



Operational Managers' Competencies Affecting Perceived Performance of Development Sector Projects in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Pakistan is currently enduring many development projects in order to improve the lifestyle of people. However, many challenges exist in the way of success of these projects including poor technologies, lack of proper policy framework, poor governance and leadership, lack of efficiency in resource utilization, lack of proper strategy formulation and poor project management. In these projects the role of operations manager lies around the implementation of accurate processes and practices throughout the organization therefore, it become essential to understand the competencies of operations managers towards the success of development sector projects. This study aims to measure the effect of individual-related five factors (technical competency, strategic orientation, age, experience, and qualification) of Operation managers on the perceived performance of development sector projects. The sample size (N = 81) comprises the Operational managers of Non-Governmental Organization (NGOs) working in literacy sector projects in Pakistan. It was inferred from the results that operations managers related five factors have a strong positive influence on development sector projects' success. The outcomes of this study are helpful for the future researchers and the managers of NGOs to understand the association between personality related factors of Operations managers on their evaluation of performance of development sector projects in Pakistan.



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1. Introduction

Management of development sector projects is gaining exceptional importance these days (Golini, Kalchschmidt, & Landoni, 2015); (Ika & Hodgson, 2014), (Irfan et al., 2021). The successful management of these projects is important to address the ever-increasing challenges of corporate world however, it has been observed that many projects in the development sector, overran the deadlines due to the lack of appropriate Operational communication and inapt perception of Operational gains concerning projects (Sala-i-Martin, 2017). Unfortunately, despite the increasing number of development sector projects in Pakistan, no serious effort has been

made to study the role of perceived Operational performance on development sector project success (Khalique, Bontis, Abdul Nassir bin Shaari, & Hassan Md. Isa, 2015); (Irfan et al., 2021).

One of the reasons of US businesses losing markets to foreign competitors, in late 20th century, was attributed to managers' short sightedness by comprising long-term performance of organizations on short-term gains (Jacobson, 1994). According to a survey conducted by FINRA Investor Education Foundation, in US, most of the people "do not have 'rainy day' funds set aside for unanticipated Operational emergencies and similarly do not plan for predictable life events" (*Financial Capability in the United States* 2009). Thus, the inability of managers to foresee future and inapt perception of the ground economic realities cannot only influence organizations but markets as well in long run. Studies have found that perceptive measure usually aid subjective measure in defining a problem (Brander, Du, & Hellmann, 2015). Subjective perceptions can have objective effects on an individual's behavior and outcomes.' This behavior can also influence their perception regarding Operational performance of their organizations relative to competitors.

A key building block of Operational capability is the ability to make ends meet, which can be measured by examining the extent to which people balance monthly expenses to avoid over-spending and how they deal with everyday Operational matters (Sala-i-Martin, 2017). Given the unique qualities of for-profit and non-profit organizations, execution metrics and measurement frameworks for these organizations are one of a kind too. Even though project execution estimation can be unique for any sort of organization, extra difficulties exist when measuring the execution of nonprofit organizations and have been tended to in the writing (Beamon & Balcik, 2008). Thus, these studies highlighted an opportunity to further explore this topic considering the limitations in the literature.

Perceived performance is not a new word in management. Haslida Abu Hasan (2013) studied the auditee perceptions of external evaluations of the use of resources by local authorities. Lapsley (2008) stressed that 'performance measurement will continue to be heavily emphasized by public organizations, audit bodies and governments. (Davis, 2014) in his study discussed the significance of the different stakeholder groups' perception of project success and reported a lack of agreement in perceptions of project success factors between the groups. Omar and Fayek (2016) stressed that though the effect of manager's competencies on the performance evaluation of organization is evident in literature, but the relationship receive scarce attention in project-based organizations. The review of literature suggested that Operational managers' perceptive measures in light of their competencies are virtually ignored in accessing the performance of the projects being executed by the organization in which they work.

