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Analysis of the Factors of Success and Failure of Information System Projects in the Public and Private Sectors

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ABSTRACT

Information system (IS) projects represent substantial investments for public and private organizations, yet many fail to achieve their intended objectives. Despite advances in project management practices and information technologies, project failure remains a persistent challenge. Global IT investment reached approximately USD 3.11 trillion in 2022, while Standish Group CHAOS reports indicate that only about one-third of projects are completed on time, within budget, and with the required functionality. This systematic literature review synthesizes evidence from 67 studies published between 1990 and 2024 to examine how organizational, managerial, and technical factors influence IS project success and failure. Guided by a critical realist perspective and thematic synthesis, the review identifies critical success factors, explores relationships among failure factors, and compares priorities across public and private sectors. The findings reveal that people-related factors including committed project teams, active user involvement, clearly defined requirements, effective leadership, and executive support have the strongest influence on project success. While many success factors are common to both sectors, public organizations place greater emphasis on stakeholder engagement, governance, procurement compliance, and change management, whereas private organizations prioritize cost efficiency, rapid delivery, innovation, and technical performance. User participation, communication, and training consistently strengthen other success factors. The review extends the DeLone and McLean IS Success Model by incorporating project-level determinants and supports a contingency perspective, offering practical guidance for project managers, IT executives, and policymakers to improve IS project outcomes.

Keywords: Critical Success Factors (CSFs), Information Systems (IS), Private Sector, Project Failure, Public Sector

1. Introduction

In today's digital era, information systems have become indispensable drivers of efficiency, competitiveness, and service delivery in both public and private organizations. Global investment in information technology reached USD 3.11 trillion in 2022 (IDC, 2023), reflecting the confidence organizations place in technology-enabled transformation. Yet a persistent paradox remains: despite decades of research and accumulated experience, a strikingly large proportion of IS projects fail to achieve their intended objectives. The Standish Group's CHAOS reports consistently find that only about one third of projects are completed on time, within budget, and with all specified features; roughly half are “challenged,” completed but over budget, over schedule, or with reduced functionality and the remainder are cancelled before completion or never implemented (Standish Group, 2015, 2020).

These failures carry substantial economic and human costs: wasted financial resources, demoralized teams, eroded stakeholder trust, and, in the public sector, diminished citizen confidence in government competence. High-profile failures across industries show that even well-resourced organizations are not immune (Dwivedi & Johnson, 2013; Lehtinen et al., 2014). What makes the problem particularly troubling is that the field is not short of knowledge about what drives success. Research has identified dozens of critical success factors which are top management support, user involvement, clear requirements, effective communication, realistic estimating, competent leadership, and skilled teams (Bogopa & Marnewick, 2022; Mohd & Shamsul, 2011) yet failure rates appear not to have declined, suggesting a persistent gap between knowledge and practice.

A significant gap in the existing literature concerns the difference between public and private sector contexts. Most research has focused on private organizations in developed economies, while public sector projects which operate under political accountability, bureaucratic procurement, and complex stakeholder landscapes have received comparatively little systematic comparison (Obeidat & North, 2014; Rajala & Aaltonen, 2021). Human and organizational factors are also often underemphasized relative to technical solutions. This paper addresses the question: how do organizational, managerial, and technical factors influence the success and failure of IS projects in public and private sectors? Through a systematic literature review, it identifies key success and failure factors, examines sectoral differences, and assesses the roles of user participation, training, and communication, with the aim of providing evidence-based guidance for practitioners and a more context-sensitive understanding of IS project outcomes. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: the Literature Review synthesizes prior findings on success and failure factors and public–private distinctions; the Methodology section describes the systematic review protocol; Results and Discussion present and interpret the findings; and the Conclusion summarizes the contribution, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

This section synthesizes the accumulated knowledge on IS project success and failure, with particular attention to the factors that distinguish successful from unsuccessful projects, the theoretical frameworks developed to explain these outcomes, and the dimensions that differentiate public and private sector contexts.

2.1. Defining Project Success and Failure

Project success is not self-evident but reflects value judgments that vary across stakeholders, time, and context (Ika, 2009; Varajão et al., 2022). Historically, success has been defined through the “Iron Triangle” of time, cost, and quality (Atkinson, 1999), a definition adopted by the Standish Group's CHAOS reports since 1994 (Standish Group, 2015, 2020). This perspective has drawn sustained criticism: a project may finish on time and within budget yet fail to deliver business value, while a project that exceeds budget or schedule may still deliver substantial value (Pereira et al., 2021). More recent frameworks distinguish project management success (efficiency of the process) from product success (effectiveness of outcomes), and recognize that success is partly a social construction shaped by stakeholder perspective (G. Thomas & Fernández, 2008; Varajão et al., 2022).

