How User Group Identity Formation and Maintenance Are Embedded in a Larger Project's Identity

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Purpose: This study explores how the identity of a user group consisting of interface stakeholders is formed and maintained within a larger project.

Study design/methodology/approach: We employed a qualitative research design coupled with an inductive case study method. User group interviews served as the primary research data, and project documentation was used as a secondary source of empirical material.

Findings: Our findings are twofold. First, we identified means for project organisations to align user groups with a large hospital construction project identity: adequate information, accountability, clear communication, sufficient resources and training, and rewards for group effort. Second, we found ways for the user group to identify with the project's identity: a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities, a good network with other project members, and necessary support and recognition.

Originality/value: While identity in temporary organisations and internal stakeholder involvement have been studied to some extent, identifying external or interface stakeholders has received limited attention. Our study offers a novel approach to involving user group contributions in project success.

Introduction

Several studies have highlighted the importance of managerial tools and methods in project management. However, "focus on people" has recently been cited as one of the crucial criteria for success in project execution to address some of the issues that cause project failures and delays (Hietajärvi et al., 2017; Tam et al., 2020; Tampio & Haapasalo, 2024). A recent discussion in leadership relates to project identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Hietajärvi & Aaltonen, 2018; Ponroy et al., 2019). Project identity defines collaborative and unique characteristics, image, values, working practices, and cooperation in a project, which are central to the organisation's self-image (Walker et al., 2015; Hietajärvi & Aaltonen, 2018). Particularly large projects are organised hierarchically, either in the vertical or horizontal dimension, to accomplish smaller tasks that contribute to fulfilling the overall project goals; these tasks further form project teams or groups (Prentice et al., 1994; Kolb & Sandmeyer, 2008; Coker, 2022). In such temporary organisations, participants from permanent organisations can be classified as internal or external stakeholders, and then a third category of interface stakeholders is added. Internal stakeholders are directly involved in decision-making, whereas external stakeholders are involved indirectly. Interface stakeholders are in between internal and external and are typically users or customers of the project outcome, and although they are not directly involved in the decision-making, they provide critical knowledge for the project (Nyameke et al., 2021; Tampio et al., 2022). As collaboration in these smaller teams or user groups has been deemed

critical for success (Hietajärvi et al., 2015; Tampio & Haapasalo, 2024), methods for achieving intensified collaboration must be supported.

Previous studies have shown that creating and maintaining a project's identity is a managerial concept and a strategic method that forms the basis of a well-developed project organisation (Gioia et al., 2010; Anteby & Molnár, 2012; Hietajärvi & Aaltonen, 2018; Ponroy et al., 2019; Nyameke et al., 2021). Moreover, project identity has been seen as essential among project participants to succeed (Walker & Lloyd-Walker, 2015; Hietajärvi & Aaltonen, 2018; Nyameke et al., 2020). Project group identification outlines the connections between group members working together to achieve specific project goals. Prioritising the group's needs over one's own is a sign of responsibility for the group (Peteraf & Shanley, 1997; Toivonen & Toivonen, 2014; Litchfield et al., 2018).

Although several studies have examined project identity and respective stakeholders' roles in project success (Peteraf & Shanley, 1997; Litchfield et al., 2018; Hietajärvi & Aaltonen, 2018; Hietajärvi & Aaltonen, 2018; Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2018), they do not directly discuss how project organisations integrate user group identity into the overall project identity or how user groups relate to the larger project identity. Therefore, our study explores how a user group of interface stakeholders forms and maintains its identity within a larger hospital construction project. The user group consisted of interface stakeholders (doctors, nurses, and hospital technicians), and we analysed their identity formation and maintenance within the project and their daily healthcare provision responsibilities. This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. How does a project organisation align a user group with a large hospital construction project's identity?
2. How does the user group identify with the large hospital construction project's identity?

We first reviewed the literature on identity in temporary organisations to provide a foundation for our empirical analysis. Second, we explored our case hospital construction project and one of its user groups in charge of planning operating rooms. In addition to interviews, which were our primary source of data, we used documents, workshop materials, and project websites to analyse how the project organisation had linked the user group's identity to the larger project's identity as well as how the user group had identified and maintained the more significant project identity throughout the project's implementation.

