

₹ 100

ISSN - 2249-555X

Volume : 1 Issue : 4 January 2012



Journal for All Subjects

www.ijar.in

Listed in International ISSN Directory, Paris.



ISSN - 2249-555X

Indian Journal of Applied Research

Journal for All Subjects

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INDEX

Sr. No	Title	Author	Subject	Page. No.
1.	Statistical Optimization Of Ferulic Acid Esterase Production In Aspergillus Niger Isolate Using Response Surface Methodology	Balljinder Kaur , Neena Garg	Biotechnology	1-6
2.	Development Of Forest Area In Tropics: The Urgency Of People's Participation In The Indian Context	Dr. M. P. Naik	Commerce	7-8
3.	Opportunity For International Corporations At Bop Segments Of Emerging Markets (Focus : India)	Bhudhar Ranjan Chatterjee , Sukanya Chatterjee.	Commerce	9-11
4.	Retail Trade	Viram. J. Vala , Dr. (Prof.) Vijay Kumar Soni	Commerce	12-15
5.	Determinants Of Market Value Added Some Empirical Evidence From Indian Automobile Industry	Dr. A. Vijayakumar	Commerce	16-20
6.	The Welfare Facilities Available To The Workers In Paper Mills In Madurai	Dr. M. Sumathy , A. Vijayalekshmi	Commerce	21-24
7.	Green Marketing - New Hopes And Challenges	Dr. Prashant M. Joshi	Commerce	25-27
8.	A Study On Employee Welfare Measures In Maharashtra State Transport Corporation With Special Reference To Kolhapur District.	Dr. H. M. Thakar , Prof. Urmila Kisan Dubal	Commerce	28-30
9.	Business Environment In South Korea An International Perspective	Dr. M. Kamalun Nabi , Dr. M. Saeed	Commerce	31-35
10.	Market Timing - Implications Of Market Valuation On Share Issues By Indian Companies	L. Ganesamoorthy , Dr. H. Shankar	Commerce	36-38
11.	The Conceptual Framework Of Corporate Social Accounting	Rechanna , Dr. B. Mahadevappa	Commerce	39-50
12.	Labour Welfare Measures And The Extent Of Satisfaction Of Tirupur Garment Employees	Mr. S. Hariharan , Mr. N. Selvakumar, Dr .H. Balakrishnan	Commerce	51-53
13.	Mahila Savstha Aur Jacha-Bacha Ko Bachane Ko Chunoti	Dr. Anup Chaturvedi	Community Science	54-55
14.	Mapping Of Existing Waste Dumping Sites And Newly Proposed Waste Dumping Sites In And Around Chitradurga Taluk, Karnataka State, Using Remote Sensing And GIS Techniques.	Sunil Kumar R. K Chinnaiiah , Suresh Kumar B.V	Earth Science	56-58
15.	A Role Of Municipal Council And Corporation Of Financial Problems In Nanded District (Maharashtra)	Dr. A. S. Pawar	Economics	59
16.	Impact Of Institutional Credit On Weaker Section In Akola District	Dr. Devyanee K Nemade, Dr. Vanita K Khobarkar	Economics	60-62
17.	Right To Education In India	Dr. Pawar A. S.	Economics	63-65
18.	Gramin Ayam Adivasi Mahilo Ke Arthik Shakti : Sukhma Virti (Adipur Jila Ke Gramin Ayam Adivasi Mahilao Ka Ek Ayaktik Adhiyan Shobha Gupta	Shobha Gupta	Economics	66-67

