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ABSTRACT
Organizations expect Information Systems (IS) projects to be successful time and time again. This rather rigid set of expectations does not necessarily transfer to other departments and business processes. However, when it comes to IS projects, the expectations for success are almost universal. The fact that different stakeholders may have different definitions of what “success” means only compounds the problem. Perhaps due to the perceived engineering aspects of IS projects – that arguably accept a more structured treatment – success simply cannot escape, or so it seems. The study relies on a grounded theory approach to advance a theory of, and provide an explanation for, the expectations of IS project success within organizations. This study found that more often than not high expectations for IS project success stem from intrinsic personal factors.

Keywords
Information systems success, project success, success expectations, grounded theory.

INTRODUCTION
Organizations engage in project management activities in order to create some unique product or service. Typically a project is a unique undertaking requiring a finite amount of time and organizational resources. In general, before a project starts, it undergoes a thorough review that seeks to address issues related to its feasibility, necessity, benefits, costs, etc. Competition for organizational resources is always a factor, as money, personnel, and other resources are usually in short supply. IS projects are subjected to the same constraints.

Projects are selected through careful evaluation of their individual characteristics as well as of their linkages to other project groups, with the objective of meeting some organizational goals or strategies. At any given time, several projects may be in various phases of existence. All of the projects an organization undertakes are expected to be successful. Why is that? A simple explanation derived from empirical evidence may be that, since monies and other organizational resources are spent, organizations simply expect a positive return on their investment. This explanation would arguably take on the accounting stance, where funds are expensed in order for certain outcome to be achieved. However, there is a number of other variables that come into play. As IS projects in general impact the organization at multiple levels – behavioral, organizational, technical and managerial - the expectations for project success need to be explored at all these levels before a possible explanation is advanced.

LITERATURE REVIEW
A literature review points to numerous papers pertaining to project management, and IS success in general. Yet notably there is very limited research on the success expectations for IS projects, and on why such projects are expected to be successful every time. There is vast amount of research related to project risk management (Clemons et al. 2003; Keil et al. 2002; Martin 2003), IS success (DeLone et al. 1992; Middleton et al. 2004; Nelson et al. 2005; Piccinno 2004), and on the critical project factors for either success (Akgün et al. 2004; Carr 2003; Le Pla 2005; Rau 2004) or failure (Guimaraes et al. 1993; Khosrowpour 1994; Udo et al. 1994). The researchers were unable to identify published research that specifically addresses the research question.

RESEARCH METHOD
To proper assess the multi-dimensional aspect of the topic of interest, the researchers choose a qualitative approach. The study was conducted according to the rules associated with grounded theory. Proceeding in an iterative, incremental approach...
manner, we derived from interview data a number of main categories (Lincoln et al. 1985). Subsequent analysis helped integrate the categories and identified relationships among them. The data collection process continued across the theoretical sample with the researchers identifying relevant data. Based on open, axial, and selective coding, the end result is a theory grounded in the data (Glaser et al. 1967).

THE STUDY

The operationalization of the study involved personal interviews that were conducted in a semi-structured format, using open-ended questions. The theoretical sample was saturated at 19 participants. All participants were involved in IS projects. The sample consisted of 16 men and three women. There were six project managers, two accountants, three executives, eight IS staff. They all worked for U.S. companies. The subjects were identified through referrals and those that agreed to participate in the study voluntarily were interviewed during April – August of 2004. The interview transcripts were processed using ATLAS.ti™. The higher-level categories identified refer to behavioral, organizational, technological, and managerial aspects.

The Behavioral Aspect

Organizations expect projects to be successful because the people involved with the project expect it to be successful. That is to say that at least the people responsible for, and in a position of authority in relation to the project, expect the project to succeed.

“Do we expect every IS project to be successful? Yes.” [ProjectManager-19]

“my perception is of a higher, required success rate for IS” [IS-Analyst-11]

But why do people expect projects to succeed? People exhibit a need for recognition and risk-taking.

“When you’re working on a project, we all want to be liked “ [ProjectManager-01]

“We want it; we want to be doing projects. That is what we do. We make things happen” [ProjectManager-02]

“It is exciting if we are going to do the big project” [IS-Analyst-04]

Progress arguably would not be possible without certain degree of risk taking in human activities.