Literature review

Temporary organisations play an important role in organisational management and are an important form of organisational structure (Argote et al., 2007; Gupta & Bose, 2018). Lundin and Soderholm (1995) originally outlined four factors that distinguish temporary organisations from conventional organisations: time, tasks, teams, and transitions (Jacobsson et al., 2013; Berkel et al., 2016). Tasks are important in developing temporary organisations, as they are created to complete specific tasks. Tasks legitimise temporary organisations and are unique and more complex than permanent ones (Bakker, 2010; Berkel et al., 2016; Tengku Izhar et al., 2017). A team, as one form of temporary organisation, is the foundation from which people impact the output of a project. The willingness, dedication, and aptitude of those participating are crucial in the conception, growth, and dissolution of temporary organisations (Miterev et al., 2017; Gupta & Bose, 2018). The size of the team required to complete an assignment depends on the task and the available time (Kenis et al., 2009; Bakker, 2010). The team for a temporary organisation is always built around the requirements of their tasks or parts of them.

Moreover, before joining a temporary organisation, the team members belong to different permanent organisations, and somehow, team members rely on a parent organisation to establish a temporary organisation (Jacobsson et al., 2013; Miterev et al., 2017).

The factors by Lundin and Soderholm (1995) define where action occurs. The primary basis on which tasks are defined and the boundaries for temporary organisations are established is called "activity." They based their argument on the fundamentals of decision-making versus action and distinguished between the theories of temporary organisations and permanent organisations (Cyert & March, 1963; Jacobsson et al., 2013; Sydow & Braun, 2018). According to Bakker (2010), temporary organisations cannot exist if they are separated from permanent organisations under normal circumstances, and they are thus somehow connected (Sydow & Braun, 2018). Therefore, collaboration between the two organisational systems is optimal (Turner & Muller, 2003; Berkel et al., 2016; Miterev et al., 2017).

A well-developed organisation's foundation is built on the managerial idea and strategic instrument known as organisational identity (Gioia et al., 2010; Ponroy et al., 2019). The identity of the organisation reveals how its members view it and the ideas and methods that structure it (Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Schultz & Hernes, 2013). It is the organisation's primary source of meaning, motivation, character, values, strategy, decision-making, trust, commitment, and internal relations since it fundamentally influences everything the company does (Gioia et al., 2010; Anteby & Molnár, 2012). Organisational identity offers a thorough, reliable, and essential lens through which to comprehend organisational phenomena. It functions as both a managerial concept and a strategic tool, forming the foundation of a strong organisation. It includes everything required to maintain a highly effective organisation that is entirely in line with the organisation's mission and vision, as well as defining and emphasising what the organisation is all about (Schultz & Hernes, 2013; Walker & Lloyd-Walker, 2015; Ponroy et al., 2019).

Most research on organisational identity has focused on permanent organisations (Gioia et al., 2010; Schultz et al., 2013; Oertel & Thommes, 2018; Ponroy et al., 2019; Gonzales-Miranda, 2020). The aim of forming a project identity is to win over stakeholders and, more importantly, to attract the best personnel to carry out the project (Hietajärvi & Aaltonen, 2018). Project participants are more dedicated and motivated when they can relate to the project's goals and vision. Few studies have focused on project identity formation (Schultz & Hernes, 2013; Walker & Lloyd-Walker, 2015; Nyameke et al., 2020) and project team identity or group identity (Toivonen & Toivonen, 2014; Litchfield et al., 2018).

