

Project Management in the Twitter Era

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Abstract

Project managers are facing a revolution that will have a profound effect on their jobs and their profession. The shake up is fueled by a widening gap between the demands of contemporary projects, and the skills and abilities—in certain critical areas—of the humans who support them.

The dynamics of this revolution are already underway. While on one hand projects in general, and project management as a profession, are increasing in complexity, on the other hand our society is becoming one that thinks, reasons, and communicates in “sound bites”—a condition that is *enabled* by the growing use of social media tools, such as Twitter and Facebook.

This paper is not intended to stake out a position for or against *social media*, nor is it a diatribe condemning the direction our society is heading. In fact, certain tools that fall under the *social media* umbrella are being used successfully to address the communication and collaboration challenges that are inherent in projects where team members cannot be collocated. Rather, the intent is to help project managers recognize and come to terms with the gap between the demands of contemporary projects and the direction our society is moving with respect to what some describe as an “addiction” to social media.

Drawing on research and expert opinion of prominent neuroscientists, this paper will describe how social media is changing not only habits but also the “hardwiring” of the brains of an entire generation. Furthermore, since these changes give rise to challenges as well as opportunities in the project management arena, this paper will explore the ramifications of these changes—the good and the bad—in the context of planning, managing, and executing projects.

Envision this scenario. You are the manager of a multi-billion dollar project—a project so large that it accounts for three-fourths of your company’s total revenue. Needless to say, maintaining an excellent relationship with the client of this project is of paramount importance. Everyone on the project team knows and understands this—or so you believed before learning that a key member of your team has “Twittered” several offensive remarks about your client to his massive network of followers, many of whom “Re-Tweeted” them to their followers. If there is a root cause to this problem, ferreting it out won’t do anything to eliminate the damage that has already

been done. You can fire this individual in the hope of making amends, but your client understands that you and your company bear more than a little responsibility for hiring him in the first place—all the more so after the client discovers that this individual has a reputation for making insensitive remarks in public.

If one of the following is an accurate portrayal of the individual in this scenario, which would you choose?

- Individual 1: This individual is a highly paid member of your project team. He is 55 years old, the father of two children, and has worked for several well-known companies. He is not noted for being technically-savvy, but his job as a “goodwill ambassador” for this megaproject doesn’t require him to be so.
- Individual 2: This individual is a 25-years old software engineer who is an avid user of social media, including Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. In his college years he formed a rock band and gained a reputation for writing lyrics that earned him a large following among his peers because they “pushed the edge of the envelope.”

Since this is a fabricated story, there isn’t a “right” answer, but as a reminder that stereotypes are often wrong, consider the following real-life story.

On March 11, 2011, a magnitude 9.0 earthquake occurred off the eastern coast of Japan, causing a massive tsunami wave and multiple aftershocks that claimed the lives of over 18,000 Japanese men, women, and children. The fiscal damage alone, in the hundreds of billions of dollars, is expected to cost the equivalent of 4% of Japan’s gross domestic product (GDP).

In less than three days after this catastrophic event, Gilbert Gottfried, the 55-year old actor, comedian, and father of two, who served as “the voice of the duck” on the highly successful television ads for the Aflac insurance company, “Tweeted” a number of insensitive “jokes” about the tragedy in Japan to his massive network of 117,000 followers. Compounding the problem from Aflac’s perspective, 75% of the company’s business comes from Japan. The company immediately cut its ties with Gottfried, but the damage had already been done.

Was Aflac to blame for Gottfried’s behavior? Perhaps not directly, but it was well known fact before the company hired him that Gottfried was an “edgy comedian” who had previously been criticized for making insensitive “jokes” about the 9/11 attacks three weeks after they occurred.

Though the factual situation I have just described pertains to an entire company, it’s easy to see how something similar could have occurred in the fabricated project scenario. One individual with a “Twitter” account could sink a billion dollar project, regardless of the generational group this individual identifies with; furthermore—and this point is especially significant—regardless or irregardless of the *intent* to do harm.

