

Pursuing alignment of clients' and contractors' perceptions of client satisfaction in Saudi Arabian projects

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Pursuing alignment of clients' and contractors' perceptions of client satisfaction in Saudi Arabian projects

Abstract

Purpose: The study explored the disparity between construction clients and contractors on what constitutes 'client satisfaction'. Such disparity is important because it can lead to different conclusions and thus disagreement on the assessment of project success.

Design /methodology/approach: The philosophical stance was interpretivism, thus the qualitative methodology was adopted. Employing purposive sampling, 30 interviews with clients and another 30 interviews with contractors were conducted in Saudi Arabia. The data obtained were evaluated by thematic analysis.

Findings: The results indicate differences in the *consensus ad idem* (meeting of the minds) between clients and contractors in terms of both their perceptions and prioritisation of the attributes that underpin client satisfaction. For example, some contractors thought that using advanced technologies was very important for client satisfaction whereas some clients preferred the contractors to be honest with them.

Research limitations/Implications: The data collection was limited to Saudi Arabia and only the views of clients and contractors were studied, thereby limiting the generalisability of the findings.

Practical implications: The identification of the differing priorities of clients and contractors on client satisfaction provides an informed basis to make more concerted efforts to satisfy clients and minimise disputes on projects in Saudi Arabia.

Originality/value: The study contrasted the views of clients and contractors simultaneously on the subject matter of client satisfaction in relation to project success, and analysed this through the lens of *consensus ad idem*. The key influences on clients' satisfaction in Saudi Arabia are also presented.

Keywords: Client satisfaction, Consensus ad-idem, Contracting Perceptions, Project success.

INTRODUCTION

Every construction project is facilitated by a contract that usually exists between the client and contractor. A feature of this contract is the agreement between the two parties. An essential characteristic of this agreement is the '*consensus ad idem*': a Latin phrase for the 'meeting of the minds' (Wild and Weinstein, 2013). Two parties in a contract should agree on its subject matters. Thus, the absence of consensus ad idem can sometimes nullify a contract. This study considered if clients and contractors usually agree fully on what the client wants.

A client is a person or an organization that procures products or services (Haddadi, Johansen and Andersen, 2016). Construction clients tend to develop or initially propose the contract documents and associated types of contracts to be used in their projects, but they often depend on construction professionals to guide them in these regards. In the collaborative types of procurement, contractors would be involved in the development of contract documents. Whichever way is utilised to develop contracts and associated documents, the establishment of all the client's desires should be reflected because a contractor is essentially only bound to deliver what is specified in the contract. If a contractor delivers the full contents of a contract that had failed to indicate the entire scope of the client's expectations, then that contractor should not be blamed for not satisfying the client's needs. Contracts thus play a key role in meeting clients' needs.

Client organisations may belong to the private or public sector. Sometimes, the client would include the users of built products, but in the context of this paper, the discussion is limited to the views of the person or organization that procures a construction project. The satisfaction of construction clients is paramount as they are key beneficiaries of construction project processes and outcomes. It is thus important to understand fully what clients want in a project and then deliver it. The aim of this paper

is to explore if construction contractors perceive the yardsticks of project satisfaction in a similar way to their clients.

Satisfaction is an emotional response (Stan *et al.*, 2013) that is achieved when realizations exceed expectations (Churchill and Serprenant, 1982) in terms of e.g. construction services or products (Rashvand and Majid, 2014; Ahmed and Kangari, 1995). The dissatisfaction of construction clients is continually reported (Bowen *et al.*, 1997; Cheng, 2008) suggesting that continued efforts are needed to address their expectations. Therefore, this study investigated the level of satisfaction of construction clients to explore prospects for improvement. Using the lens of ‘Contract’ and consensus *ad idem* in particular, the perceptions of clients and contractors were contrasted.

The indicators of client satisfaction are ever emerging (Thomson, 2011) and these include performing work successfully (Oppong, Chan and Dansoh, 2017; Saunders *et al.*, 2016); effective relationships and contractors’ leadership qualities (Wu *et al.*, 2016). Others are: supporting clients and fulfilling their financial requirements (Soetanto and Proverbs, 2002); contractors’ tactics and approach of zero rework, rectification and deviation, working within budgets and conformance to standards and specifications (Arslan and Kivrak, 2008; Zhou, Goh and Li, 2015). Further attributes of client satisfaction are contractors’ honesty, trustful relationships, doing the right work at the first opportunity, being efficient with waste management and ensuring that quality raw materials and processes are used (Nguyen and Watanabe, 2017; Thomas, 2017). An understanding of these several factors enables a contractor to both achieve them and satisfy their different clients (Tang *et al.*, 2003).