19.	Knowledge On Food Security Education Among Higher Secondary Students	Dr. P. Paul Devanesan , Dr. A. Selvan	Education	68-69
20.	Family Environment As A Determinant of Academic Anxiety And Academic Achievement	Dr. RajKumari Kalra , Ms. Preeti Manani	Education	70-71
21.	Awareness On Man-Made Disaster In Environmental Education Among High School Students	Dr. A. Selvan , Dr. P. Paul Devanesan	Education	72-73
22.	Teaching Strategies For Simplifying Fractions In Mathematics	M. Kavitha , Dr. A R. Saravanakumar	Education	74-76
23.	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA): A Boon to Tribal Women	Dr. Sherly Thomas	Education	77-78
24.	Sports as a Tool for Interest Oriented Learning	E. Baby Sumanna	Education	79-80
25.	Balanced Scorecard for Higher Education	Jyoti D Joshi	Education	81-83
26.	A Study Of The Interactive Influence Of CAI Package On Academic Achievement	Kunal D. Jadhav	Education	84-85
27.	Reduction Of Fault Current Using SFCL At The Suitable Location In The Smartgrid	Pudi Sekhar , K .Venkateswara Rao , M. Ebraheem , P. Nageswara Rao	Electronics	86-88
28.	HRD Climate in Private Manufacturing Sector: An Appraisal	Dr. Sukhwinder Singh Jolly	Engineering	89-90
29.	Wireless Speed Measurement And Control Of Universal Motor	G. Prasad , G. Ramya Swathi, Dr. P. V. N. Prasad , A. Muneiah	Engineering	91-94
30.	Design Of Decentralized Load-Frequency Controller For Deregulated Hydro-Thermal Power Systems With Non-Linearities	M. Vinothkumar , Dr. C. Kumar , Dr. S. Velusami	Engineering	95-99
31.	Optimization Of Process Parameters For Gas Tungsten Arc Welding Aluminum Alloy A6061 By Taguchi Method	P. Hema , K. Allama Prabhu , Prof. K. Ravindranath	Engineering	100-103
32.	Numerical Approach To Predict The Thermal Performance Of Parallel And Counter Flow Packed Bed Solar Air Heaters	Satyender Singha , Prashant Dhiman , Ritika Kondal	Engineering	104-108
33.	Institute For Entrepreneurship Development Amongst Farmers- Especially Small And Marginal Land Holders.	Sweta Sanjog Metha	Entrepreneurship Development	109-111
34.	Phytoplankton Diversity From Godavari River Water (Maharashtra)	Satish.S.Patil , Ishwar.B.Ghorade	Environmental Science	11-114
35.	Nutrient Adequacy Among Selected Tribal Adolescent Girls Of Kattunayakan Tribes In Tamil Nadu	Somishon Keishing , Saranya .R	Home Science	115-116
36.	Vaigyanic Sacharata Aur Arthik- Samajik Vikas	Dr. Sudobh Kumar	Humanities	117-118
37.	E-Pharmacy In India For Reducing Inter-State Accessibility Dispersion	Satinder Bhatia	Information Technology	119-121
38.	Impact Of Intermediaries' Service Delivery In Insurance Sector	Dr. P. Anbuoli , R. Meikanda Ganesh Kumar	Insurance Sector	122-124

39.	Fate And Human Endeavour In The Mahabharata	Dr Maneeta Kahlon	Literature	125-127
40.	Facets of Hunger in Bhabani Bhattacharya's So Many Hungers and Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve	Dr. Paramleen Kaur Syali , Ruchee Aggarwal	Literature	128-129
41.	Business Financial Strategy In Small And Medium Scale Brick Industries In Kolar District, Karnataka State.	Muninarayanappa , Dr. S. Muralidhar	Management	130-132
42.	A Study On Brand Equity Analysis Foreign Global Brands Vs Domestic Popular Brands Of Adult Consumer's Perspective In Coimbatore City	A.Pughazhendi , S. Susendiran , R. Thirunavukkarasu	Management	133-135
43.	Comparative Analysis of Cellular Phone Usage Outline of Undergraduate Students.	Atul Patel	Management	136-138
44.	A Study On Management Practices Of Entrepreneurs In Informal Sector	Dr. P. Vikkraman , Mr. S. Baskaran	Management	139-142
45.	E-commerce: Emerging Channel for Marketing in India	Dr Mahalaxmi Krishnan	Management	143-144
46.	The Role Of Educational Institutions In Imparting Entrepreneurship Qualities Among Student Community	Dr. N. Ramanjaneyalu	Management	145-147
47.	Impulsive buying and In-store shopping environment	Dr. Surekha Rana , Jyoti Tirthani	Management	148-149
48.	A Study On Management Practices Of Entrepreneurs In Informal Sector	Dr. P. Vikkraman , S. Baskaran	Management	150-153
49.	Risk Management Processes And Techniques For Resolving Customer - Supplier Relationship Issues	Pramod Kumar , Prof (Dr.) S.L.Gupta	Management	154-160
50.	Risk Management Processes & Techniques For The Successful Delivery Of Web Based Software Projects	Pramod Kumar , Prof (Dr.) S. L. Gupta	Management	161-166
51.	Effect Of Brand Equity On Consumer Purchasing Behaviour On Car: Evidence From Car Owners In Madurai District	R. Suganya	Management	167-169
52.	Relationship Management Model For Global It Industry.	Rishi Mohan Bhatnagar , Prof (Dr.) S. L. Gupta	Management	170-173
53.	It's A Myth That Kirana Stores Will Be Wiped Out If FDI Is Allowed In Multi Brand Retail Sector In India	Shweta Patel , M R Brahmachari	Management	174-176
54.	Learning Organization	Sitheswaran K , Dr. K. Balanaga Gurunathan	Management	177-178
55.	Behavior Management: A Ready-made Soup For Indian Managers	Winnie Jasraj Joshi	Management	179-180
56.	Customer Relationship Management In Public Sector Banks	Dr. P. Anbuoli , T. R. Thiruvén Kat Raj	Marketing	181-182
57.	Nifedipine Compared With Isoxuprine In Treatment Of Preterm Labor	Dr. Santosh Khajotia	Medical Science	183-184

