

UNDERSTANDING AND MITIGATING CHALLENGES ON GLOBAL PROJECTS: THE ROLE OF THE FREELANCE EXPATRIATE

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ABSTRACT

Global construction projects that involve collaboration between participants from multiple countries result in unique challenges that are not faced on intra-national projects. In order to further investigate this phenomenon, we conducted detailed case studies on four, matched international construction projects – two in Taiwan and two in India. Through our study we found four key differences in institutionalized work practices that led to large challenges on projects. How were these institutional challenges mitigated? We found that a group of freelance professionals, hailing mainly from the UK but also from other parts of the British Commonwealth, acted as the mediators or catalysts in resolving these differences. In this paper we describe the types of problems that arose on the project and the nature of the expatriate freelance community. We also analyze some of the strategies adopted by its members, and the ways in which conflicts were solved.

KEY WORDS

Institutional Differences, Global Projects, Freelancers, Strategies, Conflict Mitigation.

INTRODUCTION

As globalisation proceeds at an ever-increasing rate, the amount of international or cross-national construction activity is increasing dramatically. Large domestic and multinational companies are setting up overseas subsidiaries. Simultaneously many governments, particularly in developing countries, are soliciting international aid in terms of financing, technology and know-how, in order to speed up their development. Large-scale infrastructure projects involving participants and stakeholders from multiple countries are being undertaken in many parts of the developing world. To obtain an idea of the magnitude of this trend, Engineering News Record magazine estimates that the top 25 international firms alone perform work worth \$98 billion annually (ENR Sourcebook, 2004).

However, many of these large-scale international ventures run into difficulties during the course of their lifecycle. Research indicates that only 40% of International Joint Ventures meet their prescribed objectives (Beamish and Delios 1997). Informal interviews with executives from multinational companies also indicate that international ventures are beset with difficulties that lead to unforeseen costs. What kinds of difficulties do these organizations face? How can these problems be overcome? These are the questions that confront researchers as well as practitioners. To date there is no comprehensive validated theory or framework that allows us to analyse and understand

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the problems triggered on global projects. In the remainder of this paper, we plan to use case-study evidence to shed some light on the problems that beset global projects, and the ways in which these issues are resolved. In the next section we review the formulation of the problem and some preliminary research objectives. We then briefly review some of the extant theory on organizations to identify gaps in the theory that prevent us from directly applying this theory to explain the problems faced on global projects. After discussing our research methodology, we present the initial findings of the conflicts that we observed on global projects. We then analyse a group of freelance expatriates on this project and show how members of this group were instrumental in solving some the conflicts that occurred. In closing, we discuss implications of our research for both researchers and practitioners, and future avenues of exploration.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Merging concepts generated by Greif (Greif, forthcoming) and Scott (Scott 2001), we define *institutions* as “a set of rules, norms and values that help generate a regularity of behavior.” Legal regulations are an example of institutions. They are a set of **rules** that generate **regular behavior** among all actors within their domain of influence, say a particular country. All actors within this country will uniformly need to abide by these laws—e.g. drive on the right-hand side of the road—and thereby demonstrate some regularity among their behaviour, since individuals cannot unilaterally deviate from these rules without incurring costs. Work practices or contracting practices are another example of institutions. They may be a set of legal rules or professional norms that lead to a uniform and consistent method of project procurement and organization within a domain. These institutional arrangements can differ vastly from country to country or even from profession to profession. Existing research indicates that difficulties on Global Projects arise due to institutional differences. Each nation and industry has a set of institutions. The set of local institutions in a society creates a specific ‘logic’ that leads to regularities of behaviour that both influence, and to some extent define, the construction industry in these countries. In the presence of participants from multiple institutional backgrounds (as is often the case in Global Projects), differences in the institutions or in the institutionally specified behaviours lead to problems, since the differences need to be reconciled for a joint activity to be successful (Mahalingam and Levitt 2004).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Based on the above problem formulation, two research questions have been identified, the pursuit of which could lead to a better understanding of the challenges on global projects. These research questions are:

1. What are some of the kinds of institutional conflicts that occur on global projects?
2. How are these conflicts resolved and how can we better organize and manage global projects?

