

Championing and promoting innovation in UK megaprojects



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KEYWORDS

- Innovation champions
- Innovation
- Megaprojects
- Collaboration

Article highlight:

This paper is about the role of innovation champions and the ways innovation is or was championed and promoted in five construction megaprojects in London: 2012 Olympics, Crossrail railway, the underground Bank Station Upgrade, Thames Tideway Tunnel and High Speed Two (HS2).

It builds on previous studies and argues that innovation champions play a crucial role in stimulating and promoting innovations in megaprojects.

What does the paper cover?

Megaprojects are those large, one-off infrastructure projects that are used to build new water facilities, roads, railways, airports and similar. They rely on collaborative working between temporary partners who often go their separate ways once the project is completed.

There are usually substantial risks involved in megaprojects, including financial and reputational. Megaprojects are therefore also about innovation, whether to advance a technology or to find a new way of using it.

Most UK megaprojects include a small team of formal innovation managers and informal roles of innovation champions. They pull different organisations together to ensure the innovative delivery of the new infrastructure.

Innovation in this context is defined as a new product, process or service that has a step change and that creates financial, environmental or societal value or job creation, for example. It may be new to the project but not necessarily new to the world.

There is tension here: on the one hand, they offer a one-off opportunity to invest in cutting-edge innovative solutions; on the other hand, innovations are risky and in some cases could lead to failure and budget and time loss.

Innovation Champions

The role of innovation champions has been recognised in construction project management research since at least the 1990s.

Innovation champions are those who take an innovation on board and modify it to fit in a certain context, whereas 'innovators' are those who first come up with a fresh idea. The champions' role is to overcome uncertainty and resistance to innovation and to facilitate and promote successful innovations.

In a megaproject, different groups might promote an innovation, for example top management, the bid team, or the project team. Yet the different ways innovations are championed and promoted in the specific settings of megaprojects remains to be explored.

Methodology:

The authors investigated five of London's major and most recent infrastructure megaprojects at varying stages of completion. By looking at several projects at once, the authors had the opportunity to better understand a phenomenon and build new theories.

The aim was to understand how innovation is championed and promoted in megaprojects from the perspectives of innovation champions.

The authors conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 innovation managers and champions in the five megaprojects. These were added to documentation on innovation, including innovation strategies, reports and other relevant material.

Interview transcripts were read repeatedly by the authors to identify common themes, and were then codified and presented in the paper.

Research findings:

The empirical data demonstrate that innovations in megaprojects are driven by their special purpose and associated narrative about the mission, solving problems, satisfying customers and users, targets set by the government and changes in regulations, and performance improvement. The dialogues between those in senior positions (CEOs and their teams), innovation managers, champions and their teams, and academics shape the ways innovations are championed and promoted in megaprojects.

The approach to innovation varied between the five megaprojects, from something that was recognised and developed later on in the project to a CEO who immediately brought an 'innovation mind-set'.

Each megaproject aims to be unique in the way it champions and promotes innovations, yet shared approach and commitment to innovation mission is encouraged across megaprojects.

One project had no formal innovation manager roles; another started with one person in the role and later expanded.

The way innovation was promoted also varied from internal forums and 'Dragon's Den'-type events where staff pitch their own ideas to a panel, to communications campaigns and publicly available websites containing reports and case studies.

Conclusions:

The paper adds to the literature on innovation in megaprojects by better understanding the ways innovation is championed and promoted in megaprojects.

It shows the key differences and similarities taken by the five selected megaprojects in their approaches to innovation. It also provides a broader overview of the ways innovation is led in megaprojects.

Significance of the research:

Further research may deepen understanding of the ways megaprojects can enhance innovation capabilities and competencies. This could be done through follow-up interviews with innovation champions throughout the life cycle of megaprojects, combined with participant observations, textual and visual materials.

Future studies may also explore further a network of innovation champions in the sector, and the role and nature of innovation narratives in megaprojects.

Innovation, collaboration and learning legacies are critical to helping future megaprojects more easily gather learning and experiences that can be combined into innovative solutions and ultimately raise the industry's performances and hence the benefits to our communities.

Comments from the authors:

The authors of the original article have seen this summary and have agreed to its publication.

Complete article

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Glossary:

Megaproject:

A set of projects which together support a common strategic goal, cost many millions, and take many years to complete.

Innovation champion:

Someone who takes an innovation on board, modifies and 'fits' it into a context. Their role is to overcome uncertainty and resistance to innovation.



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