



MANAGING PROJECT COMMUNICATION

ASHURST, DAMIAN FROM OCE[®], DISCUSSES HERE THE ISSUE OF INFORMATION DISTRIBUTION IN CONNECTION WITH LARGE SCALE DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS. EMAILS ARE CERTAINLY THE MOST COMMON METHODS FOR SHARING INFORMATION BUT ALSO OTHER SYSTEMS SUCH AS THE FTP SITES ARE BECOMING FAMILIAR, ESPECIALLY WHEN SIZE AND COMPLEXITY OF THE DATA INCREASE AND THE RISK MISMANAGEMENT INCREASES TOO WITH THE EFFECT OF DRAMATICALLY COMPROMISING THE INFORMATION WORKFLOW.

Not so long ago, paper was the standard method of distributing information for projects. If large projects like the London Olympics had been undertaken way back when, organisations would have devised and perfected processes to deal with incoming hardcopy mail. Post rooms sorted and collated mail and then redistributed the information in a methodical way. Effectively each organisation had one entry point into the business for project information, which may have been seen as a bottleneck today, but then it was the only way to control and manage the flow of information in and out of the building.

Move on a couple of years and this entry point has opened up and new entry gates are available into the organisation with the introduction of fax transmissions. However all of the project information delivered in this way would be copied, one for the master project folder and the other for the individual to use and re-purpose.

Skip to the present day and every individual in the organisation is a potential access point with the introduction of e-mail – the primary tool for communication in business. It is typically the first application that people open when they turn on their PC.

E-mail is the primary communication tool between collaborative partners and this in itself delivers numerous problems. However, e-mail

is a casual communication tool, it is easy and instantaneous, people want to do the right thing and complete their job in the most expedient way therefore the risk of communicating the wrong information to project members increases because of the simplicity and speed of transfer.

Managing e-mails is time consuming and laborious. Users 'in-boxes' are managed in different ways and users may have hundreds of e-mails relating to projects just sitting in their in box. Because of this, e-mails that relate to a project tend not to be stored in a central location or to be more precise in the same location as the other project documentation, away from the e-mail system, such as Microsoft Outlook. So project teams have to search between multiple storage locations for all the documentation and in some instances do not have access to all of the storage locations as individuals e-mails may still be stored in private 'in-boxes'.

Once an e-mail has been received, the e-mail typically requires the recipient of the e-mail to action or to do something with it. In an environment of litigation and regulatory compliancy, proving that e-mails or information have been received, sent or actioned has become critically important.

Questions such as:

- 'can I find the e-mail?'
- 'Did the e-mail have an attachment?'
- 'Did I store the information in the shared area?'
- 'Project specific e-mail is disconnected from other project data and the project team is constantly exceeding their inbox size'
- I am working on a dozen major projects at a time;
- I can't keep track of all of this information!

are becoming more and more familiar.

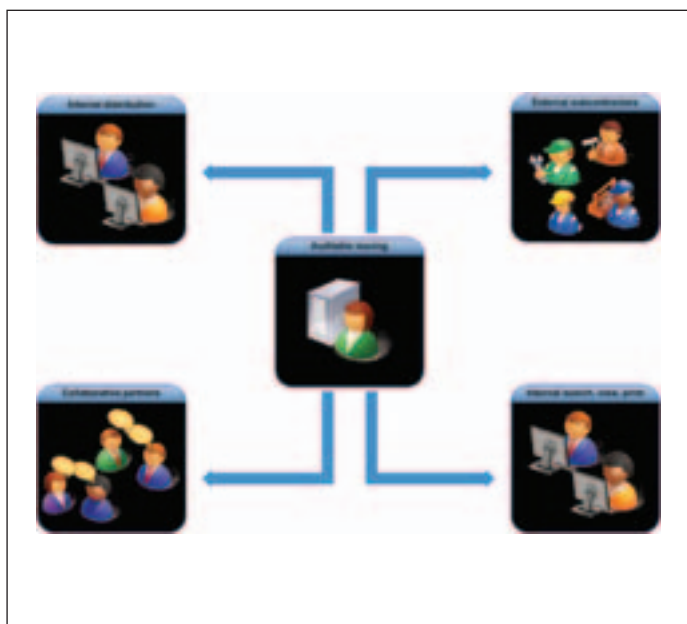
The problem then becomes compounded when e-mails contain attachments. MS Word and Excel documents, and images or at worst ZIP files. How many times have we, the user, needed to find a document that is stored within a ZIP file and within the document a paragraph or word relating to the action needed to be performed. Using Microsoft Outlook's search facility only allows you to search on the message body or subject title of the e-mail, so unless the person sending you the e-mail has been very precise in their naming methods, the chance of you finding the document with e-mail are slim. The chances of you finding the paragraph or word within the document are next to impossible.