The perceptions of pluralistic clients on project success have been studied (e.g. Thomson, 2011). Also, the perceptions of clients and contractors have been compared but not specifically on project success (e.g. Greenwood and Wu, 2012). This presented a knowledge gap, upon which this study was based, i.e. the comparative perceptions of clients and contractors on project success. Lai and

Lam (2010) indicated that different participants could perceive various performance criteria differently and would proceed to act and deliver a project based on their own perceptions. Divergence in thoughts could lead to different conclusions by the participants on the status of project success; whereas congruence in thoughts would enable contractors deliver what clients want. Hence, consensus ad idem is important in construction contracts, and it provided a basis on which our research data were interpreted.

Various scholars have studied construction client satisfaction, e.g. Rashvand and Majid (2014) and Tang *et al.* (2003) have identified the critical criteria for client satisfaction; Ahmed and Kangari, (1995) prioritized the factors that contribute to client satisfaction; and Mbachu and Nkado, (2006) explored how to measure the level of client satisfaction. While most of these studies have focused on assessing the factors underpinning client satisfaction, no research has simultaneously contrasted the relative prioritization of these factors between clients and contractors. Thus building on Ahmed and Kangari (1995), our study proposed two research questions to fill the current gap in knowledge.

The research questions posed were:

1. *How do clients and contractors perceive the attributes of client satisfaction in construction projects?*
2. *Do construction clients and contractors think alike, or operate on consensus ad-idem, in terms of client satisfaction?*

An overview of literature is presented below, followed by the methodology. The findings of the study are then presented and discussed before the conclusions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Contract Formulation

A construction contract is usually formed between two parties. There are exceptions in e.g. partnering and framework arrangements where the contract involves more than two persons, but these are outside the scope of our study. The incumbent features of a valid contract are offer, acceptance, consideration, intention to create legal relations and capacity of the parties (Hughes, Champion and Murdoch, 2015). Offer and acceptance are fundamental attributes that generate a contract agreement which is characterised in part by *consensus ad idem*.

Consensus ad idem

Consensus ad idem adds depth and validity to a contract agreement. Parties enter into contract: 1) on present circumstances and 2) looking forward to their expectations out of the agreement. However, a lack of clarity, or even short-sightedness, can undermine their *consensus ad idem*. An example in this regard is the leading case of *Raffles v Wichelhaus* (1864) which concerned the sale of cotton that was to arrive Liverpool (UK) from Bombay (India) in a ship called Peerless. Unknown to the two parties, there were two ships named Peerless on that route: one departed in October and the other in December. One party thought the contract concerned the October ship while the other party thought it referred to the December ship. The Court held that there was no *consensus ad idem* and hence no contract. This case law illustrates how the courts can retrospectively look at an agreement and use the benefit of hindsight to interpret if *consensus ad idem* existed a priori. The law of contract deals with such issues under 'Agreement' and 'Common Mistake' (Turner, 2014). Some mistakes can fundamentally invalidate a contract agreement as in *Raffles v Wichelhaus*; while others are rectifiable (Furmston, 2012).

The executors of construction projects can retrospectively check if what a client wanted in a project

matched the contractor's understanding. Some clients' previous expression of dissatisfaction with project outcomes suggests the need for this retrospection. Retrospections provide an opportunity to highlight mismatches between clients' expectations and contractors' performance. The aim here is not to invalidate a contract but to identify areas of improvement that contractors can target to maximise client satisfaction.

Client Satisfaction

The satisfaction of a client is dependent on a supply that matches or surpasses their expectations (Churchill and Serprenant, 1982). Customer or client satisfaction is studied by many sectors e.g. hotels, transport, retail, banking and construction. Now, the construction sector is broad and thus has several elements of clients and their associated satisfaction. One of these elements, which is the focus of this paper, is the construction client who procures a construction project. Although a construction client can procure an existing building, the emphasis of the paper is on new-build products.

In construction projects, clients would usually specify what they want (i.e. their demand; expectation), and the supply side, usually contractors, would go about delivering it. Client satisfaction is based on the ability of all the project stakeholders to meet the expectations of the client (Raham and Alzubi, 2015). Loosemore (2016) argues that client satisfaction plays a crucial role in project success. Consequently, gaining a full knowledge of the clients' frame of reference is vital to managing project activities and aligning these to achieve client satisfaction (Soetanto and Proverbs, 2002; Durdyev *et al.*, 2018; Raham and Alzubi, 2015). However, clients are often slow in understanding and articulating the full scope of their requirements; their diverse requirements often conflict with each other; and it takes time to reach a finalized position on the full scope of what the client really wants (Boyd and Chinyio, 2006).

