Communication management is critical for project success

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COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT IS CRITICAL FOR PROJECT SUCCESS

VAŽNOST KOMUNIKACIJSKOG MENADŽMENTA U USPJEHU PROJEKTA

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Abstract

Communication is an essential process in the world of project management. It is difficult to master, but essential to make a good effort in achieving. Many times on troubled projects, project team members feel that if the communication had been better, the project would have run smoother. Therefore, communication is often listed as one of the most needed areas for improvement. To ensure the success of a project much information, including expectations, goals, needs, resources, status reports, budgets and purchase requests, needs to be communicated on a regular basis to all major stakeholders. Project communication can often be more difficult due to challenges unique to project management. Many projects are short-term, and therefore project communication is temporary. It is truly critical for project managers to get the message across right the first time to avoid failures in the communication process. Project managers communicate by using different mediums to convey a message. The important factors involve communicating how the project will be managed, including how information will flow into and out of the project. There should be also a clear and concise communication plan to address project responsibilities and the types of communication that will take place. It includes the processes required to ensure timely and appropriate generation, collection, distribution, storage, retrieval, and ultimate disposition of project information. There are several key components in project communication plan which should be considered.

Sažetak

Komunikacija je bitan proces u svijetu upravljanja projektima. Teško ju je savladati, ali je važno da se učini svaki napor kako bi se postigla. Mnogo puta članovi projektnih timova na lošim projektima misle da bi se projekt bolje realizirao da je bila bolja komunikacija. Radi toga se komunikacija često navodi kao područje koje treba najviše pobojšanja, kako bi se osigurao uspjeh projekta puno informacija, uključujući predviđanja, ciljeve, potrebe, resurse, izvješća o stanju, proračun i zahtjevi za nabavu, trebaju biti redovito preneseni svima koji su uključeni u projekt. Komunikacija u projektu može često biti teška zbog izazova koji su specifični za upravljanje projektima. Mnogi projekti su kratkoročni i radi toga je projektna komunikacija samo privremena. Za projektne menadžere je kritično da poruka stigne odprve točnokako bi se izbjegle greške u komunikacijskom procesu. Projektni menadžeri komuniciraju koristeći razne medije za prijenos poruke. Važni faktori uključuju komunikaciju o tome kako će se projektom upravljati i kako će komunikacije teći u i iz projekta. Treba također imati jasan i koncizan komunikacijski plan koji će odrediti projktne odgovornosti i tipove komunikacije koji će se koristiti. On uključuje i procese potrebne za osiguranje pravovremenog i svrsishodnog stvaranja, prikupljanja, distribucije, spremanja, pronalaženja i krajnjeg korištenja projektnih informacija. Ima nekoliko ključnih elemenata u projektnom komunikacijskom planu koje treba razmotriti.

1. Communication models and methods

Communication, Communication, Communication! In other world of project management today, it has become increasingly more important to turn the efforts toward more effective means of communication. As blood flows, it pumps oxygen through the body to sustain life. Likewise, communication is the lifeblood of projects and organisations /**1**/. Just as the heart works to distribute oxygen throughout the body, the project manager continuously circulates project information from the external stakeholders to the project plan documentation, to the internal stakeholders, to the project plan. This cycle of communication and information flow is iterative and continues throughout the

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life of the project. Without it, stakeholders and the project team can be left wondering where things stand and what decisions have been made. Communication covers the effective exchange and understanding of information between parties. Effective communication is vital to the success of projects, programmes and portfolios; the right information has to be transmitted to relevant parties, accurately and consistently to meet their expectations. Communication should be useful, clear and timely /**2**/. The general rule to follow is to communicate information when its presence or absence will have some direct impact on project success. How does one identify when information will have a direct impact on the project? Typically if something impacts the scope, time, cost, risk, or quality of a task, this warrants escalating through the appropriate communication channels. Information that will impact the project-either good or bad-is vital to the project stakeholders /**3**/.

Project information to be distributed or shared among stakeholders can take many forms such as:

- Hard-copy document, filing systems and electronic databases;
- Electronic communication and conferencing tools, such as e-mail, fax, voice mail, telephone, video and web conferencing, websites and web publishing; and

- Electronic tools for project management, such as web interfaces to scheduling and project management software, meeting and virtual office support software, portals, and collaborative work management tools.

A basic model of communication, shown in Figure 1, demonstrates how information is sent and received between two parties, defined as the sender and the receiver. The key components of the model include:

- *Encode.* To translate thoughts or ideas into a language that is understood by others.
- *Message and feedback-message.* The output of encoding.
- *Medium.* The method used to convey the message.
- *Noise.* Anything that interferes with the transmission and understanding of the message (e.g., distance, unfamiliar technology, lack of background information).
- *Decode.* To translate the message back into meaningful thoughts or ideas.

