

THE IMPACT OF TRUST IN BUILDING A HIGH PERFORMING TEAM, SPECIFICALLY IN PROJECT BASED IT COMPANIES: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Introduction

Human resources and the dynamics involved determines the success of any organisation. The human element has got paramount importance in the growth, maintenance, and sustenance of business. Of all resources, in any business, it is the human element that contributes the most for producing results. In an IT service industry, the role gets to be more important because in service industry people play a pivotal role in execution. Here projects are handled by leaders with varied exposure and expertise cutting across different states, countries, experience, exposure and qualification. The leader's action and the reaction of team member creates the atmosphere of the organisation. The cohesiveness results in a high performing team and the ultimate goal is achieved.

Research says most successful projects are the results of ethical behavior of leaders. PMBOK (Project Management Body of Knowledge) has mandated four ethical values to be demonstrated by the project managers – *Fairness, Honesty, Respect and Responsibility*. While trust has not been mandated, many researchers have attributed immense importance to “Trust” in project management (Padhi and Mishra, 2017). Trust is subjective and understood differently by different people. The multifarious eclectic interpretations of trust have been studied in this paper.

In business environment, trust is a *bonding* between people and organizations. Success and sustainability of organizations stand on the foundation of trust. In absence of trust, there can be no consistent and productive business. Success depends on network of positive relationships. And positive relationship can be fostered by high level of trust - both cognitive and affective. Therefore it should be encouraged and treated as measurement of leadership performance during employee appraisal.

Ken Blanchard companies have investigated into the relationship between high performance and trustworthy leaders and suggested a direct correlation between a trustworthy leader and a productive employee. The Blanchard research also cites another study indicating that 45% of employees say “lack of trust in leadership is the biggest issue in work”.

Trust is normally *the belief* one carries for someone or something. The extent of trust on someone is proportional to the extent of reliability one has on the person. Trust is the key to any effective relationship as it fosters co-operation. Trust is a vital ingredient of any relationship involving exchanges such as employee-employer relationships (Argyle, 1972). Trust can be an outcome of past experiences with an individual or can be initiated and induced, built on a belief. Thus trust can be a deliverable of learning or control (Buskens, Raub, 2002).

Trust acts as a *mediator* in vitalizing the relationship between a transformational leader and his sharing of knowledge with employees (Ba Le, Lei, 2018). This is the best and most participative leadership style and the follower's trust is a precursor for such a leadership to exist and thrive. Earlier, researchers (Innocenti, Pilati, Peluso, 2011) had focused on trust's role as a *moderator* on employee's attitudes and performance.

Trust is perceived differently in different organizations. (Parra, Nalda, Perles, 2011) linked the extent of trust with the extent of concern of privacy in an organization. There is an inverse link between the two. The higher is the privacy concern, the lower is the inter personal trust. This is further endorsed by a research done on the concept of *trust in banks*. A very recent study (Esterik-Plasmeijer, Raaij, 2017) emphasized that trust is a strong indicator of loyalty. In turn, integrity is the most important predictor of trust in a bank. This is seconded by transparency, customer orientation and competence. This concept of trust is true for customer centric organizations as well.

(Snijders, Keren, 2001) has defined trust in the setting of three factors.

- It speaks about the inherent trait in a person to trust others.
- Trust is dependent on the appearance of a person. The perception of persona exuded by certain people make them more trustable than others.
- Trust can also arise as per the situation in hand and seeing what is at stake. Research has pointed out the increasing impact of the situational factors.

In corporates, trust gets affected by:

- Hierarchical differences in an organization which in turn affects the conditions of trust (Werbel, Henriques, 2009). Supervisors give importance to trust conditions which aid implementation of processes and procedures, while sub-ordinates stress on equal and fair treatment by supervisors.
- Trust is highly susceptible to demographic influences (Chang , O'Neill , Travaglione, 2016).
- Existence of trust varies with age and is largely impacted by the culture existing in companies where one has worked for a long period of time. The older male workforce, specifically who worked in the public sector for a long time and were unionized, were found to trust their supervisors lesser than the others. In a Japanese context, long term association is treated as a direct pre-requisite of trust and indirect pre-requisite of satisfaction.
- Culture also has an impact on trust levels (Noemi, Tibor, 2016).