Causes of client satisfaction / dissatisfaction

Client satisfaction or dissatisfaction in the construction industry is partly attributed to project delivery within costs, time and quality (Alinaitwe, Apolot and Tindiwensi, 2013), and data sharing and coordination between the different departments (Loosemore, 2016). Other influencers of dissatisfaction are financial deficiencies on the part of contractor or client, and unavailability of adequate equipment and tools to complete project activities appropriately (Alinaitwe, Apolot and Tindiwensi, 2013).

On the part of contractors, effective collaboration and combining project management techniques helps their project managers to identify the predominant needs of clients (Boasson and Wettestad, 2016) and generate trust and greater confidence, which contribute to the development and use of more effective work procedures, improved quality of project outcomes, the meeting of project deadlines and consequently client satisfaction (Langford and Male, 2008; Omonori and Lawal, 2014; Mackey and Gass, 2015). Furthermore, the success factors that ensure increased client satisfaction include project managers' perceptions of project mission, schedule and plans, communication strategy, monitoring and feedback provisions for achieving project outcomes (Soetanto and Proverbs, 2002; Donohoe and Brooks, 2007; Rumané, 2013). To contractors therefore, perception plays a key role in attaining client satisfaction. Both clients and contractors share the aim of attaining client satisfaction but their understanding of what is needed to achieve it may differ.

How to achieve client satisfaction

Literature suggests that a project manager's experience, knowledge, capability and efficacies will ensure that the final product delivered meets the requirements of the client (Soetanto and Proverbs, 2002; Donohoe and Brooks, 2007). However, a construction project manager cannot meet a client's expectations if these requirements are not fully understood. Hence, effective communication, project management and collaboration between the project manager and client are vital for achieving client satisfaction (Meng, 2012).

The project manager's skills and perceptions in effectively managing different construction activities help in meeting work productivity and, their quality of work performances impacts on the level of client satisfaction (Walker, 2015; Mazher *et al.*, 2015). Decision-making processes also help in managing the overall activities of a project for its successful completion and fulfilment of the clients' requirements (Meng, 2012).

Alinaitwe, Apolot and Tindiwensi (2013) opine that the ways in which the project team communicates and undertakes its tasks are crucial for the success of construction projects and client satisfaction. Project managers can enhance communication such that all activities are understood adequately, and requirements fulfilled. Accordingly, project team members are required to maintain good relations with each other and with clients (Chan *et al.*, 2004). The perceptions and ability of project managers to correctly identify any undesirable aspects in construction work help in removing aspects that do not meet the client's requirements (Meng, 2012).

Alzahrani and Emsley (2013) and Nikakhtar *et al.* (2015) argued that effective management practices by project managers such as keeping a contractor's record of accomplishment and providing management support to the contractors are actions that can improve client satisfaction. Karna (2004) raised the crucial importance of the functional relationship between the project manager and contractor's personnel during project execution and coordination of construction activities. These skills augur the better organization of project activities to achieve client satisfaction.

Arslan and Kivrak (2008) highlighted several crucial factors affecting client satisfaction levels i.e. the project managers' work performance, personal skills and management capabilities in relation to achieving the project budget and schedules.

To improve client satisfaction, the perceptions of project managers towards incorporating project management techniques effectively are crucial (Arslan and Kivrak, 2008; Al-Kharashi and Skitmore, 2009). These perceptions help in their better understanding of the problems associated with meeting the intended goals of construction projects (Arslan and Kivrak, 2008).

Alzahrani and Emsley (2013) noted how changing market imperatives could trigger rapid changes in client satisfaction. To achieve client satisfaction therefore, project managers need to perceive clients' dynamic requirements better and adopt a response strategy that makes effective use of project management standards to help in improving the quality of projects' outcomes.

The key attributes that enable project managers to complete their project activities successfully and achieve a higher degree of client satisfaction include their experience, knowledge, interaction with other project managers, timely consultation with clients, proper monitoring of projects and feedback provided to their owners. These attributes/ actions can promote the quality and standards of work, better communication and team leadership, and consequently limit project cost and time overruns (Berntsen, 2016). Keeping a contractor's track record and providing management support to the contractor further contribute to improving client satisfaction (Alzahrani and Emsley, 2013; Nikakhtar *et al.*, 2015). Omonori and Lawal (2014) reiterated how client satisfaction and successful completion of construction projects depend on project managers' full perception of the client's requirements. Orr and Scott (2008) found from their study that the use of technology in project delivery enhances client satisfaction.

