

AN ANALYTICAL REVIEW OF BRIEFING PRACTICE IN THE HONG KONG CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

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Abstract

A comprehensive client brief is essential to achieve the target time, cost and quality for a construction project. Although various attempts have been made to improve the current practice of briefing, it is still considered as inadequate by many researchers. In Hong Kong, very limited research work has been conducted to investigate the briefing process. This paper aims to present the key findings of a research, which analysed the practice and associated problems of briefing. Literature review, focus group interviews and a questionnaire survey were conducted. The findings point out that a comprehensive framework for briefing should be established for systematic identification and clarification of client requirements, and for precise and explicit representation of these requirements. It is suggested that this framework should include the stages and time frame of briefing, identification and representation of stakeholders involved, systematic approach for identification, clarification and representation of client requirements, change management of requirements, management tools to be adopted in the briefing process and the format of a comprehensive client brief.

Keywords: Briefing, Construction, Current Practice, Hong Kong

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INTRODUCTION

Briefing is the process of gathering, analyzing, and synthesizing information needed in the building process in order to inform decision-making and decision implementation (Kelly and Duerk, 2002). The purpose of briefing is to clarify the objectives and requirements of a project (Bowen *et al.*, 1999). A brief is a formal document containing the written instructions and requirements of a client in a construction project. It enables the client to inform all concerned parties of his statement of need and requirement. It has become a difficult task to prepare a comprehensive client brief due to the increased complexity of the organisation and project environment. The consequence of an inadequate client brief may affect the time, cost and quality of project seriously due to re-scoping, re-design or re-work on part or even the whole of a project.

A considerable amount of research has been conducted to investigate the problems of briefing and to improve the process (Newman *et al.*, 1981; O'Reilly, 1987; MacPherson *et al.*, 1992; Latham, 1994; Green, 1996; CIB, 1997; Salisbury, 1998; Barrett and Stanley, 1999; Fisher, 2000; Blyth and Worthington, 2001; Kamara *et al.*, 2002). However, current briefing practice is still considered by many researchers as “inadequate” and has many limitations. As concluded in the Latham Report (1994): “*more effort is required to understand clients' need*”. The recent report by Construction Industry Review Committee (2001) has also recommended client to “*set out the requirements of their project clearly, systematically and comprehensively*”.

In Hong Kong, little work has been undertaken to study the practice of briefing in sufficient depth in the construction industry. It is observed that the briefing process is less structured and informal, especially in the private sector, in which instructions from client in some cases

are delivered by verbal communication. The importance of briefing in the construction industry has been overlooked. For this reason, a research has been conducted to investigate the briefing practice in the Hong Kong construction industry. The specific objectives of this paper are to present the research findings on the current practice and associated problems of briefing, and to recommend ways for improving the briefing process.

PROBLEMS OF BRIEFING

Several researchers have investigated the problems encountered in the briefing process. Newman *et al.* (1981) conducted a survey and produce a report called “Brief Formulation and the Design of Buildings”. Their findings were well supported by the work of MacPherson *et al.* (1992). The identifiable problem areas are (1) client experience with the building industry, (2) representation of client interest groups, (3) identification of client needs, (4) interpretation of client needs in building terms, and (5) provision of sufficient time for briefing.

Barrett and Stanley (1999) identified 20 reasons for briefing failures, e.g. an inexperienced client has insufficient knowledge to decide how to proceed, confusion over the direction and aims of the project within the client organisation and client changes introduced during construction, etc. In addition, it was described further that human nature is often at the root of these failures and stated “*although there was often a desire to follow good practice ideas, in very few examples were the methods fully implemented as people tended to overrule part of the process. Thus human dimension is critical...*” It is not unusual to note the numerous problems being identified. Especially, for complex projects requiring much more information and involving multi-disciplinary professionals and end-user, they may present greater challenges for briefing. It is important to understand at the early stage what the current practices and problems are and then find the means for improvement.

