

Practitioners' Perspectives on Supply Chain Collaboration in UK Construction Projects

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ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of 1990s, there has been an increasing emphasis on supply chain collaboration in the UK construction industry through learning from manufacturing. The adoption of supply chain collaboration is now widely recognised as an effective way of addressing various traditional construction problems. This paper presents the findings of a research project that examines the practitioners' perspectives on supply chain collaboration in construction projects. The critical success factors (CSFs) of supply chain collaboration are identified from an online focus group discussion and ten expert interviews, whose results are analysed by using the NVivo software package. Unlike existing studies, this study develops an input-process-output model based on the categorisation of the identified CSFs. In addition, supply chain collaboration is compared between public and private sectors, between short-term and long-term programmes, between upstream and downstream supply chains, and between different areas of relationships. The comparative analysis describes the balanced and the unbalanced natures of supply chain collaboration. The findings in this study provide a better understanding of supply chain collaboration in today's construction practice. Although this study is based on the UK construction industry, its findings may also be useful for construction organisations in other countries to pursue supply chain collaboration.

Keywords: Construction Project, Online Group Discussion, Perceptive, Practitioner, Qualitative Analysis Software, Supply Chain Collaboration

INTRODUCTION

Supply chain collaboration has originated from car manufacturing (Harland, 1996). Industry sectors, such as manufacturing and retailing,

have made significant improvement by adopting the concept of supply chain collaboration (Briscoe & Dainty, 2005). Learning from these industry sectors, the UK construction industry has gradually realised the benefits of supply chain management (SCM). There has been an increase in the number of collaborative supply

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chains in construction practice (Akintoye et al., 2000). So far supply chain integration and collaboration have been widely recognised as an effective measure to address various traditional problems such as fragmented processes, adversarial relationships and poor performance (Saad et al., 2002). Government reports such as Latham (1994), Egan (1998) and Egan (2002) have played an important role in encouraging supply chain collaboration, calling for change in the whole industry. A core of the change movement is to replace traditional ways of working with collaborative ways of working (Ferne & Thorpe, 2007).

Although there is no widely accepted definition of supply chain collaboration, the customer-supplier relationship is considered by many researchers such as Emmett and Crocker (2006) in general and Ferne and Thorpe (2007) in construction to be the central to SCM. According to Blanchard (2010), for example, collaboration refers to cooperative supply chain relationships – formal or informal – between customers and suppliers, which are developed to enhance the business performance of both sides. A construction project is described by Stockdale (2000) as a series of customer-supplier relationships. In general, a construction supply chain is divided into the upstream supply chain involving project client, main contractor and project management consultancy and the downstream supply chain involving main contractor, specialist contractors and labour, materials and equipment suppliers (Beach et al., 2005). There are various forms of collaborative working approaches such as partnering and alliance (Bresnen & Marshall, 2000; Love et al., 2002). Supply chain collaboration in construction can be specific to a single project or based on a long-term programme (Bennett & Pearce, 2006; Meng, 2010).

Existing studies contribute to the identification of CSFs of supply chain collaboration. For example, Bennett and Jayes (1995) identified the three key features of construction partnering as mutual objective, problem resolution and continuous improvement. According to Black et al. (2000), the most important factors for partnering

success are mutual trust, effective communication, senior management commitment, action consistent with objectives, a dedicated team, flexibility with regard to change, and a commitment to continuous improvement. Similar studies may include Cheng et al. (2000), Chan et al. (2004), Akintoye and Main (2007), etc. A consensus among many researchers such as Flick (2009) in general and Knight and Ruddock (2008) in construction is that quantitative modes have been the dominant methods of research over the years. Almost all relevant studies in construction, such as Black et al. (2000), Cheng et al. (2000), Chan et al. (2004) and Akintoye and Main (2007), have identified the CSFs through questionnaire surveys in a quantitative manner.

Although a questionnaire survey is advantageous of having access to many people, there is no opportunity to collect information from respondents in terms of why a factor is selected as a CSF. In recent years, qualitative methods have been acknowledged for their contributions to academic research (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010). Compared to quantitative research, qualitative research investigates the reasons behind various aspects of behaviours. Unlike previous studies, this study adopts a combination of a focus group discussion and expert interviews, both of which are qualitative methods. The interaction between the participants in the focus group discussion makes the identification of CSFs more reliable. In addition to the focus group discussion, the expert interviews also take full advantage of the direct interaction between the interviewer and interviewees, providing in-depth information for supply chain collaboration practice. For these reasons, this research can be considered as a new attempt from the methodology perspective.

Generally, a management system can be broken down into input, process and output (Franceschini, 2007). Actually, some construction researchers have paid attention to the causal relationship between different CSFs of supply chain collaboration. For example, McDermott et al. (2004) stated that effective supply chain collaboration requires good communication that is based on mutual trust. On the other hand,

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