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# **Investigating the Role of Project Champions in e-Government Integration Initiatives in Local Government Domain**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The realisation of technological innovations has often been associated with the presence of a champion who performs the imperative functions of transformational leadership, facilitation, and endorsement of different technical projects. This study investigates the role of project champions in electronic Government (e-Government) integration initiatives in local government domain. In this context, governments across the globe are reforming their e-Government initiatives and progressing towards more integrated transformational Government (t-Government) (e.g. the cases of UK, Norway, and Sweden are a manifestation of such reforms). It is highly acknowledged in the normative literature that integration (i.e. at the data, object and process levels) is a core objective and a critical success factor for achieving a mature level of government – *horizontally* and *vertically*. While, there is a surfeit of literature that have outlined the various organisational and technical challenges posed during the implementation of e-Government integration initiatives, the research that examines the role of project champions during such initiatives is rather deficient. The shortage of such research studies presents a knowledge gap that needs to be sanctioned. Project champions possess specific domain knowledge and expertise that are crucial to the success of e-Government integration initiatives. In this regard, the authors empirically examine the dynamic nature and importance of their role, and comprehend why their domain knowledge and expertise are vital for e-Government integration initiatives; from an in-depth multiple case study based research in the local government domain.

## **KEYWORDS**

Project Champion, e-Government, t-Government, Local Government, Integration Initiatives.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Governments across the globe are striving towards a vision for government-wide transformation, in which local as well as central government departments are endeavouring to work with each other to deliver better services to citizens via a one-stop-shop environment for all services under the guise of e-Government (Reddick, 2009; Weerakkody and Dhillon, 2008; Bannister, 2005; Murphy, 2005). Many academia researchers and practitioners have conceptualised e-Government as the rigorous or generalised use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in government for the provision of public services, the improvement of managerial effectiveness, and the promotion of democratic values and mechanisms (Gil-García and Pardo, 2005; Gil-García and Luna-Reyes, 2003; Beynon-Davies and Williams, 2003). During the last five years, e-Government implementation efforts have significantly transformed from cataloguing basic government information to providing integrated and interactive based services to citizens e.g. taking the cases of governments in the UK, Norway, and Sweden. Having already realised transaction based electronic Services (e-Services), the UK local government in particular is now aiming to deliver a more integrated service delivery structure for e-Government (Kamal *et al.*, 2009; Reddick, 2009). Weerakkody and Dhillon (2008) also support that the UK local government has surpassed in successfully e-Enabling customer facing processes, whereas, currently the UK government is working towards reengineering and e-Enabling back office processes and Information Systems (IS) to facilitate more joined-up and citizen centric e-Government services; these efforts are referred to as the transformational stage of e-Government or t-Government.

However, the aforesaid theorised conceptions related to e-Government seem very promising – undeniably several governments have achieved productive results with the appropriate implementation of e-Government initiatives (Reddick,

2009; Gichoya, 2005; Beynon-Davies, 2005). Nevertheless, prior IS research exhibits several difficulties impeding the ICT-enabled organisational transformation in local government such as including among others: (a) non-integrated nature of their ICT infrastructure do not allow local government authorities to deliver end-to-end integrated services (Lam, 2005; McIvor *et al.*, 2002), (b) lack of a single approach for implementing IS instead developing IS independently to provide specific business solutions (Janssen and Cresswell, 2005), (c) inflexible IS security requirements further constraining integration (Weerakkody *et al.*, 2007). Moreover, the inaccessibility of substantial data archives and business processes in the isolated IS within local government, is at the heart of the foremost pressing challenges facing the architects of today's ICT infrastructures in transforming local government (Weerakkody *et al.*, 2007; O'Toole, 2007; Janssen and Cresswell, 2005). Despite the growing interest in this area, in-depth enquiry into how local government overcome the several impediments in their way to manage ICT-enabled transformations has remained relatively limited (Kamal *et al.*, 2009; Weerakkody and Dhillon, 2008; Tan *et al.*, 2005). A possible explanation for the scarcity of research interest is the pessimistic impression of local government as rigid, risk-averse and having insignificant desire for improvement (Ongaro, 2004; McIvor *et al.*, 2002; Bozman and Kingsley, 1998). In addition, particularly there is lack of understanding the role of the champions leading the e-Government integration initiatives (Klischewski and Scholl, 2006). Literature indicates that project champions should own the role of change champion for the duration of the project and comprehend the technology as well as the business and organisational context – this indicates that lack of sustained leadership for e-Government will lead to cycles of attention and inattention that lead to inconsistent and unreliable, stop-go progress (Klischewski and Scholl, 2006).