Contracting and Nature of Clients in Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, most of the construction projects are procured by using the large contractors (Hashmi and Hammad, 2015) that are usually limited liability companies. In recent times, more international contractors especially from China are involved in various construction projects in Saudi

Arabia. Small contractors that are often Sole Proprietor companies are utilised in small projects or as sub-contractors in medium-big size projects. The International Federation of Consulting Engineers (aka FIDIC) and Saudi Standard Government 'Standard Forms of Contract' (SFCs) are highly used in projects: where the chosen SFC will form part of a project's contract documents. Few projects have previously used the New Engineering Contract (NEC) SFC in Saudi Arabia but its utilisation is ever increasingly.

The nature of construction clients is influenced by different factors, hence they are heterogeneous (Gunning and Courtney, 1994), e.g.: private versus public (Morledge *et al.*, 2021) and on-going, on-off and one-off clients (Naoum and Mustapha, 1994). However, classifications do not necessarily show the clients' needs and preferences (Chinyio *et al.*, 1998). Additionally, how to satisfy these different categories of client is not known. The need for studying client satisfaction is still necessary (Meng 2012; Kärnä and Junnonen, 2016; Manley and Chen, 2015) especially in developing countries (Durdyev *et al.*, 2018).

In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) particularly, many clients are less involved in the decisions and processes of construction procurement or projects (Trigunarsyah and Solaiman, 2016). This may explain why their expectations are less understood and underachieved. Further, up to 70% of public construction projects in the KSA encounter issues with communication and deadlines (Al-Kharashi and Skitmore, 2009). Consequently, our study aimed to investigate the current perceptions of clients and contractors about their understanding of client satisfaction, i.e. if the two sides have similar or different views.

METHOD AND MATERIALS

The exploratory research design was adopted as it enabled the research team to increasingly familiarize themselves with, and gain the attention of the participants, which subsequently facilitated

the derivation of evidence (Supino and Borer, 2012; de Carvalho, Patah and de Souza Bido, 2015). The research study was carried out in the KSA, which has the fastest growing construction industry in the Gulf region (Trigunarsyah and Solaiman, 2016).

The interpretivism paradigm, which provides flexibility and a wider perspective (Krauss, 2005), was adopted to examine the perceptions and experiences of the study participants to gain an understanding on client satisfaction. Consequently, the qualitative inductive approach was employed, which created a platform to generate in-depth personal information/ participants' views on the subject of client satisfaction. The inductive approach also involved the cross-evaluation of the revealed practice (drawn from the study findings) with what has been reported in current literature (Dubois and Gadde, 2002).

Using purposive sampling, the research team was able to identify some study participants (construction clients and contractors) who were willing and available to share their knowledge and perceptions on the aim of the study (Lim and Ting, 2013). The participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and the conditions on how to participate in the study. Subsequently, the participants were assured of the anonymity of their responses/contribution to the study. The interview tool was employed for the collection of the data because it allowed the research team to explore the participants' views in detail. In addition, the interview tool enabled the clarification of the participants' views by asking follow-on probing questions. 30 interviews were conducted with construction clients, and 30 interviews were conducted with contractors.

The interviews were all conducted face-to-face, and each interview lasted an average of 30 minutes. Prior to conducting each interview, every participant was given the Participant Information Sheet, after which the informed consent of each participant was obtained. The participants were allowed to

discontinue an interview at any point if they did not feel comfortable or changed their mind. The interview questions were focused on factors influencing client satisfaction e.g. completing projects within cost, time and specified quality, financial prudence, use of advanced technology and skilled workers, waste management and relation management. Towards the end of interviewing, no new information was coming up which signified saturation to the researchers. Bryman (2016) suggests that interviews can be stopped when saturation is reached. Guidance from Yin (2013) and Merriam and Tisdell (2015) was followed in the design of the interview questions and interviewing process, such that the questions were drafted to be easily understandable, not misleading and not prompting the interviewees to answer in any particular direction. The interview questions broadly included:

- What practices do you think construction companies can adopt to improve the satisfaction levels of construction clients?
- In your opinion what are the other factors apart from time, cost and quality that can play a vital role in increasing the level of client satisfaction?
- Any other comments on client satisfaction?

Participants' Profile: With respect to the background of the clients, percentages have been rounded up to the nearest whole number; 40% of the clients had completed only one project, 43% had done 2-10 projects, and 17% had carried out 20 or more projects. The types of projects carried out by the clients included: residential buildings, towers, hospitals, commercial buildings, charity buildings, schools, hotels and a mosque. The range of durations of the clients' projects was: 1-7 years (63%), 8-14 years (20%) and 15-20 years (17%). The clients had procured small (13%), medium (64%) and large size (23%) projects. Individuals (77%) and employees in big client organisations (23%) were interviewed. A mix of private (77%) and public sector clients (23%) were interviewed.

