpha})^2}$$

Where: N represents target population; n represents sample size; $\hat{\alpha}$ represents significance level (0.05).

Therefore, with the help of the formula, a sample of 85 projects out of 94 target projects was selected.

Research Instruments

Data collection instruments are the tools and procedures used in the measurement of variables in research (Cooper & Schindler, 2011; Mugenda & Mugenda (2012). The study's nature resulted to utilization of triangulation and multiple methods to explore and understand the effect of employees' soft skills on project performance. The Secondary data was obtained through document analysis. Primary data was collected using self administered questionnaires. Instrument administration is a data collection method in which the sample answers questions in

the questionnaires. It is dictated by the level of the respondents' literacy. A questionnaire was developed for the project supervisors. The questionnaires were self-administered. The questionnaire was utilized to collect quantitative and qualitative data from the project supervisors. It comprised of open and closed-ended questions that included scaled responses in the format of Likert scale. The respondents answered by choosing one of the five agreement choices. This helped the researcher to get exact responses related to the study (Sproull, 1995). The scaled responses also allowed the researcher to include more items on questionnaire more than an open-ended questionnaire would allow. In addition, they were easy and faster to administer to collect more information within a short period than open-ended questionnaires (Creswell, 2009).

Data Collection Procedure

Prior to data collection, the researcher obtained an introductory letter from the chairperson of COHRED. Authority was also sought from the Ministry of Energy to facilitate data collection. In addition, a research permit was acquired from office of the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). Using these letters the researcher was able to visit the ongoing projects in the energy sector. The research instruments were revised as the researcher deemed fit and final copies produced. Subsequently, the researcher visited the various project managers for familiarization and afterward for data collection.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An investigation was also carried out on the collective effect of the employees' composite soft skills on project performance.

Table 1: Combined effect of employees' soft skills on project performance

Goodness of Fit	df	Test Statistics	P-value
R-Squared		0.631	
Adjusted R-Squared		0.625	
Durbin-Watson (Autocorrelation Test)		1.645	
F-Statistic	(1,60)	102.617	0.000**
Shapiro-Wilks test (Test of Normality)	(62)	0.922	0.001
Levene's Test (Test for Homogeneity)	(3,58)	0.291	0.832
Linear Regression Results			
Dependent Variable=Performance		Coefficient	t- statistics
			p-value
Constant		-10.698	-1.288
Soft Skills		22.958	10.130
			0.000**

Key: Significance levels of 0.01***, 0.05** & 0.1* or at 99%, 95% & 90% respectively

A unit increase in the use of the composite soft skills improves project performance by 63.1% ($R^2=0.0.631$, $P=0.000$). $F=102.617$ illustrates a very strong relationship between the combined soft skills and project performance. $t=10.130$ which is greater than 2 meaning that the model is acceptable. Using the values provided in table 1 a linear regression equation of the form:

$Y = \beta_0 + \beta X_4 + \mu$ can be fitted as follows:

$$P = 22.958 + 0.631X_4$$

Thus, the null hypothesis that:

H0: The combined effect of the employees’ soft skills does not positively affect project performance in the energy sector projects in Kenya is rejected.

Therefore, the alternate objective Ha: the combined effect of employees’ soft skills positively affects project performance in the energy sector projects in Kenya is accepted.

This is in line with findings by Awan *et al* (2010) that soft skills are vital for project performance. These findings are further supported by Bourne (2004) and Gillard (2009) who assert that Soft skills balance the effectiveness of hard skills since projects results are achieved through people. Kirsh (2004) and Lee *et al*,(1995) add that soft skills help employees to work with other people as well as fostering inter and intra organizational associations among stakeholders .

A multiple regression analysis of all the soft skills was also carried out. The results are indicated in Table 2.

Table 2: Multiple Regression

Goodness of Fit	df	Test Statistics	P-value	
R-Squared		0.723		
Adjusted R-Squared		0.705		
Durbin-Watson (Autocorrelation Test)		1.429		
F-Statistic	(3,48)	41.709	0.000**	
Linear Regression Results				
Dependent Variable=Performance	VIF	Coefficient	t-statistics	p-value
Constant		13.419	1.619	0.112
Leadership Skills	2.006	17.668	7.770	0.000**
Communication Skills	2.090	7.937	2.604	0.012**
Stakeholders Management Skills	1.670	6.878	2.987	0.004**
Key: Significance levels of 0.01***, 0.05** & 0.1* or at 99%, 95% & 90% respectively				

Using the values provided in table 4 a multiple regression equation of the form:

$Y = \beta_0 + \beta X_1 + \beta X_2 + \beta X_3 + \beta X_4 + \mu$ can be fitted as follows:

$$P = 13.419 + 17.668Ls + 7.937Cs + 6.878SMs$$

When all independent variables are held constant, the performance level increases by 13.419. **If the other independent variables are kept constant, a unit change in the use of leadership skills leads to 17.668 changes in the level of performance.** Studies on leadership have shown that strong leadership is key to the accomplishment of projects (Mascia, 2012). Leadership is the skill to convince others to achieve pre-determined goals with passion, eagerness and motivation (Shi & Chen, 2006).