Figure 1 is a basic communication model. Inherent in the model is an action to acknowledge a message. Acknowledgement means that the receiver signals receipt of the message, but not necessarily agreement with the message. Another action is the response to a message, which means that the receiver has decoded, understands, and is replying to the message.
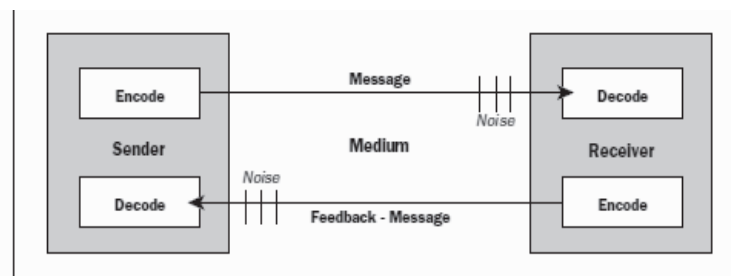

Figure 1 *Basic communications model /4/*

The components in the communications model need to be understood and taken into account when discussing project communications. As part of the communications process, the sender is responsible for making the information clear and complete so that the receiver can receive it correctly, and for confirming that it is properly understood. The receiver is responsible for making sure that the information is received in its entirety, understood correctly, and acknowledged. A failure in communication can negatively impact the project. There are several communication methods used to share information among project stakeholders. These methods can be broadly classified into:

- *Interactive communication.* Between two or more parties performing a multidirectional exchange of information. It is the most efficient way to ensure a common understanding by all participants on specified topics, and includes meetings, phone calls, video conferencing, etc.
- *Push communication.* Sent to specific recipients who need to know the information. This ensures that the information is distributed but does not certify that it actually reached or was understood by the intended audience. Push communication includes letters, memos, reports, emails, faxes, voice mails, press releases etc.
- *Pull communication.* Used for very large volumes

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of information, or for very large audiences, that requires the recipients to access the communication content at their own discretion. These methods include intranet sites, e-learning, and knowledge repositories, etc.
The project manager decides, based on communication requirements, what, how, and when communication methods are to be used in the project. Communication not only keeps everyone up-to-date on the project progress, but also facilitates buy-in and ownership of major project decisions and milestones. To ensure the success of a project much information, including expectations, goals, needs, resources, status reports, budgets and purchase requests, needs to be communicated on a regular basis to all the major stakeholders. Breakdowns in communication are unacceptable reasons for project delays. A little planning up front is worth its weight in gold. Therefore, before starting up the project, the project management should plan cmmunications. Plan is useful tool to ensure effective communication in the project /**5**/.

2. Project communication plan

Project Communication Management is the knowledge area that employs the processes required to ensure timely and appropriate generation, collection, distribution, storage, retrieval and ultimate disposition of project information. Project communication is the responsibility of everyone on the project team. The project manager, however, is responsible to develop the project communication management plan. Planning communications is the process of determining the project stakeholder information needs and defining a communication approach /**6**/. The process responds to the information and communications needs of the project stakeholders; for example, who needs what information, when they will need it, how it will be given to them, and by whom. While all projects share the need to communicate project information, the informational needs and methods of distribution vary widely. Identifying the information needs and determining a suitable means of meeting those needs are important factors for project success. Improper communication planning will lead to problems such as delay in message delivery, communication of sensitive information to the wrong audience, or lack of communication to some of the required stakeholders. A communication plan allows the project manager to document the approach to communicate most efficiently and effectively with stakeholders. Effective communication means that the information is provided in the right format,

at the right time, and with the right impact. Efficient communication means providing only the information that is needed. The results of this planning process should be reviewed regularly throughout the project and revised as needed to ensure continued applicability.
An effective communication plan should give answers to the following questions:
• Who do we need to communicate with?
• When do we communicate?
• How do we communicate?
• What needs to be communicated?
• How often do we communicate status?
• When do we meet as a team?
• When do we communicate with key stakeholders and in what fashion?
• What type of media should we use and when? For what purpose?
• Team communications, internal, external, leadership teams?

