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Risk Management in the Post Pandemic Business Environment

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A B S T R A C T

The requirement to address risk in the prevailing business environment has been accentuated due to the constraints of the pandemic. It is proposed that the nature of risk context has been fundamentally altered by the global events of COVID. This paper provides a perspective that is based on an exploratory study of the identification and addressing of risk, in terms of business projects.

A review of the literature has been undertaken and the key themes for the study topic identified. A senior manager, who is responsible for risk management at a company that runs international projects, was interviewed in an empirical study. A thematic analysis was performed, employing an inductive approach, in this research into a single case. The aim was to contribute to the prevailing literature and enhance understanding of the post pandemic business environment, in respect of risk management.

The principal questions concerning risk and risk management are discerned. The objective is to consider risk in the post pandemic environment, in order to improve understanding of the issues relevant to business. The requirement to address these issues is also covered, with an attempt to determine the main themes from the research, in order to assist practitioners.

The use of technology to support business continuity and achieve business objectives during the pandemic is discussed. An articulation of Lewin's change model is proposed to summarise this work and assist in the comprehension of the contemporary situation.

Keywords: Risk, Risk Management, Contingency, Business Continuity, Novel Risk, Change Management

Introduction

The definition of risk is provided as, the possibility of incurring misfortune or loss.¹ This focuses on the negative effects of risk, thus subscribing to a view of attempting to

protect the organisation from the consequences. A further statement is made by Maylor² as "We can view risk as a 'trade-off'". This could comprise the consideration of the costs of mitigating or preventing the risk against the costs

of the risk occurring. This could also constitute the cost of risk against potential reward, helping to determine the potential net outcomes for the organisation. The latter allows a positive perspective of risk, such as a positive sales return or investment, gleaned as a reward for the risk taken. Risk can also be viewed as the probability of an event occurring, acknowledging a degree of uncertainty as to occurrence, potentially, the outcome of this event. The potential impact of the risk on the organisation will assist in an appraisal and the resultant actions taken.

Risk can also be viewed in terms of bringing new products to market in a 'first mover' strategy. The company thus accepts the risk of leading development, in respect of costs and potential sales. The importance of leadership is stated, as "a risk-taking ethos that is supported by top management".³

The primary motivation for this paper is to understand the risk environment, following the pandemic and consider the appropriate methods to address the resultant risks to the organisation. Risk responses are viewed as being determined by the possible impact on the business. The risks that are discerned as having a high impact on the business and are highly likely to occur should, thus, be covered with plans for the appropriate response to prevent or reduce the possible effects.

The identification of risk is viewed as a critical activity, in this respect. The range of sources of risk, internal and external to the organisation and its partners and in the environment, hence, need to be detected in order to quantify an appropriate response. The components of the organisation, such as people, technology, finance, structure and materials, can all be viewed as potential sources of risk.

Methodology

This research was enacted using qualitative methods to obtain interpretations of risk management in the post pandemic environment.^{4,5} A semi-structured interview was held with an industry practitioner, in order to obtain a perspective on this topic. The interview recording was analysed, utilising an inductive approach. Key themes were discerned from the data and categorised without a prepared coding structure. This was done in order to gain a novel perspective on the data, avoiding the potential bias of a predetermined coding structure.

A literature review was undertaken and a similar technique was employed, in order to process the data. A thematic analysis was enacted and the results were categorised into groupings, to facilitate understanding.⁶

A summary of the potential contribution to practice was thus provided, with the theoretical basis being stated in the form of an adaptation of Lewin's original change model,⁷ considering this study's findings.⁸

Literature Review

It is proposed that the changes to the business environment, identified as key themes in the literature, have also engendered changes to the nature of the accompanying risks and hence require new risk management strategies to accommodate these circumstances.

