

The Attributes of Malaysian Construction Clients during Briefing Process and Factors Influencing Them: A Comparison between Public and Private Clients

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Abstract

The paper presents the findings of the 37 semi-structured interviews and the questionnaire survey of 104 consultant architects who involved in the public and private projects. The finding highlighted the current performances of client's attributes during briefing process and factors influencing them. Three categories of clients attributes were investigated namely, quality of client's representatives, brief management efforts and commitment of client's organization. A comparison was made between the public and private clients on similar situational factors of type of client, nature of the project and quality of design team that influencing their attributes. The paper concludes with significant variables that influenced their attributes and recommendation for the clients and design team to improve the client's attributes during briefing process.

Keywords

Client's attributes, Briefing process, Public client, Private client

1. Introduction

The strategic brief which prepared during pre-development phase has the most influence on the course of other phases to come. The success of these phases very much depends upon the decision made during briefing. Latham (1994) confirmed that better briefing is a key process to the success of the project. However, in many projects the process was severely under resourced and neglected as a source of improved project product (Banwell report 1967 cited in Yusof, 1997; Mac Kenzie, 1979 cited in Bowen, 1999; Brown 2001; CABE, 2003; Takim, 2005).

In the briefing process the client's needs for proposed building are expressed. These needs form objectives and definition of the project formulation. The objectives and definition of the project is the main agenda, which provide direction for a project implementation. Conformity to this agenda is essential for successful outcomes of the project (Abdul-Kadir and Price, 1995; Lim and Ling, 2002; Ahmad *et al.*, 2005). The clients are responsible for determining and expressing their needs and requirements to other project participants and leading the design team in transforming those requirements into a completed building (Jawaharnesan, 1997).

The development of brief for construction project is facing two main problems. There are inadequate brief and changes of brief at the later stage (Latham, 1994; Barret and Stanley, 1999; Kamara *et al.*, 1999; Smith, 2000; Blyth and Worthington, 2001; Austin *et al.*, 2002; Kelly *et al.*, 2005; Othman *et al.*, 2005).

The problems were generated from two key issues. Firstly, is inability of clients to provide the required information during briefing and design process. Clients are the best person who knows about their organization and what they need to strategically support their business. However, some clients or their representatives do not clearly understand their organization mission or are unable to express their requirements that result in vague or unclear project objectives.

Secondly, their inability to visualize and read the drawings are major barriers to establish the client's perceptions and requirements as similar to what is understood by the design team (Barret and Stanley, 1999; Blyth and Worthington, 2001). Lack of knowledge and experiences in implementing the construction project leaves the clients with no clue on what to expect and how to play their roles and responsibilities (Barret and Stanley, 1999). This is particularly difficult for them not only to express their operation requirements but also to confirm the option forwarded to them as meeting their requirements.

The problems had caused dissatisfaction to the clients as it affected the time, cost, quality and functionality of the produced building (Latham, 1994; Smith 2000; Barret and Stanley, 1999; Kelly *et al.*, 2005, Takim, 2005). According to Kelly *et al.*, (1992), inadequate brief is probably the main reason why buildings have been wasteful of resources or defective in use.

Latham (1994) in his report emphasized that active participation of clients is one of the most important factors in ensuring project success. The quality of the service that clients receive depends partly on the client's own involvement in the project. This will require positive attributes from the clients to promoting continuous improvement to all phases and particularly briefing process of a project. They are two main types of construction clients' i.e. public and private client. The study investigates and compare between current performances of public and private client's attributes during briefing process and factors influencing them. The findings will enable the clients and design teams to pay special attention on different types of client in the effort to improve their performances in terms of positive attributes, thus improving the briefing process of construction projects.

1.1 The Client Attributes

Client attributes refer to client's characteristics or qualities during their participation in construction process (Kometa *et al.*, 1994; Lim and Ling, 2002). In this study client attributes refer to client's characteristics qualities during their participation in briefing process. The client's representatives were classified into two, executive and technical representative. They played an important role in imparting required information to the design team about their proposed project (Barret and Stanley, 1999).

