Exploring the Personal Dynamics of Project Initiation Decisions
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Abstract

The focus of this study is on the role of individuals in making project initiation decisions. The decision to proceed with a project is critical, and the up-front process of initiation has been identified as having a dominant influence in determining the success or failure of individual project efforts. The process of project initiation lives at the intersection between organizational strategy and project management, and from different perspectives often appears to be part of one or the other, at times can be argued to belong to both, and occasionally seems to belong to neither. This study seeks to explore how individual actors engage in and support the process of making effective project initiation decisions.

The study employed grounded theory methodology to develop a substantive theory of how agency and rule emphasis influence the effectiveness of project initiation decisions. Data collection involved interviews with 28 participants who were each involved in the initiation of projects in their organizations, who discussed the process within their organizations of deciding to initiate projects, and described their role within that process. The results show that decision effectiveness is a result of the effectiveness of process and rule systems within an organization, and the agency of individual actors supporting the initiation process. Agency represents the intention, ability and capacity to act – and the corresponding level of awareness – within the rule environment of the organization. Agency reflects the willingness of actors to work within, around or despite the dominant rule system. Agency can work to support the influences of process effectiveness or rule effectiveness, and agency can also override and compensate for organizational inadequacies. Agency can supplement rule effectiveness where required to support effective decisions in implicitly-focussed environments, and can also be constrained in explicitly-focussed environments that have a strong process capability in place.

This study contributes to the project management and strategy literature by opening up the black box of the project initiation decision and demonstrating how individuals, processes and structures interact. It introduces decision making theory to the project management realm in ways that were previously unexplored, in order to increase understanding of how strategic project initiation decisions are made. The study also confirms the presence of the “project shaper” role – initially identified by Smith and Winter (2010) – as a champion of the initiation of projects. In addition, the
study contributes to the understanding of agency, not just as a means of managing uncertainty and compensating for perceived organizational inadequacies, but also in its ability to be constrained in the face of very formal and consistent processes, or perceived as limited as a result of personal attributes or external constraints. Finally, the study provides empirical support to previous studies that propose a link between personality and agency, explores the stewardship component of the exercise of agency, and demonstrates how it is operationalized by actors at all levels of the organization rather than solely at the boardroom table or in the executive suite.
Declaration

This thesis is submitted to Bond University in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. This thesis represents my own original work towards this research degree and contains no material which has been previously submitted for a degree or diploma at this University or any other institution, except where due acknowledgement is made.

Mark Edward Mullaly
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