*Enablers and barriers of team performance within
construction companies in South Africa*
by Mandla Lusenga &
Cecile Schultz

Enablers and barriers of team performance within construction companies in South Africa [1]

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Abstract

The study sought to identify enablers and barriers of team performance within construction companies in the Gauteng province of South Africa. The research was conducted in a social world, within the interpretive paradigm and was theoretical in nature. The positivistic and phenomenological paradigms served as basis for the research study. The qualitative research paradigm was adopted, and 17 construction supervisors were interviewed as part of the data collection methodology. The major themes that related to enablers of team performance within construction companies have been outlined as follows: defined team members' roles and responsibilities; aligned project and team objectives; project execution plan; project targets monitoring; effective and efficient leadership; and healthy company culture. Major themes of team performance barriers have been identified as: weak leadership; inability to comprehend instructions; and lack of team members cooperation.

Keywords: barriers; construction; enablers; performance; teams

Introduction

Inability to complete construction projects within the agreed contractual timelines has become a common occurrence. In the past 50 years, productivity in construction has been ranked below other industries (Hewage & Ruwanpura, 2006; O'Brien, 1985; The Business Round Table, 1989; Heale, 1993; Dozzi & AbouRizk cited in Barg, Ruparathna, Mendis & Hewage, 2014:1). Previous studies have also been undertaken to identify factors which contribute to construction delays. A study by Hamzah et al. (2011:493) found that delays are caused by various factors. Among these factors are contractor's

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poor planning; contractor's poor construction site management; contractor's inadequate experience; client's inadequate finance and payments for completed work. Also among the factors are subcontractor-related problems; construction material shortage; inadequate labour supply; equipment availability and failure; lack of communication between parties; and mistakes during the construction stage.

Effective teamwork can deliver excellent results, but this is easier said than done because team success depends on many factors that need to blend appropriately (Moonaisur & Parumasur, 2012:523). The World Health Organization (2007: Internet) opines that one of the critical reasons why teams fail is due to barriers to performance; these barriers may be attributed to external and/or internal environments. The study was undertaken to identify enablers and barriers of team performance within construction companies in the Gauteng province of South Africa. Findings of the study are expected to contribute towards identifying some of causes and subsequently contribute toward the improvement of infrastructure delivery and employment creation.

Research questions

Primary research question

The primary research question forming the crux of the research study reads:

➢ What are the enablers and barriers of team performance within construction companies in the Gauteng province of South Africa?

Secondary research questions

The secondary research study questions are outlined as follows:

➢ What are the enablers of team performance?

➢ What are the barriers of team performance?

Literature review

It is important for construction companies to promote, measure and evaluate the effectiveness of their teams to ensure the successful completion of their respective projects (Khoshtale & Adeli, 2016:1741). Team performance can be defined as the level to which a team achieves predetermined goals or the expected quality of a task (Faraj &

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Sproull cited in Wu & Chen, 2014:41). The following literature review will focus on barriers and enablers of team performance.

ENABLERS OF TEAM PERFORMANCE

Defined roles and responsibilities

Defining roles and responsibilities of all personnel and other participants is an important function of project planning and organisation (Zindović, 2015:47). Lynn and Kalay (2015:177) cite Gladstein in support of Zindović's (2015) view, and opine that it is important for an organisation to have a clear and supported vision. A conflict situation will arise if team members' roles are not clear; this can lead to frustration and confusion.

Aligned project and team objectives

The fragmented approach towards project delivery has been identified as one of the contributors of lack of performance in the construction environment (Latham, 1994; Egan cited in Ibrahim, Costello & Wilkinson, 2011:230). Bond-Barnard, Fletcher and Steyn (2018:9) opine that coordination is a useful tool for aligning team members with project goals. In a study conducted by Savelsbergh, Van der Heijden and Poell (2010:465), respondents outlined leadership behaviour, goal clarity and team learning as the top three important factors influencing team performance. A study by Van der Hoe, Groeneveld and Kuipers (2018:484–485) supports the view that clear team goals are important for team performance, but emphasise that self-management is more important.

