

Examining the Effects of Fluid Teams on IT Projects

Fred Niederman
St. Louis University
niederfa@slu.edu

Michelle Carter,
University of Washington
mscarter@uw.edu

Abstract

IT Projects are usually performed in teams or groups. These teams/groups may be heterogeneous on a number of dimensions including people (1) with different skills (e.g. technical/managerial); (2) with different interests (e.g. representing different stakeholders – users, sponsors, or developers); (3) with different roles (e.g. guidance and decision making, specific task performance, or multiple changing roles depending on development stage). The abilities of such teams both in terms of containing the technical skills needed to perform the job and interpersonal abilities, such as being able to communicate, coordinate, and learn from one another, are critical to creating efficient and effective IT project outcomes.

The preponderance of group literature to date, however, holds constant the membership of the team or group (Choi and Thompson, 2005) throughout the project. Much group and team research is based on careful and controlled experiments where groups are given tasks involving the same set of people beginning to end. This allows attribution of effects to the targeted factors under study rather than to the more messy and difficult to measure issues that come when membership changes. Unfortunately it is difficult to know how much of these findings remain applicable in more volatile group settings.

In practice, team members arrive and leave due to many causes, including but not limited to, employee turnover, reassignment to higher (or lower) priority projects, and completion of defined tasks. As such, it is not clear how results from stable groups in experimental settings apply to fluid groups in practice. What happens when groups must deal with frequent arrival and departure of members? We anticipate that direct effects of such fluidity in group membership include (1) a need for planning or ad hoc introduction of new members to the group; (2) rapid assignment of new members to tasks and sometimes shifting of existing members relative to task assignments; (3) assertion of desired norms and culture for the reestablished group; and (4) restructuring of goals and incentives for group members; and (5) reestablishing communication patterns, direct and indirect reporting assignments, and lines of “command and control” where appropriate. It might also include some administration of “closure” for those exiting from the group.

Each of these stress points in fluid groups has multiple dimensions. Task assignment involves (1) assuring that members are familiar with and have access to the tools used; (2) that they have time to absorb and access project documents; and (3) that they are familiarized with unique or unusual aspects of the tasks to which they are assigned (e.g. that they know about peculiarities of legacy systems they might have to interact with).

AT this time, the authors have scanned extant literature in human resource management, communications, and small group studies that targets the phenomenon of fluidity. Much of this is high level and distant matching precursor situations with probable central tendencies of outcome. We are more interested in what IS project managers can do to positively influence outcomes. Having heard our initial observations and structure of our thinking, we want to know if colleagues are in agreement that this is an important and promising area of study; what sort of specific questions might have the most positive impact, and how they might go about further study in the area.