The contractors' project managers who were interviewed worked for small (10%), medium (67%) and large (23%) companies. They carried out large building and civil engineering (48% of

contractors), medium-sized (43%) and small-sized projects (9%). The interviewees had work experience of over 7 years (37%); between 1-7 years (60%) and less than one year (3%). Table 1 gives an overview of the interviewees.

Table 1 here

Analytical Procedure: The thematic analysis method was adopted for analysing and interpreting the interview data. This involved transcribing the interviews, and then identifying themes and patterns of meanings in the data set through coding. The codes for the themes were developed using two criteria: (1) the interview questions and (2) further themes that emerged from the analysis. More precisely, Ngulube (2015)'s dialectic process of description, analysis and interpretation was followed. This meant that the first step of the process: the description, began with the identification of the main factors (themes) that contribute to client satisfaction. The next step: the analysis stage, identified the interrelationships between the factors (themes) that contribute to client satisfaction. Sub-themes were identified in this analysis phase. The third stage of the dialectic process: the interpretation, then identified the connections between the sub and main themes and the reasons for their interrelationships.

RESULTS

This section is divided into four main parts: level of client satisfaction; perceived factors that contribute to client satisfaction; top attributes influencing clients' satisfaction; and clients' suggestions for improving their satisfaction. Some quotes from the transcripts are cited in the discussions. Due to ethical considerations and requests of most interviewees, their details remain strictly confidential.

Level of client satisfaction

The clients varyingly rated their satisfaction as being: very high (10% of respondents), reasonably low (80% of respondents) and (very) low (10% of the clients). A client, T23, who rated his satisfaction ‘low’ explained that: *in the past, construction companies used to construct high-quality buildings. But at the present time, companies don't care about quality. They only care about profit.*

On their part, all the contractors (100%) thought that clients were mostly satisfied with their services as nothing contrary was communicated to them. As a consequence of this non-feedback, some contractors indicated that they had no immediate means of identifying whether or not the client was satisfied with their services. The relatively mixed views between the clients and contractors might support the idea of disparity between their perceptions of the subject matter of client satisfaction.

Perceived factors that contribute to client satisfaction

Both clients and contractors opined the things that contribute to client satisfaction. Their views that were obtained from the analysis are contrasted in Table 2 and discussed below.

Table 2 about here

Honesty of contractors

The result reveals that clients’ desire is for the contractors to be honest. According to T15: *“A dishonest contractor means shoddy workmanship, unexpected delays, amenities that never get installed, hiking of prices and many more. Who would want to work with such a person?”* This finding aligns with the works of Nguyen and Watanabe (2017) and Thomas (2017) who observed that contractor’s honesty, trustful relationship and doing the right work at the first opportunity is the priority of the client. T7 further supported this view: *“I put honesty and credibility before all other considerations when working with a contractor or consultant.”* The emphasis placed on honesty by the clients is not surprising as a study has shown that without honest and transparent relationship

among the project team the win-win attitude will not come into place (Wood and Ellis, 2005). According to Pena-moroa and Harpoth (2001), when there is honesty among the project team, it will decrease client micromanagement of the project team.

Effective financial management of the project

This is a very important factor for a client and therefore makes an important contribution to their satisfaction. Most interviewees highlighted the importance of effective financial management. For example, C18 explained that: *Clients care about their investment and money. They need to be assured that their project will be handled properly and effectively. This also avoids the company having any delays or troubles due to insufficient financing for the project. This ultimately can lead to convincing more prospective clients to trust this company.* T8's view concurs that: *the most important thing to me is when a project is completed within a budget cost, and I am presently working with a contractor who is different from others because he applies an un-conventional method to achieve cost savings.*

According to Soetanto and Proverbs (2002) and Arslan and Kivrak (2008), meeting clients' financial requirement, deploying an approach that prevents rework and working within the available budget and keeping to standards are among the factors that contribute to client satisfaction. Similarly, Alinaitwe, Apolot and Tindiwensi (2013) assert that client satisfaction in the construction industry is partly attributed to project delivery within costs, time and quality.

Proper planning and organization

Planning involves different dimensions including the consideration of materials, workforce, plants and co-ordination of sub-contractors. All these, have an indirect impact on client satisfaction. T5 explained how contractors *'usually have a careless attitude regarding the management and allocation of resources and project planning. This leads to higher wastage and causes a significant delay in project completion.'* The place of planning and organising in delivering a successful

construction project cannot be overemphasised. Ghoddousi and Hosseini (2012) found that effective planning contributes to worker's productivity in a project. This would in turn add to client satisfaction. However, when adequate attention is not paid to it the entire project could fail and the client would be dissatisfied.

