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Successful Project Management:
How to Manage Projects More Efficiently Using Online Meetings

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by **CITRIX**

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Executive Summary

Whether your business is a medium-sized organisation or a large conglomerate, now more than ever, projects are a part of your everyday work, characterised by changing tasks, flexible working groups and the participation of external specialists. Project managers increasingly face the challenge of having to motivate and direct geographically distributed teams.

With web conferences, project meetings can be carried out as if all participants were in the same room. The participants sit at their own desks, see and hear each other via the web — interacting with each other directly. This makes coordination more efficient and allows knowledge to be shared straight — causing the personal exchange of ideas to become more meaningful. As a result, project managers can build a powerfully effective team from specialists spread across the globe. In addition, business travel and the time-consuming organisation of in-person meetings are minimised. Web conferences have thus become one of the most important project management instruments in many companies.

In this white paper, you will learn more about the significance of communication in project work and receive valuable tips on how to make your project management more efficient.

1. Project work in the company

The assignment comes directly from upper management: Peter Kron is to develop a chocolate bar with a new flavour variety, Strawberry Dragonfruit, for an international confectionery manufacturer. As the project manager, his task now is to lead a worldwide team of food chemists, flavour experts and marketing specialists. Together, they have to discuss the state of market research, determine suitable aromas and develop numerous product variants along with the lab. Furthermore, countless meetings with suppliers and partners from around the world will be on the agenda. For their project, Kron and his team will have to find the right ingredients and draft the marketing strategy, including the logo and package design. The clock is ticking: in just a few months, the chocolate bar is to be available at kiosks and petrol stations everywhere in Europe — after all, the competition never sleeps.

Though this example is fictitious, it reflects everyday reality (or something very similar) in many companies. To an increasing extent, employees from different locations work together to develop products, coordinate business processes or discuss new strategies. Intensive cooperation in project groups has become an indispensable part of this.

A project always means implementing a plan on schedule and within the defined budget. This usually requires input from corporate management, project managers and experts from separate organisational units, who gather in teams. By its nature, there is a relatively high risk that a project will fail — for example, because personnel resources are missing in the critical phase, costs unexpectedly spiral out of control or the schedule cannot be adhered to.

Where project work was once the domain of engineers or IT specialists, it has now become absolutely necessary for successful business development, whatever the business or industry. One of the reasons for this is that more and more people work from on the road, and so experts in large companies are distributed throughout the world. According to a study

Project managers increasingly face the challenge of having to motivate and direct geographically distributed teams.

conducted by Nemertes Research, 60 to 70 per cent of all employees now work at different locations than their superiors do. Moreover, market research company IDC projects that in 2011, over 30 per cent of employees will be mobile workers without any fixed location at all. This raises the question: how can companies establish a project management culture that is viable for the future if employees no longer meet in the same place at all?

2. Typical problems in projects

According to a study by consulting company InforA, between 2006 and 2008, only one in five IT projects met its goals. The majority of companies surveyed believe that the reasons lie in project management shortcomings — and this applies to projects in all industries. In many cases, the individual objectives are ill-defined and unclear to the members of the project team. Subprojects sometimes develop a dangerous life of their own instead of building logically upon one another.

The more complex a project, the more extensive the tasks, responsibilities and the need for coordination in the team will be. Still, information is usually exchanged using classic means such as phone and email, and these exchanges do not always include all project participants at the same time. This is inconvenient and time-consuming. Expecting transparency for team members about the status of the ongoing project? Not a chance.

One alternative, of course, is holding meetings in person. Unfortunately, this is frequently out of the question due to high costs and even higher time expenditure for travel — and not only in international projects. This is true even though in-person meetings are highly effective in building real team spirit and communal feeling in the project team. Thus, in many cases, the team members will have never met face-to-face, only by telephone. As a result, if misunderstandings or disagreements arise in international or supra-regional teams, it is extremely difficult to clear them up. These tense relationships between team members can then have a substantial effect on the course of a project. Moreover, the danger exists that some employees will feel left out because they work in a distant subsidiary, for example, while the rest of the team meets regularly at headquarters, seemingly closer to the action.

Frequently, projects put roadblocks in their own way: if they involve the interests of multiple specialised areas or the entire company, turf battles and conflicts between departments often result. Project controlling also has shortcomings: most project managers still trust their gut feeling in everyday work instead of, for example, using established controlling tools to verify partial results. As a result, risks often go undetected. The consequences are dire: projects delay, stop too late (if necessary), go over budget and deteriorate in the quality of work.

3. Efficient project management methods

Communication is the critical factor for the success of a project, as the GPM, a professional organisation for project management in Germany, found in its 2008 study, "Project Management". Project managers are required to exchange information with their team members intensively and regularly. This is particularly challenging in globally distributed teams, as it is usually not feasible to call a meeting at a subsidiary halfway across the world. Therefore, when talking to their colleagues, project managers must rely primarily on the telephone; they must formulate the objectives as very concrete instructions — without leaving room for interpretation. To

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prevent overlap, responsibilities must be clearly defined, though continuous interaction with neighbouring fields of work, departments and divisions remains indispensable. Furthermore, for effective project management, it is important for all team members to be included, both socially and professionally: they should share their knowledge and be encouraged to make an active contribution — in a way that is quick and uncomplicated.