Chaos Reports by the Standish Group (Standish Reports, 2004) says more than one third of software projects fail¹. They opine that while technical factors do contribute to such failures, the effect of softer aspects of project performance, inclusive of ethics are equally important and worthy of a study. An article (Mushonga, Thiagarajan, Torrance, 2014) on ethics and fairness in the workplace delved deep into the mediating role of trust in the workplace. It is the existence of trust which reinforces an employee's belief that his employer shall always be just towards him. This in turn shall positively impact the employee's deliverables at workplace and beyond.

Literature Review

It is important to understand trust at both macro and micro levels so that effective policies can be created so as to maximize co operation in the organization, thereby leading to high performance. *This study aims to understand different dimensions of trust which help in creating high performing project teams in IT service companies.* Specifically this investigation can lead to exploration of methods of trust development as a process to increase project performance.

Trust is pre-requisite in team performance, cost reduction, project mining, quality service, timely execution, smooth functioning etc. Importance of trust also reflects in many business magazines and papers regularly. Lot of research has been conducted to explore into behaviour leading to development of trust which results in positive project performance.

The Literature review has been presented, based on the impact and link of major indicators on trust, with special focus on IT service companies.



[Illustration 1: Link between Trust and major indicators]

¹ The Chaos report by Standish group places the failure rate of IT projects at a very high range of 68%. A noticeable and alarming trend is that the project success rate has come down to 32 % in 2012 as compared to 35 % in 2006.

❖ Trust and Project Management

Researches in varied areas of project progress indicate one common factor responsible for successful project completion, namely trust. This has been found to impact all the phases of a project along with all stakeholders. Some of the potential areas of impact include better client relationships, accelerated time to market, reduced risk premiums in contracting and thus lower project costs and more effective communication. The last area alone made further exploration of the trust phenomenon worthwhile, as communication breakdowns account for most, if not all, project failures.

Background and the rationale is elucidated as follows - Trust, in many researches has been defined against the backdrop of the situation in hand. Particularly in a software project environment, the team faces challenges in different phases like initiation, planning, execution, monitoring and closure of a project. A project has limited time where people from different backgrounds come together to complete the task in hand. Additionally, they have to deal with other stakeholders like other departments, management, customers and vendors. Of special mention is the difference in inter-company language and culture, which is inherent as team members are integrated by virtue of the specific skills they have, which is important for the completion of any project. This makes it more important for the project to build cohesiveness in the team to complete the task in given time, within budget and with standard quality. Hence, Trust building is treated as the key to build cohesiveness in the team, (Hartman, 1999, 2000).

❖ Trust and Communication

The basic principle underlying trust in any relationship is a continuous flow of communication between the entities in the relationship. In the workplace also, trust is largely dependent on this flow of communication. (Cahoon & Rowney, 1995). This is also driver for project success. (Pinto & Slevin, 1998). The quantity of contact and the quality of open information exchange positively impacts the employee's performance as the employee feels recognized. This ingrains trust in the relationship which has a direct and visible positive effect on the existing relationship between employee and supervisor.

Extant literature has highlighted the importance of trust among key stakeholders in promoting honest communication during project implementation. (Dervitsiotis, 2003) states that honesty during project implementation is maintained when members engage in transparent communication, honest admission of mistakes, completion of tasks on time and an open demonstration of trust. (Atkinson et al., 2006) while arguing for a rethinking on project management have pointed out the benefits of trust among project members on project planning through honest estimations and specifications. In a more recent study (Walker and Lloyd Walker, 2014) using a single case study of a large Australian University, have stressed on the need for a trust worthy leader to drive honest communication amongst the project members. (Padhi S, Mishra S, 2016)

