The Social Project Manager
Balancing Collaboration with Centralized Control in a Project Driven World.
By Peter Taylor
(A book review by R. Max Wideman, FPMI)

Introduction

Peter Taylor, a familiar author to visitors to this web site, is off in a new and exciting direction. If people are central to managing projects, communication is central to managing people. As we have said before, without either, nothing gets done. But how long is it since our project management gurus have seriously examined the communication modus operandi? Indeed, the availability of material on communication in the context of project management is so sparse, it has obviously received very little attention – until now.

Once again, the title of Peter's recent book, *The Social Project Manager*, was, like his earlier book, *The Lazy Project Manager*, cause for serious heartburn. Turns out that the "lazy project manager" was expected to be anything but "lazy". For a hardened battle weary infrastructure-building project manager,[1] touchy-feely stuff characterized as "social" is for the Information-Technology brigade, and definitely off the table for construction folks.

But wait! Upon closer examination, this book, *The Social Project Manager* is clearly more for project teams who work in offices, especially large offices, than for those who work outside.[2] Looked at another way, this book is for the Information Technology, Manufacturing and, to some degree, Healthcare type project sectors,[3] but otherwise quite foreign to Construction.[4] By way of explanation, the author provides the following back-cover text:

> "The Social Project Manager describes a non-traditional way of organizing projects, managing project performance and progress. The aim being to deliver, at the enterprise level, a common goal for the business; one that harnesses the performance advantages of a collaborative community.

> Social elements help mitigate the constraints associated with the control aspect of project management, which is essential for governance. Team collaboration, problem solving and engagement in projects will never come from technology alone but require careful management."[5]

As projects get ever more far reaching and complex, the more accurate and timely information on the state of progress is essential for effective decision-making. But as Lindsay Scott observes in her Foreword to the book:[6]

> "… For the first time ever, our use of tools, apps and software in our personal lives [is] way more advanced than what we use today in our organizations. People [are] building up habits in their use of tools to connect to one another, to keep others updated, to share information and to access it in the way they [want] to. … As people change they way they interact and share information and knowledge, the project management world should be capitalizing on it."

Indeed, project managers now tend to know more about their friends' private affairs than they do about

the updated details of activities on their projects. Clearly, there are wasted opportunities here that could and should be put to improved project performance generally, especially where knowledge work is involved. We will explain how, later in this book review.

Book Structure

The contents of this book are set out in six chapters and an "Appendices" section as follows:
1. The Past, the Present and the Possible Social Future
2. The Challenge of being a Social Project Manager
3. The Practical Social Project Manager
4. The Social Project Manager as a Commercial Force
5. The Socially Mature Organization
6. Social Project Management Tips

Appendices

The first three chapters are by far the largest that, together, cover the real meat of the book. Chapter six consists of eleven tips ranging from the need to involve the team to create a social environment, to know your own social strengths and weaknesses. The Appendices section provides a brief description of some of the contributors to the book's content, among other things. The book is well written in a clear and easy style. It has 175 pages in all and includes a limited number of illustrations, mostly relating to communication links. It does not include a Glossary of Terms.

About the author

Peter Taylor is an experienced project and program manager who has also written and lectured on topics in the project management domain. More particularly, over the last four years, he has focused his energies on broader subjects like his very successful book: *Lazy Project Manager.*[7] This has culminated in his modern ground-breaking approach towards project collaboration through team members' use of personal social media software and habits, rather than using formal centralized control. Peter is also the Head of a Global PMO for a billion dollar software organization. He can be reached at peter.b.taylor@btinternet.com.

What we liked

Author Peter Taylor's framing of the potential for much improved project management communications through social communicating, the real subject of this book, is indeed captivating. So appealing, in fact, that it is difficult to know where to start. But, as my father used to drill into me as a child, the right place to start is always at the beginning. So it is that a word of caution is appropriate. The project environment envisaged is that of intense office work that easily conflicts with home life, rather than for those working out in the field – i.e. those who can go home at night and leave their work behind.

Lindsay Scott[8] provides a Foreword in which she observes:
> "Peter has given us a book that moves the practices of social project managers and project management on. As the project management profession continues to attract many different and diverse people with different ideas about managing people and successful projects, it stands to reason that there will be crossovers between our 'social selves' and our 'work selves'. As a profession, we need to understand what those characteristics of good social working are, the skills that can be improved in our selves, the support our

organizations can offer and, ultimately, a clear benefit for the projects we manage."

And in a second Foreword, Paul Bamford exclaims:[9]

"The world is changing in many ways . . . We no longer 'go to work', we just work."

And then in a later observation,

"The reality is getting the balance right between using the project control to set the boundaries and then letting the project members breathe and get the work done."