Project group identification describes the ties that bind each group member as they cooperate to complete project objectives. Prioritising the group's needs over one's own needs (or the needs of the background organisation) is a sign of responsibility for the group (Peteraf & Shanley, 1997; Toivonen & Toivonen, 2014). When group identities are strong, and groups participate in group reflection, encouraging groups to regard themselves as interdependent with other groups within the project organisation is most likely to facilitate the achievement of the project's overall aims (Jackson, 2011; Litchfield et al., 2018). To match the group identity with the broader project identity, the project organisation should aim to simultaneously increase group identification and reflexivity in various ways, such as through involvement in decision-making (Jackson, 2011; Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2018). Peteraf and Shanley (1997) introduced the term "strong group identity" to describe any group sufficiently acknowledged and cared for by its members to influence individual behaviour. Groups with a weak sense of identity are merely temporary conglomerations of project groups and have no real existence or meaningful

sense. However, a project group with a strong sense of identity can improve project delivery performance and address persistent issues (Peteraf & Shanley, 1997; Jackson, 2011).

Research Methodology

We employed a qualitative research design coupled with an inductive case study method. Our research methodology focused on interpreting project identity and the role of effective user group members in a large project (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Pekuri et al., 2015). We collected and analysed qualitative data to generate a rich and holistic understanding of identity in temporary organisations. Our unit of analysis was a user group planning OYS 2030 (Oulu University Hospital for the year 2030) operating rooms as part of a hospital construction project. This project and user group were selected because they aligned well with the scope of our study and offered an excellent opportunity to deepen our understanding of how project organisation aligns user group identity with the larger project identity and how user groups identify themselves as part of the larger project. Additionally, the project entailed a complicated interaction between the project director, the project management team, and the user group members. The project also offered various information sources and materials, enabling material triangulation and considerable access to project data.

Empirical context: user group in charge of planning OYS 2030 operating rooms

The OYS 2030 is a new hospital construction project that will renew the existing hospital operations to meet future challenges in specialised medical care. The current hospital has existed for over 50 years, and it can no longer meet the demands and functions of contemporary healthcare. The project aims to use the most cutting-edge medical technology to deliver individualised and efficient healthcare services while presenting business prospects for medical technology firms. The Northern Ostrobothnia Hospital District, the client organisation, launched OYS 2030 in 2012, and the implementation phase began in 2019 with project alliances (Lahdenperä, 2012; Hietajärvi et al., 2017; Hietajärvi & Aaltonen, 2018) as the project delivery method. It will take an estimated five years to complete the construction work. The project's estimated total cost is around 600 million euros, and the building, which is around 115,000 square meters in size and meets very high criteria, is exceptionally high quality. The user group is mandated to plan the OYS 2030 operating rooms as part of the project. About 20 people comprise the user group, including engineers, designers, and healthcare experts. However, more than half of the user group's members work part-time in addition to their full-time jobs with OYS or other organisations involved in the OYS 2030 project initiative.

Data collection and analysis

Although interviews were the primary data source for this study, we also used documents, workshop materials, and project websites to gather information (see Martinsuo & Huemann, 2021). We used project documentation (project plans, reports, contracts, and meeting minutes) before the interviews to gain a thorough overview of the project. The project documentation was used twice: first, to present our case and the signs of the user group's identity, and second, to gather information from many different sources and create a more objective picture of the situation. The interviews were conducted in January and February 2022. The interviewees consisted of nine user group members actively carrying out the group's mission. The interview questions covered the following topics: large projects, project identity, user group identity, and effectiveness of user group. The interview questions were developed from a literature review to create a conceptual framework, tools, and methods for understanding how project-based organisations create and manage project identity at both the complex project level and the team level. In the interviews, we aimed to explore the identity of this specific user group, including

who they are, whether they recognise the type of project they are involved in, and what they should accomplish within the user group task. Taylor and Bogdan (1984) argued that it is crucial to employ interviews to gather primary data because they are useful tools for discussing issues that are not easily visible. We could fully comprehend the participants' opinions and expertise in our research by asking them questions directly about the topics.