During the briefing process, the key tasks of the clients are to deliver information on client requirements and to ensure those requirements are understood by the design team in order to translate that into the concept and a detailed design of the proposed building. In other words, clients need to prepare a strategic brief and monitor that until the approval of detailed design and specification. In delivering these tasks an executive representative is responsible for formulating the policy of the project that includes decisions on project goals and objectives that support the organization's business mission. The executive representative provides approval on major issues such as scope of works and related resources required for the project. These become the parameters of the project that provides direction for his technical representative and other project participants for project implementation.

On the other hand, the technical representative, who is normally the project manager for the client has the duties to manage the gathering of functional and operational information for strategic brief development and managing the briefing process with the design team in translating it into project brief and the subsequent design for the project.

Review of literature from main references of Kometa (1994), Latham (1994), Kerzner's (1995), Jawaharnesan (1997), Bowen (1999), Barret and Stanley (1999), Lim and Ling (2002) and CABE (2003) on client related attributes in project management process had identified a total of 31 most important client attributes during briefing process (refer Table1, 2, and 3). The related attributes were re-categorized into three categories for a more organized and meaningful comparison. There are quality of client's representative, brief management efforts and commitment of client's organization.

2. Research Methodology

The research method adopted were evolving in nature where the questionnaire survey was preceded from exploratory postal survey which first carried out to provide information on formulating the scope of the research. From the census of 2100 of registered Architects in Malaysia, 394 responses were found to be useful for statistical analysis. Having confirmed on the scope of the research, 37 semi-structured interviews were carried out to investigate the process of briefing practiced locally and to validate the identified variables from the literature and explore new variables. These respondents were further pursued for final questionnaire survey

3. Research Finding and Discussion

This study is based on 104 respondents which more than half (56.7%) of the respondents were principal of the architect's firm, followed by senior architects 26.9% and the least (16.3%) is the project architects. Majority (89.4%) of them have at least 11 years of working experience in construction industry, with nearly two thirds (60.6%) of them with more than 15 years of experience. On the other hand, two thirds (66.4%) of the respondent have been with the current firm for at least five to 15 years at the time the data were collected.

3.1 The Comparison on Quality of Client Attributes Between Public and Private Clients

3.2 Quality of Client Representatives

An interval data was obtained from the survey, which was measured on the scale of 1 to 5, where scale 1 represents "very low", 3 represent "moderate" and scale 5 represents "very high" quality of attribute. The results obtained from 104 consultant architects of which 60% of them involved in public projects and remainders 40% involved in private projects. Table 1 presents the results on level of client attributes in the first category of qualities of client's representatives for both public and private clients.

The result indicated that the qualities of the client's representatives for both public and private clients were good, where the average means were 4.01(high) and 3.68 (moderate) respectively. However the qualities of the private clients were slightly higher which the t-test carried out showed that six out of 13 related attributes were found significantly different (refer Table 1). The findings were supported by the literature, where public clients were more complex due to their hierarchical in nature that is likely to have high level of conflict within the organization, resulting in poor understanding of project objectives among their project teams compared to private sector clients (Chern and Bryant 1984; Walker, 1995 and Green 1996).

Table 1: The Qualities of Client Representatives of Public and Private Clients

Client Attributes	Public Client N=62	Private Client N=42	T-Test
Knowledge in construction process	3.48	3.57	0.67
Experiences in construction process	3.40	3.50	0.65
Knowledge of their organization mission	3.92	4.19	0.11
Commitment	3.90	4.40	*0.00
Authority in decision making	3.60	4.17	*0.00
Ability to lead and manage project	3.44	3.74	0.11
Ability to coordinate and foster teamwork with project team	3.35	3.64	0.14
Ability to communicate and manage flow of information	3.40	3.76	*0.03
Degree of trust in designer's team	3.98	4.29	0.06
Understanding of project objectives	4.06	4.52	*0.00
Understanding of project priorities	4.03	4.36	*0.05
Awareness of project constraints	3.79	4.12	0.06
Understand their roles and responsibilities	3.76	4.24	*0.00
Average	3.68	4.01	-

