

## **Client-Consultant Relationship in Building Development Projects in Singapore**

**Chew Ah Seng, David**

Associate Professor, School of Civil and Environmental Engineering,  
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

**Wong Wai Fan**

Associate Professor, School of Civil and Environmental Engineering,  
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

### **Abstract**

Good client-consultant relationship is the capstone in today's building development industry, which faces the challenges from technological advances, dynamic market conditions and global competition. Healthy relationships are absolutely necessary for clients to meet or exceed project goals and for consultants to secure future contracts and useful references. This paper examines the state of the client-consultant relationship in building development projects in Singapore, using survey questionnaire and interviews. The study found that clients perceive consultants as not spending sufficient time on projects, expecting them (clients) to know exactly what they want and are reluctant to make changes once detailed design commences. In contrast, consultants perceive clients to be giving unreasonable timeframe for assignments, slow and indecisive in authorization and not valuing efforts made by the consultants. The study suggests that clients and consultants adopt a partnership mindset and work proactively towards common projects goals; have mutual respect, trust and understanding through formal and informal communications to enable both parties to work for project success. Other inherent conflicts between clients and consultants are analyzed and advantages arising from such a partnership approach are discussed.

### **Keywords**

Construction management, Communication, Motivation, Relationship building, Partnering

### **1. Introduction**

Today's building construction industry is characterized by the need to cope with environmental changes and advancement in technology. Clients' demands are responding rapidly to meet the changing organizational and market forces. Consultants' role also has to evolve so as to take on the added challenges. Through the project life, clients and consultants interact intensively to meet the project goals. Demand for a good quality building product delivered on time and within budget is now part of the service ethos. The burgeoning size and complexity of building projects overwhelm many a client, who falls back on the expertise and experience of the consultant to advise on the client's interest. However, when the supremacy of the client's needs is not

recognized in the same light by the consultant, relationship between the client and the consultant takes a rough ride.

Clients also have to keep tab on the advancement in construction and building automation technologies. Keeping an open mind helps to open the door to opportunities while maintaining a master-servant mindset only misses the benefits from a partnership. Failures to meet each party's expectations often result in conflicts that eventually lead to frustrations, costs and time wastage. As any building development is usually a multi-million project with a time-span of a few years, it is important to study the client-consultant relationship to alleviate any possible disputes during that critical period.

This paper examines the state of the client-consultant relationship in building development projects in Singapore, using both survey questionnaire and face-to-face interviews. Data collected from experienced personnel and professionals from client and consultant organizations are analyzed and concluded with findings and suggestions to enhance their relationship and project success.

## **2. Management of Client-Consultant Relationship**

A number of literatures were written on the topics of building development and partnering concepts, but little was mentioned on aspect of client-consultant relationship. Smith and Love (2001) noted that unlike in the past when clients generally accepted what they were presented, creative solutions are expected from consultants nowadays. Clients have forced major structural and procedural changes on industry through the increased use of alternative procurement methods such as design-and-build, partnering, re-engineering and other approaches. Such changes might affect the "state of health" of relationship between clients and those consultants who could not measure up to the expectations of the former.

Degoff and Friedman (1985) discussed various aspects of construction management and argued that problems could arise between the client and consultant before a construction manager is engaged. This is mainly caused by both parties' different perceptions about project's objective and criteria for success. Leary (1992) suggested that consultants who participated in the design process jointly with the architect should be engaged by the architect to avoid any complications in working with the clients. Further, clients need to be respected and kept informed as their projects represent major financial commitment and failure to achieve this would result in conflicts between clients and consultants.

T'ng (1997) observed that the sizes of consultant team and client team may influence the time taken to finalize design. Conflicts may arise when the consultant requires more than one client representative (or client-rep) to endorse his design in a big project. Anderson (2003) underlined the importance of a pro-active client-rep and sound contractual relationships among the parties to maintain a good client consultant relationship for overall project success.

Pocock and Liu (1997) validated that alternative project approaches such as design-and-build and partnering had better interaction and integration effect among the main project parties, which is contingent upon a good client-consultant relationship. Ahmed et al. (2003) identified the causes of construction delays as differences in perceptions and responsibilities from the different parties, resulting in adversarial relationships among these parties.

