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Eric Kordt
Edith Cowan University

Craig Standing
Edith Cowan University

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Always the Optimist?

Eric Kordt and
Craig Standing

E-Business Research Centre,
School of Management Information Systems
Edith Cowan University, Joondalup, Australia

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to determine the attributional style (optimistic or pessimistic) of Information Technology support workers and executive managers using attribution theory. This research suggests that support workers are likely to exhibit an optimistic attributional style whilst executive managers are likely to exhibit a pessimistic attributional style. The differences in attributional style reflected in aspects such as the strength to participate (support workers) or avoid (executive managers) projects destined for failure. The research suggests that managers can positively influence the causal dimensions of attributional style by increasing support worker involvement, supporting executive managers, empowering employees and supporting organisational learning.

Introduction

Inspirational leaders such as Rudy Giuliani suggest that leaders need to be optimists with their vision beyond the present (CNN 2004). Additionally, popular perception suggests that motivated support workers are also generally optimistic in the fact that the skills they've acquired will play a pivotal role in future projects they may be involved in. As such, one could propose that the ideal individual would always be optimistic in nature.

Unfortunately, exploratory research by Standing et al. (2006) suggests that individuals involved with Information Technology projects defy this proposition. Indeed, whilst the research suggests that support workers are likely to be optimistic, executive managers were found to be pessimistic. Research suggesting that optimists will have a tendency to experience job satisfaction, performance and success in an occupational environment in contrast to pessimistic individuals who will be more likely to be less productive and persistent (Furnham, Brewin et al. 1994; Proudfoot, Corr et al. 2001).

The purpose of this research is to determine the attributional style of Information Technology support workers and executive managers using attribution theory. The research findings capable of shedding light on the social context of projects which is frequently cited as being unstable or highly politicised for projects which fail (Wallace, Keil et al. 2004). The current environment characterised by a disproportionately high rate of failure that is frequently cited as the primary challenge facing the Information Technology profession (Hillam and Edwards 2001; Standing, Guilfoyle et al. 2006).

Research conducted by the Standish Group (2004) suggesting that a disturbing 71% of all surveyed projects fail to some extent or completely.

Attribution Theory

Attribution theory is concerned with how attributions (an idea or belief about the cause of a certain behaviour) affect an individual’s motivations, emotions and behaviour (Kelley and Michela 1980). Attributions provide individuals, particularly in modern western cultures a sense of systematic personal control over environmental forces (Heider 1958; Wortman 1976; Brehm 1996; Guilfoyle 2000; Standing, Guilfoyle et al. 2006).

Personality and motivational theorists presume that behaviour is a function of attaining a desired goal (subjective expectancy of success) and the affective value associated with that goal (Anderson and Weiner 1992). The attributional process represents a framework that seeks to describe behaviour based on this presumption. Figure 1 presents a simplified model of the attributional process.