Despite many briefing guides had developed to improve the briefing process (O'Reilly, 1987; Bailey, 1990; CIDA, 1993; CIB, 1997; Salisbury, 1998; BCSC, 2000, etc.), recent research on briefing (Karama and Anumba, 2001) indicates that there are still limitations in current practice and in the framework for briefing. The problems identified from case studies and an industry survey include the following:

- Inadequate involvement of all the relevant parties to a project
- Insufficient time allocated for briefing
- Inadequate consideration of the perspective of the client
- Inadequate communication between those involved in briefing
- Inadequate management of changes in requirements.

It was concluded that these problems that are usually associated with the briefing process stem from the limitations in the overall framework for briefing. This is considered as an important finding, which throws light on the subsequent research direction in briefing.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The investigation involved a mixture of both qualitative and quantitative research methods (Brannen, 1992; Murray, 2003). This included a comprehensive review of literature, three focus group interviews and a questionnaire survey to collect views and opinions from clients, consultants and contractors. The literature review provided the basic knowledge and information for preparing the questions to be used in the focus group interviews and the questionnaire survey. It also helps to formulate hypotheses to improve the briefing process in the construction industry.

Focus Group Interviews

Three focus group meetings were organised to collect qualitative data from a group of senior professionals in the construction industry. By using quota sampling method, over 30 construction professionals were invited from eight well-known client organisations, which were selected from the government (public sector) and the Real Estate Developers Association of Hong Kong (private sector) in accordance with their business nature and share in the local residential market. These professionals included executive directors, project managers, architects, quantity surveyors and engineers. They have more than two years of hand-on experience in conducting briefing of construction projects. The interviews followed a predetermined route based on a standard set of questions as shown in Table 1 and the respondents were encouraged to share their experience and express their opinions and suggestions. The discussion was recorded and later transcribed.

Insert Table 1 here

Questionnaire Survey

The questionnaire survey was conducted to collect quantitative data and to obtain information about the briefing practice. The proposed sample framework is to distribute 40 questionnaires to each of the three groups of survey respondents, namely client/developer, consultant and contractor contributing a total of 120 questionnaires. From the client/developer group, it was attempted to distribute 20 questionnaires to both of the public clients and private developers. The private developers are large organisations and listed developers in the stock market. From the consultant group, it was attempted to distribute 40 questionnaires to consultant firms with architectural, engineering or surveying background of large organisations. From the contractor group, it was attempted to distribute another 40

questionnaires to contractor firms of large, medium and small organisations. In order to achieve a high response rate, the questionnaires were arranged and distributed by personal interview, telephone interview and e-mail instead of by post. It is believed that a higher response rate can better represent the opinions of practitioners in the construction industry.

The questionnaire was designed in a simple 'tick-it' format to facilitate easy filling and gives numerical value from '1' to '5' to indicate the degree of agreement on individual statement as follows:

- a) Rating '1' represents 'Agree'
- b) Rating '2' represents 'Slightly Agree'
- c) Rating '3' represents 'Neutral'
- d) Rating '4' represents 'Slightly Disagree'
- e) Rating '5' represents 'Disagree'

To ascertain the research results, instrument validation in terms of reliability test is used to examine the data. The questions are grouped into 3 constructs namely:

- 1) Current practice of the briefing process
- 2) Problems encountered in the briefing process
- 3) Improvement to the briefing process

Since high correlation among alternative measures is designed for the same construct or large Cronbach alpha values are the common sign of measurement reliability, there is reasonable reliability if all investigate constructs exhibited an alpha value closer to or greater than 0.7 (Pallant, 2001). By using the SPSS software to carry out the instrument validation and

reliability analysis, all results are found greater than 0.7. Therefore, the requirement on reliability test is achieved.