❖ Trust and Collaboration

Ethics and fairness in the workplace delved deep into the mediating role of trust in the workplace (Mushonga, Thiagarajan, Torrance, 2014). It is the existence of trust which reinforces an employee's belief that his employer shall always be just towards him. This in turn shall positively impact the employee's deliverables at workplace and beyond. All individuals tend to engage in relationships where they feel they can add value to others and in turn be reciprocated in a similar manner. This speaks about a mutually beneficial relationship which is generally voluntary. These relationships are embedded in social settings. This study has focused on dyadic relationships specifically, between an employee and employer. Discussion about any relationship mandates mention of the Social Exchange theory. This theory has been talked about in this article under mention. Most social exchanges and dyadic relationships seek reciprocation by the entities in the exchange. Absence of reciprocation creates rifts in relationships. The existence of trust is of profound importance in any relationship and social exchange as individuals tend to engage in relationships with entities they trust. Hence, trust is instrumental for the longevity of any relationship and there by enhances collaborative work.

❖ Trust and Collaborative Decision Making

At workplace, existence of trust reinforces the perception of the administering capability of the supervisor in the mind of the employee. This helps the supervisor in the expeditious implementation and execution of practices and policies. In turn, existence of trust reinforces the belief that the supervisor shall be just and fair while appraising and recognizing the efforts of the employee. Employee will also deliver better in a perceived atmosphere of transparency and ethical practices. The article (Mushonga, Thiagarajan, Torrance, 2014) speaks about two kinds of trust – cognitive and affective. Cognitive trust is planned where one selects the entity to be trusted for beneficial reasons. This trust is dependent on nature of leader rather than on any emotional bondage. However, affective trust is more voluntary as it is based on emotional links between the entities in the dyadic alliance.

But Project Managers also face the apprehensions between decision making based on facts vis-à-vis value based decision making and striking the right balance between the various project stakeholders with often conflicting interests. In the backdrop of these paradoxes, project management is always an amalgam of technical science and human art.

The PMBOK as an emergent standard of best practice in project management has also been subject to relevant criticisms for its linearity and its imposition of a universal standard irrespective of the project context.

'Is there a need to reconstruct project management?' (Morris, 2013). These questions are a mere representation of the totality of questions raised in a plea to rethink project management by academia and practice alike. The culmination of these questions is ultimately in the overriding question – 'what can research offer to fill in the gap between theory and practice in project management and make projects deliver value and successful outcomes to all stakeholders?' Similar questions have been raised. 'What is the value brought in by project management standards or credentials?' (Bredillet, 2003; Hodgson and Cicimil, 2007);

❖ Trust and Empathy

In a supervisor employee relationship, employees trust and invest more emotionally with a supervisor who they perceive trusts them and cares for them. This affective trust is related to demonstrated compassion and kind heartedness (Mushonga, Thiagarajan, Torrance, 2014).

Supervisor employee relations are interwoven through varied interactions. Though unspoken and mostly informal, it is the psychological contract as defined by (Denise Rousseau, 1989), which binds an employee to an organization, more than the employment contract. This contract is influenced by the extent of management of expectations from the sides of both employees and supervisors. This contract is largely dependent on the communication between both and evolves positively when both sides see the meaningful consummation of discussed activities. This in turn strengthens the psychological contract by building a trust between both the employee and supervisor.

❖ Trust and Culture

An employee stepping into the workplace is expected to adapt to the work culture. The employee on his part has his own perceptions of the assigned roles and the supervisor has his own expectations from the employee. Both the perceptions are affected to a large extent by a strong social factor backed by unwritten and implied expectations of employee & supervisor relationship. This has been expressed in the research paper (Klieman, Quinn, Harris, 2000) which has studied the impact of interactions between a supervisor and an employee, on the exposure a job provides or what is known as breadth of a job. Employee friendly practices are on the increase to evoke a voluntary participation from employees who in turn exhibit "*organization citizenship behaviour*". These employees voluntarily participate to accomplish tasks which are not part of their role. Employers endorse such practices to strike a balance between expectations from both sides and thereby foster trust and performance which becomes visibly evident.

