

Is communications a headache for project management? Or a saving grace?

Highlights of the communications survey conducted during May 2009

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Recommendations

Include communications from the beginning

Including communications in your initial planning means it is integrated into your project and that you regularly consider the views and information needs of your key audiences. You are more likely to allocate sufficient budget and ensure your project stays aligned to its original objectives.

Understand the heart of communications

At its heart communications is all about relationships with people, in your case they are those people who have a stake in your project – your stakeholders. Don't get sidetracked by the detail of print versus online, tools and processes, or measurement. Start by thinking about the people you want to influence and then decide the best ways to build relationships with these people.

Identify your stakeholders

Identify everyone who can impact the outcome of your project and then prioritise them according to their influence. This will give you your own list of key influencers and opinion formers. Spend time listening to each group's perspectives on the issues your project is tackling, understand their communication needs and decide how involved you want them to be.

Keep communications planning simple

The simpler the better should be your aim as far as communications is concerned. Your plan should include the minimum you need to provide a framework that guides all those responsible for relationships with your stakeholder groups.

You will probably include clearly defined objectives, the risks of poor communications, a list of prioritised target audiences, core messages, a portfolio of channels, monitoring and feedback mechanisms, and roles and responsibilities.

Develop a flexible schedule of communications activities

Develop a flexible schedule of communications activities that is easy to update and spells out for each activity its objective, target audience, channel, timescales, measurement and responsibilities. Again, keeping it simple will make your schedule easy to understand and monitor.

Tailor activities to stakeholder preferences

Instead of sending the same communications to all your stakeholders, you should tailor messages and the channels you use so that each audience pays attention and reacts positively to what you say. There are lots of ways to tailor channels and messages. You might change design, language, or frequency, introduce new channels, or using channels managed by other teams.

Re-engage senior executive support

Regular communications tailored to their needs is the most effective way of building relationships with senior managers, of getting them interested in your project and persuading them to be supportive throughout its life.

Persuade end users your project benefits them

End users – those people whose working lives will be changed – will be supportive when they are convinced that your project benefits them, their colleagues and their customers. You can use communications to understand what they think and feel, as well as how to minimise the risks for them, overcome resistance and create desire for change.

Consider involving stakeholders in your project

There are lots of ways you can involve your key stakeholders, from asking for their views to having their representatives on your project communications team.

Choose the level of involvement that makes the most of their potential influence.

Monitor and measure communications

Ensure you do have measurable communications objectives in your plan and be willing to allocate budget to measuring them. You should track changes in knowledge of your project, involvement, attitudes and perceptions. Monitor the performance of each communications activity also, looking at both efficiency and effectiveness.

Demonstrate return on investment

Demonstrate return on communications investment to justify your use of resources – both people and money. By doing so you link your communications activities to achievement and this will make it easier to ask for the communications resources you need for this and future projects.

Publicise your successes

Publicise the successes of your project both to your stakeholders and within your organisation. If you don't tell people how well you are doing how will they know what you have achieved.

Conclusions

Communications is a key tool that helps project teams achieve their original objectives and deliver successful projects while at the same time meeting their budgets and timescales.

By and large project managers understand the value of regular communications with their key audiences and include communications from the initial planning stages. As a result their projects are more successful.

Most take a structured approach to communications and clearly define objectives and desired outcomes for their communication activities. They spend time identifying the risks of poor communications, measure their activities and include mechanisms to gather feedback from their audiences.

Many of the respondents have realised that they do not need complex communications activities to get their messages across and that simpler communications can be more effective and involve less effort.

Their aims are to ensure everyone who can influence their project stays engaged and that issues are identified and resolved before they have a detrimental impact.

Even with good planning project teams do face communications challenges, many of the issues boil down to communications having a low priority within their organisations.

Their biggest challenge is keeping senior executives interested and supportive, followed by difficulties communicating key messages about the project to a range of diverse audience groupings.

Unengaged senior management is not only down to poor communications on the part of the project team. Executives are under increased pressure from their boards and shareholders to meet performance and revenue targets during this economic downturn. They are becoming more cynical about the value of communications and more reluctant to talk to employees.

