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Title: An exploration of the extent to which project management tools and techniques can be applied across creative industries through a study of their application in the fashion industry in the North East of Scotland

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Abstract

Keywords: project management; tools; techniques; body of knowledge; creative industries; fashion; SMEs; creative mindset; analytical mindset; professionalism; success criteria; project planning; continuous improvement.

Abstract: This exploratory research took the form of a qualitative study that aims to investigate the extent to which project management tools and techniques can be effectively applied across the creative industries through a study of their application in the fashion industry in the North East of Scotland.

The research uncovered challenges which could influence the transferability of project management tools and techniques in more creative industries and these include: a need to be flexible and reactive; the importance of reflecting on success and lessons learnt; and a tension between the creative and analytical mindsets.

1. Introduction

This paper presents the results of an exploratory research study which sought to determine the extent to which the philosophy, tools and techniques of project management are, or might be, of value to individuals managing projects in the fashion industry and took the North East of Scotland as a test case for that preliminary investigation.

Whilst the concept of the “project” as a tool to support the achievement of strategic objectives has been increasingly recognised (British Fashion Council, 2012), the fashion industry has tended to recruit young people from an Arts rather than Social Sciences background, leading to ‘a well documented skills gap within the industry in areas such as manufacturing and business management’ (British Fashion Council, 2010, p. 83). Yet fashion is a business, requiring entrepreneurial and management skills for companies to thrive. The industry is also one where projects are a key component of the business paradigm and can come in a myriad of guises, from a collection launch, through engagement at trade events to the redesign of lines and outlets. Despite the importance of projects, techniques for their management are little referenced in the scholarly or practitioner literature. The authors hypothesised that, as a number of parallels can be drawn between project management and fashion management, in terms of the importance of planning and control of a continuously changing environment (Arghavani, 2011), fashion managers might be particularly responsive to the value of project management tools and techniques.

Conscious efforts to codify and systematise project management tools and techniques began in the 1950s in the defense, engineering and construction industries (Kwak, 2003) and it remains the case that in areas of innovative technological and scientific development, project management is considered a valuable tool. The popularity of project management techniques has arguably proven more attractive in disciplines with an analytical, qualitative and empirical base, such as the STEM subjects. However in the last few decades the “projectification” of many sectors has emerged where projects are seen as the key mechanisms for strategic delivery (Soderlund and Maylor, 2012, Winter et al, 2006). Project management is no longer “a sub-discipline of engineering... it is now the dominant model for strategy implementation” (Winter et al, 2006). Although project management is arguably applicable in any context (Meredith and Mantel, 2011), much of the existing research remains focused on its role in large organisations in engineering, IT, construction and manufacturing.

Typically the fashion industry, like the broader creative industries, draws largely on non-STEM and management skills in its workforce and consists largely of SMEs (Lee and Rodríguez-Pose, 2013), acknowledged to have an important role in helping to rebalance the UK economy, (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2012).

The aim of this research was to explore the extent to which project management tools and techniques might be effectively applied across the creative industries through an investigation of

their application in SMEs in the fashion industry in the North East of Scotland. As part of the creative industries, it was hypothesised that fashion will present particular challenges but also opportunities to maximise benefit, as it is an industry in which projects form a core component of delivery. The research seeks to determine whether there are variables relating to the sector which render it more or less likely to benefit from the application of project management.

This paper:

- (i) draws on the literature to establish relevant theory from project management, the creative industries and SMEs in order to inform a study of the applicability of project management to the fashion industry;
- (ii) reflects on the methodological approach taken;
- (iii) describes approaches taken by managers in measuring project success, planning and control, people, continuous improvement, the role of creativity and analysis and barriers to the application of project management in the fashion industry;
- (iv) discusses themes emerging from the data collection including the need for flexibility and responsiveness, how management is conceptualised in the fashion industry, the difficulties encountered in measuring success and the role of creativity in business and project success.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Management in the Fashion Industry

All this fabulousness depends on creative spirits, who can be erratic, (The Economist, 2011, np).

The fashion industry is characterised as an uncertain environment, subject to continuous evolution and change, where planning and control are particularly important (Burack, 2010). Yet research into management techniques in the fashion industry is sporadic and most prevalent in areas such as marketing and events management, supply chain management and communication, whilst Wigley and Provelengiou (2011) identify key competencies which are required in the fashion industry in marketing, branding and retail management.

One project management tool considered to have potential for the fashion industry is the concept

of the project lifecycle, which helps control a project through a sequence of structured strategic phases, including risk management (Ward and Chap, 1995, p. 145). The term “fashion lifecycle management” is becoming more prevalent and companies are encouraged to utilise the approach as a means of managing their operations more effectively, with benefits including decreased development lead-ins, reduced costs and improved processes and communication with key stakeholders, (Gerber Technology, 2006). It could be argued that a convergence between the project management lifecycle and fashion lifecycle is required; where “ideation” would represent the project concept stage and “end of life” would be the handover and close-out stage. This would enable projects to be managed and controlled with consideration of industry specific risk and uncertainty.