Table 1 provides information about the interviewees and their roles in the user group responsible for planning the facilities. The justification for selecting our sample and unit of analysis was based on the diversity of the user group, following careful discussion and consideration with the hospital construction project management team. The user group had a clear target: to plan the surgical facilities for the new hospital, requiring specific expertise from various perspectives (see Table 1 for the interviewees' positions in the user group). This provided a valuable opportunity to analyse how the identity of a group dedicated to planning the surgical facilities aligns with the overall hospital construction project. Within the user group, only the hospital designer, electrical designer, and project director were direct members of the hospital construction project. Other members were assigned to represent users while continuing their daily healthcare activities. Participants were selected for the interview based on their expertise and willingness to participate. We also ensured the anonymity of the informants to facilitate open and reliable discussions. Some participants interviewed had worked on hospital construction projects for 10 years, while others had spent 30 years on various hospital construction projects. The participants' rich healthcare and project management backgrounds gave the researchers a valuable opportunity to gather the data they needed to answer the study's research questions. Every respondent was allowed to respond to a specific topic based on their expertise in large project identity and user group identity. Microsoft Teams was used to conduct the interviews.

Table 1: Overview of interviews and interviewees' roles in the user group

Interviewee	Position of the interviewee in the user group	Interview duration
1	Hospital designer	60 mins
2	Doctor (administration, surgery, and anesthesiology)	50 mins
3	Technical demands	50 mins
4	Planning, operating tables, and beds	40 mins
5	Doctor (gastroenterology)	45 mins
6	Manager (surgery and anesthesiology)	55 mins
7	Pharmaceutical designer	45 mins
8	Electrical designer	45 mins
9	Project director	60 mins

The interviews were conducted in English, digitally recorded, and transcribed, and the interviewer also took notes as a backup strategy. About 25 pages of recordings and notes were transcribed, which made it easier to analyse the qualitative data the researchers had collected. For our analysis, we also used information from more than 30 pages of organisational documents, project materials, workshop materials, and information from the project website. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the data (Duriau et al., 2007).

In our analysis, we roughly followed the outline from the literature. Our first classification level focused on how project organisations align user group identity with a large hospital construction project and how user groups identify with the project's overall identity. We then coded items typical in the transcripts and available case documentation. We employed the qualitative content or textual analysis methods of Malterud (2012). A qualitative content analysis was conducted to discover themes and trends related to project identity and user group dynamics. Data was organised and analysed primarily using Microsoft Excel. Excel was chosen for its versatility and convenience in smaller-scale qualitative investigations, where data size and

complexity can be easily managed without requiring specialised qualitative tools. Additionally, we had case documentation alongside the interview transcripts.

Findings

During the study, our understanding was that the success or failure of the user group would have a direct consequence on the project's success. Thus, project identity influences the user group's performance. However, our observation was that, at times, certain group members did not know whether they identified solely with the user group or the large project, especially user group members who were only involved in planning the surgical facilities. Therefore, it is important for the project organisation, through the project director and the project management team, to align the user group's project identity formation and maintenance. Moreover, user group identity impacts the project identity formation and maintenance, so user groups must identify with the larger project identity formation and maintenance.

The data are shown in Table 2, including the more focused first-order concepts discussed by respondents and the broader second-order themes generated by the researchers. Due to their direct relevance to the relationship between user group identity and large hospital construction project identity, the second-order themes provided the framework for the subsequent qualitative content studies of how to align the user group identity with the large hospital construction project's identity and how the user group identifies with the large hospital construction project's identity (answering the research questions).

Table 2: Data structure for qualitative content analysis results

Process of aligning the user group with the project identity	Sub-process of aligning the user group with the project identity
Adequate information, accountability, and clear communication	Effectively communicating the project goals and vision
	Providing supportive and easily accessible information systems
Adequate resources and training	Ensuring the availability of resources
	Ensuring appropriate knowledge acquisition
Rewards for group effort	Recognition of user group efforts
	Providing incentives to encourage the user group
Process of how the user group identifies with the larger project identity	**Sub-process of how the user group identifies with the larger project identity formation and maintenance**
A clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities	Understanding from the beginning how the task of the user group relates to the larger project
	Knowing exactly what to do and sharing experiences with other project participants
Good network with other project members	Taking part in social events organised for all project staff to improve networking
	Shared knowledge about the project among project participants
Needed support and recognition	Getting the assistance required
	Profiling the user group on the larger project's platforms

Aligning a user group with a large hospital construction project's identity and related identity maintenance

Although the user group mandate was to plan the new hospital operating rooms, the goal of the project organisation was to deliver the OYS 2030 project successfully. Whatever affected the user group directly affected the project organisation's delivery. Thus, the project identity affected the user group since the user group's success or failure had direct implications for the project organisation's success. Therefore, the project director and management team needed to align the user group with the project identity. In the following sections, we describe how adequate information, accountability, and clear communication. Adequate resources, training, and rewards for group effort were instrumental in achieving this alignment.

