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# Social networks: a strategy for enhancing project-stakeholder commitment

Social networks

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to examine the human dimension of project management by establishing the extent to which social networks influence the commitment of project stakeholders. Up to date, project managers still identify inadequate stakeholder commitment to project undertakings as a key antecedent of project failure and so efforts aimed at addressing this challenge are highly valued. The paper therefore explores the use of social networks as one of the possible strategies to enhance project-stakeholder commitment.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional study design. Based on responses from 172 project stakeholders who took part in a sample of 92 citizenship projects conducted by major commercial banks in Uganda, hierarchical regression was used to indicate what happens to a model as different predictor variables are introduced. The use of specific type of projects minimizes bias in results due to the unique nature of specific projects hence enhances reliability of results.

**Findings** – The results from statistical analysis reveal that social network elements (network transitivity and network degree) are significant predictors of project stakeholder commitment. The results also suggest that network transitivity is a better significant predictor of project-stakeholder commitment than network degree.

**Practical implications** – Project-stakeholder commitment has been widely studied in relation to project performance and the study makes a number of contributions to the theory and study of projects. First and foremost, the paper studied project social networks and project-stakeholder commitment in citizenship projects in commercial banks in Uganda which is a developing country. The study therefore contributes to an understanding of project social networks and project-stakeholder commitment in citizenship projects of commercial banks in a developing country. The implication of the findings is that it provides a different view point of understanding the aspects that affect project commitment. A lot of focus has been placed on improving project performance in Uganda, but none has specifically focussed on building project-stakeholder commitment through the use of project social networks.

**Originality/value** – Earlier attempts to investigate the impact of social networks on commitment in projects did not study commitment among individuals. Also, no previous empirical study in less developed countries has given special attention to the effect of social networks on project-stakeholder commitment especially in the domain of citizenship projects which have gained a lot of momentum around the globe. The study results indicate that getting concerned with the nature of social networks the project creates and the means it uses to maintain such networks has implications for project-stakeholder commitment.

**Keywords** Social networks, Strategy, Stakeholders, Project management, Project-stakeholder commitment

**Paper type** Research paper



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## 1. Introduction

Many organizations are increasingly considering project management as a means of achieving their strategic objectives. Most strategists thriving in today's competitive and chaotic global economy are using project management practices to consistently deliver quality business results in time and within budget (PMI, 2010). Similarly, an Economist Intelligence Report (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2009) also showed that 80 percent of global executives believe that having project management as a core competence helped them remain competitive during a recession period. One such kind of projects organizations like commercial banks are investing in are corporate citizenship projects (Nangoli, 2010). Consistent with Carroll (1998) and Drucker (1993), corporate citizenship projects are "projects aimed at active commitment to making a difference in one's community, society and country. Most of these projects conducted involve provision of shelter to the disadvantaged, empowering youths to start their own jobs, eradicating malaria, improving peoples' sight, minimizing spread of HIV among others. Nangoli *et al.* (2012) have indicated that lack of project commitment is still a significant cause of project failures in Uganda. For instance, during one of the philanthropic training sessions conducted by one commercial bank for undergraduate students in Uganda about how to get jobs, over 60 percent of the concerned stakeholders either did not turn up or turned up late with low expectations and enthusiasm. This contextually revealed the low commitment by stakeholders to citizenship projects and invites both theoretical and practical studies aimed at enhancing project-stakeholder commitment. Koskosas *et al.* (2010, p. 26) advance that project commitment can be improved through active participation of stakeholders to project related tasks to which end social networks fuel the active participation. A study by Andrésen *et al.* (2012) indicates that social goals are powerful drivers of commitment among stakeholders. This study majorly aims at answering the following research question "Can social networks enhance Project-Stakeholder Commitment within the domain of citizenship projects?" In so doing, a significant contribution toward the appreciation of the role of social networks as a key determinant of the level of stakeholder commitment to projects is made. The rest of this paper is organized as follows; the next section reviews literature on social networks and individual commitment to develop hypotheses. The research methodology and data analysis are the presented. The paper concludes with a discussion on findings, implications, limitations and areas for future research.