In addition, the studies Little (2016); Michaelis and Markham (2017) reveals that little attention has been paid to development projects which highlights an opportunity to further explore this topic in light of the limitations in the literature. *Subjective* (Operational-statements-based) measures of organizational performance are widely recognized in depicting the actual performance of organizations but how *objective* (perceptive) measure of performance shape the perceived performance of organizations is yet to be seen (Junni, Sarala, Taras, & Tarba, 2013; Little, 2016).

Another rationale for conducting this study was that most of the time performance is measured using statistical performance indicators however different methods have been deployed to measure the correct level of these indicators e.g., se proposed fuzzy mathematics, and se grey system theory or other methods to determine these indicators. However, when the precise method of measuring the performance indicators is missing, the perceptual measures are used as they include the option of experts having firsthand information of the problem under study. However, in Pakistan where organizations still prefer winning on short-term gains the question is of serious importance because of the entire absence of the studies on the

measurement of Operational managers' perception of their project's performance relative to others' projects in the market. Further, a study conducted by USAID identified the key issues the development sector and NGOs are facing in Pakistan, especially in rural areas where feudalism is strong, and the rule of federal governance is relatively weaker (Sala-i-Martin, 2017). Thus, these studies highlighted an opportunity to deeply explore this topic in light of the limitations in the literature. This study will explore how Operations managers' competencies influence their perceptions of the success of development sector projects. The outcomes of the study would prompt proposals went for enhancing the understanding of organizational performance of development sector NGOs' projects in Pakistani development sector environment.

2. Literature Review

Development sector is the key industry benefiting for project management knowledge (Beamon & Balcik, 2008; Ika, Diallo, & Thuillier, 2010). The aid industry sector is a project-oriented business and therefore, project proliferation in aid recipient countries is now considered by many actors to be a challenge (Little, 2016). Development sector of Pakistan is one of the key industries of the country that is primarily operating on foreign aid, primarily from the organizations of United Nations, USA, UK and few other developed countries. Few local organizations supported by individual donations, like Edhi Foundation, have also played significant role in influencing the facets of the development sector of the country and thus successfully achieve both national and international recognition.

United Nations Development Program (UNDP) is working on the development sector of Pakistan through sustainable initiatives for 50 years. According to a UN report, Pakistan faces dozens of challenges that are diluting the gains of development initiatives, e.g., rising poverty, growing population, low levels of foreign investment, a reliance on agriculture, an ongoing energy crisis, natural disasters, poor healthcare and primary education systems, access to water and sanitation issues, malnutrition in certain areas, extrajudicial killings, women' and children' rights, slow processes of justice, weak control of government in certain areas and security challenges (*Financial Capability in the United States* 2009). Despite these critical issues, the focus of Pakistan's National Development Policy is primarily on the improvement of socio-economic conditions of the citizens through infrastructure improvements that seek criticism even from within the country for its inability to change the lives of population at large directly (Zafar, 2019).

Perceived performance defines the perceived success (or failure) of the organization as per the perceiver. Performance criteria typically reflect the values of the project stakeholders in how they will be viewing their projects or products (Javed, 2015). These perceptive measures are crucial is gauging the performance of projects and the gaps between the information and perception of performance can increase the challenges and issues for project managers in developing countries (Sarkar & Singh, 2010). Davis (2014) in his study discussed the significance of the different stakeholder groups' perception of project success and reported a lack of agreement in perceptions of project success factors between the groups. Evidence of perceived project failures in industry suggests a need to examine the subject further to inform practice Ika et al. (2010) show that gauging perception of people associated with projects execution is important as they guide us in planning.

Contrary to perceived organization performance, perceived project performance received very insignificant attention in literature. Quite a few studies have been done in this subject, especially in aid/humanitarian/development sector project management context. Beamon and Balcik (2008) measured the performance of UN humanitarian relief projects. Ika et al. (2010) measured the perception of the project coordinators in of their efforts in project success in aid

industry. Toor and Ogunlana (2010) studied Stakeholder perception of key performance indicators (KPIs) for large-scale public sector development projects.