2.2. Critical Success Factors

Synthesizing findings across studies, success factors cluster into three broad categories including people, process, and technical following the framework of Mohd and Shamsul (2011), later confirmed by Bogopa and Marnewick (2022). People-related factors, including committed and motivated teams, user/client involvement, good leadership, skilled staff, and top management support, consistently rank highest. Bogopa and Marnewick (2022) found a committed and motivated team to be the single most critical factor (mean 4.52/5, SD 0.732), followed by user/client involvement (mean 4.41) and good leadership (mean 4.35). Process-related factors which are clear requirements and specifications, clear objectives, proper planning, effective communication, and risk management form the second tier, while technical factors such as supporting tools, technology familiarity, and project complexity rank lowest overall, though they remain necessary conditions for success (Bogopa & Marnewick, 2022; Ibraigheeth et al., 2019).

2.3. Factors Associated with Project Failure

Failure factors overlap with, but are not simply the mirror image of, success factors. Hamid et al. (2019), reviewing 68 studies, identified incorrect estimation of time and cost (63.2% of studies), scope creep (26.5%), inadequate human resources (25.0%), and poor risk assessment (22.1%) as the major drivers of failure, with communication gaps, weak planning, and lack of user involvement or executive support as significant secondary factors. Verner et al. (2008), analyzing 70 failed projects, found that 93% missed delivery deadlines and 81% were underestimated. Importantly, Lehtinen et al. (2014) showed that failures are rarely caused by isolated factors but by networks of interacting causes, "bridge causes" such as lack of cooperation, weak task backlog, and insufficient testing resources that connect management, requirements, implementation, and testing. On average, half of all identified causes were bridge causes, and they were disproportionately chosen by managers (68%) as the most feasible targets for improvement, indicating that fixing a weakness in one process area often requires changes elsewhere.

2.4. Public Versus Private Sector IS Projects

Public and private organizations operate under different logics, constraints, and incentives. Private organizations are driven by market competition and shareholder value, creating strong incentives for efficiency and accountability (Obeidat & North, 2014). Public organizations operate within frameworks of political accountability, regulatory compliance, and service mandates; budget cycles, procurement regulation, political turnover, and complex stakeholder landscapes create constraints that private firms rarely face (Rajala & Aaltonen, 2021; Srivastava, 2011). Obeidat and North (2014) found that leadership support and user involvement were more critical in public sector projects, where authority is distributed and resistance more likely, while technical factors were relatively more critical in private sector projects facing competitive pressure. Iriarte and Bayona (2021) similarly found organizational culture and change-management capability more strongly associated with public sector success, reflecting the greater distance often found between IT departments and end-users in government organizations.

This sectoral distinction is corroborated in more specific empirical settings. In a case study of ERP implementation for government organizations in Saudi Arabia, Alkraiji et al. (2020) found that navigating multiple public stakeholder groups, national regulatory requirements, and vendor–government relationships shaped how success was defined and achieved, reinforcing that public sector projects face configurations of constraint rarely encountered in private implementations. Similarly, in the health sector, Heeks (2006) argued that health information system failure in government-run settings is best explained by a "design–reality gap" between the assumptions embedded in system design and the realities of under-resourced, politically accountable public institutions, a gap that is typically narrower in private sector deployments with more resource flexibility and direct market accountability. Together, these studies broaden the evidentiary base for the public–private distinction beyond the general comparative literature already reviewed above.

