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Project management: five strategies for the digital world of work

Online Chat, Social Media & More - discover the digital project world with "Reverse Mentoring"

Summary: Digital technologies such as online chat and social media inspire project work. They accelerate collaboration and support team building. However, many project managers struggle with these media. Professor Manfred Mühlfelder of SRH Mobile University, an economics psychologist, recommends five strategies for project managers to benefit from the digital opportunities.

A serious indiscretion: the project manager has revised the project deadlines, and sent the confidential draft paper by e-mail to his assistant project manager. A discussion ensued via email until a copy of the incomplete analysis landed in the inbox of a divisional manager who forwarded the document to the executive board. Horrified, the project manager ordered his team to revert to communication methods from thirty years ago: telephone, meetings and paper files - so nothing had a chance to leak out again.

Whether e-mail, central data storage, online chat or social media: digital communication has reached project management. Data flows keep entire teams together. The teams work online and often know their project manager only from video conferences. Digital communication brings enormous efficiency to project work - if project managers are able to deal with it. This is often not the case. "Especially older project managers do not use the full potential of the digital world of work," observes Professor Manfred Mühlfelder, economics psychologist at SRH Mobile University, and a member of the expert network of next level consulting. He observes: "Many project managers lead and communicate as they did twenty years

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ago. They run into typical "digital traps": in the past, project managers had to pay attention to what they say. Today, they also have to decide which communication channels to use. For example, confidential information should not be discussed by e-mail."

Despite the risks and obstacles, Professor Mühlfelder sees many benefits for digital innovation in project management. For example, video conferencing makes communication more efficient for distributed teams. While face-to-face conversations create much more trust and commitment than a call or an email, the latter require neither money nor time for a journey to a common meeting place. "By skilfully using media and other digital tools, project managers can be very effective in managing their projects," explains Professor Mühlfelder. He advises that project managers can maximise the potential of the digital world of work with the following five strategies:

1. Develop media competency

Most project managers carefully plan the communication in their projects. When is what information sent to whom? Who takes part in which meetings and with what responsibilities? But until now, the "how" of communication was not the main focus of project managers. Professor Mühlfelder considers this to be a failure. Not every communication channel is equally suitable for each content. For example, email messages are a no-no for conflict resolution: arguments are better resolved by telephone. On the other hand, conference calls are not suitable for difficult team decisions or brainstorming. Video conferences are better suited for this, as employees are more present and their facial expression can be observed. Online chats are helpful in difficult specialist discussions as the dialog is automatically logged. "Those who use specific channels should also be aware of the associated risks," warns Professor Mühlfelder. Rumours spread quickly over social media. Misinformation in chat protocols is difficult to take back. Information sent to a wrong distribution list cannot be recovered. "Project managers should establish rules within their

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team for dealing with these media types, and also agree on rules for data security," recommends Professor Mühlfelder.

2. Reduce the personal distance

It may sound strange: Digital communication brings people closer together. But it also erects walls between the same people. The fast pace of digital communication allows for quick coordination and decision-making. But the quickly typed message makes the communication more impersonal than a phone conversation. Email messages often employ ruder wording than used during a personal dialogue. "Undesirable group formation is especially risky." explains Professor Mühlfelder, "In digital communication the individual recipient is pushed into the background. The individual recipients of the message are associated with a group. This can lead to perceptions like "The IT people are difficult to deal with" - instead of "my IT colleague has some open questions."

3. Increase your own presence

Digital communication has a "big catch". The problem: The efficiency of digital media emphasizes the factual information and causes the invisible messenger to remain in the background. This also applies to the project manager. As a leader, he is at risk of literally disappearing from the scene, as he ceases to be personally visible. "Especially in the digital world of work, project managers have to find new ways to maintain their presence as leaders" explains Professor Mühlfelder. In addition to personal visits, video conferencing and social media in particular can help to improve presence in the team.

4. Think about your own style of leadership

In today's digital world of work, employees can coordinate themselves faster than ever. Many teams organise their work independently and without the intervention of the project manager. They agree on their goals, and then plan their solutions, work packages and appointments. Many project managers appreciate

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this independence. "Nowadays, few project managers can control all details of their project, distribute tasks and control results," explains Professor Mühlfelder. The project manager transforms himself from a project "doer" to a teamwork facilitator and team coach. He clarifies objectives, sets the guidelines and then supports his team to ensure smooth and productive cooperation. Especially older project managers have to get used to this new role model. Not only does it mean delegating responsibility and "letting go", but project managers also have to adopt a completely new leadership style. For example, to advise employees intensively, to conduct extensive feedback discussions and to sensitively resolve conflicts.

5. Rediscover experimentation

The digital workplace comprise more than the use of email, document servers and planning software. Projects can draw from a richly filled technology toolbox. For example, the use of social media by the project team. Internal social media platforms allow employees to interact with the team, show-case their work and also exchange information about private matters. "In this way, social media can create connections and increase cohesion, especially in spatially distributed teams that do not work next-door to each other," explains Professor Mühlfelder. However, many older project managers find it difficult to use these new media tools. The expert recommends a dialogue with young employees employing "reverse mentoring": the project manager coaches younger colleagues using his experience. In return, the "digital natives" explain social media to him.

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