Performance measurement criteria vary from project to project. However, the perceptive measures of performance are turned out to be strong predictor of objective measures of performance. For example, studies such as Davis (2014); Ika et al. (2010) have found that managers' perception of success of projects or organizations are important as they are directly linked to objective measures of success and thus to actual performance.

As the industrial society turns into a services society, where learning and data are the pillars of business development, the significance of intangible assets will be progressively to the bleeding edge. Teece (2000) recommends that an organization's better execution relies on upon its capacity than protect and utilize the intangible resources it makes (e.g., learning, perception, etc). As indicated by Kochhar (2001), intangible assets are more probable than substantial assets to deliver an upper hand for an organization. According to Carmeli and Tishler (2004), perceived organizational reputation, managerial capabilities and internal auditing are few intangible assets of an organization that influence organizational performance.

Competency, or skill sets, is one of the key attributes defining the significance of an employee for an organization. Technical competency's influence on the performance of business units is not unknown in literature. For example, Sanghi (2016) studied how competency mapping can help align the managerial skills with the organizational requirements and thus influencing the organizational performance. Education level defined the knowledge acquired by a person throughout his/her educational career. It is one of the key attributes defining the significance of an employee for an organization during recruitment process. Okon Akpan (2014) studied the role different managers with different education level can play in affecting company performance. Studies argue that the affect is significant during the initial years of an employees' career (Alzeban & Gwilliam, 2014). Experience level is one of the key features defining the significance of an employee for an organization during the later stage of his relationship with the organization. Beamon and Balcik (2008) in his study on governmental and nongovernmental organization's performance have categorized experience as one of the top five influencing factors. Uppal and Mishra (2013) studied the effect of job experience on the academic performance of professional students in intuitions. Desai, Lockett, and Paton (2016) studied the role of experience on the performance of companies during succession phase when one manager or leader replaces the other. Like experience level, age is another factor defining the significance of an employee for an organization during the later stage of his relationship with the organization. Age is associated with experience and both influence on the performance of business units. Durand and Coeurderoy (2001) studied the effect of age and strategic orientation on organizational performance. Ng and Feldman (2008) studied the relationship of age to the term dimensions of performance. Kunze, Boehm, and Bruch (2013) studied the effect of age diversity on the success of organization. Strategic orientation defines the application of knowledge acquired by a person throughout his/her educational career in real life scenarios considering long term or short-term benefits. It is one of the important factors defining the significance of an employee for an organization during recruitment process. Education level or qualification's influence on the performance of business units is not well studied in literature, especially in project related organizations. Shelly Ping-Ju Wu (2015) discussed the role strategic alignment of a manager plays in affecting business performance.

These studies highlighted an opportunity to further explore this topic in light of the limitations in the literature. This study will explore how Operations mangers see the performance of development sector projects executed by their organizations relative to competitors' projects' perceived productivity.

