

Developing a Model for Social Media in Project Management Communications

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Abstract

The explosion of social media is changing the way we communicate, thus affecting the processes involved with information services supporting project management. In this paper, we document the emerging practice of companies using social media to support project management, review relevant literature, identify several examples of this practice, delineate dimensions along which these systems vary and lay the groundwork for the development of a model and future research into this area. Practitioners and researchers can build on this work to help organizations realize more value by using social media to support project management.

Keywords: Information Services, Trust, Project Management, Social Media

1. Introduction

Social media are affecting the way people communicate, develop relationships and build trust in home and work settings. What began as a set of tools for friends to stay connected has evolved into a means for businesses to communicate internally and externally. Although social media channels are used in a variety of contexts, this paper focuses on the emerging trend of its application to support project management. Managing relationships to build trust is especially important for projects managers, because it is becoming increasingly common for project team members to be distributed. This lack of physical contact makes it more difficult to establish strong relationships and bonds that lead to high levels of trust, making the communication process more challenging (Grabner & Kaluscha, 2003). Communications delivered through social media are potentially a valuable resource for developing trust between project team members. The next sections review research related to social networks and social media, trust, and project management information systems that incorporate social media. The paper concludes with a review of project management information systems that incorporate social media and lays the foundations for a model to guide future research into role of social media in supporting projects.

2. Social Networks and Social Media

Social media is transforming consumer behaviors and business communication patterns. The growth of social media platforms such as Face book and its equivalents have been well documented. For example, a 2009 survey by McKinsey of 1700 executives worldwide showed that about 64% of these companies were using social media for effective internal communications (Culnan et al., 2010). Similarly, in a study of executives, Barnes and Mattson found that 52% reported using social media as effective tools in their businesses. When asked if their company uses social media “to communicate with other companies like vendors, suppliers or partners,” they found that “social networking is the most widely used with 34% reporting they employed these tools” (Barnes & Mattson, 2009).

The reasons for the success of online social networks can be found in the work of researchers who studied off-line communities of practice and social networks. Etienne Wenger was one of the pioneers in studying the value that these communities bring to organizations via the strong relationships and social ties that create effective communication and the exchange of knowledge. His research suggests that the power of these communities lies in their ability to develop strong relationships and trust, a prerequisite for effective communications (1996).

The benefits associated with social networks are why they continue to grow within businesses. According to Bryan et al. (2007), “social networks, both within and outside of companies, increase the value of collaboration by reducing the search and coordination costs of connecting parties who have related knowledge and interests.” They suggest that by developing and managing relevant formal social networks, organizations can facilitate communications that improve decision making and operations. This is due in part because employees develop more “weak ties” across organizational and project spaces. This allows them to be boundary spanners, bringing expertise across the various social networks and increasing the flow of ideas and communication. In addition, social networks can make it easier to access employees’ tacit knowledge (expertise and know-how) (Bresnen et al., 2003). Because of these and other benefits associated social networks, it is predicted that the adoption of social media will continue to grow and expand across business functions and industries within the business community (Fenn et al., 2010).

3. Trust

Besides influencing the level of understanding among communicating parties, a communication exchange often results in an assessment of the parties’ trustworthiness. The choice of words, format, and frequency can influence the perception of trustworthiness. According to Van Zyl (2009), social networking accelerates the development of trust, relationship-building and effective communications among people in communities because of the short ended response time and contribution to the network. Social media enables small talk, which supports familiarization and helps build rapport and a nurturing, supportive, collaborative, trusting environment (Pullin, 2010). Trust supports a project manager’s ability to influence and manage stakeholder expectations (Pinto, Slevin & English, 2009; Smyth, Gustafsson & Ganskau, 2010), which is important to the success of projects (Project Management Institute, 2008). In addition, trust has been cited as facilitating cooperation (Mayer, 1995), a more productive free flow of information (Hart & Saunders, 1997; Nelson & Coopridge, 1996), and collective learning and knowledge sharing (Argyris, 1999; Reina & Reina, 1999). Trust also can help increase satisfaction with the processes and transactions associated with intangible services like information services (Featherman & Wells, 2010). Moreover, researchers have found that trust in intermediaries can be transferred to peripheral parties (Hong & Cho, 2011). Thus, we speculate that strong relationships among core team members could influence the development of trust throughout the network of parties involved in a project.