LITERATURE REVIEW: INSTITUTIONAL THEORY

We look first at how extant literature can contribute to answering these research objectives. We have already defined the concept of ‘Institutions’ in our theoretical framework. How do organizations respond to institutional forces? Some scholars posit that “organizational isomorphism” will result, wherein all organizations within the same

environment come to display similar features (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). However organizations that are more self-sufficient and that do not need to be viewed as legitimate to survive may avoid, defy or even manipulate institutions in order to perform efficiently (Oliver 1991). Under institutional pressure, organizations may also exhibit ‘loose coupling’ wherein only a veneer of institutional conformance is proffered (Meyer and Rowen 1977). Work on institutional change and conflict is still in its early stages. Some indications are that disruptive events are necessary to induce institutional change (Fligstein 1991). In terms of institutional conflict, some initial research indicates that, institutional differences at a cognitive level result in conflicts and resistance, whereas differences in formal rationalities may be easier to resolve (Townley 2002).

GAPS IN THE APPLICATION OF INSTITUTIONAL THEORY:

There are significant gaps in the application of institutional theory with respect to our research questions. Firstly, institutional theorists have never considered projects as a unit of analysis. Projects are short-term activities that feature diverse teams that will disband at the end of the project. As a result there will always be a variety of institutional beliefs on projects. Secondly, the construction industry has seldom been in institutional theory as the domain of analysis. Thirdly, very little work has been done in describing the process of institutional change or institutional conflict at a micro level. These gaps indicate that we need to investigate global projects further in order to answer our research questions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

Since we did not have a-priori hypotheses that we wished to test, we chose to pursue exploratory case studies to inform our research. We selected four public sector projects on which we conducted case studies, two of which were segments on a high-speed Rail project in Taiwan. The first segment was a joint venture between a Taiwanese firm and a Japanese firm. The second segment was a joint venture between a Taiwanese firm and a Korean firm. The other two projects were segments of a Metro Railroad project in India. The first of these projects was a joint venture between companies from Japan, Korea, Germany and India while the second project was a joint venture between companies from Sweden, Japan and India. The contractors on these projects employed international design firms from the UK. Further, on all these projects, multiple international consulting firms were contracted to act as the client’s representatives. These firms were from India, the USA and Japan. Some of these firms employed freelancers as consultants. In terms of data collection we employed both on-site interviews with project participants, as well as observations conducted during project team meetings. From these interviews and observations, we then reconstructed the incidents that occurred on these projects.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS:

Having spent two weeks in Taiwan and three months in India collecting data and observing the projects, we observed four primary sources of problems on these projects (Mahalingam, Levitt and Scott, 2005). We now briefly discuss each of these sources.

RULES VS. RESULTS ORIENTATION

One of the most prominent issues that we observed on these projects was a conflict between certain groups that would insist on following the exact wording of the contract; and other groups that were more intent on exercising engineering judgment and trying to

progress the works as quickly and as efficiently as possible. In particular, we observed this difference in the projects in India wherein the Indian client tended to be highly ‘Rules’ oriented, while the international contractors and consultants tended to be more ‘Results’ focussed. This difference contributed to a large number of problems.

An instance of this was when the client-side inspectors would insist that the contractor should break up the formwork to re-align the reinforcing steel, if parts of the existing alignment were even a few centimetres off from the specifications in the design documents. This rework represented a cost and wastage of time to the contractor, who would contend that a deviation of a few centimetres was well within the acceptable tolerance for such an activity, and that they were being denied a chance to progress the work. Although the international consultants hired by the client tended in fact to be sympathetic to the views of the contractor, such impasses were continual occurrences.