## 2. Literature review

Cooke-Davies and Arzymanow (2003) propose that project management can entirely be studied under two dimensions. These include the technical dimension and the human dimension. The technical dimension covers those groups of practices or processes that are integral to project management, and the human dimension covers the people who operate on the technical processes and their expertise. Extant studies (e.g. Baker, 2007) indicate that the human dimension accounts for a larger percentage of project failures. This study symbolizes part of the efforts to investigate how the human dimension could be efficiently managed by establishing the extent to which social networks enhance the commitment of project stakeholders.

In order to examine and describe carefully the relevance of social networks in project-stakeholder commitment, the researchers have greatly drawn from social network theory. Social network theory explains the relationships between individuals, groups, organizations or societies to analyze social structures determined by such

interactions. According to Downes (2005, p. 411) and Scott (2000), social network theory explains social relationships in terms of nodes and ties; nodes are the individual actors within the networks and ties are the relationships between the actors. There can be many kinds of ties between the nodes, however, in its most simple form; a social network is a map of all of the relevant ties between the nodes being studied (Fowler *et al.*, 2009). The network can also be used to determine the social capital of individual actors (Ntayi *et al.*, 2010). Social networks can be examined at micro level, meso level and macro levels. For instance a dyad is a social relationship between two individuals at the micro level. When one individual is added to a dyad, a triad is formed. Analyses at this level may concentrate on factors such as balance and transitivity, as well as social equality and tendencies toward reciprocity. This simply implies that the smallest unit of analysis in a social network is an individual in their social setting. Additionally, at a meso level, network theories study population size that falls between the micro levels and macro levels. Examples are formal organizations that are social groups that distribute tasks for collective goals. The focus here is on either intra-organizational or inter-organizational ties in terms of formal or informal relationships. Macro level analyses generally trace the outcomes of interactions, such as economic or other resource transfer interactions over a large population. Examples are complex networks which involves substantial non-trivial features of network topology, with patterns of complex connections between elements that are neither purely regular nor purely random. This study therefore, focusses on individuals as the level of analysis toward establishing the extent to which social networks influence the commitment of project stakeholders.

### 2.1 Social networks

Although various scholars conceptualize social networks differently, they all agree to the fact that there must be linkages between entities for a social network to exist (Granovetter, 1973; Downes, 2005; Gray *et al.*, 2007). This study uses Downes's (2005) definition of social networks as a collection of individuals linked together by a set of relations or interconnections. Classical works of *Systems Theory* by Bertalanffy (1969) suggest that everything is interconnected and therefore the interconnections among entities should be studied as a means of understanding the world. Fowler *et al.* (2009), explain interconnections among entities in terms of network degree and transitivity. They considered all other social network aspects like density, degree, centralization and distance to arise from network degree and transitivity. Similarly, Ahimbisibwe and Nangoli (2012) define social network degree as the number of social ties the project has (both incoming and outgoing), and network transitivity as the likelihood that two of a person's contacts are connected to each other. Consistently, Herkt (2007) affirms that the project manager's major responsibility is to build supportive social networks (collaborative relationships) among its stakeholders.

### 2.2 Project-stakeholder commitment

Project-stakeholder commitment is a state of mind that holds project stakeholders in some line of behavior and includes psychological factors that force individuals to take action aimed at setting and achieving project objectives. Gallagher and Parks (2001) suggest that commitment indicates the degree to which a stakeholder identifies with the project and wants to continue actively participating in it. Therefore, as popularized by Meyer and Allen (1997), Greenberg (2005) and Scott-Lad *et al.* (2006), project-stakeholder commitment can be defined using three constructs