From a project manager's perspective, the marriage of *bad judgment* coupled with a social media tool—such as Twitter—that can spread a message or in some cases a document, a photograph, or a video to tens of thousands of “followers” in a matter of seconds, should be cause for concern. It's a lesson the U.S. Government learned the hard way when thousands of classified diplomatic documents were made available in April 2010—allegedly by a disgruntled U.S. Army private—to anyone in the world via the Wikileaks website.

These examples set the stage for our remaining discussion regarding the impact that social media will have on the practice of project management as a profession. The theme of these examples speaks to a specific concern—i.e., the potential for damaging communications on a grand scale, instantaneously and with minimum effort. But, there are other social media-related issues and concerns, which I will touch on, that may be more likely and damaging in other ways than this.

Birth and Rise of the Social Media Phenomenon

Prior to the Internet the distribution of information—at least on a wide scale—was essentially limited to the domain of the mass media: newspapers, radio and television. But once the Internet came on the scene and was accessible to the public at large, all of this quickly changed. Since then applications for the Internet have grown at a pace limited only by the imagination of a vast community of users and software developers—including the introduction of social media applications, such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and YouTube, to name a few that are currently in wide use.

In contrast to traditional mass media, social media applications allow individuals to be both the providers and distributors of information. The information may take the form of text, images, or videos, depending on the application. Furthermore, it can be distributed in real-time to anyone who is in the information provider's network of “friends,” as with Twitter, or it can be accessed on-demand from The Web, as with Wikipedia and YouTube.

For obvious reasons, the growth of the Internet and the increasing number of users of social media go hand in hand. But the rise in social media usage may also be linked to other factors, such as feature enhancements in mobile phones that permit users of these devices to access The Web and also to send and receive videos, photographs, and text messages.

So, how big is “big” when it comes to the user community of social media applications? Here are a few statistics that may shed some light on this question:

- According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, in a report titled [*Digital Nation: Expanding Internet Usage*](#), during the first decade of the current millennium, the percentage of U.S. households with Internet access increased from 41.5% to 71.1%.
- Since March 21, 2006, when the first Twitter “Tweet” was sent, it took 3 years, 2 months, and 1 day for the number of Tweets to reach 1 billion. Now, five years after that first Tweet, Twitter logs a billion Tweets every week. (<http://blog.twitter.com/2011/03/numbers.html>)
- In the five year span from 2005 to 2010, the number of text messages increased from 9.8 billion to 187.7 billion. (<http://www.ctia.org/advocacy/research/index.cfm/aid/10323>)

- According to research by the [Nielsen Company](#), as of 2010, teens that “text” do so at an average of 3,339 messages per month, while young adults (age 18-24) average 1,630 text messages per month.

Though new social media platforms are sure to appear on the scene, there appears to be no end in sight to the increasing popularity of social media. Furthermore, much of this growth in the user community is coming from countries other than the U.S. and from individuals in the over-55 age group—a group that has been labeled as “digital immigrants.”

Talking More but Communicating Less

With all of the text messaging and Tweeting that’s going on in our society, it would seem that the art of communicating is alive and well. But perhaps not! Dialogue that is exclusively text-based has inherent drawbacks, omitting richer and often more subtle ingredients that are essential to effective human-to-human communications—especially in the project environment where “communications problems” are often cited as a principal cause for failed projects. Also, if it is true, as some believe, that the impersonal nature of social media encourages a level of bluntness and incivility that would not be tolerated in face-to-face encounters, project managers should be prepared for even greater challenges ahead in the human-factors arena.