Adequate information, accountability, and clear communication

Adequate information, accountability, and clear communication were key factors in aligning the user group's identity with the larger project's identity. In the early phase of the project, there was a need for mutual definitions of the goals and vision of the project to lay the groundwork for building the project's identity. The project organisation needed to clearly articulate the project vision and the importance of the user group's role in achieving the overall project vision. Thus, it is the responsibility of the project organisation to communicate the project vision clearly to the user group and the effect of their objectives over the entire project, thereby enhancing the user group's ability to identify with the larger project. However, for the project organisation to communicate the project vision and goals effectively, a supportive information system was needed to enable the user group to use the information effectively. A supportive information system enables user group accountability by evaluating implementation actions.

Adequate information systems are necessary to communicate project activities to the user group and thereby enhance the user group's identification with the larger project. The project organisation's open communication enables the user group to take advantage of the available communication opportunities to share important information regarding the project activities among the group members and the relevant project organisation members for successful project delivery.

In aligning user group identity with the larger project identity, it is also important to align user group goals with those of the overall larger project vision at the strategic management level. There is a need for the project organisation to clearly show how user group activities are incorporated into the larger project goals and vision. This ensures that the user group does not feel disconnected from the larger project and aligns them with the project identity. Time is one of the four key elements in the theory of temporary organisations; hence, time constraints are vital in aligning user groups with the larger project identity. Engaging group members at the right time enhances their sense of belonging to the larger project. However, when engaging the user group on time, the project organisation needs to provide an adequate information system to enhance effective communication between the project organisation and the user group.

Adequate resources and training

Project organisation that provide user groups with resources and relevant training enhance their ability to better commit to and identify with the project. User groups enable project organisations to achieve project success; therefore, providing adequate resources to the group is directly relevant to project success and building a strong project identity. In aligning user group identity with the larger project identity, the organisation must ensure sufficient resources (e.g., financial resources), staff, time, and tools to enable the user group to execute their tasks effectively.

The user group identity mediates the project identity; thus, the success or failure of the user group is directly linked to the larger project's success or failure. Therefore, in aligning the user group identity with the project identity, training and developing the user group to incorporate the group's interests and the project vision and goals are significant and positively affect the group's performance. However, it is appropriate for the project organisation to ensure that the right training is provided to the user group to increase their performance in achieving larger project goals. Project organisations need to provide the required training to user groups because it increases their productivity. However, providing adequate training for the user group also enhances the user group's ability to deliver the project successfully. In addition, user groups need the right skills and competence to execute their tasks conforming to the larger project;

therefore, adequate training is an effective avenue for them to gain the required skills and competence.

In aligning user group identity with project identity, user group involvement in decision-making plays a vital role. Thus, involving key user group members at the project front end in setting the group's goals prevents the user group from feeling disconnected from the larger project and, rather, aligns it. There is a strong relationship between group members' involvement in decisions and project success. Thus, the more the members of the group are involved in decision-making, the higher the likelihood of the project's success. The project organisation needs to provide a platform for group members to participate in task-related decision-making to increase user group task satisfaction. Thus, when user groups are involved in decisions related to their tasks, their satisfaction increases, which results in them identifying with the project. User group members identify with the project identity when the project organisation has provided a conducive environment for them to place high importance on their tasks and the free will to incorporate their ideas and knowledge into their work.

Rewards for user group effort

Rewarding the work of the user group and reorganising the group's activities become important when the user group's identity is adapted to the broader project identity. User groups feel a sense of belonging when the project organisation recognises their efforts. Therefore, the project organisation needs to recognise the group's efforts and acknowledge their success. Recognising the group's effort not only motivates them and brings out the very best in them to work toward the project's success but also enables them to identify with the larger project, as they know that the people in charge of the project have their eyes on them and acknowledge their efforts.