continuance commitment; affective commitment; and normative commitment. Continuance commitment refers to the strength of a stakeholder's desire to remain working and associated with a given project. Affective commitment means the strength of a stakeholder's desire to continue working on a project because they agree with its underlying goals and values. The last type of commitment which is normative commitment is used to refer to a stakeholder's feelings of obligation to stay on a project because of pressures from others, and concern about what others would think about one's leaving. The thinking that project-stakeholder commitment deserves strategic attention is consistent with Koskosas *et al.*'s (2010) argument that stakeholder commitment should emanate from the top level management. Technically, this should involve joint goal setting to instill a shared sense of responsibility and commitment among project stakeholders mainly the project team, project beneficiaries, the local community and project funders. Research by Provan and Kenis (2008), also suggests that consent on broad social network-level goals, stimulates network members to become more involved and committed.

Morgan and Hunt (1994), Andréßen *et al.* (2012) demonstrated that social goals are powerful stimulators of commitment. Many other studies such as Eisenberger *et al.* (1990), Shore and Wayne (1993) have also suggested some positive links between social networks and commitment. Similarly, Dubrin (2002) indicates that interwoven relationships at work and commitment are inseparable. According to Shin (2010), social networks have the potential of enabling members to express themselves freely. Thus, they become emotionally attached to the project and therefore willing to continue actively participating in it (Gallagher and Parks, 2001). Likewise, According to Laszlo (1999), project managers who get people to do what they want by sharing their purpose, vision and values also establish emotional and intellectual ties that result in sustained commitment to an established cause. It can therefore be hypothesized that:

*H1.* Social network elements positively influence project-stakeholder commitment.

*H1(a).* Network transitivity is positively associated with continuance commitment.

*H1(b).* Network transitivity is positively associated with normative commitment.

*H1(c).* Network transitivity is positively associated with affective commitment.

*H1(d).* Network degree is positively associated with continuance commitment.

*H1(e).* Network degree is positively associated with normative commitment.

*H1(f).* Network degree is positively associated with affective commitment.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research design and sampling procedure

This study considers a particular category of projects referred to as corporate citizenship projects to establish the extent to which social networks explain project-stakeholder commitment. The use of context specific methodologies has been used by earlier researchers in analyzing projects due to the somewhat unique and context

specific nature of projects which undermines comparisons across projects of differing natures (Smyth and Morris, 2007). This research used a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design which was meant to test rather than generate theory and was focussed on describing and drawing inferences from the findings on the relationships between social networks and project-stakeholder commitment. Simple random sampling method was used. The population comprised of 121 citizenship projects from which a sample of 92 projects was randomly selected (Bank of Uganda, 2009/2010). Bank of Uganda is the central bank mandated with regulating the activities and maintaining records for the country's banking sector including all commercial banks. Citizenship projects are often reflected as part of banks corporate social responsibility in financial statements. The unit of inquiry comprised the corporate affairs managers (citizenship project champions), employees who were or had ever taken part in citizenship projects and the different beneficiaries of these projects across the whole country. From each bank, three project managers, two of whom were from any two conveniently selected branches of the bank and one from the bank's head office, were targeted. Five employees from each of the bank branches were purposively selected (Patton, 1990). Similarly, at least five beneficiaries for each project were targeted. This finally added up to a total of 920 target respondents. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were that where a person was picked and found not to have participated in the selected projects, he/she was replaced with the next convenient person. The responses were 172 usable questionnaires.