The authors assert that there is a need to understand the essence of what exactly e-Government is and why are project champions required to lead e-Government integration initiatives? There is plethora of perceptions and hypothesis presented in comprehending e-Government (Reddick, 2009; Gichoya, 2005; Beynon-Davies, 2005; Murphy, 2005). However, Themistocleous *et al.*, (2005) argues that e-Government platform should not been merely seen as a stand-alone system but as a solution that communicates with back office applications through an integrated infrastructure. E-government transformation is one of the biggest challenges within the IT-related sector from the perspective of scale and complexity, especially when it comes to adapting existing e-Government to new computing requirements based on the citizens' new service concept (Cheng-Yi Wu, 2007). Integrated e-Government IS can efficiently automate the business processes of the public domain and increase citizens' satisfaction. Nevertheless, to capture such e-Government accomplishments there is a need for strong leadership directing these initiatives. According to Cook *et al.*, (2002) leadership is imperative in successful e-Government projects and leaders are the people who pull the initiative together, establish it as a priority, and steer it toward a successful completion – i.e. the project champions. Researchers in the IS community also acknowledge that by appointing an executive level individual with extensive knowledge of the organisation's operational processes, senior management can monitor the IS implementation, because the champion has direct responsibility for and is held accountable for the project outcome (Clemons, 1998). One advantage of positioning the champion high in the organisation is associated with the authority to move large and complicated projects through the transition (McKersie and Walton, 1991). The authors argue that championship is a critical enabling factor if e-Government integration initiatives stand a chance of succeeding. Cook *et al.*, (2002) and Norris (1991) also support and state that within government organisations, the existence of a project champion is one of the most important facilitators in the adoption of technologies.

There are a few recent published research studies on stakeholders involved e-Government integration projects, such as project champions who lead and promote these projects, have been advocated in recent local government literature (e.g. Kamal *et al.*, 2009; Kamal and Themistocleous, 2009; Themistocleous *et al.*, 2005; Pardo and Scholl, 2002). However, past research on this area of research has been on a small scale (Sathish *et al.*, 2004). Janssen and Cresswell (2005) and Schneider (2002) highlight that in reality such projects involve many different stakeholders, both from within (directly) and outside (indirectly) the organisation, who possess knowledge and expertise, which facilitates their roles during the projects and interactions with one another. Massey *et al.*, (2001) also supports that the knowledge and expertise of stakeholders consists of relevant information that is actionable and based on experience on different projects. Given their importance as sources of knowledge and expertise, any e-Government integration project model should thus include the project champions (Evans and Yen, 2006; Carter and Belanger, 2005), so local government can consolidate and reconcile their intellectual capital, or knowledge assets, for organisational advantage (Kamal *et al.*, 2009; Kamal and Themistocleous, 2009). The authors argue that although such studies may seem obvious, there has been little application in understanding the significance of project champions in e-Government integration projects in the local government domain. This study aims to contribute towards bridging this gap in e-Government literature by investigating and understanding the role of project champions in e-Government integration projects. In doing so, conducting an in-depth multiple case study research on project champions and how they utilise their knowledge and expertise during e-Government integration projects, can provide greater insight into their impact on the project and each other, and how they should be managed to maximise their contributions.

This paper commences with a look at the theoretical perspective on project champions. It then looks at the dynamic role and nature of the project champions during the e-Government integration projects. Thereafter, this research presents the research methodology and case data from four case studies. Based on the case organisations, the authors illustrate the lessons learned and finally summarising the conclusions with future research.

**PROJECT CHAMPIONS: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE**

In this section, we present the results of the literature review that we made in order to clarify and analyse our research focus in relation to project champion, project sponsor and project manager roles. Several researchers have acknowledged the importance of strong project leadership in the form of project champions, executive sponsors, executive leaders, project managers and steering committees (Beath, 1991). Esteves and Pastor (2002) state that the term ‘project champion’ is widely used in research articles; it is often studied without a clear definition and rigorous identification process. Some of the definitions on project champion are extracted from the literature review conducted by Roure (1999) are presented in Table 1.

