

Social Support in a Self-Organizing Project Team

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ABSTRACT

Projects having a specific goal and a time limit may lead to project teams having to face tough pressure. This pressure increases the workload of team members. The basic nature of project work means that project team members are in a position where they can face quite a lot of uncertainty and stressful situations from the beginning of the project. Projects can also be multidisciplinary and self-organizing in nature. Uncertainty can be managed with social support, which helps to cope with stressful situations. This article describes the employees' and team members' perceptions and experiences of social support in the project team, so the research setting is qualitative. The methodology selected was semi-structured thematic interviews of various project teams as the interview format. The aim of this study has been to describe the perceptions and experiences of project team members about social support.

Keywords: Social support, Self-organizing, Project teams, Teamwork, Perceptions, Experiences

INTRODUCTION

Projects are characterized by being time-limited and goal-oriented. For this reason, project teams face tough time pressures, that increase the workload of their members. A project team refers to a group of three or more people who are assembled for a fixed period of time to work on a common goal and who disperse after completing their main task.

In addition, project teams are put together for a specific task, so their members may not have worked with each other before. A project team and even individuals in the team can have quite an independent way of working, self-organizing tasks while having the same team objective. The basic nature of project work means that project team members are in a position from the beginning of a project where they can face quite a lot of uncertainty and stressful situations. Uncertainty can be managed with social support, which helps to cope with workload situations.

In this article, social support refers to the means of interaction that alleviate the feeling of uncertainty that arises in stressful situations (Mikkola 2020). The research and analysis of social support in project teams is important because project work and thus multidisciplinary and partially self-organizing project teams are common in working life. Project team members face a lot of stressful situations where they need to be able to manage the uncertainty that arises from them.

The aim of this research is to describe the perceptions and experiences of project team members about social support. We pursue this goal by examining the perceptions and experiences of project team members of the manifestation of social support and the factors that promote and hinder social support in project team interaction. In addition, we examine how project team members perceive the relevance of social support.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Social support has a positive effect on well-being at work and work efficiency, (Lambert et al. 2016, Wright et al. 2010), which is why the related research not necessary is relevant for both employees and organizations.

According to Mikkola (2009, 27), social support is defined as an interaction that helps manage the uncertainty associated with a stressful situation and strengthens an individual's perception of acceptance and control of their life. There are three different forms of social support in working life: informational, emotional, and instrumental support (Mikkola 2020, pp. 151–159).

The employer can also benefit from the positive effects of social support, as social support has been found to have a significant link to work motivation (Lambert et al. 2016) and the desire to perform better (Chang & Wu 2013). In addition, it promotes commitment to work and the work community (Lambert et al. 2016; Mikkola 2009, p. 26) and a sense of belonging to the organization (Lutgen-Sandvik et al. 2011).

In this research, a project team is defined as a group of three or more people who have been brought together to work on a common goal, and the group will disperse after succeeding their main task (Malone 2004, Scott & Einstein 2001, 107–116, Hoegl & Gemuend 2001, 436).

In a project-oriented organization with a rapid transition from one project to another, pressures can be caused by constant uncertainty about future requirements and fluctuations in colleagues and workloads (Turner et al. 2008, 577–578). Task-centricity is emphasized in the project team's activities, in which case relational-focused tasks are given little attention (DePoel et al. 2014).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH APPROACH

The aim of this article is to describe the perceptions and experiences of project team members concerning social support. For the research, the following three research questions were set:

1. How does social support occur in the project team?
2. What factors are seen to promote and hinder social support in the project team?
3. How is the meaningfulness of social support understood in the project team?

These questions have been used to describe social support precisely from the perspective of project team members in working life in multidisciplinary

and self-organizing teams. Because social support is constructed and mediated through interaction, it makes sense to examine it through its manifestation.

In this research the focus has been on the interaction between project team members. External support, such as support between the team and the rest of the organization, the supervisor, or the project team's client was left out of the study.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

This research describes the employees' perceptions and experiences of social support in the project team, so the research setting is qualitative. The goal was to collect genuine opinions on this topic, in which case a thematic interview conducted as individual interviews was the best fit for this research. A semi-structured thematic interview was chosen as the interview format. When you want to hear people's perceptions, it is justified to talk with them.

With the help of the interview, the interviewee could share his or her perceptions and experiences openly and freely, and include example stories in the narrative, which enable a more in-depth treatment of the phenomenon. The interviewees were chosen based on having experience in working life and working in a project team.

The interviews were analyzed through an inductive, qualitative content analysis, to gain a clear description of the phenomenon under study without the interference of earlier theories.

This research has examined perceptions and experiences of social support in the interaction of project team members. Thus, the aim has been to describe, based on the perceptions and experiences gained from the interviews, how social support manifests itself in a project team according to the perceptions and experiences of the interviewed.

MAJOR RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Social support in the interaction of project team members was analyzed according to three research questions and classified according to Table 1.

The purpose of the first research question is to describe the manifestation of social support in the project team, ie. how the members of the project team give, receive, and seek support from each other according to their own perceptions and experiences. According to the results of this study the interviewees see social support being manifested in several ways in a project team's interaction. Social support is given through task-centric support, like sharing opinions and experiences. Additionally social support is given through emotional support, listening, showing consideration to the other, and leadership communication. Social support is sought either through direct means, such as asking, or indirect means, like "acting dumb".