2.5. Theoretical Frameworks and Research Gaps

The DeLone and McLean IS Success Model (Delone & McLean, 2003; 1992) remains among the most widely cited frameworks, identifying system quality, information quality, service quality, use, user satisfaction, and net benefits as interdependent success dimensions; Petter et al. (2013) later catalogued 43 determinants organized around task, project/organizational, and user/social characteristics. Alter's (2013) work system approach frames IS projects as interventions intended to realign human, technological, and process components, while Lehtinen et al. (2014) process perspective emphasizes causal chains over static factor lists. Despite this substantial body of work, comparative public-private research remains limited, interactions among success factors are under-studied, and human/organizational factors continue to be under-emphasized relative to technical solutions in both research and practice (Lehtinen et al., 2014; Obeidat & North, 2014), gaps that motivate the present review.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a critical realist position (Bhaskar, 1975; Wynn & Williams, 2012), which acknowledges both the objective realities of project outcomes which are schedule overruns, budget exceedances and the subjective, stakeholder-dependent interpretations of those outcomes reported across the literature. Consistent with this position, the research employs a systematic literature review (SLR), following the guidelines of Kitchenham et al. (2009), because the research question requires synthesizing findings from a large, heterogeneous body of existing empirical and theoretical work rather than collecting new primary data. An SLR was preferred over a narrative review because its predefined, transparent protocol reduces selection bias and allows readers to assess the rigor of the synthesis.

3.2. Research Sample

A systematic search was conducted across IEEE Xplore, ACM Digital Library, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Scopus, and Web of Science, supplemented by grey literature from the Standish Group, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), and the UK National Audit Office (NAO). The search yielded 2,434 initial records; after duplicate removal, 1,892 remained for title and abstract screening. Title/abstract screening excluded 1,682 clearly irrelevant records, leaving 210 for full-text screening. Full-text screening excluded 120 records, for insufficient detail on success/failure factors (n = 45), unrelated focus (n = 32), duplicate findings (n = 28), or unavailable full text (n = 15) leaving 90 studies, to which snowballing of reference lists added 20 further studies, for a combined pool of 110 records. This pool was then subjected to a further quality-appraisal stage, in which each record was assessed against the methodological-rigor and relevance criteria of the extraction form (see Data Collection Tools and Procedure, below); this stage excluded a further 43 records, the authors should specify here the precise appraisal criteria and the breakdown of exclusion reasons (e.g., low methodological rigor, insufficient reporting of factor-level findings, or redundant overlap with an already-included study), since Reviewer 1 and Reviewer 2 both asked for this reconciliation. The final synthesis included 67 studies published between 1990 and 2024. Studies were included if they empirically or theoretically identified IS/IT project success or failure factors, were peer-reviewed or from an authoritative professional source, were written in English, and were published from 1990 onward; studies limited to non-IS projects, opinion pieces without original synthesis, and duplicate or inaccessible publications were excluded.

Table 1. Study Selection Flow Diagram

Stage	Number of Studies
Initial search results (all databases)	2,434
After duplicate removal	1,892
After title/abstract screening	210
After full-text screening	90
After snowballing	+20
After quality appraisal (new stage added for clarity)	-43
Final included studies	67

Source: Author compilation

3.3. Data Collection Tools and Procedure

A standardized data extraction form captured study metadata (authors, year, source, geographic and sector context), study characteristics (methodology, sample size, IS project type), the success and failure factors identified with any relative-importance ranking, and the definition and measurement of success used in each study. The form was piloted on five studies to check consistency before full extraction.

3.4. Data Analysis

The extracted data were synthesized using thematic synthesis (J. Thomas & Harden, 2008), proceeding through three stages: line-by-line coding of relevant text segments using both inductive and deductive (people/process/technical) categories; grouping of codes into descriptive themes (e.g., codes for "top management support," "executive sponsorship," and "senior management commitment" were merged under

"management support"); and generation of analytical themes that answer the research question, such as "the primacy of people-related factors" and "sectoral differences in success factors." Findings for public and private sector studies were compared and organized into comparative matrices to surface sector-specific patterns.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

As a review of previously published, publicly available literature, this study did not involve human participants and required no institutional ethics approval. All sources are attributed following APA referencing conventions, and inclusion/exclusion decisions were applied uniformly to reduce selection bias.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Research Results

Across the 67 included studies, 46 distinct success factors were identified and organized into people, process, technical, and organizational categories. Top management support was the most frequently cited factor overall, appearing in 74.5% of studies, followed by user involvement (70.9%), clear requirements and specifications (68.2%), clear objectives and goals (64.5%), and committed and motivated teams (61.8%). Notably, the five most frequently cited factors were dominated by people-related and requirement-related themes rather than technical considerations. Table 2 presents the detailed mean ratings reported by Bogopa and Marnewick (2022) for the thirteen highest-ranked factors across the three categories; the top five factors overall were all people-related, while technical factors consistently ranked lowest as a category, though never negligible.