Project execution plan

Planning can be described as a process or effort that is executed prior to the commencement of a project to formalise decision-making activities by decomposition, articulation and rationalisation (Mintzberg cited in Serrador, 2012: Internet). Adzmi and Hassan (2018:654) further state that project planning is aimed at minimising uncertainties in areas such as staffing, budget, timelines, deadlines, goals and measurements. Steyn (2016:37) maintains that the ability to conceptualise projects through a business plan to express deliverables throughout the lifecycle is an essential skill for project and programme managers.

Targets and compliance monitoring

Kusek and Rist (cited in Callistus & Clinton, 2018:574) state that the monitoring process provides project status on progress made in the execution of tasks, which is measured

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against planned or desired targets and outcomes. One of the factors that contribute towards project success is monitoring and feedback (Prabhakar cited in Kamau & Mohamed, 2015:82). Likewise, Kissi et al. (2019:14) opine that improper monitoring and evaluation will result in unsuccessful completion of projects.

Effective leadership

A review by Ismail and Fathi (2018:28) on leadership style in the construction industry found that the success of project-based organisations depends on the leadership style practised by its leaders. Competent leadership is characterised by several management processes. These include, among other processes, communication, organisational design, initiating structure, and the capability and ability to direct human behaviour in a responsible manner that enables the organisation to consistently perform at an optimal level (Steyn, 2017:18). Maalouf (2015:2), citing Hansen and Ibarra, found that engagement and openness among employees are collaborative leadership fundamentals. A study by Lukiyanto (2018:858) on the perception of leadership style that is effective and capable of increasing performance concluded that informal workers preferred leaders who respect and fulfil their commitments.

Healthy company culture

A workplace is healthy when workers and managers in the organisation work together to protect and promote health, safety and wellbeing of their colleagues as well as workplace sustainability through continuous improvement processes (World Health Organization, 2010:6). Grawitch, Gottschalk and Munz (2006:145) point out that an organisation cannot exist without employees. "A healthy organisation survives in its environment and continues to cope adequately over a long haul and continuously develops and extends its surviving and coping abilities" (Mile cited in Hoy & Feldman, 1987:30). Pravamayee (2014:58–59) opines that a good and healthy relationship is characterised by trust, mutual respect, mindfulness, welcoming diversity, open communication and cooperation.

BARRIERS TO TEAM PERFORMANCE

Eliminate weak leadership

A study by Aboyassin and Abood (2013:78) found that ineffective leadership is characterised by lack of shared strategic vision, lack of ethics and negative effect on labour and organisational performance. According to Ali (2012:82), competent leaders make a difference in the organisation if they can appropriately inspire and influence people.

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Address team members' inability to comprehend instructions

Low skills among construction workers contribute towards low productivity, poor quality, reduced wage levels, fewer promotion opportunities and increased on-site accidents (Riaz, Din & Aflab, 2015:293). Lacerenza, Marlow, Tannenbaum and Salas (2018:528) found that while technical capability to execute assignments is essential, team members must also demonstrate teamwork proficiencies, leadership capabilities and effective interpersonal and team processing engagement capabilities.

Deal with lack of cooperation amongst team members

Sanyal and Hisam (2018:15) state that employees who work for organisations with limited emphasis on teamwork usually underperform in relation to predetermined organisational goals and visions. Delarue, Van Hootegem, Procter and Burridge (2008:127) posit that theoretical arguments have been advanced to explain the link between teamworking and improved organisational performance.

Research methodology

The research focused on a specific outcome and was aimed at solving an existing problem through applied research. The research was conducted in a social world, within the interpretive paradigm, which involved understanding the world as it existed at a subjective level of experience. The research was theoretical in nature, and the positivistic and phenomenological paradigms served as basis for the research. Qualitative paradigm results provided hard facts and figures to validate and generate theory. Subsequently, qualitative evidence was used to support the research findings obtained from the collected data.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect evidence from construction project team members who formed a highly specialised technical group of individuals. The aim was to gain their perspective on the impact of the inability to identify enablers and barriers of team performance on the achievement of infrastructure targets in the province and socio-economic development goals. This was specifically related to the Gauteng province of South Africa. All interviews were semi-structured, and participants were provided with interview questions prior to the convening of the sessions. Individual interviews involved the recorded interaction between the interviewer and the participant.

