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## **The project sponsor role and benefits realisation: more than 'just doing the day job'**

### **Abstract**

The project sponsor role has been identified in both guidance and research as being a key factor affecting project success. However, there is still a knowledge gap in terms of how the project sponsor role is experienced and understood by the senior managers undertaking the role, including their understanding of their accountability for benefits realisation. Phenomenography is ideally suited to address these issues, and was used to explore project sponsor experiences at a hospital in England. One conception of the project sponsor role was 'just doing the day job', which is contrary to project sponsorship guidance, but is consistent with some of the evidence on the role in practice. Using the interactionist perspective from role theory, it is suggested that seniority enables 'role making' individuals holding such views to conflate it with their substantive position. This contrasts with the 'role taking' conception of the sponsor as 'wearing two different hats'.

## 1. Introduction

Amongst the reasons for project success and failure, one key factor is the effectiveness of senior management level project roles (Bryde, 2008; Cooke-Davies, 2002; Kloppenborg and Tesch, 2015). As project success is increasingly measured against the objectives of the project and realising benefits (Breese et al., 2015; Cooke-Davies, 2002; Musawir et al., 2017), the role of the senior manager accountable for these outcomes is under increasing scrutiny. This role is usually referred to as project sponsorship, and the individual as the project sponsor or executive sponsor (Crawford et al., 2008; Englund and Bucero, 2015; Kloppenborg et al., 2007; PMI, 2017; Van der Molen, 2015; West, 2010). However, terminology is inconsistent (Zwikael and Meredith, 2018). Alternative titles include 'project owner' (Zwikael and Meredith, 2018; Zwikael et al., 2019), and 'senior responsible owner' (SRO), the term used in the UK civil service (Lupson and Partington, 2011).

There is a limited amount of research or guidance that has specifically addressed understandings of the project sponsor role. There are practitioner-orientated books providing guidance on how to be a project sponsor (Begg, 2009; Englund and Bucero, 2015; James et al., 2013; Van der Molen, 2015; West, 2010) and research that specifically looks at the impact of sponsor behaviour on the outcomes of projects (Bryde, 2008; Helm and Remington, 2005; Kloppenborg and Tesch, 2015; Perkins, 2014). Research has identified that there can be different perceptions of the role (Crawford et al., 2008;), leading to differences in behaviour ranging from 'alienated passivity' to, at the other extreme, 'overbearing micro-management' (Englund and Bucero, 2015). However, there is a gap in the literature on what project sponsors themselves say about the position and, in particular, what they see as their role in relation to benefits. The aim of the research was, therefore, to explore inductively the qualitatively different ways that project sponsors experience and understand their role and how they conceive of that role in terms of realising benefits.

In common with other research exploring roles in project management (Bechky, 2006; Zwikael and Meredith, 2018), role theory will be used to interpret findings and deepen explanation. The structural and interactionist branches of role theory will both be utilised (Bechky, 2006). The structural perspective

on the project sponsor role focuses on tasks, norms and behaviours derived from guidance documents and organisational routines; this perspective implicitly underpins most extant research on project sponsors (Helm and Remington, 2006). Our article places a greater emphasis on exploring the interactionist (or, more fully, symbolic interactionist (McAuley et al., 2014)) perspective, whereby 'role takers' actively construct and enact the role as 'role makers', based on their understanding of it (Bechty, 2006; Turner, 1962). This perspective aligns with the aim of identifying different conceptualisations of the project sponsor role.

The interactionist perspective has been used to explore role-based coordination in projects as temporary organisations (Bechty, 2006), but here it will be related to a single role - the project sponsor. The novel aspect in relation to previous applications of symbolic interactionism theory in organisation and leadership studies (McAuley et al., 2014; Winkler, 2009) is that project sponsorship involves taking on an additional role separate from the substantive role of the individual manager.

A single organisation was used for the research, 'the hospital', an acute specialist trust employing a wide range of health care professionals, located in the North East of England. It serves the local and regional community and takes patient referrals nationally for some specialisms. As a Foundation Trust in the National Health Service (NHS), the hospital's approach to project management takes place in the context of national policies and processes. The project sponsor role was introduced in the NHS in the early 2000s (NHS, 2010). It was one of several initiatives intended to improve public sector project delivery (Cabinet Office, 2000). Its introduction was linked with the PRINCE2® methodology, which includes guidance on executive sponsorship. Use of PRINCE2® became a requirement for large-scale IT projects (Edmonstone, 2010), and structured project management methods have become accepted as a standard means of delivering major change in the NHS (NHS Improvement, n. d.).

Within the frameworks provided by the NHS nationally, local initiatives are undertaken by individual Foundation Trusts. 'The hospital' introduced a new governance structure in 2013 that included a

Project Management Office (PMO). The remit of the PMO covered service improvement projects to enhance financial efficiency across the Trust, and the wider initiatives of which these projects were a part. The PMO was not aligned to one particular professionally recognised standard, but the principle of setting up temporary work packages as ‘projects’ and ‘programmes’ with a defined life-cycle was adopted, along with specific role designations, including the project sponsor role. The research is based on the experiences of individuals from ‘the hospital’ who have been project sponsors.

The research was undertaken using a phenomenographic approach. More details on phenomenography are provided in Section 3, but the principal reason for choosing it was because of its suitability where the aim is to find out how individuals occupying a particular role conceive of that role. The use of phenomenography contributes to the unique perspective on the project sponsor role in this research, with findings addressing a hitherto neglected aspect of the role, the existence of different conceptualisations. The article makes an incremental contribution to knowledge (Nicholson et al., 2018) in the project management field and also applies role theory in a novel way.

Section 2 reviews research and guidance on the project sponsor role, to establish the existing evidence base, before the method used is described in Section 3. The results of the research are then presented in Section 4, and reviewed against the project management and benefits management literature in Section 5, in order to identify the contribution to knowledge. The conclusion in Section 6 highlights some limitations and areas for future research.