SURVEY RESPONSES

A total of 130 nos. questionnaires in which 45 nos. for both the client/developer and consultant and 40 nos. for contractor were actually distributed. 119 replies were received. A response rate of 92% is achieved. A detail breakdown of response rate from each group is shown in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 here

A comparative analysis of the survey response to the proposed sample framework is discussed as below:

For the Client/Developer Group, the survey respondents from the public and private sectors are 26 nos. and 17 nos. respectively. Although the actual number of reply is slightly deviated from the target 20 nos. in each sector, it should not have significant effect to the analysis. Moreover, reliability test was adopted to examine the internal consistency amongst alternatives.

For Consultant Group, the survey respondents from the public and private sectors are 24 nos. and 20 nos., which are close to the target of 20 nos., in each sector.

For Contractor Group, the survey respondents from the public and private sectors are 12 nos. and 20 nos. respectively. Although the actual number of reply in public sector is relatively

small according to the target of 20 nos., it is still a useful data to represent the construction industry in an overview.

There are 62 and 57 survey respondents involved with public work and private projects respectively. The figures reflect a good balance on both types of project. Concerning the company size of the survey respondents, 69% and 56% of the respondents are employed in large companies of the public and private sectors respectively. Thus, the survey results could provide an overall picture of briefing process in Hong Kong.

SURVEY RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The survey results and findings are grouped under three headings:

- 1) Current practice of briefing process
- 2) Problems encountered in the briefing process
- 3) Improvement to the briefing process

Current Practice of Briefing Process

According to the survey respondents in the public sector, the client brief was given either in written format (58%) or a combination of written and verbal format (42%). The communication of client brief in pure verbal form was not found from the survey. Whereas in the private sector, it revealed that 77% of the client brief was issued in a combination of written and verbal format. It also indicated that only 13 % of client brief was given in written format and 10% of the client brief was given in pure verbal form.

Having reviewed the client brief format, the next item is to investigate who are involved in the client briefing process. In both in the public and private sectors, 68% of the survey respondents replied that the client project manager and client in-house consultant were involved in most cases, whereas external adviser, end-user and major stakeholder were less frequently involved. This was also confirmed by the results of the focus group interviews. The details of the parties participated in the briefing process is shown in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 here

The briefing process described in eight stages as adopted by Atkin *et al.* (1996) was included in the question to review the survey respondents' involvement at each stage in the briefing process. Table 4 indicates the involvement of the respondents in each stage. From the survey, for both the public and the private sectors, the two most frequently involved stages are concept design and scheme design stages. This coincided with Kamara and Anumba's findings that briefing is combined with conceptual and scheme design and the stages in the process are blurred (Kamara and Anumba, 2001).

Insert Table 4 here

Table 5 shows the major requirements/concerns in the briefing process. In the public sector, the three most frequent requirements and concerns are "project identification", "programme for the development" and "budget of development". Whereas, in the private sector, the three most frequent requirements are "programme for the development", "design requirement" and "budget of development".

Insert Table 5 here

Time, cost and quality are usually considered as the three principal factors to be considered in running a project. The high frequency of “programme for the development” and “budget of development” as rated by the survey respondents in both the public and private sectors supports part of this argument. However, “quality requirement” is not amongst the three most frequent requirements in all the sectors. Quality issue is not given the same emphasis in comparison with time and budget issues.

For the technique used in the briefing process, “cash flow forecast and financial plan”, “issues relate to environmental protection” and “issues relate to health and safety” are the three most frequent analysis and assessment techniques adopted in the public sector. Among them, “cash flow forecast and financial plan” has the highest frequency with an overall percentage of 20%. The survey in the private sector has the similar findings but “issues relate to environmental protection” receives the highest percentage with an overall percentage of 19%. Table 6 indicates the analysis/assessments that were carried out in the briefing process.

Insert Table 6 here

Problems encountered in the Briefing Process

The percentages of survey respondents who agree (comprise the “agree” and “slightly agree” columns in the questionnaire) that briefing is comprehensive enough for the design team to proceed with design works are only 40% and 25% for the public and private sectors, respectively. Similar situation was found in the survey conducted in the UK construction industry where 34% of the respondents were fully satisfied with the briefing process for the

project (Kamara and Anumba, 2001). It reflects the need to investigate the problems in the current practice and the ways to improve the briefing process.