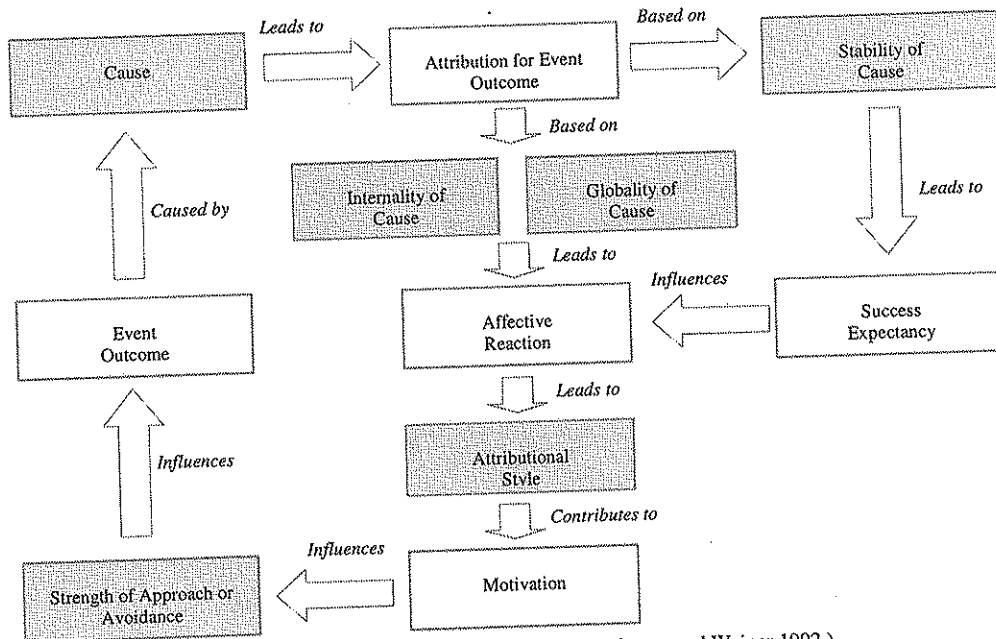


Figure 1: Simplified model of the attributional process (Based on Anderson and Weiner 1992)

The attributional process commences when an event has transpired (e.g. project has failed or succeeded). An attribution for the event outcome then leads to a deeper causal understanding which in turn influences success expectancy and affective reactions (Anderson and Weiner 1992). The resultant combination of success expectancy and affective reaction reflected in an individual differences variable termed attributional style.

Three causality dimensions characterise attributional style (Higgins and Hay 2003):

- **Internality** – whether the cause is specific to an individual (internal) or external to the individual (external);
- **Stability** – whether the cause is constant (stable) or fluctuates (unstable); and
- **Globality** – whether the cause affects a variety of situations (global) or is limited to narrow and specific outcomes (specific).

Individuals who exhibit a depressive (pessimistic) attributional style are characterised through these causality dimensions as having a tendency to explain failure with internal, stable and global causes and to explain successes with external, unstable and specific causes (Abramson, Metalsky et al. 1989; Furnham, Brewin et al. 1994). Conversely, an individual exhibiting a self serving (optimistic) attributional style is characterised as having a tendency to explain failure with external, unstable and specific causes and to explain successes with internal, stable and global causes (Abramson, Metalsky et al. 1989; Furnham, Brewin et al. 1994). Individuals capable of exhibiting both attributional styles in different aspects of life due to varying responses to different negative events (Furnham, Brewin et al. 1994).

Motivation that includes strength of approach or avoidance is influenced by an individual's attributional style which in turn may impact future event outcomes (Anderson and Weiner 1992). Research suggests that individuals may develop a certain attributional style through the processes of socialisation and selection that can be observed in the organisational climate and culture (Furnham, Brewin, & O Kelly, 1994).

Research Design and Methodology

The research is based on the theoretical work of Weiner (1974) and the validated and widely employed Occupational Attributional Style Questionnaire (OASQ) by Furnham et al. (1994). This approach has ensured that the research is based on a validated framework. The modified OASQ applied through semi-structured interviews conducted with both support workers and executive managers purposively selected in the Canberra region based on their job responsibility. In total, 10 support workers and 6 executive managers were interviewed. This sample size assessed as adequate due to definitive themes that emerged during the interview process.

Findings

The research findings are sequenced to correspond with the attributional process presented in Figure 1.

Project Outcome

The attributional process commences when an event has transpired (i.e. project success or failure). An attribution for the event outcome then made based on a perceived cause. To ascertain this cause each participant was asked to explain why the project success or failure occurred. The five most frequently cited causes for project success and failure by support workers and executive managers in order of frequency are presented in Figure 2.