Researchers	Project Champion Definitions
Beath (1991, p. 355)	‘Information technology champions are managers who actively and vigorously promote their personal vision for using information technology, pushing the project over or around approval and implementation hurdles’
Day (1994, p.149)	‘The agent who helps the venture navigate the socio-political environment inside the corporation’
Fischer <i>et al.</i> , (1986, p. 13)	‘The key characteristic of the product champion is the tension between the individual and what the organisation wants’
Howell and Higgins (1990, p. 40)	Champions ‘make a decisive contribution to the innovation process by actively and enthusiastically promoting the innovation, building support, overcoming resistance and ensuring that the innovation is implemented’
Maidique (1980, p. 64)	‘A member of an organisation who creates, defines or adopts an idea for a new technological innovation and who is willing to risk his or her position and prestige to make possible the innovation’s successful implementation’
Markham and Griffin (1998, p.437)	A person who takes an inordinate interest in seeing that a particular process or product is fully developed and marketed’

Table 1: Champion Definitions (*Adapted: Roure, 1999*)

Championship refers to the existence of a person in the organisation who is committed to introduce ICT related initiative to the organisation. The literature on strategic uses of ICT suggests that a very important antecedent to a successful adoption and implementation of critical information systems is a ‘*champion*’ for the new system (Gopalakrishnan and Damanpour, 1997; Reich and Benbasat, 1996). Project champions are personnel who actively and vigorously promote their personal vision for using ICT, pushing the project over or around approval and implementation hurdles (Beath, 1991). Similarly, Garfield (2000) reported that in inter-organisational information systems the presence of an internal sponsor in each participating organisation is very important in providing the necessary leadership as the existence of a system-wide sponsor is not always sufficient. Norris (1999) reported that within local government organisations, the existence of a champion is one of the most important facilitators in the adoption of technologies. Project champions play a critical role in the acceptance of technology and, to a lesser extent, during its use and incorporation into the organisation (Kamal and Themistocleous, 2009). Roure (1999, p. 4) defined a project champion as ‘any individual who made a decisive contribution to the innovation by actively and enthusiastically promoting its progress through critical stages in order to obtain resources and/or active support from top management’. Based in literature on organisational innovation and project champions, Beath (1991) refers that project champions operate using four types of resources: (a) information to evaluate, (b) choose and sell an innovation; (c) material resources to obtain the necessary information and to test and make transitions; and (d) political support to guarantee both the availability of the material resources and, eventually the rewards for successful innovations.

**UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF PROJECT CHAMPIONS: A CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVE**

Due to the size, complexity and implementation time taken by e-Government integration projects, it has been noted that local government has generally focused on joint or outsourcing their developments or procured pre-packaged solutions to their integration problems (Themistocleous *et al.*, 2004). One of the motivations for using joint and outsourced approaches was the increasing shortage of in-house integration specialists as the private sector proved increasingly attractive to them (Brown,

2001). Similarly, decision makers and top management in many e-Government integration projects in local government relied on joint approaches with external expertise (Themistocleous *et al.*, 2005). Since integration technological solutions adoption (and implementation) and management require different set of tasks, skills and expertise (Lam, 2005; Janssen and Cresswell, 2005), this is a way of getting the necessary knowledge from experienced experts (that can also lead the projects) to plug this gap (Chan *et al.*, 2003). The authors argue that this is because e-Government integration projects are the start of long-term relationship between local government and their leading experts such as the project champions. Local government thus needs to focus and understand the impact of such experts and the acquisition of knowledge and their expertise (Chan *et al.*, 2003). This also indicates that the roles and responsibilities of the project champions may vary from organisation to organisation, and local government needs to focus on identifying new ways of involving them and managing their knowledge and expertise in different e-Government integration projects.

Efficient and effective integration of e-Government applications has been one of the core objectives in the local government (Kamal *et al.*, 2009; Kamal and Themistocleous, 2009; Beynon-Davies and Williams, 2003). It involves the integration of applications, organisational functions, or information across these functional units. Integration is a complex process (Lam, 2005), which can influence the entire operational activities of local government or even the inter-organisational supply chain. Since integration technological solutions (e.g. Enterprise Application Integration technologies) can potentially influence project champions in local government organisations department on the type of e-Government integration initiative pursued, each with their own domain knowledge and expertise, local government should also facilitate knowledge sharing between different project champions in different organisations for e-Government integration initiative implementations.