Excellent communication with stakeholders has always been acknowledged as significant in the fashion industry. Zhang (2010) argues that the advent of new stakeholders in the fashion industry, such as fashion bloggers and opinion leaders, means that a renewed emphasis on stakeholder management is required. Hauge (2006) considers the importance of the knowledge pipeline and the fact that fashion managers rely on this but also that consumers themselves, as followers of fashion, have a level of dependence on various forms of communication. Entwistle and Rocamora’s (2006) research focuses on a study of London Fashion Week (LFW); an event which they feel embodies fashion as a broader sector, bringing together influential voices within the industry.

In the fashion industry identifying indicators of success can be challenging and it is arguably much harder to determine the success of a fashion event, (Bourdieu, 1993 and 1996). Whilst there may be pragmatic outcomes, such as sales, which the organisers wish to achieve, there are typically also less measurable gains, such as cultural and reputational value, and so stakeholder management is considered to be a key performance indicator.

2.2 Project Management in the Creative Industries

It is a concern that the creative industries often lack adequate general business skills, (The Stationers’ Company, 2010, np).

Given the extent to which in the creative industries there has been a reluctance to fully engage with

and utilise the techniques of business management, it is not surprising that project management as a field of study has an even lower profile. Traditional project management literature tends to focus on a “one size fits all” approach whereby tools and techniques can be applied across industry without modification. There has been a focus on aspects of monitoring and control, success being measured in terms of time, cost and quality (Atkinson, 1999). Project management tools and techniques can be broadly categorised as: those which help plan and control a project; those concerned with the people aspect of project management; and those which help facilitate lessons learnt and continuous improvement. The research interviews carried out as part of the current project were structured to reflect these three categories and to explore some of the tools that are most relevant to each.

In their research, Koskela and Howell (2002) identify three types of goals which project management should achieve: product goals which centre on production; internal goals which are concerned with efficiency and adoption; and finally those which relate to the needs of the customer, for example quality, reliability and flexibility. The latter in particular can be seen as relevant to the creative industries and fashion more specifically. This links to research which has been conducted into the scalability of project management and the movement towards more flexible methods which might suit more dynamic industries like fashion, (Highsmith, 2009). Project management increasingly has to develop to respond to the challenges of increasing uncertainty and dynamism in projects.

Researchers have examined the perspective of the creative industries from a theoretical and policy perspective (see for example Cunningham, 2002). Bettiol and Sedita (2011, np) discuss the social aspect of project management and project-based organisations (PBOs) within the creative industries; specifically media, film, music, live events and advertising. Their research focuses on the concept of project-based organisations (PBOs) and the relationship between these and the “community of practice” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, np). They compare the community of practice combining individual competency and experience to develop a pool of skilled people with a “common identity” who can work together to share knowledge and carry out projects successfully, with the project oriented organisation where expertise helps to establish best practice and a basis for continuous improvement within a company, (Association for Project Management, 2006).

There is some evidence of the successful application of project management tools and techniques within the film industry, indicative of their potential relevance to fashion, (Worley, 2005). De-Fillippi and Arthur (1998, np) also argue that the film industry has “a long tradition of project-based organising”. Ribera and Sieber (2009) focus more specifically on project risk management; maintaining that this is a useful tool in film production, given the uncertainty prevalent in earlier

stages of development. Uncertainty is also a significant feature of the fashion industry, both in terms of minimising threats and optimising opportunities, (Hirsch, 1972).

From the scarce literature linking project management and the creative industries, some key contextual challenges have been identified including: the value of people; less tangible benefits; and high levels of uncertainty within the industry.

2.3 Project Management in SMEs

SMEs, ranging from the dynamic, innovative and growth-oriented to the traditional enterprises satisfied to remain static, are critical to the economy as an engine of economic and social development, (Murphy and Ledwith, 2007, np).

The fashion industry in the North East of Scotland and more widely tends to be dominated by SMEs (Creative Skillset, 2013, np). SMEs are acknowledged as being less process driven and more informal in their approach towards achieving strategic aims and objectives. Murphy and Ledwith (2007) suggest that clear objectives and senior management support are the most important success factors for projects in SMEs, whilst quality is the most important success criterion. The application of project planning techniques and appointment of a full time project manager were also found to increase likelihood of success. Achanga et al (2006) also highlight the importance of project leadership in SMEs, whilst Scozzi and Garaveli (2005) outline the value of modelling in supporting innovation in SMEs.

Hudson et al (2001, np) examine performance measurement techniques in SMEs. They reinforce the requirement for these to be set in line with corporate strategy. Their research highlights two major components of strategic performance measurement: performance dimensions by which measures are identified; and the characteristics of those measures. However many SMEs take a very short term, resource driven approaches to strategy. The researcher argues that SMEs require processes which are “resource effective and produce notable short term, as well as long term benefits, to help maintain the momentum and enthusiasm”, (Hudson et al, 2001, np).

Crals and Vereeck (2008, p. 1) investigate sustainable entrepreneurship in SMEs. They find that “lack of time” is an issue and recommend that SMEs consider return on investment in terms of time but also the opportunity cost (rather than just financial) of a more sustainable strategy. SMEs view time as more precious and so measuring opportunity cost might be of particular value to them. As the literature points towards limited resource being a concern within SMEs, every project undertaken might be considered at the expense of something else; something which could be deemed as more or less valuable and therefore project delivery becomes critical.

