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Introduction to Realtime Publishers

by Don Jones, Series Editor

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Don Jones

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Moving from Project Management to Project Execution

Project management can be roughly divided into two stages: planning and execution. During the planning stage, organizations create a plan with milestones, deliverables, resources, and timelines. Together these represent the best estimate of how the project will proceed and what is required to realize the project goals. When the project is underway and you are using the project plan as a guide, you are in the execution phase. Keeping track of tasks and resources is a primary concern during the project execution phase. This tracking can be especially difficult in complex IT projects. There may be project team members from multiple departments all reporting to different managers, and sometimes key personnel will be required to address operational issues or to work on another project. Maintaining an accurate and up-to-date representation of the state of the project can be difficult.

Project management tools are evolving to become more supportive of collaborative management. The benefits of this advance include:

- Improved information sharing
- Reduced risk of miscommunication and misunderstanding
- Collaborative problem solving

To appreciate the importance of this move to a more collaborative approach to project management, it helps to understand earlier, less collaborative methods.

Project Management Becomes More Collaborative

Project management can be a solitary responsibility. A single project manager might be assigned to manage a project. This person is responsible for collecting information about the scope of the project, the personnel and technical resources required, and the tasks necessary to meet milestones and deliverables. This information is commonly stored in a desktop project management application. The project manager becomes the keeper of the project management file and shares schedules, Gantt charts, and other reports with team members, but the information flow is generally from individual team members to the project manager and then back to individuals (see Figure 1).

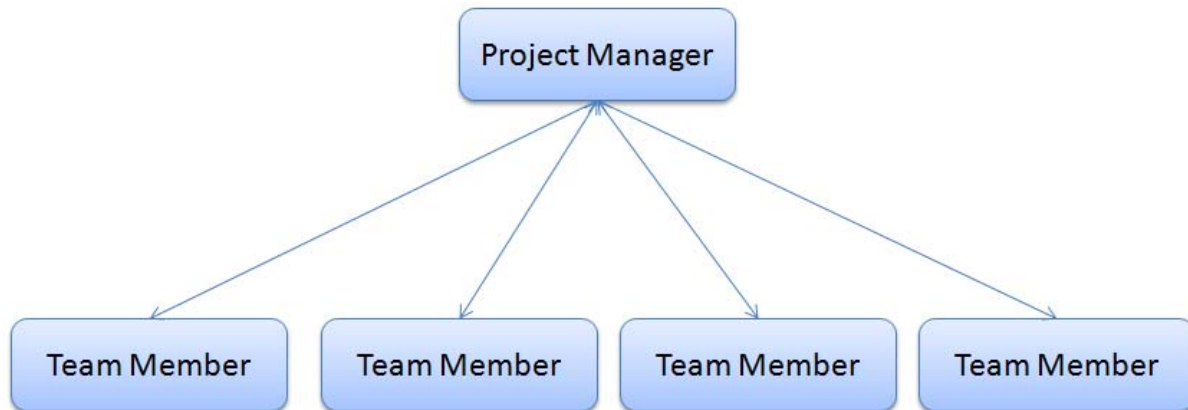


Figure 1: Non-collaborative, hierarchical project management requires the project manager to be the primary collector and distributor of information about a project.

New project management tools have more social networking tools that allow for collaboration on project management topics. Rather than keep project management information in a single file on the project manager's desktop, the information can be stored online and accessed directly by team members. If there is a change in a delivery date or a developer wants to provide details about an implementation task, the person responsible for performing that task can change the project plan. The project manager is no longer the single point of contact for all project information management.