## **2. Literature Review**

This section reviews guidance for the project sponsor role and research into the project sponsor role. This is used to explore the debates in the literature on the required attributes of a project sponsor, and the role of the sponsor in benefits realization, and identify gaps in the literature.

### **2.1 Guidance on project sponsorship roles and responsibilities**

Core project management standards and methods refer to project sponsorship, but do not provide much detail on roles and responsibilities. PRINCE2® guidance (Axelos, 2017) does not define a sponsor role, but indicates that sponsorship is likely to be vested in the 'executive', an individual from the Project Board with accountability for the project's success and responsibility for appointing project team members. The PMBOK® Guide (PMI, 2017) refers to the sponsor as having a dual role, in providing resources and support for the project and also being accountable for enabling success. The sponsor addresses issues which lie above the control of the project manager and enables a smooth transfer of the project into the business of the organisation. The APM Body of Knowledge (2012: 36) states that the sponsor of a project, programme or portfolio is 'accountable for ensuring that the work is governed effectively and delivers the objectives that meet identified needs'.

While the core guidance documents may contain little detail on project sponsorship, the growing interest in governance mechanisms has meant that professional bodies have commissioned research and published further guidance on how to undertake the project sponsor role (APM, 2018; Crawford et al., 2008; Englund and Bucero, 2015). Englund and Bucero (2015:14) define sponsorship as 'a commitment by management to define, defend and support major activities from the start to the end and to ensure desired benefits are achieved'. To fulfil this responsibility, a project sponsor may be involved in a wide variety of roles, including protector, seller, negotiator, motivator, link to upper management, judge, filter and coach/mentor. The sponsor will have a key role in project initiation and will be instrumental in solving any major problems and issues over the project life-cycle. The sponsor will have a continuing role beyond project closure in ensuring that capabilities and benefits are realised (Kloppenborg and Tesch, 2015).

Englund and Bucero (2015) include amongst the key roles of the project sponsor, 'ensure that the solution fixes the problem' and 'hold the team accountable for results'. APM (2018) include 'owning the business case' and 'focusing on benefits' as being functions for the project sponsor to undertake. The understanding of the project sponsor role is an important element in identifying its impact,

particularly in relation to benefit realisation. How key responsibilities such as 'owning the business case' are interpreted in practice will have a major bearing on the influence of the project sponsor on whether projects achieve their goals and optimize benefits.

Some studies have questioned the term 'project sponsor' as too generic and have drawn a distinction between two different sets of responsibilities. Bryde (2008) drew a distinction between external focused client-representing activities and internal focused supporting/championing activities. Olsen (2018) reviewed the literature on project ownership/sponsorship and identified 'Type 1' owners who are concerned with project delivery against the business plan and benefits realisation, and 'Type 2' owners, who support the project managers and enable project delivery. Zwikael and Meredith (2018) refer to the project sponsor as 'a senior manager who is supportive of the project and provides political and top management support for the project manager and their team' and the project owner as 'the senior manager who is held accountable by the funder for realizing the business case' (p. 485). Only when the funding entity is the same as the performing entity are these roles vested in the same individual.

## **2.2 Researching project sponsors**

Research evidence on the views of project sponsors on the role and how it relates to benefits realisation tends to have asked sponsors directly about particular aspects of their role. For example, Bryde (2008) posed 13 questions about activities which might be associated with project sponsorship and asked for responses on a Likert scale, from 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree'. Research framed in such a way may lead to different responses, compared to a more open approach which asks the sponsor about their understandings of the role without a pre-conceived list of activities.

The impact of the project sponsor may have both tangible and intangible results, and may extend beyond the confines of the specific project they are sponsoring, in terms of project success and realising benefits. For example, Sense (2013) suggested that a valuable role of the sponsor may be to encourage practice-based learning in the project environment.

Much research has been undertaken which has identified shortcomings in the carrying out of the project sponsor role in practice. For example, Helm and Remington (2005) refer to project managers having to undertake a range of actions and behaviours to compensate for inadequate sponsor support. To address such issues, it is necessary to investigate what factors lie behind poor sponsor support, in terms of the understandings of the role amongst the individuals performing that role.

There is growing evidence that individuals in the role of project sponsor often do not have the appropriate skills and understanding required to be effective in the role (Crawford et al., 2008; Helm and Remington, 2005; Kloppenborg et al., 2007; Müller and Turner, 2010). APM (2018) suggest that a 'representative sponsor', whose day job is delivering business as usual, is common for transformation projects, but that such sponsors may bring with them unhelpful characteristics. They might be a 'butterfly sponsor' with uneven interest in the project, a 'reluctant sponsor', who is not committed to the intended benefits from the project, or even an 'incompetent sponsor', who does not understand the role.

### **2.3 Attributes of the project sponsor**

In their research on capital projects, Patel and Robinson (2010) concluded that having accountability clearly vested in a single project sponsor will help ensure effective governance of projects. However, the various requirements for effective sponsorship may be in conflict with each other. While most practitioner-orientated publications and research on sponsorship of projects suggests that seniority is a key requirement for the project sponsor (APM, 2018; Begg, 2009; Crawford et al., 2009; Helm and Remington, 2005; PMI, 2017; Van Der Molen, 2015; West, 2010), in general terms, the more senior an individual is in the organisation, the wider the scope of their responsibilities and the less time they can devote to the project sponsor role. Therefore, they may not be able to meet other required attributes, such as commitment and availability Crawford et al. (2008).

There are other reasons why seniority may not necessarily be advantageous for successful project sponsorship. Smith's (2003) research across 75 business process design projects found that they were



more likely to be successful when the sponsor was a mid-level manager rather than a senior executive. Smith suggested that senior managers are more distant from the challenges faced by project workers and do not have as much control as mid-level managers over the levers of change, such as work standards and rewards. Therefore, senior managers are not as well positioned as mid-level managers to oversee change efforts. A similar argument is put forward by Zwikael et al. (2019), who advocate the appointment of a 'project owner', often a business or operations manager, to be responsible for overseeing projects. Their proposals are based on survey research of 13 CEOs and CFOs and a case study of an organisation which had successfully adopted this approach.