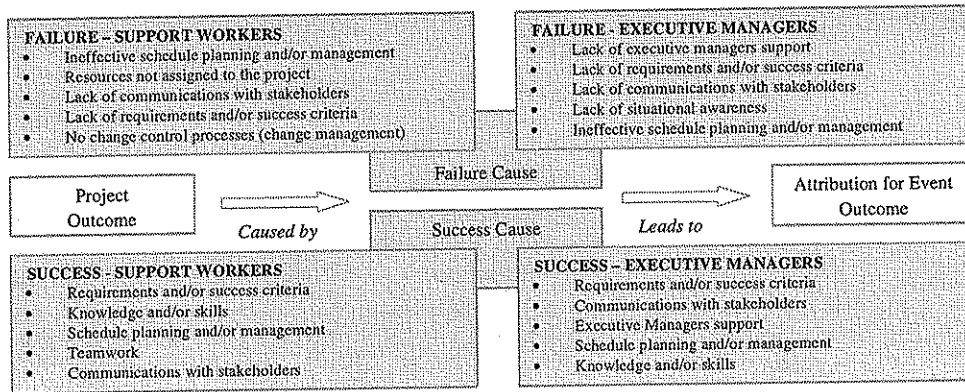


Figure 2: Causes for project success and failure Attribution for Event Outcome

Internality

Based on the previously identified cause for success and failure, interview participants were asked whether the cause was due to them (internal) or to another factor (external). The interview findings suggest that the majority of support workers and executive managers attributed failure to external causes. The findings for success were less clear with both support workers and executive managers being divided. The most frequently cited reasons for attributing success and failure to internal and external causes are presented in Figure 3.

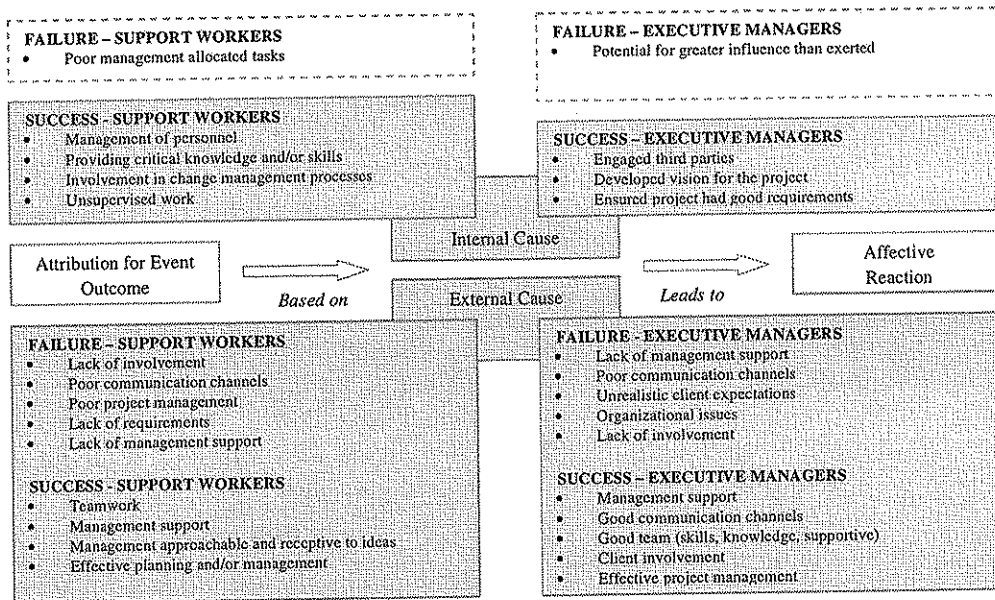


Figure 3: Frequently cited reasons for internal or external attributions

Globality

Based on the previously identified cause for success and failure, interview participants were asked whether the cause affected a variety of situations (global) or was limited to narrow and specific outcomes (specific). The interview findings suggest that support workers were more likely to attribute success to global causes and failure to specific causes. This is in contrast to executive managers who were likely to attribute both success and failure to global causes. The most frequently cited reasons for attributing projects to specific and global causes are presented in Figure 4.