Leopoulos et al (2006) identify the adoption of day-to-day risk management within SMEs, as a key element in improving efficiency in today’s competitive environment. Kähkönen (2001) examines the balancing of project risk with opportunities; where carrying out a cost-benefit analysis might be important, particularly if risk is viewed as unusually high. Where there is a greater degree of uncertainty there should be clear opportunity for benefits and improvements if something is to be considered worthwhile, as risk management is all about maximising opportunities and minimising threats, (Project Management Institute, 2000).

2.4 The Creative and Analytical Mindsets

It is by understanding the functioning of the creative brain that we begin to understand the concept of the creative mind, (Newberg and D’Aquili, 2000, np).

There is a long history of academic debate around the tension between the creative and analytical mindsets and this discussion centres on left and right brain thinking. Project management is considered an analytical discipline, in the extent to which it is concerned with order and processes. However, fashion is seen as being more creative; requiring greater flexibility and an open ability to behave reactively in a fast-paced industry. This concept of the more informal and impulsive creative mindset is in line with literature which suggests that SMEs are also more informal and less process driven.

The left side helps us to select and use words, but it is the right side that interjects emotional

tones and inflexions into our language. The right hemisphere allows us to hear the emotional aspect of language. Thus the left hemisphere helps us with what is said, and the right hemisphere helps us with how it is said, (Newberg and D’Aquili, 2000, p. 58).

Lumsdaine and Lumsdaine (1994) attempt to map individual mindsets (using the four quadrant Herrmann model, 1991) to different stages in the problem solving process in the belief that a more diverse team might arrive at a more effective solution to a problem, (Figure 1). Their characterisation of the analytical left side of the brain as the “judge” and the creative right side as the “artist” also posits the opposing nature of the “engineer” and the “producer” where the engineer combines elements of the analytical mindset with those of the creative as “risk driven”, “entrepreneurs” and “explorers” with strengths in conceptualising from the technical and quantitative perspectives. They also recognise producers who combine the analytical elements of “detail”, “organisation” and “structure” with creativity that draws on “spiritual”, “sensory” and “feeling-oriented” strengths. These ideas provide a rich source of theoretical explanation which will be returned to in drawing conclusions from the current research. Lumsdaine and Lumsdaine (1994) go on to identify the types of project tasks that are best suited to each of the mindsets and these are drawn together in the current authors’ adaptation of their model, (Table 1).

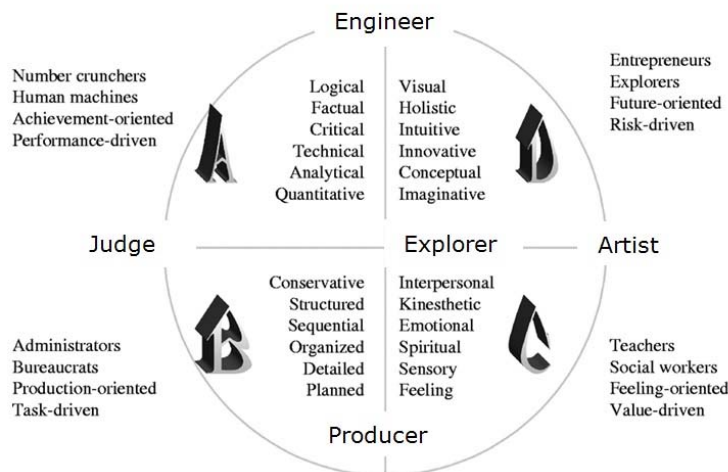


Figure 1: Quadrant Model of Mindsets and Brain Dominance (adapted from Lumsdaine and Lumsdaine, 1995, p. 5-6)

Table 6: Creative Problem Solving Process and Mindsets	
Stage	Mindsets
Problem definition	Explorer
Idea generation (many ideas)	Artist
Idea synthesis (better ideas)	Engineer
Idea evaluation (best idea)	Judge

Solution implementation	Producer
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This theory would suggest that the “artist” or “producer” is best suited to the creation of many ideas whilst the engineer and judge have greater capacity to select the best ideas.

In today’s economy, where businesses seek to secure and maintain a competitive advantage, creativity and novelty are seen as key, (Heracleous, 1998). “Problem solving is traditionally viewed as an analytical process which relies on “left brain” thinking, whereas creative problem solving advocates the use of the “whole brain” to seek more effective solutions to problems as part of a “team effort””, (Lumsdaine and Lumsdaine, 1994, p. 5). Hines (1997) discusses the tensions between left and right thinking for business management and training.

Theories of the analytical vs creative divide are central to the current research, where it is hypothesised that the fashion industry as a creative industry will recruit individuals whose primary tendency is towards the creative rather than the analytical mindset, characterised by the erratic, unpredictable, diverse and chaotic as a principle of creation and where analytical methodical approaches may be less prized as a result. The interview participants were, therefore, asked to reflect on this dichotomy.