The authors argue that involvement of project champions and the potential for integration emphasize the need to focus on project champions with different domain knowledge and expertise during e-Government integration initiatives. This is particularly so since most of the knowledge required for the project that people really care about is not on computers but comes from them (Davenport, 1998). As this knowledge is generally personalised and based on the individual experiences, before one stakeholder's knowledge is useful to another stakeholder, it must be communicated from where it was created or captured to where it is needed and should be used in such a manner as to be interpretable and accessible to the others (Massey *et al.*, 2001). LGAs should thus focus more on making those stakeholders as project champions who possess the required knowledge and expertise, who prioritise their knowledge and expertise according to the e-Government integration initiatives, and thus those that facilitate the sharing of knowledge and expertise amongst all their stakeholders in the department (Kamal *et al.*, 2009; Janssen and Cresswell, 2005; Beynon-Davies and Williams, 2003). The aforementioned conceptions illustrate that project champions are vital and thus may also be significant for the success in e-Government integration projects because of their skills and expertise in bringing about change at the organisational level.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study uses a qualitative research approach utilising structured and semi-structured interviews and document reviews in a multiple case study setting (Kaplan and Duchon, 1988). The advantages of using qualitative research are that it provides in-depth insight, provides flexibility and the results obtained are in real life like and rich with ideas (Creswell, 2003). Furthermore, case studies are useful in providing a multidimensional picture of a situation (Whitman and Woszczyński, 2004). Case studies also offer the potential for generating alternative explanations from different stakeholder perspectives, thereby allowing the researchers to highlight contradictions and misunderstandings (Flick, 2006). Conversely, Yin (2003) suggests that case studies are appropriate where the purpose is to study current events, and where it is not necessary to control behavioural events or variables. Interview agenda based structured interviews and open-ended semi-structured interviews were conducted with project champions involved in e-Government integration initiatives in four United Kingdom based local government organisations (hereafter referred to as LG\_NORTH, LG\_SOUTH, LG\_EAST, LG\_WEST from the region of England – for confidentiality reasons the authors employ these coded-name to refer to these entities). These LGs were initially contacted using personal connections. Emails and telephone conversations were exchanged at the beginning which then led to the identification of relevant people to interview in these LGs. The actual interviews were then conducted by the authors visiting these LG's premises. The interviews were specifically conducted with project champions (though they were initially investigated for their designation and position in the organisation) from each LG.

All the interviewees were responsible for leading and promoting their respective e-Government integration projects – projects that were eventually associated with delivering public services. Since the focus of this research was to investigate the role of project champion in the e-Government integration projects, the questions were fairly focused. Notes were taken during the interviews in a logbook and later transcribed into the computer. The participants were given a consent form to read through regarding ethical considerations and their rights to withdraw from the study anytime without any prior notice or explanation. The formal interviews lasted approximately one to two hours, and were undertaken in a meeting room of the LG buildings. This allowed the authors and respondents to build the necessary rapport and privacy for the required questions. Data

triangulation was used by comparing and contrasting the interview findings with document reviews as it was necessary to validate and verify the findings of the primary data with secondary information (Saunders *et al.*, 2002). This ensured that no bias emerged from either the participants or the authors, thus the findings and conclusion made from the cases are valid (Yin, 2003).

## **CASE ORGANISATIONS**

The selected case organisations provide services through various departments including among others: social and environmental services, benefits, property, housing, education, health etc. The analysis of the empirical research conducted illustrate that the departments within each case organisation had developed their own IT infrastructures. As a result, they consisted of numerous heterogeneous information systems that were based on a diversity of platforms, operating systems, data structures and computer languages. Most of these systems were legacy applications that still today run on mainframe environments. Since there was a lack of common IT infrastructure, and a lack of central coordination of IT, the majority of departments within these case organisations adopted their own applications to support their business activities. Due to this, these case organisations faced a number of challenges in meeting their internal performance targets whilst also addressing the modernising government agenda. The way these case organisations were conducting their business with their partners and other stakeholders was costing too much, due to which there was no productivity and performance is degrading. There was no control over the systems from data security point of view. It was clear that a single, integrated solution was required within these case organisations if these LGs were to achieve the major business transformation involved in modernising their service delivery. In doing so, these case organisations adopted integration technological solutions based on their requirements and nature of e-Government integration initiatives undertaken. In the following, the authors present the findings based on the analysis of project champions involved in different e-Government integration projects in the case organisations.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF PROJECT CHAMPIONS FROM AN EMPIRICAL PERSPECTIVE**