There is clearly ambiguity in the literature about how to ensure that sponsorship of a project best contributes to successful outcomes. This ambiguity could be attributed to the complexity and variability of the role (Crawford et al., 2008), as well as the trade-off between project sponsor requirements of seniority and availability, which is explored above. The findings of research in a specific work culture and set of circumstances may not transfer across to a different organisational context. Therefore, a productive starting point might be to investigate the understandings that project sponsors have of their role, and relate that to specific organisational contexts, rather than start with comparisons on the basis of factors such as level of seniority.

#### **2.4 Project sponsors and benefits realisation**

Research on the role of project sponsors has distinguished between their role in project management success, linked to the 'iron triangle' of time, cost and quality, and project success, the longer term contribution to organisational objectives and realising benefits (Bryde, 2008). While some aspects of the project sponsor role may contribute to project management success, such as securing resources for project delivery, the emphasis in guidance on project sponsorship is on accountability for project success (Englund and Bucero, 2015; Van der Molen, 2015).. Guidance on benefits management highlights the role of the project sponsor. Jenner (2014) identifies the SRO/project sponsor as 'the individual who is accountable for an initiative meeting its objectives and optimizing benefits realization' (p. 39), while Bradley (2006) refers to the sponsor as 'the person ultimately responsible

and accountable for the effective fulfilment of the programme, including the realization of benefits' (p. 281). However, the effectiveness of the SRO/sponsor in ensuring benefits realization has been questioned, with Jenner (2014) suggesting that the application of the concept of a single point of accountability for benefits is compromised by lack of experience, inadequate commitment and poor support. These are some of the problems which Zwikael et al. (2019) suggest can be addressed if the 'project owner' role has accountability for benefits realization.

Research on benefits realization for healthcare projects has tended to focus on IT investments (see, for example, Caldeira et al., 2012). Waring et al. (2018) undertook a survey of Directors of Nursing, Finance and IT in NHS acute hospitals on benefits management from IT enabled innovation. While their research did not address the project sponsor role, from the perspective of senior staff it identified that most hospitals have a basic approach to benefits realization for IT enabled change, and that more staff development is required in this area.

## **2.5 Summary of the literature**

There is evidence that effective project sponsorship is a major contributing factor to project success and benefits optimization, but the role of the project sponsor is emerging as a complex and varied one, and generalisation across different organisational contexts may be difficult. If an involved and committed sponsor with the requisite experience and understanding of the role is usually critical to project success, then research into understandings of the project sponsor role and how benefits realisation fits into that role is required. The research which has been undertaken so far into project sponsor behaviour has been mainly using preconceived checklists defining different aspects of the role, rather than inviting project sponsors to articulate their own understandings in an open manner.

## **3. Method**

The research used phenomenography after a review of different methodological options, because it is particularly suitable where research seeks to find out how individuals occupying a particular role conceive of that role. After a brief introduction to phenomenography, this section outlines how it has

been used in this research, while the conclusion reviews the implications of the method for the use of the findings.

### **3.1 Research using phenomenography**

Phenomenography is an interpretive approach to research, defined by Marton (1994: 4425) as 'the empirical study of the limited number of qualitatively different ways in which various phenomena in, and aspects of, the world around us are experienced, conceptualised, understood, perceived and apprehended'. The object of study in phenomenography concerns the variations in ways in which a particular aspect of the world has been experienced, with the variation being revealed through the method applied. As a qualitative research method, standards of quality specific to phenomenography have been developed as the expanding literature based on phenomenographic research has been critically appraised over the years (Cope, 2004; Sin, 2010).

Phenomenography as a research approach has commonly been utilised for teaching and learning questions, but there are examples of its use in other fields, including project management (Garrido-Lopez, 2011). In particular, Lupson and Partington (2011) used phenomenography to research UK civil servants' conceptions of accountability in the role of Senior Responsible Owner, as an appropriate methodology for identifying variations in understanding of a role, in a similar manner to our research study.

Within the phenomenographic research approach, *conceptions* are the central unit of description about people's experiences and they can be defined as 'different ways of understanding' (Marton and Pong, 2005: 335). *Categories of description* characterising each conception across a number of different *themes of awareness* are the main products of phenomenographic research, representing the qualitatively different ways in which the phenomenon is experienced. The categories of description capture the variations in experience across the collective group of participants, and do not attempt to categorise particular individuals. It is possible for a single participant to associate with more than one conception of the phenomenon (Boon et al., 2007).

The *conceptions* and *themes of awareness* together form what is known as the *outcome space* of phenomenographic inquiry (Marton, 1981; Åkerlind, 2005). The outcome space is described by Marton (2000: 105) as 'the logically structured complex of the different ways of experiencing an object'. The outcome space captures the range of different experiences which collectively represent the phenomenon, and is often presented as a table.

The outcome space does not necessarily include all possible ways in which the phenomenon in question can be experienced. It does, however, serve as a means of expressing the variations in the ways in which the participants in the research exercise have articulated their experience of a specific phenomenon, and the limits of the horizon associated with each conception (Yates et al., 2012). In our study, it represents the variations in how the participants described their experience of the project sponsor role.

The commonest way for researchers utilising phenomenography to gather data is using semi-structured interviews, which are recorded and transcribed (Tight, 2015). The aim is for the interviewee to articulate their experiences so that a clear understanding about the meanings of the experiences is communicated. Later in the research, transcriptions of the interviews are pooled, so the analysis process is collective (Bowden and Green, 2005).

### **3.2 Research design and data collection**

In this study, the participants came from amongst the senior Executive Directors and Associate Directors of 'the hospital', chosen for the research because of the opportunity afforded to investigate the role of the project sponsor there. Potential participants were identified based on their work history and experience. A participant had to have had direct experience of the role of project sponsor, or of being directly accountable to a project sponsor as a project manager, at some point in their career. 30 people fulfilled the criteria, from which nine, all of whom had been a Project Sponsor, were available and willing to take part. Their collective experience of projects covered mainly the health sector, but

also economic regeneration. Estates and facilities build projects and transfers of services within and between organisations featured highly, together with hospital process change projects. Interviewees' substantive professional roles included finance, operations, medical specialities and HR. The participants had varied ages, cultural backgrounds and genders, with an average of 15 years experience of undertaking the role of project sponsor or being directly accountable to that role. These factors were regarded as increasing the chances of there being significant variation amongst the participants in their experience of the role of project sponsor.

