

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON THE BENEFITS, RISKS AND FACTORS INFLUENCING THE ADOPTION OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT CONSULTANCY IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

After reviewing the literature that highlights the main internal and external factors that could have an impact on the adoption of Project Management consulting services within public organizations in Romania, this study empirically tests the perception of managers of public institutions in Romania regarding the main factors that enhance or limit the process of adopting such consulting services and the main benefits and risks of project management practices. The results of the study highlight the qualitative aspects - the identification of the benefits and risks of adopting consulting services in Project Management, but also the factors that favor or limit their adoption and use, from the perspective of the organizational environment in the public sector.

KEYWORDS: *benefits, consulting, project management, public administration, risks*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Consulting services in project management represent opportunities that can be successfully captured by public institutions in Romania, in order to more easily reach the performance indicators assumed in the projects. Obviously, there is an acute problem related to the budgeting of such consulting services, as long as they can only be supported from the own financial resources of these institutions.

The main objectives and questions to which this qualitative study aims to identify answers are highlighted below:

Objective 1	Identifying the benefits generated by the adoption of consulting services in Project Management.
Research Question 1	<i>What are the main benefits or advantages of adopting Project Management consulting services?</i>
Objective 2	Identifying the risks generated by the adoption of consulting services in Project Management.
Research Question 2	<i>What are the main risks or disadvantages of adopting Project Management consulting services?</i>
Objective 3	Identifying the factors that favor or limit the adoption and use of consulting services in Project Management.
Research Question 3	<i>What are the main factors that favor or limit the adoption of consulting services in Project Management?</i>

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2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Consultancy services should be aimed at raising standards, results and performance within an institution or company. In this sense, the entity under consideration is approached from a contextual, holistic perspective and involves decision-makers throughout the period of consultancy activity, taking into account the evolution in an external dynamic environment (Dunford, 2000).

The identification of an appropriate consultant for project management support involves understanding and assimilating all the characteristics of the entity (including vision, mission, strategy and objectives), conducting pre-feasibility studies to identify the results that can be achieved, the needs for allocated resources (personal information, time) and cost-benefit analyses (Darie et al., 2019).

The exploitation stage involves the employment of a set of consultancy tools such as: designing the work strategy, organizing the necessary information system, making decisions regarding the allocation of resources, carrying out the necessary studies, achieving and fulfilling all the objectives proposed in the current phase (Kerzner, 2002).

By creating canvases with clear value propositions, consultants have increased the demand for all aspects of project management in the public institutions across the world (Morris et al., 2006). In public institutions, the implementation strategy via consulting involves setting the direction for organizations to achieve performance goals by making long-term plans and managerial decisions. Due to this fact, the number of public institutions that intend to turn to management consulting services is constantly increasing (Mitchell, 2022). Consultants are expected to perform all counselling assignments, considering their relevant expertise, to ensure accuracy of procedures, as well as public institutions' interests in a smooth implementation of projects are served (Muzio et al., 2011).

Benefits of acquiring professional consultancy in Project Management often emerge from the valuable interactions between project managers and consultants, team building exercises, project management tools and cross-project learning (Curuksu, 2018). A productive relationship between its team members is essential to the success of relationships between public institutions and consulting company. In projects implemented by public authorities, benefits of consulting services reflect the following insights: providing decision-making support to the institution; making a diagnosis of project implementation, which may necessitate redefinition of specific activities; making recommendations based on the diagnosis; assisting project team in the implementation of recommended actions; building a consensus and commitment with project manager, based on proposed corrective actions; permanently improving project implementation effectiveness (Appelbaum and Steed, 2005). There also risks in what concern the consulting services adoption. For example, a risk could appear when consultants are used to implementing their ways of working to public institutions with methods that they are comfortable with (Visscher et al., 2010). Limited confidence in the consultants' ability to understand certain mechanisms specific to public institutions is cited as another potential risk (Furusten, 2013).

In a study conducted in Romania, the main critical success factors related to project management consulting in different types of organizations, including public ones, proved to be: the management style consultant (leadership), consulting team competence, the capability to fulfill the purpose and objectives of the project, the quality of sub-contractors and the control of execution (Ceptureanu et al., 2017).

3. METHOD

The study is based on a qualitative research methodology, i.e. a focus group survey - a structured discussion with a small group of people, moderated by a facilitator or a moderation team, with the

aim of generating qualitative data on a specific topic of interest, using a set of open questions. The investigation accumulated a focus group, carried out between May 2022 and July 2022, with 12 participants, managers or decision-makers from public institutions in Romania, who participated in the mentioned period in the coordinated discussions by the researchers involved in this study.