As the result of the above shown exercise, the project communication plan should include the following major items /**7**/:

2.1 Communication Requirements Analysis

The analysis of the communication requirements determines the information needs of the project stakeholders. These requirements are defined by combining the type and format of information needed with an analysis of the value of that information. Project resources are expended only on communicating information that contributes to success, or where a lack of communication can lead to failure. A key component of planning the project's actual communications, therefore, is to determine and limit who will communicate with whom and who will receive what information. Information typically used to determine project communication requirements includes /**8**/:
• Organization charts,
• Project organization and stakeholder responsibility relationships,
• Disciplines, departments, and specialties involved in the project,
• Logistics of how many persons will be involved with the project and at which locations,
• Internal information needs (e.g., communicating across organizations),
• External information needs (e.g., communicating with the media, public, or contractors), and
• Stakeholder information from the stakeholder register and the stakeholder management strategy.
Factors that can affect the management of project

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communications include:
- *Urgency of the need for information.* Is project success dependent upon having frequently updated information available on a moment's notice, or would regularly issued written reports suffice?
- *Availability of technology.* Are appropriate systems already in place or do project needs warrant change? For example, do the intended stakeholder(s) have access to a selected communications technology?
- *Expected project staffing.* Are the proposed communication systems compatible withthe experience and expertise of the project participants, or is extensive training and learning required?
- *Duration of the project.* Is the available technology likely to change before the project is over?
- *Project environment.* Does the team meet and operate on a face-to-face basis or in a virtual environment?

2.2 Communication Item

This category describes exactly which piece of information needs to be communicated and what vehicles, channels or methods project team members will use to carry out the necessary communications. Some examples of necessary information might include software updates, output from meetings (agendas, action items, handouts), a project calendar, expectations of external vendors, resource requests, and the list goes on. This list will vary widely depending on the scope of the project.

2.3 Communication Technology

This item determines what vehicles or methods project team members will use to carry out the necessary communications . With the Internet and email, many creative solutions can be found, such as servers, or a project intranet with postings, updates, and a message board (Figure 2). The obstacles that confront all the stakeholders of the project should be assessed before considering which vehicle to use for each communication item. The methods used to transfer information among project stakeholders can vary significantly. For example, a project team may use techniques from brief conversations all the way through to extended meetings, or from simple written documents to material (e.g., schedules and databases) that is accessible online as methods of communication.

Analysing the audience, the type of information being communicated, and the urgency of the information should all be factored in to the method. Technology has brought us collaboration tools and document repositories for distributing project related communication. But one should be careful not to throw a tool at an audience and expect the job to be done. Tools are excellent supplements, allowing individuals to 'pull' information. However, imposing a technology that is inappropriate to the audience or the project may result in un-accessed information, which remains idle. In addition to making sure the tool and communication medium is appropriate to the areas already mentioned, the tool must already be accepted, heavily promoted, and fully integrated within the organisation prior to use.

Communication technology

Type/technique	Description
E-mail	Allows project teams to communicate text, audio, and video files between the team members
Interoffice memos	Provides a formal forum to communicate key dates, policies, and procedures
Instant Messaging (IM)	Allows team members to communicate real-time
Project status meetings	Provides regular status updates and reviews of the project
Telephone/video conferences	Provides a medium to involve team members located in other geographic regions
Intranet, Internet boards	Formally communicates status, progress, highlights, and objectives to all
Project road show	Provides feedback to stakeholders or users
Walk-about	Involves a hands-on face-to-face approach with your team and clients

Figure 2: *Communication technology* /9/

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2.4 Communication Objective

This category describes what specific objective will be accomplished by delivering the communications device. For example, if someone is held accountable for delivering a status report to project supervisors, the objective may be to communicate progress and the status of the project. Another possible objective for this scenario might be to review the recent project successes and short-term future targets. The project should be carefully analyzed: each piece of communication should have a specific objective. Otherwise, it should be evaluated whether or not there is a true need for that communication.

2.5 Delivery channels

When it comes to delivery, there are many issues to consider especially if there is a team that spreads across organizational or geographical boundaries. Proper information distribution makes information available to project stakeholders in a timely manner.