3 Methodology

This research took the form of an exploratory study drawing on qualitative data, where the views of individuals leading projects in the fashion industry in the North East of Scotland were obtained in order to explore the value and benefits of the use of project management tools and techniques. The region is therefore treated as a case study indicative of an area where fashion is not a predominant industry activity. Industry in the North East of Scotland is very heavily dominated by the oil and gas sector and its associated supply chain, fishing, agriculture and tourism. Consequently it has proven impossible to locate statistics to determine the scale and nature of the fashion industry in this area. In terms of fashion in the region, the textile industry produces high quality woolen fabrics that are supplied to fashion manufacture worldwide whilst a limited amount of local manufacture takes place. Fashion design tends to be small scale with stimulus from the local art school, whilst fashion retail ranges from high street to high end, with

a range of media and events companies in support. This is typical of non-fashion regions.

The research paradigm adopted is qualitative and exploratory because the topic had not been previously investigated, in line with social science research methods (see for example Bryman, 2012, Cassell and Symon, 2004, Corbin, 1998, Cranfield, 2009 and Flick 2007).

Yin (2008) maintains that findings from a single case study such as this can be generalised to theory, if not the actual behaviour of populations, whilst Burns (2000, p. 474) states that they are “focused on circumstantial uniqueness and not just the obscurities of mass representation”. Eisenhardt (1999, np) also recognises case study research as being valuable for “the development of testable, relevant and valid theory”. Stake (1995, p.8) agrees with this view defining case studies as an “art”. However, Stake identifies a potential basis for bias within case study research and stresses the importance of critical thinking and focus on the case itself rather than over-generalisation. Given the exploratory nature of this study, to examine the extent to which project management tools and techniques can be applied across industry, case study research (even with its limitations) was deemed appropriate as it deepens understanding of the case, the fashion industry in the North East of Scotland, in a way that helps to develop theory.

In line with Davis and Wagner (2003) who recognise the importance of identifying experts when researching local human ecological knowledge, the primary data sources for the present research came from eight interviews with fashion managers in the North East of Scotland, representing fashion design and manufacture, fashion events and fashion retail. Interviewees were obtained using a combination of key contacts from an existing network and “snowball” sampling. Table 2 sets out the demographic characteristics of the participants.

The research was carried out with a small all female sample of eight participants, whose characteristics as illustrated in Table 2, are indicative of a predominantly female working environment, largely in SMEs. The sample population covers those subsectors of the fashion industry predominating in the North East of Scotland.

The interviews were semi-structured enabling the interviewer to ask prompting questions (Opdenakker, 2006). It was envisaged that interviewees may not have had formal training or experience in project management and that some of the terminology may be unfamiliar. Only one interviewee has formal training in project management. It was therefore necessary to include some

explanatory material. Tools and techniques were split into three sections, in line with the literature and to provide clarity for participants: those which help plan and control a project; those concerned with the people aspect of project management; and tools and techniques which help facilitate lessons learnt and continuous improvement. Definitions for each tool were taken from the APM Project Management Body of Knowledge (2006), for consistency.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed to create a data set of qualitative perceptions and experiences. This helped control bias and enabled results to be analysed into themes, in line with findings from relevant literature, (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2006). Analysis of data was carried out using a spreadsheet approach of multiple iterations; which is a qualitative analysis technique. Themes were organised and mapped visually within the spreadsheet (Harry et al, 2005).

A key variable in the sample is the length of time for which the businesses had been operating, with half of the sample representing business established for four years or less. These less mature businesses also had fewest staff, with two as the maximum. Seven of the research participants are entrepreneurs with their own business; two are involved in a business partnership.

4 Results of Primary Research

4.1 Success Criteria

Most respondents found it easy to provide examples of projects from within their organisation, although in some instances confirmation was sought from the researcher that their choice was valid. In most cases (six), the interviewee selected a fashion event.

In terms of how they measured and evaluated the success or failure of the project, five respondents viewed sales as an indicator, whether these were sales of products or tickets/attendance in the case of events. For one interviewee, success was very focused on orders generated and commercial return on investment. Sales are a factual and clear measure but for some interviewees: "You... kind of just watch and see and if it wasn't selling" in a more retrospective and intuitive approach. In some instances the two measures, sales and event attendance, were very closely linked and difficult to disentangle for interviewees: "In terms of measuring an event, it's not always as clear cut, you could

have massive footfall but sales aren't so good". Although, the link between the event and sales might be more directly analysed causally, some respondents failed to do so.

Four interviewees discussed a cost versus benefit tension, suggesting that the success criteria were not simple and one dimensional. Some interviewees expressed the view that the benefits of engaging in a project might not be immediate and were therefore difficult to formulate and monitor. One interviewee, for example, described a typical approach as one where the project benefits were not specified in advance but considered retrospectively. Overall seven of the eight interviewees described a very informal and intuitive approach. A range of other success measures were identified including: levels of interaction on social media (two); new customers attracted (one respondent); customer loyalty measures (two); reputation enhancement in terms of customer perception (one); and dwell-time of customers in a shopping centre (one).

Interviewees identified three critical factors influencing success and these were: understanding of the customer, (three); level of resource (two respondents); and level of control (two). In terms of control, one interviewee made reference to a project which relied heavily on one project leader who did not communicate well with other team members.

Overall, interviewees might be held to have taken a somewhat informal and disorganised approach to measuring success and the identification of key performance indicators (KPIs), with only two specifying KPIs.