At the outset, Peter Taylor declares that: "there is no such thing as a ***non-social*** project."[10] He believes that project management is now entering its fourth phase[11]. That is, we have "a period of transition as technology – in particular the social tools – offers a platform for this new way of collective and collaborative way of working … commonly referred to as "social project management'."[12]

But here Peter inserts a caveat that needs to be accounted for: "… social project management recognizes that there are clearly two worlds:

- First, the world of the large, enterprise project requiring more centralized control; and
- Second, the world of the smaller, less complex projects that can thrive in a decentralized controlling manner"[13]

True, these are different in that they require a different approach to management and discipline, but does that also mean a different vehicle for communication? We think not. After all, Email is used extensively in both project management arenas and, in fact, there are many more arenas than just those two, where Email works just fine.[14]

The interesting part

Now comes the really interesting part – Chapter 2 The Challenge of Being a Social Project Manager. What's the point, you may ask? Well, it's all about a new way of working on projects to enable a higher level of project team performance that enables a better product in a shorter time frame with consequent lower ultimate cost. Is that too good to be true? Indeed, it is possible. It just requires a different organizational approach that takes advantage of modern technology.

What follows is specifically targeted at the so-called knowledge-work product sectors that we like to refer to as "Intellect Projects", especially those that may be large and involve a number of stakeholders world wide. How do we know it can work? Because, believe it or not, the construction sector has been doing it for ages. It's called "fast-tracking".

In traditional projects, the project manager has ultimate authority and responsibility over the project work. This is an essential requirement for maintaining complete control. All detailed short-term plans, progress reports, quality control results, change requests, change orders, and the like must flow up to the project manager for approval or acknowledgement and from there be redistributed to those who need to know.

This list must also include completion of each activity so that the next actor can be notified to start their activity. Collectively, this routing of authority through the project manager most often accounts for significant loss of time. On a complex project, what if someone in the hierarchy mis-directs activity completion information? What if the prior activity is completed early, or late, and the follow-on actor is not ready, or has got engaged in other work? Then an opportunity is lost for moving on more quickly.

In construction, the project site is the central pivot. Project managers can encourage the various actors to

see for themselves the state of progress and hence be ready to start promptly, or even arrange to overlap their work for overall completion sooner. Hence, this approach in construction is given the name "fast-tracking".

In intellectual project work, lack of visibility of the state of the project is a problem. Hence, according to Peter Taylor, the social project manager's goals are:[15]

> "To help increase their project team's performance by encouraging and enabling:
> * Collaboration, communication and commitment;
> * Transparent information sharing in a time efficient way;
> * Visibility of collective purpose;
> * Collective risk management;
> * Self-correcting communication;
> * Removal of burdensome bureaucracy and empowerment of the individual; and
> * Provision of the right level of enterprise governance."

Amen to all of that. The point is, all of this can now be accomplished by taking advantage of cloud-based computing to "house" the project, and personal cell phones for instant direct communication to the various project components regardless of the location of the contributions from around the world. This significantly reduces the time for overall product development.
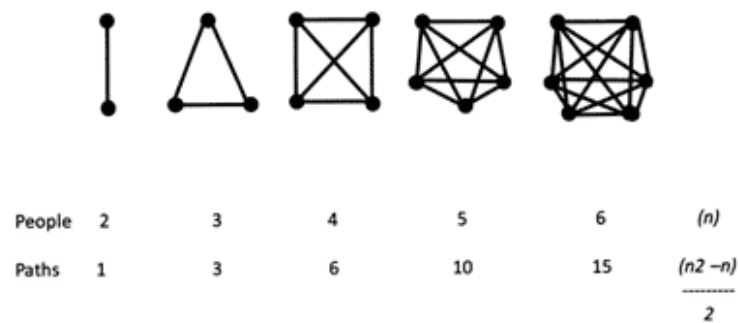
The following graphics describe the improvement:

People	2	3	4	5	6	(n)
Paths	1	3	6	10	15	$\frac{(n^2 - n)}{2}$

Figure 1: Impact of increasing team size on communication paths[16]
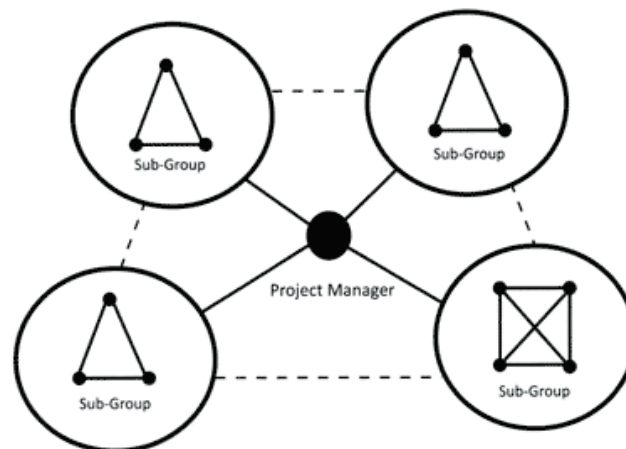