Maintaining good communication between the client and the project team

The interviewees indicated that maintaining good communication between a client and the project team could contribute to their satisfaction. *"One of the major problems that cause disputes and delays in construction projects, particularly in Saudi Arabia, is poor communication and collaboration among project participants"* (T23). This finding corroborates Trigunaryyah and Solaiman (2016)'s observation that in KSA, many clients are less involved in the decisions and procurement of construction projects. This may explain why their expectations are less understood and underachieved. According to Meng (2012), effective communication, project management and collaboration between the project manager and client are vital for achieving client satisfaction.

Efficient customer services

Efficient customer service warrants project delivery on time, keeping to promises, always thinking of quality and keeping communication lines open. It may warrant going the extra mile to make a client happy. T9 commented that: *among the things I admire about a contractor is keeping to his word and treating his clients well and with the greatest respect. With this kind of attitude, you can be sure that clients will definitely come back because they would rather work with trusted contractors than new ones.* The goal of every supplier is to ensure the customer is satisfied with the service they are offered; but sometimes, this target is not achieved or met due to either lack of consensus or wrong assumptions on what the customer wants by the supplier. Churchill and Serprenant (1982) pointed out that the satisfaction of a customer is dependent on a supply that matches or surpasses their expectations. This implies that contractors should ensure they understand the clients' (customer)

requirements in order to meet their expectations accordingly.

Clarity of words and statements in contracts

Clearly articulated contracts with simple wording that can be understood undoubtedly instil confidence in the parties and promote transparency in project execution. As T26 noted,

Contracts are supposed to be clear and understood by everyone. However, the style of drafting and subjective phrases within contracts make them hard to comprehend, which in turn leads to the dissatisfaction of both the service providers (contractors and consultants) and the client himself. T4 complained that some contractors take advantage of knowing the “get-out” clauses in a contract and use these to cheat inexperienced clients.

Cooperation with the client

The need for a cordial relationship between the project team members and the client was seen as very important by most interviewees. According to T18, *what is even more important to me is a contractor who keeps me involved in the project, particularly where it involves making changes, either minor or major. T11 added that: a good relationship with the client will increase his psychological comfort, reassurance and satisfaction, and sometimes make him overlook minor mistakes that can be modified because of this good relationship.* Also, T12 suggested that duties and responsibilities have to be transparent for all parties, and information exchange between them should be open, clear and fast.

Health and safety

The majority of respondents agreed that health and safety requirements have a direct impact on client satisfaction. Some clients (22%) explained how accidents create extra work such as long investigative processes, writing reports, providing explanations and even litigation. T13 stated that: *I go out of my way to ensure that the contractors I hire have a good safety record.*

Good logistics

Construction logistics concerns the procedures for designing and managing the supply chain, which includes purchasing, storage, manufacturing and transport. Good logistics shortens time and reduces waste, risk of accidents, rework, excessive storage of materials on-site, and even damage to materials and other items. Good logistics according to T24 *“is vital to the successful delivery of the project.”*

Hygienic environment

Some clients opined that a clean and well-organized construction site is very satisfying because it facilitates the free flow of movement and reduces the possibility of accidents. T13 stated that: *I am always happy to see a construction site well organized and free from waste lying everywhere. This gives me the opportunity to look around the site for any defective work or make observations where I see it is necessary.*

Use of advanced technology

Some clients mentioned the use of advanced technology as a contributor to their satisfaction. Many contractors agreed that innovative technology could make a positive impact but were concerned about the cost of its implementation. C29 indicated that *using equipment shortens the project delivery duration and gives us quality work. Its cost is what matters most. They are sometimes expensive.*

C15 remarked that the use of *advanced construction technology saves waste, labour, time.* The contribution of advanced technology and logistics to reducing wastes, risks, costs and mistakes illustrates how some of the constructs are inter-related. Similar connections are inherent in the many other attributes of client satisfaction.

Satisfaction with time

Many clients (53%) reported satisfaction with the timely completion of their projects. Another set of clients (47%) however expressed dissatisfaction with time overrun on some of their projects. T16

explained how *“there were mistakes in the design and schemes. This resulted in delaying the project”*. Contractors’ inexperience was also indicated as a reason for project time overrun. Overall, clients would want their projects to finish on time.