58.	Single Intraoperative Dose of Tranexamic Acid In Orthopedic Surgery (A Study of Bipolar Modular Prosthesis and Dynamic Hip Screw fixation)	Dr. B. L. Khajotia , Dr. S. K. Agarwal, Dr. Prasant Gadwal	Medical Science	185-187
59.	MVA - A Simple & Safe Surgical Procedure For First Trimester Abortion / Medical Termination Of Pregnancy (MTP)	Dr. Priyamvada Shah , Dr. Sameer Darawade	Medical Science	188-190
60.	Pneumococcal Septic Arthritis in an Infant A Case Report	Dr. Vrishali A Muley , Dr. Dnyaneshwari P Ghadage, . Dr. Arvind V Bhore	Medical Science	191-192
61.	A Clear CSF may not be a Normal CSF A Case Report	Dr. Dnyaneshwari P Ghadage , Dr. Vrishali A. Muley , Dr. Arvind V. Bhore	Medical Science	193-194
62.	Neurectomy For Tic How Much Reliable?	Dr. Monali H. Ghodke , Dr. Seemit V. Shah , Dr. Smita A. Kamtane	Medical Science	195-198
63.	To Assess Acceptability Of Female Condom As A Method Of Temporary Contraception Among Indian Women	Dr Priyanka Shekhawat , Dr. Col (Retd) Gulab Singh, Dr Vidula Kulkarni Joshi	Medical Science	199-200
64.	A Study To Evaluate The Efficacy Of Teaching Intervention On Reduction Of Pediatric Immunization Pain Among Nursing Students	Dr. Ramachandra , Dr. S. Valliammal, Mr. Raja Sudhakar	Nursing	201-202
65.	Screening Of Antenatal Patients For Thalassemia	Dr Mukta Rayate , Dr Durga Karne , Dr Shilpa Bhat, Dr Hemant Damle , Dr Sameer Darawade, Varsha Gogavale	Obstetrics & Gynaecology	203-204
66.	Reservoir Rock Quality of the Lakadong Member in the Eastern Part of Upper Assam Basin, India	Dr. Pradip Borgohain	Petroleum Geology	205-207
67.	Study Of Refractive Index And Excess Parameters For Different Liquid Mixtures At Different Temperatures	Sheeraz Akbar , Mahendra Kumar	Physics	208-210
68.	Refractometric And Excess Parameter Study For Liquid Mixtures Containing High Order Alkanes (C17) And 1-alkanols At Different Temperatures	Sheeraz Akbar , Mahendra Kumar	Physics	211-213
69.	Assessment Of Knowledge About Health Services Available At Subcentre Level Among Village Inhabitants	Balpreet Singh , Jayanti Dutta	Public Health	214-215
70.	Effect Of Yogic, Aerobic And Laughter Exercises On Body Composition (An experimental study)	Dr. Manjappa. P. , Dr. Shivarama Reddy. M	Sports	216-220
71.	Age At Menarche In Physically Active And Non Active Urban Girls Of Patiala District	Jyoti Sharma , Dr. Ajita	Sports Science	221-222
72.	Use Of Ranks For Analysis Of Groups Of Experiments	Dr. Vanita K Khobarkar , Dr. S. W. Jahagirdar, Dr. N. A. Chaube	Statistics	223-225



Risk Management Processes And Techniques For Resolving Customer - Supplier Relationship Issues

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates what risk management processes & techniques are perceived to address customer supplier relationship issues and how effective those techniques are considered to be. Whatever approach is adopted, it is likely that some compromise will be required in order for both parties to classify a project as a success. If both supplier and customer work towards an outcome that both parties can agree is a success then perhaps that is a better measure of project success than whether or not what was delivered is completely the same as what was originally specified. Anything that threatens project success (in this broad sense) may be termed a project risk. Thus the nature of supplier and customer relationships becomes very important when considering risk management for web based software projects.

More important, IT Project managers need to do more to raise the awareness of the importance of risks associated with customer supplier relationship issues with their software delivery team. In a typical situation one supplier will have several customers. Thus the context of the project risk may vary from project to project. This means that these relationships have a bearing on the risk management at a project level, not just a business level. There are two potential areas where future research might be most fruitful. They are; introduction of new technology and unrealistic schedules and budgets.

Keywords : Customer Supplier Relationship Issue, Risk Management Techniques, Software Engineering.

Introduction

In our contemporary world, software plays a part in almost every aspect of our lives. This includes government administration, telecommunications and virtually every sector of the economy. Government and business have become so reliant on software it is hard to see how they would function without it. Software is crucial to the productivity of wealthy countries. The public have an increasing, direct exposure to software, particularly commoditized applications. In short, software has become pervasive.

Anything that threatens project success (in this broad sense) may be termed as a project risk. It is suggested that IT (Information Technology) project managers may find it useful to consider the 14 important risks and how applicable those risks are for their individual organizations. Risks related to customer relationship issues are of particular significance and have tended to be over looked in the project management literature. It is submitted that study into customer supplier relationship risk management approaches may need to be combined with business risk management to gain a full understanding of the risks faced and addressed. Thus the nature of supplier and customer relationships becomes very important when considering risk management for software implementation projects.