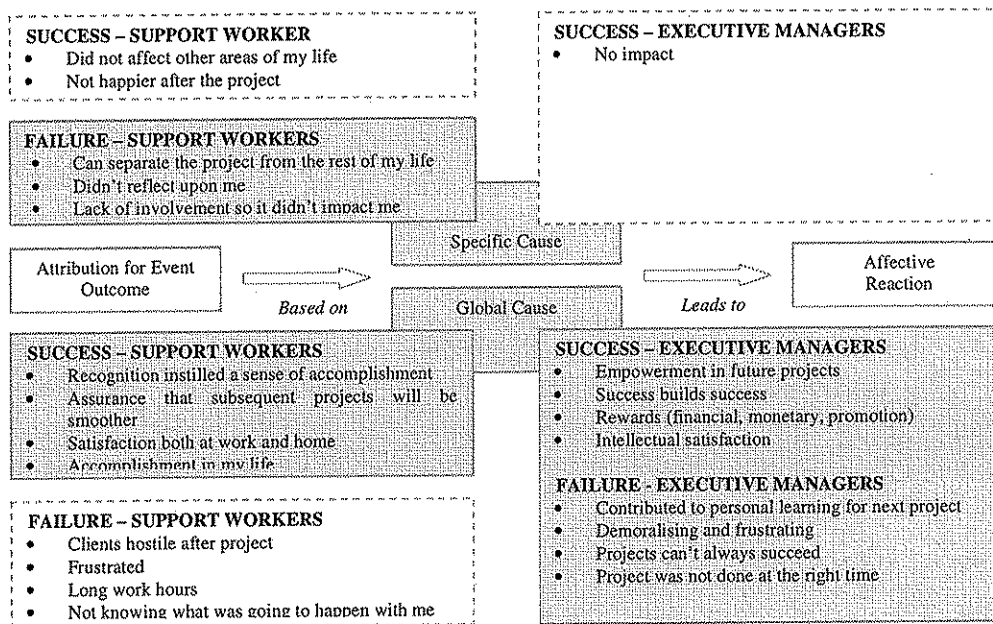


Figure 4: Frequently cited reasons for specific or global attributions

Stability

Based on the previously identified cause for success and failure, interview participants were asked whether the cause is constant (stable) or fluctuates (unstable). The interview findings suggest that support workers were likely to attribute success and failure to stable causes. This differed from executive managers who were likely to attribute success to unstable causes and failure to stable causes. The most frequently cited reasons for attributing projects to stable and unstable causes are presented in Figure 5.

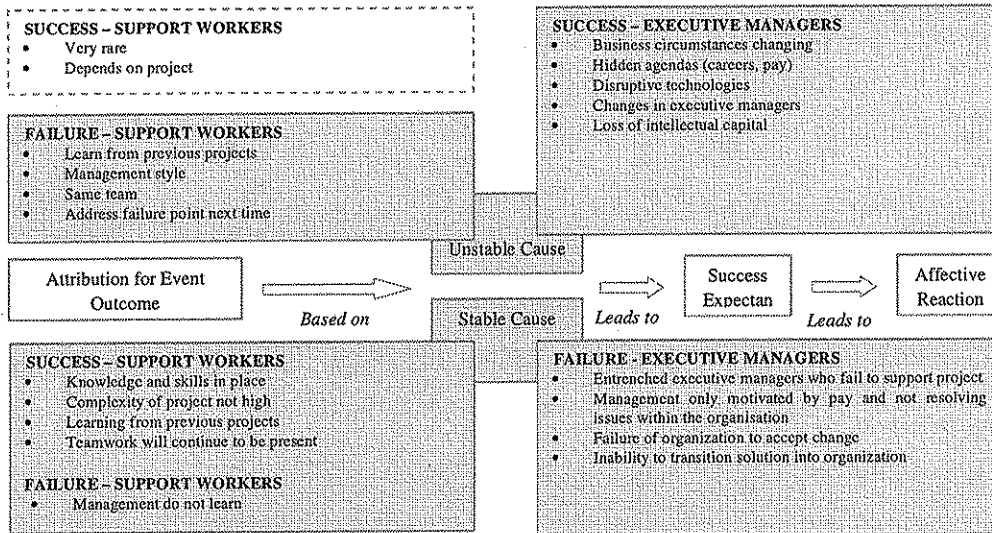


Figure 5: Frequently cited reasons for stable or unstable attributions

Affective Reaction

Based on the previous results obtained for internality, globality and stability the attributional style was determined for both support workers and executive managers. The results presented in Figure 6 indicate that support workers are likely to exhibit an affective reaction of optimism which contrasts to pessimism which is likely to be exhibited by executive managers.

