

## Chapter 7

# Project Management Communication

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## 7.1 The Importance of Project Communications Management

- Many experts agree **that the greatest threat to the success** of any project, especially IT projects, is a **failure to communicate**.
- Many problems in other knowledge areas, such as an unclear scope or unrealistic schedules, indicate problems with communication.
- It is crucial for project managers and their teams to make good communication a priority, especially with top management and other key stakeholders.



- When computer professionals communicate with people who aren't as proficient with or knowledgeable about computers—a group that includes many business professionals and senior managers—technical jargon can often complicate matters and create confusion.
- Even though most people use computers today, the gap between users and developers increases as technology advances. This gap in knowledge and experience causes some of the communication problems between technical professionals and their business colleagues.



- Most IT-related degree programs have many technical requirements, but few require courses in communications (speaking, writing, listening), psychology, sociology, and the humanities.
- People often assume that learning these soft skills is easy, but they *are* important skills, so people must learn and develop them.
- Many studies have shown that IT professionals need these soft skills just as much or even more than other skills. You cannot totally separate technical skills and soft skills when working on IT projects.



Studies continue to show a high demand and the importance of good communication and business skills. According to an article in the *International Journal of Business and Social Science*:

- Organisations are looking for workers with the correct mix of technical, soft, and business skills.



- The most important non-technical skills are problem solving, team work, listening, the ability to adapt to new technologies and languages, time management, the ability to transfer knowledge to application, multitasking, verbal communication, the ability to visualize and conceptualize, “be the customer” mentality, interpersonal skills, understanding business culture, inter-team communication, and give and receive constructive criticism.
- “The need for these non-technical skills is so great that some IT companies indicate that they will hire individuals with minimum technical skills so long as they demonstrate solid soft and business skills.”



There are three main processes in project communications management:

- 1) *Planning communications management* involves determining the information and communications needs of the stakeholders. Who needs what information? When will they need it? How will the information be given to them? The outputs of this process include a communications management plan, project management plan updates, and project documents updates.



- 2) *Managing communications* involves creating, distributing, storing, retrieving, and disposing of project communications based on the communications management plan. The main outputs of this process are project communications, project management plan updates, project documents updates, and organizational process assets updates.
- 3) *Monitoring communications* involves ensuring that stakeholder communication needs are met.