4.2 Project Planning and Control

The respondents were asked about tools and techniques used to plan and control a project. Most interviewees (seven) were unfamiliar with the concept of scope management which had to be explained. The majority (six) subsequently stated that they had used the approach, usually informally, with only two engaging formally with external stakeholders and clients. Whilst the majority of respondents engaged in resource management (five) and budgeting (six), these were used rather loosely and mainly concerned management of time and money. Budgeting was considered particularly important, at a time of economic pressure and tightening margins. Two respondents, both sole operators, claimed not to use either tool. Costs were difficult for some

interviewees to define: “you probably end up never really knowing how much time you spend on these things ... we don’t really just sit down and work it all out”.

Project scheduling was used by all but two interviewees. There were varying levels of formality in both project scheduling and in the extent to which the schedule was documented and updated. Some interviewees referred to the inclusion of milestones and review periods, where others felt this was more difficult due to short lead-in times for projects. Other issues with scheduling arose from the need to be reactive to dynamic and unpredictable client needs. The concept of the project lifecycle was new to most respondents; three felt that this was something they used whilst two others recognised that this could be a useful tool. One respondent felt this was something they encountered as part of the buying process, in line with the seasonal purchasing pattern.

Risk management was something that all interviewees recognised as a term and the majority used (seven). However, only two respondents described a recorded process for logging and managing risk. One respondent believed that risk management was a more long term consideration for them: “With events, it’s something you can only judge as the months go on”. This again indicates a less analytical and more qualitative approach to risk management.

Four respondents described the use of change management as a tool, again with varying levels of formality. Six respondents discussed conscious changes that they have made in the business but there did not always appear to be a procedure for managing change. In some instances a more unstructured approach was taken: “As we made changes, we’d go back and check how that would affect the schedule and also the budget”. Two interviewees were mainly concerned with the communication of change to stakeholders and ensuring this was done effectively was important to them. This was mainly done on a face-to-face basis through “engagement sessions” and meetings.

An additional project management technique which three respondents identified and discussed was quality management; this was seen as a critical success factor and a key selling point in the business requiring strict controls, reflecting a focus on customer service: “Quality affects customers coming back; we want to assure quality of garments”.

4.3 People in Project Management

The importance of project leadership was recognised by four respondents, as was the establishment of clear lines of internal communication. Overall, the concept of project sponsorship is not something with which most respondents engaged. However, two respondents, who work with external clients, could see the value of the tool and the benefit of a project champion being identified.

Stakeholder management was seen as extremely important to all respondents, in the sense of the underlying centrality of customer service, with one respondent describing this as “critical”, in line with Evans (1989). However there was evidence of formal and informal approaches to identifying and managing stakeholders. For the most part, stakeholders were categorised as customers or attendees at events. Most respondents recognised that it was necessary to engage with different stakeholders in different ways: “We sit down and look at all the stakeholders and their different needs and how best to engage with them depending on the different groups”.

4.4 Lessons Learnt and Continuous Improvement

The final category of project management tools about which interviewees were questioned are those concerned with lessons learnt and continuous improvement, where respondents were asked if they utilised mid-project reviews and post-project evaluation. Only two respondents used mid-project reviews, where one respondent referred to a project involving third party contractors, where it was necessary to review to progress in line with the contract. All respondents agreed that post project evaluation was valuable in informing future decisions, appraising success and making improvements. In some cases this was considered more important even than planning: “perhaps the planning is not always critical but the review is definitely. I think now more than ever because budgets are under the microscope and you have to justify everything”.

As with many of the other tools and techniques, there were different levels of formality as to the manner in which post project reviews were carried out. Only one respondent, a trained project manager, mentioned carrying out a formal review of benefits, referring explicitly to a “cost vs benefits analysis”. Overall, lessons learnt were considered important by the research sample:

I think your big thing is learning from each one. As long as you always review and can honestly say, hand on heart, you're doing this again because it delivered X, Y, Z; you're not just doing it again because you've always done a fashion show in March or whatever. You've got to have confidence it works, but clear reasons as to why it worked.

One respondent stressed the importance of obtaining feedback to help inform lessons learnt. However, the same interviewee also recognised that their organisation might benefit from recording this feedback more formally: “[Perhaps] if there was an actual document produced; that’s something that doesn’t always happen”. So whilst the importance of lessons learnt was recognised, these were not always recorded in a meaningful way.

4.5 The Creative vs Analytical Mindset

Project management is considered an analytical discipline and it was hypothesised that this could present challenges, when attempting to apply project management tools and techniques to the creative industries in line with Lumsdaine and Lumsdaine (1994). Therefore, as a close to the interview, respondents were asked if they considered themselves to be creative or analytical in their approach to project management.

The majority of respondents described themselves as tending towards a more creative mindset; however four of these went on to describe themselves as both. One respondent felt that creativity was most important, stating: “I think you have to have a bit of both, but you have to have the creativity to do the job”. Another interviewee spoke of the need to harness both, due to the need for a broader skill set to manage the day-to-day running of a business. Finally one respondent, who reported an aptitude for both, alluded to a tension when it came to the analytical aspects:

I still have an analytical mind, to a point. I probably find it easier to let go of that and not be so rigid in my ways of thinking and sticking to processes. It's probably helpful to have both.