4. Communication and Project Management Information Systems

In the past, project managers could assume that most team members would be located together, project management software would be on a desktop workstation, and status reports could be delivered at weekly team meetings or monthly executive review meetings. Today it is likely that at least one team member will be physically or temporally separated from the team, sponsors will expect to have real-time access to project data, and executives will want the ability to view their projects as a portfolio of efforts. These transformations have changed the requirements for information systems that support project managers and increased the importance of strong communication skills in project managers.

The importance of effective communication to the success of projects is well documented. Müller (2003) studied projects that spanned organizational boundaries and found that good communication between project managers and sponsors was necessary for effective communication across project team boundaries. In addition, he found that successful project managers communicated in ways that promoted good relationships and conveyed project status information while adapting the communication style to the project’s characteristics and organizational context. Task-oriented communications that lacked relationship building aspects were insufficient to support successful projects. Before Muller, others documented the importance of effective project communication on project outcomes (Pinto & Pinto, 1991).

Strong communication skills have been shown to compliment other aspects of team performance such as supporting team-building efforts by maintaining relationships throughout the project (Haywood, 1998) and promoting team member satisfaction and project team productivity (Henderson, 2008). These and other relational elements, along with financial and operational outcomes, play a key role in determining whether a project is judged as a success (Haried & Ramamurthy, 2009). The recognition of the positive relationship between project communication practices and project success has led to communication skills becoming one of the most desired project management competencies (Crawford, 2002; Ingason & Jónasson, 2009) and increased the demands placed on information systems that support project managers.

The adoption of network-based software combined with the recognition of the important role of communication and the inadequacies of email have led software vendors to incorporate social media into project management information systems. This includes the ability to deliver status updates in a Twitter-like manner, Face book-like project news feeds, and LinkedIn-like profiles. For example, VMware introduced Strides, a project management tool that provides each project with a social network where team members see who else is assigned to the project, view a news feed related to project tasks and milestones, and view a list of everyone logged into the project’s social network and what task they are working on at that time. Other companies that have incorporated social media into project management information systems are listed in Table 1.1.

Social Media for PM Software Vendors (Table 1.1)

AtTask
CentralDesk
Liquid Planner
MangoProjects
ProjectPlace
Sprintr
VM Ware’s Strides
Teambox
Zoho Projects

5. Model Foundations

Because the practice of using social media to support project management is still emerging, vendors have included or excluded support for activities based on many factors, none of which include rigorous research. No research is available to guide practitioners in understanding what combination of social media support and practices contribute to successful projects. To address this knowledge gap, the systems in Table 1.1 were reviewed and a list of dimensions along which they varied was compiled and is presented in Table 1.2. These dimensions can form the foundation for a model to guide future research efforts into the social media supports and actions that contribute to project success.

Dimensions of Social Media in PM Systems (Table 1.2)

Assumes a PM methodology (Agile, etc.)
Integration with enterprise-level social network
Integrates with outside social networks
Integrates with other collaboration systems (email, Microsoft Project Server, etc.)
Integrates with existing network access and security systems
Multiple projects view for a PM
Portfolio view of all projects
Projects inside a community or vice versa
Workflow management
Collaboration support (file sharing, wiki, blog, etc.)
File permission control
Provides real time updates and links to social network members
Support for traditional PM activities (Monte Carlo simulations, risk management, change control, etc.)
Support for complying with government regulations (privacy laws, securities laws, etc.)

6. Conclusion

Project management requires communication practices that go beyond transaction confirmation to include managing relationships, building trust, and managing stakeholder expectations. It seems likely that project managers can enhance the communication effectiveness of teams by incorporating social media. Therefore, it is important for project managers to understand the relationships among communication practices, trust development and the affect that social media have on them as they apply to the execution of projects. Not only is it important for practitioners to understand these relationships, but researchers and project management software vendors would benefit from understating the role of social media in managing projects.

Because the phenomenon of using social media to support project management is new, there are no models to guide our understanding of the important elements associated with this practice or how these elements influence project success. This paper identifies project management information systems that incorporate social media in various ways. It extracts dimensions of these systems and lays the groundwork for the development of a model that can guide researchers and practitioners in understanding this emerging practice.

7. References

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