Power as a Factor of Effectiveness in IM Projects

By

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to highlight the role of power within a triad of selected factors – trust, power, and knowledge – that determine the effectiveness of Interim Management (IM) projects. The text discusses the preliminary results of a longitudinal study based on the empirical-inductive approach. The study was conducted in Poland in 2019–2021 in enterprises using Interim Management (IM) in their operations. The statistical analysis confirmed the validity of the empirically adopted factors, including power. A statistically significant relationship was found between the level of power and the level of trust. The implications of the findings can be used by both Interim Managers (IMs) and clients for the planning of their pre- and mid-project tasks. Research may be continued in other companies representing various sectors and management cultures, also outside Poland, to search for further variables and their correlations with trust, power, and knowledge.

Keywords: Power, Trust, Knowledge, Effectiveness, Interim management, Empirical-inductive research

Introduction

Interim Management (IM) is a form of employment where an organisation hires a highly skilled expert for a specified period of time to achieve specific objectives (Inkson & Heising, 2001; Isidor et al., 2014). There are different work arrangements that can be used: Interim Managers (IMs) can become employees of the organisation, work for it as self-employed persons, or be involved as third parties (similarly to a temporary employment agency that hires IMs to place them in their clients' companies).

According to Eurofound:

> Interim management is a form of employment in which a company 'leases out' workers to other companies temporarily and for a specific purpose. Such leasing of workers is the main objective of the employer company, but, unlike a temporary employment agency, its staff is limited to highly specialized experts who are sent to the receiving companies to solve a specific management or technical challenge or assist in economically difficult times. In contrast to traditional fixed-term work arrangements, interim management has some elements of consultancy, but the expert has employee status rather than that of external advisor. (2020, pp. 51–52)

Interim Management seeks primarily to provide external managers responsible for IM projects, i.e. for temporary internal operations with a predefined purpose and scope, aimed at achieving specific and long-lasting business outcomes (Wendt et al., 2014).

Interim Managers are mainly people who enter this career path after they have acquired experience in top management positions, i.e. in management boards or supervisory boards. Strategy, management and sales projects rank high as regular areas of work for IMs. Companies typically seek external support of IMs with projects related to transformation, which suggests that the lack of certain skills, organisational changes or the need for an additional manager are the key reasons why enterprises opt for this solution. This thesis finds its confirmation in research conducted by the International Network of Interim Management Associations (INIMA) in nine European countries: Poland, France, United Kingdom (UK), Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Italy, and Spain (Figure 1). The findings presented below put a particular emphasis on Poland's case as this article is based on the authors' study conducted in this country.

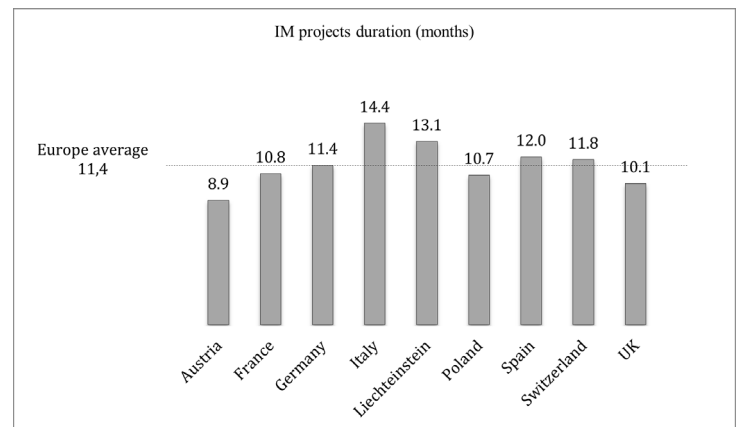**Figure 1.** *Business Issues Managed by IMs in Their Last Project*

Note 1: Adapted from the 2021 European Survey conducted in January 2021 by the International Network of Interim Management Associations (INIMA).

Note 2: Only first 81% and 74% of projects are shown for Poland and other countries, respectively.