The study was applied to a sample of 12 public institutions in Romania, from the South-East region, through their representatives - managers and decision-makers - who participated in the focus group. The number of 12 participants in a focus group was optimal, as it allowed for appropriate mediation of the discussions, facilitated adequate participation, their satisfaction and the collection of consistent information and the generation of a considerable number of ideas, without there being dominant vocal members, which prevent balanced contribution to discussions and make it difficult to have discussions within the set time frame.

The qualitative study involved a focus group survey as a data collection method. The tool for collecting information was a semi-structured interview guide with open questions to facilitate the collection of as much information as possible, and later discussions were demarcated with the participants in the focus group.

The interview guide used was structured on the following dimensions:

- The main benefits or advantages presented by the adoption of consulting services in Project Management;
- The main risks or disadvantages of adopting consulting services in Project Management;
- The main internal and external factors that favour or limit the process of adoption of consulting services in Project Management.

In order to ensure the reliability and clarity of the questions in the interview guide, the questions were discussed before completion with experts from the public domain, providing explanations regarding the uncertainties identified by the respondents, to test the validity of the research instrument. As the focus group participants found it easier to answer by connecting the concepts of benefits and advantages and risks or disadvantages, the questionnaire questions were supplemented and reformulated at their request. The questions from the questionnaire were also the main questions discussed in the focus groups.

4. FINDINGS

The first objective of the study was to identify the main benefits or advantages that the institution in which each participant works may have, following the process of adopting consulting services in Project Management. The answers provided by the respondents during the focus group discussions were grouped into broader answer classes, as follows (table 1).

After completing the discussions generated in the focus group, all respondents were asked to rate the importance of the 10 benefits, resulting from the centralization of all responses. Each identified benefit was rated on a scale from 1 - low importance to 5 - high importance. Individual responses were then aggregated to obtain an average rating for each benefit. The average ratings for each benefit are highlighted in Table 1.

Following the aggregation of individual responses and the elements highlighted following the focus group surveys, we emphasize the fact that there is an increased interest of public institutions in terms of the expected impact following the adoption of consulting services in Project Management, which must be reflected in the increase in the financial performance of projects carried out, in this sense being the highest scores (4.5). High expectations also exist regarding the streamlining of activities in implemented projects and the improvement of decision-making processes in projects (both with average scores of 4.3). Scores higher than the threshold of 4 were recorded by items that reflect both global aspects, such as the increase in the performance of implemented projects, and

specific ones, such as the increase in the performance of the institution's employees involved in projects, or operational, such as the validation of progress reports, reimbursement requests.

A moderate attention is attributed to some relevant items, such as the faster resolution of requests for clarifications, the implementation of innovative practices of simultaneous project management, an efficient communication at the level of project teams and the efficiency of the allocation of resources in projects, the scores of these items being below threshold of 4.

Table 1. Synthesis of benefits and advantages related to consulting services adoption

No.	Benefits/ Advantages	Score
1.	Increasing the financial performance of ongoing projects	4.5
2.	Streamlining activities from implemented projects	4.3
3.	Clarifying and improving decision-making processes in projects	4.3
4.	Increasing the overall performance of implemented projects	4.1
5.	Increasing the performance of employees in the institution involved in projects	4.1
6.	Validation of progress reports, reimbursement requests	4.1
7.	Faster resolution of clarification requests	3.9
8.	Innovative practices of simultaneous project management	3.9
9.	Effective communication at the level of project teams	3.7
10.	Streamlining the allocation of resources in projects	3.7

Source: Authors' contribution

The second objective of the qualitative study was to identify the main risks or disadvantages that the public institution in which each participant works may have, following the process of adopting consulting services in Project Management. The answers provided by the respondents were grouped into broad classes of answers as follows:

Table 2. Synthesis of risks and disadvantages

No.	Disadvantages / Risks	Score
1.	High costs of consulting services in Project Management	4.1
2.	The risk of not having control over the decision-making process	3.7
3.	Fear of breach of confidentiality in some components of the projects	3.5
4.	Different views on how to implement the project between the project team and the consultant team	3.5
5.	Limited confidence in the consultants' ability to understand certain mechanisms specific to public institutions, which are sometimes rigid	3.3
6.	The use of procedures in similar projects, without the consent of the public institution that contracted the consulting services	2.7
7.	Long time to analyze some implementation procedures	2.7
8.	Costs higher than benefits	2.5
9.	Impossibility of doing impact studies without consultants	2.3
10.	Consultants' reluctance to require firm decisions by project managers	2.1

Source: Authors' contribution

All participants were asked to rate the importance of the 10 identified risks on a scale of 1 to 5, with individual responses aggregated to obtain an average rating for each position.

