

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

*As long as there is communication, everything can be solved.*¹

—Robert Trujillo, bassist for the rock band Metallica

Think about any time you have needed to work with another person to accomplish something. Did you coordinate with your spouse this morning to determine who would pack your children’s lunches or pick them up after soccer practice? Did you call the doctor’s office to schedule an appointment? Did you send or respond to a meeting invitation at work? Did you speak with your boss about a project assignment or to prioritize your workload?

Communication is *how* people work together to get things done. Without it, the kids would never get picked up from school (or get there in the first place). You would never see the doctor (or tell him what ails you). You would never meet with your colleagues (or discuss the tasks at hand with them). You would never understand your project assignment (or receive it in the first place).

Still not convinced? Try spending an hour at work without communicating. Do not read or respond to any e-mails, use the phone, attend a meeting, speak to coworkers. You’re probably thinking, “That’s impossible!”

Exactly.

In a project, communication is vital because the project is a new endeavor for every stakeholder involved. Even if every member of the team has worked together on dozens of projects before this one, every project is unique. Communication is how stakeholders understand what this project is about, how it will affect them, and what role they may be expected to play.

There are a number of resources available on communication in project management. Most of those resources, however, focus on the “how”—the tools and techniques project managers, project teams, and stakeholders can use. This book will take a step back to look at communication more holistically as *the* way projects—and just about everything else that involves more than one person—get done. So let’s get started. Welcome to Chapter 1.

The purpose of this chapter is to help you:

- Understand why project communication is so important
- Know what to expect from this book: what it will cover, who the audience is, how the book is structured, and key definitions
- Trace the evolution of project communications

Are you ready? We are!

Why Is Communication So Important in Projects?

Communication is, of course, a necessity in projects. But just how important is it? Good communication skills separate good project managers from the rest of the pack, and separate successful projects from unsuccessful ones. Research from the Project Management Institute (PMI) and other sources shows that project communication has a significant impact on project budgets and project success. In 2013, PMI published an in-depth report on “The Essential Role of Communications” in project management, with conclusions derived from the organization’s annual, global *Pulse of the Profession*® survey. This report revealed how impactful project communications are.

- Effective communication to all stakeholders is “the most crucial success factor in project management.”
- 7.5 percent of every dollar spent on a project is at risk due to ineffective communication.
- Effective communication leads to a 17-percent increase in finishing projects within budget.
- Half of all unsuccessful projects fall short due to ineffective communication.

- High-performing organizations create project communications management plans for nearly twice as many projects as low-performing organizations (see more about project communications management plans in Chapter 5).
- High-performing organizations also perform significantly better at delivering the message in a timely manner, with sufficient detail and clarity, using nontechnical language, through appropriate communication channels/media.²

In another study of 448 innovative projects, researchers found that interpersonal skills including communication were more predictive of project success than traditional project management skills such as planning and controlling activities. These interpersonal skills are what separate leaders from managers, and become more important to project success as the complexity and innovativeness of the project increases.³

With so much evidence demonstrating the value that effective communication can bring to a project, why do project communications continue to fall short, thereby putting projects at risk? The literature reveals at least two reasons.

First, project managers do not always follow or prioritize good communication practices. In one study of several projects at a large IT service provider, only a small percentage of the projects had a formal communications plan, and performance reports and lessons learned were not frequently utilized. This was despite the company having well-defined communication processes in its project management framework.⁴

Second, project managers may take a narrow, transactional view of communication as a means of delivering information about the project. In a study of communication practices of project managers at a large international bank, 82 percent viewed communication as a means to transmit clear and complete information about the project.⁵

Communication, however, is much more than simply sending and receiving information. It is a mechanism to reduce uncertainty, build trust, demonstrate leadership, generate support, manage change, mitigate conflict, and facilitate stakeholder satisfaction—all key elements to a project's success.

Which is why we wrote this book.