Observations made on the basis of these results and the nature of IM projects prompt a question about the scope of power necessary to perform these tasks. This is particularly important taking into account the relatively short time that IMs have at their disposal, as illustrated in Figure 2 for Europe and Figure 3 for Poland.
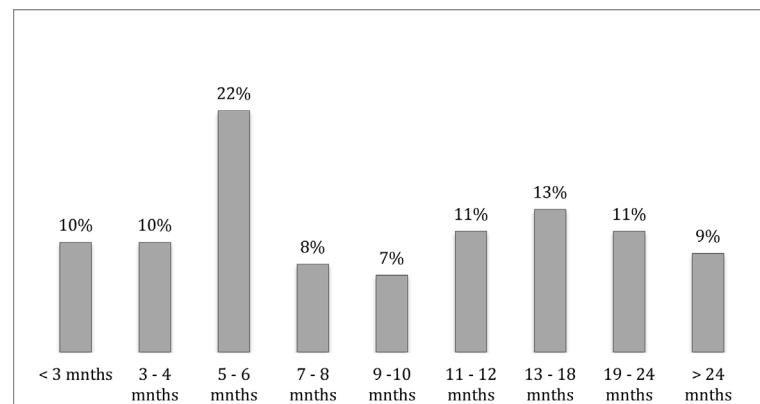
It is worth noting that the proposed research programme could be extended to include other European countries, using the same research architecture and research instrument. Such an approach would be possible due to similarities of project perspectives with regards to power. Not only are the areas of IMs' involvement similar across countries, but also the duration of IM projects does not differ from the average.

Figure 2. *Average Duration of IM Projects in Europe (in months)*

Note: Based on the 2021 European Survey conducted in January 2021 by the International Network of Interim Management Associations (INIMA).

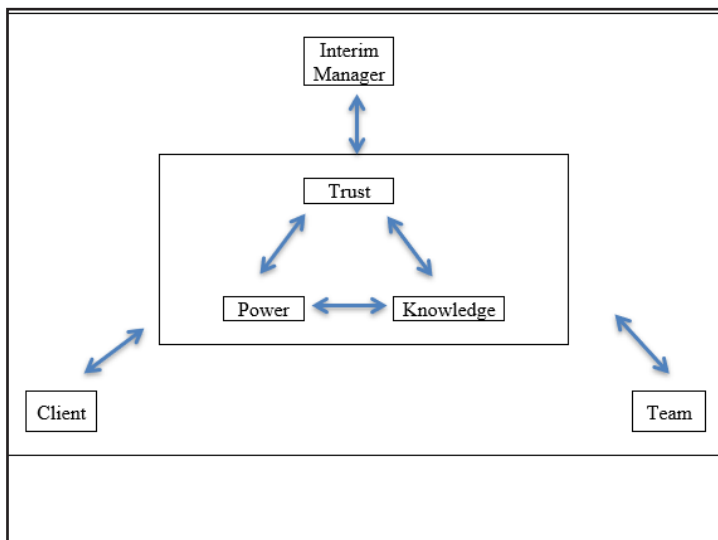**Figure 3.** *Duration of the Last IM Project in Poland (in months)*

Note: Based on the 2021 European Survey conducted in January 2021 by the International Network of Interim Management Associations (INIMA).

The authors of this article developed a research programme that combines three categories of effectiveness factors in IM projects: trust, power, and knowledge (Skowron-Mielnik & Sobiecki, 2020a). These factors were selected based on an analysis of extant research in the field of IM (Goss & Bridson, 1998; Weerd de, 2015). At the same time, three perspectives were identified for further analysis: (1) the perspective of the client who hires the IM; (2) the perspective of the client's team of employees who cooperate with the IM; and (3) the perspective of the IM (Figure 4). In full-time employment, power is determined by the system applied across the company, and as such it depends on the employee's formal

position as well as informal but well-established social relations. Upon acquiring a new project in a new company, the IM must gain power; however, this means that he or she must enter the existing system of power that the current stakeholders and beneficiaries of the company's present organisation are unwilling to change. The entrepreneur will not share power and the IM will share knowledge only to a limited extent unless both parties in this business relationship (the IM project) do not trust each other.

Figure 4. *Proposed Research Model*

Note: Developed by authors based on own research concept.

In light of the above, the following research questions were formulated: (1) Is power a factor that can largely determine the effectiveness of IM projects? (2) How does power relate to the other two factors: trust and knowledge? (3) How is power shaped in relations with clients, teams of employees, and IMs?