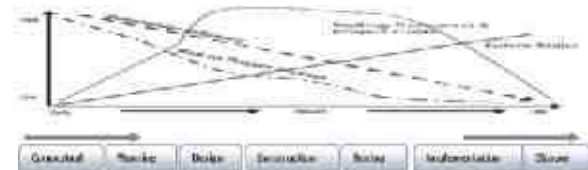
It can be argued that this traditional view of project success is not suitable for an endeavor such as software development. Agile methodology is supposed to cater frequently changing

business requirement. Unfortunately under this development methodology, the customer may in fact be taking ownership for an excessive amount of the risk. Whatever approach is adopted, it is likely that some compromise will be required in order for both parties to classify a project as a success. If both supplier and customer work towards an outcome that both parties can agree is a success then perhaps that is a better measure of project success than whether or not what was delivered is completely the same as what was originally specified.

Study team finds following hypothesis as an important criterion for the root cause analysis of the relationship issues:

Moving forward on a project without a proactive focus on customer supplier relationship increases the impact that a realized risk can have on software project and can potentially lead to failure of software projects.

Fig.2: Phase wise pattern of cost, stakeholder influence, project success and customer relation.



Hypothesis

H-1: Multilevel communication to high degree may lead to miscommunication.

H-2: Poor Account management may result into weak customer supplier relationship.

H-3: Awareness of customer expectation and providing the solution for the same during project discussion may cement the customer relationship.

H-4: Consulting techniques may result in identification and turnaround of situations where customer don't fully engage in discussions, maintaining their distance and not forthcoming.

H-5 : Sometimes sending someone to onsite to maintain a good relationship may result into positive attitude in customer.

Importance of Customer Relationship Management

CRM (Customer Relationship Management) is "an IT enhanced value process, which identifies, develops, integrates and focuses the various competencies of the firm to the 'voice' of the customer in order to deliver long-term superior customer value, at a profit to well identified existing and potential customers" (Plakoyiannaki and Tzokas, 2001).

Customer Relationship management is the strongest and the most efficient approach in maintaining and creating relationships with customers. Customer relationship management is not only pure business but also ideate strong personal bonding within people. Development of this type of bonding drives the business to new levels of success.

Once this personal and emotional linkage is built, it is very easy for any organization to identify the actual needs of customer and help them to serve them in a better way. It is a belief that more the sophisticated strategies involved in implementing the customer relationship management, the more strong and fruitful is the business. Most of the organizations have dedicated world class tools for maintaining CRM systems into their workplace. Some of the efficient tools used in most of the renowned organization are BatchBook, Salesforce, Buzzstream, Sugar CRM etc.

Objective of the study

- To explore the project risk management issues and suggest resolution that relate to relationship issues between customers and suppliers.
- The identification and avoidance of risk pertaining to customer-supplier relationship issues.

Materials and Methods

This study is concerned with realities and perceptions regarding customer supplier relationship pertaining to software projects. As previously discussed in the introduction to this study, software development is a human endeavor that is at least partially creative. It also includes a high degree of abstract representation. A purely positivist paradigm cannot account for such personal and metaphysical experiences. Thus a certain degree of interpretation is required for this part of the study.

By being grounded in a positivist paradigm, a measure of scientific rigor can be achieved. At the same time by leaning towards an interpretive paradigm this work considers those social and metaphysical aspects that are so important to customer supplier relationship. Beachboard (2004) describes the traditional existence of two contentious issues when considering IT practices in academia:

- There is a desire for scientific-style rigor in research, yet there is a pressing need to address issues relevant to practitioners.
- There is debate concerning the suitability of positivist versus non-positivist approaches to what is a branch of social science research

Beachboard further discusses these issues and consequently promotes a multi- paradigmatic approach to

research on risk management practices including customer supplier relationship. This study also leans away from a singularly positivist paradigm towards an interpretive paradigm. It should be considered that any particular view of the world sits on a sliding scale of recognized ways to view reality. A certain degree of the interpretive paradigm has been included for the purposes of this study to gain the rich insights potentially available from practitioners. The appropriateness of a mixed-method approach is further reinforced if the uniqueness of software projects is considered. To elaborate: the objective of this study is to consider current practices, a practice being a process that is generally followed. A practice might be considered a code of conduct. That is, a series of steps or actions that is expected to be followed in most situations.

An appropriate approach for this study was to interview experienced project managers involved in managing customer relationship and executing web based projects in different IT (Information Technology) organizations. Structured interviews enable the collection of targeted data while also allowing depth to be explored in areas of interest as they arise. A range of experienced project managers, delivery managers deeply involved in managing customer supplier relationship from several IT organizations were interviewed to form a multi-site field study. This was achieved by having prepared questions and by filling out a worksheet as the interview progressed. This provided a sense of the practices employed in general whilst the use of interviews provides rich insights into processes and effective techniques used by different IT organizations for managing customer supplier relationship.