Only one respondent described themselves as purely analytical, going on to state that they were an “off the scale ‘completer finisher’ – a nightmare perfectionist”. A second interviewee felt that they favoured the analytical but could draw on both mindsets, stating: “I think you can be non-creative in a creative industry and you can still add value, still do really well”. Interestingly, the respondent who instantly identified themselves as being dominantly analytical was the only participant fully trained in project management.

4.6 Challenges to the Adoption of Project Management Tools and Techniques

The biggest issue I had in applying project management to fashion is that there were so many changes.

Throughout the interviews a number of key challenges to the application of project management tools and techniques in fashion were expressed. Two respondents spoke of the fast paced nature of the industry and a further two respondents (four in total) spoke of the need to be flexible and reactive when delivering projects in the industry. The limited resources and skills available to companies were also felt to be a barrier to a more structured approach to project management, with four respondents concerned at the opportunity cost of staff time being consumed in tasks outwith their primary skill-set.

One respondent, who held project management qualifications, spoke of a lack of professionalism in the industry: “Fashion to me is one of the most unprofessional industries I’ve worked in unfortunately”, which for this respondent appeared to relate to a lack of understanding of and adherence to sound principles of management.

Perhaps most interestingly, the unconscious, intuitive use of project management tools and techniques is evident throughout the results and almost all respondents demonstrated this to some extent. Respondents typically used phrases like “I suppose we do use that but I’d just never thought about it”, “I guess I do but I didn’t really think of it in that way” and “we do that all the time but probably without realising”.

5 Discussion

The current research uncovered a number of themes relating to the use of project management tools and techniques within the fashion industry and in particular SMEs. These can be grouped into the following areas: the application of project management tools and techniques; the need to be flexible and reactive; the intuitive application of project management techniques; the importance of lessons learnt; and the tension between the creative and analytical mindsets. Some of the results reflect the dynamics of the fashion industry, whilst others may relate more to the fact that respondents typically operate in an SME environment.

5.1 The Application of Project Management Tools and Techniques

Challenges to planning were felt by participants to be a result of the dynamic nature of the industry and their lack of resources in running small businesses, in line with research by Crals and Vereeck (2008) who found that lack of time to plan was an issue in SMEs where managers did not always see short term benefits and were reluctant to commit valuable resource. This also reinforces research by Worley (2005) into the application of project management in the film industry, where lack of time and talent was found to be key constraints.

Due to the smaller scale of their organisations, it was found that participants were taking on tasks outwith their own skill-set, presenting a tension in terms of opportunity cost. Kähkönen's (2001) research into the balancing of project risk and opportunities within SMEs showed that companies often consider time spent on planning to be a risk as it reduces effort on other, potentially more important, activities. Respondents were, therefore, aware that time was a limited asset but typically did not think coherently about opportunity cost and benefit. The opportunity cost of management is often higher in small companies and so this aspect of the study might be particularly significant in that the majority of participants, whilst acknowledging that time was limited and high value, had little clarity about how to appraise their company's performance in this respect, in line with Westhead and Storey, (1996). Participants typically showed little appreciation of the potential for sound planning to save management time in the longer term, as propounded by Murphy and Ledwith (2007). They demonstrated a resistance towards formal and time consuming procedures, which eventuated in the avoidance of planning and the adoption of more flexible and adaptable approaches.

Whilst lack of will to plan might be viewed negatively, some project management research indicates that an overly rigid and planned approach may fail in situations where greater flexibility and open mindedness is required, (Koskela and Howell, 2002).

Although the fashion industry is uncertain and dynamic, project management could be argued to lend itself quite naturally to the cyclical nature of this sector, (Varley, 2006). Of the respondents, only three felt that the project lifecycle was something that they consciously recognised and used. Two respondents stated that, although they had not previously considered this, they could see that their projects did have a lifecycle as did the business itself; for example, some of the respondents discussed the management of annual events. This was one of the tools to which participants responded most positively in discussion.

Stakeholder management was considered critical by all participants and a core theme permeating the interviews. This focus on people was also evident in the respondents' reaction to change management, where their main concern was the communication of change to staff and external stakeholders. All participants consciously engage with the concept of stakeholder management in their business activities, although their approaches to managing stakeholders were largely informal, with only two adopting more formal processes. Stakeholder management is regarded as increasingly complex in the fashion industry and Zhang (2010) highlights the advent of new stakeholders as a potential opportunity for the fashion industry in providing a valuable research tool to enhance planning.

Fashion lifecycle management and stakeholder management are arguably fundamentally interlinked. Chu (2011) and Beum (2006) maintain that a lifecycle approach can help improve communications with key stakeholders and so a flexible lifecycle approach would allow for the effective management of stakeholders and the creation and control of a knowledge pipeline. This is in line with Hauge (2006) who discusses the mutual dependencies between the fashion industry and consumers in terms of communication of the latest styles and trends. The evidence of the current research would suggest that, in their focus on stakeholders, managers in the fashion industry are particularly attuned to the potential of such new approaches. Equally resource and time constraints, endemic amongst participants suggest that the capacity of lifecycle management to utilise staff time efficiently would be attractive to managers in the fashion industry. Aloini et al (2007) highlight another advantage of a

lifecycle approach in that it can help manage risk and this could be attractive in the fashion industry where change is constant and uncertainty is high.