Dimensions of Power in IM Projects

The importance of power has been recognised by theorists in various fields (Oliveira, 2010). In the mainstream theory of functionalism, Pfeffer (1992) observes that power is critical to organisational and individual success. Representing a non-functionalist and therefore more critical approach, Clegg et al. (2006) defined the importance of power as inscribed in the core of the organisation's achievements; without it there would be no social relations that make up the organisation and the common effort to collect and coordinate individual wills, endeavours, and energies. Power is often closely connected with restrictions and domination. Clegg et al. (2006) and Pfeffer (1992) argue that power research is traditionally a

less studied area, with business research showing a particular tendency to ignore organisational power or attribute it to illegal behaviour. While power can also be positive and facilitate the agreement of interests represented by different parties, in practice the two concepts of "power" and "power over" may overlap, whereby the classification of power as positive or negative may depend on the situation of specific entities and the actual sources of power (Oliveira, 2010).

Searching for methodological foundations, the authors turned to studies conducted by Handfield and Bechtel (2004), whose conclusions shed some light on the relationship between trust and power. Their findings were found to be adequate in terms of the choice of research construct and research instrument, and could therefore be applied to our study of power for three reasons. Firstly, Handfield and Bechtel point out that due to the recent development of knowledge and practice, supply chain management covers many levels of management practice, extending far beyond the boundaries of the company's organisation and includes online shopping, raw material sourcing through strategic partnerships, logistics provided by third parties, relocating production to other countries, and global competition. Secondly, IM applies to equally broad areas of practice, as indicated in Figure 1, and our study sought a single universal construct and research tool to examine the scope of power and either confirm or reject a relationship between power and trust. Thirdly, given Handfield's and Bechtel's bibliographic review of perspectives, such as theoretical foundations, constructs and research based on them, search for a multifaceted scientific approach combined with a unified theoretical construct, their publication was found to be particularly helpful when choosing the theory and research instrument applicable to our surveys.

Handfield and Bechtel compiled a review of 74 studies, analysing the relationship between trust and seven other constructs in supply chain management (Table 1).

Table 1. *Trust with Respect to Seven Other Constructs Identified in Research*

No.	Trust vs. other constructs	Number and percentage of publications	
1	Trust – Power	6	8%
2	Trust – Dependency	13	18%
3	Trust – Economic performance	10	14%
4	Trust – Collaboration	16	22%
5	Trust – Dependency on assets	7	9%
6	Trust – Risk	12	16%
7	Trust – Communication	10	14%
	Total	74	100%

Note: Adapted by authors from "Trust, Power, Dependence and Economics: Can SCM Research Borrow from Paradigms? By R.B. Handfield and C. Bechtel, 2004, *International Journal of Integrated Supply Management, 1*(1), pp. 1-23.

For the purposes of our study, the relationship indicated in the first row of Table 1 is further developed in Table 2. It presents relations between different types of trust and power proposed by Handfield and Bechtel, as well as the concept of power types and their impact on IM projects according to Wendt et al. (2014). Effectively, the Table identifies power types specific to IM projects (Column C), which to a varying degree contribute to the overall success of the project.

When considering power (competence) as a predictor of effectiveness in IM projects, based on the interpretation of Table 1 and Table 2 from the perspective of a possible relationship between the former and the latter, the hypothesis about the existence of such a relationship seems justified, particularly in light of the observations made in the first row of Table 1, "Trust – Power", and in Column C of Table 2, "Power in IM projects", for the following types of power: informational power, referent power, expert power.

One might also conclude that the attributes necessary for the selection of a research instrument could be derived from Column C in Table 2. However, choosing between a validated questionnaire from the subject literature and the development of a completely new instrument, the authors of this study decided to use a research instrument built around the attributes of power identified in Column A in Table 2. Consequently, the authors opted for the use of a questionnaire based directly on the types of power identified by French and Raven in their study (1959).