A second phase of interviews achieved two purposes. First, it enabled the views of people holding different roles within the organizations to be considered in light of the results from the first phase of interviews. Second, a further interview with some of the high-level managers participating in Phase I allowed time to explore the relationships issues between suppliers and customers. Often the largest and possibly most important of these groups are the suppliers, customers and end users of the software. The majority of issues relating to customers are dealt with during the evaluation and implementation stages rather than the development stage. However there are significant issues of usability, testing and functional acceptance where direct user involvement is highly desired during development (Jiang, Klein, Chen, & Laura, 2002). In addition, involving users during the entire project lifecycle is a key way to reduce risk in these projects (Addison, 2002).

Traditionally it has not been viewed as the customers role to be involved in risk management of the project. In part this was due to perceived conflicting goals the customer naturally desires more for less whereas IT project managers will need to supply deliverables within certain resource constraints. Therefore their perspectives on risk management diverged. However as capability maturity model practice has matured, IT savvy customers have become aware of software project risks such as the consequences of making excessive demands. In contemporary practice, as the Author has observed, experienced customers and project managers recognize the need to work collaboratively, making compromises in order to achieve a successful outcome.

Data collection method

Following methods were adopted to collect the data of Customer Supplier Relationship Issues from different IT organizations as given below in TABLE 1.

1. Phase I survey style demographic questions
2. Phase I highly structured interview questions
3. Phase II exploratory interview questions.

Structured interviews were more appropriate method to use, when exploring experienced project manager's perspectives. The participants were unanimous when considering the importance of customer relationship issues as can be seen in Figure below. All interviewees perceived this risk to be worth controlling and used one or more techniques to control them

Figure 3 : Importance of risk “ Customer Supplier Relationship Issues”



- Worth controlling and a technique is used.
- Worth Controlling but technique often not used.
- Usually not worth controlling.

The interviewees were also unanimous in their attitude to risks related to customer relationship issues. In fact they all considered this risk to have the potential to supersede all other risks. They all reported that this risk was worth controlling and one or more techniques were used.

Sample Demographic Data Collected

Table 1 : Sample Demographic Data

Organization Type	Project Type	No Projects	Geography	PM Exp (Yrs.)	Type of Software
Telecom Product Company	New	4	India	>7	Billing Software
Organization Support System Integrator	New	25	UK	>8	Web Based Software
Consulting Organization	Custom	202	Europe	>10	Java/J2ee based
Portal development	Custom	25	South Asia	>6	IBM web portal
Report development	New	100	North Asia	>6	Oracle
CRM practice	Custom	55	Middle east	>8	SAP
Banking Product company	New	20	USA	>8	Object Oriented Language

Results & Discussion

What is done to identify and avoid customer-supplier relationship related risks?

In terms of identifying customer-supplier relationship risks the need to build and maintain a sense of mutual trust was repeatedly mentioned. The early detection of such risks was considered of particular importance. It was thought that formal approaches to risk management tended to identify such risks earlier. However, many of the risks that fall into this category could only be identified by informal approaches, such as chatting to the customer over a coffee. Thus both formal and informal channels needed attention in regard to the relationship.

The suppliers believed that they put considerable effort into maintaining a good working relationship with their customers so as to avoid these risks. This was conducted at multiple levels of the supplier organization but it was key to the role of the account manager/customer delivery manager. The importance of preventing these sorts of risks from escalating was stressed by the experienced project managers.

What risk responses do these practitioners use to address customer-supplier relationship related risks?

Organizational response to these risks was seen as necessitating a tailored solution to each situation. The initial step typically involved an internal discussion within the supplier organization, usually involving senior management. Consistent with the findings related to the identification of such risks, it was suggested that some issues could then be addressed through formal project management processes and that others were better addressed informally with the customer.

Steps taken to identify risks pertaining to customer supplier relationship

The steps taken by the developers and project managers were a combination of regular communication events and

informal interactions. Almost every IT organization used multiple types of regular communication channel including scheduled meetings, video conference, web chat, teleconferences, email etc. There was a common thread of having meetings that included people from various stakeholder within both the supplier and customer organizations. For example, one project manager explained that they have weekly meetings that included the supplier, vendor and the customer. It also included the supplier customer delivery manager, software development team, the application support team, quality assurance staff and a business analyst. One project manager also commented on the value of ad-hoc and formal channels of communication such as via the service helpdesk.