3. Conceptual Framework

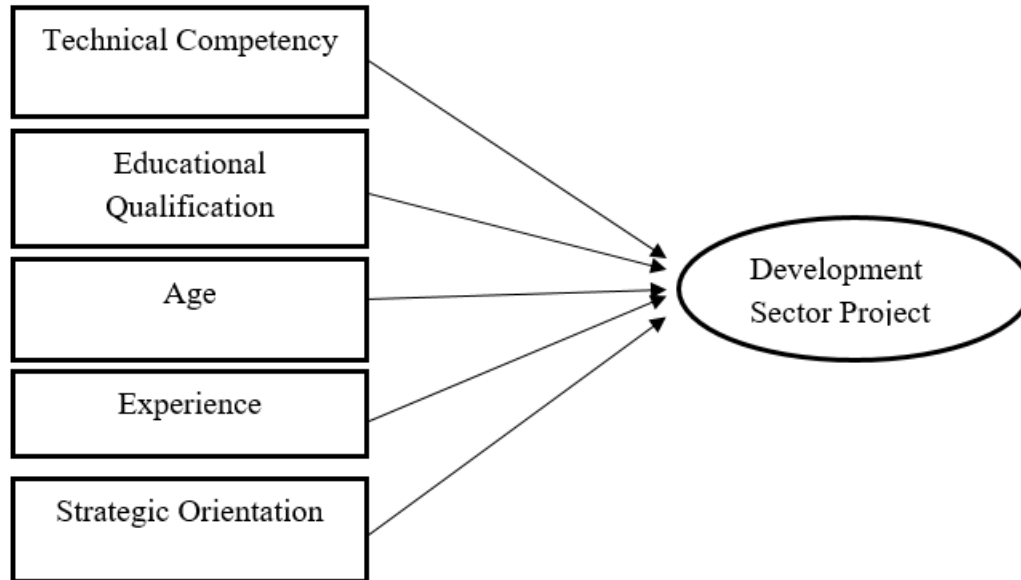


Figure 1: The Research Model

3.1 Hypotheses

H₁: OM's Technical Competency (TC) is positively associated with Development Sector Project success.

H₂: OM's Educational Qualification (EQ) is positively associated with Development Sector Project success.

H₃: OM's Age (AG) is positively associated with Development Sector Project success.

H₄: OM's Experience (EX) is positively associated with Development Sector Project success.

H₅: OM's Strategic Orientation (SO) is positively associated with Development Sector Project success.

4. Research Methodology

The design of this explanatory study is cross-sectional and is driven by survey using close-ended questions based on the research items derived from the previously established studies in the field. Data was collected for a sample 200 respondents using convenience sampling, where the questionnaires were sent to the Operations Managers of 200 NGOs by post. These NGOs were randomly selected from the UNESCO (2008) report and most of them were from Punjab. Out of these 200, only 86 responses were received back, out of which 81 were properly filled and utilized for data analysis.

Each of the variables was recorded on the 5-point likert scale. There are five independent variables and one dependent variable, as illustrated in the framework (see Fig 1), each of them is measured using the research items as defined in following table. Following tables illustrates the variables involved and way to gauge them, built upon previous studies.

Table 1
Instrument and Measures

Variables	Nature of Variable	No. of Items	Source	Likert scale
Perceived Performance of Projects (PPP)	Dependent Variable	7	Brown (2005)	5-point
Technical Competency (TC)	Independent Variable	10	Sarkodie-Poku (2014)	5-point
Educational Qualification (EQ)	Independent Variable	4	Self-developed	5-point
Age (AG)	Independent Variable	4	Self-developed	5-point
Experience (EX)	Independent Variable	4	Self-developed	5-point
Strategic Orientation (SO)	Independent Variable	5	Durand and Coeurderoy (2001)	5-point

IBM SPSS (version 25) is used for data analysis and hypotheses testing. At first, reliability of questionnaire is tested using Cronbach alpha to know whether the instrument is suitable for the study or not. Furthermore, based on definition of variables, their nature and relationships, statistical tests involving Regression and Correlation Analyses and descriptive statistics are used to analyze the variables in the model.

5. Results and Discussion

First portion of this chapter is included the demographical factors analysis e.g., gender, age group and designation. In the second part, reliability test is conducted and discussed; furthermore, inter item correlation matrix has been shown. At the end, the results of correlation and regression analysis are conducted and discussed.

Demographical information related to respondents is presented in table 2

Table 2
Demographic factors (N=81)

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	62	77.0
Female	19	23.0
Total	81	100
Age	Frequency	Percent
20-29	43	53.1
30-39	29	35.8
40+	9	11.1
Total	81	100.0
Position	Frequency	Percent
Assistant Operations Manager	32	39.5
Manager (Operations)	49	60.5
Total	81	100.0

The alpha value of 0.85 is showing the good internal consistency as in social sciences the value ranging from .7 to .9 is considered adequate. Normality test of the data is presented in table 5. Reliability of the research instrument is given in table 4.