Although rewards do not have to be monetary, such rewards are often used successfully. Rewards for the user group align the group identity with the project identity and motivate the user group to complete their tasks on schedule. For instance, incentives improve the effort, and all members are encouraged to ensure tasks are completed on schedule.

How does a user group identify with the identity of the large hospital construction project?

This section describes the three managerial activities by which the user group can identify with the project identity in order not to lose focus of the larger project vision and goals that were established in our project group: 1) a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities, 2) a good network with other project members, and 3) needed support and recognition.

A clear understanding of roles and responsibilities

User group members of a shared identity are interested in the collective interests, goals, activities, and other key features of their given tasks. However, a user group with a clear understanding of its role within the larger project and a clear sense of its responsibilities plays a vital role in the project's success. Typically, a user group focuses on a specific given goal and overlooks the larger project vision and goals, creating challenges for the user group and the project. Hence, it is challenging for the user group to focus on their task. However, it is good practice for group members to agree on the goals and individual responsibilities of the user group and link them to the overall vision and goals of the project. This enables group members to clearly understand their responsibilities and how they relate to the larger project vision. The highest goal of the user group is to help achieve and facilitate the project organisation's vision and goals strategically.

One of the things that helped the user group feel part of the larger project is that not all the group members were working solely for the user group; some group members were working on

other aspects of the larger project. This means that for some members, just a fraction of their time was spent working with the user group. Due to some group members' involvement with other aspects of the larger project, they had a sense of belonging to the larger project. At the user group meetings, this had a positive effect on other group members, who realised that irrespective of the group goals, the chief objective was to fulfil the larger project's vision, resulting in them identifying with the larger project. According to one interviewee, "Even though I am working 100% for this user group, that makes me feel that I can identify more with it; due to certain colleagues' involvement in other groups of the larger project, we are more exposed to the larger project to some extent, we feel we can identify with it as well. After all, the group's goal is a subset of the larger project vision." The user group members clearly understand their roles and responsibilities and how they are linked to the larger project vision, which enhances how user groups identify themselves as part of the larger project.

A good network with other project members

Good networking between the larger project and the user group members is vital in determining how they identify with the larger project. Such good working relations in connecting with other project members outside the user group can be a good platform to obtain relevant information, support, and assistance to facilitate the group's goals when needed. One interviewee said, "We have had a couple of social events that connect us to other members of the larger project. Such events identify us with the larger project, serve as a network platform among all the project members, and enhance your ability to obtain relevant information and support when needed." This also gives the user group the feeling that they are all working toward a single project vision.

In addition, it is unusual to have the same group members from the beginning of project execution to the end. New members join, and some older group members leave the group (perhaps for other projects) during project implementation. Having a good working relationship or network with other project members provides a platform for newly joined user group members to familiarise themselves with what is going on within the group and bond with the other group members, which facilitates successfully achieving the user group goals. Usually, a challenge for new user group members is catching up with and being on the same page as existing group members. One interviewee recalled, "It is like jumping into a moving train. It is difficult because some members have worked on the project for months or years; you now need to figure out how to cope with them as a new group member. Fortunately, I have a good network and a working relationship with most of the members on board in the context of the larger project, and that helped me catch up." Thus, good networking enhances group members' willingness to share their experiences and knowledge with other group members. This is done in good faith, knowing that, in the end, it is all about successfully achieving the larger project vision.

Project director and project management team support and recognition

Our empirical data revealed that external support from the project director and project management team and recognition of the user group's efforts are key features that enable the user group to identify themselves as part of the larger project. The project director and project management team should provide external systems that enhance the user group's chances of achieving its goals successfully. Thus, when user groups receive needed support, they can identify with the larger project. Typically, the challenge of getting user groups to identify with the larger project is not due to internal issues but rather external issues in the project's organisational environment. This is especially true when the user group does not have adequate information and resources provided by the project director and project management team. In

this study's user group, information and resources were well provided, and the group members did not feel marginalised; instead, they identified with the larger project. One interviewee said, "Before joining the user group, I worked at the hospital for over ten years at the same work premises. Because of that, I sometimes feel that I identify more with KÄRY. However, when there is the need for some information or resources, especially finances, that is when I realise that I identify with the larger project because we are drawing from the same pool of resources." Adequate information and available resources motivate members and enhance their identification with the larger project. Thus, good communication between the project management team and the user group is important, as it enables the user group to obtain the necessary information, resources, and support needed to identify with the larger project.