Table 2. *Relationships Between Power and Trust*

Power according to Handfield and Bechtel (2004)		Power in IM projects	
A. Power according to French Jr. and Raven (1959)	B. Trust according to Lewicki and Bunker (1995), and Sheppard and Tuchinsky (1995)	C. Power in IM according to Wendt et al. (2014)	
Coersive power	Calculus-based trust	Coercive power	Strength 0–3
Based on the expectation that the other party will use coercion/punishment if objectives are not met	Trust is maintained through deterrence and the threat of punishment that is likely to occur if trust is violated; the threat of punishment is likely to act as a greater motivator than a promise of a reward	Obtained indirectly through applying to legally and/or organisationally empowered superiors	1
Expert power	Knowledge-based trust	Expert power	Strength 0–3
Power originating from the perception of one's knowledge in a given area	A relationship based on knowing the other party and therefore being able to anticipate their behaviour	Based on competence, expertise and experience within the scope of the IM project, as well as within change management and project management	3
Referent power	Identification-based trust	Referent power	Strength 0–3
Rooted in the identification of one party with the other, based on a sense of unity	A relationship based on one's identification with the desires and intentions of the other party	Rooted in a respected and liked personality	3
Reward power		Reward power	Strength 0–3
Based on one's ability to reward; it occurs when one party recognises that they can be promoted by the other party	No theory proposed by Handfield and Bechtel	Obtained indirectly through applying to legally and/or organisationally empowered superiors	1
Legitimate power		Legitimate power	Strength 0–3
Power originating from values internalised in one of the parties, which dictate that the other party has a legitimate influence that must be accepted by the former party; this is the most complicated construct that refers to structural sociology, group norms, and social psychology	No theory proposed by Handfield and Bechtel	Power within the authorised project tasks – direct application of one's authority on a regular basis or indirectly through individual authorisations issued by the legitimate authority whenever necessary	2
x	x	Informational power	Strength 0–3
		Full access to all information for the purposes of the IM project	3
		Referent power	Strength 0–3
x	x	Direct access to and respect of top management, including decision-makers, management board, and project sponsors	2

Note: Adapted by authors from "Trust, Power, Dependence and Economics: Can SCM Research Borrow from Paradigms? By R.B. Handfield and C. Bechtel, 2004, *International Journal of Integrated Supply Management, 1*(1); Metodyka Interim Management by R.Wendt, E. Madra, K. Niesiobedzka-Rogatko and G. Sobiecki, 2014.

Methodology

Our methodological approach originated from grounded theory, where hypotheses and theories are constructed on the basis of systematically collected empirical data, with the resulting theory emerging from systematically conducted field studies and the analysis of empirical data referring directly to the observed part of social reality (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). In order to determine to what extent the use of IM solutions influences project effectiveness, defined as meeting the organisation's needs, the proposed research programme required multiple surveys to be performed with respect to IM projects implemented in real business organisations. The surveys were conducted in 2019 and 2021. This study focuses on nine already completed IM projects (Table 3), which should guarantee a relative objectiveness of all respondents (clients, IMs, teams). In an attempt to avoid confounding our study design and results, the names of the participating organisations and respondents remain anonymous. The study was carried out in two stages. Firstly, surveys were conducted among clients who commissioned projects with IMs and supervised their implementation, as well as teams managed by IMs. To this end, a questionnaire was applied that used the Likert scale (Table 4). The original questionnaire was prepared in English; however, for the purposes of the field study conducted in Poland, certain corrections were introduced to account for the local cultural context of selected terms and concepts.Secondly, having collected and analysed the questionnaires from clients and teams in all companies listed in Table 3, the authors conducted interviews with clients and IMs in the respective companies to obtain a more complete picture of power and its importance in the implementation of IM projects.