Issues with Response to COVID

The problem of issues originating from the response to COVID-19 and the accompanying restrictions was identified.⁹ This principally relates to the efforts to utilise technology to continue organisational activity. The effects on individuals are highlighted, as a consequence of this technology-led response. Inequality has been created, due to disparities in income and technical skills. Some jobs benefitted from homeworking via online provision but others did not and this has led to financial penalties, including the removal of these jobs, for the period of restrictions and beyond, in some cases. The move to online working caused stress due to the requirements of understanding the technology. The change to online teaching also affected the supply of the workforce. Lack of equipment, suitable home space and domestic support could be identified as affecting the standard of education of the student population, to varying degrees. The movement of some jobs to online homeworking tended to occur in the case of the higher-skilled employment. Manual work and other jobs with less technical content were affected more significantly by the measures to combat the pandemic. This led to redundancies and reductions in pay, including the UK furlough scheme (where workers who could no longer attend their workplace were paid a percentage of their salary, supported by the government and their employer). The use of automation to replace labour, for example in factories and distribution centres, was given impetus by these circumstances.

The psychological consequences of such changes were also specified. Isolation and online bullying were cited as two such aspects of increased virtual activity. The lack of socialisation, issues with the home environment, tendency to overwork and lack of separation between domestic and work spheres were viewed as potentially generating negative psychological effects.

The occurrence of physical problems, either now or in the future, were identified as a possible symptom of working from home. These are caused by the unsuitability of the home in respect of the requisite ergonomics of a work environment.

The security of systems was also noted as a fundamental concern, arising from the measures to accommodate the restrictions of the pandemic.¹⁰ The movement away from regular workplaces to homeworking could potentially cause security issues.

The usage of domestic broadband, for example, together with a less secure domestic environment, could permit security breaches, through accidental or malicious means. Lack of technical skills, training and support were also potential issues, identified in respect of this environment.

Problems with communication of the need for self-isolation, due to possible infection, were stated. The use of software applications (such as the NHS App in the UK) to send these instructions via mobile devices has led to excessive numbers of people being sent the messages. This has created workforce shortages, caused by workers needlessly being told to self-isolate, in different sectors, as the economy recovers from the effects of the pandemic. The dynamics of business operation is also illustrated through ADR editorial by Mishra.²⁷ Even Risk seems highly focused based on Airport Risk Assessment by Shakya and Mishra.²⁸

Barriers to Learning

The requirement was for organisations to attempt to 'learn' rapidly, in order to respond effectively to the new situation. The literature identifies potential 'barriers' to learning that could inhibit the organisational response to the amended business environment.¹¹ One of the main areas identified was that success could be envisaged as problematic, in that organisations could fail to learn from this outcome. The latter prevented a thorough appraisal of the situation and led to overconfidence and an inability to apply necessary changes to ensure continued success. The tendency was to attribute success to internal factors, such as talent and correct strategy, rather than external circumstances. A trend was also observed for powerful individuals in the organisation to fail to consult or take advice, particularly in the context of success. It was identified as discouraging reflection in senior management. The implicit assumption was that seniority meant that the manager did not need to learn from their subordinates and even that it may be a sign of weakness. The important aspect was to examine success and use data to understand, in the same manner as a failure would be analysed.

It is proposed that there is a bias towards success. The requirement to destigmatise failure was noted, so that it could be accepted and analysed. Organisations that take this approach are able to stimulate learning and facilitate the cancellation of failing projects, thereby saving resources. This approach encourages a more positive environment, where risk-taking is encouraged, rather than a fear of failure inhibiting the initiation of potential, beneficial projects. The inherent bias in organisations was identified as being towards action and conformity. The bias to action leads to exhaustion of the assets of the business, especially the human assets, and a dearth of reflection in the business processes. The requirement for a pause in activity to accommodate a suitable period of post-action review

was stated. The need to conform to internal and external expectations and standards is viewed as another driver that inhibits change. The requirement to maintain variations of behaviour within set standards will thus restrict the scope of change.

The use of external experts is also cited as a possible inhibitor of organisational learning. This is borne of a narrow view of expertise, where the opinions of subject matter experts from outside the organisation are given greater validity than those of the staff. The resultant actions are likely to reinforce the established rationale, rather than stimulate innovation, as these experts are likely to have similar qualifications and experience in their professional areas. The suggestion is that the workforce should be regarded as experts, in their own spheres, and be developed via training and being given a varied experience in the organisation.