The participants explained that informal interactions were just as, if not more important for identifying customer relationship issues. A practice akin to “taking the customer aside for a coffee”, as one participant described it, was mentioned repeatedly. This was meant both literally but also as a euphemism to engage a key person in friendly conversation often simply to build rapport. Once the key person felt comfortable conversing with the supplier, as they would with any friendly person, they may volunteer information about important hidden risks. Many of these significant issues only came to light during such informal social encounters. When one developer was asked what they did to identify any emerging customer relationship challenges he answered: “[We] pick up the phone”. In other words maintaining this friendly, easy, informal line of communication created safe channel through which the customer might raise concerns that they felt uncomfortable raising through formal channels. This may happen at any level of the organization, which was why having multiple levels of communication between both the supplier and customer was so important.

Responses further suggested that the members of the supplier organizations had learnt over time to be sensitive to such information from unlikely sources. For example, joining a conversation around the water cooler, with people not on the project team, could provide hints of problems that had not been expressed formally. One respondent described an interesting situation where a third party became aware of a future event which might have a major impact on the supplier's project. This event was creating uncertainty in the mind of the customer but the customer had not felt confident enough to share this with the supplier. Once the supplier discovered this information from the third party they were able to arrange an informal situation with the customer where they could gently draw the concerns out of the customer. This resulted in contingency plans being drawn up for the mutual benefit of both parties and a healthier working relationship was established.

Techniques and effectiveness determinant:

This section describes different techniques to resolve customer supplier relationship issues, their effectiveness and determinant in details.

Incidence and effectiveness of techniques

Project manager participants reported that this risk superseded all other risks. They explained that if a problem that could be described as a customer relationship issue was not dealt with effectively then it could undermine the whole project.

Figure 4 : Incidence & effectiveness of techniques used to address customer Relationship issues



Table 2 : Customer Supplier Relationship Techniques, Effectiveness and Determinant

Techniques	Effectiveness	Determined to be effective by
Convince client to participate in Agile processes	Mostly	Risk reduces/Risk no longer exist.
Maintain multilevel communication	Always	The more trusting and closer the relationship the more successful the project delivery. Willingness and speed to reference + more easily forgiven if other project mistakes made.
Put extra effort beyond what was contracted in order to improve strategic customer relationship	Always	Value of customer over the long term.
Maintain multiple levels of contact between Customer and Supplier	Always	Longevity of customer – supplier relationships which have surpassed individual's tenure within the Organization
Send resources to onsite on rotation basis in order to maintain good relationship with customer.	Always	Immediate lift in positive attitude in customer. When someone not send, occasionally had customer relationship issues.
Strong account management	Always	Account Managers/Customer Delivery Managers at onsite should build up strong business relationship with customer.
Consulting techniques	Always	Results in identification and turnaround of situations where customers do not fully engage in discussions, maintaining their distance and not being forthcoming.
Multilevel communication to a high degree	Mostly	Not always effective because sometimes miscommunication occurs or perception of importance of some issues can be difficult between customer and supplier.

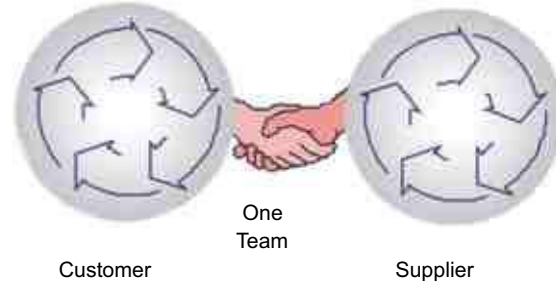
Table 3 : Context, Issues & Techniques For Resolving Customer Supplier relationship issues

Customer supplier relationship issues and Effective Techniques :		
Context	Issues	Effective Techniques
Customer Contact Approach	A multiple level contact approach is not in place for managing customer relationship issues and this issue may threaten project success. What other things should an organization do to keep a positive customer relationship and to identify any emerging challenges?	Establish one channel of communication via Account Manager/ Customer Delivery Manager (CDM-Customer Delivery Manager who is based out of onsite, works as a front face for customer. Helps in identifying and managing customer relationship issues) Direct communication with customer via phone calls, email, chat etc. Informal interaction: Social chat with customer over coffee. Propose to customer for Lunch/Dinner.
Distance-Offshore/Onsite	Physical distance (Onsite-Offshore) Developer-customer communication is not happening through one channel – i.e. through Customer Delivery Manager. Typically development team doesn't have strong relationship with customer. Language barriers sometimes Results in time consuming and ambiguous Lack of appreciation for problems	Developer to establish a channel of communication with customer via Account Manager/Customer Delivery Manager, apart from normal direct communication (i.e Audio calls, video calls, email, chat , web link , live link etc. Effective Implementation of rotation plan, where offshore development resources are given chance for travelling onsite for face to face interaction with customer.
Issue Log for managing issues.	Some time issues are not maintained and tracked properly. Mismanagement of issue may result into customer escalation.	Project manager to ensure issue logs are maintained, discussed and tracked until closure.
Response to an issue	How to respond to customer, when an issue has been identified.	Discuss in regular project meeting Highlight in project report Informal discussion around coffee. Provide options and often make recommendation.
Flexible approach of customer towards formal risk management	Customers usually don't want to pay to do Risk Management and may not prefer formal risk management. Worry about it when it happens.	Propose prototype and agree with customer for the contingency budget. Adopt Spiral Methodology and agree with customer for the contingency budget. Adopt agile methodology and agree with customer for the contingency budget.