A pilot interview was undertaken with an individual from another organisation, before finalising the questions and general approach, and carrying out the nine interviews in late 2014/early 2015. Four broad conversation starter questions were posed to the participants:

- 1) Can you tell me what has been your experience of being a project sponsor?
- 2) Can you tell me what decisions you made about your approach to the role of project sponsor?
- 3) Can you tell me what the term 'benefits realisation' means to you?
- 4) Can you tell me what is your experience of 'benefit realisation' as a project sponsor in the project environment?

The questions were adapted according to whether the participant was speaking about undertaking the role of project sponsor or of an experience in being directly accountable to that role. Probing follow up questions were used to enable participants to fully articulate their understanding of the project sponsor role and to illustrate their understanding using examples.

After the first six of the nine interviews, new perspectives were starting to become less frequent, and by the time of the final interview the discussion did not seem to be revealing any significantly different information, suggesting data saturation (Baker and Edwards, 2012). One reason for this is that all the examples referred to by the participants were concerned with experiences within the health sector, with the exception of one participant who mentioned their previous experience of the project sponsor role outside health. Furthermore, most of the examples provided were from 'the hospital'.

Given the variability of the interviewees in terms of discipline, age, cultural background and gender, the low number of interviews before approaching data saturation suggests the over-riding importance of social context in the variations in understanding of the project sponsor role. This confirms the adequacy, given the interpretivist method used, of the number of interviewees (King, 2004) but it also limits transferability; other conceptions may be held by individuals carrying out the role in organisations with different organisational cultures and project management regimes.

### **3.3 Data analysis**

Following the completion of the empirical research, the data analysis stage in phenomenographic research is undertaken in a very structured way, which distinguishes it from other qualitative research methods. The data analysis was undertaken over an extended period of time (several months) and involved an iterative process of categorisation and recategorisation based on deep immersion in the data. The approach taken in this study was adapted from Larsson and Holmstrom's (2007) seven step approach, and is summarised in Table 1. Step 6, formulating the categories of description into the conceptions was an especially demanding process, with six iterations, each one involving grouping of categories, the refinement of the themes of expanding awareness and the delimitation of the external horizon. This process was required to achieve the quality criteria of (1) distinctiveness of each conception, (2) categories being optimal and parsimonious, and (3) the relation between the categories being clearly stated (Marton and Booth, 1997). The refinement of categories of description based on these criteria eventually resulted in three conceptions.

At the end of the data analysis, the principal research output was a table synthesising the results in the form of the 'outcome space', the distinctive characteristic of studies using a phenomenographic approach. As the final step, a metaphor was assigned to each conception, as a summary of the understanding of the project sponsor role represented in that conception. Metaphors are useful for communication of phenomenological research (Willis, 2018), but they should not be regarded as a typology, in this case of project sponsors (Larsson and Holmstrom, 2007).

| <b>Larsson and Holmström (2007) – Seven Step Approach</b>   | <b>This research study: Stages Steps</b>   |   |
|---|--|---|
| Read the whole text   | <b>First Stage</b><br>Familiarisation and awareness                                      | 1. Listen to recorded interviews at least twice. Note themes.   |
| Read again and mark where interviewees gave answers to the main interview questions   |  | 2. Read and re-read all the transcripts looking for common themes in relation to the main interview questions. Note themes                                  |
| In these passages look for what the focus of attention is and they describe their way of working. Make a preliminary description of each interviewee’s predominant way of understanding the work. | <b>Second Stage</b><br>Coding of textual meanings or conceptions                         | 3. Code textual meanings from themes found in initial rounds of analysis. Write preliminary description of each interviewee’s way of experiencing the role. |
| Group the descriptions into categories, based on similarities and differences. Formulate categories of description.   | <b>Third Stage</b><br>Group descriptions into categories of similarities and differences | 4. Group individual descriptions into descriptive categories of similarity and difference. Repeat iteratively.  |
| Look for non-dominant ways of understanding.  |  | 5. Immersion in the pooled data to look for non-dominant ways of understanding the role.  |
| Find a structure in the outcome space   | <b>Fourth Stage</b><br>Formulate categories and find structure in the outcome space      | 6. Formulate the categories of description into the conceptions   |
| Assign a metaphor to each category of description   |  | 7. Develop the outcome space and find the structure   |
|   |  | 8. Assign a metaphor to each conception   |

**Table 1** – Overview of Larsson and Holmström 7 step approach and this research study’s approach to analysis using the phenomenographic method.

#### 4. Results

The outcome space from the study is presented in Table 2, which includes

1. The three conceptions, or qualitatively different experiences, of the role of project sponsor, including the metaphor given to each one and the categories of description across the themes of awareness that are associated with each conception (rows in Table 2)
2. The seven themes of awareness which highlight the similarities and differences between the conceptions (expanding awareness going down the columns in Table 2 from Conception 1 to Conception 3). The differences enable the relationships between the conceptions to be

explored in detail. Table 2 also shows the limits of the horizon associated with each conception (final column).

In the rest of this section, each of the three conceptions will be described in detail with quotes from participants (PS1-9) to illustrate the nature of the conception. As the transcripts were pooled, an individual may contribute to more than one conception.

#### **4.1 Conception C1 – just doing the day job**

In this conception, the project sponsor does not differentiate between this role and the day-to-day role they fulfil. In undertaking the day-to-day senior manager role it is assumed that the project sponsor role, when it comes along, is subsumed into it, as demonstrated in the extracts from the transcripts below.

