Communication Risks Within and Around a Virtual Team
By Gary Hamilton, Jeff Hodgkinson and Gareth Byatt

In recent years, the way that projects take shape has evolved at or near the same pace as the information and communications technology we use in our business and personal lives. Not long ago, a project team was either co-located (all team members in the same close proximity), or connected together via express couriers and air travel (regular travel to meet face–to-face was reasonable, prudent, the best method, and acceptable in cost).

Then came the email revolution. Project teams could readily and efficiently communicate in an asynchronous manner, 'virtual' team members were welcomed and new ways of achieving productivity were discovered. Project productivity certainly benefitted from this approach, but risks also became apparent (which we will elaborate on below). Nowadays, video conferencing, application sharing technologies, and other technology advances have enabled project teams to be assembled with talent from anywhere, regardless of location, while minimizing location costs. Communications technologies are so readily available that the virtual project team member is now commonplace in today's working environment.

Depending on the industry in which you operate, the percentage of virtual team members on a project will vary and in some cases your entire project team may be virtual – meaning no two members geographically reside in the same location, nor meet often (if at all). The Linux development was a classic example of such a team. For sure, projects where something physical is being put together always require people in the same physical location to coordinate it (such as construction of a new building, or a new mining development), however these projects also have many more virtual partners than before (such as designers and offsite manufacturers working remotely). Regardless of the percentage allocation of your team that is "virtual", communication risks exist. What are the key risks and how can the project manager effectively mitigate them?

The basic theory of communication involves a sender, a receiver, a message and a medium. When the medium of the message is virtual, such as email or instant messaging, risks exist in that the "intended message" may not be the "message received", Email and the like does not give you the emphasis, inflection, tone, or body language that you have when dealing with people face to face, or to a lesser extent by phone. Over the course of our careers, we have all probably been guilty of at least once, or known someone, who has sent an email, or instant message only to live to regret it as the intended message got distorted and ended up requiring far more "patching up" communication to resolve the matter than the time taken to craft the original email message.

Lack of body language, tone, facial expressions and hand gestures make it very difficult to effectively communicate across all forms of virtual communication, especially when cultural and generational differences are factored into the equation. A project manager needs to be aware of these differences as well as the communication preferences of every stakeholder and adapt their communications accordingly. In order to mitigate communication risks, the project manager should think hard about how their team members select and use the most appropriate communication mediums for the messages being delivered. In the table below are some suggestions for considering communication mediums.

Communication Medium	Suggested Uses in Virtual Teams	Don't Do This
Email	Group updates, work statuses, general management updates, delivery of documents and in some cases sign-off on deliverables. Key: keep emails clear and concise – "write for your audience, not for yourself"	Send an 'emotive' message. Any difficult discussion should be dealt with in person, or if not possible by phone.
Instant Messages	Quick and immediate clarifications, team discussions	Use for collecting sign-offs or Requirements gathering, or any other formal requirement. Send an 'emotive' message. Do by phone or in person. Use during another meeting. Remember: IM's can be stored and retrieved by law in most countries, the same as emails.
Telephone	General project discussions, conference calls to review progress etc Personal Performance reviews for the project (if there is no way they can be held face-to-face), conflict resolution, project on-boarding and off boarding,	Leave a message without giving detail information as to why you called, when, who you are, etc.
Conference Calls	Regular project team meetings	Continue with a sensitive discussion post a conference call, as others could still be on it.
Video Conference	Group and team meetings, more formal work reviews, Training As close to face-to-face as you can get (some modern video conferencing is very advanced, but expensive)	Don't use for unimportant events, it is costly.
Face to Face	General meetings and daily work interactions, Celebrate successes, Training, Project conclusion, Major Milestones	Don't forget those that cannot travel to meet face to face, consider the best options for them.

Virtual teams and virtual team members offer many advantages to projects that, overall, far outweigh the communication risks that they imply. The number of virtual workers on projects continues to grow each year. In order for you as a project manager to effectively manage your project, make sure you understand the communication styles that are required for in-situ and virtual team members, and ensure the appropriate communications mediums for the messages being sent are being used for the benefit of your project.

About Our Authors

Gareth Byatt, Gary Hamilton, and Jeff Hodgkinson are experienced PMO, program, and project managers who through networking developed a mutual friendship. Realizing a common goal to help others, in February 2010, agreed to collaborate on a five (5) year program goal to write 100 PM subject articles (pro bono) for publication in any/all PM subject websites, newsletters, and professional magazines / journals.

Their mission is to help proliferate program and project management practices, add value and promote the PM profession, to be a positive influence to the PM Community, and in earnest hope readers gain benefit from the advice of their 60+ years of combined experience and expertise. To date, they have completed 14 articles and have a planned output of 1-2 articles per month. Although each of them are well credentialed, together they have the distinction of being 3 of only 25 worldwide that hold the Project Management Institute's PMP®, PgMP®, and PMI-RMP®. Credentials and continue to obtain others. Gary and Jeff are 2 of only 14 PM practiconers that also have the PMI-SP® (total of four PMI credentials).

Along with writing articles, each also champions a role in the overall writing program collaboration process:
- Gareth manages all requests for additional guest author collaborations
- Gary manages the article development tracking and readership metrics
- Jeff manages the article distribution and new readership demographics

Gareth Byatt is Head of the IT Global Program Management Office for Lend Lease Corporation. Gareth has worked in several countries, and is currently located in Sydney, Australia. Gareth has 14+ years of project and program management experience in IT and construction. Gareth can be contacted through LinkedIn.

Gareth holds numerous degrees, certifications and credentials in program and project management as follows: an MBA and first-class undergraduate management degree, PMP®, PgMP®, and PRINCE2. Gareth is also the APAC Region Director for the PMI's PMOSIG and chairs several peer networking groups.

Gary Hamilton is the Manager of the PMO and Governance within Bank of America's Learning and Leadership Development Products organization. Gary has 14+ years of project and program management experience in the IT, Finance and HR. He has won several internal awards for results achieved from projects and programs he managed as well as being named one of the Business Journal's Top 40 Professionals in 2007. Contact Gary through LinkedIn.

Gary holds numerous degrees and certifications in IT, management, and project management and they include: an advanced MBA degree in finance, and has the PgMP®, PMP®, PMI-RMP®, PMI-SP®, ITIL-F, and SSGB professional certifications. Gary also is a 2009 Presidents' Volunteer Award recipient for his charitable work with local fire services and professional groups.

Jeff Hodgkinson is the IT Cloud Program Manager for Intel Corporation. He is a 30+ year veteran of Intel Corporation with a progressive career as a Program/Project Manager. He lives in Chandler, Arizona and volunteers in various support positions for the Phoenix PMI Chapter.

Jeff received the 2010 PMI (Project Mgmt Institute) Distinguished Contribution Award for his support of the Project Management profession from the Project Management Institute. Jeff was also the 2nd place finalist for the 2009 Kerzner International Project Manager of the Year Award™. Due to helping people achieve their goals, 'Hodge' as referred to by his many friends is one of the most well networked and recommended people on LinkedIn.

Jeff holds numerous certifications and credentials in program and project management as follows: CCS, CDT, CPC™, CIPM™, CPPM–L10, CDRP, CSQE, IPMA Level-B®, ITIL-F, MPM™, PME™, PMOC, PMP®, PgMP®, PMI-RMP®, PMW, and SSGB.

He is an expert at program and project management principles and best practices and enjoys sharing his experiences with audiences around the globe as a keynote speaker.

Listed trademarks are the property of their registered owners