Scientists ranging from anthropologists to neurologists have expressed concerns that predominately text-based social media tools are having a deleterious effect on the way humans interact and communicate, largely as a result of eliminating subtle but important aural and visual signals in the message. Furthermore, the damage may be compounded in a “flat world”—which is the milieu that many contemporary projects are required to function in. For instance, in citing the views of the venerable anthropologist, Edward T. Hall—views that were shaped by Hall’s lengthy career and extensive field work—a Wall Street Journal article titled *Why Gen-Y Johnny Can’t Read Nonverbal Cues* stated the following:

(Hall) argued that body language, facial expressions and stock mannerisms function “in juxtaposition to words,” imparting feelings, attitudes, reactions and judgments in a different register.... For Hall, breakdowns in nonverbal communication took place most damagingly in cross-cultural circumstances—for instance, federal workers dealing with Navajo Indians and misconstruing their basic conceptions of time.

While none of these experts is arguing for the need to turn the technology clock back in time, they are united in their message that technology is fundamentally changing the way humans communicate, some for better and some for worse. And, since communications plays such a pivotal role in the success or failure of most projects, it behooves project managers to understand, anticipate, and proactively deal with these changes—all the more so as project teams are increasingly populated by so-called “digital natives”—individuals who were born into an Internet society. On the other hand it would be wrong to assume that project managers simply need to know how to get their job done despite the growing presence of social media. There are genuine benefits that social networking brings to the table, most notably in the realm of improving communication and collaboration among the team members of distributed projects—the so-called *virtual project teams*.

Nature and Nurture

Our discussion so far has skirted around the issue of generational differences, and for good reason. I felt it was too important to first establish two premises: 1) that social media gives rise to certain challenges that project managers need to understand and be prepared to deal with, though it is not an “evil” to be squashed, and 2) that the use, misuse, and abuse of social media is not necessarily a “generational thing,” a fact that the Gilbert Gottfried example highlights. Nevertheless, there are certain generational differences that potentially have bearing on the way projects are led and managed. Generalizations must always give way to specific circumstances, since there are exceptions to every rule when it comes to human behavior. Still, it is helpful in anticipating challenges, establishing policy, designing the work environment, and bridging communications gaps to recognize the behaviors that are commonly attributed to generational differences in order to exploit them, work around them, or minimize them—but not ignore them.

Also, as the title of this section suggests, there are generational differences that are due to the environment in which an individual was raised and became accustomed to, and there are those that are attributable to the various stages of life. An example of the first kind is the difference between the generational groups who grew up with and without the Internet, especially during their formative years. Since these differences have more to do with societal factors than biology, their root cause or causes are a function of how an individual has been *nurtured*. An example of the second kind would be the age-related difference in an individual’s willingness to take risks. As a general rule, the older we get the less inclined we are to take risks. Since changes in risk-taking propensity can now be traced to how our “brain wiring” changes as we age, a factor such as this is attributable to *nature*. Figure 1 provides a summary of the often-cited distinguishing characteristics between one generational group and the other.