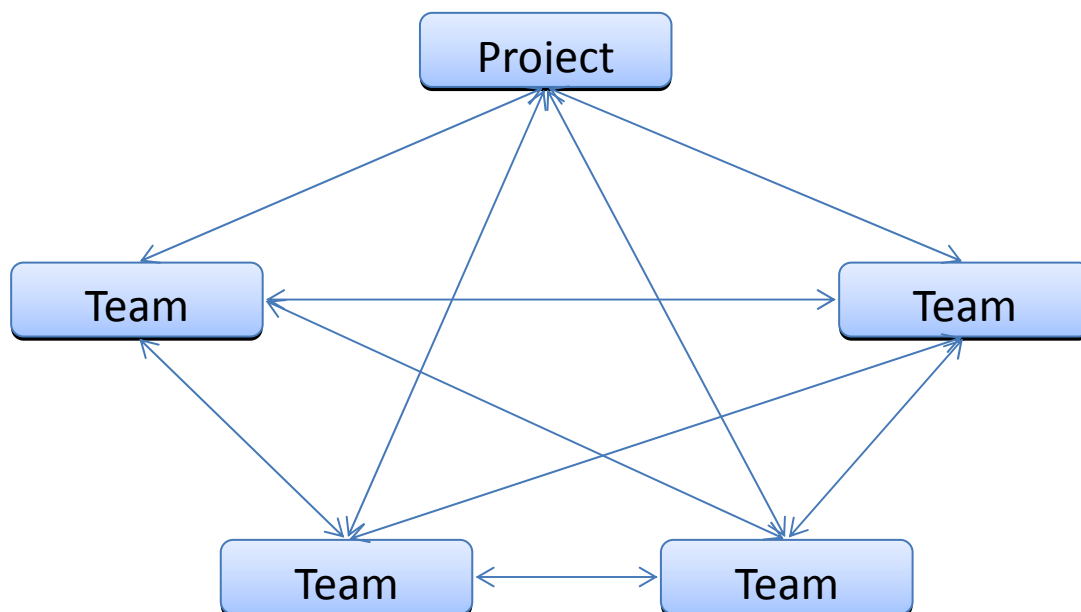


Figure 2: Collaborative project management practices allow more interaction and information sharing directly between team members and managers.

Characteristics of Collaborative Project Management

Collaborative project management tools can change the way organizations manage projects. The project management tool becomes more like a social networking tool and less like a siloed desktop application. For example, team members can log into the project management tool to view their tasks and delivery dates, update the status of milestones and deliverables, and view the status of other tasks. This functionality is especially important for tracking dependencies.

Team members can have a personalized view of project management data. Not everyone on a team needs to delve into the details of all aspects of a project plan. A combination of access controls and custom views will enable team members to find what they need efficiently and without having to wade through information not relevant to their roles.

Sharing project information can help promote a sense of shared commitment. Team members no longer depend on a single project manager to review and maintain project status data; rather it is a group responsibility.

Collaborative project management tools can be especially helpful for geographically dispersed teams. The social network aspects of collaborative project management tools can help overcome distant working relations by providing a means to communicate in a structured and asynchronous way.

Also, collaborative tools can help engage from the bottom up by providing a tool that supports all team members and not just project managers. Having access to information about your responsibilities whenever you need that access is a significant advance over depending on the project manager to share a small set of reports.

Benefits of Collaborative Project Management

The benefits of collaborative project management fall into three broad categories: improving information sharing, reducing miscommunication and misunderstanding, and promoting collaborative problem solving. The improved information sharing can streamline the work of a project manager. Collecting information is no longer a matter of personally contacting team members to collect updates; instead, team members can update a centralized repository as needed.

Collaborative project management tools can help avoid misunderstandings by making information readily accessible. If a deliverable will be delayed and the status is updated appropriately, other team members will have access to this information. This functionality helps reduce the chances of a “oh, you didn’t hear about ...” scenario. Of course the information is only of use if team members review project status data. Ensuring team members do so might require some changes in how collaborators work, especially for those who might not have project management experience.

Another key benefit of this model of project management is improved collaborative problem solving. By sharing information widely, you can increase the team's chances of solving problems as they arise. Ideally, potential problems can be identified early and addressed before they become substantial problems.

Summary

Project management practices are changing. Many social networking techniques are leveraged in collaborative project management tools to create a more streamlined management process. Information is shared more widely, the risk of miscommunication is mitigated, and team members can assume more shared responsibility. The significant inefficiencies in siloed project management approaches can be reduced with collaborative project management techniques.