The most important stakeholder group identified by all respondents consisted of customers. In terms of communication, respondents discussed face-to-face communication and also electronic, via social media. The latter was being used as a marketing tool in some instances to raise awareness amongst new customers, but also as a means of customer relationship management to enhance loyalty with existing customers. Participants were prepared to devote time and effort to maintaining excellent customer relations and any techniques with demonstrable impact on this relationship were welcomed. The current research indicates that the use of a lifecycle approach would enable the development of a strategy by which the various stakeholders could be identified and managed, in line with research by Varley (2006) who maintains that a more consumer driven approach to management in the fashion industry is required. The current research would indicate that fashion managers are convinced by the need to be consumer driven and need only to understand the demonstrable benefits accruing from use of such techniques to be willing to adopt them.

5.2 The Need to be Flexible and Reactive

A characteristic of today's fashion industry, frequently cited by this study's participants, is its dynamic nature whereby change is intrinsic and constant. Fashion managers, therefore, need to have an aptitude for embracing uncertainty. This characteristic may have been influenced by the research sample, where seven of the eight interviewees were entrepreneurs, a group recognised by researchers to be more willing to take risks, (McLelland, 2011). This could explain why participants appeared very relaxed in their approach to risk management.

A key finding of this research project is that the fast-paced, change-oriented nature of the fashion industry makes it more difficult for managers to carefully plan as there is a need to be more open and reactive to opportunities. One respondent who has attempted to apply project management to the fashion industry felt this was a major issue: "it just constantly moves" whilst another maintained this was an ongoing challenge and one best managed in a more free-flowing and open way:

I find that the challenges are time... it's a bit faster moving and you kind of need to just run with things sometimes and so you don't always get the luxury of planning and preparing.

Some research supports the benefits of more flexible approaches to project management enabling greater flexibility and responsiveness, for example in use of agile management, (Schwaber, 2009 and Mishra, Kumar and Chan, 2010). Whilst not dealt with in the current research, these more flexible techniques could arguably be of particular value in the dynamic fashion industry. Equally the lack of constraint, capacity for responsiveness and preparedness to change of those operating in the fashion industry may be qualities important to factor into emerging techniques such as agile management.

5.3 The Intuitive Application of Project Management Techniques

Although respondents failed to recognise many of the key tools and techniques of project management they did understand and appreciate their value when further explanation was provided. They verbalised a lack of formal and conscious management process in much of what they did. This is in line with research by the Stationers' Company (2010) and Creative Skillset (2013) where managers within the creative industries were often found to lack general business skills. However, for the current group of participants the view that was expressed was rather that it was not that they lacked these skills necessarily, but that they engaged in such activities in an unstructured and more intuitive manner. It is highly unlikely that the current study's respondents would regard themselves as lacking in skills but rather that they focus on the use of other skills, such as communication and excellent customer relations management, which they regard as critical to commercial success. Participants were aware of a lack of structure and specificity in their approach with a tendency not to follow through on things like measuring costs or simply recording data and it may be that project management techniques are more self evidently desirable in highly regulated industries where practices must be very closely documented, monitored and controlled.

There was a sense amongst participants of an acknowledged almost personal deficiency in not utilising a more management oriented approach. Throughout there was a self confessed lack of structure and specificity in the application of project management techniques, as characterised by: loosely defined aims and objectives; a lack of precision in budget management even where budgets were tight; poor time management and little use of scheduling and specification, despite constrained

resources and skills. Milestones tended to be quite significant but despite the significance of the annual cycle in fashion, there was still little evidence of the use of any formal processes being used to manage time. Whilst this tendency to utilise only a limited number of project management tools supports research by White and Fortune (2002), it contradicts their more specific finding that scheduling was one of the most commonly adopted tools. For this group it was less about monitoring the schedule than simply meeting the deadline, which was often non-negotiable. In terms of managing risk, again participants chiefly took a relaxed, informal, qualitative and reactive approach. Almost all participants were able to identify a change impacting on the business but tended to focus on management of change in respect of the stakeholders involved rather than its commercial consequences for the business. Whilst aware of the importance of people management to commercial success, the majority of participants worked with very small teams and described themselves as little engaged with project leadership or competency assessment in any formal way, although again the sense of project sponsorship and communication with internal stakeholders was felt to be capable of adding value.

One participant described this wider lack of awareness of management techniques in the fashion industry as a lack of professionalism. Interestingly this was the sole participant with formal training in project management, or indeed with any management training. However the authors would argue that professionalism cannot be equated simply with knowledge and application of management techniques and further research might usefully explore what being professional means to managers in the creative industries: the current research would suggest that this might be situated more around customer focus, positive people engagement, openness to change and creation of new ideas.