For the purpose of this research only designated e-Government project champions were identified and that were specifically involved in e-Government integration projects. The authors contacted the Personal Assistant (PA) to the heads of the ICT departments within these case organisations and requested permission to meet the designated e-Government project champions at a scheduled time. The authors acquired a written permission from their department explaining the purpose to visit the case organisations that was shown to the heads of IT before they could approach the project champions. The interviews that lasted between 1 and 2hrs constituted the main data source from the case organisations. Project champions selected from the four selected case organisations were involved in the following e-Government integration projects, such as:

- *Project Champion from LG\_NORTH* led their Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and Local Land Property Gazetteer integration pilot project that was based on a hub and spoke architecture, to provide multi-LG access and sharing of information.
- *Project Champion from LG\_SOUTH* led a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems integration project, to provide electronic end-to-end processes that ensure referential data integrity.
- *Project Champion from LG\_EAST* set out to lead a document imaging system and SAP integration project, that was utilised to enhance their existing human resource system and provide additional functionality for use by managers and employees
- *Project Champion from LG\_WEST* led an environment department integration project that was based on integrating their CRM system with their software vendor system in order to provide citizens with better services and respond to their waste collection queries quickly.

These project champions based on their position in the case organisation had other different roles and responsibilities to perform during the aforementioned e-Government related integration projects. It was also reported that the reason for selection of these project champions within the case organisations was due to their dynamic nature and possession of domain knowledge and expertise required for the e-Government integration projects. For example:

- The *Project Champion at LG\_NORTH* was also the head of their ICT department. This made their department easier in receiving funds and completing the pilot project on the scheduled time.
- The *Project Champion at LG\_SOUTH* was only responsible for leading their respective e-Government integration project. In addition, the project champion had complete support from the top management and head of ICT department in terms of access to funds, and besides pressure to complete the project on time.

- The *Project Champion at LG\_EAST* also acted as the head of their ICT department and led their designated e-Government integration project.
- The *Project Champion at LG\_WEST* was specifically allocated by the head of ICT department in order to lead their environment department e-Government integration related project. It was reported that their project champion acted as a key player and among other responsibilities, the champion also assisted where and when needed during the implementation phases of the project, as well as for acquiring more funding.

Questions asked from the project champions mainly focused on e.g. *Who initiated the idea of investing in e-Government integration projects? What was the need to integrate their e-Government IT infrastructure? Why were they selected for their selected e-Government integration projects? What are the main motivations for implementing their designated e-Government integration projects? What was the process towards integrating e-Government information systems? What are the limitations in their IT infrastructure?* It was considered important to select a cross section of questions to fully understand the nature of the e-Government integration projects and the role of designated project champions within these projects. The authors argue that this detailed list of questions also supported in providing better understanding of different e-Government integration projects and their related issues and outcomes.

## CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RECOMMENDATION

In investigating the role of project champions in the e-Government integration initiatives, this study identified that LGs for their integration projects have to understand and utilise the knowledge and expertise of project champions. No claim(s) for generalisation is made for interpretive research of this type. It is not the intention of this paper to offer prescriptive guidelines for investigating the role of project champions in the e-Government integration initiatives in local government domain, but rather to describe case organisations' perspectives that allow others to relate their experiences to those reported. Hence, this paper offers a broader understanding of the phenomenon of investigating the role and involvement of project champions' in e-Government integration initiatives. An interpretive, qualitative multiple case study approach was selected to conduct this research. The proposed rationale of understanding the role of project champions in e-Government integration projects in local government context makes an exclusive contribution at both the practical and conceptual level. At both the levels, the findings contribute towards an understanding of the role and nature of project champions in e-Government integration projects in local government domain. The research work presented in this paper is no exception; as a result this research can be further developed. In the light of the reflections and the limitations it is recommended that further work could usefully be pursued as follows:

- **Recommendation:** Despite investigating the role and nature of project champions that are internal to LG, the authors assert that 'project champion' is designated with several other terms in the normative literature such as project manager, project leader, chief information officers, and project sponsor (Esteves and Pastor, 2002; Cook *et al.*, 2002). A recommendation for the future study may be the detailed identification and analysing the role of other professional individuals that can be or are selected as project champions in different e-Government integration projects.

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