Table 4
Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.852	.861	30

Table 5
Normality Test

	N	Skewness		Kurtosis	
		Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Technical Competency	81	0.323	0.045	-0.621	0.101
Educational Qualification	81	1.89	0.347	5.831	0.713
Age	81	0.231	0.12	0.112	0.242
Experience	81	1.006	0.123	1.5003	0.241
Strategic Orientation	81	0.076	0.345	-0.847	0.722

Following table shows the results of correlation between Operations manager’s competencies and perceived performance of development sector projects.

Table 6
Correlation

		TC	AG	EQ	EX	SO	Proj_Suc
TC	Pearson Correlation	1	.614**	.689**	.677**	.397**	.510**
	N	81	81	81	81	81	81
AG	Pearson Correlation	.614**	1	.594**	.613**	.590**	.556**
	N	81	81	81	81	81	81
EQ	Pearson Correlation	.689**	.594**	1	.695**	.376**	.429**
	N	81	81	81	81	81	81
EX	Pearson Correlation	.677**	.613**	.695**	1	.575**	.600**
	N	81	81	81	81	81	81
SO	Pearson Correlation	.397**	.590**	.376**	.575**	1	.661**
	N	81	81	81	81	81	81
Proj_Suc	Pearson Correlation	.510**	.556**	.429**	.600**	.661**	1
	N	81	81	81	81	81	81

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

The values in above table represent that Operational manager related five factors are positively correlated with perceived performance of development projects. Project success is most strongly related to strategic orientation, followed by experience, age and technical competency and least strongly related to qualification, as per the results. This association is highly significant at significant level of 0.01. Thus, first five hypotheses are accepted.

To measure the impact of Operations manager’s competencies on perceived performance of development sector projects regression analysis are made. Simple linear regression is used to check the influence of Operations manager’s competencies as an independent variable on perceived performance of development sector projects. Irfan et al. (2021) assumed that in social sciences studies, the linear regression equation provides an adequate estimate to the factual relationship between x and y. The beta coefficient is called slope and it is interpreted as the changing in Y for a unit changing in X. To check the hypothesis following model is developed:

$$PS_i = \alpha + \beta_1 TC_i + \beta_2 SO_i + \beta_3 EX_i + \beta_4 EQ_i + \beta_5 AG_i + e \quad (1)$$

Were, PS is the Project success, TC is the technical competency, SO is the strategic orientation EX is experience, EQ is qualification, AG is age and i is number of projects.

Table 7
Model Summary^b

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.772 ^a	.597	.592	1.74750	1.921

a. Predictors: (Constant), TC, AG, EQ, EX, SO

b. Dependent Variable: Proj_Suc

In linear regression analysis, R² value represents the communal variance because of dependent variable in explanatory variable Nimon (2014). The value of R² (.597) in model indicating 59.7% variation in perceived performance of development sector projects is explained by these factors.

Table 8
ANOVA^b

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	2033.276	5	406.655	133.166	.000 ^a
	Residual	1374.189	450	3.054		
	Total	3407.465	455			

a. Predictors: (Constant), TC, AG, EQ, EX, SO

b. Dependent Variable: Proj_Suc

In above table, the value of F is representing the whole significance of model. F value 133 shows high significance of whole model at significance level of < 0.01.

Table 9
Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.142	.378		3.019	.001
	TC	.109	.050	.106	2.175	.000
	AG	.142	.052	.127	2.764	.000
	EQ	.071	.050	.068	1.404	.000
	EX	.240	.046	.276	5.254	.000
	SO	.574	.054	.446	10.721	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Proj_Suc

In above table, value of t representing a strongest and positive relationship with beta value and p value is less than 0.01. It shows that Operations manager related factors have positive influence on perceived success of development sector projects, except in the case of education where effect is weakest.