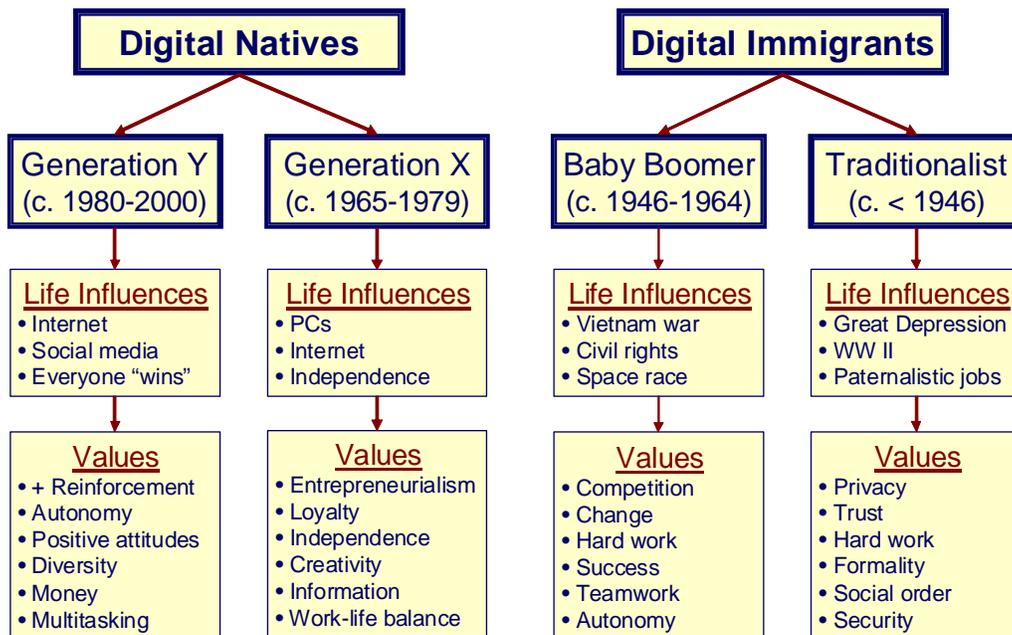


Figure 1

In reality the line of demarcation that determines whether a generational factor is due to nature or nurture is often grey, rather than black and white. But in the end—at least as far as a project manager is concerned—it will likely matter less to know whether a behavior is due to nature or nurture than to be aware that the differences are real and they must be constructively and perhaps creatively dealt with. Also there is much to be gained when there is mutual understanding and appreciation of the contribution that each generational group brings to the table—and much to be lost when not. It will likely fall on the project manager’s shoulders to figure out how to productively exploit these differences rather than allowing them to become generational silos—a job that will call for a new breed of project manager and a shift in the emphasis that is placed on training and developing project managers.

Impact of Social Media on the Practice of Project Management

Few would argue with the assertion that social media is having a profound effect on society. But our understanding of what this means to the workplace is still sketchy. And even less is understood about the impact of social media on the project environment, so at least some of what follows is speculation based on extrapolating from what we *do* know and the trends we are able to observe.

First a few words about the current research on social media and my assessment of the quality of this research.

By and large the research to date on social media has focused on tracking the burgeoning growth in the use of this relatively new communications technology. But, since much of this research has been conducted by entities that have a vested interest in selling social media “solutions,” questions arise regarding its validity, irrespective of its utility—especially when little if any information is provided about the research methodology, as is often the case.

For the purpose of understanding the impact that social media is having on individual and team performance—and thus the workplace—some of the most useful research comes to us from neuroscience and the relatively few studies that speak directly to workplace issues. Using the number of Google “hit counts” to make the point, Figure 2 provides an indication of the relative interest shown in social media as it relates to marketing issues in comparison to job-related issues.



Figure 2

As Figure 2 shows, at the time these data were collected, the combination of “social media” with “marketing” returned slightly more than 200 times the number of Google *hits* as that obtained from combining “social media” with “job performance.” Whatever else this may intimate, it might suggest that much of the current “buzz” about the impact that social media will have on society is motivated by commercial interests, rather than the desire for knowledge enhancement related to workplace issues. Yet, there’s no denying the fact that the use of social media is rapidly on the rise and that this will undoubtedly have a profound—if not well understood—effect on the way business is conducted and projects are managed.

One of the leading academic researchers who is investigating the impact that social media is having on the brain, and thus human behavior, is Gary Small, M.D. Dr. Small heads up the UCLA Memory and Aging Research Center and is co-author of the book titled *iBrain: Surviving the Technological Alteration of the Modern Mind*. Here are some interesting findings that he and his colleagues have been able to uncover:

- Over time, a syndrome that has been labeled as “continuous partial attention” can have a permanent effect on the neural circuitry of the brain, conditioning the brain to scan for an opportunity of any type of contact at every given moment. Some see this as a kind of culturally induced form of Attention Deficit Disorder, giving it the label “Divided Attention Disorder” (DAD) to distinguish it from ADD of the variety that is thought to be biologically innate.
- Social media is altering the neural circuitry of the brains of young people by weakening the neural pathways that are essential to human-to-human interaction—for instance, eye contact, body language, and the ability to empathize. Brain economy ostensibly does not allow for any portion of the brain to go unused for long without changing its intended purpose or allowing it to atrophy.
- 20 percent of young people suffer from “pathological internet use”—triggering the same neurological responses that are associated with other *addictions*. Those who need an “internet fix” and can’t get it are likely to suffer from irritability and other consequences, much the same as a chain smoker who is in desperate need of a smoke.

