What is Social Project Management and why should we care?

– Five and a half insights about the hottest trend in project management
Introduction

British science journalist Matt Ridley claims: “Innovation happens when ideas start having sex with each other”. Think of walkie talkies mating with telephones to spawn cellular telephony. Project management is currently going through a similar transformation in its adaptation of social media tools to facilitate collaboration and improve project outcomes. This whitepaper will outline what social project management is and how it improves life for project participants.
Project Management meet Social media

A project is a temporary social system where people come together to work towards a common goal – whether it’s launching a satellite into space, getting your political party re-elected or launching a groundbreaking new product before the competition does. The key to making projects run smoothly is understanding how you make a temporary social system perform better – the key question for any project manager.

Social media has been somewhat hijacked in terms of publicity by brands like Twitter and Facebook with a common misperception being that social media is mainly about private gossip and wasting time. This is missing the point completely. Social media is a revolution in media and communication. The world was once Mad Men-like, where communication was a one-way street. You listened to the radio, watched TV, read the newspaper, obeyed the CEO and so on. Social media has now transformed this landscape into a two-way street with many lanes, where any one individual can communicate with whomever they want. Quickly, efficiently and for free. This is why social media promises to be a liberator of projects. As project managers around the world can attest, the main reason projects fail is misinformation and miscommunication. Or as George Bernard Shaw once claimed, “the single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”
The first insight: Project Motivation is the scarce resource

It is bewildering to see many project managers spend significant amounts of time planning around resources like time and money while ignoring the social dynamics of their teams. Are people enjoying themselves? Are they talking to each other? Do they consider the task at hand to be meaningful? In his book *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, author Dan Pink attributes work motivation to three factors: autonomy, mastery and meaning. These are the three most vital components of any project. Are we giving people enough space to creatively solve problems? Are we trusting people to grow with their tasks? Is there a sense of meaning in what we do?

Social media tools – from real-time chat functions to Facebook-like news feeds from team members – cannot solve these components alone. But they can liberate team members from having to sit together physically. They can open up conversation and dialogue. They can collectively highlight issues and obstacles that would have rendered silence in the old world where communication was rare and one-dimensional. Simply put, social tools make people talk and share.
The second insight: Innovation is a social endeavor

Creativity and invention have traditionally been seen as a solo sport. A lone genius spawns a new idea and single-handedly changes the world. Innovation research has recently proven this image to be wrong. A new idea is a network. A network of synapses firing in a new direction in the brain. New ideas depend on social encounters to flourish. A new influence makes the brain’s neurons fire synapses in new ways and sharing the idea adds the new insights and creates more stakeholders in making the idea becoming a reality.

In the book *Where Good Ideas Come From*, Steven Johnson tells the story of how GPS was invented. Two US scientists built a device to listen to the signals transmitted by Russia’s Sputnik satellite in 1957. Proud of their accomplishment, they invited colleagues to listen in on the signals and someone suggested that they could determine the exact position of the satellite using the Doppler effect. Word of their machine spread and some months later, their boss asked if they could reverse the measurement. In other words, instead of finding a moving satellite from a fixed point on earth, could they find unknown points on earth given that they know where the satellite is? GPS was borne of ideas contributed by many people. Furthermore, GPS became a platform for ideas. Think of all the different ways it is used today – from cars, airplanes, logistics containers and cell phones. Ideas are enriched when they are exposed to the minds of many people and, to put it in Steven Johnson’s words, chance favours the connected mind…or should that be “the connected project”?
The third insight: Work with your wife or with whomever

A company’s knowledge and competencies used to end at its walls. If you had a problem or a question, you consulted someone inside the company. Most often somebody sitting directly beside your desk. Nowadays, you are a few clicks away from world-class expertise with the net – whether in the fields of software programming or Texas Hold’Em Poker. This is known as communities of practice – people sitting anywhere around the world yet connected by a common interest, value or goal. If you consider that half the online population has joined a brand community, you begin to see the power unleashed as the shackles of geography are loosened. Projects can suddenly become transparent, open not only to project members but to monitoring CFO’s or curious onlookers. Moreover, each team member carries with them a network of friends, relatives and professional acquaintances into a project.

These used to be invisible to others but can now become contributors as other members realize their utility in a certain phase of the project (“Hey, you know Jane at Toyota Motors – let’s hear what she has to say about this idea!”) You might even find yourself accidentally working with your husband or wife but we will let you decide whether that is a good or bad thing.
The fourth insight: Follow the conversation wherever you are

A key component in innovative companies is something called “information leakage”. These are firms that don’t shelter information within closed-off units and instead create an environment where sharing ideas and information is a key success factor. This might very well be the most important factor in helping a project succeed. If people were soulless robots, all we would need in project management would be a blueprint – what should be done and when?

But people – especially the kind of talented individuals we want to have as team members - tend to be imaginative beings who challenge authority and in the process discover new obstacles and challenges. Making people share these thoughts and insights is the lifeblood of a project. Social media tools enable all members to track and follow the conversation in the case they miss a day, tune out for a week’s holiday or similarly or, as many prefer nowadays, work from home. For new generations this way of work will be essential when choosing who to work for.
The fourth and a half insight: Facebook is more fun than Excel

There is a reason social media is viewed as a time-thief by many executives; it’s fun. In fact, some even claimed to become addicted to checking in to see what your friends are doing right now. It’s like reading a magazine written only for you about the things you care about the most. Social Project Management is about being inspired by the social features that make Facebook, Twitter and others such a success. From their ease-of-use and functionality to the user interface that people recognize – the news feed, the instant chat, the conversation forums. It’s therefore obvious today that team collaboration in user friendly tools are much more inspiring than planning the project in a static Excel sheet.
The fifth and last insight: Welcome to the real-time economy!

The most important word for businesses in the coming decade will be “Now!” We can today track consumer insights, competitor tactics and market movements in real-time. This is a challenging world in which to think strategically. After all, a strategy is based on the concept of planning ahead whereas the power of now needs us to act immediately. Companies cannot choose between strategic planning and real-time operations. They will need to do both. Projects could easily get stuck in the middle as they traditionally represent something on the side of daily operations.

In a world that is always-on, constantly online and where the mobile phone has become the most common device for accessing the net, project managers need to update their operations to a real-time world. There are many ways in which to do this but one of the first steps is to adapt the tools offered online. This is a technological shift but it can also act as a corporate culture shaper. Instead of seeing the organisation as a set of boxes, it becomes an ongoing conversation between human beings. Instead of a static project plan- a melting pot of insights, ideas and perspectives. This promises to change not only project management but the way entire companies and organisations functions in the 21st century. The question is; can you afford not to take part in this conversation?

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Projectplace International is the European leader in project collaboration on the Web. Since 1998, Projectplace has been driving the development of online project tools, inspired by Social Project Management. Today, the service is available in seven languages and has helped over 600,000 users to improve communication and collaboration in their projects. The company has 120 employees based at the headquarters in Stockholm and in local offices in Oslo, Copenhagen, Frankfurt and Amsterdam. Visit us at www.projectplace.com