Delivering projects within price

On a scale of 1-10 (highest), the clients mostly rated this attribute between 2 and 6, explaining that projects hardly ever finished within the initial cost. According to T29, *“the contractors will always find a way to increase the initial cost of the project. Any time you are starting a project, you know the cost will almost certainly increase. This makes it difficult if you have not planned for extra spending on the project”*.

Delivering expected quality in project outcomes

Clients are very much interested in quality. T18 explained that quality management practices *“...boost the reputation of the company due to the high-quality project that was done. Clients admire high-quality projects. It is the main goal of construction companies and clients as well.”* Quality remains visible in a finished project and is thus very appealing to clients.

Goals, aspirations and improved reputation

Some contractors aspire to be excellent in their undertakings, e.g. in using the latest technologies and reducing wastes, risks, costs and mistakes. Contractors reckon that these endeavours add to client satisfaction. C15 explained that *good contractors also care about all minor and major details of the project: they want to boost their reputation.*

The implementation of Codes and Standards (training of employees, behaving professionally)

C16 indicated that following the Saudi Building Code *“helps us to ensure the buildings we put up will meet all the quality requirements of Saudi Arabia. If a client can see you meet the requirements*

of the code, it gives them some level of assurance about your work.”

Knowledge and skills of contractors' personnel

Skilful workers contribute to achieving high quality outcomes. C20 stated that *“the workers who work in the project should have the necessary skills”*. This is yet another effort to attain client satisfaction.

Good teamwork between members of supply chains

A construction project requires cooperation and teamwork for it to be completed on time. C24 explained how they *“value a good relationship between the contractors and the suppliers because it is vital to the successful delivery of the project.”* Good teamwork has a bearing on e.g. communication, efficiency and logistics.

Understanding the client's brief and requirements

Understanding the client's brief is very important as it reflects the expectations to be attained in the project. C10 in this regard stated that; *“if the project manager has a clear and correct perception regarding quality and its importance while delivering the project, the client satisfaction tends to be higher.* This view reinforces the need for consensus ad idem.

The top attributes influencing client satisfaction

The clients identified the following as the attributes that influenced their satisfaction:

- Honesty of contractors (mentioned by 97% of the clients).
- Effective financial management of the project (93%).
- Proper planning and organization (87%).
- Use of skilled workforce (87%).
- Adequate provision of quality materials (87%)

- Maintaining good communication between the client and project team (80%).

Given that these were mentioned more frequently by clients, they represent their key desires.

On their part, contractors in decreasing frequency highlighted quality (80% of contractors), time (70%), cost (60%), safety (40%), commitment (30%) and honesty (30%) as very important factors that influenced the level of client satisfaction. This suggests a disparity between the favourites of the clients and contractors. If so, the perceptions of clients and contractors may not always align perfectly, and this may explain why clients sometimes indicate that they are not fully satisfied with their project outcomes. According to Lai and Lam (2010) a disparity between clients and contractors is not unexpected and supports the need for full *consensus ad idem* between the parties involved in a contract to ensure they are operating on the same understanding (Boyd and Chinyio, 2006). The implication of the absence of congruence is that clients' expectations would not be prioritised and achieved. According to Azis *et al.* (2012), satisfaction is the main goal of clients in the KSA and its under-achievement thus impacts on their level of confidence and loyalty.

Clients' suggestions for ensuring their satisfaction

Six main attributes were identified by clients for improving their satisfaction i.e. 1) effective communication, 2) improving the quality of works, 3) use of skilled workforce, 4) cost savings, 5) timely completion of projects and 6) honesty of contractors. These self-explanatory attributes, which are depicted in Figure 1, may not be new on their own, but may be an indication that they are often missing in KSA practices. Attention should thus be paid to these attributes by contractors.

Figure 1 here

DISCUSSION

Levels of client satisfaction within the KSA construction industry

As found in our research study, client satisfaction with the quality of construction work was generally high. Literature suggests that clients will be satisfied when the required levels of quality are met (Rumane, 2013). The results also indicate that although quality is very important to clients, there are other contributors to their satisfaction e.g. time, cost and relationship management. Rashvand and Majid (2014) opined that a critical criterion for client satisfaction is the issue of performance management. Langford and Male (2008) suggest that technical knowledge and providing quality in the work are main requirements for client satisfaction.

The results of the research further share some common grounds with Hill and Alexander (2017) who indicated that the level of satisfaction might vary with the specific requirements and preferences of the customers. Overall, the research indicates that the level of client satisfaction in the KSA is not yet maximal, and the contributors to it are multifaceted.