BUREAUCRATIC VS CRAFT ADMINISTRATION

In his seminal work on administration, Stinchcombe describes a bureaucratic administration as one where ‘products and the work process are planned in advance by persons not on the work crew’ (Stinchcombe, 1959). Decisions are communicated through a centralized apparatus. Construction projects on the other hand are examples of craft administration, wherein the organizations or crews on the work site make most local decisions autonomously. In the projects in India, the international contractors expected that they would be in control of their designs and their decisions. For instance, on the subject of approving vendors, the contractors expected to be able to choose a vendor of their choice as long as the vendor met the requirements laid down in the contract. The Indian client on the other hand preferred a more bureaucratic style of project administration, wherein they wanted to control all decisions that were made at every level of the project. These opposing views often came into conflict on the project and as one of the contractor’s representative observed:

“The Client’s involvement in this project is very hands on – they are involved in every minor detail of this project – Since I have given you the guarantee of the product the workmanship and the design – so everything is at my risk – and so if its at my risk then maybe the decision <to do something or not> should be mine”

The rule-oriented and bureaucratic nature of the client could partially be explained as a consequence of the “Vigilance” anti-corruption unit created by the Indian government in an attempt to root out corruption. This unit was charged with investigating any potential evidence of corruption on projects. Heavy punitive measures were levied; and there were significant costs, such as delayed promotions, even for those not yet found guilty, but who were merely being investigated. As a result, Indian engineers were discouraged from exercising any form of judgment, as they feared incurring the wrath of Vigilance. This led to an inclination to abide strictly by the written rule, rather than employing even a modicum of commonsense judgment, often causing delays and friction on the project—an unanticipated side effect of the government’s anti-corruption drive.

THE MASTER-SLAVE RELATIONSHIP

A third dynamic that we observed that led to conflicts on some of these projects was the following. On other Indian projects, the client was used to dealing in a highly dictatorial manner with the local contractors. The threat of blacklisting them from future jobs quelled the ability of these contractors to protest. The international contractors however

were not affected by the 'shadow of the future' and were therefore more aggressive. There were numerous situations on the project, where, from the contractor's viewpoint, the client would insist on receiving a product in excess of what was specified in the contract. The contractors would resist and protest against some of these mandates. From the clients point of view, the contractors were not performing to their expectation levels. This difference in ideologies thereby lead to numerous impasses on the project.

SAFETY AND QUALITY ISSUES

Foreign contractors and the expatriate freelancers were accustomed to observing and implementing high standards of safety and quality on their projects. However, the safety and quality standards prevalent in India and Taiwan were very poor. The clients consultants as well the international contractors were in agreement that safety and quality standards on the project needed to be high. This led to problems as they were faced with the difficulty of having to change the mindset of local subcontractors and laborers on the project. Laborers on the project would frequently flout safety regulations and perform work without appropriate safety equipment. This was partly due to the fact that in developing countries, the cost of replacing an injured worker is viewed as very small, the available labor pool is large and safety consciousness among the construction workers is generally low. On encountering a safety violation, the contractors would stop the project in order to ensure that safety rules were being followed. They would attempt to educate the workers either coercively through imposing fines, or normatively through toolbox talks. All four projects were plagued by intermittent work stoppages and altercations on issues regarding safety and quality, between the international contractors and the local subcontractors and laborers.

UNDERSTANDING CONFLICTS ON GLOBAL PROJECTS:

As the discussion above shows, we observed a large amount of conflict on the global projects that we studied. At first glance however, it may appear as if the nature of these conflicts are not fundamentally different from those that appear on monocultural projects performed by firms belonging to the same nationality, as client-contractor disputes indeed occur on many projects. Although the types of disputes were not dissimilar to ones that occur on normal unit price or lump sum contracts, participants felt that the owner-contractor cultural gap was more pronounced on the two sets of international projects studied, due to the impact of the Vigilance program in India, and the lack of experience of the newly created owner agency in Taiwan. Furthermore, the international participants who were part of the consultant organization hired by the client – and therefore parts of the client's organization, themselves pointed to the client-contractor dynamics being more acrimonious than they had seen in previous projects.