The key to organisational learning was viewed as implementing project reviews and recognising the appropriate timescales for decisions, in terms of obtaining feedback.¹² The notion is proposed that replication of actions in the organisation does not constitute learning, so it is important to experiment in order to generate improvement, as well as analysing performance, irrespective of the outcomes.

The issue of large organisations being 'risk averse' was also mentioned.¹³ The problem was viewed as being the allocation of decisions to middle managers, whose careers could be affected by the outcome of a single decision. The requirement to encourage risk-taking and reduce the personal aspects, in terms of responsibility, was proposed.

Solutions

Potential solutions were offered, in the form of creating a 'learning' environment within organisations in order to address the risks created by the pandemic and accompanying restrictions.

Team resilience was identified as an important factor for organisations to consider.¹⁴ The tendency for teams to be placed under additional pressure, due to the pandemic, increases the importance of this area. Examples of the disruptive elements are: restrictions on movement, perhaps leading to increased virtual communications, economic issues that affect profit, so reduce operations and removal of team members for health reasons. A practitioner survey of project teams was analysed to produce definitions of team resilience. It was determined that trust was required, in two forms: cognition-based; and affect-based. The former was founded on perceptions of competence, reliability and dependability, thus comprising a view of professionalism in respect of work. The latter was based on care and concern between team members, thus constituting the emotional

connections. This research noted that cognition-based trust was required before affect-based trust could be formed. The outcome, in terms of team effectiveness, was defined as 'group potency', namely the ability to perform effectively as a team. This was viewed as determining team resilience, in respect of coping with conflict and pressure in projects. A qualitative study of a large project, termed a 'megaproject', was accessed in order to contribute to this research.¹⁵ The subject comprised a stalled project, namely the Lyon-Turin High Speed Railway. This source examined the range of key skills required to complete the project, identified as including strategic planning, construction of legislation, diplomacy, politics, socio-technical, negotiation and legal competences. These were viewed as necessary in order to facilitate the successful delivery of the project. The latter involved international cooperation to deliver the transport system and was stalled, as local objections to the plans resulted in legal issues. The requirement for the successful application of negotiating skills and legal support was thus highlighted. The scope of the project demanded resources at many levels, including international diplomacy, project management, industry and local citizen agreements. Problems in key areas led to the halting of progress on this megaproject. The need to address the concerns of key stakeholders, in terms of value creation for example, was therefore a critical risk identified in this literature.¹⁶

The use of systems to reduce and control risk is proposed.¹⁷ These can allow flexible working, with the employment of mobile systems to allow the workforce to be connected via centralised collation of data into the data repositories for analysis, for instance. The monitoring function can thus be fulfilled, allowing control of a distributed workforce to be enacted. Work activities can thus be recorded easily, with service and sales targets and budgets being readily updated, via mobile devices which are used to capture data from operatives to update central systems, located at headquarters, for instance. Data can be transmitted at several points in the process, so progress with key tasks can be recorded and measured against the prescribed standards. The system data can thus be used to indicate areas of potential risk via pre-programmed indicators. Failure to respond to a request for information could, for example, be used as an indicator of risk, with an escalation procedure provided, to be applied as appropriate.

The aim is to engender trust in the system and the associated processes. The information movements accommodate a distributed workforce and allow control, via individual and group target-setting, performance and standard monitoring. The dual objectives of management control and agent autonomy can therefore be achieved, using systems to deliver real-time, auditable information to all users.

Coping with Novel Risk

The problem of risk management in the pandemic is that of coping with new forms of risk, which are not easy to quantify or detect. The literature has attempted to consider this issue, by proposing methods to manage this risk.

The central tenet is that the past cannot be used as a guide.¹⁸ The 'traditional' approach to risk management uses information from previous events, experienced directly and by others to compile data in order to identify, categorise and assess risk, using prescribed criteria, such as impact on the organisation.