The survey respondents were requested to rate the barriers for preparing a comprehensive client brief with the 11 items in a question. In both the public and private sectors, the total percentage of survey respondents on the “agree” and “slightly agree” columns is higher than that on the “disagree” and “slightly disagree” columns. In the public sector, the five main barriers to prepare a comprehensive client brief are “client changes requirement and design frequently”, “need of end-user not clearly stated”, “poor communication”, “insufficient resources and financial support” and “lack of an experienced professional as the brief leader”. Whereas in the private sector, they are “client changes requirement and design frequently”, “need of end-user not clearly stated”, “lack of time”, “lack of a systematic approach in clarifying and representing requirement” and “lack of review and feedback to the client brief” and “lack of review and feedback to the client brief”. The detail percentages are shown in Figure 1 and 2 for public and private sectors respectively.

Insert Figure 1 and 2 here

Improvement to the Briefing Process

This part reviews what improvement is necessary in the briefing process. The opinion of respondents on the format of client brief, elements to be included in the brief and improvement areas of the briefing process were collected.

As for the preference on the format of client brief, nearly 70 % of the respondents in both the public and private sectors support the use of a standard format for briefing. As discussed

earlier, the use of written and verbal format in both the public and private sectors and the use of purely verbal format in the private sector are common in the current practice. However, it is not considered as a good practice during the interviews with the focus group. The survey respondents tend to accept written client brief in standard format. The establishment of a standard format is worth further exploration.

The next question is to identify which of the 14 elements should be included in the client brief. In both the public and private sectors, the total percentage of survey respondents on the “agree” and “slightly agree” columns is higher than that on the “disagree” and “slightly disagree” columns for all the 14 items. Apart from the five most accepted elements as shown in Figure 3, above 50% of respondents also agreed to include “environmental issue”, “health and safety issue”, “value engineering of design” and “life cycle costing analysis” in the briefing process.

Insert Figure 3 here

The survey respondents were also requested to rate the nine remedial measures proposed to improve the briefing process. In both the public and private sectors, the total percentage of survey respondents on the “agree” and “slightly agree” columns is higher than that on the “disagree” and “slightly disagree” columns for all the nine items. The five commonly agreed areas for improvement are “full understanding of client’s need”, “allow sufficient time to prepare the briefing”, “the end-user to participate in the briefing”, “good communication skill” and “regular review and provide feedback to the client’s need”. These are true for both the public and private sectors. This is well supported by other studies on briefing (Kelly *et*

al., 1992; Barrett and Stanley, 1999; Kamara and Anumba, 2001). The detail percentages are indicated in Figure 4.

Insert Figure 4 here

Comparisons between the Briefing Process of Hong Kong and the United Kingdom

Although there are limitations to compare this study with the research conducted by Kamara and Chimay (2001) in the UK, because the research methodology and focus are not identical, an attempt was made to produce a detail comparison between the briefing practices in these two places. The comparison is presented in Table 7.

Insert Table 7 here

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are of the important issues regarding the briefing process that have been identified from the findings of this study.

Format of client brief

The medium through which the client brief is communicated is an area of concern. The practice of verbal communication in the briefing process is quite common in the private sector. However, verbal communication is not considered a good practice by majority as it increases the chance of misunderstanding amongst the participants in the briefing process. Lack of records creates ambiguity and disputes in the later part of the contract period, and

leads to adversarial relationship amongst the project participants. The practice of written communication in a standard format is highly recommended. The standard format can be grouped under 1) general requirements which outline the client's needs and objectives and 2) specific client's requirements which provide details of implementation and key performance indicators to measure the achievement.

Representation of client interest groups

As revealed from the study, the client project manager and in-house consultants frequently participate in preparing the client brief. However, the external advisors, end-users and all stakeholders should also be identified and represented in the briefing process (Barrett and Stanley, 1999; Kelly and Duerk, 2002). The participants in the briefing process should have clearly defined power of decision-making. The needs of the end-users and stakeholders should be carefully identified, assessed and included in the project brief.