Table 3. *Description of IM Projects Included in the Study*

Project	Functional area / industry	Duration	Result – type	Result vs. objective	Respondents	Research tool	
#1	IT / IT	6 months	Implementation of an IT system	Achieved 100%	Client	Questionnaire	Interview
					IM	–	Interview
					Team	Questionnaire	–
#2	Logistics / Rail vehicle repairs	12 months	Implementation of a logistics management system	Achieved 100%	Client	Questionnaire	Interview
					IM	–	Interview
					Team	–	–
#3	Production / Mobile device repairs	5 months	Technology transfer	Achieved 100%	Client	Questionnaire	Interview
					IM	–	Interview
					Team	Questionnaire	–
#4	Finance / Consulting	6 months	Implementation of a financial reporting system	Achieved 100%	Client	Questionnaire	Interview
					IM	–	Interview
					Team	Questionnaire	–
#5	Operational / Construction	8 months	Improved ability and effectiveness of contract performance	Achieved 100%	Client	Questionnaire	Interview
					IM	–	Interview
					Team	Questionnaire	–
#6	Operational / Sales in retail shops	6 months	Process improvement	Achieved 100%	Client	Questionnaire	Interview
					IM	–	Interview
					Team	Questionnaire	–
#7	HR / Surface treatment and anti-corrosion coating	12 months	Replacement for the duration of a planned leave	N/A	Client	Questionnaire	Interview
					IM	–	Interview
					Team	Questionnaire	–
#8	Finance / Surface treatment and anti-corrosion coating	6 months	Covering the vacancy until a full-time employee could be hired	N/A	Client	Questionnaire	Interview
					IM	–	Interview
					Team	Questionnaire	–
#9	Operational, furniture industry	6 months	Improved effectiveness of managers' work	Achieved 100%	Client	Questionnaire	Interview
					IM	–	Interview
					Team	Questionnaire	–

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Note: Developed by authors based on own research plan. IM = Interim Manager
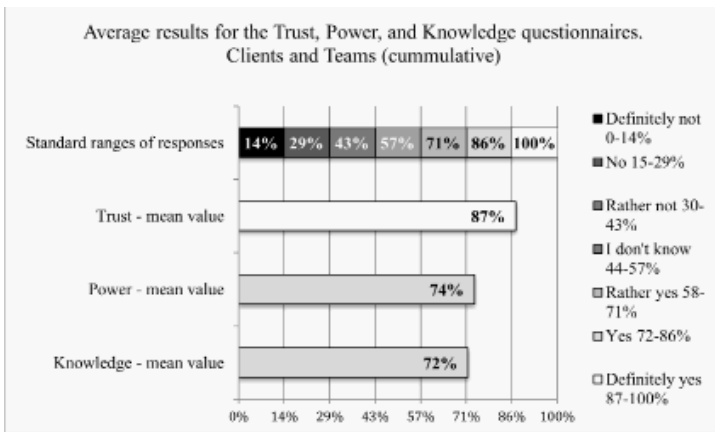
Table 4. *The Questionnaire Form*

Research tool dedicated to power
Dear Respondent,
•   By completing this questionnaire, you participate in a scientific research on Interim Management (IM).
•   The research is conducted as a joint effort of the Poznań University of Economics and Business, and the Interim Managers Association (SIM) of Poland.
•   As a person that has been part of an IM project, you are invited to share your valuable insight with us by answering these questions and thus contributing to the discovery of factors that may have an effect on IM projects and their outcomes.
Instructions for completing the questionnaire
•   Please mark your answer for each question by circling a number from 1 to 7 (on the right). Choose the number that best represents your opinion regarding the issue asked in the question.
•   Choose the answers spontaneously, to the best of your knowledge.
Anonymity
•   Your personal data and answers as well as the data and answers of other respondents will not be disclosed.
•   Your answers will be statistically processed in a pool of data along with the answers from other respondents. As a result, only the aggregated observations will be published regarding the factors that, statistically, can have an impact on IM projects and their effectiveness.

No.	Questions	Answers
1	This person can give me extra time off.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
2	This is the person I report to and to whom I answer for my responsibilities.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
3	This person can make me feel important.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
4	This person sets the standards for me.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
5	This person can give me good references.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
6	This person assigns tasks for me to carry out.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
7	This person can make me feel accepted as a person.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
8	This person can make it easier for me to do my job.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
9	This person can make me feel part of his/her team.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
10	This person can provide me with special benefits.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
11	This person can make me feel appreciated.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
12	This person can give me a job that I don't like.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
13	This person can provide me with the necessary technical knowledge.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
14	This person can make my work difficult.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
15	This person can give me reliable advice regarding my work.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
16	This person can make the working environment unpleasant.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
17	This person can share his/her vast experience and/or knowledge with me.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
18	This person can turn one's presence at work into an unpleasant experience.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
19	This person can give me good technical guidance.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
20	This person assigns responsibilities to me.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Note: Adapted by authors from "The Bases of Social Power," by R. P. French and B. H. Raven, 1959, in D. Cartwright (Ed.), *Studies in Power,* pp. 259-269.