Since today’s complex projects require attention to details, and also the ability to deal with complicated and delicate human interactions, it doesn’t require much imagination to speculate on what these research findings might mean to project managers and the project environment.

But on a positive note, as suggested earlier, social media can also serve as a useful tool (or tools) in support of the project environment. Arguably the project-types that can benefit the most are those in which the project team is geographically dispersed—in other words, *distributed projects* supported by *virtual project teams*. Project teams that are unable to collocate suffer from the loss of informal communication—so-called “water cooler” conversation where spontaneous communication occurs and interpersonal relationships are nurtured. While social media may not be able to fill the gap completely, evidence is emerging that social media platforms that permit dynamic, synchronous communication—platforms such as Twitter and Tumblr—can be harnessed for use in encouraging informal communication. Furthermore, the 140-character limitation that Twitter imposes has much in common with the short, pithy dialogue that occurs when two or more project team members meet at the water cooler or pass in the hall. And by

setting up a private group account, the project team can exchange project-related *Tweets* that are blocked from any but those who are authorized to participate in the group. Also, by using “hashtags”—which are markers within the text of a Tweet that take the form *#keyword* (where “keyword” is a shortcut referring to a certain topic or piece of information)—it is possible to rapidly classify and access the Tweets that pertain to a particular subject or issue. As a note of caution, since Tweets can be read by anyone who is authorized to do so, usage guidelines and rules of etiquette may need to be established in advance. Still, the idea of placing minimum constraints on the dialogue is considered by some to be essential to the free flow of information. For instance, one school of thought asserts that Tweets should not be regulated since they can enable “osmotic communication”—a label describing the indirect transfer of information that occurs by overhearing conversations or simply noticing things happening around you (de Baar, 2009). Figure 3 shows an excerpt from the Twitter help page that describes how to protect Tweets from all but those who are authorized to view them.



The screenshot shows a help page titled "About Public and Protected Tweets" with a "Tweet" button in the top right corner. The page is divided into several sections:

- Public or protected?**

When you sign up for Twitter, you have the option of keeping your Tweets public (the default account setting) or protecting your Tweets.

 - **Accounts with public Tweets** have profile pages that are visible to everyone.
 - **Accounts with protected Tweets** require manual approval of each and every person who may view that account's Tweets. Only approved followers can view Tweets made on these accounts.
- How Do I Protect My Tweets?**

You can protect your Tweets in your [account settings](#) page, following these steps:

 1. Log in to your Twitter account
 2. Visit your [Account Settings](#) Page by selecting Settings from the drop-down menu on the right hand side of your screen.
 3. Scroll down and check the box next to **Protect my Tweets**
 4. **Save** your changes
- When you navigate to your home page after protecting your Tweets, you'll see a notice reminding you that your Tweets are now protected. Accounts with protected Tweets can always go public by unchecking the box in account settings.
- Tweet Privacy** **Protect my tweets**

Your tweets are currently protected; only those you approve will receive your tweets. Your future tweets will not be available publicly. Tweets posted previously may still be publicly visible in some places.

Figure 3

In addition to the communications gap that is inherent in every distributed project, these projects also pose challenges when it comes to collaborating on the content of documents, specifications, diagrams, spreadsheets, project plans, etc. Fortunately, another set of social networking tools are available to help with this. For instance, tools such as Google Docs and Vyew allow geographically dispersed project teams to dynamically collaborate on documents, diagrams, etc., while also assisting with the task of tracking and managing changes. Also, to enhance the interaction between the project team members while they are in the process of collaborating on a document, another social media tool, Skype, can be used to share webcam views of the individuals who are involved in the process—getting as close to real-time, face-to-face collaboration as distributed projects will allow. Figure 4 shows an example of a synchronous collaboration effort in progress using Vyew.