### 3.2 Measurements

Social networks were measured using a combination of the network degree and network transitivity (Fowler *et al.*, 2009; Rosenthal, 2007). Abridged items that were used for measuring social network transitivity were: "I think that the beneficiaries of our citizenship projects become our advocates," "I believe that many consumer groups are pleased with our citizenship projects," "Without hesitation I can act on the information that I receive through my teammates," "Community leaders have always welcomed our citizenship projects," "In my view, our citizenship activities are liked by people of diverse interests," "We have united many communities through our citizenship activities." Also, the abridged items that were used for measuring social network degree were; "Many members of the general public know much about our citizenship projects," "Through citizenship activities, we have improved the lives of many citizens," "We trust that many societies are in support of our citizenship projects," "Our top management strongly supports citizenship activities." On the other hand, stakeholder commitment was measured using five Likert-type items adopted and adapted from Meyer and Allen (1997). This tool describes commitment in three categories namely; affective commitment, continuance commitment and normative commitment and it is still popularly used (e.g. Greenberg, 2005). Abridged examples of items used for measuring project-stakeholder commitment included, "It would be too costly for me to quit citizenship activities right now," "I feel emotionally attached to citizenship projects" and "I owe a great deal to citizenship projects." In both the above cases responses were solicited on the extent to which the respondents strongly agree (5), agree (4), not sure (3), disagree (2) and strongly disagree (1) with a statement. The self-administered questionnaire was first pilot tested on experienced business management lecturers from Makerere University in Uganda and project citizenship managers from selected commercial banks. Based on these responses and comments, item scales that were unclear and ambiguous were either improved or deleted. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 19.0 based on 172 responses after data cleaning.

3.3 Reliability

The reliability analysis was conducted by calculating the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient for each construct. The results in Table I show that the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  measures for all the constructs well exceeded the recommended critical point of 0.70 (Hair *et al.*, 2009), indicating good internal-consistency reliability.

4. Descriptive statistics

The project types included the categories of health (31.7 percent), education (19 percent), environment (11.1 percent), economic (25.4 percent) and rehabilitation (12.7 percent). The results also revealed that 54 percent of respondents had been involved in the execution of citizenship projects for a period of three to six years; 6.4 and 1.7 percent had spent seven to ten and more than ten years, respectively, in the execution of citizenship projects. The findings further indicated that most of these projects had existed for about three to six years (48.8 percent), less than six years (43.6 percent), or more than ten years (2.9 percent). As regards gender of respondents, the majority were females (51.7 percent), which could imply that more females take part in citizenship activities than their male counterparts. A majority of these respondents were either married (52 percent) or single (46 percent), with those in the age bracket of 20-30 years representing 73.3 percent. Of the respondents, 72.7 percent had attained at least a bachelor's degree, and 4 and 15 percent had masters and professional qualifications, respectively. Regarding the positions held in the execution of citizenship projects by individual respondents, a majority (78.5 percent) of them revealed that they participated in the capacity of both beneficiaries and team members, while 10.5 percent were project managers and 4.1 percent were purely project beneficiaries.

4.1 Zero-order Pearson's correlation analysis of all the study constructs

As seen in Table II, all respondents agreed that continuance commitment (mean = 3.6), normative commitment (mean = 3.9), network transitivity (mean = 3.9), network degree (mean = 3.8), social networks (3.8) and project-stakeholder commitment (mean = 3.8) affective commitment (mean = 4.1) exist. This is because all the means for the study constructs were above (mean = 3.0). The findings reveal a significant positive relationship between social network elements and project-stakeholder commitment ( $r = 0.585$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Thus supporting hypothesis *H1*. The study also revealed a positive relationship between network transitivity with continuance commitment ( $r = 0.485$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Therefore providing support for hypothesis *H1(a)*. Findings showed a positive

	Cronbach's $\alpha$
Transitivity	0.847
Network degree	0.843
Social networks	0.849
Project-stakeholder commitment	0.823
Affective	0.869
Continuance	0.868
Normative	0.849

**Table I.**  
Shows Cronbach's  $\alpha$   
values per construct

**Source:** Primary data

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Continuance (1)	3.6259	0.96664	1						
Normative (2)	3.8544	0.73091	0.411**	1					
Affective (3)	4.0921	0.86396	0.231**	0.521**	1				
Network transitivity (4)	3.9132	0.63993	0.485**	0.565**	0.457**	1			
Network degree (5)	3.8092	0.7871	0.421**	0.510**	0.766**	0.788**	1		
Social networks (6)	3.8092	0.95587	0.340**	0.537**	0.445**	0.836**	0.837**	1	
Project-stakeholder commitment (7)	3.8309	0.7871	0.773**	0.815**	0.414**	0.646**	0.589**	0.585**	1