❖ Trust and Micro Management

The research (Klieman, Quinn, Harris, 2000) went on to establish that supervisor's constant monitoring of employee's performance devalues and de-motivates an employee, thereby affecting the performance. The quantity of contact and the quality of information exchange positively impacts the employee's performance as the employee feels recognized. This ingrains trust in the relationship which has a direct and visible positive effect on the existing relationship between employee and supervisor.

❖ Trust and Perception

Supervisor's attitude is elemental towards building trust with employee. Attitude is described in various manners but is most commonly a settled thinking about something or someone, thereby evoking different kinds of spoken and unspoken behaviour. Inaccurate perceptions of attitude can induce negative behaviour which can even damage relationships. This perception has also been talked about in an article on integrity of behaviour and how it is aligned with the perceptions of employees, thereby creating trust and leading to positive deliverables at work (Kannan-Narasimhan, Rangapriya, Lawrence, Barbara, 2012). The pattern of integrity in behaviour has been studied in this paper. It was emphasized that the trust in employee noticeably affects the trust which employee has on the senior management.

❖ Trust and HRM practices

There is an established link between perceived HRM practices and the trust in the employer on employee performance outcomes (Alfes, Shantz, Truss, 2012). This has discussed the three aspects of trust which has been pointed out in the literature presented by (Searle et al., 2011). This also reinforces the fact that trust can arise due to different reasons. First, trust can be inculcated as a rational choice and a decision for a dichotomous balance between employee and employer. Second, trust can be a behavior or an act directed towards positive outcomes. These two views regard trust as a pre-requisite for positive outcomes only and therefore indicate some amount of manoeuvrability. The third perspective has however induced a lot of research on trust at workplace as a subset of a set of beliefs an employee and an employer have on each other. This study corroborated the fact that the presence of trust in an employee for the supervisor, positively impacts the employee's perceptions of the HR practices implemented by the supervisor and this in turn induces better citizenship behaviour amongst employees. This intensifies the feeling of belongingness in an employee and increases the association of employee at workplace.

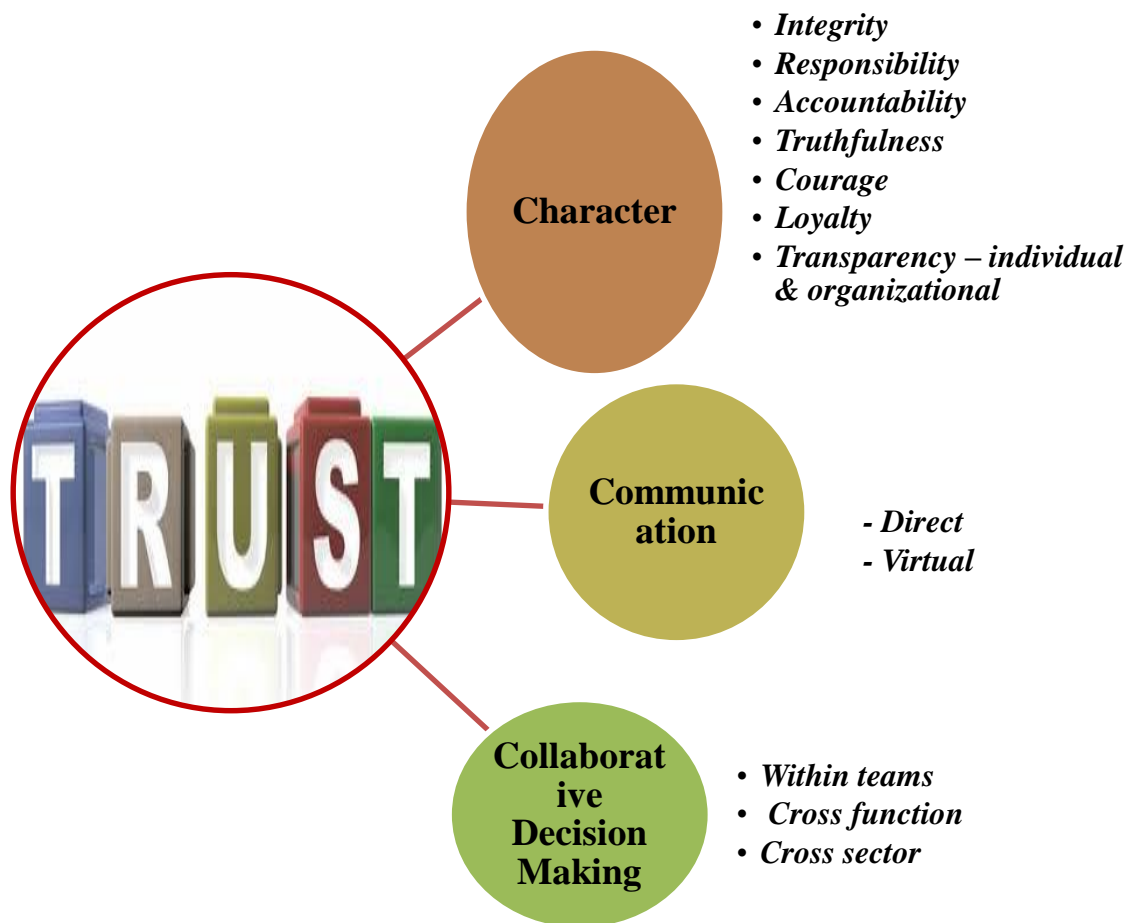
The literature review indicates the following gaps :