The current study attempts to observe the practices of Pakistani development sector with respect to the impact of individual related factors over the perceived performance of development sector projects. It tries to examine the association of Operations manager's five attributes with development sector project success. According to the results of correlation, it is found that Operations managers' strategic orientation and experience have strong and positive relationship with perceived performance of development sector project. Fr the outcomes of

simple linear regression, it has been found that the success of development sector projects is significantly connected with them. In the nutshell, as per correlation and regression analysis the study has revealed that Operations managers' all five factors are positively related to perceived performance of Pakistani development sector projects with varying degree of significance and strength of association. These findings are related with Dogbegah (2011); Owusu and Badu (2009) who emphasized that managerial competencies, skills, and experience are associated with handling, functioning and operating projects while play a conclusive role as regards to the project's success or failure.

The aim of current study is to analyze the attributes of Operations managers with the perceived performance of Pakistani development sector projects. Operations managers' competencies and experience variables have shown a strongest positive influence on perceived performance of Pakistani development sector projects. The outcomes of this study will help the researchers to understand the association between Operations managers' competencies and perceived performance of Pakistani development sector projects.

Here it is worth mentioning that the findings of the study are well aligned with the previous studies especially the work done by (Owusu & Badu, 2009). For instance, the former study reveals that managers' skills influence their perception of performance of their employees and the later study reveals that the skills and capabilities of decision makers in an organization influences the performance of organization and workforce. The current study reveals that Operations managers of development sector organizations are fully competent to gauge the performance of the performance of the projects of the organization in which they are working. The current study stresses that since poor management is one of the three key constraints of the project management hence including the competencies and perceptions of Operational managers in evaluating project success and avoiding project delays is a wise step.

6. Conclusion

Several studies have been conducted on the development sector projects in Pakistan however, little work has been done in discovering the basic associations of Operations managers' competencies with performance of development sector projects. Pakistan is currently undergoing many development sector projects in order to improve the lifestyle of people. However, many challenges exist in the way of success of these projects such as poor technologies, lack of proper policy framework, poor governance, lack of proper leadership, lack of efficiency in resource utilization, lack of proper strategy formulation and poor project management. In these projects the role of operations manager lies around the implementation of accurate processes and practices throughout the organization therefore, it become essential to understand the competencies of operations managers towards the success of development sector projects. This study reveals that the operations manager's competencies exhibit a positive and significant impact over the success of development sector projects in Pakistan.

The study is of primary importance for the local and multinational NGOs working in Pakistan and the South Asian countries, in general; where developments sector is facing huge challenges because of the prevalence of old means of productions, feudalism in rural areas and lack of good governance in these areas. The current study emphasizes in consideration of the operational managers' experience and strategic orientation while hiring them for the projects. The study also shows that age should be paid least attention while education needs normal attention while consideration for the project (Owusu & Badu, 2009).

This study recommends that NGOs' management should consider some personality characteristics while hiring of operations managers including their skills, competencies,

experience, knowledge and behavior which have a greater influence on the success of the projects. Used efficiently, the competencies may encourage discussion and discover crucial capabilities and growth needs of managers and their proper contributions towards achieving perceived performance of projects. The findings also highlight the importance of trainings to enhance the Operations managers' competencies who have lacked the pertinent expertise in execution of the projects. The originality of current study is its effort to explore the association between Operations managers' competencies and perceived project performance in development sector projects of Pakistan. Therefore, it can provide a significant base in achieving the success of the development sector projects in the Pakistan. The study can also be extended further to imitate the environments of other sectors where the study has most relevancy.

Present study articulates a good substance for further research. This study uses the communal methods in design which are mostly used before in research on social projects. However, it may increase or decrease the relationship between results of the experiential variables. In future research, impact of finance manager's personality related factors can also be analyzed in further sectors of economy other than development sector by using different analysis methods such as structural equation modelling and using a different sample.

Authors Contribution

Saniya Malik Khawaja Khail: Conception or design of the work, Data collection

Safia Bano: incorporation of intellectual content

Saira Baloch: Data analysis and Interpretation, Drafting the article

Safiullah: Critical revision of the article

Conflict of Interests/ Disclosures

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest w.r.t the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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