“… people would look first at their needs and then to how the project will impact than, at a personal level” [Stakeholder-03]

As project success usually reflects on the project team and its stakeholders, there may be monetary incentives involved, respect and publicity.

“If I’m an IT manager, that’s what my review is going to be based on” [ProjectManager-19]

It follows that the success of the project may lead to personal achievement, recognition, acceptance, confirmation, and material gain.

“Everybody looks at - at how they’re - how it affects them.” [IS-Staff-05]

It becomes then clear that success of the IS project, once attained, addresses most of the personal, human needs described earlier. It is only natural then that people will have expectations of success for each of the projects they associate with.

The Organizational Aspect

Projects do not occur in a vacuum. Each organizational project does have a number of stakeholders and IS projects are no exception. One of the more difficult aspects of every project is ensuring that all of the stakeholders agree on how success is defined and measured.

“There is a political environment, and people that are involved have different stakes in the project… and it impacts the organization differently.” [ProjectManager-19]

IS projects bear a significant impact on various areas of the organization and may affect business processes and operations in many ways. At times, IS are seen as the solution of choice. It is perhaps this very perception of IS as a silver-bullet solution that induces organizations to engage in IS projects.

“if they are wizards, surely if they’re doing projects, they know what the heck they are doing to deliver.” [Stakeholder-10]

As each of the stakeholders is expecting a successful project completion, they expect their goals will be met.
“Those people that initially sponsor the project will declare success no matter what happens. Because they cannot have failure… If you fail, you’re not going to get promoted, and you basically will have to look for another job.” [ProjectManager-14]

However, anecdotal evidence seems to indicate that people tend to pay rather superficial, cursory interest in the organizational change aspects of the IS project. Often the need for change is discounted, while the ability of the organization to accommodate change is overstated.

“If you’re more candid about what’s gonna do they may not like it…” [ProjectManager-17]

While arguably their goals may be satisfied whether or not the project succeeds, a successful outcome would without a doubt help improve their reputation and perceived professionalism. Hence the expectations for project success.

“in the organizational structure you cannot fail” [Controller-08]

The Technological Aspect

Businesses are increasingly dependent on their use of information technology for their survival. Emerging technologies need proper attention as they may turn into the much sought-after provider of competitive advantages. Competitive advantage may materialize in the form of cost savings, quality improvements, differentiation, and increased customer and stakeholder satisfaction.

“automation is supposed to make you more efficient, right. Information is power. Or you wanna do it to increase your volume or whatever.” [ProjectManager-06]

Organizations constantly seek to maintain and discover new providers of competitive advantages for a variety of reasons. There are shorter life cycles for products and services, noticeable increase in global competition, and sophisticated, complex, rapidly changing technologies. Organizations must manage their absorption of any new technology in an effective manner and address the interests of various stakeholders groups.

“it’s still a reasonable to expect to have a powerful system. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with high expectations” [Stakeholder-07]

But even more important, proper balance must be maintained between technology, management, and the organizational structures. Otherwise, the delicate organizational equilibrium may suffer and lead to dire consequences.

In many ways IS project management is reminiscent of engineering. There usually is a project plan that spells out the details of the project, resource requirements and allocations, timetables, and so on. It may be due to this very structure that people tend to assume that control can be exercised throughout the project.

“I think there is something to that notion that we expect to know what we do, what we’re doing” [ProjectManager-02]

However, circumstances may occur that can derail even a project that is backed by the best project plan. Why? Because the project plan is more like a roadmap reflecting the intended strategy for the project. As circumstances change, the project plan must be updated to reflect the changes. However, at the very beginning of the project, human optimism seems to prevail as reflected in the shared expectations for project success. Decisions are largely based on the initial assessment of the project components. Success is factored into the equation.

The Managerial Aspect

Anecdotal evidence suggests that IS projects and marketing projects tend to receive a different treatment in almost every organization. Numerous organizations engage in marketing campaigns that – just like any other projects – utilize organizational resources. However, a greater degree of uncertainty stemming from the presence of the human factor (the consumer) seems to grant marketing campaigns and projects a privileged status. Namely while the expectations for marketing campaigns success may be just as high as those for IS projects, arguably failure is easier accepted when it occurs in a marketing campaign, but not when it comes to an IS project.

