

Viewpoint: Are Critical Success Factors unique?

Our [global survey into the Factors Critical to Successful Change](#) set out with a simple aim. We wanted to see whether there is a common ‘ranking’ of each factor’s contribution to an initiative’s success, in order to help executives focus on those factors which most improve their chances of succeeding.

From the start, though, we wondered about a fundamental question: assuming a clear ranking emerged from the survey, could it be applied to all large-scale change initiatives? Or is each situation unique in ways which mean it can only be addressed through a ‘bespoke’ set of specifically-tuned CSFs?

We certainly found professionals who took the second view. As one senior executive put it:

“I think the factors vary according the business in question - its history, the people, the nature of the change. The context for change is very important.... We’ve looked at this before and have found no common ground - and it gets even more confused when you take national cultures into account.”

So now we have the survey results, do they support a common set of CSFs applied to all initiatives?

Aspects which drive uniqueness

Several aspects of change initiatives have been put forward, in our survey responses and elsewhere, as reasons why each situation is unique. The key ones seem to be:

- **Industries are very different** – approaches which work in one often won’t in another
- **National cultures vary** – an approach which fits one culture will clash with another
- **Initiative size matters** – approaches to small-medium initiatives aren’t flexible enough for large ones
- **Professional perspectives differ** – there is no single view across disciplines about what’s important
- **Context and type of change are key** – these must shape the way change is implemented.

We’ll first take a look at what the survey responses suggest about each in turn, then we’ll attempt an overall conclusion about whether the survey supports an approach which applies to all large-scale change.

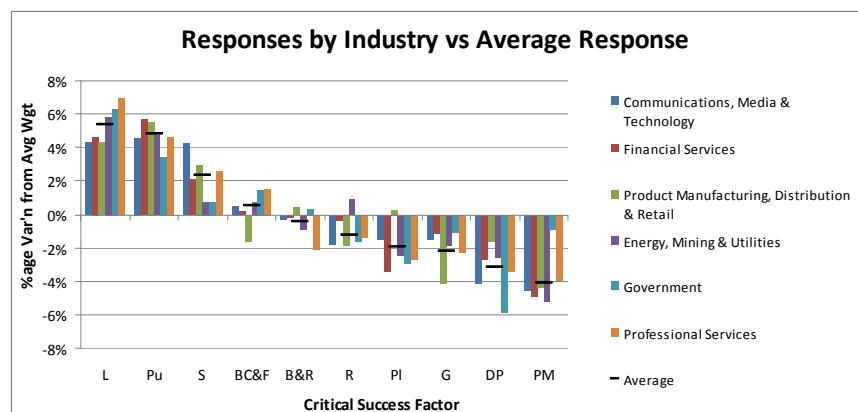
Differences between industries

At one level, this is self-evident. The technology, people and processes in a media organisation, for example, clearly aren’t the same as those in a car manufacturer, an oil company or a bank. End of discussion?

Well, perhaps not. We’re not comparing technology, people and processes; we’re looking at whether the same Critical Success Factors emerge as the most, and least, important in delivering successful change.

The results are striking: overall, there is strong agreement between industries.

This is perhaps not as surprising as it appears at first sight. While the specific content of change will vary widely, the stages of change, many of the barriers to change and most of the activities required to deliver and enable change aren’t so different across industries.



So what? This seems to be clear: the success factors are remarkably consistent across industries. *Commonality 1, Uniqueness 0.*

National cultures

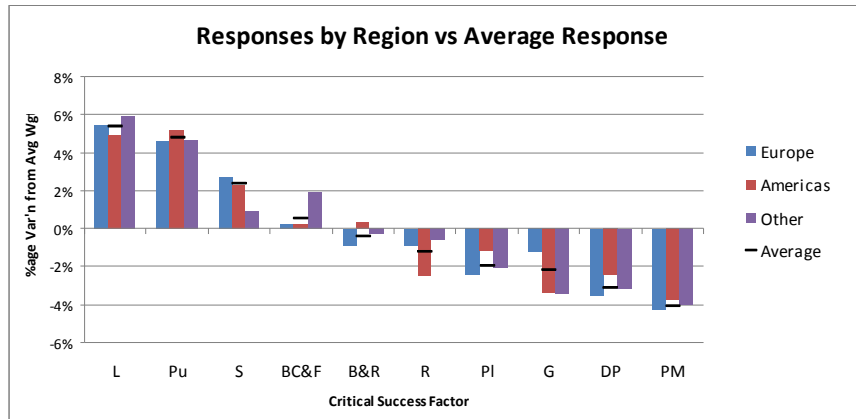
Although our survey didn't record respondents' individual countries, it did ask for their continents, and enables us to draw useful conclusions, particularly between Europeans and Americans, the largest groups.

There were certainly some variations in individual CSFs, but the overall ranking is not very different, and the importance of the 'top three' (Leadership, Purpose and Stakeholders) is similar.

This is not to suggest that the techniques to address a CSF - for example, to exert Leadership - may not vary significantly

between cultures. Nor is it to deny that there may be differences between the regions which were less well represented, and indeed between individual countries (which are not recorded by the survey).