Cultural differences and the diversity of audiences, even within each of the countries in which they operate, means project teams do tailor information for their key audiences.

Teams that don't have budget to reach all their audiences prioritise communications activities to audiences that have the greatest impact on their project's outcomes.

Project managers are proactive in finding solutions to the communications challenges they face, many have implemented at least one solution. The most popular solutions focus on relationships with key stakeholders, listening to their views, providing information from their perspectives, and involving them more in the project.

Much effort has also gone into improving communications channels. Teams have tailored existing channels, created new ones and made better use of channels managed by other teams such as the staff magazine and intranet.

They are far more likely now to use different channels for different audiences and to engage in face-to-face activities to build relationships and get close to opinion formers and influencers.

Around a sixth of projects are completed on budget and a third are completed on time. Most projects that over-run, miss their financial targets and deadlines by 10 per cent or less.

However, too stringent a focus on budgets and deadlines may mean not enough focus is given to identifying and fixing the core problem and ensuring longer-term sustainability.

Communications is considered a key tool that helps project teams achieve their original objectives while at the same time meeting their budgets and timescales.

Deliver successful projects using communications

Discover the secrets professional communicators use to win over key stakeholders in CommsAbilities free ezine

People are the heart of any change programme, regular communications that make them feel involved are critical to success. So how well are you doing, to find out tick the boxes below that apply to your project?

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Our project leader is perceived as credible and expert by senior execs | <input type="checkbox"/> Key people are positive about our project's contribution to the triple bottom line – that is finances, people and the environment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> We've won the support and trust of key people, as a result our project has high profile within the company | <input type="checkbox"/> Project team members, including me, are recognised for our achievements and given new career-enhancing responsibilities |
| <input type="checkbox"/> End users believe our project is improving their working lives and their relationships with customers and colleagues | <input type="checkbox"/> There is a tangible improvement that project team members feel proud of and for which we can legitimately claim the credit. |

Now for some good news! You too can turn your project around and tick each of these boxes when you learn the secrets of great communications. Just sign up for my ezine CommsAbilities at www.commsabilities.com and over the coming weeks and months I will share with you the secrets I have learnt in my 25 years as a communications consultant.

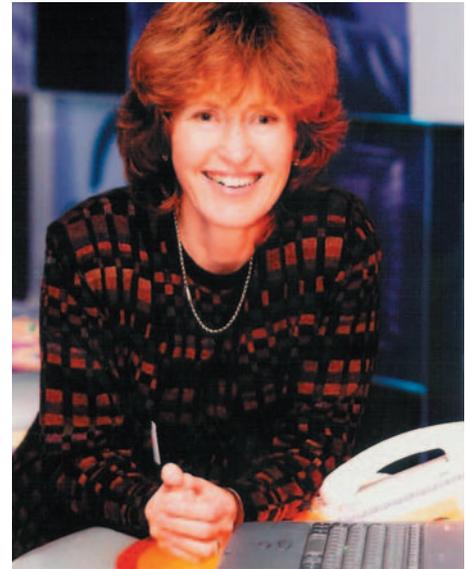
I'm looking forward to connecting with you

Jo Ann Sweeney

About the author

Jo Ann Sweeney is known for her ability to clearly communicate technical and complex information so audiences understand both the detail and the relevance to themselves.

As a consultant she develops communication strategies and manages communications activities for change programmes. Clients including multinationals, government departments and charities.



Her results-focused approach ensures communications achieve their objectives, meet audience expectations, make best use of resources and deliver value to reputation and the bottom line.

Projects have spanned skills development, new product launches, office relocations, redundancies and redeployment, political lobbying, technology rollouts and brand makeovers.

Jo Ann has more than 25 years experience and is a trained journalist, chartered marketer and fellow of the Chartered Institute of Marketing, fellow of the British Association of Communicators in Business and member of the UK Institute of Directors.

For more information visit www.sweeneycomms.com