

Assessing the Performance of Clients During the Briefing Process in Malaysia: Case Study Universiti Teknologi MARA

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Abstract

In the briefing process, the client's requirements for the proposed building are communicated. This process informs decision making, especially with regard to forming the objectives and definition of the project formulation. The objectives and definition of the project are important since they provide direction and are essential for successful outcomes of the project. The clients are responsible for determining and communicating their requirements to other project participants and leading them in transforming those requirements into a completed building. Therefore the performance of clients during the briefing process is crucial. This paper describes the ongoing research carried out at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), which is continuously involved in implementing construction projects for their 24 (twenty-four) campuses nationwide. It presents the conceptual framework of the research and the findings of the pilot study carried out on such construction projects. Semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire survey on 17 mixed-development projects for various faculties within the university were administered. The data was obtained from both the client's representatives and consultant Architects involved in the projects. Three categories of clients' performance were investigated namely, quality, brief management efforts and commitment of the clients' organization. The findings highlight the current performances of clients during the briefing process and their impact on project success in terms of time, cost and functionality.

Keywords

Briefing Process, Client's Performance, Project Success, Construction Project

1. Introduction

The briefing process, the initial phase of a construction project, is associated with a high level of uncertainty with regard to the lack of information on the client's requirements. Completeness of information about the client's requirements is most important to reduce the risk of mis-interpretation by the designer and delivery of the wrong kind of building to the client (Salisbury, 2000, Norizan, 2008). Thus, the client's active involvement is crucial to ensure optimal information is communicated during the briefing stage.

The development of a brief for construction projects faces two main problems which are inadequate briefs and changes in the brief at a later stage (Latham, 1994; Barret & Stanley, 1999; Blyth & Worthington, 2001; Kelly et al., 2005; Norizan, 2008). The main cause that generated briefing problems is inability of clients to provide the required information during the briefing process. The clients themselves are the key people in the process as they are the best persons who know about their organization and what they need to strategically support their business. However, some clients or their representatives are unclear about their roles and the importance of briefing. Lack of attention and commitment from the clients during briefing can result in vague or unclear project objectives which may impact the direction of the project (Barret & Stanley, 1999; Blyth & Worthington, 2001).

These problems cause dissatisfaction to clients as they affect time, cost, and functionality of the produced building (Latham, 1994; Barret & Stanley, 1999; Kelly et al., 2005; Othman, 2006). Time and cost overruns of projects are also common problems faced by the Malaysian construction industry (Samsudin, 2005 and Abdul-Rahman et al., 2006). Samsudin (2005) identified that more than 50% of the projects faced cost overruns and some 14% of them faced overruns of up to 60% of the original project cost. Similarly, a study by Norizan et al (2005) discovered that two thirds (70%) of projects faced cost overruns and more than two thirds (75%) were found to have time overruns due to inadequate briefs.

2. The Research

Construction projects carried-out by UiTM were generally found to be delayed, suffering cost overruns and in some cases requiring major renovation works prior to user moving-in into newly completed buildings. The on-going research is carried-out to investigate the clients' performance during briefings and its impact on the outcome of the project.

UiTM is continuously involved in infrastructure construction projects including expansion works on existing buildings and the construction of new campus buildings nationwide. Therefore a pilot study was first carried out to examine the relevant issues on briefing performance of the project implementation, before larger scale data collection is carried-out. Seventeen (17) completed projects were investigated including construction of academic buildings and mixed development projects. Academic building projects comprises of various types of building for the purpose of academic activities such as lecture theaters, classrooms and studios, computer labs, library, workshops etc. Mixed development projects, on the other hand, comprises of academic and non-academic buildings. Non-academic buildings comprise of hostel, administrative and general amenities building such as mosques, food courts, health centre etc. These are commonly associated with development of new campuses.

The aim of the research is to improve the client's performances during the briefing process which is critical to the project success. Three research objectives were set out to achieve the aim of the research:

To identify the levels of client's attributes during the briefing process

To investigate the briefing practices of the client

To investigate influences of client performance during briefing on the project success

2.1 Methodology

A combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods was adopted. The investigations begin with semi-structured interviews with client representatives. The objectives of the interview were to investigate briefing practices in UiTM, to identify problems and the outcomes of the projects. Five project managers who were involved in the chosen projects were interviewed. Relevant documents and information such as final accounts of the projects were also inspected. A postal questionnaire survey was used to investigate the attributes of clients, confirming clients' practices during briefing and their

perception level of project success. Information obtained from interviews and variables on attributes of clients during briefing derived by Norizan (2008) were evaluated and re-tested in this pilot study.