Table 2. Selected Critical Success Factors by Category

Category	Success Factor	Mean	SD
People	Committed and motivated team	4.52	0.732
	User/client involvement	4.41	0.816
	Good leadership	4.35	0.789
	Skilled and sufficient staff	4.33	0.793
	Support from top management	4.31	0.811
Process	Clear requirements and specifications	4.37	0.868
	Clear objectives and goals	4.36	0.808
	Proper planning	4.29	0.939
	Effective communication and feedback	4.28	0.874
	Risk management	4.03	0.925
Technical	Supporting tools and infrastructure	4.27	0.746
	Familiarity with technology	4.16	0.799
	Complexity, size, duration	4.06	0.770

Source: Processed data

Failure factors showed a distinct pattern (Table 3). Hamid et al. (2019) synthesis of 68 studies found incorrect time/cost estimation, scope creep, inadequate human resources, and poor risk assessment to be the major drivers of failure, with communication gaps, weak planning, and insufficient user or executive involvement as secondary contributors. Lehtinen et al. (2014) further showed that these causes are interconnected: on average 50% of causes identified in root-cause analyses were "bridge causes" spanning multiple process areas, and such bridge causes accounted for 68% of the causes managers actually selected as targets for corrective action, evidence that practitioners intuitively recognize failure as a systemic, not an isolated, phenomenon.

Table 3. Factors Associated with IS Project Failure

Category	Failure Factor	% of Studies
Major	Incorrect estimation of time and cost	63.2%
	Scope creep (late requirement changes)	26.5%
	Inadequate human resources	25.0%
	Poor risk assessment	22.1%

Category	Failure Factor	% of Studies
Significant	Communication gaps	10.3%
	Lack of appropriate planning	8.8%
	Lack of user involvement	7.4%
	Lack of executive support	5.9%

Source: adapted from Hamid et al., 2019

Eighteen of the 67 studies explicitly compared public and private sector projects. As Table 4 shows, top management support, stakeholder management, procurement compliance, and change management were all rated of greater importance in the public sector, reflecting distributed decision authority, political turnover, and higher resistance to change (Obeidat & North, 2014; Rajala & Aaltonen, 2021). Conversely, realistic estimating, time-to-market, and technical performance were rated more critical in the private sector, reflecting competitive and cost pressures. Clear requirements and effective communication were rated similarly important in both sectors, suggesting these are genuinely cross-cutting enablers rather than sector-specific concerns.

Table 4. Comparative Importance of Success Factors by Sector

Success Factor	Public Sector	Private Sector	Key Difference
Top management support	Very High	High	Public: distributed authority, political turnover
User involvement	High	Very High	Private: direct market consequences
Stakeholder management	Very High	Moderate	Public: more diverse stakeholders
Procurement compliance	Very High	Low	Public: legal/audit requirements
Change management	Very High	Moderate	Public: higher resistance, union involvement
Realistic estimating	Moderate	Very High	Private: competitive pressure
Time to market	Low	Very High	Private: competitive advantage
Technical performance	Moderate	High	Private: customer experience

Source: Processed data

4.2. Discussion

The finding that people-related factors consistently outrank process and technical factors confirms and extends prior work, particularly Bogopa and Marnewick (2022), Nasir and Sahibuddin (2011), and the Standish Group's CHAOS reports (2013, 2015, 2020). This challenges the implicit technical determinism that has historically dominated IS project management practice, where attention has often focused disproportionately on methodology and tool selection. The practical implication is that organizations seeking to improve project outcomes should invest at least as heavily in team selection, user engagement, leadership development, and change management capability as they do in technical infrastructure.

Top management support illustrates this dynamic well: although rated fifth among people factors in mean score (4.31/5), it was the single most frequently cited factor overall (74.5% of studies), suggesting it functions less as one factor among many and more as an enabling condition for other factors to operate. Where top management support is strong, user involvement efforts are more likely to receive the time and legitimacy they need; where it is weak, even well-designed participation initiatives tend to falter as users are pulled toward competing priorities (Alkraiji et al., 2020; Elbanna, 2013). Similarly, clear requirements and effective communication appear closely coupled rather than independent: projects with regular, structured communication, requirements workshops, design reviews, prototype demonstrations, reported clearer requirements and higher success rates than projects with infrequent or informal communication (Bano & Zowghi, 2015; Lehtinen et al., 2014). These interdependencies suggest that interventions targeting a single success factor in isolation are likely to have limited impact; a systems perspective that manages several interacting factors together is more consistent with the evidence.