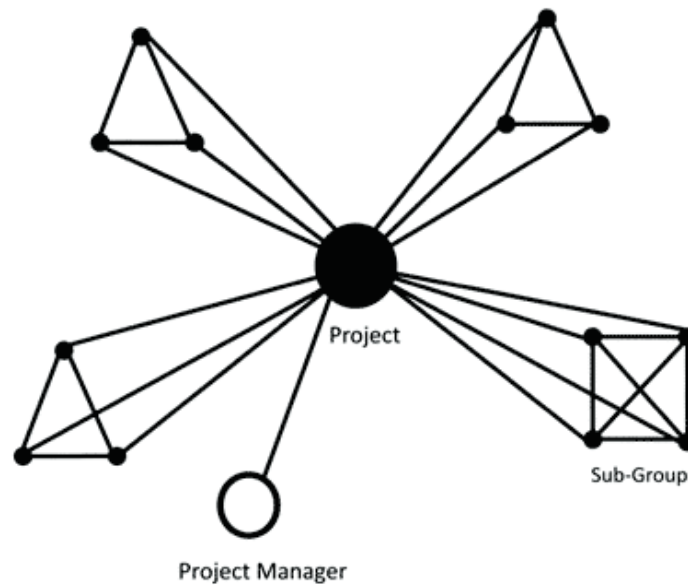**Figure 2: Fragmented nature of project managed communications[17]**

Figure 3: Design of peer-to-project self-managed communication[18]

In Figure 3, it will be seen that the project manager is now removed from the onerous secretarial-like task and responsibility of keeping the information flow going. Instead, the project manager can focus on building the product.

The downside
(for practitioners, that is)

The impact of social communication

As Peter Taylor observes:[19]
> "Social collaboration in the work place is changing at a frantic pace. And the definition of social communication is changing right along with it. Workers of the past viewed collaboration and social project management as the increase of collaboration with team members, which results in more frequent meetings, more ad hoc conversations in the hallway, and an influx in email to read in the inbox, all of which means that everyone needs updating on everything."

But has that changed significantly, or even is it changing? If not, reportedly, workers are spending 25-35 hours a week just preparing information and engaging in collaboration with others – an incredible amount of time to be engaged in communicating and being "social". Obviously, this refocusing of effort leaves less time to do actual useful work. As a result, the more dedicated workers find that they have to take work home to get their work done.[20]

Our own experience in such working environments is that much work is taken home for a rather different reason. Knowledge workers frequently require the peace and quiet necessary for periods of uninterrupted thought. Such periods are essential for solving the complicated or difficult technical challenges encountered in the development of the intended product.

When you follow the intended benefits of social communication software, an inevitable requirement is that there must be a repository for the information that is gathered. This introduces its own set of

problems, such as what sorts of information will be discarded, what will be saved, in what format, under what headings, and so on. But then another obvious challenge will arise. Who will be responsible for organizing the information in the project depository, so that it is relevant to the needs of would-be users, easily found there, and sufficient to be self explanatory?

The real problem - an ever-changing environment

Such minutiae aside, Peter Taylor suggests that the real problem lies in an ever-changing environment, such as "rapid changes in technology, global expansions and heightened competition not only for market share, but also for (competent) employees." In our view, such issues are beyond the purview of the project manager and really fall into the lap of more senior management. Peter goes on to observe that: "Our new social world has jumped into the idea of solid collaboration without truly understanding how to do it effectively." [21]

That is true, indeed! Interestingly, the problem gets worse as you move up the ladder from project, to program management, to project portfolio management especially. Here, given resource restrictions, you need almost exclusively to get agreement amongst other senior managers on a definitive plan to move forward on specific projects for the ensuing production periods. But social media not withstanding, these "other senior managers" are often difficult to "pin down" for a variety of reasons. These reasons include: lack of time; lack of priority; lack of interest; and, worst of all, seeing a lack of relevance to their own area of responsibility.

Again, Peter points out: "Today's world faces low tool adoption rates while project portfolio management software struggles to find the right features for social collaboration in the context of work."[22] Under the circumstances, this should come as no surprise.[23] If you don't know where you are going, you'll never get there!

Time is inflexible but assignable

One last thought in this section. It's all about time, and time is inflexible – it just keeps on going. However, what you do with that time falls into any number of categories. These include personal care and refreshment, personal housekeeping (at work), formal progress identification and reporting, to say nothing of this social interaction we've been discussing. That's before we even get to the necessary research and idea generating as the prerequisite to actually producing some output of value.