Representation of client requirements

There is inadequate attention and lack of a systematic approach in identifying, clarifying and representing the client requirements. Development of comprehensive framework for briefing can lead to (1) systematic identification and clarification of requirements, and (2) precise and explicit representation of these requirements. To facilitate assessment, clarification and representation of client requirements and measurable key performance indicators should also be established which are used to monitor achievement in the subsequent design, tender and construction and post-occupancy evaluation stages.

Provision of sufficient time for briefing

By the time most projects get as far as the project briefing stage, the client group is anxious to proceed as quickly as possible. As a result, there is usually not enough time allocated to the project briefing stage (Carrington, 1979; Lera, 1984; Karama and Anumba, 2001). A distinct stage for briefing should be developed to identify and define client requirements before any design work commences. Sufficient time should be allowed to formulate a comprehensive brief to avoid loss of time, over-budget or abortive work as a result of re-scoping, re-design and re-work on projects. The length of time allowed for briefing depends on the size and complexity of the project.

Responsibilities of the client

The client creates barrier in the briefing process if he changes his requirements frequently. It is unreasonable to expect all clients to confirm precise requirements with zero change afterward. Furthermore, not all of them are knowledgeable client who could exercise professional judgment. However, frequent changes to the client brief should be avoided. The leader in the client briefing process should assess the style and culture in the management of the client organisation so that changes could be minimized. An effective mechanism is needed for managing the inevitable changes to requirements. The mechanism allows for tracing and correlating the history of design decisions to the original and evolving requirements of the client (Kamara and Anumba, 2001). Barrier in communication could be resolved by active participation in discussion. Briefing workshop could be adopted in which all participants' needs and concerns are addressed with the aim to focus on the common goal.

Management tools for briefing

Budget and programme for projects are commonly considered in the briefing process in both the public and private sectors. The quality requirement should be given the same emphasis,

particularly the overall quality and standard to be achieved. Benchmarking with other products and services as well as feedback from past projects may give a better understanding of the required standard (Blyth and Worthington, 2001). There is a growing emphasis on environmental protection and health and safety management in the briefing process. However, there is a lack of concerns about value management, life cycle costing analysis, risk management and facility management in the briefing process. It requires further study in the industry to verify if these missing management techniques could add value to the briefing process.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has reviewed the current practice and associated problems of briefing, and recommended improvement for the briefing process in the construction industry. The research findings point out that a holistic approach with a comprehensive framework for briefing is lacking. The comprehensive framework should include the stages and time frame of briefing, identification and representation of stakeholders to be involved in briefing, a systematic approach for identification, clarification and representation of client requirements, change management of requirements and management tools to be adopted in the briefing and the format of a comprehensive client brief. Although the survey and focus group interviews were local based, attempt has been made to compare the results with the international studies. It was found that findings of this research well support those issues related the UK construction industry. The aforesaid framework has provided the foundation for subsequent international research of developing a system for accurate project brief. The variables of the briefing framework will be identified and validated through a questionnaire survey and real-life projects.

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Table 1 Questions raised to the respondents in the focus group interviews

1. Please give a brief description of your current briefing
 2. Please list out three items that you like most in this practice
 3. Please list out three items that you like least in this practice
 4. Please suggest in what ways do you think that this practice can be further improved.
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Table 2 Details of response rate

Group	Questionnaire Distributed	Questionnaire received	Response rate (%)
Client/ Developer	45	43	96
Consultant	45	44	98
Contractor	40	32	80
Total	130	119	92

Table 3 Parties participated in the briefing process

	Public (%)	Private (%)
Client project manager	41	44
External advisor	4	6
Major stakeholder	12	10
Client in-house consultant	27	24
End user	14	12
Others	2	4