A body of individuals served as unit of analysis, namely 8 construction managers and 7 supervisors. Additional interviews which served as a pilot were included for testing the

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quality of the questions. The unit of analysis increased from 15 to 17 and it also extended to Supervisors, Directors, Site Agents and Foremen. Participants represented a total of 17 construction companies in the Gauteng province of South Africa. Data saturation was reached by the time the 17th interview was conducted or earlier.

Trustworthiness of the data

There are five principles that should be considered to reach data validity in a qualitative research approach, namely descriptive validity, interpretive validity, theoretical validity, generalisability and evaluative validity (Maxwell cited in Thomson, 2011:78). Thomson (2011) further states that the capturing of participants' data must be accurate and reflect what was said. Data obtained from 17 participants were recorded and accurately transcribed to conform to the descriptive validity requirements. According to Norris (1997:175), "the interpretive validity concerns the intentions, beliefs, thoughts, feelings, understandings of the people whose lives are represented in an account."

Data collection relied on participants' own words that outlined their beliefs, thoughts, feelings and experiences in response to the questions that were posed. According to Thomson (2011), theoretical validity is concerned with whether the researcher has provided an accurate explanation of the phenomenon. The theoretical background on enablers and barriers of team performance was provided and a literature review also provided additional content. Thomson (2011) states that there are challenges associated with generalisation in qualitative research; in this case, findings are limited to only construction companies in the Gauteng province of South Africa. According to Thomson (2011), research findings can be affected by culture and the environment but, despite the challenge, the researcher should be able to deliver similar results. The researcher anticipates that findings can be replicated under similar conditions.

Data analysis and findings

Participants' overview

All participants were male. A detailed description of each participant, which excludes their personal information and company details, is provided in Table 1 below.

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Table 1: Participant profiles

ID:	Current position	Previous position	Completed projects	Construction experience	Type of construction projects
#1	Director	Quantity Surveyor	50	23 years	Roads and buildings
#2	Site Agent	Site Agent	25	15 years	Roads and building
#3	Site Manager	Technician	4	9 years	Roads
#4	Project Manager	Project Manager	10	10 years	Building
#5	Site Agent	Foreman	35	20 years	Building
#6	Contracts Manager	Site Agent	45	20 years	Roads and buildings
#7	Contracts Manager	Project Manager	37	30 years	Roads and buildings
#8	Contracts Manager	Project Manager	25	16 years	Roads and buildings
#9	Operational Manager	Business Development Manager	15	15 years	Roads and buildings
#10	Managing Director	Supervisor	15	20 years	Building
#11	Resident Engineer	Senior Foreman	15	20 years	Roads and buildings
#12	Contracts Manager	Site Agent	20	19 years	Roads and buildings
#13	Supervisor	Handyman	7	11 years	Roads and buildings
#14	Foreman	Supervisor	10	32 years	Roads and buildings
#15	Director	Supervisor	8	13 years	Roads and buildings
#16	Owner / Manager	Owner / Manager	30	45 years	Building
#17	Foreman	Technician	15	15 years	Roads and buildings

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INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

Enablers of team performance

The transcription of all interview recordings began immediately after the first interview. Interview transcripts were used for coding and, as a result, 129 themes and 188 categories were generated. Themes and verbatim comments associated with enablers of team performance have been summarised in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Themes and verbatim comments associated with the enablers of team performance