Chan (1998) addressed the issue of adverse relationship in construction industry and advocated the partnering concept to overcome this problem with a case in Hong Kong. However, this partnering concept is applied only between the client and contractor, and not specifically between the client and consultant. In an entirely different context, Kellen (1997) examined the management of client-consultant relationship in the IT and software industries and concluded that most projects failed for non-technical reasons and he advocated the mastering of non-technical aspects of project development, principally in the aspects of communication and relationship building.

### 3. Empirical Findings

The survey has a two-fold objective- firstly to find out the perception of clients of their consultants based on their past encounters, and vice versa, to deduce the causes and state of their relationship; secondly to identify the obstacles and ways to improve their relationship. Interviews with highly experienced professionals in client and consultant firms were conducted for their views on client-consultant relationship.

#### 3.1 Perception of Client and Consultant on One Another

To find out what kind of relationship clients and consultants have, the obstacles as perceived by each party on the other that lead to a poor relationship were ascertained and summarized as follows:

Client's Perception of Consultant	Consultant's Perception of Client
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• consultants <u>frequently</u> do not spend sufficient time on projects</li> <li>• consultants <u>frequently</u> expect their clients to know exactly what they want</li> <li>• consultants are <u>frequently</u> reluctant to make design changes once detailed design commences</li> <li>• consultants' personnel change <u>frequently</u> due to high turnover</li> <li>• delay in commencement of work on project is <u>occasionally</u> due to consultants' slow response</li> <li>• due to lack of relevant experience, consultants <u>occasionally</u> rely on client-rep for solutions to manage the contractor</li> <li>• consultants <u>occasionally</u> fall below their client's expectations</li> <li>• consultants <u>occasionally</u> are not able to foresee problems and provide timely solutions</li> <li>• consultants <u>occasionally</u> do not work well in coordinating their work</li> <li>• consultants <u>seldom</u> practice value engineering for client's interest</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• clients <u>frequently</u> give an unreasonable timeframe for consultants to prepare their work</li> <li>• Clients <u>occasionally</u> expect consultants to coordinate other subcontractors or suppliers outside the main contractor's work</li> <li>• clients <u>occasionally</u> do not pay for project management fee but expect consultants to handle such tasks</li> <li>• clients <u>occasionally</u> require a lot of effort and time by consultants to convince them to accept changes</li> <li>• clients are <u>occasionally</u> slow in authorization/response and are indecisive</li> <li>• clients are <u>seldom</u> a good source of referrals</li> </ul>

From the above evidence, it is clear that both parties are responsible for their less-than-desirable relationship.

### 3.2 Responses to Client-Consultant Relationship Issues

Another objective of the survey is to identify the obstacles to good client-consultant relationship and the keys to a good relationship. From the questionnaire survey, it was revealed, in the order of agreeable responses, that

- a clear understanding of duties and responsibilities of each party is critical for mutual trust and confidence (91%)
- the key to a good client-consultant relationship is to adopt a healthy and productive partnership concept (88%)
- poor client-consultant relationship reduces morale of entire project team (86%)
- clients and consultants with common project goal help to build a strong relationship in successful project (85%)
- having a clear design brief at the onset helps to reduce subsequent changes and frustrations between clients and consultants (83%)
- client and consultant should maintain proper documentation process to reduce potential for conflicts and miscommunication (77%)
- clients and consultants should monitor the projects closely at every stage of the development (74%)
- consultants should not offer a solution based on their track record only but one that is most suitable to meet the client's problem (69%)
- for effective teamwork between clients and consultants, it is important that clients keep tab on construction technologies and design trends so as to appreciate consultants' recommendations (54%)
- consultants, in setting their goals too low and allowing themselves more time for design works, are doing themselves a disservice (46%)

### 3.3 Responses from the Interviews

The interviews were conducted to elicit in-depth views and personal experiences of the professionals on issues concerning client-consultant relationship that offered possible explanations to the survey findings and also provided further insights. The qualitative findings are as follows:

- **Clear roles and responsibilities**  
Roles and responsibilities of both parties should be clearly spelt out in the contract, with full commitment to be expected; clients often presumed more responsibilities for consultants than contracted and consultant felt that clients should provide clear instructions/information to facilitate project development and progress.
- **Communication**  
There must be established procedures for open communication so that information are exchanged expeditiously; mutual respect should prevail where both parties are receptive to different opinions and concepts and the "master-servant" mentality should be avoided; consultants should ensure that clients know what the end product is before work commences, with the use of mock-ups or graphic presentations.