Customer Supplier Risk Management Principles

Customer Supplier Risk Management extends risk management with team-oriented activities involving customer and supplier, where customer and supplier work together as a one team for resolving the risk in order to have successful delivery of projects.

Fig.5 : Customer & Supplier working as a One Team



Principles of Customer Supplier Risk Management

The first two principles below added to the five principles of customer supplier risk management constitute the principles of One team risk management. Open communications are further enhanced when customer and supplier use consensus-based processes, tools and techniques in order to have successful delivery of the project.

What is the "One Team" Concept?



- Willingness to listen
- Complementary mgt teams
- SME leadership and mentoring
- Executive involvement
- Mutual ownership and accountability
- Mutual success not blame
- Open access to engineers
- Relationships across levels
- Enablement not ownership
- Recognizing and providing opportunities for growth
- Not about "up and down" escalations
- Not about "over the wall"
- Not about barriers

Customer Supplier Risk Management Functions

Customer supplier risk management functions is a framework for managing programs/projects as a one-team by sharing project goal focused on results, and using the processes and effective techniques of risk management for cooperatively managing risks and opportunities. Customer supplier risk management adds two new functions, Initiate and One-Team, to recognize both the required cultural paradigm shift and the emphasis on teamwork required for customer and supplier to work as a One Team and resolve issues and risks pertaining to customer supplier relationship issues

Table 4 : Principle And Effective Processes/approach Required For Managing Customer Supplier Relationship.

Principle	Effective customer supplier risk management requires:
Shared project goal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sharing project goal based upon common purpose, shared ownership, and collective commitment. Focusing on quality delivery within agreed parameters.
Teamwork	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working cooperatively to achieve a common goal. Pooling talent, collaboration, skills, and knowledge.
Global perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Viewing within the project/program context.
Forward-looking view	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anticipating uncertainties.
Open communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enabling communication. Using consensus-based processes, tools and techniques in order to have successful delivery of projects.
Integrated management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Making risk management integral.
Continuous process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Managing risks routinely.

Fig.6 : Project Risk Paradigm and Risk Management Functions

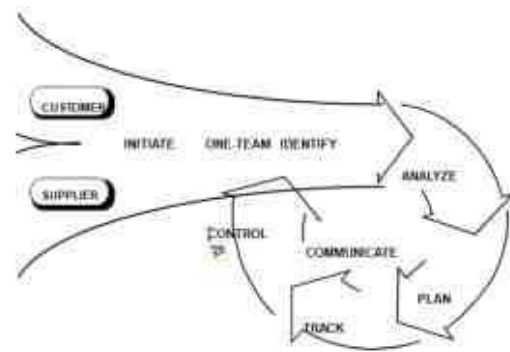


*Note: One Team is used as an action verb.

Customer Supplier Risk Management Model

Customer supplier risk management model is shown below. Each function has a set of activities that are backed by processes, methods, and tools that encourage and enhance communication and teamwork. Two additional functions, Initiate and One-Team, described below complete the model.

Fig.7 : Customer Supplier Risk Management Model



Customer Supplier Risk Management Functions

The table below describes how Customer Supplier Risk Management model implements the risk management functions as a One team . Communication is an integral part of all these activities. However, explicit formal activities provide excellent communication opportunities for both customer and supplier.

Functions : Description

Initiate: Recognize project need and commit to create one team culture. Either customer or supplier may initiate team activity, but both must commit to sustain the team.

One Team: Formalize the customer and supplier team and merge the viewpoints to have common project goal. Systematic methods periodically and jointly applied. Share understanding of the project risks and their impact. Establish joint information base of risks, priorities, metrics, and action plans.

Example methods:

- Team building

Identify : Search for and locate risks before they become problems. Identify risks and set project priorities to arrive at a joint understanding of what is important. Identify new risks and changes.

Example methods:

- Examine each element of the project work breakdown structure to uncover risks.
- Conduct a risk assessment using risk category, source.
- Interview subject matter experts.

Function : Description

Analyze : Process risk data into decision-making information. Risk analysis is performed to determine what is important to the project, to set priorities, and to allocate resources. Group risks and quantify impact, and time frame.

Example methods:

- Rank the risk based on risk exposure (Probability*Impact)
- High exposure risk should be tracked and attended to

Plan : Translate risk information into decisions and mitigating actions and implement those actions. Joint risks require One team approach to develop commonly agreed mitigation plans. Establish the mitigation, contingency plans for the risks.