Following the communication plan ensures that all members of the project team are aware of their responsibilities to communicate with external stakeholders. The project manager should also consider the number of potential communication channels or paths as an indicator of the complexity of a project's communications. The number of potential communication channels or paths as an indicator of the complexity of a project's communications. The total number of potential communication channels is n(n-1)/2, where n represents the number of stakeholders. Thus, a project with 10 stakeholders has 10(10-1)/2 = 45 potential communication channels. A key component of planning the project's actual communications, therefore, is to determine and limit who will communicate with whom and who will receive what information. There are three clear communication channels that managers need to establish once the project has started (Figure 3). Managing and improving these channels can dramatically increase your chances of success.
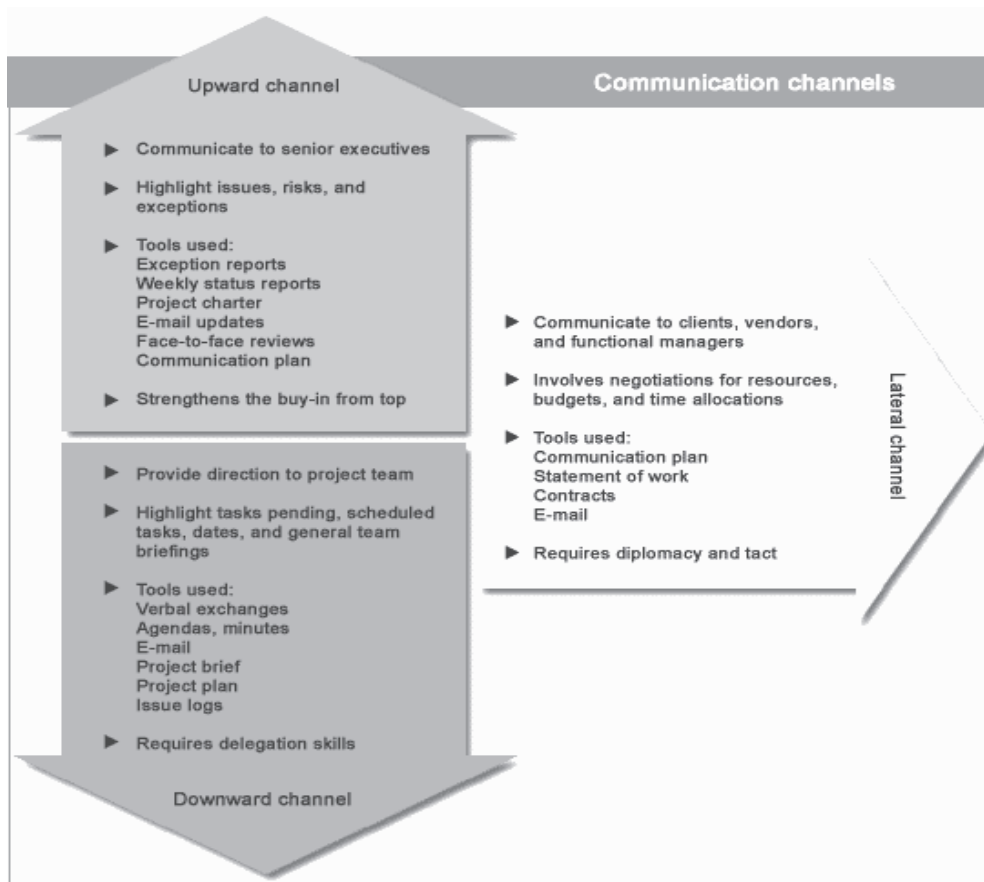

Figure 3: *Three main communication channels* /**10**/

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2.6 Communication Accountability

This category lists the name of the team member responsible for ensuring the communication occurs. Whether it is actually initiating the communication or ensuring someone else does, this category establishes ownership of the communication and indicates specific people to hold responsible if the project suffers a delay due to a communication failure. As part of the communications process, the sender is responsible for making the information clear and complete so that the receiver can receive it correctly, and for confirming that it is properly understood. The receiver is responsible for making sure that the information is received in its entirety, understood correctly, and acknowledged. A failure in communication can negatively impact the project.

2.7 Communication Recipients

This category describes which person or groups will be receiving the intended communication. For each communication objective, all of the stakeholders who should be privy to this communication, needs to be identified. Scaling the communication plan appropriately to fit the audience is necessary for continued project buy-in and interest. The ability to communicate with individuals on various levels with various project interests is important for successful project management. The project manager should become intimate with the needs and background of individuals involved with the project in order to relay an appropriate message to each member of the team, be it internal or external. Different individuals on the project team and those on the other end of the project have specific desires and individual objectives they are interested in achieving. Keeping individuals interested in the project is all part of the process. It is also important to consider confidentiality in relation to communication. If confidential information is directly or indirectly communicated to someone who should not know it, then the project or the permanent organisation may be adversely affected. Some typical examples of confidential information include industrial secrets, marketing information, and intellectual property.

2.8 Communication Frequency

This category describes how often the specific communication will take place. When deciding this it has to be determined how often it is necessary to relay the information so that it is effective, without throwing the stakeholders into information overload. While the plan documents help establish some rigor in the process, it should not become too rigid. If stakeholders are requiring more frequent communication, perhaps this is an indicator that the plan document needs to be updated as the project is not as straightforward as once thought.