- **Client's management style**  
A flexible client who is forthright in decision-making contributes to a healthy relationship with consultants, as contrasted to a rigid and bureaucratic style of management. On average, the former are organizations from the private sector, which enjoy better relationship than the latter which comprise organizations from the public sector.
- **Client's knowledge**  
Client's knowledge in construction technology and building requirements can make for smooth project development through a client-rep who is technically proficient; such a person can share and be acquainted with consultant's regular updating of project information; client's ability to appreciate technicality helps to minimize changes made to a project.
- **Consultant's professionalism**  
Consultant should be knowledgeable and should not depend on contractor's information to advise the client or vice versa; consultants should accord priority to the project once contract is signed and also should avoid frequent changes of personnel; consultants also have to advise the clients on the impact of project on the public and society at large that would affect its long term success; consultants' commitment is crucial for enhancing relationship with the client, ensuring project success and future contracts.
- **Quality of service**  
Consultants and clients should be encouraged to conduct independent service quality (SQ) audits and to apply for national/international quality awards; consultant should consider maintainability of design to avoid any problem for client in the future. This would engender goodwill from clients who would likely award future jobs or recommend as referrals to consultants.
- **Incentive for consultants**  
Monetary incentive could be used to motivate consultants to practise value engineering; consultant should be paid well and promptly for rendering good services to clients; it is useful for consultants to offer differentiated pricing for varying levels of involvement or scope of work; consultants do not share client's goals when they only earn a fixed fee while their scope of work is being expanded by the client.
- **Use of referrals**  
Some clients do not use referrals due to their own financial regulations, particularly those public-listed clients and public organizations. As bids are required for new projects, consultants do not see the need to maintain a long-term relationship.
- **Partnering**  
Both parties consider partnering as a win-win strategy for project success in an increasingly competitive market environment. Globalization has spurred many clients to realize the power of partnership with consultants as a way to doing business. Mutual understanding, trust and respect are essential for this partnering approach.

## 4. Conclusions

The importance of good client-consultant relationship cannot be over-emphasized in today's building development industry, which is challenged by technological advancement, dynamic market demands and global competition. This paper examines the factors contributing to the state of client-consultant relationship in building development projects in Singapore. It revealed the underlying conflicts and weaknesses of both the client and consultant and highlighted measures that could improve their relationship. In essence, both parties should steer clear of their common pitfalls by changing their traditional perception and practices, through effective communication and partnership to enhance their relationship for a win-win outcome of a successful project. Professionalism and teamwork, coupled with trust, mutual respect and clear understanding of roles and responsibilities of each party, could serve to strengthen the client-consultant relationship and the partnering approach is strongly recommended.

## 5. References

- Ahmed, Syed M. et al. (2003). "Delays in Construction: A Brief Study of the Florida Construction Industry", *ASC Proceedings of the 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference*, Clemson University, Clemson, South Carolina, pp.257-266.
- Anderson, R.T. (2003). "Working with Owner Representatives During Design and Construction", *Roundtable Discussion Luncheon*, AIA/AGC/ACEC Liaison Committee.
- Chan, P.C. (1998). "Critical Issues and Challenges Into The Next Millennium", Proceedings from *Second International Conference on Construction Project Management*, NTU-CIDB Centre for Advanced Construction Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.
- Degoff, R.A. and Friedman, H.A. (1985). *Construction Management*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Kellen, V. (1997). *Managing the Client-Consultant Relationship*, <http://www.kellen.net/vk>
- Leary, A.F. (1992). *Construction Administration in Architectural Practice*. McGraw Hill.
- Smith, J. and Love, P. (2001). "Adapting to Clients' Needs in Construction- a Dialogue", *MCB University Press*, Vol.19.
- Pocock, J.B. and Liu, L.Y. (1997). "Impact of Management Approach on Project Interaction and Performance", *Journal of Construction Engineering and Management*, Vol. 123, American Society of Civil Engineers.
- T'ng, L.L. (1997). *Factors Affecting Design Development Time of Commercial Projects in Singapore*. Unpublished postgraduate dissertation, National University of Singapore.