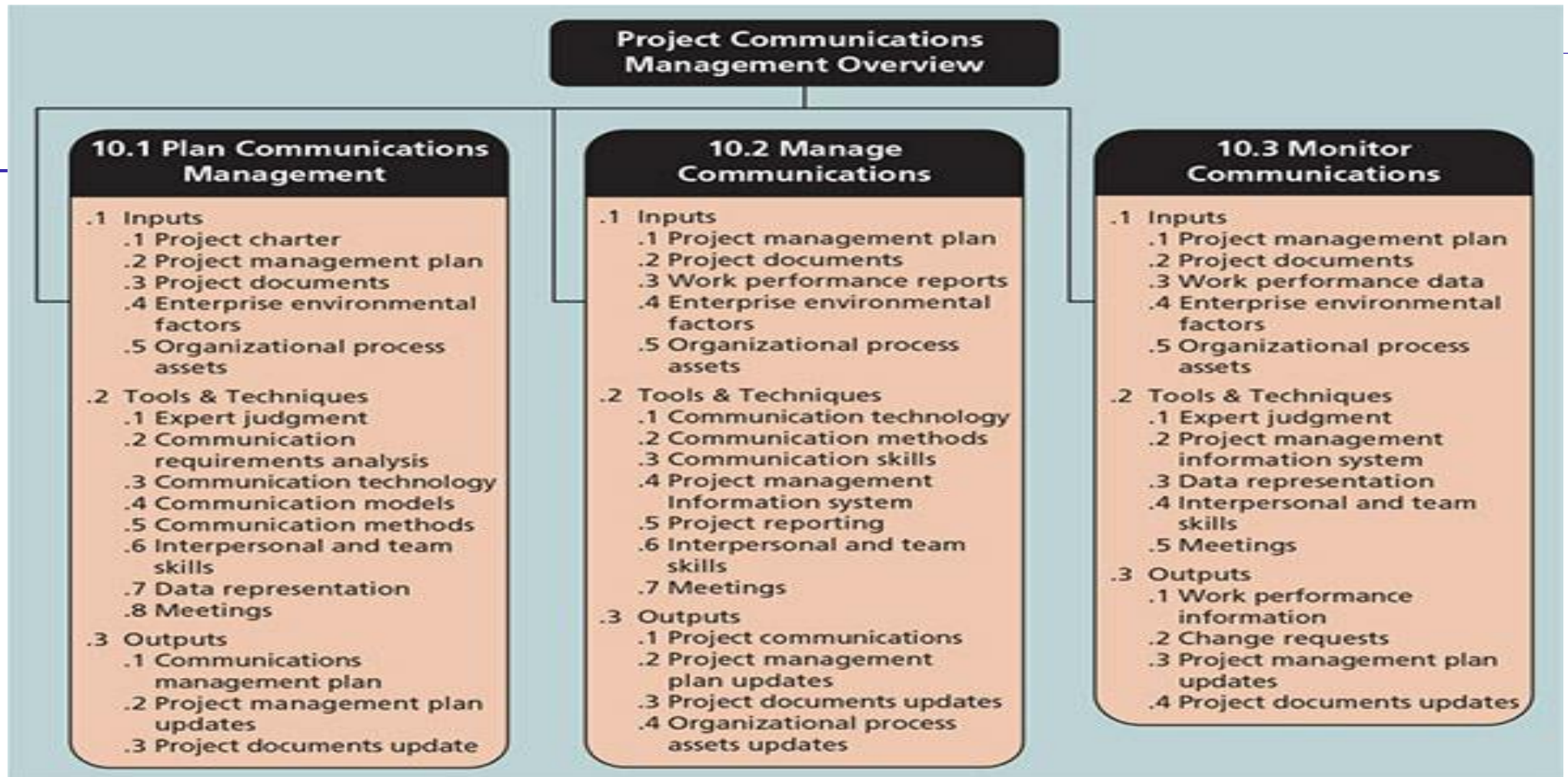


Figure 7.1 Summarises the inputs, tools and techniques, and outputs of project communications management.



## 7.2 Keys to Good Communications

Project managers say they spend as much as 90 percent of their time communicating. Just as it is difficult to understand people and their motivations, it is also difficult to communicate with people effectively.



## 7.2.1 Focusing on Group and Individual Communication Needs

Many top managers think they can just add more people to a project that is falling behind schedule. Unfortunately, this approach often causes more setbacks because of the increased complexity of communications. It is important to understand individual and group preferences for communications. As you learned before, people have different personality traits that often affect their communication preferences.



Example:

If you want to praise a project team member for doing a good job,

- **Most introverts** would be more comfortable receiving that praise in private, while **most extroverts** would like everyone to hear about their good work.
- **An intuitive** person would want to understand how something fits into the big picture, while **a sensing** person would prefer to have more focused, step-by-step details.



- Strong thinkers would want to know the logic behind information, while feeling people would want to know how the information affects them personally as well as other people.
- A judging person would be very driven to meet deadlines with few reminders, while a perceiving person would need more assistance in developing and following plans.



However, every person is unique, so you cannot simply generalize based on a personality profile or other traits. You need to seek first to understand, as author Stephen Covey suggests in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, and put yourself in someone else's shoes before you can truly communicate.



It is important for project managers and their team members to be aware of their own communication styles. Many IT professionals have different personality traits than the general population, such as being more introverted, intuitive, and oriented to thinking (as opposed to feeling). These personality differences can lead to miscommunication with people who are extroverted, sensation-oriented, and feeling-oriented.



For example, a user guide written by an IT professional might not provide the detailed steps most users need. Many users also prefer face-to-face meetings or short videos to learn how to use a new system instead of trying to follow a written guide. They might prefer to have a two-way conversation in which they can get hands-on experience and ask questions on the spot.





Also, the receiver of information rarely interprets it exactly as the sender intended. Therefore, it is important to provide several methods of communication, such as written words, visuals, videos, and meetings, and an environment that promotes open dialogue. Instead of assuming that the receiver understands, you can build in a feedback loop to make sure.



Geographic location and cultural background also affect the complexity of project communications. If project stakeholders are in different countries, it is often difficult or impossible to schedule times for two-way communication during normal working hours. Language barriers can also cause communication problems; the same word may have very different meanings in different languages. Times, dates, and other units of measure are also interpreted differently. People from some cultures also communicate in ways that might make others uncomfortable.



## 7.2.2 Formal and Informal Methods for Communicating

It is not enough for project team members to submit reports to their project managers and other stakeholders and then assume that everyone who needs to know the information will read the reports. Occasionally, that approach might work, but many people prefer informal communications.

About half the general population are extroverts, so they enjoy talking to other people. Often, many nontechnical professionals—from colleagues to managers—prefer to have a two-way conversation about a project rather than reading detailed reports, e-mails, or Web pages to try to find pertinent information.



