

Eight Times to Abandon E-mail

By Bob McGannon, PMP

As busy project managers manage their precious personal and project schedules, they look for any means to save time and money. The need to do this is amplified by the economic conditions present today. A tempting target for time and cost reduction activities is the communication tasks that are a major part of the successful project manager's responsibility. We are tempted to try to save time and money by foregoing face-to-face meetings or the organisation of conference calls, opting instead to send quick and cheap e-mails. Don't do it! E-mails are fraught with danger and lurking costs due to miscommunication and misunderstandings. Here are eight circumstances when e-mail should NOT be used as the main form of communication.

1) Engaging in debates, deriving new solutions or settling complaints

The agenda for your meeting or your objective should be a primary consideration for when to use e-mail (or any other medium, for that matter). You are simply not going to be successful at achieving your objectives using a 'low touch' tool when you need a highly interactive process to achieve your objective

2) Changing tasks or assigning new tasks to a team member

When new tasks are introduced, team members can have significant questions about the nature of the project, its status and the relationships between their work and the work of other team members. Confirming an assignment via e-mail is a viable alternative. But, when assigning tasks an interactive discussion needs to take place to ensure valuable time and money aren't spent producing a deliverable that is different from what is required. In addition, the value and productivity of a team member can be enhanced if he or she feels more integrated into the team and fully understand the significance of his or her deliverable to the project and the sponsoring business. Only a richer communication maximises the probability of this enhanced value.

3) Anything other than an 'all is well' status report to your sponsor

The wise project manager will take any and every opportunity to ensure the project status is fully understood by the sponsor. Interactive discussions with this critical stakeholder can ensure that understanding, and can also provide an opportunity to ensure stakeholder perceptions are clear and aligned with reality. Potential risks, business trends and personnel status (which wouldn't be discussed in a publicly available status report) can also be discussed when a face-to-face conversation with the sponsor is arranged.

4) Any time there is a change to the triple constraints

The significance of changes to the triple constraints can be easily underestimated by the project manager, especially if the project manager does not have extensive technical experience in the areas being managed. Team member perceptions and rumors can easily spread when these significant project alterations are made. A proactive project manager will ensure these changes are communicated completely and that a fully accurate understanding of the changes rests with the team members. An e-mail is very unlikely to accomplish this.



5) Introducing significant new team members into the project team

Team dynamics can change significantly when a new team member is introduced. New team members can bring very positive morale and confidence to a team or team effectiveness can plummet. Successful project managers are continuously aware of the status of their project teams. As new team members can present significant changes, most project managers prefer to introduce new team members using an interactive approach. This helps the project manager more fully and quickly understand how a new team member will be perceived.

6) When requirements clarifications are warranted

Requirements that aren't fully understood by customers or technical team members are the bane of the life of many project managers. Ensuring that requirements and their implications, costs and integration with the customer's business processes are fully understood is imperative for a project to move forward successfully. Handling these clarifications with anything other than a highly interactive communication approach is high risk for the project.

7) When questions revolving around a stage-gate decision are discussed

Project perception and the perception of the preparedness of the project manager are in the limelight when a stage gate is scheduled. All stakeholders 'the steering committee, sponsor and team members' should be informed, confident and poised to move forward. This need for focused communication during the stage gate process far surpasses the communication capabilities of e-mail.

8) When reporting quality test or assessment results that are less than perfect

Since testing normally immediately precedes the installation or implementation of the project's product, time and schedule are of the essence. Increased attention will be paid to the results of the testing, accompanied with increased anxiety. Some stakeholders will be anxious to move forward to the next step; others will want to be very cautious to ensure the product is fully ready. Managing this myriad of emotions and agendas requires rich communication that cannot be delivered via e-mail only.

Implementing these recommendations requires additional work in the short term. But, approaching these scenarios using e-mail will put the project at risk and will cost more in the long term. E-mail is a fantastic and efficient tool for confirming more complicated communications, not for delivering that communication. E-mail is great for record keeping, not for establishing appropriate perceptions. Using e-mail extensively yet wisely is the best way to leverage this efficient, but not universally effective, communication tool.

If you have any questions about this article, or want to add other items to this list, feel free to send me an e-mail. (I'll give you a call to ensure I understand you fully!)

Bob McGannon is a Founder and Principal of MINDAVATION, a company providing project management training, consulting, keynotes and coaching services throughout North America, Europe, the Middle East and Australia. Bob can be reached at MINDAVATION via the Web at WWW.MINDAVATION.COM or via e-mail at rmcgannon@mindavation.com.



Find out how ESI International can help your organisation.

To learn more, please contact ESI at enquiries@esi-intl.com or +44(0)20 7017 7100.