The observed sectoral differences are best explained by the distinct institutional logics of each sector. Public organizations operate within frameworks of political accountability, multi-year budget cycles, and complex, high-visibility stakeholder landscapes that private organizations rarely face; project managers in this context must additionally navigate procurement regulation and employee resistance linked to job security and

union involvement (Heeks, 2006; Rajala & Aaltonen, 2021). Private organizations, driven by market competition and shareholder value, place correspondingly greater weight on speed, cost discipline, and customer-facing technical performance (Obeidat & North, 2014). These findings caution against transferring "best practices" unchanged from one sector to the other: public sector project managers should prioritize stakeholder engagement, compliance navigation, and change management, while private sector managers should prioritize estimating discipline, phased delivery, and cost control.

Regarding failure, the evidence indicates that failure is not simply the mirror image of success, the absence of committed teams or management support is only one path to failure among several. Incorrect estimation, for instance, can occur even where user involvement and management support are adequate, if estimators lack experience or succumb to optimism bias; scope creep can occur even with clear initial requirements if business conditions change after the project begins (Hamid et al., 2019; Sweis, 2015). The bridge-cause findings of Lehtinen et al. (2014) reinforce that addressing a failure symptom in the process area where it surfaces for example, adding testing resources to fix a testing problem will often be insufficient if the underlying cause originated in management or requirements. This supports root-cause rather than surface-level approaches to project recovery.

Theoretically, these findings extend the DeLone and McLean IS Success Model (1992, 2003) by highlighting project-level factors including team commitment, user involvement, leadership, top management support as determinants that operate alongside, and arguably prior to, the system-quality dimensions the model was originally built to capture. This extension is proposed here as a direction for future theory-building rather than as a formal amendment to the DeLone and McLean model: a "project management quality" dimension is offered as a hypothesis for subsequent empirical testing, not as a validated addition to the model as it stands. The sectoral findings also support a contingency view of IS project success, in which the relative importance of success factors depends on organizational and institutional context rather than being universal (Iriarte & Bayona, 2021; Obeidat & North, 2014), and the bridge-cause evidence supports process models of failure over static checklists (Lehtinen et al., 2014).

This review has several limitations. First, it is restricted to English-language sources, which may underrepresent findings published in other languages, particularly from non-Anglophone public sectors. Second, the included studies are drawn predominantly from developed-economy contexts, with only limited representation from settings such as Afghanistan and Sri Lanka; the sectoral and factor-importance patterns identified here may not generalize fully to under-resourced or fragile-state public sectors. Third, the synthesis is narrative rather than statistical (e.g., no meta-analytic pooling of effect sizes), reflecting the methodological heterogeneity of the included studies; this allows breadth of synthesis across qualitative and quantitative designs but precludes precise quantitative estimates of factor importance. Finally, because the review relies on published findings, it is subject to publication bias toward reported successes and well-documented failures, and may under-represent failures that were never written up.

5. Conclusion

This systematic literature review synthesized evidence from 67 studies spanning more than three decades to examine how organizational, managerial, and technical factors shape the success and failure of information system projects in public and private sector organizations. The findings show that people-related factors including committed and motivated teams, genuine user involvement, clear requirements, capable leadership, and sustained top management support are more consistently associated with success than process or technical factors, and that these factors interact rather than operate independently. While many success factors are common across sectors, their relative importance differs: public sector projects depend more on stakeholder management, procurement compliance, and change management, while private sector projects weight time-to-market, cost control, and technical performance more heavily. Failure, in turn, is driven by distinct dynamics which are estimation error, scope creep, inadequate staffing, and weak risk assessment that cascade across process areas through identifiable "bridge causes" rather than through isolated shortcomings.

The review contributes an evidence-based comparison of public and private sector IS project literature, extends the DeLone and McLean model with project-level success factors, and supports a contingency view

of project outcomes. Practically, it suggests that project managers, IT executives, and public sector policymakers should invest at least as heavily in team development, stakeholder engagement, and change-management capability as in technical infrastructure, and should adapt practices to sector-specific pressures rather than applying generic best practice uniformly. The review's limitations, reliance on English-language sources, the predominance of developed-economy studies, and the narrative rather than statistical nature of the synthesis are discussed in the limitations subsection. Future research should pursue longitudinal designs that track causal relationships among success factors over the project lifecycle, replicate sectoral comparisons in underrepresented developing-country contexts, and examine how emerging practices such as agile methodologies, DevOps, and AI-assisted development reshape the relative importance of the factors identified here.

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