Table 4 Stages that have involved in the briefing process

	Public (%)	Private (%)
Strategic analysis	7	9
Client analysis	8	6
Facilities analysis	8	9
Statement of need	12	9
Confirming the need	7	10
Functional brief	14	14
Concept design	22	22
Scheme design	22	21

Table 5 Requirements/concerns considered in the briefing process

	Public (%)	Private (%)
Project identification	22	13
Design requirement	16	19
Budget of development	16	18
Procurement of contract	7	4
Resources	6	8
Programme for the development	18	19
Quality requirement	7	14
Facilities specification	8	5

Table 6 Analysis/assessments made in the briefing process

	Public (%)	Private (%)
Value management	17	12
Life cycle costing	10	13
Risk management	11	13
Issue relates to health and safety	16	16
Issue relates to environmental protection	17	19
Cash flow forecast and financial plan	20	16
Facilities management	9	11

Table7 Comparisons between the briefing process of Hong Kong and the UK

Briefing Process	Hong Kong	United Kingdom
1. Format of briefing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formal procedures were used in the public sector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formal procedures were used in the briefing process
2. Stages in briefing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Briefing is carried out in the concept and scheme design stages, and usually less attention is paid on the other stages such as strategic client analysis and facilities analysis, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Briefing is combined with design, i.e. conceptual and scheme design, and usually there are no distinct stages in the process
3. Participants involved in briefing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Client project manager, Client in-house architect, (end-users and major stakeholders in some of the cases) Client project manager tends to dominate the briefing process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A broad mix of professionals both within and outside the client organisation including architect, engineers and project managers. Design professionals, e.g. architect tends to dominate the briefing process
4. Precise definition of client requirements before detailed design was done	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> About half of the survey respondents agreed that there is lack of formal assessment of client requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Only about half of the survey respondents has spent time in defining the client requirements
5. Structured methodology to analyse and prioritise client requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> About half of the survey respondents agreed that there is lack of a systematic approach in clarifying and representing the client requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not happen in 70% of projects
6. Documentation of client brief	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Written instruction, minutes of meeting, letter, tender document, committee paper, fax, email, project presentation, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Letter, fax, email, minutes of meeting, sketch and drawings, etc.
7. Overall satisfaction with the briefing process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over 22% and 35% in the public and private sector respectively are not fully satisfied with client briefing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not fully satisfied in over 65% of projects
8. Limitations in the current practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Need of end-user not clearly stated Poor communication amongst the parties Client changes requirement and design frequently Lack of a systematic approach in clarifying and representing requirements Lack of time and financial support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inadequate involvement of all the relevant parties Inadequate consideration of the perspectives of client Inadequate communication between those involved in briefing Inadequate management of changes to requirements Insufficient time allocated for briefing