In addition, the project director and project management team recognise the group's efforts, influence group members to identify with the larger project and provide incentives that are not necessarily monetary; for example, they may profile the user group in the larger project magazines. One interviewee recalled, "I felt super when I saw our user group's image in the OYS 2030 project news outlet. I felt my group was identifying with the larger project, and therefore, we were all fighting for one cause, which was building the smartest hospital in the world." Recognising and profiling user groups in project newsletters, magazines, and other project media platforms motivate group members and make them realise that their group's goals are important and part of a larger project.

Discussion

We explored how project organisations align user group identity with a large hospital construction project and how user groups identify with the project's identity. Our study mainly contributes to the literature on organisational identity formation (Gioia et al., 2010; Schultz & Hernes, 2013; Hietajärvi & Aaltonen, 2018), group identity (Peteraf & Shanley, 1997; Toivonen & Toivonen, 2014; Litchfield et al., 2018), and project management.

Figure 1 illustrates how the project organisation, through the project director and the project management team, aligned the user group identity with the large hospital construction project identity and how the user group identified with the project.
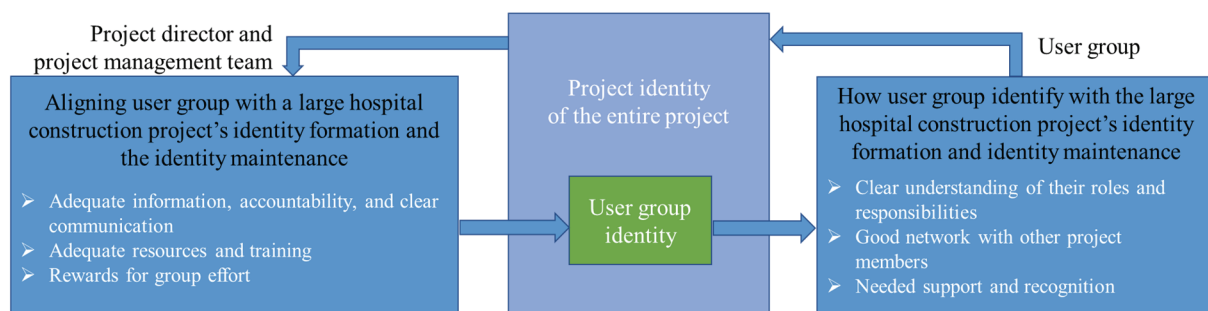
Figure 1: How to align the user group identity with the larger hospital construction project's identity and how the user group identifies with the large hospital construction project's identity

Our findings are in line with those of previous studies on project identity research (Gioia et al., 2010; Hietajärvi & Aaltonen, 2018; Hietajärvi & Aaltonen, 2018; Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2018; Ponroy et al., 2019; Nyameke et al., 2020; Nyameke et al., 2021; Nyameke & Haapasalo, 2022; Michael, 2022). However, earlier research has focused on how organisational identity influences user group identity and vice versa (Peteraf & Shanley, 1997; Litchfield et al., 2018; Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2018). These studies do not address how project organisations align the user group identity with the larger project identity or how user groups identify with the larger project identity.

Our research offers insights into a developing and original research issue that may interest project management professionals on both a theoretical and practical level. Our findings resonate with those of Litchfield et al.'s (2018) study, which showed that user group identity influences the larger project identity; therefore, the project director and the project management team need to work to enhance user group identity and align it with the larger project identity.