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What to Expect from This Book

This book intends to help you apply theory and best practices from the communication world to enhance your understanding and execution of the communication aspects of project management. It may reconfirm some of the techniques and approaches you already use. We also hope that it helps you look at project communications more holistically, giving you some new ideas to try. The goal is not to achieve perfect communications in a project—that is unrealistic to define, much less accomplish. Rather, our purpose is to demonstrate the importance of good communication in any project, and to help you improve your project communications to have more successful projects, more satisfied stakeholders, and more productive project teams.

Remember that there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to any aspect of project management, including project communication. Everything from the style and tone of your messages, to the tools and technology you use to create and deliver them, needs to be modified and adapted to suit the project (and the stakeholders) at hand. Some of what is presented in this book will make perfect sense in your current projects, while other information may not apply. Use what fits, and modify it as necessary to accomplish your communication and project goals. Most of all, enjoy the learning and practical experience, and keep track of lessons learned to help you communicate even more effectively in future projects.

Who This Book Is for

This book is designed for project managers, team members, project sponsors, and all stakeholders who are impacted by project actions, decisions, and outcomes. While the book directly addresses project managers, all other project stakeholders can learn from the information presented here to improve the

way they communicate, both within projects and in many other contexts. In addition, educators can benefit by using this book in the classroom with students studying project management and project communication.

What You Will Find in This Book

We begin with an overview of the importance of project communication, and travel through time to reflect on the evolution of project communication. In Chapter 2, we will take a deeper look at communication theories that fit well within the project management context. These theories are based on the concept of uncertainty, how it affects people's attitudes and behaviors, and how you can use communication to minimize the impact of uncertainties on your project. Chapter 3 looks at the concept of audience, including how to identify the audience of your project, and how to tailor your communications to engage your audience in ways that will support the success of the project.

Chapter 4 reviews some of the "basics" and "things to consider" when communicating on projects, along with looking at why high-performing organizations and project teams are better at communicating. Chapters 5 and 6 cover the Project Communications Management Knowledge Area as outlined in *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide)*, a widely used set of project management standards published by PMI. Chapter 5 covers planning project communications, while Chapter 6 reviews managing and monitoring project communications. Then in Chapter 7 we will review common tools used to communicate in projects. Note that this chapter does not highlight specific tools (e.g. Slack® or GoToMeeting™); rather, it provides considerations on various types of tools available, along with some guidelines on how to choose the right communication tool(s) for your project.

We'll conclude with two topics that share a significant overlap with communication within projects, and also apply more broadly within organizations. Chapter 8 looks at the process and nascent field of change management, emphasizing concepts that can help you communicate the changes your project will create for your stakeholders. In Chapter 9, we look at conflict management and share communication-based strategies for handling conflict within the project team, and with stakeholders outside

the team. Chapter 10 concludes with a review of what you can take away from this book, both conceptually and practically, including how to build a personalized action plan to grow your project communication skills.

Each chapter begins with specific chapter objectives, uses examples that demonstrate the practical relevance of the information, and includes templates and other tools and activities you can use to apply the concepts in your current and future projects. Each chapter concludes with a summary of what was covered. There are also key questions to encourage reflection on the information, how it can be applied to your projects, and how it can be used in your own professional development. These key questions can also be useful in educational environments to stimulate students' critical thinking about applying these concepts to practice.

In Chapters 3 to 9, the end of each chapter also includes a special "Putting it into Practice" section that provides practical tips for applying the chapter's information in specific project contexts such as:

- traditional (also called "waterfall") project teams (colocated teams),
- agile project teams, and
- virtual project teams (also called distributed project teams; those that are not colocated and so have limited opportunity for face-to-face communication).

The book concludes with appendices that provide additional resources, templates, and other information for your use and reference.

Key Definitions

Before progressing further, let's take a moment to define some terms we will use often in this book. As we discuss further in Chapter 4, words matter, and using language that everyone understands is a critical aspect of clear and effective communication. So, let's provide some basic definitions to ensure a common understanding.

- **Agile project teams:** Agile project teams are those that work on projects using an agile or iterative approach. Rather than planning the full project at initiation, agile projects are planned in sprints

of a set period of time (for example, 1 week or 2 months) that have a set list of goals/deliverables. Once the sprint is complete, the project is evaluated, and the next sprint is planned. This allows for changes and decisions to be made throughout the project as it progresses.

