

Balancing Structure and Flexibility in Collaborative Project Management

by
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Pankaj Taneja's article [The Microsoft Yammer Acquisition, Sharepoint, and Social Business](#) speculates about Microsoft's plans for integrating the social networking tool Yammer with the rest of Microsoft's product line, including SharePoint.

Given how so many organizations have SharePoint licenses and are looking for ways to improve how they manage projects, I think it makes sense to consider how tools such as SharePoint can be used to support individual projects as well as multi-project PMO's. It also makes good sense to consider how more social tools such as Yammer can also fit into the project manager's collaboration toolbox.



Out of the box, SharePoint supports a structured, document-centric approach to managing and sharing information about a project. Yammer is more Twitter-like with a more social approach to how people collaborate and share information. SharePoint is like a Swiss Army Knife. Yammer has more restricted and targeted functionality.

Despite the differences between the two tools, balancing their use in support of project or program management is not an unreasonable requirement. The question is how.

If you've ever managed a large or complex project you know there's a limit to how much structure and formalism you can impose, especially in situations where uncertainty is high or where some project activities are more production oriented or repetitive than others. No matter what kind of hierarchy or reporting structure you impose on teams throughout the project, informal groups or teams emerge or evolve to make and implement decisions, especially in areas where the project plan is less detailed or is out of date.

As a project manager you may also realize how difficult it is to get project staff to document everything that, at least according to more traditional approaches to project management, needs to be documented. This is especially the case in fast-paced corporate project situations where putting out project fires is the norm. The experienced project manager learns how to operate in such environments.

Back to SharePoint and Yammer. As the author of the linked article points out, a question arises concerning what integration of the two might look like, starting with the fact that the

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technical architectures of SharePoint and Yammer are so different.

My own question is more fundamental than that and goes beyond the features of any individual tool such as these. From the standpoint of promoting collaboration and information sharing in connection with project management, I think it makes good sense to support *both* document and network centric tools such as SharePoint as well as more social and potentially informal tools such as Yammer. Sometimes you need to do some things "by the book" in ways that promote formal processes. If you and your project sponsor haven't agreed and signed off on a Project Charter, for example, there's likely to be hell to pay down the road when you discover that team members' don't agree on project fundamentals.

On the other hand, you also know that a lot of work gets done in small groups and via informal communication in ways that can't be anticipated or controlled. Whether you use terms such as "knowledge management," "best practices," or "learning communities," establishing a social network to support such independent communications and networking might be just as valuable if not more valuable than the "formalisms" that many of us have taken for granted in project planning and project management.

If a project manager has a SharePoint based site that integrates project documentation, formal group access controls, as well as interfaces with corporate systems such as time reporting, scheduling, and executive reporting, should the manager also push to have more social tools such as Yammer integrated as well? Or would such integration tend to "kill off" the more informal and potentially serendipitous knowledge sharing benefits that social networking can provide?

Organizations will differ about how they go about accomplishing such integration. While it might make sense to integrate the more technical aspects such as network security, credentialing, access control, and group membership, I also see benefits of enabling staff to view the two systems as separate entities, one focused on project documentation and formal processes, the other on less formal -- and less controlled -- group communication.

From a project management perspective, we will always need agreement on project goals and deliverables, on a high level plan to accomplish these goals that specifies roles and responsibilities, and on a method for tracking and reporting progress.

Communication, collaboration, and information sharing are critical to all these project areas. Increasingly, the ease with which communication, collaboration, and information sharing are accomplished are becoming much more personal, less formalized, and more social. We need to take advantage of this trend in how we manage projects.