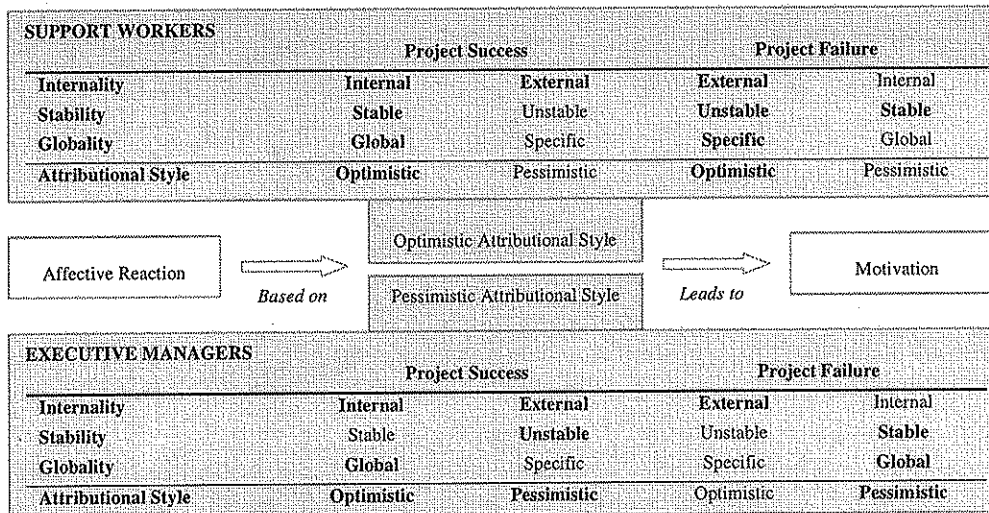


Figure 6: Attributional style for support workers and executive managers

Motivation

To gauge the influence of pessimism or optimism on motivation each participant was asked whether they had the strength to participate in future projects or avoid them. Based on the results support workers had the strength of approach to participate again in both a similar successful or failed project. Conversely, executive managers indicated that they had the strength of approach to participate again in successful projects but were divided on whether they would avoid projects which looked destined for failure or participate. The most frequently cited causes for strength of approach for support workers and executive managers are presented in Figure 7.

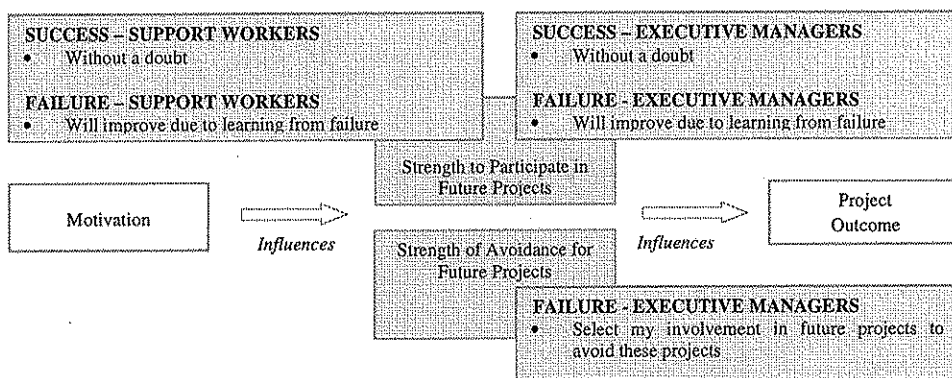


Figure 7: Motivation to participate in future projects

Discussion

Support workers exhibited an optimistic attributional style that was reflected in the group’s tendency to look at failed projects more positively. In contrast, executive managers exhibited a pessimistic attributional style that was reflected in the group’s tendency to look at failed projects more critically. The difference between support workers and executive managers potentially reflected in experience and situational awareness differences. Executive managers with extensive experience and increased levels of situational awareness capable of scanning failed projects and identifying causes that may not be apparent for support workers with rudimentary experience and limited situational awareness.