3. Client's Organisation

UiTM is Malaysia's largest institution of higher learning in terms of size and population. It has experienced phenomenal growth since its inception in 1956 and it is still growing. The university has expanded nationwide with 12 branch campuses, three satellite campuses, 9 city campuses and 21 affiliated colleges. With this vast network and a workforce of 17 000, the university offers more than 300 academic programmes in a conducive and vibrant environment. It is also home to some 172,000 students. A federal agency under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), the university continues to physically expand nationwide as it needs to accommodate an enrolment of 200 000 students by 2015 (Irwan, 2011). There are urgencies to provide the necessary facilities to accommodate this huge increase in students. Besides fulfilling the role as higher education institution, the development of the university also plays a catalytic role in the nation's economic growth.

4. Briefing Practices

Public construction projects in Malaysia are implemented in various ways by different project management organizations. Projects can either be managed by the Public Works Department (PWD) or self managed by the ministries, government bodies or agencies themselves with or without an in-house project team. In most cases the PWD is the implementer for government projects. However under certain circumstances, it is conducted by the respective government bodies that possess sufficient manpower and expertise to implement their own projects. UiTM is one such organization that undertakes and implements most of their own projects as the university has the required manpower and expertise. UiTM construction projects are generally implemented using the PM-model or MD-consultant. In the case of the PM-model, the in-house technical team acts as the project manager while the MD-consultant is used in cases when the in-house technical teams are heavily loaded. They then appoint external consultants to manage the projects for them (Norizan, 2008).

Regardless of the form of management, public projects have to comply with the standard guidelines drawn up by the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) and in some cases the standard brief prepared by the PWD. The standard guidelines basically provide information on the specifications of material, space standards and approval procedures that the project has to go through. The projects are only varied in terms of capacity and minor architectural features to match the organization (Norizan, 2008). Figure 1.0 illustrates the stages involved in the strategic briefing process of public projects. The budget allocation for the intended project must first be planned and clearly allocated in the national budget plan i.e. the Malaysian Plan budget which is formulated every five years, failing which the project cannot be implemented. Budget allocations must be approved by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) and Ministry of Finance (MOF).

The briefing process begins with the preparation of statement of need and schedule of accommodation (SOA). The main parameters of the project in terms of scope of works, location, type of development and the estimated cost of the proposed projects are decided. The proposal is then submitted to MOHE for approval of the scope of works. Should this be rejected, the university needs to amend the scope of works and re-submit. The approved scope of works is then detailed in the SOA and submission and presentation of the SOA to the EPU and MOF is carried-out for project approval. The university will then proceed for project implementation by appointing a consultant design team (Irwan, 2011).

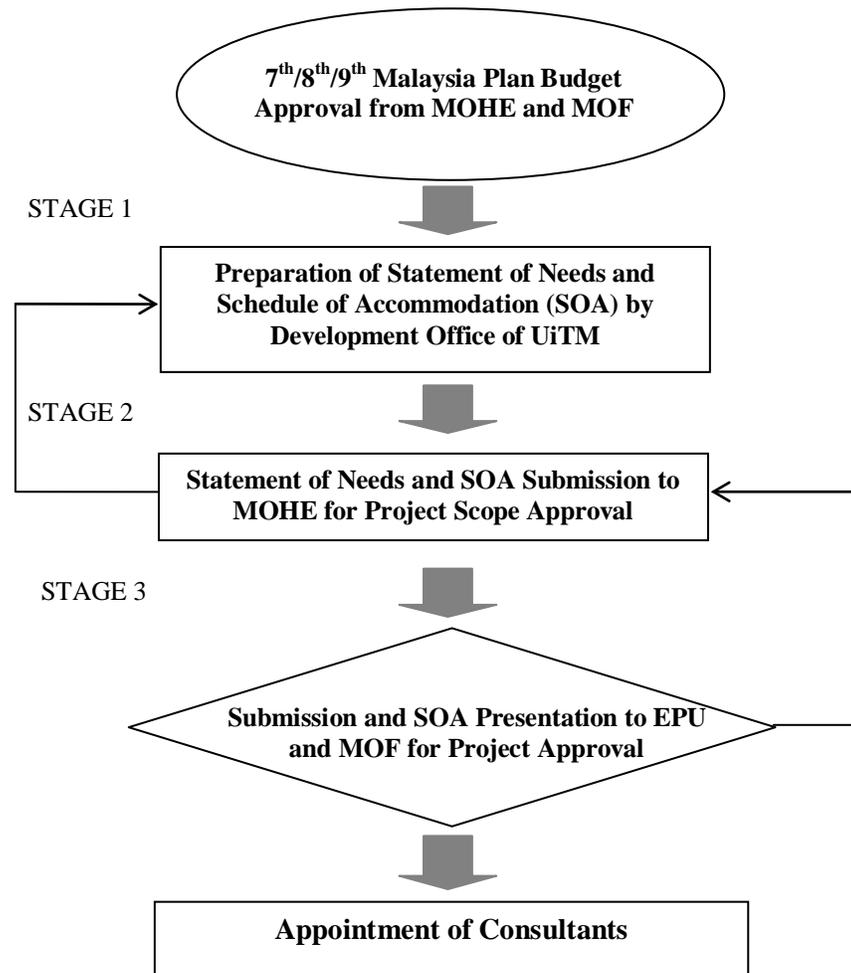


Figure 1.0 Steps and stages in the briefing process

(Source: Project Implementations Flow Chart for 7th, 8th and 9th Malaysia Plan (Bahagian Pembangunan, UiTM, 2005).