Project sponsor I think 99 times out of 100 is the actual bread and butter substantive role of the senior leader, ... who is responsible for taking forward that particular piece of work ... (PS4)

I am executive sponsor for the [name of project] but then why wouldn't I be ... because I'm [title of substantive executive role] of the organisation so what is distinctive and unique about the role? – nothing ... (PS4)

In the next quote, a tension is expressed arising from the conflation of the project sponsor role with being an Executive Director:

I don't draw a line between them [the Project Sponsor role and Executive Director role] and I feel a bit schizophrenic sometimes because when I'm talking about finance ... you've got to do something about the finance but then when I'm talking about quality I say ... you can't compromise on quality ... (PS2)



| CONCEPTION                                |  | Ways of experiencing                             |   |   |  |  |   |   | EXTERNAL HORIZON (MARGIN)   |
|---|--|--|---|---|--|--|---|---|---|
|   |  | INTERNAL HORIZON ( themes of awareness)          |   |   |  |  |   |   |   |
|   |  | Seniority of position                            | Responsibility & accountability                             | Transactional or transformational   | Formal structures  | Knowledge & skills set   | Realising benefits  | Clarity of role                           |   |
| Project sponsor role experienced as ..... | <b>C1</b><br><i>Just doing the day job</i><br>An additional requirement of the substantive role                                    | Requirement to undertake role of project sponsor | Same as substantive role                                    | Understood as tactics and processes of project delivery   | Delivery through existing management structures & governance                         | Understood as generic skill-set of senior manager                                  |   |   | Delimits the role of project sponsor to that of 'figurehead role'                       |
|   | <b>C2</b><br><i>The capable manager</i><br>Managing and controlling through experience   |  | Based on previous experience of the role                    | Understood as drawing on examples from past experiences of managing and controlling project outputs | Delivery through project management methodology for 'big' projects only              | Understood as generalisable skills of experienced project sponsor role             | Identifies benefits as part of delivering projects  |   | Delimits the role of project sponsor to the scope of personal authority and experience  |
|   | <b>C3</b><br><i>Wearing two different hats</i><br>A distinct and separate function operating within a project management framework |  | Based on scope of project and remit of project sponsor role | Understood as transformational change & cultural change   | Delivery through project management methodology as preferred method for all projects | Understood as specific role profile and/or training in the role of project sponsor | Identifies benefits and understands responsibilities for realising them as being part of role | Seeks clarity to understand scope of role | Delimits the role of project sponsor to collective ownership within a defined structure |

**Table 2:** The three conceptions of the project sponsor role

The dilemmas arising when not separating the two roles is a challenge in the quote above, but in the excerpt below the responsibilities of the substantive role and the project sponsor role are seen as being aligned. The project sponsor role is understood in terms of responsibility, accountability and governance as being experienced in the same way as the senior substantive position.

My substantive role ... as an Executive Director, ...[is] to make the Trust successful ... [so if] this project is integral to the Trust being successful then it's my responsibility to make sure that that project works. (PS5)

The role of project sponsor in C1 can also be experienced as nothing more than part of a day-to-day management chain:

[..] the role of the project sponsor is a just a mechanism to find a route for that project to the top of the organisation so there is some oversight on progress, direction, performance. (PS8)

Within this conception, there was a view expressed that the senior day-to-day role not only subsumed the role of project sponsor automatically but that to draw attention to the sponsor role was unhelpful:

[...] it is confusing for an organisation if you have a [Director] that wears lots of different hats, I think they always have to be seen as [a Director] and actually in all conversations be the [Director] because it is what you are always thinking – I'm always thinking well I am the [Director] ... not that I am the project sponsor for this particular project. (PS4)

There was a key theme of awareness in C1, 'seniority of position', which was only experienced in this conception. This theme had the understanding that the substantive position of the senior manager undertaking the project sponsor role was the only requirement to fulfil that role. There was no indication that the role of sponsor required a different or additional skill-set. Participants experienced their senior position in the organisations they had worked for as the measure against which to express their understanding of the role. This focus on seniority is expressed in the quote below (which is based on a misinterpretation of the criteria for undertaking the role):

Well I guess the clue's in the title because to be ... an Executive Sponsor you have to be an Executive Director so the recruitment of a sponsor for the Project Sponsor [role] is fairly limited and ring fenced. (PS2)

The alignment with the senior leadership role is also articulated in the quote below:

I've had no training about how to be a project sponsor and I suppose I don't think you need to have a separate license to be a sponsor as being an executive director my perhaps controversial view is if you're an executive director by default you should be able to be an executive sponsor. (PS2)

The quote above demonstrates simplicity, in that the focus for that participant was their senior substantive position, but other extracts from this sub-section highlight tensions in C1, notably where the conflation of director and project sponsor roles led to feelings of being in a dilemma and even being 'schizophrenic' when fulfilling both roles. A specific absence in C1 was that there was no experience of benefits or benefit realisation expressed as a function of the project sponsor role.

#### **4.2 Conception C2 – the capable manager**

In this conception, participants understood the project sponsor role in terms of their experience generally and their involvement in projects, focussing on the roles they have undertaken and how they have approached them over the lifetime of their professional careers. Participants used expressions like 'my own personal view, probably built on experience, awareness and common sense' and 'it's my professional judgement'. C2 understands the role and its requirements by reflecting on previous experience of the role. It could be experience in being a project sponsor or through being managed by someone else in that role. This expressed experience concerns delivering projects but also has a more general focus on managing and controlling activities, in terms of how such experiences can mould understanding of the project sponsor role. Project benefits appear in this conception, with the focus being on identifying benefits as part of the project development activities undertaken by the project sponsor.

Addressing project delivery issues in relation to the responsibilities of the project sponsor are illustrated in the quote below:

[...] the notes are clinical notes and drivers are clinical and I'm the [name of substantive role] and it's going to be about patient safety and that's going to be the driver. There are massive cost improvements to be delivered around it but the primary responsibility has to be delivered to the clinicians and that is good quality notes so that's why it came to me and also I've got a good background in IT. (PS3)

There is a focus in C2 on management and control in experiences of the project sponsor role. In the extract below, the interviewee experienced the use of control by the project sponsor as having a negative impact:

... we have had a project sponsor who has had a direct operational responsibility for part of the project delivery and that has not worked because ... they have got so involved in the detail, wanted to take so much control that they kind of forgotten the

focus of the stepping back, .... [and] that created more noise and slowed things down...

