

Project management turnover: causes and effects on project performance

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Abstract

Changes in management personnel – variously termed displacement, succession or just turnover – have been found by many to have significant negative effects on organisational performance. This paper provides the results of a web-based survey designed to examine this in the project management context. The main findings are that turnover occurs predominantly during the execution phase of the project life cycle, with the main causes being related to career and personal development and dissatisfaction with the organisational culture and project management role. The results also confirm that turnover disrupts and negatively affects the performance of the project team, the project, and potentially negates the competitive advantage of organisations concerned. © 2004 Elsevier Ltd and IPMA. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The importance of the project manager and continuity of leadership is a recurring theme, both in practice and research (e.g., Sotiriou and Wittmer [1]). For many successful project teams, their invariable disbandment on project completion is a regrettable, if necessary, destabilising factor (Heizer and Render [2]). Similarly, during the project life cycle, the team composition often changes to match the tasks to be implemented – further decreasing stability as well as adding an additional layer of management complexity (Kloppenborg and Petrick [3]).

It is not surprising, therefore, that lack of continuity of individual managers is thought to be a primary factor behind inadequate project execution (e.g., Abdel-Hamid [4]; Rondinelli [5]), completions, system upgrades, morale, teamwork, workloads, group stress levels and “a host of other intangibles” (Longenecker and Scazzero [6]).

Although the occurrence of staff turnover in general has been an area of substantial research,¹ only a relatively small number have addressed the topic of management changes – variously termed displacement, succession or just turnover – with most concentrating on consequences rather than causes. The majority of these have pointed to a significant negative impact on performance and profitability (Birdir [7]).

However, as noted by Carroll [9] ‘researchers have often ignored the organizational context of succession, the timing of succession relative to the organizational life cycle, and the type of transfer undertaken in control surfaces’. Adams and Barndt [10], for example, have also suggested that the idea of specifically choosing a project manager to see the project completely through its life cycle may need to be discarded in favour of selecting at each phase point, a new project manager best suited to the anticipated project environment.

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¹ 1500 studies of turnover have been conducted in the last century (Bluedorn [8])

This paper describes a web-based survey designed to investigate this further. In particular, the goals were to:

- find the reasons for project management turnover;
- examine the extent to which project management turnover is associated with a particular phase of the project life cycle; and
- investigate the effects of project management turnover on project performance.

2. Management turnover

2.1. Generally

Numerous studies, research and theoretical development have been conducted on the turnover of staff *generally*. The causes of turnover have been associated with demographics, such as age, marital status and tenure (Arnold and Feldman [11]) and include:

- poor commitment and performance (Harrison et al. [12])
- inadequate pay, benefits, working conditions, supervision, fit with co-workers or company culture, definition and responsibilities (Woods and Macaulay [13])
- alternative job possibilities (Mobley et al. [14])

Many believe employee turnover to have significant negative effects on the organisations involved (e.g., Herzberg et al. [15]). Others (e.g., Dalton et al. [16]) argue that some kinds and levels of turnover are actually beneficial or functional for organisations, as they help prevent stagnation, maintain organisational development and provide career opportunities (Ball [17]).

The turnover of *management* staff on the other hand, has been attributed generally to:

- dissatisfaction with the immediate supervisor (Tulacz [18]);
- organisational size (Harrison et al. [12]);
- unpleasant experiences in management (Campion and Mitchell [19]); and
- a lack of resources/staff (Longenecker and Scazzero [6]).

with the main causes of managerial departures in the *construction industry* being due to (Tulacz [18]):

- issues with the immediate supervisor;
- promotion;
- increased compensation;
- stock ownership;
- job security;
- incompetent leadership;

- job autonomy;
- broken promises;
- ethics and integrity; and
- unpaid bonuses.

The effects of management turnover have been the subject of several empirical studies, the overwhelming majority of which have been conducted on sports teams in US football, baseball and basketball, and UK soccer. These have led to the development of three main opposing theories – termed *common-sense explanation*, *vicious cycle* and *ritual scapegoating* – concerning the relationship between turnover and organisational performance:

- *Common-sense explanation*. The common sense, or one-way causality, theory, attributes a significant portion of responsibility for team performance to the actions of the manager (Grusky [20]). Implicit in this explanation is the assumption that team performance will improve under a new manager (Fabianic [21]) as, far from creating conflict and tension, the replacement of managers reduces team conflict, which indirectly improves performance.
- *Vicious-cycle theory*. Vicious-cycle, or two-way causality, theory holds that manager departure is more likely to occur in poorly performing teams and that once the new manager takes over, team performance deteriorates further (Grusky [22]).
- *Ritual scapegoating theory*. Research by Gamson and Scotch [23], although finding some support for the previous two theories, found managerial turnover mainly to have little impact upon team performance. As Fazel and D'Itri [24] and others (e.g., Brown [25]) point out, this implies that the effect of firm performance on turnover – recurring theme in most turnover studies – is typically a consequence of the belief that organisational performance is attributable to the leader or as a result of scapegoating.

Of course, managing a sports team is not necessarily the same as managing a project and, although the research previously undertaken appears to be comparable, as the teams are similar in size, goals, internal structures and environment to that of work groups or teams, it is obvious that that further study is needed in other fields of activity before any generalisations can be made. In fact, as Bartol et al. [26] observe, the magnitude of the managerial turnover problem and the disruptions that are caused, strongly indicates the need for more “concentrated research” in this area.

2.2. Project management

From a project management perspective, six major themes are of potential relevance, comprising:

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