- **Communication:** There are three aspects of the term communication that we will explore in this book. First, it is a discipline within the social sciences that studies the way in which human beings share meaning through verbal, nonverbal, and symbolic (words and images) messages. Second, it is the act of transmitting and receiving those messages. Third, it is the tools or methods we use to transmit those messages.
- **Project communication:** This refers to the communication that takes place among project stakeholders and is related to some aspect of the project and its execution.
- **Project communications management plan:** This is a plan that outlines when, how, and what to communicate to various stakeholder groups throughout the duration of the project.
- **Project communication tools:** Project communication tools can be a wide range of technologies, documents, devices, interactions, and skills. For the purposes of this book, we define project communication tools as any mechanism or strategy to exchange information, reduce uncertainty, engage stakeholders, build trust, generate support for the project, and, ultimately, deliver project and team success.
- **Project risk:** A risk is an event or condition that may occur, resulting in a positive and/or negative effect on the project.
- **Stakeholders:** Stakeholders are anyone who affects or is affected by the project. This includes the project team, leadership who have authority over the project (such as the project sponsor), and others both inside and outside the organization who could be affected by the activities or outcomes of the project. At times we will distinguish different groups of stakeholders, since communication needs and approaches can differ based on the stakeholders' relationship to the project.
- **Traditional project teams:** Traditional project teams are those that use a traditional (or "waterfall") methodology. This is a linear

approach where most of the planning for the entire project is done after the initiation of the project.

- **Uncertainty management theory:** This is a theory in the field of communication that proposes that uncertainty is both a cognitive (knowledge-based) and emotional state. People may or may not communicate to reduce uncertainty.
- **Uncertainty reduction theory:** This is a theory in the field of communication that proposes that uncertainty is a cognitive state based on an individual's knowledge, and is separate from emotion. People will communicate in order to reduce uncertainty.
- **Virtual project teams:** Virtual (or distributed) project teams are those that involve individuals who are not geographically colocated. These teams generally rely heavily on technology to maintain communication, as face-to-face interactions are limited or nonexistent.

Now that we have covered these key concepts, let's take a quick trip through history to look at how project communication has evolved over time, through the lens of the *PMBOK® Guide*. Why look back? The *PMBOK® Guide* is written by project management professionals from around the world. A review will show how project communication (and project management knowledge) has changed and progressed as the profession itself has grown and matured. This may also give you a greater appreciation for how *your* project communication and approaches have developed, and can continue to evolve, over time.

The Evolution of Communications in the *PMBOK® Guide*

As project management has progressed since it first emerged as a profession in the middle of the last century, so has the approach to project communication. Understanding this historical context is a great place to start our conversation on project communication. So let's look at how the subject has changed in one of the seminal sources of information about project management practice, *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge*, or *PMBOK® Guide*, published by PMI and currently in its sixth edition. Figure 1.1 provides a high-level overview of this evolution, while the rest of this section traces the progression in more detail.