(PS9)

In this conception, there were also references to experiencing the role through the language of the project management community, in highlighting project management methodologies in the responses and referring to formal training for project management skills and abilities, as in the extract below:

..... if you asked me about PRINCE2® management and projects you'd get very little from me in terms of depths of knowledge around it ... I understand the concept and I understand that it is a way of managing projects but I've had no formal training ...

(PS2)

The categories of description within C2 were experienced at an expanding level of awareness to those articulated in C1 and there was no mention of the theme of 'seniority of position'. In C2 the theme of awareness 'realising benefits' features, with benefits being experienced as part of project delivery and being expressed as something that is considered an indicator of project success. There is an understanding of the role of the project sponsor in relation to benefits in the early stages of project planning but the focus is limited to the identification of benefits in this conception, as exemplified in the following quotes:

[...] at the beginning when they said what would success look like, the success criteria weren't about pounds' shillings and pence ... [the] driver was really about improving the quality of their service. (PS2)

[...] so you are working backwards from a vision through objectives, deadlines, milestones – you have then got project plan because you have worked out what you are going to be doing whether you have got enough capacity [...], but by mapping out the

work backwards from the point you want to get to you can actually then construct the resources you need to achieve it. (PS5)

[...] success then becomes dependent upon correctly defining the objectives in the first place because you get set a set of objectives that were unachievable or the wrong objectives and then come out the other end with a different set of outcomes and they don't marry up. (PS8)

In the examples above, there is a description of benefits as being an indicator of success, although the words 'objectives', 'outcomes' and 'success criteria' are used instead of 'benefit'. The excerpts recognise the importance of benefits being recognised early in the process but this is in the context of a delivery mechanism. In this conception, the project sponsor role is not accountable for the realisation of benefits at the end of the process.

#### **4.3 Conception C3 – wearing two different hats**

In C3, the experience of being a project sponsor was understood as a distinct and separate role within a project management framework. Participants who articulated this conception experienced the themes of awareness of C2, but at an expanded level and also experienced a further theme, 'clarity of role'. This theme emerged from the data as a variation of the theme of awareness *responsibility and accountability*, in that seeking to understand the scope of responsibility and accountability assigned to the role is a requirement when the role is seen as a distinct one. Examples are outlined below:

I think it is probably quite good to have someone as a sponsor that is not trying to do all the doing as well so you have somebody who is slightly removed from the actual hands on delivery bit. (PS6)

I know that at a fairly high level that the only game in town is to become more efficient and that's why as project sponsor with this project I'm trying to focus on the remit of

my role and those efficiencies will come at various rates but part of this is a culture shift for this organisation. (PS2)

Where this theme was expressed, interviewees talked about seeking clarity and also the consequences of not having clarity:

I wrote the description of an executive project sponsor for our PMO which was a couple of years ago, so when we first established the fact that we needed a programme of work I started by identifying the governance requirements and looking at the role sponsors, managers, leaders etc. and trying to differentiate and be very clear about well what is the difference between a sponsor and somebody who leads and manages. (PS9)

I was project sponsor in the main although I don't know that on all occasions the role of project sponsor was clearly [defined] ... I was heading up the projects but I don't believe we had somebody who was project sponsor so I was both leading it and driving it but I was the most senior person involved so it was probably a combination ... so I think the role was not sufficiently defined in terms of that's a project sponsor role. (PS8)

[...] you knew that the executive sponsor would come in and would be the person where you escalated things to and would make change [...] it was very clear [...] we had a project team working on a capital build scheme in [Place name] and it was very clear who was who and what the role of the exec sponsor was [...] (PS9)

In C3, the *realising benefits* theme was understood as identifying benefits at the start of a process and then being responsible for their realisation at the end of the delivery of the change. In common with C2, benefits were regarded as an indicator of success, while the variation in this theme was the responsibility for benefits realisation as well as identification. The understanding of benefits is better

developed in C3 compared to C2, so there is a hierarchical element in this theme of expanding awareness. The examples below illustrate the development of the understanding of benefits in C3, compared to C2:

I'm used to doing benefits analysis on projects of a high value where usually the benefits will either be about money, saving money, efficiencies, it might be about quality, quality of service, quality of data, or it might be about process in a sense of we are trying to get more patients though or we are trying to make patients journey smoother, slicker, so you would normally on a project do a benefits analysis and say [...] what are our expected outcomes from that so normally it's return on investment in three years so they would look at it from that perspective. (PS7)

[...]you have to give some leadership for example for a project and that leadership is to give everybody a voice but to guide people towards some sort of outcome milestone conclusion and you have to be able to give direction, take the majority with you, and that's a technique [...](PS5)

[...] somebody who understands the nature of the project as well, so somebody who understands enough to understand what the outcome is and how to get there and keep that in mind throughout the process [...] (PS9)

[...] people don't always understand the impact of a change there is no doubt we have made changes along the way [...] and we have had unintended consequences and you have to manage it but [...] should be about how an organisation learns to make change better as they go forward and refines the approach that they use for the benefits [...] so the more you can learn about effective change management the better [...] (PS6).

## **5. Discussion**



In this section, the literature on the project sponsor role and how it relates to benefits realisation will be related to the findings of the research regarding a hierarchy of conceptions based on expanding themes of awareness of the project sponsor role. We will suggest how the qualitatively different ways of experiencing the project sponsor role, when related to the existing evidence base, can present insights on how that role can assist with benefit realisation in projects. Then, role theory will be used to help interpret the different understandings of the project sponsor and deepen the level of explanation in the study, and finally practical issues on seniority of the project sponsor will be discussed.