So what? Despite some differences in the detail, the survey data suggests that an overall 'global ranking' is still applicable to the main regional cultures. *Commonality 2, Uniqueness 0.*

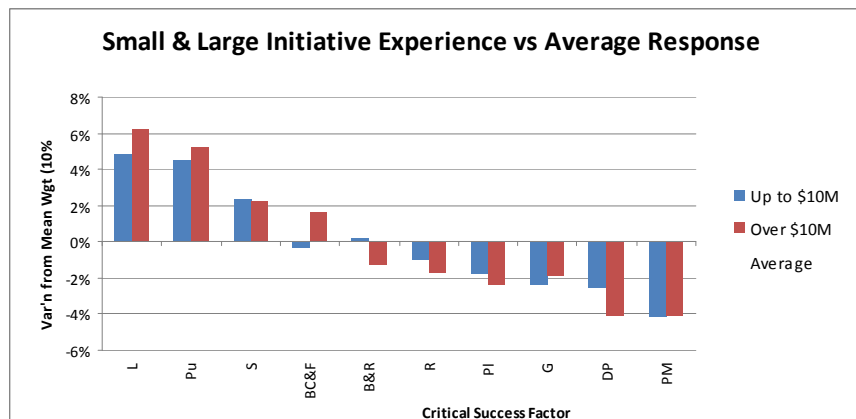


Size of initiative

This has been covered in the survey results in detail, and is only reviewed briefly here.

Respondents from larger initiatives (\$10m+) gave more weight to factors which keep a large initiative on track, while those from smaller ones emphasised the factors which keep 'on budget and on plan'.

However, the overall ranking is again not dramatically different between the two groups – a few factors differ by a place or two.



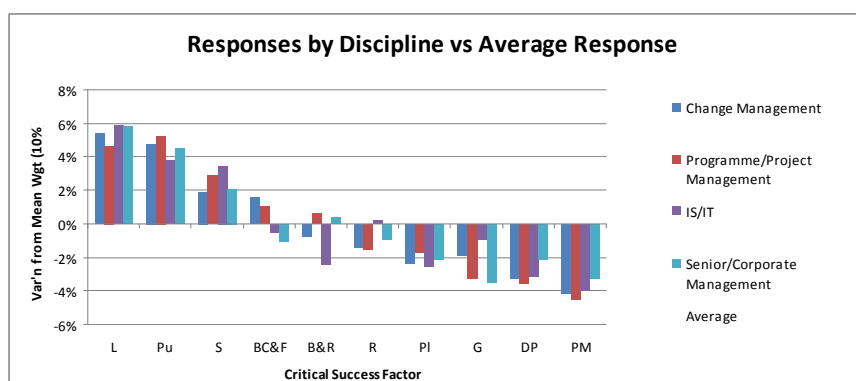
So what? Again, the survey data suggests that an overall 'global ranking' is valid across all initiative sizes. *Commonality 3, Uniqueness 0.*

Professional perspectives

Again this is covered in the survey, which shows differences in perspective - particularly between Programme/Project Managers and Change Management professionals.

So, an argument for uniqueness?

Well, that would imply that one or other perspective is 'right' and the other is 'wrong' in a particular



situation. We argue that generally each perspective is legitimate – i.e. both are ‘right’ – and that successful delivery is best achieved by reflecting both in the overall direction of the initiative. On that basis, the combined ranking, reflecting both views, is justified – although one can debate the correct relative weights of the two perspectives, and also others which were less heavily represented in our survey.

So what? If the argument is accepted that different professional perspectives are equally valid and should be represented in the overall ranking, then a common ranking is justified. *Commonality 4, Uniqueness 0.*

Context and type of change

The survey data does not specifically address this, so we must rely on our experience and judgement – and other people’s may well be different.

Our experience certainly suggests that the context of change is important. To take a simple example, an organisation with a history of successful change is likely to be much more open to, and proficient at, change than one with a history of failure, which may be uncertain and resistant. And an organisation changing from a position of success and strength will approach change differently from one which is struggling and trying to change in a last-ditch effort to survive – although it’s debatable which is more motivated to succeed.

However, does that mean we should necessarily conclude that the factors critical to success are different?

We offer an alternative hypothesis: that the relative importance of the factors is in fact typically similar; it is the degree and type of effort needed to put them in place which generally varies.

To illustrate... an organisation which has failed before is likely to need stronger leadership, a clearer blueprint and a more detailed plan (to pick out just 3 CSFs) than one which has generally succeeded at change in the past and knows how to do it. But that doesn’t mean Leadership is any more or less important than Blueprint or Plan in the two situations; merely that the standard required in each case is different.

Clearly the type of change also affects the situation. A detailed process-refinement initiative designed to improve operational efficiency and reduce error is going to be different from a culture-change one designed to promote empowerment and (controlled) risk-taking.

But this argument begins to sound a little like the one in the industries section above: the specific type of change will vary widely, but the stages, barriers and activities may not be so different. In that case, are the critical success factors necessarily different?

We’d argue that the answer is No.

So what? Of all the aspects, this is the one where the case for uniqueness is probably strongest, and we can’t deny that an element of environment-specific ‘context and content’ may be applicable in many cases. *Commonality 4½, Uniqueness ½.*

Conclusion

The overall score suggests a clear conclusion, and that seems to be justified by the evidence:

- In areas where strong differences might be expected (between industries, and between regional cultures, for example) they didn’t really appear – and certainly not to a degree which undermines the essential message that some CSFs contribute much more to success than others
- Looked at holistically, rather than from one particular discipline, professional perspectives don’t make a compelling argument against a common ranking
- While different initiative sizes produce some differences of emphasis, they don’t generate sufficiently different results to undermine the principle of a common ranking
- Context and type of change certainly affect the approach, but it isn’t clear that they fundamentally alter the relative importance of the underlying success factors – in fact, the opposite can be argued.

If we were proposing a precise, mathematically rigorous calculation then the detail differences in these aspects would certainly raise questions. But we're not; we're suggesting that the overall ranking provides executives with a way to focus first on those areas which have most impact on the chances of success.

On that basis, we believe the survey supports a common ranking of CSFs by their impact on an initiative's chances of success.

We recognise some people will disagree, and that there will be valid reasons in particular cases to adjust the standard ranking. Our [revised Rapid Assessment](#) will provide that ability but before using it we will always challenge our clients to think through against the tests above: ***are we really so very different?***

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