In contrast, flatter structure of private sector clients, provided efficient communication and allowed their representatives to possess higher authority in decision making (Green, 1996; Li and Mustapha, 1995). Private clients were profit oriented, therefore very committed in achieving their goals compared to benefit and obligatory oriented public clients (Green, 1996).

In addition, findings from the interview highlighted that in Malaysia, Public Service Department (PWD) was the main government agent responsible for implementing most of the construction projects for public bodies. PWD placed greater emphasis on implementing the projects and completing them on time at target cost. However, they lacked focus in understanding the mission and functional objectives of the public bodies they represented.

Furthermore, it was discovered that clients have failed to learn from previous experiences. There was very little or no initiative on their part to undertake project implementation appraisal, particularly the briefing process for the purpose of improvement. In each time the clients were found repeating similar mistakes in their project implementation. It is therefore not surprise for repetitive clients such as public clients to score lower compared to private client. The finding was further supported by Takim's (2005) study, who found that clients seldom implement project success measurement. If they did it was not communicated and not on continuous basis.

3.3 The Brief Management Efforts

Table 2, presents the result on quality of client attributes in the second category of brief management efforts during briefing process for both public and private clients. The result indicated that both public and private clients were moderate in their effort in managing the brief. The private clients scored slightly higher compared to public client with an average mean value of 3.62 and 3.30 respectively. The t-test carried out showed that five related attributes were found significantly different (refer Table 2).

Table 2: The Brief Management Efforts of Public and Private Clients During Briefing Process

Client Attributes	Public Client N=62	Private Client N=42	T-Test
Organizing of client's project team	3.53	3.57	0.83
Allocating adequate time for project	3.31	3.57	0.17
Planning for brief development	3.24	3.40	0.39
Allocating adequate time for briefing process	3.19	3.40	0.29
Coordinating user group for brief development	3.10	3.40	0.10
Developing, documenting and communicating clear brief	3.13	3.50	0.06
Coordinating and monitoring of brief	3.24	3.60	0.09
Communication within client organization	3.39	3.62	*0.03
Communication with project team	3.58	3.93	*0.04
Reducing level of bureaucracy	3.19	3.76	*0.00
Ensuring changes are evaluated and taken into account	3.44	3.88	*0.01
Review brief and sign-off complete brief and specification that fully meet requirements	3.37	3.88	*0.00
Average	3.30	3.62	

Private clients were generally adopted the 'MD-consultant' approach of project management organization. Therefore, the top management deals directly with the consultant's design team and less internal interaction (Bresnen and Haslem, 1991; Green, 1996). These provide effective and efficient communication with the project team. The flatter structure of private client's organization and direct involvement of the top management reduces bureaucracy compared to public clients (Bresnen and Haslem, 1991; Li and Musthapa, 1995).

3.4 The Commitment of Client's Organization

Table 3, presents the result on level of client attributes in the third category of commitment of client's organization during briefing process. Private clients scored higher in commitment of client's organization compared to public clients with an average mean value of 4.11 and 3.66 respectively. The t-test carried out showed that four related attributes were found significantly different (refer Table 3). They are providing full time representative; maintain active participation in the project, promptness of decision making and effectiveness of communication. The private clients were profit oriented and focus on their investment. Therefore, they were more committed than the public sector clients (Bresnen and Haslem, 1991; Li and Musthapa 1995).