1. Researches opine that while technical factors do contribute to most project failures, the effect of softer aspects of project performance, inclusive of ethics are equally important and worthy of a study. PMBOK is very silent on trust. It has mentioned about ethics but not emphasized on the linkage between ethics and trust.
2. The impact of communication on trust is a vast area, which has been indicated in many research but impact on software industry not been emphasized.
3. The link between trust and overall HR practices has been discussed. Individual practices have not been studied.

Discussion:

A combination of attributes demonstrated by the team in project along with the project manager creates a high performing team (Turknett and Lyn, 2002). Trust is a synthesis of several attributes. None of the attributes that impact trust are fixed at birth. As humans, we learn the attributes that generate trust based on the environments we are exposed to and hone them based on effort and importance we place on these characteristics. (Gibbons, 2016) aptly started her article saying that values are not taught or learnt from written documents. They are voluntarily inculcated and imbibed. This is true for an individual on the personal as well as the professional front.

Characteristics that define trust in IT service industries are illustrated and detailed hereunder.



[Illustration 2: Defining characteristics of Trust]

The three most significant characteristics that shape trust in IT service industries are:

▪ **Character** – is reflected by inherent traits like integrity, responsibility, accountability, courage, truthfulness, transparency, loyalty and benevolence. Any culture of good character is ingrained in integrity. People of good character with perceived stable moral qualities get things done. These people are the ones we normally turn to during times of need or when we need advise on matters, so as to get a job done right. These people in turn take *responsibility* wherever they are to deliver desired outcomes. Progressive organizations have to imbibe a culture of openness and need to identify employees displaying organization citizenship behavior. People like Sherron Watkins, the whistleblower in the Enron fraud case should be encouraged and motivated to speak up for the right cause at the right instance.

For people with character, *responsibility brings “accountability”* along with it. Businesses have witnessed innovation turnarounds by responsible and accountable employees. Exemplary is the exceptional accountability shown in the case of IT giant, IBM in 1998. (Hamel, 2000) has described a laudable face change in the brand, competence and scope of services extended by IBM, all this by two mid level employees. Both the cases cite the need of the presence of a closely linked trait – *courage* in responsible employees. This in turn necessitates every organization to identify and encourage employees with these traits, for the organization to be progressive.