Example methods:

- Fish Bone Diagram
- Brainstorming
- Pert charting

Note: A joint risk is one that requires action or attention by both customer and supplier.

Track : Monitor risk indicators and mitigation plans. Indicators and trends provide information to activate plans and contingencies. These are also reviewed periodically to measure progress and identify new risks.

Maintain visibility of risks, project priority, and mitigation plans.

Example methods:

- Risk-driven technical performance measures
- Performance trend charts

Control : Correct for deviations from the risk mitigation plans. Actions can lead to corrections in processes, tools etc. Any action may lead to joint resolution. Changes to risks, risks that become problems, or faulty plans require adjustments in plans or actions.

Maintain the level of risk that is acceptable to the delivery managers.

Example methods:

- Action plans
- Decision trees and tables

Communicate : Provide information and feedback internal and external to the project on the risk activities, current risks, and emerging risks. Communication occurs formally as well as informally.

Establish continuous, open communication. Formal communication about risks and action plans is discussed during design reviews, customer calls and user requirements meetings.

Example formal processes:

- Project Review: Weekly review meetings to evaluate status, new risks, priorities, and action plans.
- Joint Action Planning: Joint activity to develop mitigation and contingency plans for joint risks.

Scenario Comparing One-Team Risk Management to Risk Management

Customer supplier risk management builds on the principles and functions of risk management considering customer and supplier as One team. To show the differences between One-Team risk management and general risk management, a scenario of how a risk would be handled in each is compared in Table 5.

Conclusion

In terms of identifying customer-supplier relationship risks, the need to build a sense of mutual trust was repeatedly mentioned. The early detection of such risks was considered of particular importance. It was thought that formal approaches to risk management tended to identify such risks earlier. However many of these risks could only be identified by informal approaches such as chatting to the customer over a coffee. It would be useful to include the perceptions of account managers/customer delivery managers regarding these issues in further research since their role is key in such relationships.

Project managers may need to do more to raise the awareness of the importance of risks associated with customer relationship issues within their own organizations. Project managers, senior developers and testers that participated in this study perceived risks related to customer relationship issues have potential to supersede all other risks. Although the project managers and senior developers agreed that this was a very important risk they generally did not exhibit the same level of awareness of its potential

impact, on individual projects but also on the organization as a whole.

This finding is not evident in the project management literature. It is considered in some depth, however, in the business change literature. Software projects by their nature tend to involve varying amounts of business change. The two are inexorably linked together, since business change drives software requirements and software functionality binds business processes. Hence there is a significant gap in the software project literature in terms of researching customer relationship issues as they relate to software project management in general and customer supplier risk management in particular.

This study conducted some exploratory research methodology into this area. The customer's business environment appears to have a large impact on the project risks. In some markets customers seem to be risk averse and seek commoditized software solutions. In other markets customers are seen to have a mature understanding of software risks and the value of customized software solutions. In these latter cases, the customers and suppliers seem to be more likely to take a partnership approach to overcoming problems and ensuring a project outcome that both parties can call a success.

There is much more that can be learned from practitioners in this important domain.

For example, the perceptions of customer project risk management and relationship issues could be explored. Of particular interest would be to gain greater insight into how and why suppliers and customers develop and maintain a partnership approach for managing and maintaining good relationship throughout the project.

Table 5 : Comparison between Risk management and One-Team risk management based on function

Function	In Risk Management	In One-Team Risk Management
Initiate	There is no comparable activity (the first activity is to identify risks).	Customer requests the supplier to execute risk management as a one-team. Customer separately identifies the project risks. Supplier separately identifies the project risks.
One-Team	There is no comparable activity (the first activity is to identify risks).	Customer and supplier do team building. Customer and supplier formally constitute a project team to conduct Project Reviews for the project.
Identify	Supplier identifies risk of inadequate time in the test lab prior to project delivery.	Supplier identifies risk of inadequate time in the test lab prior to project delivery and both (Customer & Supplier) agrees for the same.
Analyze	Supplier identifies this risk as first priority.	Supplier reviews risk with customer during project review meeting. Customer and supplier jointly determine the high exposure risk.
Plan	Supplier plans to reorder test schedule to ensure critical elements are tested first in case risk proves true.	Customer and supplier jointly plan to have: • supplier reorder tests • customer locate & secure contingency test lab
Track	Test schedule is reordered.	Each test event and planned action is monitored jointly for follow-up.
Control	Risk proves true. Supplier asks for delay in delivery time to complete testing.	Risk proves true. Supplier makes use of contingency lab for the rest of testing.
Communicate	Internal communications are open. Issues are shared with the customer on a case-by-case basis. The test schedule does not come up until the supplier asks for a delay.	Internal communications are open. Communications between customer and supplier are open. Customer and supplier know ahead of the decision the risk and alternative actions to take.
Results	Project delivery is delayed to allow for complete testing.	Project is delivered on time, completely tested. Customer and supplier now know each other's point of view and both share a common set of priorities.

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