

Adapting to the Changing Nature of Project Information

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Overview

This whitepaper explores the impact some newer technologies and social media are having or going to have on the nature of project information. It also looks at how we, as users of project information, can adapt to meet the changing environment.

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Introduction

Have you received a project status update via Twitter yet?

In this “age of effortless information” (Cashmore, Peter), is the nature of project information changing and do we need to adapt?

We recently became aware of an Exec GM in a large company who insists on daily “status” tweets from their direct reports. This in turn has resulted in project managers from key projects tweeting status updates to their direct reports.

Background

The past five to ten years have seen strong take up in Enterprise Project Management software, Corporate Instant Messenger and Desktop Conferencing. More recently social media is beginning to make its presence felt in the working environment.

If you do a review of online discussions at the moment there seems little doubt that social media is beginning to play a significant role in projects. On average there appears to be overwhelming support for the likes of Facebook, Linked-In and Twitter. Support is for the capability of these tools not necessary these brands per se.

In her survey “Social Media in a Project Environment”, Elizabeth Harrin found that 36% of survey respondents now use social media tools for communicating with their project team, while 24% reported that they communicate with the project stakeholders using these tools. Furthermore, 27% of respondents reported using them for project status updates.

However, as Ty Kiisel notes, *“No CEO is going to spend any money on a tool that simply incorporates a Twitter or Facebook feed into its project management solution. Business leaders don’t want to fund an employee’s ability to waste time talking about what they are going to eat for lunch or where they might be spending their weekend holiday. The conversations need to be about the work and projects that team members have in common”.* (Kiisel,Ty)

Discussion

Many tools have provided project teams with an opportunity to operate more efficiently than they have in the past. This is especially true for teams who are geographically dispersed, whether across the globe or across town. We can see when others are available, seek and receive immediate answers to questions, resolve issues, clear roadblocks, often while seeing their face.

Desktop conferencing has offered communication improvements beyond that of phone and email by enabling us to see facial expressions and body language and providing us a more holistic communications experience. Project WIKI’s and Blogs have offered teams another opportunity for presenting strategy, concepts, opinions, plans and feedback outside the project meetings, allowing more timely development of many aspects of project management. All of which appears to offer clear benefit for organisation.

EPM solutions have supported information centralisation and fostered a considerable move towards dashboard reporting. One of the perceived values of which is the “real time” nature of project information, on offer to executives with a simple click of a button. Executives can conceivably “self serve” drawing on “real time” project information at any point in time and reviewing project status of any or all of their projects. This is a significant departure from past approaches where project status was provided via a periodic report and a less frequent steering committee meeting, where the information presented may already be a week or so out of date.



While offering a significantly different experience in timing, this information may also offer a completely different experience in reliability. Where the older style reports had been reviewed, vetted and confirmed, much of a projects real time data has not had the same rigor applied and may be misleading.

Turning the clock back even further, those of us with grey hair may remember the days pre email when documents were printed, numbered, distributed and returned all within a very controlled and configuration managed environment. A far cry from current practices of online documents, email signoffs (or lack thereof) and further still from dynamic documents stored as WIKI's, continually evolving and rarely achieving an "approved" status.

So in a relatively short number of years we are transitioning from a top down, command and control approach to project information through a pull rather than push information model and into an "all in" approach where everyone is involved in maintaining project information and responsibility for its currency is equally shared. Do we have the structure to support such a change? Do we have the understanding and the norms by which project teams can operate effectively such an environment?

Faster signoffs, problem resolution, clarification requests together with immediate access to data and latest documents, reduced travel times and increased visual communication have all arguably enabled greater project productivity. But has it supported improvements in quality. Has the quality of project documentation increased? Do signoffs carry increased accountability? Is version control applied any more thoroughly? Are we recording decisions made within the context of project governance and inspecting or revising the impact of those decisions on project risk? Are decisions being made based on real time information, before analysis and corrective action are applied? Are we happy with the impact of these toolsets on the quality of our project delivery?

Project information is changing. Information exchange is increasing in frequency and decreasing in size. A significant number of people in project environments share their concerns of information overload. With such a volume of data comes filtering and simplification. Information that was once delivered in words and numbers now seems to be delivered by traffic lights. Variances are rarely

provided in numeric terms and are more likely displayed as a  or .

Project teams expect online collaborative capability, anytime, anywhere access to current information, alerts to warn them of change, immediate access to others to resolve issues. Executives, Sponsors, Managers are starting to expect real time access to project information systems to reach their own views on the state of a project. The introduction of social media toolsets are sure to further increase the love of real time information delivered directly to the palm of their hand.

The value in old fashioned project status reporting, primarily comes from the analysis, corrective action and repeat analysis that is applied in the process of forecasting the likely future state. While none of the toolsets discussed in this paper are capable of this level of analysis, they can all, in different ways, aid the project manager and others in the analysis and modelling the impact of corrective action and in developing a forecast of the likely future state.

So how do we adapt to the changing nature of project information?

Project Team Members will find the greatest opportunity for increases in productivity through embracing collaborative and social media toolsets. Adoption of these toolsets in the working environment will be easiest for those who use similar toolsets in their personal life. For most project resources the introduction of toolsets to date has resulted in a reduction in emails and an increase in alerts / reminders which has aided increases in productivity.

Project Managers should also experience a reduction in email volumes. Where they and their teams have embraced new technology toolsets well, they should find more time for strategic planning, problem resolution, stakeholder management and corrective action planning. PMs are also likely to spend time coaching and cautioning others in their use of "real time"

information (especially senior stakeholders) and setting “the norms and policies” by which the team will engage with the toolsets. PMs may also feel pressure to drop formal reporting in favour of the more sexy and available dash-boarding. We caution PMs against this and encourage a separation of real time information from formal, validated, analysed status and forecast reporting.

Senior Stakeholders can observe project progress through real time data, they can even seek real time sound bite based status updates. They would be foolish to base decisions on the anecdotal information this provides. We need to be clear on the difference Key decisions still need to be based on solid forecasts founded on current situations and planned corrective action.

References:

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