The major concern of public institutions, following the centralization of risks highlighted by organizations and the aggregation of scores, is the high costs of adopting and implementing consulting services in Project Management, this element marking the highest average score, 4.1, an element also highlighted by the specialized literature ; on the other hand, the reluctance towards higher costs in relation to the benefits of adopting consulting services in Project Management is low (average score of 2.5). The risk of not having control over the decision-making process is perceived as quite significant (average score of 3.7). The fear of breach of confidentiality in some components of the projects, as well as the existence of different visions on the way to implement the project between the project team and the consultant team received average scores above the critical threshold of 3. Below this threshold, the use of some procedures in similar projects, without the consent of the public institution that contracted the consultancy services, as well as the longtime of analysis of some implementation procedures (both with an average score of 2.7). The use of procedures in similar projects, without the consent of the public institution that contracted the consultancy services and the longtime of analysis of some implementation procedures represent the elements towards which the representatives of public institutions have the greatest reluctance.

The third objective of the study was to identify the main factors that could potentiate or limit the adoption of Project Management consulting services by public institutions in Romania. The answers provided by the respondents were grouped into broader classes of answers and identify elements that we also find in the synthesis of the benefits and risks identified by the organizations, as follows (table 3).

Table 3. Synthesis of internal and external factors

No.	Internal and external factors	Score
1.	Level of knowledge of consultants	4.5
2.	Confidence in the validated practices of consulting teams	4.5
3.	Consultant support provided to project managers	4.3
4.	Results of project implementation	4.3
5.	Attitude towards the added value of consulting services	4.1
6.	Organizational culture oriented towards openness to external advice	3.7
7.	Perceived risks in the relationship with consultants	3.5
8.	Charged cost of consulting services	3.5
9.	The pressure of project completion deadlines	3.3
10.	Support of consultants in public procurement	3.3

Source: Authors' contribution

After centralizing the answers of the participants, they were asked to evaluate the importance of the 10 factors that can impact the level of adoption of consulting services in Project Management, factors resulting from the centralization of all their answers, each factor being evaluated on a scale from 1 to 5.

The main factors identified by the participants were the level of knowledge of the consultants and confidence in the validated practices of consulting teams (4.5). Another highlighted factor was the consultants' support to project managers, with an average score of 4.3. Another element that could impact the adoption of consulting services in Project Management concerns the attitude towards the added value of consulting services (score of 4.1). The organizational culture oriented towards openness to external advice involves changing the mentality of many managers in public

institutions in Romania (score 3.7). Perceived risks in the relationship with consultants and perceived cost of consulting services recorded average scores of 3.5, while pressure of project completion deadlines and consultant support in public procurement obtained the lowest scores in this section (3.3).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The study sought to identify the main benefits and risks presented by the adoption of consulting services in Project Management, but also the main factors that favor or limit the process of their adoption, within public organizations in Romania.

Public institutions have high expectations regarding the benefits of adopting consulting services in Project Management, which must be reflected mainly in the improvement of global and financial performance, in the efficiency and explanation of decision-making processes. Cost is an important concern for public organizations, the objective being its efficiency. It is also aimed at the fruition of innovative opportunities for the development and efficiency of project activities, consulting practices being seen as a source of opportunities for management specialists of public institutions, who can identify innovative solutions that can be implemented within the implemented projects and to support their global evolution. Focusing the answers in the area of increasing project performance and understanding decision-making processes, indicates that participants have higher expectations compared to traditional methods, which present a number of limitations and do not always deliver the expected results, following the need for a deeper understanding of the procedures in projects.

In terms of risks, participants expressed concern about the high costs of adopting Project Management consulting services and a distorted cost-benefit ratio, as well as the fear that this practice could violate the confidentiality of procedural aspects of projects, there is a risk of manipulation and a lack of control over decision-making processes. The lack of confidence in the results of the activities carried out together with the consultant teams is low.

Regarding the factors that influence the process of adoption of consulting services in Project Management, the participants mainly highlighted the perceived trust and the level of knowledge and the degree of familiarity with the concept of counseling, but also the need for external support for its assimilation and implementation. The perceived results represent an important highlighted factor, the attitude towards consulting of public organizations being an element that can influence the adoption behavior, together with the pressure of the strict deadlines of the projects, which force the organizations to adapt their management approaches, the perceived cost, the interest to acquire consulting services. Also, the support of the top management of the organizations is important, since it can decide to implement or, on the contrary, can refuse the adoption at the organizational level of these consulting practices, and an organizational culture oriented towards innovation can support their adoption more easily.

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