“in my experience we have higher expectations for IS projects to be successful” [ProjectManager-02]

A possible explanation may revolve around the higher degree of perceived variability introduced by the human factor prevalent in a marketing campaign, while the IS projects may appear to be of a more manageable type. This is not to say that marketing campaigns will lack structure and proper planning. Rather, there are differences in the perceived degree of control available for each type of project (marketing- and IS-projects). As the hard costs of technology are easier to quantify than the soft benefits associated with information quality, it is possible that qualitative evaluations are
approached with more optimism than their quantitative counterparts, in effect lending support to the expectations for the project to succeed.

“they don’t spend enough time on defining the requirements and they don’t involve all of the processing people that those requirements affect.” [IS-Staff-05]

If the goal for the project is to implement a system that will create new information, then arguably the perceived value of the outcome is the main thrust for the project. Alternatively, it may be that an IS project is undertaken in order to close an information or technological gap with a business partner. In that case, it may be a matter of pure survival as the organization feels threatened by the lack of information that seemingly the new IS would provide. Success therefore becomes the ultimate goal of the project, and it must be achieved at all cost.

“most of the large projects are usually mandated” [Stakeholder-03]

The IS may be considered for implementation with the hope or belief that similar benefits are sure to materialize once the projects complete. This view may fail to consider the fact that all projects are context-based. Organizational differences may lead to very different outcomes for similar projects. Still, the expectations for success are always present. The expectations for organization success at a macro level reflects upon the expectations of IS project success at the micro level.

“… there is something to that notion that we expect to know what we do, what we’re doing” [ProjectManager-02]

Likewise, in learning about failed IS implementation projects at other organizations, overly optimistic assumptions may lead to assumptions that success cannot escape, given local capabilities, resource availability, motivation, and organizational characteristics.

“one of the vendors that we recently worked with, for project management software, their company motto is “every project is successful”.“ [Stakeholder-07]

While this constitutes a reflection of how similar projects may lead to opposite outcomes in different organizations, still, success is expected.

“the explicit expectations of success are already high. No one is gonna say they expect the thing to fail.“ [ProjectManager-06]

“There’s certain degree of optimism on each side” [Stakeholder-09]

Arguably, belief in success is a necessary condition to undertaking the project in the first place.

“you’re not going to cut yourself with a fatalistic prophecy.” [Executive-16]

What seems to be common knowledge is that people tend to undertake projects they believe they will be successful. A practitioner’s analysis of past IS project experiences indicates that people believe that they can overcome problems. As people carefully consider IS projects, it is their positive, optimistic stance that leads them to believe success is possible, and therefore it will be achieved.

“I think that the mindset is that, we as managers and information technology executives are going in and, do a big sale. We are going to take and emphasize the positive, and convince the management that we can do it.” [ProjectManager-02]

The initial phase of the project requires careful consideration of all the necessary elements and justification for the IS project. However, it is all too easy to put a positive spin on everything and make the project appear attractive.

“you tend to start telling them what the benefits are before you ever implement a system, and then, there’s this expectation that “gee - if I can get this, I can get that,” “ [Stakeholder-03]

“You tend to oversimplify it: once so that they can understand it. As soon as you do that, they think it’s so simple, they have higher expectations…” [Executive-15]

No organization is immune to politics, and arguably some of the IS projects are highly charged political undertakings. People know that, if they play their political cards right, and associate themselves with an successful IS project they are in a better position to see their needs for monetary rewards, belongingness, recognition and approval being satisfied.

“you need to know the complexities and the politics of the department in order to make them go” [IS-Staff-05]

It is perhaps due to the lack of understanding of the other impacts the IS project has – the inevitable frictions with other projects, and the culture, technology and management dimensions of the organization – that allow people to adopt the stance of the eternal optimist: all IS projects will eventually succeed. While success may be attainable, one must carefully consider whether the cost and time required can be justified in the end.
“(we) would give them some set of false premises, to raise their expectations, they’ll do that because the implementation is important. The feel that they can deal with the dissatisfaction after the fact.” [Stakeholder-03]

Another dimension to ponder upon is the management of expectations. Managerial pressures of either implicit or explicit nature may lead to an environment where it is acceptable for numbers to be forced into submission.