Although support workers and executive managers exhibited a different attributional style, the causal dimension of internality was attributed alike. That is, both support workers and executive managers took a balanced view on accepting personal responsibility for the cause that contributed to project success whilst also acknowledging the contribution of other project participants or external factors (e.g. vendor support). This balanced approach unfortunately not reflected during project failure. In this instance, both support workers and executive managers failed to instinctively take personal responsibility for the cause that contributed to the project failure, instead focusing on other project participants or external factors (e.g.

organisational structure). This failure to take some degree of personal responsibility for failure potentially reflective of the negative consequences and fear associated with failure in western cultures.

Whilst support workers and executive managers attributed the internality causal dimension alike, differences emerged in how the globality causal dimension was attributed. In particular, support workers associated the cause and any emotional consequences (e.g. anger, resentment) of the failure solely with the specific project. In contrast, executive managers associated the cause of failure with a variety of projects and felt the emotional consequences influenced their life outside the project (e.g. felt anger at home). This difference in attribution potentially due to a multitude of factors that can include experience (e.g. ability to recognise cause as recurring) and work differences (e.g. support workers typically work a fixed schedule where executive managers frequently work long hours and take work home).

Similarly, support workers and executive managers attributed the stability causal dimension differently. In particular, support workers associated the causes of project success and failure as being present in future projects based on factors such as organisational learning and the development of knowledge and skills. In contrast, executive managers associated the causes of project success and failure as not always being present in future projects based on factors such as organisational change, hidden agendas of senior management and disruptive technologies. This difference in attribution potentially indicative of expectations support workers place on their employer to continuously improve and the experience of executive managers that may suggest that these expectations are misplaced.

It is clear from the research that differences in attributional style did appear to translate into differences in individual motivation. Support workers exhibiting an optimistic attributional style suggesting they were motivated to participate in future projects even if they appeared destined for failure. In contrast, executive managers exhibiting a pessimistic attributional style were mixed in their motivation to participate again in future projects that appeared destined for failure. Almost half the executive managers interviewed suggesting they would seek to avoid similar future projects that appeared destined for failure. This avoidance capable of adversely impacting future projects which are dependent on prior experience to minimise the likelihood of project failure.

Managerial Implications

The findings and insights obtained through this research have various managerial implications. We have observed four of the most pertinent points and implications for management from this research.

Involve support workers. Support workers accepted no personal responsibility for project failure, due in part to a lack of project involvement. To address this situation management need to more actively involve support workers in projects. Increased

involvement of support workers has the potential to increase personal responsibility (e.g. greater presence in shaping the direction of the project) whilst also facilitating personal development (e.g. doing roles not typically assigned to them).

Support Executive Managers. Executive managers accepted no personal responsibility for project failure, due in part to a lack of management support. To address this situation management need to support their executive managers through simple actions that include communications, mentoring, recognition and resources.

Empower Employees. Both support workers and executive managers indicated a need for empowerment (e.g. felt I could influence the project but I had no real mandate). Failure to empower employees has the real potential to create a state where they feel they can't stop or fix problems plaguing a project (Thompson 2004). Consequently, they are potentially less likely to accept blame for project failure (e.g. "the buck stops here"). This is particularly pertinent for executive managers.

Support Organisational Learning. Support workers in particular were extremely confident that organisational learning would occur in future projects. Failure to learn as an organization has the real potential to undermine the optimism of support workers and adversely impact future project success. Management must ensure that initiatives to support organisational learning are implemented and adequately resourced.

Limitations and Future Research

Some limitations in this research currently exist. Firstly, the lack of interviews for executive managers in relation to support workers may have an impact (i.e. ten versus six). However, trends were formed in this smaller sample set which allowed the researchers to be confident in the results. Secondly, the lack of triangulation on the data set has the potential to impact the validity of the data. Future research by the researchers will seek to address these limitations. Potential future research can be conducted to gauge the impact of generational differences (e.g. Gen X, Gen Y) on attributional style in projects.

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