The literature suggests techniques for planning, given this uncertain environment. 'Backcasting', for instance, is proposed. This suggests that the organisation envisions a desired future position then implements change to achieve it. The alternative approach is to envision what is undesirable and attempt to avoid it. Analysis of trends, crisis simulation and forecasting, namely more traditional techniques, are also recommended.

The importance of 'horizon scanning' was emphasised, where the organisation's representatives check the environment for signs of change that could ultimately affect operations.

The use of tools for business analytics was viewed as essential to allow the early recognition of potential risk.¹⁹ The requirement to build capacity in respect of these tools and skills, in order to utilise them successfully, was highlighted as being of paramount importance. The use of business analytics in order to glean 'situational awareness' regarding the risk environment was emphasised and viewed as superior to other methods, such as Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning, which are based on a stable perspective and the use of statistics, that tend to access results of historical data. The problem is that both premises could be invalid in the post pandemic environment.

The examples of novel risk are specified as, events occurring outside the normal environment of the organisation; multiple breakdowns that are difficult to accommodate; rapid acceleration of risk on an international scale.²⁰ The potential solution offered was to 'scan the horizon' in order to identify potential risks and empower an executive or team to provide a response for the organisation. The delegation of responsibility to local experts was also recommended, in order to formulate an appropriate response. The inclusion of all employees in the activity of risk identification was suggested, via a suitable system to gather, evaluate and respond to potential threats and opportunities. General tactics to reduce project risk are also offered, including the reduction of duration and complexity.²¹ The consideration of environments, in terms of sustainability, is recognised as an important aspect of risk identification and management.

The capture and review of learning from projects via appropriate systems is regarded as being of paramount importance, in this endeavour.

Findings

An interview with an industry practitioner, responsible for risk management at a company that runs international projects, was undertaken. The principal themes were discerned for analysis, cited and related to the literature. These themes also comprise potential areas of learning for practitioners.

Horizon Scanning

The process of 'horizon scanning' was mentioned. This was defined as a collaborative effort by members of the company to identify risks and opportunities in the environment. These were then registered in the systems, in order to permit appraisal. This should allow the risk data to be filtered for use. All employees were encouraged to participate, with a central team collating and evaluating the risk data.

This theme relates to Kaplan et al.,²⁰ for example, who stress the importance of actively viewing risk in the organisation's environment²² in respect of such a perspective.

Revenue Stream Interrupted

The restriction on movement to combat the pandemic was highlighted. This meant that company operatives could not perform activities relating to a commercial project. This led to the 'interruption of a revenue stream' for the firm. The requirement was thus highlighted for a budget contingency to accommodate this risk.

This concern is stated by Marabelli et al.,⁹ for instance, in considering the effect on remote workers regarding risk and financial penalties.

Learning from Previous Critical Incident

One key aspect that helped enhance the company's ability to cope with the pandemic was the 'issues arising from a previous critical incident' (a terrorist bomb in the city centre several years before the pandemic). The use of transport and headquarters' office access were inhibited, interrupting business continuity. This led to the promotion of home working with the use of laptops. The eventual effect was to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the level of business.

This is mentioned by Kaplan et al.,²⁰ and Blair et al.²¹ The importance of gathering knowledge from the environment including organisational history is emphasised.

Homeworking

The company had already introduced a 'provision for homeworking' using laptops and access to a web communications platform for most employees. This was accelerated by the previous terrorist incident and the

subsequent office access problems. These measures meant that the move to homeworking, due to the actions required to combat the pandemic, was facilitated.

This company initiated workstation health and safety assessments, to ensure that homeworking conditions were appropriate. A budget for homeworking was created, necessitated by these measures.

These issues are addressed in the literature, for example Marabelli et al.⁹ and Hacker et al.¹⁰ These authors consider the usage of online activities in the pandemic and the use of virtual teams (in respect of organisational leadership).²³

International Audits done Virtually

The respondent cited a change of role, as international travel to perform audits for overseas customers had been part of the remit. These were now delivered virtually, to accommodate the prevailing constraints. 'Webcams were used to examine the overseas sites remotely and thus deliver this service', so procedures were adapted to enable business continuity.