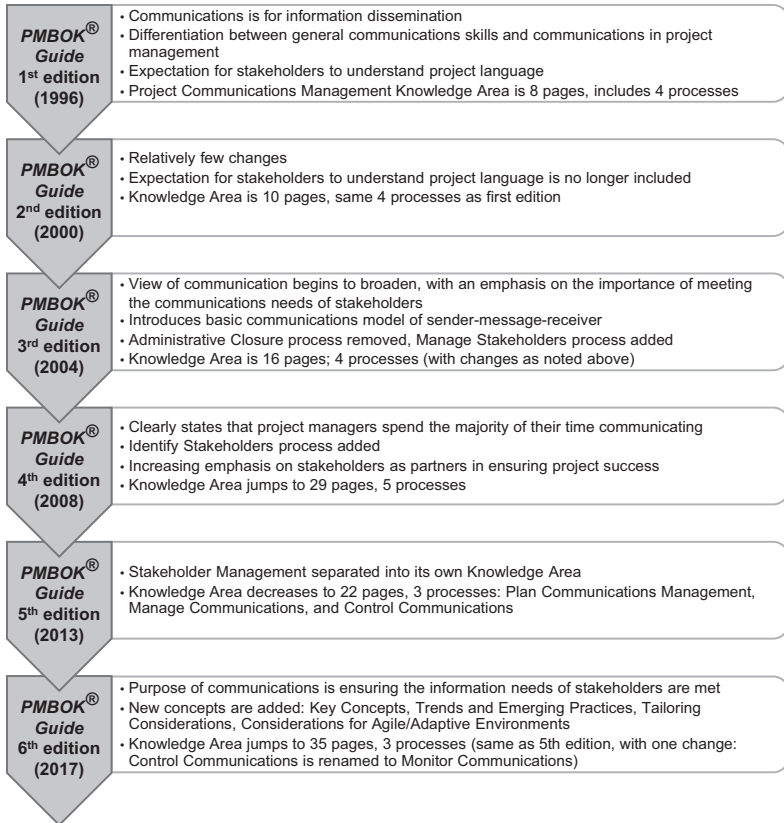


Figure 1.1 An overview of the evolution of the Project Communications Management Knowledge Area in the *PMBOK® Guide First Edition, 1996*

PMI published the very first *PMBOK® Guide* in 1996. Prior to that, the institute published a white paper called the “Ethics, Standards, and Accreditation Committee Final Report” in the *Project Management Journal*⁶ in 1983 that included baseline standards for the profession. Those standards outlined six major knowledge areas (today there are ten). One of those six was Communications Management.⁶

The very first *PMBOK® Guide* debuted in 1996 with nine knowledge areas, once again including Project Communications Management. The emphasis was on processes that are relatively unilateral—information is disseminated to stakeholders, but there was little acknowledgement of stakeholders having input back into the process. The introduction of the communications section of the guide notably stated, “Everyone involved

in the project must be prepared to send and receive communications in the project ‘language’ and must understand how the communications they are involved in as individuals affect the project as a whole”⁷ (as shown in Exhibit 1.1). This put the onus on stakeholders to understand project jargon, which we will discuss more in Chapter 4.

Exhibit 1.1

Quote from the beginning of the Project Communications Management Knowledge Area in the first edition of the PMBOK® Guide

Everyone involved in the project must be prepared to send and receive communications in the project ‘language’ and must understand how the communications they are involved in as individuals affect the project as a whole.

Additionally, this edition noted, “The general management skill of communicating is related to, but not the same as, project communications management.”⁸ While some communication concepts were mentioned, such as basic communication models and information delivery techniques, there was no further explanation of the integration of these concepts into the practice of communicating within projects.

The whole of the Project Communications Management Knowledge Area in this first edition comprised just eight pages of the book and was built on four processes, each with inputs, tools and techniques, and outputs:

1. Communications Planning used only one tool: stakeholder analysis. This process included ways to access information in between planned communications, and also acknowledged the need to build in review and revision of the communication plan.
2. Information Distribution was simply what the name of the process implies: the distribution of information about the project to stakeholders.

3. Performance Reporting included status reports (current status), progress reports (what has been done so far), and forecasts (what to expect for the rest of the project).
4. Administrative Closure was the documentation and dissemination of information around the end of each phase of the project and the project as a whole.

Second Edition, 2000

The second edition of the guide expanded the Project Communications Management Knowledge Area by two pages. One interesting change was that the quote noted in Exhibit 1.2 no longer included the phrase “in the project ‘language,’” demonstrating that expecting others to understand project jargon was not a viable expectation for the wide range of stakeholders involved in a project.

Exhibit 1.2

Quote from the beginning of the Project Communications Management Knowledge Area in the second edition of the PMBOK® Guide

Everyone involved in the project must be prepared to send and receive communications ~~in the project ‘language’~~ and must understand how the communications they are involved in as individuals affect the project as a whole.

The second edition’s approach to communications changed relatively little; the most notable changes were some additions within the communications processes. Two outputs were added to the Information Distribution process: project reports and project closures. In the Administrative Closure process, project reports and project presentations were added to tools and techniques, while “formal acceptance” was replaced with “project closure.”