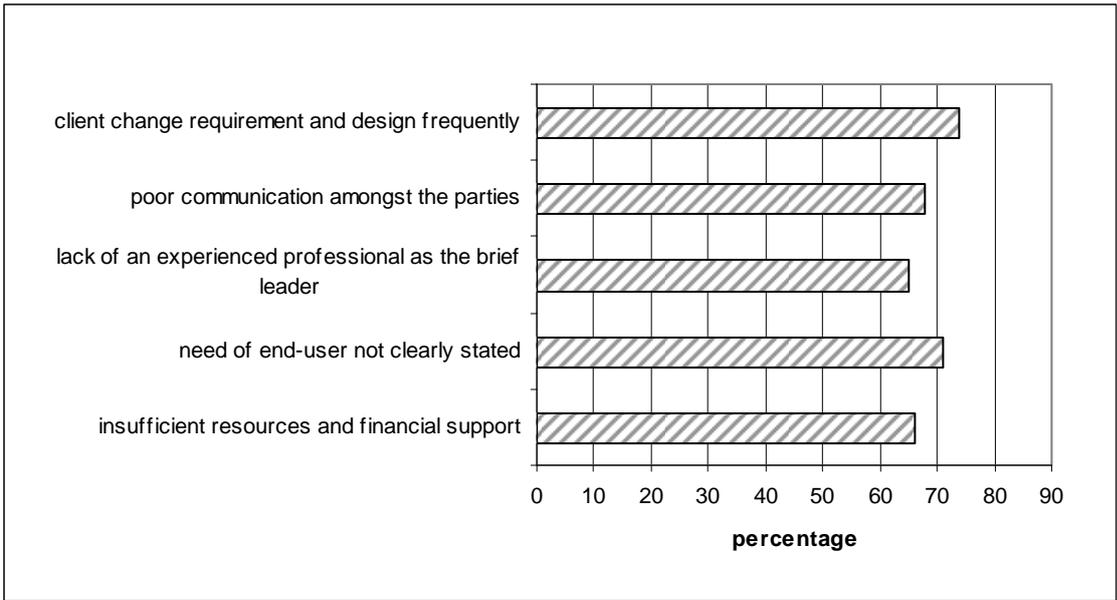


Figure 1 Barriers for preparing a comprehensive client brief (public)

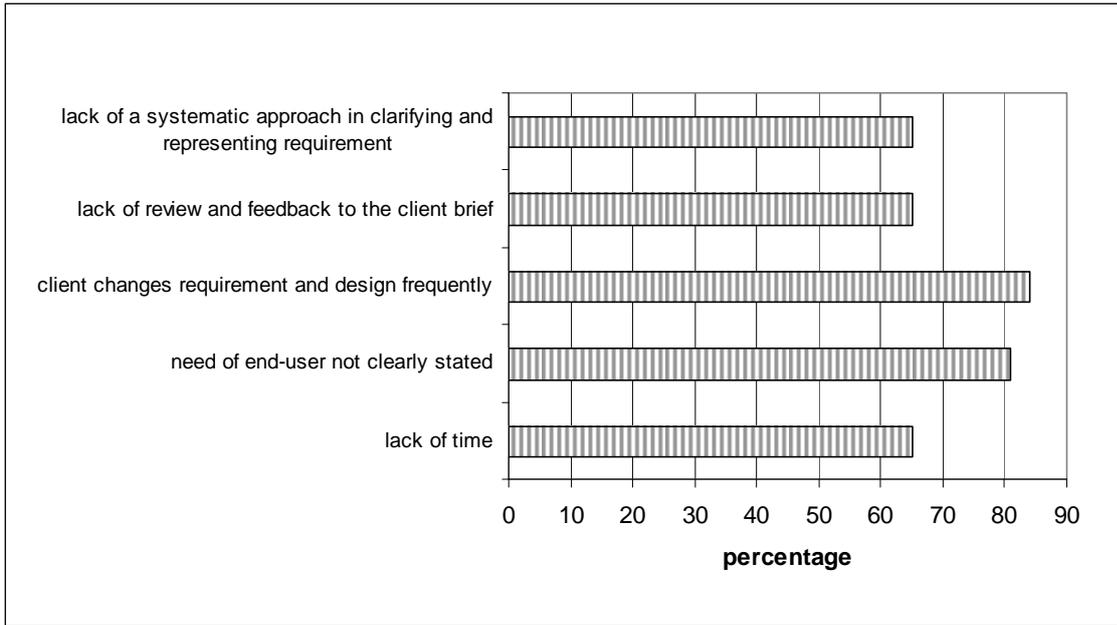


Figure 2 Barriers for preparing a comprehensive client brief (private)