a. Clients' Practices at Various Stages of the Briefing Process

The practices of clients during the briefing process were investigated according to the stages in the flow chart. Issues and problems were also explored. The Strategic Department of UiTM manages the long term planning of the expansion of the University. The requests and subsequent allocation of funds in the five-yearly budgets are thus based on this planning. Cost yardstick against unit capacity was used as a basis for budget estimation. Decisions on which faculties to build and types of development will be further refined in the estimation. On the approval of the budget, the development office will proceed with preparation of the statement of needs and SOA which forms the strategic briefing process. Commonly, clients are keen to speed up the process of determining the parameters of the project such as scope of works, location and user requirements. The reason for this being, the approval process by MOHE may take from six months to up to two years. The approval is based on the assessment of conformance to the EPU standard and a cost saving exercise. Due to this, insufficient time is allocated to capture user requirements and there is inadequate user involvement. The following are the common problems faced during this stage due to insufficient time allocation:

- i) Users unaware of project constraints
- ii) User confusion over the direction and objectives of the project
- iii) Inadequate user involvement
- iv) Changes in user requirements
- v) Lack of objective communication with the user

Stage 2 involves the submission of statement of needs and the SOA to MOHE for project approval where the project implementer will need to defend their proposal. Lack of in-depth assessment and inadequate communication were identified as the main reasons for failure to obtain approval. While MOHE fails to clearly understand the project aims and direction, the presence of bureaucracy delays the decision for the approval of the whole scope of works proposed. More often, the scope of works was reduced and lesser budgets were approved. Such decisions on the main parameters of the project could implicate a major impact on project outcomes.

Stage 3 concerns project approval from the EPU and MOF; similar situations were encountered during this stage where the EPU and MOF lacked in-depth assessment of the proposal. The parties were more focused towards cost reduction thus displaying a lack of consideration of the aims and objectives of the proposed project. At this stage, the senior management plays a significant role to convince the authorities about the project objectives. However, their involvement during this stage was inadequate. The solution proposed suffers from cost reductions with some of the works having to be removed. Consequently, it is common practice for the Development Office to request additional budget to accommodate the required works at a later stage. This will appear as variation order.

5. Attributes of clients during briefing

Client attributes refer to client characteristics or qualities during their participation in the briefing process. Clients are represented by executive and technical representatives during briefing process. They play important roles in imparting required information to the design team about their proposed project (Barret & Stanley, 1999). Three categories of client attributes were investigated; quality of clients' personnel, brief management efforts, and commitment of the clients' organization. The results presented in Table 1 indicate the overall qualities of clients are good (3.85). They possess good knowledge (4.45) and are highly experienced (4.45) in the construction process.

Table 1: Summary of quality of client representatives

Quality of client representatives	Mean (N=104)
Knowledge of construction process	4.45
Experience in construction process	4.45
Knowledge of their organization's mission	3.45
Understanding of project objectives	3.55
Understand their roles and responsibilities	4.22
Ability to lead and manage projects	4.10
Ability to communicate and manage flow of information	3.78
Ability to coordinate and foster teamwork with project team	3.33
Degree of trust in designer's team	3.78
Maintain participation in the project	2.89
Awareness of project constraints	2.33
Average	3.85

The clients understood their responsibilities (4.22) and are able to lead and manage projects (4.10). However, they lack awareness of project constraints (2.33) and low in maintain active participation (2.89) in the project. Active participation during briefing is crucial as it will affect the flow of information. Timely decisions need to be made to reduce uncertainty during briefing. Table 2 displays the level of management efforts during the briefing process by the clients. The overall performance of the clients is low (2.45). The clients are only good at organizing their project teams. Their efforts to develop and document the brief is recorded as satisfactory (3.00), this is reflected in the low scores (mean range from

2.09-1.64) in all other efforts required during briefing. This finding explains the problems faced by the development office in obtaining approval of their proposal from the authorities (MOHE, EPU, MOF).