Many colleagues and managers want to know the people working on their projects and develop a trusting relationship with them. They use informal discussions about the project to develop these relationships. Therefore, project managers must be good at nurturing relationships through good communication. Many experts believe that the difference between good project managers and excellent project managers is their ability to nurture relationships and use empathic listening skills.



Oral communication also helps build stronger relationships among project personnel and project stakeholders. People like to interact with each other to get a true feeling for how a project is going. Research conducted by Albert Mehrabian and discussed in his book *Silent Messages* indicated that in face-to-face interactions information is communicated through body language, tone of voice, and the spoken content.

The lesson for project communications today is that it is important to pay attention to more than someone's actual words. A person's tone of voice and body language say a lot about how they feel.



Effective creation and distribution of information depends on project managers and project team members having good communication skills. Communicating includes many different dimensions such as writing, speaking, and listening, and project personnel need to use all of these dimensions in their daily routines. In addition, different people respond positively to different levels or types of communication.



### 7.2.3 Distributing Important Information in an Effective and Timely Manner

It is important to include detailed technical information that affects critical performance features of products or services developed in a project. It is even more important to document any changes in technical specifications that might affect product performance. The information should not be buried in an attachment with the supplier's new product brochure.



People have a tendency to avoid reporting bad news. However, people tend to become overwhelmed by too much information, and they might not understand what it means to them on their particular project.

Oral communication via meetings and informal talks helps bring important information– positive or negative–into the open. Because IT projects often require a lot of coordination, it is a good idea to have short, frequent meetings.





## 7.2.4 Setting the Stage for Communicating Bad News

It is important to put information in context, especially if it's bad news. If there is a problem, know how it will affect the whole project and the organization. Bad news might seem like a major setback, but you can recommend steps to take to mitigate a problem.



## 7.2.5 Determining the Number of Communication Channels

Another important aspect of communications is the number of people involved in a project. As the number increases, the complexity of communication increases because there are more channels or pathways through which people can communicate.



You can use the following simple formula to determine the number of communication channels as the number of people involved in a project increases:

