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The Social Project Team: Using Social Collaboration & Networking to Enhance Project Success

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Introduction

Your project teams are already using collaborative and social networking tools, whether your organization embraces them or not. They're using these tools to build relationships, share information, and collaborate. This presents a great opportunity for improved project success. While many corporations struggle to find ways to live with the social/business networking and collaboration trend, project teams can thrive on it.

While many collaboration and networking tools exist, there are three that merit strong consideration by project teams: Microsoft® SharePoint®, Facebook, and LinkedIn®. These tools can help create an environment conducive to informal learning, team collaboration, and information access and decision making. But these benefits won't happen organically. It's up to project managers to take these collaboration and social networking tools and mold them into a powerful project management function.

Informal Learning

Informal learning (which takes place outside of a classroom) represents approximately 75 percent of actual corporate learning and training. The most valuable learning often takes place serendipitously, by random chance. Informal learning describes a lifelong process whereby individuals acquire attitudes, values, skills, and knowledge from daily experience and the educational influences and resources in his or her environment, from family and neighbors, from work and play, from the market place, the library and the mass media. Opportunities for this to happen have increased substantially since the dawn of online social networking.

Unlike formal classroom training, informal learning puts the individual learner in charge, enabling him or her to ask, "What do I need to learn today, this week, or before I can complete an assigned project task?"

Project teams can use collaborative and social networking tools to support this kind of informal learning by allowing team members to:

- Find and connect with an available expert who can answer that “very important” question.
- Read an internal white paper or article available in the corporate knowledgebase or project team site.
- Download a template that guides them through a new process.
- Attend a live or recorded internal webinar on a topic critical to their success.
- Complete a single module of an online training course that addresses the specific knowledge or skill they need.

SharePoint, for example, was recently introduced by a major corporation along with Microsoft® Project Server to create an effective project management tool suite on a \$1.2B program. It turns out that one of the most often-used sections of this particular collaborative tool suite is the Repository of project documentation. This large-scale library is organized by major topics, as well as by project phases. The tool suite enables project team members to quickly filter documents to drill down and “zero in” on exactly what is needed. Or, of course, project team members can use the search box and enter key words to find the target document. For smaller-scale projects (this specific tool suite houses 45 project plans representing approximately 500,000 tasks), Facebook and LinkedIn can create informal repository environments as well.

Team Collaboration

Today we’re all pressured to achieve project success with existing (or in some cases, diminished) staff. To accomplish this, each project team member must make bigger and better contributions than ever before. Everyone is a potential thought leader. Additionally, the collective intelligence of a group can far surpass that of an individual member of the group. In fact, researchers investigating how some of the world’s most productive scientists achieved great success have determined that measurable breakthroughs take place through simple, open, and honest conversations among risk-free collaboration. This is the essence of social networking for business.

This collaboration—the basis for bringing together the knowledge, experience and skills of multiple team members—requires effective team work. Collaborative and social networking tools can help achieve this by helping to:

- Provide portals with easy access to collaborative work spaces.
- Improve the ability of team members to share with each other.
- Boost project and organizational collaboration.
- Build and deepen project team member relationships.

The idea is to organize sites around common concepts such as a Calendar, Tasks, Contacts, a Risk List, Action Items, and a Document Library. Collaboration on document development becomes easier when drafts no longer need to be emailed to everyone, and when check-in/check-out features enable version control.

In addition, collaboration tools can encourage and deepen team relationships and networking. Since business “gets done” through relationships, this is a very positive development. By either adding team member profiles to SharePoint via the My Site feature, or by encouraging team members to use LinkedIn and Facebook, which both put user profiles center stage, people can easily share common interests with others.

Information Access and Decision Making

Communication, collaboration, and relationships provide a foundation that can enable more effective project work. However, one of the most potent reasons to embrace collaborative tools such as SharePoint is to improve information access and availability in order to enhance decision making and management of project risks.

The decision making process takes place in a “decision environment.” An ideal decision environment would provide all possible information, and all of this information would be accurate. In reality, however, information is constrained because the time and effort to gain it is usually limited. Since decisions must be made within a constrained environment, the major challenge of decision making is uncertainty. In other words, we can almost never have all information needed to make a decision with certainty, so most decisions involve an undeniable amount of risk.

According to the Project Management Institute (PMI[®]), poor information access is often reported as a primary cause of technology project failure. Providing improved information access for all team members enables faster use of critical information and, thus, enhanced decision making and project management.

Recent research indicates that people typically waste 15-30 minutes daily searching for information. This adds up fast for the typical project team. In fact, IDC research suggests that organizations waste up to \$14,000 per knowledge worker each year because those workers are unable to find information, forcing them to resort to recreating existing data.

One way to improve information access is to simplify workflows by standardizing and streamlining project processes. This means that people no longer have to remember what to do within a process; instead, they are alerted when a process requires their response. For instance, Microsoft Office Professional 2007, in conjunction with Microsoft SharePoint Server 2007, includes built-in workflow services for tracking feedback and approval. Another way to improve information access is to organize the

collaborative site around project phases, processes, and/or repositories to make it easier for team members to quickly find the information they need. SharePoint also supports dashboards and KPIs, which compile critical information that project managers and team leads can use to determine progress and status and to make decisions.

Conclusion

Project teams should be taking full advantage of collaboration and social networking tools to enhance informal learning, collaboration, and information access and decision making. While technology is never a silver bullet, collaboration and social networking tools provide a strong foundation for substantial project management improvements. SharePoint is a great example of this, when it is implemented and configured to meet the needs of an individual project and project team members. Success also requires providing the training, standards, and processes that team members will need for effective use. And finally, don't neglect to encourage and advocate use during and after the rollout of any new tool.

Embrace collaborative and social networking technology to ensure that your project team members have the best information and the tools they need to access and use it efficiently. British politician Benjamin Disraeli once said that as a general rule, the most successful person in life is the one who has the best information.

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