Power in IM Projects: Results

The scores for all three categories of factors proved to be high (Figure 5). Particularly high scores were obtained for trust and power, with the former corresponding to the mean value for "Definitely yes" and the latter being equivalent to the response "Yes". Knowledge produced the lowest score that corresponded to the response "Rather yes". As a result, it was concluded that the high scores confirmed the correct choice of effectiveness factors in IM projects.

Figure 5. *Trust, Power, and Knowledge – Mean Values for Total Results from Nine Surveys*
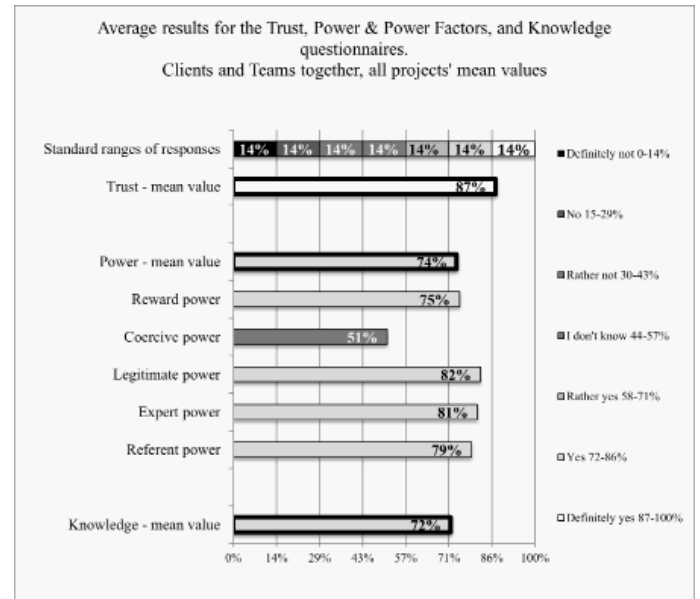

Note: Developed by authors based on research by PUEB[1] and SIM.

Descriptive statistics shows that in order to obtain a relatively high effect of the project and ensure its durability, one requires, firstly, a very high level of trust and, secondly, a high level of power.

The next figure (Figure 6) presents five types or detailed elements of power (reward power, coercive power, legitimate power, expert power, referent power), compared with the overall scores for power, trust, and knowledge, based on the cumulative opinions of clients and teams.

Figure 6. *Trust, Power, and Knowledge – Mean Values for Total Results from Nine Surveys: The Perspectives of Clients and Teams*
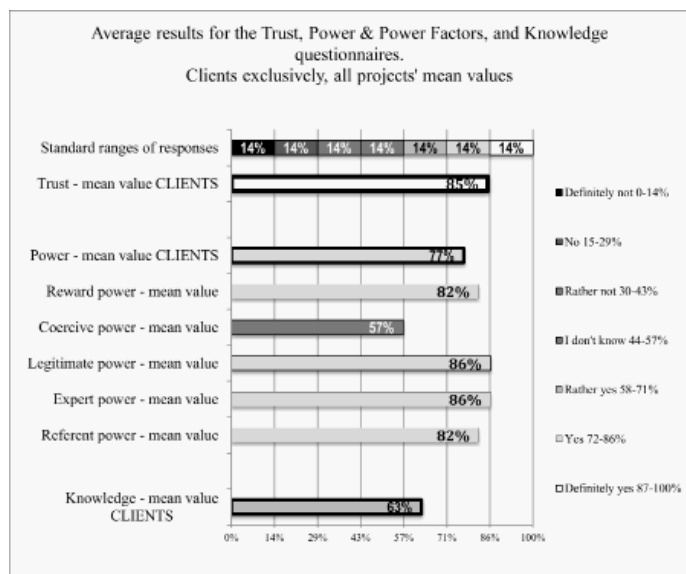

Note: Developed by authors based on results by PUEB and SIM.