$$\text{Number of communication channels} = \frac{n(n-1)}{2}$$

where  $n$  is the number of people involved

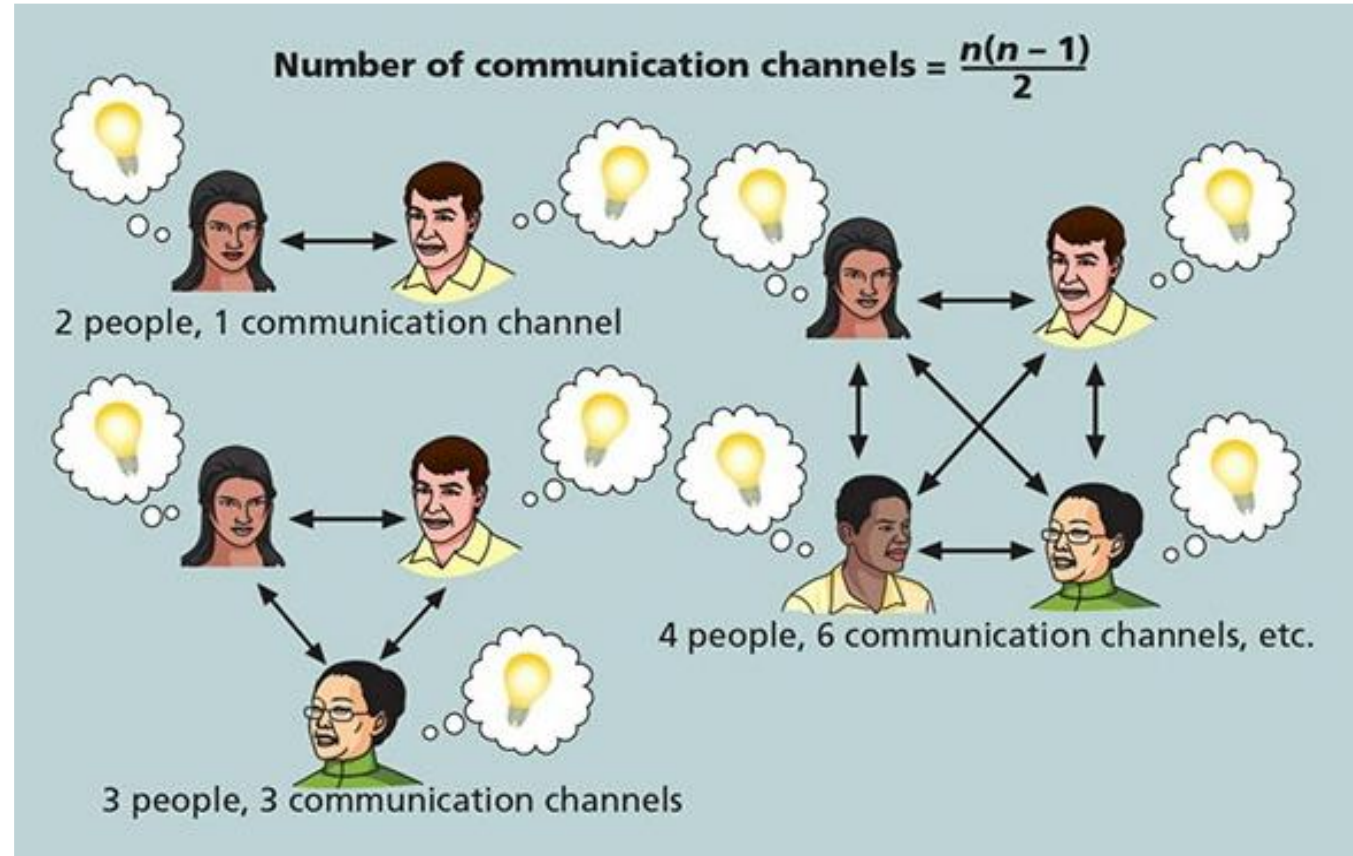


Figure 7.3 The impact of the number of people on communication channels



Good communicators consider many factors before deciding how to distribute information, including the size of the group, the type of information, and the appropriate communication medium.

People often send e-mail messages that are quickly written and therefore not as carefully planned as they should be. While this can be a problem even with a small group of five recipients, the negative effects multiply many times when sending such a message to a group of 500 people or more.



## 7.3 Planning Communications Management

Because communication is so important on projects, every project should include a **communications management plan** –a document that guides project communications.

The communications management plan should address the following items:



1. Stakeholder communications requirements
2. Information to be communicated, including format, content, and level of detail
3. Who will receive the information and who will produce it
4. Suggested methods or technologies for conveying the information
5. Frequency of communication
6. Escalation procedures for resolving issues
7. Revision procedures for updating the communications management plan
8. A glossary of common terminology



It is important to know what kinds of information will be distributed to particular stakeholders. By analysing stakeholder communication needs, you can avoid wasting time or money on creating or disseminating unnecessary information.





**Table 7. 1 Sample stakeholder communications analysis**

Stakeholders	Document Name	Document Format	Contact Person	Due
Customer management	Monthly status report	Hard copy and meeting	Tina Erndt, Tom Silva	First of month
Customer business staff	Monthly status report	Hard copy	Julie Grant, Sergey Cristobal	First of month
Customer technical staff	Monthly status report	E-mail	Li Chau, Nancy Michaels	First of month
Internal management	Monthly status report	Hard copy and meeting	Bob Thomson	First of month
Internal business and technical staff	Monthly status report	Intranet	Angie Liu	First of month
Training subcontractor	Training plan	Hard copy	Jonathan Kraus	November 1
Software subcontractor	Software implementation plan	E-mail	Najwa Gates	June 1



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## 7.4 Managing Communications

Managing communications is a large part of a project manager's job. Getting project information to the right people at the right time and in a useful format is just as important as developing the information in the first place. The stakeholder communications analysis serves as a good starting point for managing communications. Project managers and their teams must decide who receives particular information, but they must also determine the best way to create and distribute the information.



### 7.4.1 Using Technology to Enhance Information Creation and Distribution

Technology can facilitate the process of creating and distributing information, when used effectively. Most people and businesses rely on e-mail, instant messaging, websites, telephones, cell phones, texting, and other technologies to communicate. Using a project management information system, you can create and organize project documents, schedules, meeting minutes, and customer requests, and make them available in an electronic format.

You can store this information locally or in the cloud. Storing templates and samples of project documents electronically can make accessing standard forms easier, thus making information distribution easier. It is also important to have backup procedures in place in case something goes wrong with normal communications technologies.



## 7.4.2 Selecting the Appropriate Communication Methods and Media

There are three broad classifications for communication methods:

1. *Interactive communication*: As the name implies, two or more people interact to exchange information via meetings, phone calls, or video conferencing. This method is usually the most effective way to ensure common understanding.
2. *Push communication*: Information is sent or pushed to recipients without their request via reports, e-mails, faxes, voice mails, and other means. This method ensures that the information is distributed, but does not ensure that it was received or understood.
3. *Pull communication*: Information is sent to recipients at their request via websites, bulletin boards, e-learning, knowledge repositories like blogs and wikis, and other means.