“the definition of success that you get in the beginning is the explicit success. Based on that definition, various stakeholders will build their own implicit expectations for success.” [ProjectManager-19]

A managerial style that avoids participative decision-making and leans toward a dictatorial stance, arguably, may be conducive of such behavior.

“Theyir main job is to get it up and running. If you don’t get it up and running, your consequences are much greater than having to satisfy people.” [IS-Staff-05]

Should expectations for IS project success be apparent at top levels in the organizations, dissenting views may tend to be discouraged and muted in short order.

“The (management) doesn’t want to be told that we’re going to fail. Because then, they are on the hook if they approved it.” [ProjectManager-02]

“I think the reality that, what you end up with at the end of the process may not be a hundred percent correlated to what you thought you’re going to get. I still claim success, and move on.” [Controller-12]

A form of window-dressing practices would arguably follow that ensure IS project success appears attainable.

“even (if) marginally successful… we will be moving the organization forward in such important ways that it doesn’t have to be a resounding success to play a big win.” [ProjectManager-02]

A simple explanation derived from empirical evidence may be that, since monies and other organizational resources are spent, organizations simply expect a positive return on their investment.

“usually you’ll have high expectations because information systems development is a large capital expenditure. So, when you spend the money, you expect to have a return.” [ProjectManager-06]

“definitely you want something in return for the money you spend” [IS-Staff-13]

**FINDINGS: A THEORY OF IS PROJECT SUCCESS EXPECTATIONS**

A number of variables in four general categories are instrumental in setting high expectations for IS project success. The major categories identified are Behavioral/People, Technology, Organization and Management (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Dimensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behavior/People</td>
<td>achievement; approval; belief; belongingness; behavior; assumptions; risk;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>risk-taking; self-actualization; project team; resources; esteem; defining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>success; recognition; expectations; failure; human needs; incentives;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>learning; optimism;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>organization; stakeholders; uncertainty; competitive advantage; context;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>control; culture; project team; resources; culture; expectations; incentives;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>learning; resources; politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>silver-bullet; technology; requirements; resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>communication; competence; window dressing; risk; optimism; drivers; define</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>success; expect success; failure; incentives; management; politics; pressure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the Behavioral/People category, people exhibit a need for achievement, recognition, opportunities for advancement, learning new skills, and in general prefer to be associated with successful endeavors. People carefully assess the risks and take on projects they feel they can benefit from. However, the optimism that leads them to discount risks may be overstated.

Organizational dimensions bear a significant effect on the IS project expectations, in terms of organizational culture, resource allocation, favored practices, and organizational values. The various stakeholders to a project will tend to develop their own expectations for the success of the IS project. Furthermore, these expectations may evolve with the project, and it is not uncommon for the very definition of expected success for the IS project to be revised, as more information becomes available in the course of the project.

The perceived deterministic aspects of technology lead to higher expectations for success, as IS projects are deemed to be well-structured and manageable – based on their technology component. Technology is often regarded as a silver-bullet solution, manned by wizards that can deliver almost anything.
From a managerial perspective, success is highly desirable and must be pursued. A positive stance is natural and necessary. Political and organizational pressure, or perhaps poor communication may lead to window-dressing, where unwarranted, optimistic project data are expected. Risks are discounted, organizational capabilities viewed optimistically, and if need be, project success is redefined to avoid reporting an outright failure. Spending corporate resources is a sufficient reason to expect IS project success time and time again.

A graphical representation of the constructs involved and their relationships is presented in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Constructs and Relationships of IS Project Success](image)

DISCUSSION / IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical Sensitivity

A number of studies published in the IS literature attempt to address the issue of how critical factors may lead to IS project failure (Guimaraes et al. 1993; Khosrowpour 1994; Udo et al. 1994). Practical experience seems to indicate that more often than not these critical factors are at the very core of the assumptions made people involved with the project. As these factors are either discounted or misconstrued, success is expected.

The overly optimistic assumptions that are made about end-user involvement increase the expectations for a successful IS project. People involved with the project tend to approve of project plans and structures that may in fact turn out to be poorly defined.