Figure 6 shows that in the category of power three factors are of greatest importance for ensuring effectiveness of IM projects: legitimate power, expert power, and referent power, with all three assessed at the level corresponding to the response "Yes". Coercive power and reward power scored the lowest, which suggests that in IM projects the effectiveness of these classic tools of exercising power is low.

The next two figures present the results separately for each category of respondents: Figure 7 – Clients' opinions, and Figure 8 – Opinions of teams cooperating with IMs. In the case of the former (clients), three factors emerge as the most important in the category of power to ensure project effectiveness: legitimate power, expert power, and referent power. The first two (legitimate power and expert power) were assessed at the level equivalent to the response "Definitely yes". The score for the third factor (referent power) corresponded to the response "Yes".
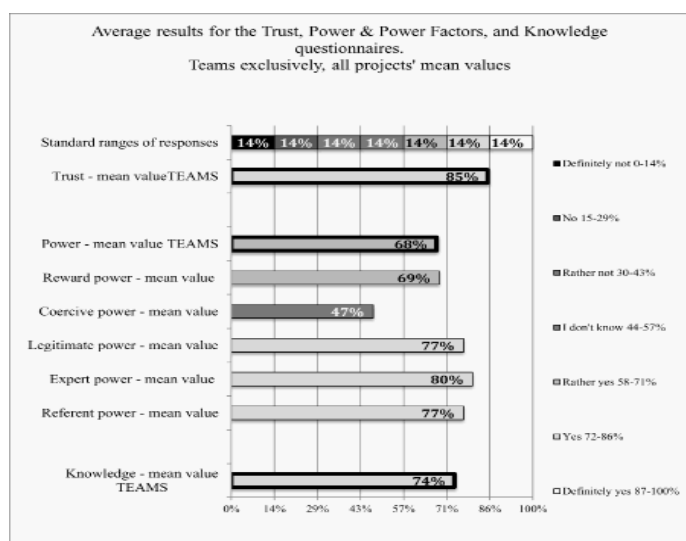
Figure 7. *Trust, Power, and Knowledge – Mean Values for Total Results from Nine Surveys: The Perspective of Clients*

Average results for the Trust, Power & Power Factors, and Knowledge questionnaires.
Clients exclusively, all projects' mean values

Note: Developed by authors based on research by PUEB and SIM.

According to teams (Figure 8), project effectiveness also turned out to depend the most on legitimate power, expert power, and referent power, i.e. the same three factors of power that were indicated by the clients. However, the scores for teams were 10 percentage points lower than in the case of clients. Legitimate power and referent power were assessed at the level equivalent to the response "Rather yes", with expert power rated the highest ("Yes").

Figure 8. *Trust, Power, and Knowledge – Mean Values for Total Results from Nine Surveys: The Perspective of Teams*

Average results for the Trust, Power & Power Factors, and Knowledge questionnaires.
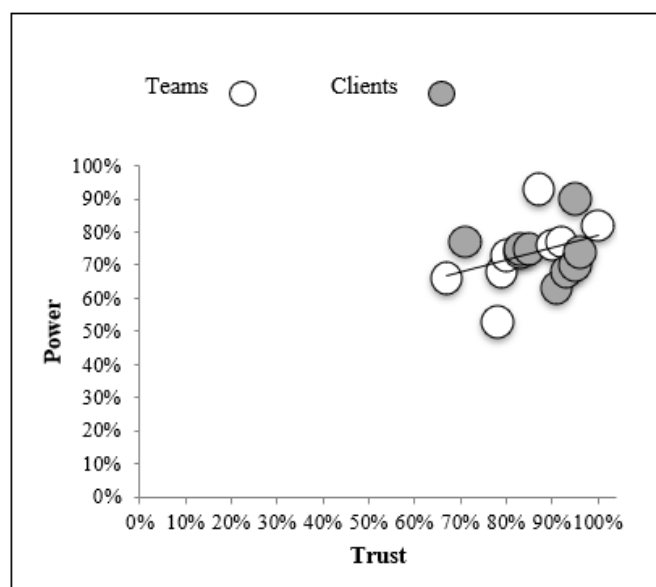Teams exclusively, all projects' mean values

Note: Developed by authors based on research by PUEB and SIM.