Third Edition, 2004

In the third edition, the Project Communications Management Knowledge Area grew to 16 pages, and began to take a more holistic view of

communication. While processes were still at the forefront, this version of the guide shifted toward emphasizing the importance of effective communication as a project management skill, rather than implying that stakeholders are responsible for participating in and understanding the importance of project communication. The quote shown in Exhibit 1.3 was modified significantly to, “Everyone involved in the project should understand how communications affect the project as a whole.”⁹

Exhibit 1.3

Quote from the beginning of the Project Communications Management Knowledge Area in the third edition of the PMBOK® Guide

Everyone involved in the project must be prepared to send and receive communications and must understand how the communications they are involved in as individuals affect the project as a whole.

Everyone involved in the project should understand how communications affect the project as a whole.

While the introduction still noted a differentiation between project management communication and general communication skills, it did outline several general communication concepts. Notably, this included an illustration of a basic sender–message–receiver communication model that demonstrated how communication takes place between the party that sends the message and the party that receives it. This model, which has been carried forward through every subsequent revision of the *PMBOK® Guide*, encompassed two important aspects of communication that had not been acknowledged in previous editions: that communication includes some element of feedback to acknowledge that the receiver has received and understood the message, and the concept of “noise” to recognize that many different factors can interfere with transmitting and understanding the message. An understanding of this model is important because, as this edition of the guide now stated, “A breakdown in communications can negatively impact the project.”¹⁰

This emphasis on the importance of communication was carried through in major changes to the processes in the Project Communications Management Knowledge Area in the third edition. The Administrative Closure process was removed and replaced with the Manage Stakeholders process, which focused on communication as a means to “satisfy the requirements of and resolve issues with project stakeholders,”¹¹ and suggested the connection between good stakeholder management and project success. Changes were also made to the remaining three processes in the knowledge area. These changes broadened the scope of what can affect communication planning, such as enterprise environmental factors (conditions outside the control of the project team, but which can affect the project) and organizational process assets (the knowledge bases and practices of the organization that may be used within the project). The changes also reflected the desired outcome of project communication—to identify and then meet the informational needs of stakeholders, which is an important factor in project success.

Fourth Edition, 2008

The fourth edition of the *PMBOK® Guide* included the single largest increase in the Project Communications Management Knowledge Area across any revision, nearly doubling in size to 29 pages. This edition was the first to directly call out just how significant communication is in a project: “Project managers spend the majority of their time communicating with team members and other project stakeholders, whether they are internal (at all organizational levels) or external to the organization.”¹² It also broke down the barrier that previous editions had created between general communication skills and those used in project management: “Most communication skills are common for general management and project management.”¹³

Project managers spend the majority of their time communicating.

The four processes from the third edition remained: Plan Communications, Distribute Information, Manage Stakeholder Expectations, and Report Performance. The emphasis on stakeholders increased with

the addition of a new process called Identify Stakeholders. It included stakeholder analysis as well as expert judgment and provided examples of tools such as a stakeholder analysis matrix and a power/interest grid. The Manage Stakeholders process was renamed to Manage Stakeholder Expectations, shifting away from the idea of controlling stakeholders and toward the concept of working with them as partners in ensuring project success. Interpersonal and management skills like leadership, influencing, and political/cultural awareness were included as tools for accomplishing this desired outcome.

Fifth Edition, 2013

The fifth edition of the *PMBOK® Guide* brought a major change to the Project Communications Management Knowledge Area. Stakeholder Management was separated out into its own knowledge area, in response to global feedback on the fourth edition regarding the need to expand stakeholder management concepts and recognize communications management and stakeholder management as two distinct areas.¹⁴ As a result, the Identify Stakeholders and Manage Stakeholder Expectations processes were moved to this new knowledge area, reducing the Project Communications Management Knowledge Area to 22 pages.

The three processes that remained in the communications knowledge area were renamed to eliminate confusion and to focus on three key elements:

- Plan Communications Management changed little from the fourth edition.
- Manage Communications (changed from Distribute Information) added an emphasis on the need to ensure that stakeholders understand project communications and have opportunities for further information or clarification.
- Control Communications (changed from Report Performance) emphasized the need for a smooth flow of information among all stakeholders. This process shifted the focus from simply producing reports on how the project is progressing, to ensuring that those reports adequately meet stakeholder needs.