However, our surprising finding was that the problems we observed were not completely new or unique to global projects. In fact, the institutional or cultural differences that we had expected to observe between the various nationalities on the project were virtually absent. Why was this so? The answer partly lies in the fact that the most of the international employees (engineers from Germany, Sweden, Japan, Korea) on the project had been groomed by their parent organizations to work on international projects. As a result, they all had long, prior experience at working internationally in developing countries. This experience helped them speed up their process of acculturation and they were able to flexibly adjust and negotiate any differences in national culture. Also, the technology used on this project was relatively standardized, the engineering

principles used spanned cultural boundaries, and most participants were familiar with the project specifications, as similar specifications had been used on prior projects.

The other surprising finding that emerged from our study related to the ways in which the conflicts that we described in the previous section were overcome. Traditionally, projects involve two communities – the client and their representatives on the one hand, and all the contracted firms on the other (designers, contractors, subcontractors etc). However, in India and Taiwan, we observed the existence of a third community that was widely represented on these projects. This community was entirely composed of freelance expatriates, mostly hailing from the UK, who had spent several years working on infrastructure projects in Asia as consulting engineers and had considerable experience working in developing countries. These freelancers were not permanent employees of any of the firms on the project. Rather, they were mostly on ‘project contracts’, and at the end of each of these projects, they would use their personal contact networks to find future employment. The lure of money and the desire to face new challenges was the prime motivation behind their adoption of such an itinerant lifestyle. In the next section, we further analyse the role that some members of this community played on these projects.

THE ROLE OF FREELANCE EXPATRIATES ON GLOBAL PROJECTS:

The freelance expatriates were recruited by both the General Contractors on the project as well as the consulting organization hired by the clients. Hired primarily for their technical abilities, these expatriates filled positions on the projects that the international firms were unable to staff. Over the course of their professional careers, most of these expatriates had worked both on the side of the client as well as on the side of the contractor. Therefore, while they were specialists with regards to their trade (Structural design, tunneling etc), they were not specialists with regard to their administrative positions on global projects.

The freelancers who were part of the contractors organization did not report very many difficulties in merging together and working with the international contractors. This was partly due to the fact that many of the freelancers as well as many of the contractors representatives had spent numerous years on various international projects and had therefore developed similar mindsets and competencies towards dealing with and working with different cultural groups. Both these groups were similar in their outlook towards the project and the freelancers were therefore able to blend in to the contractors organization with minimal disruption, as they were used to dealing with different nationalities.

The freelancers who were part of the client’s organization however were presented with a more challenging task. In India, the client was heavily involved with the project and had very little experience working with people from different cultural and institutional backgrounds. The freelancers therefore had to expend a lot of time and effort in order to blend in and win the trust of the client. In Taiwan, this problem was alleviated due to the fact that the client was a new organization with little prior experience, and so chose not to take a hands-on approach to the project and let the project consultants (who were composed mostly of the freelance expatriates) manage the project. The amount of interaction and conflict between the client and the freelancers was therefore much reduced in this case.

In India, however, at the start of the project, the relationship between the client and the freelancers hired as the client’s representatives was rather stormy. Some of the freelancers were not flexible enough to accommodate the cultural practices and mindset of the client. This led to them being voluntarily or involuntarily removed from the project.

Over a period of time however, under the leadership of an experienced and diplomatic project director, a corps of expatriates emerged who were able to win the trust of the client and work within the client's organization. These freelancers were able to develop good working relationships with their local colleagues and therefore were able to reduce the friction within the clients organization.

This group of freelancers who were hired to work for the client were therefore able to assimilate into the client's organization and work together with the client. In doing so, this created a group of people within the client's organization whose institutional frameworks, based on their vast international experience, were very similar to the institutional frameworks of most of the project participants on the contractor's side. This created a bridge between the contractors and the client's organization that facilitated dialogues and the solution of some of the conflicts outlined previously. Furthermore, the freelancers that were part of the client's organization were also able to use the powers of authority vested in the client (ability to control financial cash flows, technical approvals etc.), thus making them more effective at resolving disputes than the other freelancers who were part of the contractors team. Therefore, we would like to argue that the freelance expatriates on the client's side of the organization were the catalysts who were able to help solve conflicts on these projects, and were able to progress the works. In the next section, we discuss some of the strategies that this group of freelancers adopted to resolve project conflicts.