It has been found that the project team occasionally pays less attention to relationship-centered interaction processes (DePoel et al. 2014; Marks et al. 2001), which include social support.

With the second research question, the aim has been to describe what affects social support according to project team members. This can be observed

Table 1. Classification system of the analysis.

How is social support seen in the project team?	Support is given and received by	Task-centric support Emotional support Listening Taking one into consideration Leadership communication
	Support is sought by	Locating the problem Sharing one's challenges Asking "Acting dumb"
What factors are seen to promote and hinder social support in the project team?	Factors promoting support	Informal and face-to-face conversation Timeliness of support Specific features of team member Experience and expertise of team member Certain kind of relationship Open interaction climate
	Factors hindering support	Unwillingness to burden the other Not perceiving the need for support Lack of open interaction climate Technology-mediated interaction Certain cultural expectations
How is the meaningfulness of social support seen in the project team?	Support is needed for	Preventing challenges Problem solving and analysis Practical challenges
	Support affects	Project team members Project work

through the factors that promote and hinder social support, according to the interviewees. The results of our research indicate that social support between team members can be promoted by multiple factors, such as certain features of a team member, their experience and expertise, and the relationships between team members. According to the interviewees social support is hindered by the unwillingness to burden the other, not noticing the need for support, the bad timing of support and certain cultural expectations regarding support. This indicates that support is affected by features of the team members, their condition, and certain relationships. Additionally, the interviewees felt that social support is promoted by open, face-to-face conversation, while technology-mediated communication hinders it. Other factors promoting support seem to be the timeliness of support and an open interaction climate, while the bad timing of support and lack of an open interaction climate seem to hinder support. In summary, social support is affected by member features (leave out /attributes), the platform of interaction, the timing of support, and the openness of the interaction climate.

Social support is known to have several positive effects in working life (e.g., Reinardy 2009; Wright et al. 2010), which makes it reasonable to ask how project team members perceive the relevance of social support.

We examine this with the third research question, seeking insights and experiences about the relevance of social support through the need for support and its impact. According to the insights and experiences of project team members social support needed for preventing challenges, analyzing and solving problems, and coping with practical challenges. It is seen to influence a project team member, for example by advancing their well-being, and project work itself, for example by leading to better end results.

The results of this research help to understand the importance of social support for the project team. The results increase understanding of how social support manifests itself in project team interaction and what factors promote and hinder its delivery and application. In addition, they deepen the understanding of what social support is needed for and what implications it is seen to have from the perspective of project team members. In previous studies, social support has been seen as an interaction in working life in a number of ways, but it has not been linked to, for example, management communication, which is suggested by the results of this study. Due to several positive effects, it is important to study social support in project teams since they seem to be increasing in working life. Social support offers another perspective on project research, combining the process of support interaction with both the well-being of individuals and the positive effects at work.

It can be seen from the results of this research that social support seems to be more difficult in technology-mediated interaction compared to face-to-face interaction. The difficulty of social support in technology-mediated interactions could require further research, as the working remotely seems to have increased due to the COVID pandemic.

The project team is likely to operate under constant time pressure because projects are time-limited. It may be that the constant rush that is typical for project work hampers social support in the project team. This can have an impact on the resilience of project team members and the outcome of the project. The impact of urgency on interaction should be explored if it is such a central part of project work.

BUILDING LEADERSHIP OF A SELF-ORGANIZING TEAM

The organizations of the future and especially team behavioral structures are low-hierarchical or even non-hierarchical and cannot be derived in the traditional way. The need for change has been identified in many organizations, but the means are often missing. Building self-direction in team relationships must be developed from the perspective of the organization, leadership, structures, and people.

Jaser (2020) proposes that both leaders and followers play an equally important part in the co-production of leadership outcomes, and leader and follower identities are fluid, so that the same individual can enact both roles at different times. Leadership is stretched a step further by exploring the co-enactment of both roles, identities, and positions of leader and follower by one same individual. This individual is defined as a connecting leader, as in

this co-enactment they function as a connector between different leadership relationships.

All the project teams analyzed have worked on project work with self-organized principles and the individuals were doing their own tasks rather independently but according to the common objective. This seems to be a focal manifestation of modern project work. Social support is essential in managing uncertainty in all project teams, which means it is also relevant for self-organizing project teams.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of this research support the well-recognized divide of social support into informational, emotional, and instrumental support stated in the theoretical analysis. According to the results, informational support appears in a project team as analyzing and solving problems and recognizing new points of view. Emotional support occurred in the results as consolation and encouragement. Social support is enabled by showing willingness to listen to the other person. In such cases it is helpful to understand the support seeker's background. In some cases, instrumental support was noticeable as practical help, such as with technical details.

According to the results, social support affects motivation and engagement for working in order to achieve the project's common objectives.

Project team leadership requires setting a common objective for project work and managing uncertainties through social support. An open interaction climate and an open attitude enable conflict management and problem solving. Without social support leadership may suffer. In modern, self-organized team-work social support is necessary for an effective working culture.

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