5.4 Reflecting on Success and Lessons Learnt

The establishment of the success criteria at the outset of a project is considered vital for effective project management. Some respondents were able to identify measurable success criteria, whilst others spoke of less tangible benefits. There were a significant number who acknowledged that it was unusual for success to be specified in advance, describing retrospective and non-analytical approaches. Indeed, overall, this tended to be undertaken on an instinctive, loosely defined and ad hoc basis. Only one respondent discussed aligning their success criteria with corporate objectives; something which is considered effective in project management, (Hudson et al, 2001). Similarly, in terms of measuring costs and benefits, respondents felt that the success criteria were not simple and one dimensional, indicating a trend towards intangible and less measurable success criteria,

such as the delivery of cultural and reputational values and improvements in the perceived quality of products and services; which are much harder to measure in project management terms.

Post-project evaluation and the application of lessons learnt are fundamental tools in project management, (Basili et al, 2002). Participants tended not to carry out mid-project reviews, but in all instances carried out a post-project evaluation. Indeed, this point of reflection was explicitly regarded as more valuable than early planning. It was clear from their responses that participants engaged in a meaningful way with the importance of learning lessons, although the manner in which they carried out these reviews might not be regarded as structured and objective.

5.5 The Creative Versus Analytical Mindset

Respondents recognised and responded to the notion of the creative versus analytical mindset, believed there was a difference between the two and were able to articulate how they used these different approaches. Overall, three quarters described themselves as drawing upon both creative and analytical styles and there was a tendency to think of the management and commercial aspects of their business requiring the analytical mindset to predominate.

In leading SMEs with limited resources, participants were conscious that they had to draw on skills outwith their natural skill-set. They were confident that they could do so when required: however this confidence was largely untested and given the relative immaturity of some of the businesses represented may indeed be a delusion. The balance between the two approaches varied for participants but the majority described themselves as tending towards the creative, with the belief that this was a fundamental requirement. Some regarded analytical capacity as a necessary, if less natural mode, if they were to be commercially successful, whilst others equated analytical approaches as rigid and process driven and apt to stifle creativity.

In terms of the Lumsdaine and Lumsdaine (1994) four quadrant model of mindsets and brain dominance, participants in the current research feel that they drew on creative strengths in being forward thinking, embracing change, prepared to take risks, being innovative, imaginative, conceptual, intuitive, impressionistic, focused on the interpersonal, engaged with the aesthetic, sensory and feelings oriented and focused on quality of service or product. They typically described themselves as less engaged with the numbers, the factual, the detail; the process more

unstructured, informal and unplanned. They equated the latter with their 'business head' and the former with their creative flair. There was recognition of the need for both in achieving success in the fashion and creative industries and, while the need for the latter is well attested in project management, the contribution of creativity as exemplified in the artist and the entrepreneur is perhaps less well understood. It is hypothesised that this creative mindset predominance would not typically be found in many of the other industry sectors, where project management techniques have proven successful and, as such, it is a fertile ground for future research.

6 Conclusions

The current research sought to explore the applicability of project management tools and techniques amongst SMEs in the fashion industry. From the results of the current study, a number of conclusions may be drawn.

Whilst there were low levels of conscious awareness of project management tools and techniques, participants recognised the value and benefits that these might bring to their business operations, in particular to stakeholder and lifecycle management, the definition of success criteria and the adoption of more formal approaches to project review.

However, participants tended to demonstrate scepticism about overly complex and iterative processes, which they associated with management techniques generally. The dynamic nature of the industry, subject as it is to constant change and requiring flexibility and rapid response together with the constrained resources available in the SME environment were seen by managers as a barrier to the application of project management, in line with Crals and Vereeck (2008). Whilst the industry might therefore be characterised as resistant to the adoption of project management techniques, the current authors believe that with acknowledgement of a particular industry context and demonstration of actual and real benefits a case for adoption could convincingly be made, in line with White and Fortune (2002) who argue that project management should be transferrable, adaptable and scalable.

The results also demonstrate that, where fashion managers are applying project management tools and techniques, they tend to be used in a very unstructured, poorly documented and intuitive rather than intentional manner. The current research indicates some of the ways in which project

management might adapt in recognition of the needs of the fashion industry, as in for example understanding the fashion lifecycle and the role of agile project management or improving stakeholder relations through delivery of successful projects.

Participants explicitly favoured the creative mindset, with a concomitant reluctance to use their 'business head' which they construed as being necessary only when required to engage with more analytical, time consuming and bureaucratic procedures. They tended towards the explorer/artist frame of the Lumsdaine and Lumsdaine (1994) model of mindsets. Future research could usefully explore: (i) how to assist creative entrepreneurs in being business-like in a manner that recognised their preferred mindset; and (ii) the contribution of the artistic and explorer mindsets to project management. Lumsdaine and Lumsdaine (1994) suggest that the artist and explorer have a valuable role to play in problem definition and the generation of many ideas, whilst the engineer/judge has more to offer in idea synthesis, idea evaluation and solution implementation. The current authors would argue that the artist/explorer has a contribution to make across a number of elements of project management beyond problem definition and idea generation: in stakeholder engagement, in qualitative approaches to evaluation, in maintaining excellent relations, in conceptualising, in producing imaginative and innovative solutions, in openness to change, in being prepared to take action quickly, in being flexible and in seeing the bigger picture and understanding success holistically rather than in disparate parts. These managers were also very customer and service oriented and very willing to be critical and reflective in self-evaluation.

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