MEDIATION STRATEGIES TO RESOLVE CONFLICTS:

As we have discussed, differences in ideologies and viewpoints led to repeated impasses between representatives of the client and contractor organizations. Neither side was willing to relent and modify their views independantly. The freelance expatriates on the clients side were able to play a key role in mitigating these conflicts. We observed four strategies that this group used in order to mitigate conflicts on these global projects – the four strategies are briefly discussed next.

CIRCUMVENTION

One of the primary strategies that these freelancers employed was to change the political or the structural texture of the project in order to circumvent bottlenecks or impasses. As an example, on one of the Indian projects, a local client representative would not sign off on a progress payment, if the criteria for the payment were substantially but not completely met. In certain cases, it would be imperative for the contractors to receive the progress payment in order to facilitate their cash flows and the financing of future work on the project. However, due to the pressures of the Vigilance system, the client's representative would refuse to sanction payment even if the gap between the performed work and progress payment criteria was infinitesimally small. In order to solve this issue, the freelancers restructured the organization so that the responsibility to *recommend* payments was retained by a local participant, but the responsibility to *authorize* payment was in the hands of a freelancer, who was not concerned with, and was outside the purview of the local Vigilance system. This freelancer was then able to approve payments that would help progress the works without being bound by strict rules. The decision-making structure of the project organization was thus changed to avoid bottlenecks.

Many other examples of circumvention were observed on the projects. In certain cases the expatriates prevailed upon the local client to make modifications to the contract document itself to resolve conflicts.

ESCALATION

Related to the strategy of circumvention, another strategy that the freelancers employed was to escalate issues to higher levels within the client's organization. In several cases, when confronted with an impasse where the representatives from two parties would refuse to compromise, the freelancers would facilitate and reconvene a separate meeting where they would escalate the issue, bringing together senior decision makers on both the clients and the contractor's side who were more flexible and could overrule their subordinates to reach a decision. In the Indian project, the Managing Director (MD) was a highly revered and extremely progress-oriented individual, in contrast to some of his subordinates. In some cases, the Indian engineers would delay making decisions or force the contractor to do things outside the purview of the contract. Since many of the local client representatives would agree with this philosophy, the matter would result in an impasse, frequently without the MD's knowledge. The freelancers at a senior level were able to raise these issues directly to the MD, who would then issue a direct order to his subordinates to change their decisions and progress the works. The combination of a progress oriented MD along with the escalation strategy followed by the contractors resulted in many of the impasses being resolved on the project. This strategy had to be judiciously applied since the MD did not have the time to deal with a large number of issues simultaneously.

AUTHORITY

In many cases, the freelancers on the client's side would use their authority (as given by their position in the organization) either to make their own subordinates relent or to make the contractors compromise on issues that led to conflicts. However, although such coercive means were often employed, they were couched within a layer of diplomacy. Both the contractors and the client's representatives would be allowed to air their views and would not be berated in public. Raised voices were seldom used and care was taken to make sure that no one 'lost face'. Rather than imposing a decision, the freelancers would provide normative justification and explanations for their decisions, thereby convincing the participants in the decision making process. As a result, the freelancers were able to do what other project participants could not – impose their views on a situation, while also gathering implicit acceptance from all participants.

POSTPONEMENT

Finally, when faced with an impasse that would take a long time to resolve, the freelancers created 'quick-fix' solutions to postpone the conflict so that work could progress. For instance, they would help obtain a signed statement from the client giving instructions to the contractor. Although the contractor would still disagree with the client's directive, they would go ahead with the project, in the knowledge that they could use the client's signed statement to negotiate a change order at a later stage on the project. The conflict in this case would be postponed while the work would progress. Similarly in meetings when an impasse would be reached and senior decision makers were not present, the freelancers would quickly move on to other issues. In absence of freelancers on the other hand, the client and the contractor's representatives would continue to discuss these issues for large amounts of time, without obtaining a solution.