Email retention is as important as every other item of project information and should be treated as such. However because e-mail has a strong positive and negative claim, that it is instantaneous, organisations don't look at it as carefully as they should. E-mail should be retained just like anything else, according to policy. It is often not done that way; people don't retain it and don't treat it like they do other forms of communication. They treat it as a more informal means of communication, which it is not.

Even the issue and distribution process of project documentation/drawings impacts e-mail management. Collaborative partners require project documentation in multiple formats and on multiple media types. Email, hardcopy, portal uploads and internally hosted web sites provides organisations with ways and means to distribute the documentation, however the receiving organisation has to be able to deal with, access and reproduce the documentation. Once again ensuring that the documentation is tracked consistently in and out of the organisation is critical. The historic 'issue sheet' is still in operation but the creation of this sheet, its update and ensuring that the issue sheet is also transferred with the document sent in any one of the distribution media can sometimes be problematic.

FTP

As electronic distribution of information becomes more prevalent, the size and complexity of the information also increases. Colour images, GIS data, 3D models are all transferred between collaborative partners. Project



Extranets are typically demanded and widely used on large scale projects, but the complexity and cost of these systems forces users and data exchangers to find other means of transport.

One transportation system that is commonly used to move large amounts of electronic data is FTP. Whilst this is a simple vehicle, the mechanics of managing the process are not. Take a simple task of getting the IT department to create the FTP site, providing user passwords and access permissions to the FTP site, allowing the users of the site to download defined documents and directories. Once the information is uploaded to the FTP site there is no mechanism to manage the ever expanding digital landfill of data, the landfill site expands, navigation of the site becomes more and more problematic and users who both upload and download become more and more irate. In addition, how do people know when to go and download the information, and more importantly when was the information downloaded? Audit ability within the project phase is paramount and FTP just doesn't cut the mustard anymore. Finally, does the use of FTP sites promote a professional image to other collaborative partners, I believe the answer is no, FTP has become a necessary evil and one that people would ideally love to change.

RISK

But what is the effect of losing e-mails, being unable to find or get access to important documents that are locked within personnel 'in-boxes' or are lost within the sea of project information. Simple – RISK, and this is not the typical risk that has been associated with transferring electronic information in the past, 'have I been sent the right drawing with all of the right files within it' type risk. This risk is even more basic, it is the risk of working on bad projects, being unable to manage the project information competently, communicating with collaborative partners with good designs based on good information that has been managed and processed effectively and efficiently. It is being unable to educate your staff with all of the information they need to make valued decisions on the project. It is the potential of losing business with collaborative partners even before the next project has come onto the horizon because they find you difficult to communicate with.

Summary

The simple digital workflow of project information has become complicated and open to mismanagement. E-mail management of project information is on everyone's lips because this problem is becoming greater. Why is it becoming greater? Because e-mail is the primary business communication tool and it is believed that e-mail usage will double in the next three years thanks to mobile communication. People and organisations want clear audit trails, fast responses and the ability to transfer documentation from the desktop. E-mail provides that but it also creates issues and problems deeper within the supporting workflows and increases risk to the business on a grand scale.

Organisations that do a good job of managing risk have few problems as all forms of communication are integrated. It's not just the model of the building; it is a model they develop for managing the project. Organisations that have a totally integrated system for managing the project are the ones that have best chance of discovering problems early.

Applications such as Newforma Project Centre have been designed to find and organise information quickly and easily. Project e-mail and project data can be searched from a single interface regardless of the physical location of the information providing a single uniform window on the project documentation. Newforma info Exchange provides users with a powerful tool for transferring large electronic documents in a professional manner that provides a full audit trail of access and downloads.

So the message is clear, don't just look to address e-mail management, consider all of the project documentation and distribution requirements of your organisation. Project information Management is about managing all of the facets of communication on a project, reducing the risk of making a bad decision based on not having access or the ability to find the information you need when it is required.

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