Chapter 40

Using Twitter for Collaborative Student and Project Manager Learning:
Reflections from a UK Pilot Project

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents an insight into a pilot project which took place at a UK higher education institution which used Twitter as a social media tool for engaging industry managers and students in sharing knowledge and collaborating on problem solving in the field of project management. Project management education and team formation literature is discussed, as well as reflections from the authors on the advantages and challenges for project teams on using Twitter as a social media tool. The wider implications for Project Managers adopting social media is considered more broadly, and important factors are recommended when making decisions whether to use social media to encourage teamwork and co-operation.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there have been an increasing number of ways for people to connect using social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and Yammer, amongst many others. Adopting social media as a way of linking with like-minded individuals has now become an everyday regular mode of communication, being instantly available on mobile phones, tablets and laptops which can be used at any time across the globe.

The reasons for using social media as a method for communicating within teams, specifically project teams are abundant. As project management increases as a profession, the need to involve a wide base

of stakeholders is fundamental to project success (Assundani et al 2010). Furthermore, communication across different countries is becoming less expensive and more efficient with the integration of technology on international projects. Additionally, the notion that projects are a central part of organizations has seen the escalation of collaborative project software being introduced in teams. It remains to be seen how effective communication can truly be when using social media as the dominant mode of exchange in preference to face-to-face. There are questions to be asked when deciding if, how, and when, social media should be used to encourage the exchange of ideas and enhance teamwork. Regardless, it is clear that social media is here to stay as a means of communication both socially and professionally, and therefore it is imperative that organizations understand how to harness the full use and potential of these tools.

The basis of this chapter focusses on the use of Twitter as a method of engagement, learning, and sharing of ideas using a case study from the United Kingdom (UK), which took place at a Higher Education Institution. The authors initiated a project to enable students and industry professionals to discuss project management issues and challenges in a collaborative team based environment. The objective of this social media project was to enhance student involvement in debate and discourse with employers in creating an informal community of practice where project management was the main focus.

This chapter will discuss the evolving nature of project management education and the need for both industry professionals and project management students to engage in collaborative learning in order to enhance both the employability of students, and enabling managers to reflect on their own practice and understanding. The make-up of how teams collaborate on projects is changing at pace, and the literature regarding how project teams come together, communicate and learn from each other using technology is also presented. The authors reflections and perspectives of the value and challenges in using Twitter for this type of endeavor are discussed in detail. Finally, the future implications for adopting the use of a) Twitter, and b) social media more broadly for project teams are presented. This chapter will be of interest to project management professionals who are considering using Twitter or other social media tools as a method of communication to encourage dialogue in project teams.

BACKGROUND

Project Management Learning

Traditional project management education, focusing on the development of technical skills, is seen by many as the best way to educate and train future project managers (Pant & Baroudi 2008, Schultz 2008) and is often facilitated by the use of established project management approaches such as Agile, PMBoK and PRINCE2. Many in the industry have gained their understanding of project management either as part of a degree programme, which included project management units or modules, or during intensive week long training and professional development programmes within, or outside of their organizations. Whilst these sessions provide plenty of technical knowledge they allow little opportunity for reflection and application to real world scenarios and issues. For example, project management taught as part of an undergraduate degree involves a high proportion of students who have never worked with project management. Those on intensive week long training and development programmes, who often do have experience within the field are given little time to reflect upon theories being taught and apply them to their practice until after the training has occurred.

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