**Note:** \*\*Correlations significant at 0.01 level (two-tailed)

**Source:** Primary data

**Table II.**  
The zero-order Pearson's correlations for all the study constructs

relationship between network transitivity with normative commitment ( $r = 0.565$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Hence supporting *H1(b)*. Findings further revealed a positive relationship between network transitivity and affective commitment (0.457,  $p < 0.01$ ). These were in line with hypothesis *H1(c)*. There was a positive relationship between network degree and continuance commitment (0.421,  $p < 0.01$ ). This was in line with hypothesis *H1(d)*. Network degree was also positively associated with normative commitment (0.510,  $p < 0.01$ ) and this was in line with hypothesis *H1(e)*. Lastly, network degree was positively associated with affective commitment (0.766). This was in line with hypothesis *H1(f)*.

#### 4.2 Hierarchical regression analysis

Hierarchical regression was used to investigate the relationships between the variables and the extent to which changes in project-stakeholder commitment were explained by variations in transitivity and network degree as shown in Table III. Hierarchical regression was used because it precisely indicates what happens to a model as different

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Collinearity statistics	
				Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	4.213	0.675	0.785	na	na
Gender	0.06	0.092	0.083	0.915	1.092
Marital status	-0.074	-0.073	-0.09	0.732	1.365
Age bracket	-0.015	0.019	0.011	0.67	1.492
Highest level of education	-0.09	0.068	0.074	0.802	1.246
Market share	0.088	0.007	0	0.939	1.064
Tenure	-0.102	-0.161	-0.139	0.595	1.682
<i>Social networks</i>					
Network transitivity		0.681	0.514	0.342	2.926
Network degree			0.209		2.91
$R$	0.237 <sup>a</sup>	0.699 <sup>b</sup>	0.710 <sup>c</sup>	na	na
$R^2$	0.056	0.489	0.504	na	na
Adjusted $R^2$	0.005	0.456	0.467	na	na
$F$ -statistics	1.101	15.02	13.828	na	na
Significance	0.367 <sup>a</sup>	0.000 <sup>b</sup>	0.000 <sup>c</sup>	na	na
$R^2$ change		0.433	0.015	na	na
$F$ -change statistics	1.101	93.062	3.291	na	na
Significant $F$ change	0.367	0	0.072	na	na

**Source:** Primary data

**Table III.**  
Hierarchical regression analysis with project commitment as the dependent variable

predictor variables are introduced. Moreover, it clearly shows the contribution of each study construct.

In model 1 control variables were introduced which predicted 5.6 percent of the variance in project commitment. When the second model was run the variable for network transitivity was introduced and it was found to be a significant predictor of project commitment with a prediction potential of 45.6 percent. The  $R^2$  change was 43.3 percent and the  $F$ -change statistics was significant ( $F$ -statistic = 93.062). When network degree was introduced, the  $\beta$  coefficient for network transitivity dropped from 0.681 to 0.514. The  $\beta$  coefficient for the network degree construct was  $\beta = 0.209$ . The research results are in agreement with those of Ramírez (2002), who found out that a positive relationship exists between the network size and project commitment. According to him, stakeholders left out of the project network were more likely to sabotage project activities and also have different interests in these projects. Such interests can be positive or negative. The findings are also consistent with Ntayi *et al.* (2010) who asserts that project team members with positive attitude about the project tasks will carry out certain role behaviors which are beyond the basic minimum levels required of them. In model 3, when network degree was added and as indicated it was also a significant predictor of stakeholder project commitment ( $R^2$  change = 0.015, adjusted  $R^2 = 0.467$ ). The variance inflation factor (VIF) and the tolerance levels were run to test for multi-collinearity. The VIF was  $< 4$  and tolerance ratio was above 0.1, indicating that multicollinearity in this study was not a problem (Garson, 2010), thus, the interpretations of the  $\beta$  weights and  $R^2$  values were reliable.