Truthfulness is another essential indicator of good character. It requires a courageous person to speak up truth which is not pleasant. Trust is induced in a supervisor-subordinate relationship when the leader encourages an atmosphere of fearlessness and people get automatically inclined to speak up the truth and own up for errors.

(Gibbons, 2016) has cited an ethics summit where, Frank Chamberlain, a turn-around specialist, has cited that many interpersonal problems in organizations owe their existence to lack of transparency and trust in employees. The management has not been able to share the stark truth about certain practices with the internal customers, who in turn embark upon these practices and treat them as ethical lapses, thereby widening the breach of values and trust with the management. Truthfulness in the initial place would have inspired trust amidst employees, making them more *loyal and committed* towards attaining desired deliverables at work.

Transparency is crucial in any ethical organization. Both *organizational transparency* and *individual transparency* have to co-exist towards an ethical organization. Moreover, transparency has to permeate into every field of functioning to be ethical and to gain trust. Corporate transparency knows no limits in today's era of openness. Howard Schultz, the head of Starbucks, said last year that “the currency of leadership is transparency.”

Jack Stack, President & CEO, Springfield ReManufacturing Corp professed a very simple and straight-forward approach to management. He held every one responsible and accountable for building a quality culture and for emanating values. Documents, commonly considered confidential, were displayed at conspicuous places for all to see and comprehend. The idea was to increase the feeling of belongingness.

This has been accentuated by (Collins, Porras, 1994) that visionary companies are not born out of dynamic and visionary leaders only. They owe their existence to the deep seated values ingrained in the organizations which goes beyond leaders and products. The organization design in such companies gives rise to charismatic leaders. Visionary companies pursues both ideological and financial considerations to move on the growth path.

- Communication – Quality of communication defines the effectiveness of any dyadic relationship and is a predictor of trust between the entities. Communication flow between entities fosters confidence and trust. Going beyond dyadic relationships, it is amply researched that quality of communications defines teamwork as well. A free flow of information in line with set objectives directs the performance seamlessly towards desired outcomes. Today's world of VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity) can be handled through positive, clear and concise communication patterns.

(Jarvenpaa, Leidner, 1999) explored the challenge of trust creation amidst virtual teams. With the advent of globalization, virtual functioning across geographies was the need of the hour and like any team, even a virtual team needs trust for its effective functioning. Any ambiguity in communication frustrates team members as this either delays outcomes or affects the quality of outcomes. In the study, synchronized computer aided communication was used for team functioning which was seen to have created a kind of cognitive trust only till outcomes were achieved. The term “swift trust” was used for the first time in this regard by Meyerson *et al.* (1996). Direct and interactive communication creates trust which is more permanent. In absence, swift trust had to be inculcated through well designed and timely online interventions, for desired results. HR's role includes supporting the development of virtual teams and development of swift trust in tandem.

In every workplace, the unspoken psychological contract is largely dependent on the communication between entities involved and evolves positively when both sides – supervisor and employee see the meaningful consummation of discussed activities. One sided communication between entities can breed de-motivation as it impresses an atmosphere of monitoring by the entity issuing instructions, thereby curbing a free flow of meaningful information. This can affect the level of trust.

In addition to communication, supervisor's attitude is of prime importance, towards building trust with employee. Attitude is described in various manners but is most commonly a pre-conceived notion about something or someone, thereby evoking different kinds of spoken and unspoken behaviour. Inaccurate perceptions and notions of attitude can induce negative behaviour which can even damage relationships.

- Collaborative Decision Making – At workplace, it is imperative for employees to get together and *collaborate* to work towards common goals and objectives. Even virtual teams need to collaborate to attain the desired outcome. Collaboration enables brainstorming and conjuring different perspectives in situations for best solutions. Every employee is allowed to add value and has an equal chance of getting recognized for sharing thoughts. Needless to say, the quality of decision making affects the performance and outcomes. Decisions taken without participation of team members normally do not withstand the challenge of non-acceptance from a team member or members. Hence, collaborative decision making stands out as it creates a bond and trust between the entities in a team or project. Decisions appear fair and therefore have longstanding impact. Graver the situation which elicits decision making, higher should be the need for collaboration to ensure expeditious solutions.