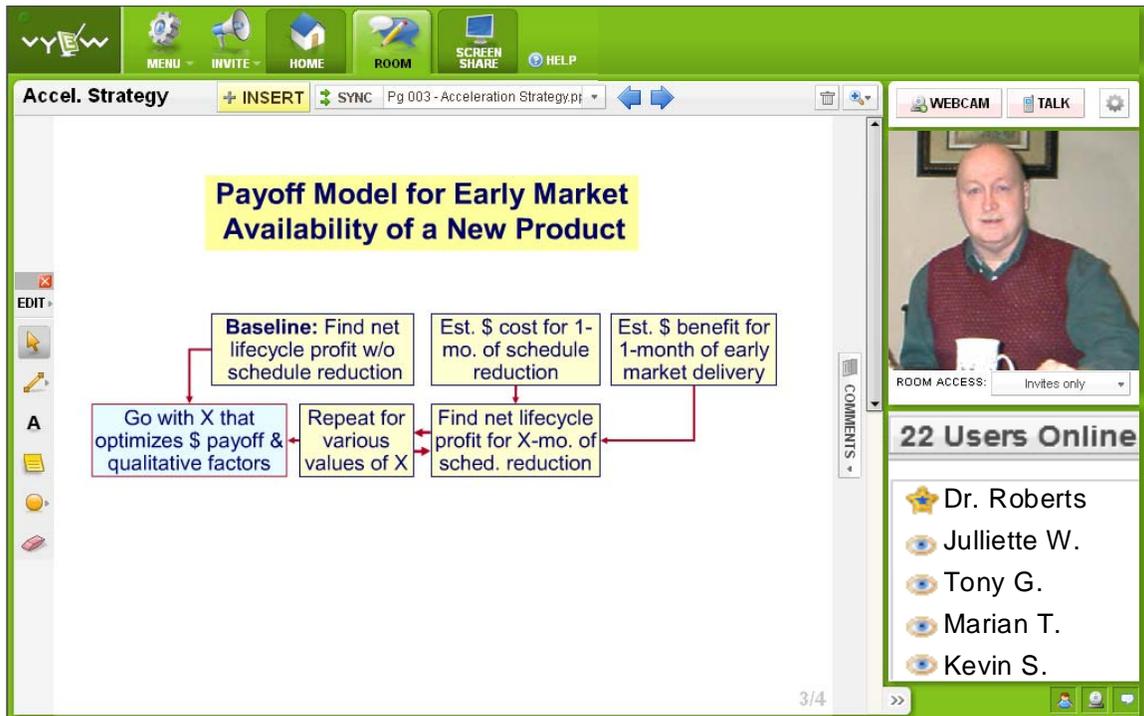


Figure 4

Project managers have discovered a variety of uses for social media tools. Below is a list of applications that were included in a recent survey on how such tools are being used (Harrin, 2010):

- Staying in touch with other project team members
- Collaborating on project status updates
- Communicating with the customer and suppliers
- Collaborating on and sharing documents
- Tracking tasks

The examples cited above may be the tip of the proverbial iceberg when it comes to the ways social media tools can be used to support projects. Furthermore, new tools are on the way that will come with added features, benefits, and also risks, such as security and privacy concerns. And so, I leave you with this question: Are you prepared for the transformational impact that social media tools will have on the way projects are planned, managed, and executed?

References and Recommended Reading

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<p><u>Training Courses</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Leading Accelerated Projects• Multitasking Skills & Tools Workshop• Gleaning Facts From Figures• Quantitative Tools for Project Managers• Project Communications and Collaboration in the Social Networking Era <p>See descriptions at www.R2assoc.com/Trainp.htm</p>	<p>Roberts & Roberts Associates</p> <p>Lon Roberts, Ph.D.</p>  <p>www.R2assoc.com info@R2assoc.com 972.596.2956</p>
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