Table 2: Summary of client’s brief management efforts

Brief Management Efforts	Mean (N=17)
Organizing of clients’ project team	4.20
Developing and documenting clear brief	3.00
Communication within clients’ organization	3.00
Coordinating and monitoring of brief	2.09
Coordinating user groups for brief development	2.09
Ensuring changes are evaluated and taken into consideration	2.00
Planning for brief development	1.64
Allocating adequate time for briefing process	1.64
Average	2.45

Further investigation on the commitment of senior managers to communicate and partake in decision making during briefing are illustrated in Table.3. Communication and promptness of decision making are two most important factors to produce clear and accurate brief. During strategic briefing, information and decision focus on the main parameters of the project. This includes the aim and objectives of the project, scope of works, site location, project cost, project priority and programme. Senior manager possess the highest authority in making decisions on these main parameters of the project. The performance of the senior manager in communicating information is generally satisfactory (average mean. 3.10). The clients can only be sure of the site location (4.64) and programme of the project (3.82). The other parameters (refer Table 3.0) are subject to the authorities’ approval. Therefore lower levels of communication were found in these other areas. Similar results were found on the level of performance in promptness in decision making. The promptness of decision making for the objectives (4.33), site location (4.0) and programme (4.0) of the project are high. The rest recorded a below satisfactory level (mean range from 2.27-2.91)

Table 3: Levels of senior managers’ commitment during briefing

Communication within Client Organization	Mean
Project objectives	2.91
Scope of works (size, function, user of the project)	2.45
Site Location	4.64
Cost of the project	2.36
Project Programme	3.82
Project Priority (cost, functionality, time)	2.45
Average	3.10
Promptness in decision making	Mean
Project objectives	4.33
Scope of works (size, function, user of the project)	2.55
Site Location	4.10
Cost of the project	2.45
Construction Programme	4.00
Project Priority (cost, functionality, time)	2.89

6. Level of Project Success

a. Time and Budget Achievement

Project success in this study refers to achievement of the clients' requirements in terms of cost, time and functionality. Table 4 shows that the achievement of budget and time of project are low. Inspection of final accounts documentation revealed that two thirds (70.5%) of the project were delayed for more than 6 months and nearly half (47%) were delayed for more than 10 months. While 82% of the project suffers cost overruns of less than 20% of the project cost, 12% suffer overruns of more than 20% of project cost. Only 6% of the projects completed were on budget.

Table 4: Levels of project success: budget and time achievement

Criteria of Project Success	Mean N=17
Budget achievement	2.55
Time achievement	2.18

An investigation on the causes of change order which contribute to the poor time and budget achievement revealed that nearly half, (45.7%), are due to changes in decisions about clients' requirements. Thus the results reflected an inaccurate brief of the project.

b. Functionality

Functionality success refers to intended 'fitness for purpose' (CIC, 2004). Three main variables were measured to capture functionality success i.e. use; space and access. Table 5 shows detail scores on sub-variables measured. The results revealed that the achievement of functional success is moderate to low where the scores are moderate for space provision (3.24) and access (3.24) and low for uses (2.75). This reflected inaccurate brief that used for design.

Table 5: Levels of project success: functionality

Use	Mean
The building provides sufficient accommodation needed	2.91
The building provides sufficient flexibility for layout change	2.33
The building provides sufficient flexibility for services change	3.00
Average	2.75
Space	
The building provides sufficient sizes of space required	2.82
The building provides sufficient circulation area	3.91
The building provides suitable linkages between operational spaces	3.00
Average	3.24
Access	
The building provides easy access for all	3.73
The building provides sufficient car parks	2.40
The building provides clear signage and direction	3.36
The building provides safe and secure access for people	4.00
The building provides safe and secure access for goods	2.73
Average	3.24

7. Renovation Works Prior to Moving-in of the User

The semi-structured interview revealed that there were cases where newly completed projects required additional renovation works prior to moving-in of the user. Among the main reasons for renovation were:

- i) To improve the functionality and usability of spaces of the building
- ii) To upgrade the safety and security features of the building
- iii) To upgrade new requirements on services
- iv) To enhance the aesthetic appearance of the building

The completed buildings were found to be under provision due to lack of information on the expected capacity and functionality of the proposed building. The problem occurs as a result of poor strategic planning and poor briefing process at the outset. Inaccurate project parameters were due to poor practices and performance of clients during the briefing process and their failure to impart essential information. In some cases the intended users of the building were substituted with different users as a result of decisions made by the top management. The additional renovation works undertaken further reduces the level of project success.

8. Conclusion

The performance of UiTM during the strategic briefing process was inadequate. The clients lacked focus and appreciation of the importance of the briefing process, indicating that they do not fully understand the pivotal roles they play in it. Devoting more time, optimising senior management and user involvement as well as more efforts in managing brief development are significant for improving the quality of briefs. Further investigation on the characteristics of the organization stake holder should be carried out to understand the position of the project in the strategic planning of the organization. It is concluded that these systematic identification and clarification of client requirements during the briefing process holds greater chances of fulfilling the clients' needs whilst ensuring greater project success.

9. References

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