(Cooperman, 1999) in his research in a school has included collaborative decision making and management as an essential part of governance amongst all stakeholders – teachers, parents, administrators. Such a working style induces innovational practices as it creates an atmosphere where all are empowered to share their ideas.

(Jeffery, Maes, Bratton, 2005) have conceptualized shared mental models and linked them with collaborative management and the positive impact on team performance. Set of five imperatives have been discussed which affect collaboration. This includes role clarification in line with the goals of an organization, effective communication and information sharing, existence of a personal bond and familiarity between team members breeding trust and a base or model centered around collaboration, which is accepted by all team members.

These imperatives have also been cited in an article eleven years later (Intindola, Weisinger, Gomez, 2016). This reviewed the need of multi sector collaboration as this can help in overcoming social issues. Organizations interact sectors as per their business needs. A cross sector collaboration also needs leadership, mutual respect and understanding, shared vision and common goals, which have been identified as three critical factors in the success of such collaborations.

Even if we succeed in project, the employees do not work in collaboration. There exists differences, undercurrents and adverse conflicts. We fail to create an atmosphere where people trust each other and value their thoughts. (Ralston, 1995, p. 2).

Research over the years have co-related effective communication and mental models and how this has improved performance.

(Buvik, Rolfsen, 2015) have researched on the increasing importance of trust in *project based industries*. Research has been conducted in construction industry, which is essentially project based where the processes are not routine. Employee attrition being high in the construction industry, inter-personal relations are complex and not delved upon too much as the tenure is of shorter duration due to the high attrition. Working relationships are therefore temporary in nature in a project. The research established that working relationships tend to be affected by the history of interactions and inter-personal relationships between the team members.

A very recent research paper (Bond-Barnard, Fletcher, Steyn, 2018) highlighted the importance and existence of trust and collaboration for increasing the plausibility of success in *project management*. An international survey was conducted on 151 project specialists to demonstrate the connotation that trust and collaboration have to co-exist for the success of project management. Ingredients of trust including expectations from each other, knowledge & information sharing and trust – cognitive & affective were studied. Ingredients of collaboration comprising familiarity in relationships, commitment, co-ordination, degree of conflict and link with external and internal incentives were analyzed.