3. Obstacles to project communications

Interfaces may be constraint that limit project success. In this context interfaces are boundaries between different groups within an extended project team. Many project communication problems have, in fact, occurred at interfaces. In this post I explore the notion of an interface as an obstacle to project communication. The most common interfaces are:
• Between organisations (e.g. customer-supplier),
• Between departments within an organisation (e.g. marketing-production),
• Between teams within a department (e.g testers-developers) and
• Within geografically distributed or virtual teams
The main communication obstacles (across interfaces listed above) can be boiled down to three broad ones /11/:
• *Political:* Whenever there are many groups involved, there's the possibility of vested interests and power games getting in the way of dialogue. Such political obstacles usually originate in the upper ranks of an organisational hierarchy, a step or two above levels at which projects are planned and executed. Project managers therefore need to make special efforts to be aware of the key political players in the organisation. In traditional corporate environments these might be functional or senior-level managers who aren't always obvious project stakeholders. Once the political players have been identified, the project manager should take steps to gain their confidence and buy-in on project goals. This should help eliminate political barriers to project communications. In my experience, it is best to settle political issues at the level where they originate - escalating political problems up the hierarchy (i.e. to the manager's manager) generally doesn't help, and may even be counterproductive.
• *Cultural:* Organisational culture is essentially the totality of assumptions and values commonly held within an organisation. This can vary considerably between organisations - some may be more open than others, for example. Communication at the interface between two organisations with vastly differing cultures can be difficult. For example, one might expect some differences of opinion at a joint project planning session involving a very forward-looking, can-do supplier and a conservative, risk-averse

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customer. Another example: in one organisation it might be considered perfectly natural for a developer to air a dissenting opinion at a meeting whereas in another it might not. Project managers can ease such difficulties by understanding the divergences in attitudes between the parties involved, and then acting as intermediaries to facilitate communication. In geographically distributed (or virtual) teams, differences between regional cultures can come into play. These could manifest themselves in a variety of ways such as differences in fluency of language, or social attitudes and behaviours.

- *Linguistic:* The term linguistic is used here in the sense of specialised terminology used by different disciplines such as Accounting, IT, Marketing etc. Often when specialists from diverse areas get together to discuss project related matters, there's a tendency for each side to make assumptions (often tacitly) regarding a common understanding of specialised jargon. This often leads to incomplete (at best) or incorrect (at worst) communication.

There are also two other impediments to look for that could at the early stage of project development signal possible project failure:

- *Micromanaging everything on the project:* Managers design very detaild project plans and start pushing themselves and the team to get every task done in the most incredible detail. This style of project manager actually stifles the entire communication process as a result of getting too involved with the details. The team soon realizes that a dictator has taken over the project, and they typically refrain from saying too much, or, worse yet, can't wait to leave the project. This style of management leads to mistrust and eventual frustration. The project manager usually only releases information on an "as-needed" basis and, as a result, the team becomes less creative or unwilling to come up with great ideas.

- *Allowing too much communication:* Sending too much communication can actually hamper the amount of work that gets done. Sharing every piece of data and information with everyone is the norm for this type of manager. Team members are actively encouraged to speak their minds, share their pains, and, eventually, a 40-hour workweek is made even longer, all due to overcommunication. The downside here is that when breakdowns do occur because of technical challenges, the project manager will have a tough time trying to bring the project back on track, due to communication paralysis.

A good communication plan includes also a conflict management strategy which is designed to make issues between stakeholders more manageable. Project managers minimize conflicts and resolve issues through constant communication with the project sponsor(s), project team members, and other project stakeholders /**12**/.

4. Conclusion

Communications Management includes the processes required to ensure timely and appropriate generation, collection, distribution, storage, retrieval, and ultimate disposition of project information. Effective project managers spend about 90% of their time communicating with team members and other project stakeholders, whether they are internal (at all organizational levels) or external to the organization. Effective communication creates a bridge between diverse stakeholders involved in a project, connecting various cultural and organizational backgrounds, different levels of expertise, and various perspectives and interests in the project execution or outcome. There are no misunderstandings; there are only failures to communicate. Project managers communicate by using different mediums to convey a message. It is truly critical for project managers to get the message across right the first time to avoid failures in the communication process. The important factors involve communicating how the project will be managed, including how information will flow into and out of the project. There should be also a clear and concise communication plan to address project responsibilities and the types of communication that will take place. The communication plan - like the project plan - is a necessary part of the project. However, when thinking of the project manager's role in communication planning, organisations and project teams too often think solely of the documents that establish the frequency, roles, responsibilities, recipients, and channel for which communication will be dispersed during a project. If the project manager doesn't look beyond the written word and the outline prepared in the early phases of a project, the project is setting up for losses. While it is important to understand who is involved in the project, it is equally important to understand what information is needed and the level at which they need to receive it.

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