While the scores for trust were equally high for both teams and clients, knowledge was assessed higher by the former (74%) than the latter (63%). One cannot say that power played an insignificant role for teams; however, the median for power was lower in the case of teams (68%) than in the case of clients (77%).

Conclusions, Possible Beneficiaries, and Future Research

In addition to the already presented relationships, established on the basis of cumulative scores for the analysed responses, it was also interesting to study the in-depth observations, i.e. the distribution of our findings with respect to individual IM projects. The results are shown in Figure 9.

Figure 9. *Relationships Between the Levels of Trust and Power*

Note: Developed by authors based on research by PUEB and SIM.

Descriptive statistics in Figure 9 shows that trust towards IMs was assessed equally high by both clients and teams, ranging between 65% and 100%, which means that most of the respondents answered "Definitely yes" and "Yes". In most projects, clients rated trust higher than teams. A positive relationship was also found between the level of trust and the level of power; however, there were clear differences between clients and teams. Clients described the level of power granted by them to IMs as higher, while in the perception of teams reporting to IMs the power exercised over them by IMs was lower. However, it should be remembered that clients assessed also the trust levels as slightly higher compared with teams. In light of the above, two hypotheses may

be proposed. Firstly, high trust levels seem to determine the scope of power given to IMs: the greater the trust (between 65% and 100%), the more power is granted to IMs (between 50% and 90%). Secondly, trust appears to have an indirect effect on the effectiveness of IM projects through power: the greater the power based on trust, the more effective the IM projects can become. Both hypotheses require further research and more data to verify the presented descriptive statistics by means of inferential statistics.

A few aspects of the study must be borne in mind. Firstly, the surveys discussed here were conducted on a sample of clients and teams in IM projects carried out exclusively in Poland, where interim management is generally less known and less frequently used compared with Western European countries. Therefore, studies conducted by researchers outside Poland would provide a valuable contribution to the discussion.

Secondly, the relatively low number of projects does not allow for an analysis of results with regards to companies' profile measured by factors such as company size or culture (corporations, ownership structure, etc.).

Thirdly, the projects covered thus far by our research were carried out mostly by IMs who were men, which at this stage makes it impossible to verify whether the relationship between trust and power is influenced by gender.

Moreover, it would be recommended for other research teams to continue and further expand our research. This is one of the reasons why the questionnaire dedicated to studying power is included in this article (Table 4). The trust-oriented questionnaire was published in an article last year (Skowron-Mielnik & Sobiecki 2020b, pp. 171–190), and the next article (in preparation) will contain the questionnaire that was used to test the level of knowledge.

In addition, researchers can use the presented results not only when studying the fairly narrow field of interim management, but also the much broader one – general management. This is possible because the trust and knowledge questionnaires, applied in our surveys, were borrowed from other researchers who used them for studying general management. In contrast, the knowledge-oriented questionnaire was developed by the authors for the purposes of this research; however, it is also based on literature dedicated to general management.

Furthermore, beneficiaries of this article include not only academics but also management practitioners – IMs, clients, and companies – both those that have been using IM solutions for years as well as those who are only just considering this approach to address their problems. Our findings may prove to be particularly beneficial to employees of companies who are already involved in an ongoing IM project or are about to join a project that is to be supervised by an IM.

Last but not least, expert power and referent power have been found to be of particular importance for project effectiveness. In terms of IM, these two types of power may either appear as new or differ from the types of power used in the client's company on a daily basis such as legitimate power, reward power, or coercive power. The latter tend to dominate in traditional styles of management based on demand and control. While the new types of power may emerge during the implementation of an IM project, the remaining employees of the company, including the end users of the IM project and its effects, will not be part of this process and will continue to be exposed to said traditional types of power. However, as the IM project expands and progresses, the interaction and collaboration between the project team members and its end users will be inevitable. This process may be facilitated by HR departments and managers of both the IM project team and the end users, who can use the findings presented in this article to conduct training courses during which their employees could learn more about the innovative aspects of the IM project related to new types of power and the illuminating perspective of trust versus power. Companies interested in such an approach, i.e. essentially in preparing their staff for an IM project before it starts, can use the information shared in this paper as an opportunity to increase the effectiveness of projects implemented in their organisations under the guidance and the supervision of IMs.

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