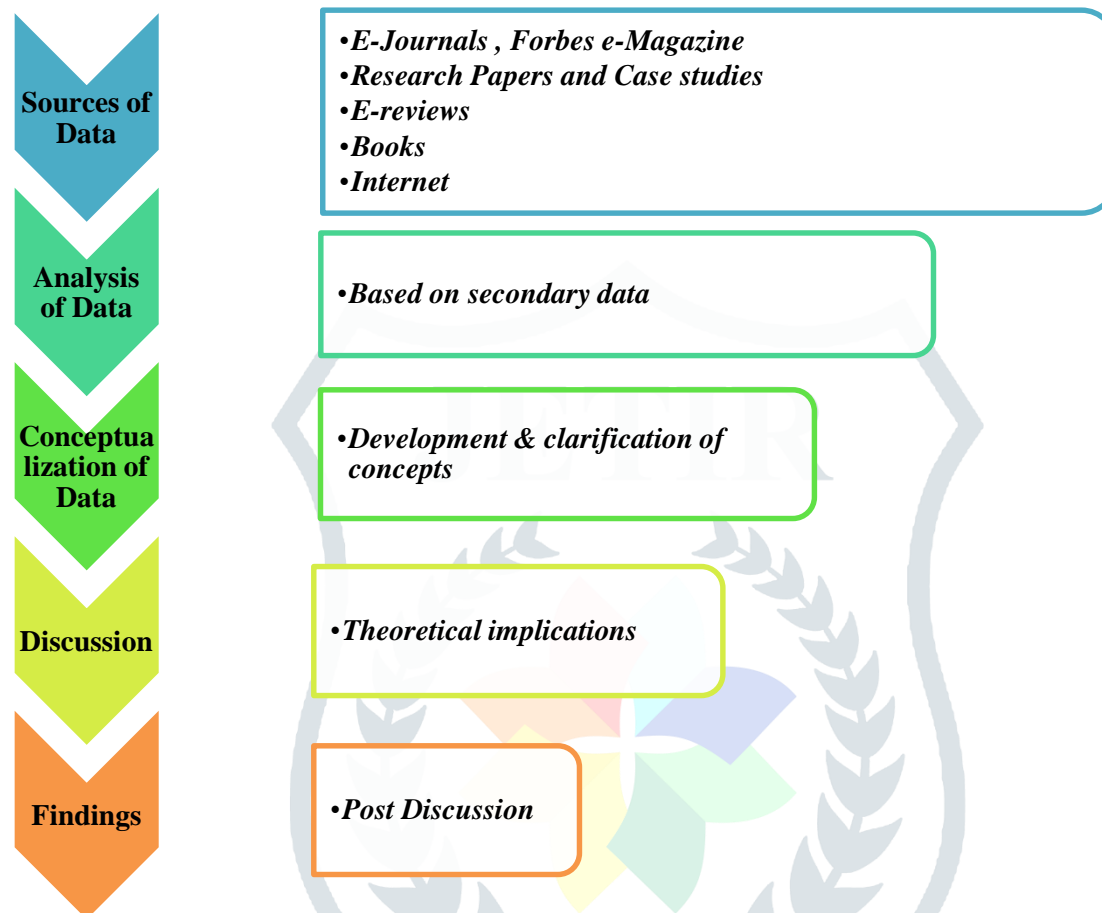
Every decision made by an authority represents an amalgamation of varied capabilities and competencies of the team members. This implies that teams that can effectively collaborate make effective decisions.

Methodology

This research focuses on understanding the major indicators having a co-relation with trust, how these attributes are demonstrated by Project Managers and its effect on project performance. This study is based on the assumption that behaviour of project managers impacts the project performance. We chose to focus our study in the information technology (IT) services sourcing (offshoring) industry given its phenomenal growth in the past decade (Messner 2013; NASSCOM 2013)².

This study also analyses Behaviour of team to know whether team behaviour impact the performance of the project.

This is a conceptual paper based on literature review. Data has been collected from secondary sources and analysed. The Process Flow followed in this paper is illustrated below:



[Illustration 3: Process Flow of the paper]

Findings

The best leadership advice is given in the book “Rhetoric” by Aristotle. For speakers to make an impact and to be believed, they have to do three things well: show good character, good sense and good will. These three elements shall in turn foster ‘Trust’. Our review of literature has focussed on the co-relation of major indicators with trust, with special focus on IT service companies.

This paper has discussed the three defining attributes of trust – character, communication and collaborative decision making that create a high performing team in IT Industry.

It is emphasized that trust influences virtually every aspect of project management and is perhaps even more important in project management than in operations management. This added significance stems from the very nature of projects today. They are fast-paced and of short duration. They involve organizations, groups and individuals who have never worked together. Worse, they involve groups that have worked together and who are still fighting over the last experience! We have little time and often little inclination to address the social niceties of getting along or even learning to trust one another. The consequence is that we end up with either difficult relations that lead to communication breakdown and hence to project failures or we pay a price in terms of additional work, churn and premiums to offset the perceived risks.

The research findings can also help in creating a trust model in projects to standardized code of conduct resulting in project success. However, further research with detailed quantitative evidence from IT service companies would enrich the usefulness of the proposed model. To sum it up, the authors welcome more empirical research efforts in this emerging field.

² In India, the services sourcing industry enjoys the highest impact factor with eight percent relative to India’s GDP and a seven percent share in all foreign direct investment as reported through statistics from the National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM)-India’s premier IT trade body in IT software and services (Messner, 2013).

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