### **5.1 Understandings of the project sponsor role and alignment with guidance**

A common feature of the guidance documents referred to in Section 2 (APM, 2018; Begg, 2009; Crawford et al., 2009; Englund and Bucero, 2015; James et al., 2013; Van Der Molen, 2015; West, 2010) is that the project sponsor role is a distinct one requiring specific skills and attributes which are specific to the role. This is fully recognised in C3, ‘wearing two different hats’ and to a degree in C2, ‘the capable manager’. The additional theme of expanding awareness experienced in C3 compared to C2 is the theme of *clarity of role*. Not only is clarity of role emphasised in the guidance on project sponsorship, but it has also been recognised as contributing to project success. For example, the National Audit Office (NAO) (2013) concluded from a review of 24 successful projects and programmes that senior level engagement was vital when delivering IT-enabled business change, one aspect being to create a clear decision making structure. Clarity of structure and accountability to enable the right decisions to be made was recognised by the NAO as being linked to the experience and skills of the project sponsor.

In contrast, in C1 ‘just doing the day job’, the project sponsor role is understood as being an additional requirement of that person's substantive senior position, which is contrary to the central tenets of the body of guidance on project sponsorship. Crucially, C1 limits the project sponsor role to that of a figurehead, thus not taking ownership of accountability for success of the project, which is often regarded as the key requirement of project sponsorship (Englund and Bucero, 2015; Van der Molen,

2015). In addition, in the literature the commitment and availability of the sponsor is seen as critical (Crawford et al., 2008) and the 'attitude' of the sponsor is seen as being more important than executive position (Kloppenborg et al., 2014). Project sponsors who see the role as 'just doing the day job' are unlikely to set aside time for the role or view it as high priority and may turn out to be 'butterfly', 'reluctant' or 'incompetent' project sponsors (APM, 2018).

## **5.2 Training for project sponsors**

Project sponsors understanding the role as C1, 'just doing the day job' are unlikely to have received any training in the role and may view training as unnecessary. They will be unlikely to accept the guidance (James et al., 2013; Van der Molen, 2015) that training in the role will enhance the chances of project success.

In C2, 'the capable manager', the project sponsor role is based largely on experience gleaned from undertaking or observing the role previously, rather than training in the role. Recalling how they came to undertake the project sponsor role, interviewees highlighted an expectation by others that they would take it on, saying, 'it was kind of expected that I would know what the role of project sponsor was' and 'I broadly understand what the role is' (PS2). This experience has been described as 'the accidental project sponsor' (Hanley, 2009), in which individuals who attain a senior management position in an organization are expected to become project sponsors. They are expected to be able to undertake the role, often without training, support or guidance (James et al., 2003).

C3 was the only conception that experienced the theme of awareness of 'knowledge and skills set' as involving specific training for the role of project sponsor. This recognition of the role of training acknowledges that project sponsors will not always have a background or experience in project based activity, and also that ability to undertake the project sponsor role should not be assumed based on the ability of that person to attain a senior position in in an organisation (James et al., 2013). As referred to in Section 2 above, shortcomings in current practice suggest that training and development is required for project sponsors across all sectors. For example, Hall et al. (2003) identified that for

public sector construction projects there was a need for project sponsors to exercise a broad range of skills and so more priority needed to be given to training and development, especially on 'softer' managerial skills. Their research also found that training needs to be combined with experience; long-term relationships and undertaking the role often in different projects were required for project sponsors to cope with all the demands on them.

### **5.3 Project sponsor role in benefits realisation**

The lack of a theme of awareness of benefit realisation in C1, 'just doing the day job', means that there is an absence of realising benefits being part of the role of project sponsor. In contrast, in C2, 'the capable manager', the project sponsor understands the role as having a responsibility for the identification of project benefits, which is recognised in the literature on the early stages of the project life-cycle as an activity crucial to project success (Zwikael et al., 2018). However, because the understanding of the project sponsor role in C2 does not extend to ensuring *delivery* of benefits, it is partial and, therefore, inadequate when compared with the guidance on benefits management (Bradley, 2006; Jenner, 2014) and also guidance on the role of the Project Sponsor (Begg, 2009; Englund and Bucero, 2015; Van Der Molen, 2015). Both types of guidance highlight that the project sponsor has responsibilities not only for the identification of benefits but also benefit realisation in the later stages of the project cycle and in the subsequent handover to the business. In Bryde's (2008) study, responsibility for defining business benefits and monitoring benefits realisation are both aspects of the 'external focus' role of the project sponsor; C2 includes an understanding of the first duty, but not the second one.

The shortcomings in the approach to benefits realisation in C2 reflect a theme within the investigation of practice in the benefits management literature. Studies have found that the focus on benefits in the business case is often not followed through later on, with a lack of accountability for realising benefits (Ashurst and Hodges, 2010; Naidoo and Palk, 2011; Ward et al., 2007; Waring et al., 2018). This is particularly concerning because of optimism bias in business case benefits targets (Jenner, 2009; Prater et al., 2017). Cha (2016) identified the need for back-end dynamic capabilities

for project owners to address the weaknesses in ultimate benefits realisation in UK central government information system projects.

C3, 'wearing two different hats' recognises the project sponsor role in the realisation of benefits beyond the early phases of the project, in relation to the achievement later on of the targets originally set in the initial business plan. While this is the most complete understanding of the role of the project sponsor for benefits realisation in this study, it reflects a narrower conception of the role than guidance on benefits management advises, where identifying/establishing the potential for further benefits (Ward and Daniel, 2012; Serra, 2017) and unexpected emergent benefits (Jenner, 2014) are part of the benefits management process. The project sponsor would have a key role in championing this wider approach to benefits realisation. Therefore, the conception of the project sponsor role in relation to benefits in C3 does not cover the full range of activities advocated in recent guidance.

In terms of the project life-cycle, benefits are realised mainly, or even totally, after the handover to 'business as usual' (Jenner, 2014; Reiss, 2007). There was little in the research findings specifically on this issue, although one of the quotes supporting C3 in Section 4 above refers to benefits analysis aiming for a return on investment after three years as being an organisation standard. C3, 'wearing two different hats', accords with the metaphor used in the literature of the project sponsor having one foot in the permanent organization and the other in the temporary project organisation (Crawford et al., 2008). This understanding of the differentiation between day to day operational responsibilities and delivery of change is likely to mean that the project sponsor will take responsibility for managing the handover process. However, for C1, 'just doing the day job' suggests that the benefits of project activity when it affects the 'day job' after handover could be of more interest than the project itself. After handover the tension in C1 which was hinted at in the quote in Section 4 on feeling 'schizophrenic' about the project sponsor role would be resolved.