Table 3: The Commitment of Client's Organization of Public and Private Clients During Briefing Process

Client Attributes	Public Client N=62	Private Client N=42	T-Test
Providing finance	4.15	4.31	0.35
Providing full time representative	3.71	4.12	*0.04
Maintain active participation in the project	3.65	4.29	*0.00
Support from top management	3.92	4.14	0.18
Promptness of decision making	3.18	3.90	*0.00
Effectiveness of communication	3.37	3.95	*0.00
Average	3.66	4.11	-

3.5 Other Situational Factors Influencing Client Attributes

Nature of the project

Briefing has become a more complex task because of the increasing complexity of the nature of construction project (Kelly *et al.*, 1992; Jawaharnesan, 1997). The study had identified four main variables under these situational factors of complexity, priority, constraints and certainty to be tested against quality of client attributes during briefing. The correlation test carried out found that the levels of public clients attributes were highly influenced by the complexities of the projects. All sub-variables tested were found significantly correlated. However, there was no significant correlation of the complexities of the project with the related attributes of private clients.

The results were parallel with the interview finding that public client will employ more comprehensive project team in complex project such as hospital and big offices complex compare to smaller and less complex project. The projects were lead by senior personal that were highly committed and possess higher level of authorities. Unlike in private client their organisations were generally smaller in size and the same personal were likely to be in charged. They maintained similar level of commitments and efforts as they are very focus on their investment in achieving maximum return.

Similar results were observed in terms of priority of the project, where the attributes of public client were influenced by the levels of priority of the projects. All sub-variables tested were found significantly correlated to public client related attributes. The interview conducted highlighted that for less priority projects it may take one to three year for the public client to grant approval on the budget and proposal forwarded to them. However for high priority projects, immediate attentions were given where projects were classified as “fast-track” project.

On the other hand, in terms of certainty of the projects the related attributes of both clients were found highly influenced. Where most (26 out of 31related attributes) related attributes were found significant in the public clients and 14 out of 31 related attributes were significant in private clients. However, the constraint of the project does not affect the attributes of both the public and private client during briefing.

The results of the correlation test on the certainty of the project were consistent with the literature. Barret and Stanley (1999) and Blyth and Worthington (2001) concurred that, certainty is most important in project delivery process, clients must have the knowledge and skill in construction, full understanding of the proposed project and able to play the expected roles in order to be very certain and clearly confirmed on their requirements of proposed project. The finding was also parallel with the agreement by many interviewees discovered from the semi-structured interview that project certainty was the most important not only because it motivates the client's representatives but also all project participants to be seriously committed on the project.

The quality of the design team

Three main professional teams that frequently made-up the design teams during briefing process were investigated. They were the architects, engineers (civil and structural and mechanical) and quantity surveyors. There were two main tasks that needed to be performed by the design teams during this phase i.e. gathering and capturing the client's requirements and translating them into a concept for project solution.

Under this factor the correlation test carried out found that, the levels of public clients attributes were more influenced by the sub-variables tested compared to private clients. The public clients attributes were particularly influenced by five sub-variables i.e. the experience of the design team in managing brief with the client, commitment of the architect's team, degree of specialization in the specific type of building, teamwork within designer's team and ability to understand the client. The attributes of private clients on

the other hand were particularly influenced by three sub-variables only i.e. degree of specialization in the specific type of building, teamwork within designer's team and ability to understand the client.

4. Summary

Drawing from the results private clients were higher in the quality of attributes during briefing and maintain their qualities regardless of levels of complexities and priorities of the projects compared to public client. Private clients were profit oriented, therefore very committed in achieving their goals compared to benefit and obligatory oriented public clients. However the qualities of the attributes for both clients were highly influenced by the certainty of the project. The client and the design team need to focus on the justification of the projects as that will influence the certainty of the projects.

Both public and private clients were moderate in their effort in managing the brief. The client's representative needs to possess leadership skills and knowledge in construction process and their organization mission in order to effectively manage the whole process of the briefing. These are the key qualities required to positively contribute to a successful briefing as well as project success. In addition the leadership skill needs to couple with the authority for effective management efforts.

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