Practitioners may agree that more often than not they tend to ignore the frictions between departments. There are numerous problems associated with communication, interaction and feedback. For example, the degree of participation in decision-making processes related to the IS project may not be adequate – conceivably not all of the interested parties are included, although at first sight the processes appear in order. In particular, user complaints about slow delivery of new systems, high costs, and charge-backs may lead to grass root, bootleg IS projects initiated by users. Their very perception of corporate IS does lead them to believe they can deliver a better product, with the expectations for IS success the
driving force. Another situation occurs when business divisions or senior managers are pressing for systems that they believe will deliver competitive advantage, and push for IS projects as they hope to achieve success.

Empirical evidence suggests that most times the factors that can help attain project success are ignored, while the factors that can ensure project failure are misinterpreted and discounted. This is reflected in people taking on IS projects and expecting success when in fact a critical, cold-blooded analysis would prove their expectations for success are unwarranted.

The Behavioral Aspect
Progress arguably would not be possible without certain degree of risk taking in human activities. Research in psychology indicates that humans exhibit a certain hierarchy of needs (Maslow 1943). Once the physiological and safety needs are satisfied, humans will eventually focus on satisfying belongingness, esteem, cognitive, esthetic, and self-actualization needs, in this very order. The belongingness need involves acceptance by others, and affiliation with others. Satisfying the need for esteem involves achievement, competence, gain of approval and recognition.

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is not the only model worth considering. Further support comes from Alderfer’s work and his hierarchy of motivational needs (Alderfer 1972).

The Organizational Aspect
Projects do not occur in a vacuum, and IS projects are no exception. From a cultural standpoint, is entirely conceivable that the expectations of IS project success are in fact an example of cultural conditioning. The conditioning effect induced by an organizational culture that values and expects success can have a very powerful effect on people’s perceived expectations of an outcome. In some instances the conditioning is deeply rooted in people as a result of their family, school, religion, and country’s culture (Fasser et al. 2002). All these concur to make the expectations for IS project success all too common.

The Technological Aspect
IS projects - at a minimum - involve people and technology. People are assumed to be manageable, replaceable components in the IS being built. Technology, as argued by Carr (2003) has become a commodity. Technology may indeed share some of the characteristics of a commodity today, as Carr claims, although arguably not all of them. While some technologies are readily available and interchangeable, most of them are not.

The perception of technology as a commodity may drive organizations to expect IS project success as stakeholders and decision-makers mistakenly assume that a commodity product is also a simpler product. Simple products therefore are expected to be simpler to manage, and once again success is expected to be within reach.

The Managerial Aspect
Many of the problems affecting project management can be observed in IS projects. Among them: optimistic assumptions, overly enthusiastic goals, lack of organization, faulty planning, insufficient management support, poor leadership, etc. (Meredith et al. 2003). Scholars in Social Psychology posit that one must believe in success in order to be able to achieve it. Ample research literature published in the psychology field shows that expectations may alter outcomes significantly. The Expectations effect (Begley 2003) - also known as the Pygmalion effect - discusses the power of expectations becoming self-fulfilling prophecies.

Limitations
The findings of the study are subject to obvious limitations stemming from the qualitative nature of the study, the theoretical sample involved, and the relatively small sample size. Yet, the theory presented here informs on what drives the expectations of IS projects towards success. The findings are of interest for IS researchers and practitioners alike.

CONCLUSION
Numerous factors intervene that leads users, groups, departments and organizations to expect the IS projects they undertake to be successful. Among the organizational, technological, managerial and behavioral factors that were reviewed in the paper, those related to the human component stand apart. People’s inner motivation, needs and constant
strive for success seemingly has a lot to do with the expectations for IS projects to succeed. Furthermore, return is expected on all monies spent by organizations.

IS project success expectations, as reported by the respondents, are high; certainly higher in comparison to other type of projects. However, these high expectations are often unwarranted, as they appear driven by a variety of factors, in the four main categories proposed by the study. While the effect born by these factors cannot, and should not be discounted, the IS project success expectations should be grounded in the project reality, more than anything.

As the individualist culture that characterizes the American worker stresses personal goals, it may be interesting to see whether the same shared expectations for IS project success can be found in collectivist cultures that favor group needs. Hofstede’s cultural management model categorizes national cultures along five different dimensions. Of those dimensions, power distance, individualism, and uncertainty avoidance may be of interest to the researcher attempting to study whether cultural and national differences bear any effect on the expectations for IS projects success (Hofstede 1993). Further research may help shed light on how expectations of IS project success transcend national and cultural boundaries.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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