Sixth Edition, 2017

In the most recent edition of the *PMBOK® Guide*, the Project Communications Management Knowledge Area grew substantially, totaling 35 pages. The first sentence of this section shows the shift in the focus from process to purpose, indicating that the processes outlined in this knowledge area are those that are “necessary to ensure that the information needs of the project and its stakeholders are met.”¹⁵

Several key concepts were added to the introduction, including:

- *Key Concepts for Project Communications Management*, which provides definitions, as well as general concepts about how information is exchanged and how miscommunication can be avoided.
- *Trends and Emerging Practices in Project Communications Management*, which looks at recent developments such as the inclusion of stakeholders in project reviews and meetings, and the increasing use of social media and other technology to communicate in projects.
- *Tailoring Considerations*, which includes considerations to apply communication strategies to each unique project.
- *Considerations for Agile/Adaptive Environments*, which for the first time calls out unique considerations for agile projects.

These changes continued the trend toward emphasizing the importance of communication in any project; adapting communication based on the needs of the project, stakeholders, and changing technology/environment; and tying effective project communication to general communication concepts and best practices.

Where We Are Today

Through its iterative revision process, the *PMBOK® Guide* has evolved over time to reflect the developing understanding of the purpose and importance of communication to the practice of project management worldwide. The guide has moved away from being process-oriented and toward acknowledging the important role that communication plays in project success. The guide now offers project managers much more information and

knowledge about considerations and proven practices in communication. While this knowledge is not unique to project management, it is crucial in achieving the intent of the Project Communications Management Knowledge Area—to ensure that stakeholders’ communication needs are met so that they support the project’s deliverables and expected outcomes.

Summary

The goal of this book is to encourage you to think more comprehensively and critically about your project communication, and to view it as much more than a means to provide information to your stakeholders. We hope you will come to see that communication is the most critical factor to project success. In fact, it is *how* the project succeeds by serving as the link between the process (project management) and the people (project stakeholders). By applying the concepts and practices outlined throughout the book, you can plan, manage, and monitor project communications that will not only help your projects succeed, but also help ensure satisfied stakeholders who will contribute toward your positive reputation as an exceptional project participant, regardless of your project role.

As you read this book, consider tailoring the content and concepts to your own project communications practices and approaches. Refer back to the evolution of project communications as you continue to evolve your own project communications. Where we have been will help guide the way to where we are going!

Key Questions

1. What successes and challenges have you experienced when communicating on projects?
2. How would you answer this question: If so much has been written about effective communication in projects, why does ineffective communication continue, risking project success?
3. Now that you have explored the evolution of project communication through the lens of the *PMBOK® Guide*, describe your own journey in communicating on projects. How has your approach to communicating on a project evolved over time?

Notes

1. Kielty (2018).
2. Project Management Institute (2013), *The High Cost of Low Performance*, pp. 1–6.
3. Dominick et al. (2004), p. 5.
4. Carvalho (2013), p. 54.
5. Ziek and Anderson (2015), p. 788.
6. Project Management Institute (1996), *PMBOK® Guide*, 1st ed., p. 139.
7. Project Management Institute (1996), *PMBOK® Guide*, 1st ed., p. 103.
8. Project Management Institute (1996), *PMBOK® Guide*, 1st ed., p. 103.
9. Project Management Institute (2004), *PMBOK® Guide*, 3rd ed., p. 221.
10. Project Management Institute (2004), *PMBOK® Guide*, 3rd ed., p. 224.
11. Project Management Institute (2004), *PMBOK® Guide*, 3rd ed., p. 221.
12. Project Management Institute (2008), *PMBOK® Guide*, 4th ed., p. 243.
13. Project Management Institute (2008), *PMBOK® Guide*, 4th ed., p. 245.
14. Project Management Institute (2013), *PMBOK® Guide*, 5th ed., p. 469.
15. Project Management Institute (2017), *PMBOK® Guide*, 6th ed., p. 359.

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