Little wonder that those who are really dedicated to their work are somewhat disparaging about the concepts of socializing project management, when you are trying to keep within tight schedules and budgets. Unlike "business as usual" activity that is all about competitive advantage and profitability,[24] project management requires looser constraints. This is to offset the inherent uncertainty – and requirements for the improved quality derived from "socializing" the work effort described above.

If senior management wants to "socialize" team interactions, for the improved quality and relevance to the stakeholders' requirements that can be gained, then those extra times and costs must be factored into the schedules and budgets for the work.

Summary

To conclude, Peter Taylor describes the Socially Mature Organization. He observes that:[25]

"Organizations need to cultivate a culture where 'social' drives better communication and collaboration, and is not just a distraction – for the greater good of project success."

And he goes on to quote Gartner:[26]

"Being a social organization goes beyond experimenting with social media technology tools – the 'provide and pray' approach. In fact, it's not about the technology at all.

A social organization addresses significant business challenges and opportunities using the social media platform to create mass collaboration – what Gartner predicts will be the next evolutionary pillar defining how work gets done around the world."[27]

And further quotes Gartner:[28]

"A social organization is one that strategically applies mass collaboration to address significant business challenges and opportunities. Its leaders recognize that becoming a social enterprise is not about incremental improvement. They know it demands a new way of thinking, so that they're moving on beyond tactical, one-time grassroots efforts and pushing for greater business impact through a thoughtful, planned approach to applying social media."

And in that we sincerely trust that these "social organizations" duly divest themselves of the idea that anyone can do it – all it takes is to tell someone to do it. And then promptly appoint some technological expert who would much rather be engaged in the actual doing of product development rather than the orchestration of social connections.

This sort of change requires people with a dedication to this type of change, and the necessary training to implement it effectively.

R. Max Wideman
Fellow, PMI

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[1] Like us!

[2] In other words, "brain" workers rather than "brawn" workers

[3] For a discussion of a simplified characterization and hence classification of our project management economy, please refer to pages http://www.maxwideman.com/papers/challenge/pm.htm and http://www.maxwideman.com/papers/challenge/industry.htm

[4] It seems regrettable that this distinction is not made clear in the opening pages of the book for the benefit of potential purchasers.

[5] Taylor, Peter, *The Social Project Manager*, Gower Publishing Limited, Farnham, Surrey, GU9 7PT, UK, 2015, back cover

[6] Ibid, pp xv-xvi. Lindsay Scott is co-editor with Dennis Lock of *Handbook of People in Project Management* reviewed here: http://www.maxwideman.com/papers/people/intro.htm, in May 2014

[7] See our book review of the *Lazy Project Manager* here: http://www.maxwideman.com/papers/lazy_pm/intro.htm who, by the way, has to be anything but lazy!

[8] See reference to Lindsay Scott earlier and see page vxii

[9] Paul Bamforth is UK Managing Director at Textura Europe, previously Country Manager with Projectplace, pp vviii and xx

[10] Taylor, Peter, The Social Project Manager, p1. The emphasis is ours.

[11] According to Taylor, the four phases are: 1) Traditional Project Management as depicted by Dr. Harold Kerzner in many of his publications (p4); 2) A different way of working on product development as necessitated and conducted by project managers involved in software development projects (p7); 3) A transition that includes the adoption of social means of communicating, often as an overlay (p9), and 4) –presumably- full conversion to managing by social means.

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[12] Ibid, p3

[13] Ibid, p9

[14] In the past few years we have continued to assemble definitions for our *Wideman Comparative Glossary of Project Management Terms*. Now, however, we have tried using the database to extract terms that are relevant to specific areas of product interest to make the resulting sub-glossaries more focused. The challenge is: How do we establish appropriate sub-glossaries? (See: http://www.maxwideman.com/papers/challenge/intro.htm). It occurs to us that social project management is facing a similar communication challenge.

[15] Ibid, p39

[16] Ibid, p44

[17] Ibid, p45

[18] Ibid, p47

[19] Ibid, p11

[20] Ibid, summarized extracts from pp14-15

[21] Ibid, p15

[22] Ibid, p17

[23] As an aside and personal observation, this review is being written in the era of Donald Trump as US president. Trump has been using social media (Twitter) to great effect to the chagrin of established media hosts. As a result, Trump has been able to keep well-established media hosts, especially those of opposite political persuasion, one step behind. This is because putting together a public broadcast takes time, while social media is instantaneous. For the media as we know it today, "the writing of obsolescence is clearly on the wall." But for future projects, it should become a godsend.

[24] Well, at least that is true of the wealth-creating private sector.

[25] Ibid, p139

[26] See http://www.gartner.com/it/products/research/media_products/social_org. Interestingly, this book published by Gartner (2011) starts out by describing why most social media initiatives fail. This includes a list of five key misconceptions that are worth reading at the above link.

[27] Intellectual work, that is!

[28] Ibid, p140