First, we identified three activities the project director and management team needed to align the user group with the large hospital construction project identity (see Figure 1): providing adequate information, accountability, and clear communication. Their accountability arrangements gave the user group information on the project and related tasks. This finding shows how clear communication aligns the user group with the larger project identity. This finding agrees with the work of Burga and Rezania (2017) and Carvalho (2013) on how clear communication and accountability encourage the project director and project management team to make available the needed information about the project to the user group. Introducing free-form communication may enhance a group's ability to develop a stronger sense of group identity (Camera & Hohl, 2021). This finding is also in line with prior research (Ahlemann, 2009; Karim, 2011; Braglia & Frosolini, 2014; Varajão et al., 2017), highlighting that the lack of adequate information is problematic for the user group in delivering on its given task; therefore, the project organisation needs to provide the appropriate structure to avoid an information deficiency in the user group to ensure successful project delivery.

Our findings regarding providing adequate resources and training show the importance of the project director and the project management team providing user groups with the resources and training they need to align themselves with a larger project's identity. Providing adequate resources to the user group will facilitate their sense of belonging, which is one of the key features of project identity. Providing user groups with adequate training will enhance their understanding of the given task and help them achieve a long-term project's objectives and vision (Kolb & Sandmeyer, 2008; Gunawan, 2015). Finally, our findings indicate that rewards for group effort are an important activity that helps align user group identity with the larger project identity. Our findings reveal that a project organisation needs to provide structures and systems that encourage rewarding user groups for their efforts to achieve specific goals successfully (Kolb & Sandmeyer, 2008; Natvig & Stark, 2016).

Second, we highlighted three activities by which the user group can be identified with the large hospital construction project identity so as not to lose focus on the project vision and goals (see Figure 1). However, the way the user group identifies with the larger project identity is equally important.

A clear understanding among user group members of their roles and responsibilities enhances their identification with the larger project. Our results confirm prior research that indicates that unclear roles and ambiguous responsibilities among user groups are an obstacle to the delivery of tasks and may make them feel disengaged from the larger project identity (Aarseth et al., 2012; Engebø et al., 2020; Nyameke et al., 2021). This result shows that when a user group clearly understands its role within the larger project and its responsibilities, it plays a vital role in the project's success and intensifies how the members identify with the larger project.

Our findings indicate that a user group's good network with other project members outside the group is an effective way to ensure identification with the larger project and increases its chance of delivering the project successfully. Networking among project groups is a great tool for strengthening connections among project participants (Hossain, 2009; Pollack & Matous, 2019). Our findings indicate that the project organisation utilised social events to connect groups to improve their sense of belonging and to encourage identification with the larger project.

Finally, our findings demonstrate that user groups are more likely to identify with the larger project when they receive support and acknowledgement from the project director and the project management team. This is consistent with the work of Scott (1997), Kolb and Sandmeyer (2008), and Natvig et al. (2016), who found a positive correlation between user group social identity and top management support and appreciation. We found that user group support and acknowledgement improved the group's ability to identify with the larger project.

Conclusion

We examined the relationship between a user group's identity and a large hospital construction project's identity. Our aim was to enhance our understanding of how the user group identified with and maintained the larger project identity and how the project organisation, through the project director and the project management team, aligned the user group identity with the overall project identity during the project implementation period. Our empirical case involved a user group planning operating rooms for the hospital under construction. Fragmented project group identities with conflicting overall project goals can challenge and impede project success. Thus, when the user group focuses only on the group identity and overlooks the larger project identity, it may not contribute optimally to the entire project outcome.

Our study provides a model (figure 1) of project organisation to align user group identity with that of the large hospital construction project identity and how the user group identified with the large project identity during the project implementation period. Our findings describe how project organisations use these activities (figure 1) during implementation. The results of our research could serve as a guide and assist in developing and managing highly effective project user groups and help project organisations carry out large projects successfully, particularly during the project implementation phase.

The results can also help project organisations improve their workers' commitment to executing successful projects. While we concur that project identity should be an intentional management act or even a method or tool for delivering a project during the early phases of the project, we also think the project organisation must use a model that aligns the user group identity with that of the larger project identity during the project implementation period. Our research was limited to a single case study and one user group among many; thus, the results of other studies with several user groups may differ. To determine whether our findings can be generalised, more research on large projects with different user groups should be conducted.

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