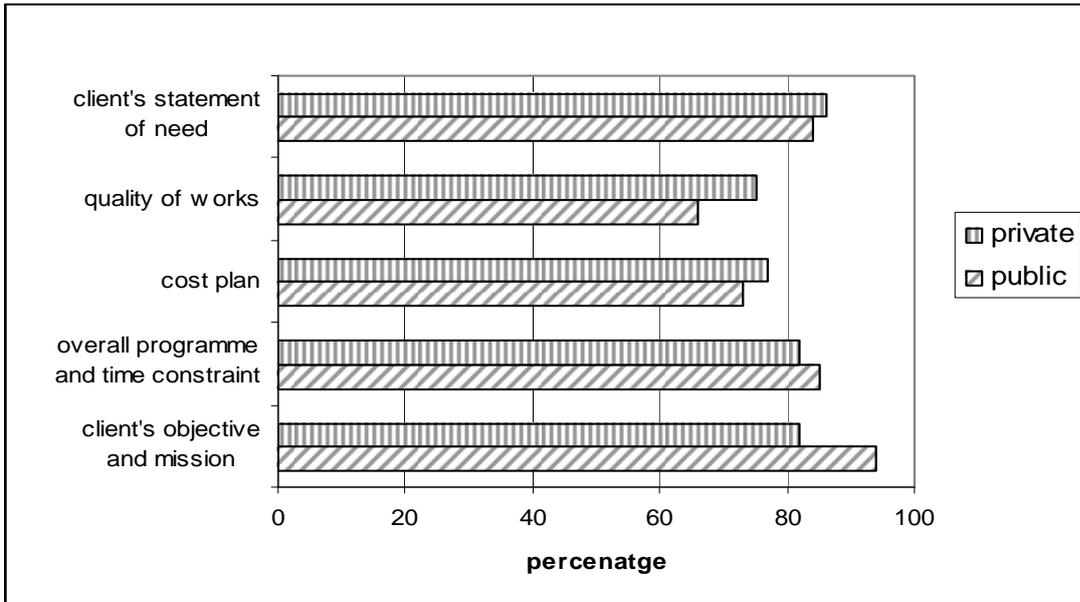


Figure 3 The five important elements to be included in the client brief

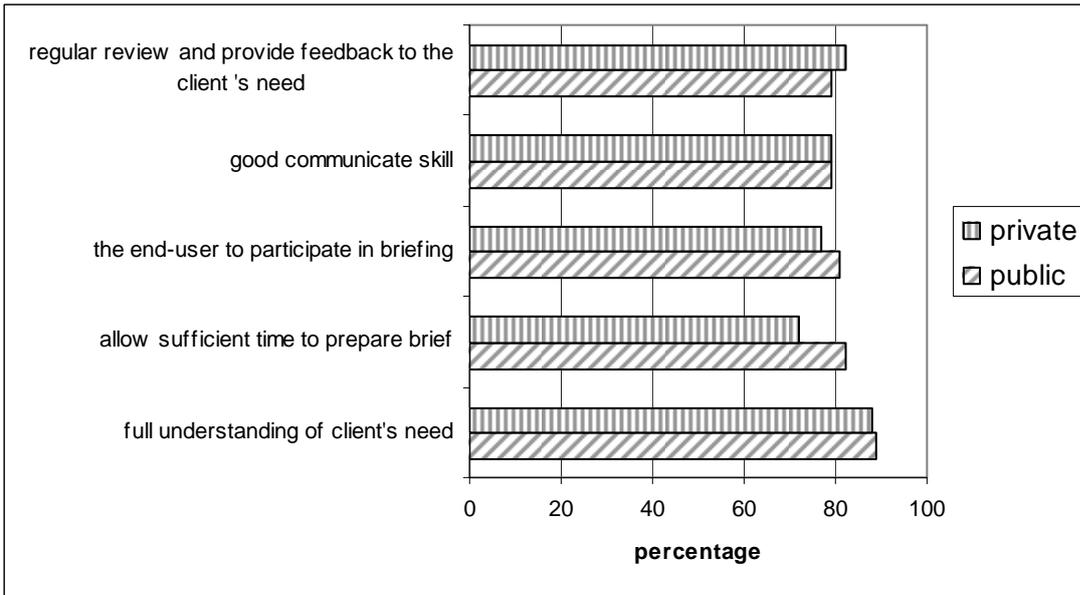


Figure 4 Improvement areas for the briefing process