#### **5.4 Role theory and conceptions of the project sponsor role**

As referred to in Section 1, most research on project sponsors is implicitly based on the structural perspective in role theory, which focuses on tasks, norms and behaviours. At 'the hospital', at the time of the research, project management supported by a PMO and with generic training in Prince2® was in place, but the role of the project sponsor was not tightly defined and no specific training for the role was provided. Coupled with their seniority, this left individuals taking on the role with the flexibility to be 'role-makers' (Turner, 1962), actively creating and modifying that role based on their individual preferences and interactions with others at 'the hospital'. Thus, the interactionist perspective from role theory becomes as relevant as the structural perspective.

In general, 'role making' is viewed as a creative process, akin to improvisation in jazz, whereas 'role taking' is seen as conformity to organisational expectations (McAuley et al., 2014). However, in this study, the role taking/role making process for the project sponsor has to be related to the other, substantive, position of that individual. In C1, the substantive position takes precedence over the project role, and 'role making' occurs with a convergent aim, to subsume the project sponsor role within the 'day job'. In contrast, in C3, a 'role taker' attitude to being a project sponsor is adopted, accepting the need to widen horizons and manage competing demands from both the substantive role and the project. The 'role taking' in C3 accepts accountability for realising benefits identified in the business case. A possible creative 'role making' process, in broadening benefits management to generating emergent benefits during project delivery, which would go beyond the responsibilities for benefits realisation in C3, was not evident.

### **5.5 Seniority and other requirements of the project sponsor role**

In section 2, a theme within the literature of trade-offs between seniority and other requirements of the project sponsor role was highlighted. Our research findings emphasise the importance of this issue. The identification of a conception of the project sponsor role as 'just doing the day job' would align with suggestions in the literature that seniority should not be the over-riding attribute (Smith, 2003; Zwikaël et al., 2019). Paradoxically, those understanding the role as C1 might also be the ones who would see no reason why seniority should not be the most important attribute.

## 6. Conclusion

The findings of this research identify the role of project sponsor as being conceived of in three qualitatively different ways. Interviewees experienced project sponsorship as 'just part of the day job', as part of the role of 'the capable manager', and as a distinct additional role, 'wearing two hats'. In the first conception, benefits realization was not recognised in the project sponsor role. In the second, benefits were rolled up into the idea of measures of success, but the role of the project sponsor was limited to the identification of benefits. Only in the third conception was there an understanding that realising benefits was a personal responsibility of the project sponsor.

The study fills a research gap through being, as far as we are aware, the first published study to be centrally concerned with understandings of the project sponsor role, using a method specifically orientated to such research. While the questions in the interviews were about experiences of the project sponsor role and how it relates to benefits realisation, striking variations were found in how the project sponsor role is perceived in relation to the substantive position. This issue is under-researched in the literature although, from the point of view of the individual in the project sponsor role, their substantive position is likely to be more important to them than their project role.

As with any research undertaking there are limitations to this study. First, because of the phenomenographic method and the research in a single organisation, the findings are highly contextual, although this does not prevent them being transferable (Sin, 2010). Characteristics of 'the hospital' which may affect the transferability of the results include historical and cultural factors associated with being an NHS hospital and the lack of training or guidance specific to the role of the project sponsor undertaken by the organisation at the time of the research.

Another limitation is that only project sponsors were interviewed (including their experiences when directly accountable to that role), rather than the full range of project-related roles. Also, the research did not attempt to relate what the participants said to what they did in practice.

To develop the evidence base on understandings of project sponsorship, future research might usefully investigate other organisational contexts, explore the views on project sponsorship of other roles, and see whether practice differs from experience as described in interviews. Future research might be undertaken using phenomenography or another inductive method, using similar conversation starters to those in our study, with findings being compared with our results and the wider literature. Alternatively, the outcome space from our study might be used as a theoretical framework to develop a deductive approach, to test whether the three conceptions in our research are found more widely to reflect the views and behaviours of project sponsors.

At a deeper level, further research might use the interactionist perspective from role theory to seek to explain why project sponsors understand their role the way they do, exploring underlying motives. Such a study would follow the example of Pinto and Patanakul (2015), who explored links between the project championing role of sponsors and narcissistic behaviours which can adversely affect project success. The three conceptions in our study may be influenced by the backgrounds of the participants and their specific role at 'the hospital', in particular because of the mix of managerial and clinical specialisms amongst them. The association of project methods of organising with New Public Management (Hall et al., 2003) and the attitudes of the participants towards the changes that this has led to in their working lives may have had a strong influence on their understandings of the project sponsor role and responsibilities for benefits realisation. For example, C1, 'just doing the day job', may reflect conscious or unconscious resistance to these fundamental changes, whereas C3, 'wearing two different hats', seems to represent movement towards embracing changes in management culture. However, our research did not explore the role of relationships within the hospital or outside it in moulding differing views on project sponsorship; it did not ask directly about interactions.

While there are many avenues for future research to explore underlying factors behind the different conceptions, as well as identifying similarities and differences in the understandings of project sponsors in other organisational contexts, it is suggested that the results of this research have implications for practice, notwithstanding the constraints on transferability referred to above. The hierarchical nature of the experience of the project sponsor role and understanding of its role in relation to benefits has implications for induction and training for the project sponsor position. In particular, the conception that the project sponsor role involves nothing more than just doing the day job is manifestly in conflict with good practice guidance on the role in relation to benefits realization. Therefore, those responsible for induction and training in this area who recognise any hint of such a mindset in their organisation would need to review their practices, even if the individuals holding such attitudes may be resistant to efforts to change their views and behaviours.

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