Contrasting the perceived factors that contribute to client satisfaction

The literature agrees with most of the yardsticks of client satisfaction as catalogued in the first column of Table 1. For instance, Mazher *et al.* (2015) argue that the use of a highly skilled workforce can lead to client satisfaction because of the level of experience and expertise which they bring to the project to ensure e.g. timely completion and good quality outcomes. Rumane (2013) reports that factors such as meeting bidding requirements, timely completion of projects, and delivery and communication methods are all important when considering the best practices that would contribute to client satisfaction. These factors were established directly or indirectly in the findings of our study. Regarding communication particularly, many interviewees highlighted the need for maintaining good communication and cordial relationship between clients and their project teams.

Orr and Scott (2008) found that the main issues affecting the Saudi construction industry include technological advancement, time constraints, finance and budgeting, risk and health issues, legal and

strategic issues and the lack of effective monitoring techniques. In view of the information shown in Table 1, if these issues are addressed, clients would be more satisfied.

Top attributes influencing clients' satisfaction

Four things stand out for clients in Table 1, which the contractors did not highlight immediately, i.e.: clarity of statements, documents and contracts; cooperation between client and contractor; good logistics and maintaining a hygienic environment. Further, the lower end of Table 1 shows some contractors' endeavours, which they actively exert to impress and satisfy their clients. Meanwhile, the clients did not specifically highlight such attributes as yardsticks of satisfaction. There is thus a possibility that the thinking of a client and an associated contractor in a project may not align perfectly. This could be due to the lesser involvement of the client in the procurement process in KSA which could contribute to the non-alignment of the contractor's and client's thinking on the project (Trigunaryyah and Solaiman, 2016).

Suggestions for ensuring client satisfaction

The clients in the study could identify things that contractors could do to ensure their (clients') satisfaction e.g. paying attention to detail, use of highly trained and skillful workers, delivering a high-quality project with aesthetical appeal and striving for perfection. Since clients know what they want, it demands a proactive approach on the contractors' part to try to find out what their clients specifically want, and then endeavour to deliver it. However, achieving a clear communication pathway between the client and contractor must be established as part of the project delivery framework (Meng, 2012).

The majority of the clients suggested that dishonesty in terms of progress of projects and issues relating to their contracts had a great deal to do with their satisfaction levels. At least 30% of the clients who participated in this research cited honesty as an important behavioural trait that a

contractor should possess.

For most of the clients, the need for their projects to be completed and handed over on time was a very important factor. Where delays had occurred, these affected the organizations' plans and thus led to their dissatisfaction. For some clients who had commercial interests, the monetary loss due to delays was a very important factor in their dissatisfaction (Arslan and Kivrak, 2008).

CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to investigate the current perceptions of clients and contractors about their understanding of client satisfaction in the KSA construction industry and explore how to improve it. The study found that clients seem to know what they want and can express these. The study revealed that Contractors also think they know what pleases their clients and often proceed to deliver projects on that basis. However, what contractors consider as 'satisfiers' may not always align perfectly with what the clients want; hence there may be no perfect *consensus ad idem*; and when that happens, the clients are ultimately dissatisfied.

The study shows that understanding the project brief and details of contract documents is important for client satisfaction as it enables the delivery of the right product in a way that pleases the client. However, the attributes of client satisfaction are multifaceted and contractors need to be fully cognisant of all these. Moreover, some clients' desires could be implicit and not expressed in the contract, e.g. maintaining a hygienic construction environment. Concerted efforts may be necessary to fully decipher all the things that a particular client wants. Therefore, the study concludes that, a deeper consideration of *consensus ad idem* is warranted if client satisfaction is to be improved. If a client expects certain behaviours or actions from a contractor, and these are not highlighted in the contract documents, e.g. honesty, then a means of finding out these extras is necessary. This can be achieved by i) the client making concerted efforts to inform the contractor about their entire

expectations; ii) the contractor taking proactive steps to continually elicit the client's expectations, and iii) a dialogue mechanism introduced for clients and contractors to track progress in terms of client satisfaction. The authors think the three options are all workable and are thus exploring the development of a framework that will facilitate a continuous dialogue that is warranted in this regard.

This study contributes to knowledge and practice on improving client satisfaction in construction project delivery as follows: Firstly, by pooling the factors that improve client satisfaction from both the perspectives of client and the contractor, as this has received less attention. Secondly, the study established the differing perceptions between clients and contractors about the former's priorities which calls for necessary adjustment by the contractors to enhance the achievement of project outcomes with increased client satisfaction.

Although the empirical study was limited to the KSA, the findings provide a guide to contract formulation generally and could serve as a lens and basis for future studies that aim to understand how to enhance construction clients' satisfaction in other parts of world.

Case law

Raffles v Wichelhaus [1864] EWHC Exch J19

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