This theme of adapting service delivery to a virtual mode and the subsequent issues is present in the literature, for example Hacker et al.¹⁰ and Marabelli et al.⁹

Guarantees of the Systems for Virtual Working

The respondent stated that the move to homeworking meant that 'system security and integrity were paramount'. These aspects had already been considered and investment had been made in systems to guarantee them, via the engagement of suitable partners.²⁴ The increase in homeworking due to the circumstances of the pandemic meant that that heavier reliance was placed on systems, in respect of delivering the business objectives.

This is reflected in the work of Hacker et al.,¹⁰ who identify security as a principal concern of homeworkers, using web communications platforms and addressing the technology life cycle.²⁵

Key Person Dependency

The company was described as being 'small' and thus the problem of 'key person dependency', namely reliance on certain individuals, was identified. The occurrence of the pandemic exacerbated this potential risk, with staff having to self-isolate, cope with family illness and being more likely to become ill themselves, with consequences for performing their work. The possible deterioration of the service, due to these conditions, was therefore considered. Measures had already been implemented, prior to the pandemic, to distribute the knowledge of key staff.

The use of deputies and contracts that retained some access to key staff, even after leaving full-time employment, provided a level of cover in respect of this risk. The system

of homeworking also enabled potential access to key staff, in an emergency.

This is reflected in the work of Blair et al.,²¹ considering the requirement for the appropriate personnel and skills to deliver business-critical projects.

New Arrangements Formalised with Contracts

The respondent stated that the actions taken to accommodate the pandemic had a permanent aspect, in that the new 'flexible working policy' meant that the facility to work at home was offered to the majority of employees, as part of their contracts. These allowed the employees to continue to work from home and spend only a minor percentage of time in the office, according to the dictates of the business. The temporary arrangements to accommodate the constraints of the pandemic were thus continued as a potentially permanent state, embodied in these contracts, to suit both the employee and employer.

This is reflected in the literature, in Lewin⁷ and Esposito et al.,¹⁵ on the importance of agreements. The new contracts represent the 'refreezing stage', where change is embodied in the 'new order', as an ongoing arrangement.

Discussion

The research can be summarised by applying a modification to Lewin's original change model,⁷ characterising change as having three steps, unfreezing, change, refreezing. The suggested model of change, illustrated in Figure 1, reinterpreted in the post pandemic environment, examined in this research, comprises the following steps, imposed change, change accommodation or exploitation, establish new order.

Change was imposed, due to the constraints of the pandemic, potentially creating ongoing problems with the technological solutions. Lewin's original 'unfreezing' stage, by contrast, entailed the preparation for the change agenda via persuasion of individuals and groups, in a 'voluntary' phase.

The next stage, comprising the implementation of the change agenda, overcoming the barriers to learning in order to achieve this objective, is now viewed as a response to the constraints of the pandemic. This response can be divided into exploitation of potential opportunities and accommodation, where the organisation has to find alternative methods of delivery, namely possible solutions, or absorb losses, thus revising their strategic choices.²⁶

The final stage of 'refreezing', comprising the incorporation of the changes into normal business, is similar. The 'new order' is established so the changes in the post pandemic environment are adopted, amended or, in some instances, discarded. This will constitute the revised arrangements,

following the pandemic, thus setting up mechanisms for coping in the future.

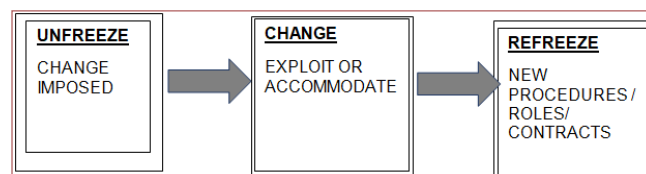


Figure 1. Adaptation of Lewin's Change Model for the Post Pandemic Environment

Conclusion

An exploratory, empirical study of a single case and literature review were employed. The analysis is summarised by an interpretation of Lewin's change model together with recommendations for practitioners to accommodate the circumstances of the pandemic and the ensuing risk environment. Further research could be performed on more cases in a variety of organisational contexts, in order to verify and extend these findings.

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