Theme	Verbatim
Defined roles and responsibilities of team members	"I think the big one is this one of identifying people's strength …." (Participant 2)
	"He must know what he must do, what are you expecting from him." (Participant 14)
Aligned project and team objectives	"Knowing the objective of why they are involved in a project …." (Participant 9)
	"… when new people come in, they need proper induction into the team where their roles are clearly defined, and the expectations are defined…." (Participant 7)
Develop plans for executing the project	"… it is very important that a programme is in place because that is what will guide the project from beginning to the end…." (Participant 1)
	"… the first thing is your plan …." (Participant 8)
Set project targets and monitor compliance	"… I call my team, sit down with them, tell them where they are going to work on that particular week…." (Participant 3)
	"… make sure everyone is doing his job. No one is getting paid without doing anything or just coming to work and sleep and expect to get paid at the end of the day." (Participant 11)
Promote effective and efficient leadership	"Team performance will only be as good as your team leader is." (Participant 17)
	"You must never take your position as being a boss." (Participant 5)
Healthy company culture development	"… making sure that their wellbeing is actually being recognised." (Participant 12)
	"… avoid working in silos." (Participant 9)

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The study identified the following enablers of team performance: defined roles and responsibilities of team members; aligned project and team objectives; development of plans for executing the project; setting project targets and monitoring compliance; promote effective and efficient leadership; and healthy company culture development. Research findings support the earlier study by Assaf, Hassanain and Mughal (2014:5154) that found that teamwork will be counterproductive if there are no clear objectives; there is ambiguity in project processes and roles; and the leadership is incompetent. Zakaria, Mohamed, Ahzahar and Hashim (2015:94) support the views of Assaf et al. (2014) and found that planning and setting targets are two of the most important skills required by the project manager. Findings on leadership support the opinion of Oyetunji, Adebiyi and Olatunde (2019:12) that the timely delivery of construction projects can be enhanced by effective leadership that ought to be possessed by the construction team. Again, findings on organisational culture affirms the study by Cheung, Wong and Lam (2012:699) that shows that organisational cultures can influence performance.

Barriers of team performance

Themes and verbatim comments associated with barriers of team performance have been summarised in the Table 3 below.

Table 3: Themes and verbatim comments associated with the barriers of team performance

Theme	Verbatim
Eliminate weak leadership	"… where seniors have preferences of, to work with certain individuals in a team …." (Participant 4)
	"If you are hammering on the negative, your team turns to become negative." (Participant 6)
Address team members' inability to comprehend instructions	"Well, you find it, you find it easier with somebody who has got a little bit of basic education to develop further, unlike somebody that is totally illiterate. The person needs to have some kind of literacy." (Participant 16)
	"… where two different ethnic groups wouldn't like to work together and it's because of communication … guys don't understand each other …." (Participant 6)
Deal with lack of cooperation amongst team members	"… workers themselves, they don't trust each other …." (Participant 10)
	"Sometimes they feel segregated and that one becomes a barrier. People who feel like that cannot participate positively in a team." (Participant 7)

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The study found that weak leadership, inability to comprehend instructions and lack of cooperation amongst team members were some of the barriers of team performance. Research findings on weak leadership support the claim of Ofori and Toor (2012:16) that construction industries in developing countries require authentic leaders and followers to effect continuous development. Findings on team members' inabilities to comprehend instructions support the claim by Ochieng and Price (2009:531) that multicultural teamwork has posed various challenges in construction projects and the industry ought to make an effort to resolve these challenges because it is possible for project teams from different countries to work together effectively. Findings support the claim of Baker and Sala (cited in Curseu et al., 2019:638) that cooperation between team members, planning and coordination supported by effective measures of dealing with interpersonal conflicts are a precursor to effective team work. In contrast, a study by Fung (2014:213) found that team trust and team satisfaction rather than team cohesion and team effectiveness were found to be effective predictors of project performance.

Conclusion and recommendations

The research aimed to identify enablers and barriers of team performance within construction companies in the Gauteng province of South Africa. The research identified some of the enablers and barriers. Based on the findings, contractors ought to consider the need to:

- define roles and responsibilities of team members;
- align project and team objectives;
- develop plans before executing projects;
- set project targets and monitor team compliance;
- promote effective and efficient leadership;
- develop healthy company culture;
- eliminate weak project team leadership;
- address team members' inability to comprehend instructions; and
- deal with lack of cooperation among team members.

This research towards a Master's degree at Cranefield College contributes to the further understanding of the construction environment in the Gauteng province of South Africa.

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