By holding leadership skills and stakeholder management skills constant, a unit increase in the use of communication skills causes 7.937 change in project performance.

Communication is essential for securing projects' approvals, enhancing leaders' credibility, securing consensus on pertinent issues, resources and solutions, reinforcing processes, promoting actions aimed at improving projects and showing the complete results of the project (Cataldo & Ehrlich, 2011). The process of communication in project management entails activities that create, distribute and disperse information relating to project implementation and identifying responsibilities that team members and other stakeholders play in project implementation (Hill, 2010). Tipili *et al* (2014), and Cataldo and Ehrlich (2011) add that project communication links the right people, information and ideas that are relevant for the successful project implementation. Poor or insufficient communication is a contributor to project failure (Tipili *et al*, 2014).

When leadership skills and communication skills are held constant, a unit increase in the use of stakeholder management skills leads to a 6.878 improvement in project performance.

Project employees must manage the projects' stakeholders in order to win their support (Thompson, 2011). Stakeholders can include those who approve the project, the project financiers, those who provide resources such as labour, equipment, materials and facilities, as well as the beneficiaries of the project (KPMG, 2013). The stakeholder community is comprised of groups and individuals that have potential influence on projects' outcomes and who can influence those outcomes either positively or negatively (Bourne, 2006).

CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that leadership skills positively affect project performance. The leadership styles applied by the project managers affect the level of motivation of the project employees. The study investigated transactional and transformational leadership styles. However, from the findings it can be concluded that transactional leadership is used more in the public energy sector

projects. They reward effort and penalize undesirable behaviour, provide adequate pay, better terms of employment, better working conditions and incentives which are motivating factors for some project employees. Transformational leadership is only applied to a small extent.

From the study it was concluded that employees' communication skills significantly affect project performance. Communication skills in the energy sector in Kenya are used in decision making, conflict resolution and negotiation. For communication to be effective, the study established that a clear communication plan with simple and collaborative channels, proper feedback systems, regular communication, two way participatory communication, prompt feedback, timely and clear communication, open communication and free access to information must be in place. Still, there is little or no free access to information by stakeholders, feedback is never prompt, communication is not open and timely.

Appropriate communication channels should also be used. From the study, it can be concluded that the communication channels preferred in the public energy sector projects in Kenya are emails, meetings, phone calls, letters and circulars, social media, and public barazas . Nevertheless, the findings of the study reveal that letters and circulars, social media and public barazas are only used to a small extent. This means that communication with the external stakeholders is compromised.

According to the study findings, it can be concluded that stakeholder management skills significantly affect project management. It is done through stakeholder analysis, stakeholder engagement in the projects and establishment of stakeholder relationships. It can also be concluded that project stakeholders' needs are met through innovativeness, prompt payment of compensation, stakeholder involvement and corporate social responsibility. Yet, the findings of the study also indicate that, there is lack of prompt and adequate compensation of stakeholders, projects are not completed on time, there is lack of innovativeness, little or no open, timely and regular communication, no post project audits, no project benefits are presented to affected persons, no proper redress of customer concerns. There is also lack of proper documentation, public sensitization, little or no follow ups on affected persons and very little adherence to quality and safety.

These findings thus suggest that leadership skills, communication skills and stakeholder management skills are essential for the performance of the energy sector projects in Kenya.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Projects play a major role in economic growth in Kenya. Recognizing the commitment of the Government of Kenya to economic growth and development as shown in its Vision 2030 blueprint, the study has apt implications. Therefore, the following recommendations can benefit government, agencies that implement its agendas and citizens as a whole. The study has established and identified statistically significant relationships between employees' soft skills

and project performance. The end result of this is the possibility that if employees working on projects utilize soft skills, then projects would be completed on time and on budget. The study therefore provides a stimulus and framework for policy makers to review the education ACT and to ensure that soft skills form part of the training especially in middle level colleges and universities. This would ensure that all employees are well equipped not only with hard skills but also with soft skills both of which are necessary in the workplace.

The study's evidence points towards and supports the idea that employees' soft skills are crucial for project performance. This implies that organizations and project management practitioners should adopt a fact based approach in order to enhance project performance. They must incorporate soft skills such as leadership skills, communication skills and stakeholder management skills in the day to day running of the projects. In this era of scientific approach to management, project management skills must transcend the employees' technical skills to integrate employees' soft skills.

The findings of the study have considerable managerial implications with regard to the project performance. For organizations to be effective and efficient in implementation of projects, they must provide mechanisms that would engage all the stakeholders fruitfully while providing proper leadership, with the aim of boosting performance. Organizations and project practitioners can apply the findings of this study in areas such participatory programme and project design, principally in programme and project interpretation and implementation, programme building and programme structuring. The study provides further insight into the issues within an organization that can hamper project performance. The study proposes an assessment, classification and appropriate separation of employees according to the soft skills with which they are equipped. It further advocates for the provision of basic soft skill training and education as appropriate to individual needs so as to add to what they already have with the aim of improving performance.

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