Many of these strategies were also adopted for conflicts that arose due to safety and quality issues. The freelancers primarily used their authority (by stopping the work)

coupled with normative education (in the form of tool box talks on site) in order to resolve these conflicts. There were also some meetings where no freelancer was able to attend. In these meetings, either no resolution would be reached, or, the client's representative would force his solution on to the contractor. The contractor would grudgingly have to accept this and would plan to launch a legal claim at the end of the project. In contrast, freelancers were able to resolve many issues in a manner that reduced the number of claims at the end of the project. Finally, our analyses clearly indicated that only the freelancers on the client's side of the project were able to be effective mediators on these global projects. There was very little evidence of any collusion between freelancer groups on the client's and the contractor's side to solve issues. Furthermore, certain representatives from the local clients who were less bureaucratic than some of their counterparts, also acted as mediators in certain cases, thus showing that mediation was not only a strategy used by freelancers. However, both as a result of having shared values with the contractor's representatives, and being less reliant on local institutions like the Vigilance committee and local cultural norms, the freelance expatriates were far more likely to function as mediators to help solve conflicts on global projects.

CONCLUSION: THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS:

Our research shows that on some large-scale global infrastructure projects, many of the conflicts that arise are not unique to such projects, but are merely magnified versions of conflicts that may occur on mono-cultural projects. Freelance expatriates who are not bound by the 'shadow of the future', or by local institutions can help resolve these conflicts and minimize their impact on project performance. Our data was collected from four projects and therefore we recognize that we will be unable to draw large-scale generalizations from our study. However, many infrastructure projects in developing countries involve similar technologies, similar mixes of nationalities and actors (international contractors, freelance expatriates, multilateral funding agencies such as the World Bank or the ADB etc) and comparable contracting forms and structures. Therefore, we believe that our findings can indeed be considered to be representative of (albeit to a limited extent), some of the behaviours that may occur across other infrastructure projects in developing countries in Asia.

As discussed earlier, from a theoretical viewpoint, the literature on institutional conflict in project situations is virtually non-existent. Our findings allow us to develop an initial model and show that when two conflicting institutional thought processes (e.g. rule orientation vs results orientation) are brought to bear on a project, an impasse results. Mediators in the form of freelance expatriates in this case, are then required to solve these impasses. Interestingly, the institutional conflict itself is not resolved. The mediators on these projects manage to find temporary solutions to these problems, while still enabling the project participants to retain their original views. This phenomenon might well be unique to project based industries, since projects are relatively short-term activities that bring together a different composition of participants every time. The time, ability and incentive for participants to alter their institutional frameworks to fit any one project is therefore lacking. Therefore, mediators who can solve disputes without upsetting the institutional balance of participants are likely to succeed in such an environment. In the absence of these mediators the process of conflict resolution is more contentious with a high likelihood of legal claims occurring at the end of the project.

From a practical standpoint, the freelance expatriates play a key role in mitigating conflict on global projects. As developing countries acquire technical competency, they are reducing their reliance on the freelancers. The risk that projects in these countries run, is that they may be left without mediators who can solve disputes. Therefore, unless local individuals with the mindset of the mediators can be staffed on these projects, we recommend that the freelancers still be considered for boundary spanning project positions such as procurement and contract administration, if only for their managerial capabilities. As a corollary, firms that expand abroad frequently conduct training programs for their employees to “acclimatize” them into a new cultural environment. When entering a country where the prospect of future work is uncertain, we suggest that firms have an alternative to conducting training programs within their organization. They may be able to hire experienced freelancers, for their technical skills (as done currently) as well as their mediating abilities in foreign environments. The costs vs. benefits of training vs. hiring a freelancer might prove attractive in many cases.

In terms of future avenues of research, more quantitative research in the form of survey questionnaires can be conducted on different classes of projects in different countries to identify the conditions under which the above propositions are true. Another avenue would be to conduct “deep-dive” ethnographic research on the community of freelancers to further analyze their roles, actions and how they may be better utilized on global projects.

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