Project managers must ensure that no team member feels left out. If employees receive comprehensive and regular information, this can help to diminish personal objections to objectives, methods or procedures. Moreover, the project manager is required to actively lead his or her colleagues — which is hardly possible without regular meetings. The results of the meetings have to be documented and visible to each team member to make information binding and prevent uncertainties from happening in the first place. Most misunderstandings between colleagues — whether while sitting in the same office or spread across the globe — can be prevented by regular personal interaction.

Project management tools can help to promote communication, share knowledge and put teams on the best path to success — while keeping a close eye on schedule and budget requirements. For communicating in projects with geographically distributed teams, the use of web conferences has proven valuable in recent years. They enable regular meetings to be held via the Internet at negligible cost, during which participants can not only see and talk to each other but also work jointly on documents. Team members can take part in meetings with their project group from anywhere in the world. This makes coordinating distributed teams much easier. This regular personal interaction means that any planning problems are voiced at an early stage and thus remedied more quickly.

4. Advantages of online meetings in project management

Web conferences create a feeling of closeness comparable to that of an in-person meeting. Project managers can see their teams regularly, bring them closer together and promote the exchange of knowledge between them. With the support of the software, they are able to communicate with their colleagues as if they were sitting in the same building. This provides the ideal conditions for building a powerfully effective team from specialists spread across the globe.

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Low investment

The basic conditions to hold online meetings are currently in place almost everywhere in the world. Only a normal computer with Internet access and special web conferencing software is required to participate in an online meeting. In Germany, the bandwidth necessary to transmit images and sound is available virtually everywhere thanks to high-speed connections. Web cameras and headsets can transport voice and nonverbal communication directly to the other participants. Presentations no longer depend on an overhead projector, since participants view the moderator's desktop right on their own screens. All participants can jointly access, view and edit documents in real time. The service is usually provided via the Internet. No difficult-to-install hardware is required. Cost-intensive maintenance is not necessary. Thus, only a small investment is necessary to implement online meetings. Due to the low investment, there is also minimal economic risk.

More efficient collaboration

Online meetings can be organised quickly and easily. Additional labour and cost-intensive tasks such as booking business trips or searching for suitable facilities for meetings are eliminated. Since long and arduous travel is no longer required, employees can use their work time more productively — and communicate much more effectively than by phone and email. Regular coordination meetings on short notice are no longer a problem, even for international teams. Opinions and concerns can be shared without having to leave one's own desk. Moreover, all employees are equally fit during the meeting, rather than suffering from jet lag or other stresses of travel. All participants in the meeting have a level playing field, with no one put at an advantage or disadvantage.

Lower costs

The very time-consuming and less efficient practise of exchanging information incrementally in emails is avoided. As a result, fewer electronic messages bombard the company and its mail server each day. Unlike telephone conferences, web conferencing systems, with their integrated VoIP voice transmission function, avoid expensive connection charges, particularly when doing business internationally.

Personal interaction across distances

While email-based communication is sure to involve plenty of misunderstandings, web conferences enable direct, interpersonal interaction that feels very much like a traditional meeting and encourages trusting relationships. With this support, project managers can set up clearly structured meetings and also call spontaneous meetings at any time; even with globally distributed teams, meetings at frequent intervals are no problem. And if required, sessions can be recorded and thus securely documented.

Higher productivity in meetings

Experience shows that web conference participants are more inclined to make their points quicker and deviate less from the topic of conversation. In addition, when all participants in online meetings work together on the same document in real time and converse with each other just like in an in-person meeting, working together becomes more fun. This allows teams to become closer, increasing productivity. Web conferencing technology gives companies new ways to be flexible with telecommuting and home-based work.

The number of employees who work mostly online has increased by 800 per cent over the last 5 years. Between 60 to 70 per cent of all employees now work at different locations than their superiors do.

-Source: Nemertes Research

Conclusion

In companies of all sizes, projects are an indispensable part of everyday business. First-class communication in the team is critical for efficient planning and implementation. Project managers face the challenge of working together with geographically distributed teams and managing them across distances. Web conferences can support them in this task. They make regular interaction in the team easier, enable personal, face-to-face dialogue, provide lasting savings and significantly accelerate project implementation. Because sessions can be recorded and securely documented, objectives and requirements can be tracked and reviewed more easily. This creates transparency for the project manager and employees. Web conferences can be deployed quickly and cost-effectively — and thus have become a central project management tool in many companies.

Extra: Five practical tips for project managers

1. Put together the best team

Select the employees for your team who are best suited to the task — not just those who have time or are on site at the moment. With web conferencing solutions, you can also recruit external experts or colleagues from other subsidiaries for your team. Therefore, it is worthwhile to find out whether suitable employees may also be available at other locations.

2. Set clear objectives and deadlines

A clearly defined objective is critical in ensuring that all project participants move in the same direction and set priorities for their work. You can classify the objectives according to project phases. The deadlines must be appropriate, but neither too tight nor too far out — otherwise, postponements may occur.

3. Communicate regularly with your team

Communication is the most important success factor in project work. Define information channels and schedule regular and mandatory meetings. Show that open communication is important to you. This motivates your employees to contribute their own knowledge and move processes forward.

4. Delegate tasks

Project managers tend to want to do everything themselves. Consequently, they lose time for more important tasks. Give defined portions of the work to colleagues. You will see that this not only saves time and money but also reduces stress — and reinforces your colleagues' sense of belonging to the team.

5. Analyse your mistakes

Do not be afraid to analyse your project again after it is finished — or even if it has been stopped prematurely. Particularly if some things have gone wrong, looking back can help you get ahead. Most importantly, find the systematic and recurring errors. Then you will have learned something for your next project.

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