



Effective Project Management with Social Media Communications

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If you are a project manager, then you are probably aware of the 24/7 access that social media tools allow for us to communicate, collaborate, and engage with every member of your project team and its stakeholders from anywhere in the world. Sharing your ideas with more efficiency and effectiveness when it is not possible to physically meet with everyone to talk with them in person can be assisted with social media tools. Your message can spread globally on a passive basis with or without your presence as a solution to more effective project management. It first requires mapping out a social networking plan to determine who and how team members and stakeholders can benefit from all party participation to generate a better outcome. Everyone on the team needs to be clear on their assignments and understand the goals of the project which can only be achieved through proper communication. It is done by creating, managing, and maintaining formal accounts on relevant social networks, which are seamlessly built into the project management tools. Thus, organizations can enhance communications between their project team members and stakeholders.

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Assuring the security of information can be achieved with a role-based access system and a need to know basis for access to more sensitive information. However, just because information is to be shared, it does not mean everyone needs the same amount to do their job. What is most important is building relationships, which is perhaps one of the biggest challenges facing most project managers. Social media tools can help meet, network, and maintain a good relationship with the likes of LinkedIn, Skype, and Twitter, provided it is understood that all information remains within a project manager's sphere

and relevant to the project. What must be avoided is an accumulation of background noise that detracts from meeting project objectives (i.e., gossip, personal attacks, unacceptable language, and political rhetoric).

Social Media and Project Management

Social media was not invented nor was it ever intended to be used in conjunction with project management. But, both have evolved as the Internet revolutionized all means of communication. Why did this happen?

This evolution has happened because at the heart of a successful project is an effective means of communication, where one person can reach many others and many others can reach back to one person instantaneously.

When Program Evaluation Review Technique (PERT) charts incorporated full computer simulation scenarios that calculated critical paths and dependent tasks, then an enormous burden of work was reduced. But, it still took too much time to communicate the project's changes to everyone. The use of email was the next step and changes were sent out and reached everyone concerned. But, eventually, inboxes were clogging up with information on project changes and the changes were falling out of sync.

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The use of email does not foster collaboration, as it can be ignored, and lacks the sense of being part of a community or team. Having documents of different types attached to the email meant that everyone had to standardize on a particular file and maybe the project management tool (i.e., Microsoft Project). This led to frustration and wasted efforts as documents had to convert into acceptable file formats. File sizes are also limited to what the email system will accept.

The traditional model of project management is an hourglass structure with the senior management at the top, the project team at the bottom, and the project manager in the narrow middle. The project manager strives to manage information flow between the upper and lower parts of the hourglass. This model faces the challenges of handling the volume, variety, and velocity of spreading the project's information.

Checking a social media website and its network of contacts has become part of many employees' work day activities. The issue is whether it is for work or social entertainment, which does not add to productivity. However, networks of contacts on LinkedIn can be useful in developing a bond with others

in and outside of the organization. These connections can enable and foster collaboration as individuals share their professional profiles. Members of the same social network can post comments, pictures, and can share project information without the need of a project manager as a bottleneck to dissemination.

Social networks use information threads that link conversations and individuals to share common topics, helping everyone involved to see the entire picture and not just their portion. They can easily appreciate why their contribution is essential to the whole project and gain their commitment. This includes the stakeholders and policymakers. Social media allows all project participants to “sing from the same music sheet” and see the same information.

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For security purposes, it is better to have a private and internally managed social media tool within their own secure internal network for projects only. Lockheed, the aerospace giant has its own project social networking tool called “Project Unity.” The tool allows employees to share their profiles, expertise, interests, and conversations with the hopes of improving collaboration.

Does this work?

It is hard to measure the effectiveness in financial terms, but the intrinsic value seems to allow individuals to join in the conversation more easily than how it might have been done under the previous project structure.

Social networks are about building online communities of similar interests. A BLOG allows individuals to publish their thoughts and ideas, and it is an easier type of web page to edit and publish using a simple editor to insert pictures, comments, and links to other web pages.

Project managers need to consider a framework of how to integrate social media into their project management. This may take some effort and experimentation with what works best for their team and processes. To move forward:

- Engage the team in the evaluation before making a commitment to full adoption.
- Establish agreed upon measures (qualitative and quantitative) including the cost to implement and maintain.
- Try to anticipate the risks and what means you have to mitigate them such slippage, privacy, and confidentiality.
- Look for the return on collaboration (RoC) through any means where past issues are resolved in less time.

It takes a considerable amount of trust to move from central control to a distribution of accountability as each member of the team shares the project's challenges. There will be a fundamental sense of vulnerability to expose oneself through the use of social media and to try to balance the “need to know” and “need to share.” Corporate cultural change is necessary and must be led by senior management where the culture enables practical rules and ways to gain collaboration. Have younger members help with some reverse mentoring to help older generations adapt to the tools so that everyone gains from greater agility.

Finally, be sure to develop a social media policy that is direct and manageable to support its application to project management that transcends the technology with clarity on people and processes for successful integration.