## 5. Discussions

The purpose of this paper was to examine the human dimension of project management by establishing the extent to which social networks influence the commitment of project stakeholders. The finding on the significant relationship between project social networks elements and project-stakeholder commitment agree with a number of scholars like Ramírez (2002), Ntayi *et al.* (2010) and Fowler *et al.* (2009) who have also demonstrated that project social networks have a positive impact on individual project commitment. The finding that affective commitment explains project-stakeholder commitment more than continuance and normative agree with earlier studies on commitment by Munene (1995), Meyer and Allen (1997). According to Ntayi *et al.* (2010), individuals in a project are willing to carry out their activities without being pushed to do so while Fowler *et al.* (2009) found that existences of social networks in projects promotes social relations which make it easy for individuals to contact each other during projects and also create connections. Similarly, Ramírez (2002) findings indicate that a project with a wider network makes it easy for parties in a project to develop a common interest for it because all stakeholders are involved which makes them have a positive attitude toward it unlike when some of the stakeholders are left out. Eliminating some of the stakeholders from participating in the project social network results into resistances toward the project. It also leads to individuals developing negative attitudes toward it. This means that individuals have got different interests and reactions toward a project and efforts aimed at creating shared ambitions in projects can easily be pursued through social networks. In Uganda, citizenship projects conducted by commercial banks have been ineffective in one way or another due to limited project-stakeholder commitment in these projects although a lot of money and time has been invested in them. Some of these projects have got resistances in some societies in the country and this has been because the

commercial banks have not created social ties with the people existing within these societies. Therefore, how well organizations relate with other nodes, like the local community in shaping citizenship project goals and pursuing them to the very end will determine how freely the locals accept products offered by that organization.

## 6. Implications, limitations of the study and areas for further research

Project-stakeholder commitment has been widely studied in relation to project performance and our study makes a number of contributions to the theory and study of projects. First and foremost, we studied project social networks and project-stakeholder commitment in citizenship projects in commercial Banks in Uganda which is a developing country. Our study therefore contributes to an understanding of project social networks and project-stakeholder commitment in citizenship projects of commercial banks in a developing country. The implication of our findings is that we provide a different view point of understanding the aspects that affect project commitment. A lot of focus has been placed on improving project performance in Uganda, but none has specifically focussed on building project-stakeholder commitment through the use of project social networks.

Our findings generally show that project social networks influence project-stakeholder commitment and are significant predictors of individual project commitment. However, it should be noted particularly that our study provides an understanding that the components of project social networks do not equally affect project commitment. Both net transitivity and network degree are significant predictors of the project-stakeholder commitment but network transitivity influences project-stakeholder commitment more than network degree. Network transitivity has a beta coefficient of 0.514 which is higher than that of network degree which is 0.209. Therefore it is important for members to create project social networks if they are to improve their individual project commitment. Project managers should understand that project social networks explain individual project commitment. There should ensure that they build and grow proper social networks for their projects which will not only lead to project-stakeholder commitment but also contribute to the sharing of results that the different parties have within the project as well as easy acquisition of resources.

The study is limited by a number of factors that provide opportunities and directions for studies that can be carried out in future in the area of project management. These factors are project social networks and project-stakeholder commitment were studied in banks and basically looking at citizenship projects. In future, studies can consider examining social networks and project-stakeholder commitment from the perspective of other kinds of projects. The independent variables, which were network transitivity and network degree, explain 50.4 percent of the variance on individual project commitment. The percentage is not a hundred percent, implying that there are other variables that need to be included in the model to increase its explanatory power. Other variables like project governance, project climate, project ethics in Uganda, should be incorporated and studied to determine the extent to which they affect individual project commitment. Also, project-stakeholder commitment is an aspect that is built and grows over a given period of time. Therefore, in order to study the variable of project commitment, a longitudinal study may prove appropriate.

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