# APM web briefing - Social media in project management, is it a waste of time?

## Introduction

Social media has become an increasingly mainstream tool available to businesses over the past five years. In project management, it has been used in a variety of ways, but whatever its use, it has been critical to establish a clear understanding of its purpose in a given project scenario in order to get the most out of it.

## Internal or external?

When we think of social media, we usually imagine major external platforms like Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter. However, there are many internal social platforms within companies or created for specific projects. It is crucial to think of social media not just as large-scale networking and broadcasting but as any technology that facilitates dynamic interaction between a group of people; the emphasis is on the 'social' bit. Social media is just another way of interacting with one another – the only difference is that interaction takes place online.

## What is its purpose?

Different social platforms serve different purposes. Four main uses are particularly relevant to project management:

- **Discursive**: These are any platforms with a discussion forum / question and answer format – they have several main uses in a project context.

  First of these is sharing lessons learned. This is often done on major external platforms, such as LinkedIn groups, amongst the wider project management community.

  Sharing best practice is a second use of discursive platforms and, similarly to sharing lessons learned, often takes place within the wider project management context.

  Thirdly, discursive platforms are used in stakeholder management. In this case, the nature of the platform tends to vary depending on the size of the project. For example, a government mega-project might use a major external platform to keep anyone wishing to be informed up-to-date on the project's progress. Meanwhile, a market sensitive mergers and acquisitions project might use an internal, closed platform with only key approved stakeholders invited to view updates in order to keep information protected.

- **Networking:** This is most commonly project managers using external platforms to connect with one another and the wider project community. However, a number of

project managers have also started using internal social platforms to source skills and expertise for their projects from within the business.

- **Events calendar / task scheduling:** This relates to the use of collaborative calendar platforms (such as Doodle) to organise meetings, or of organisation platforms such as Trello to organise and manage work streams.

- **Collaboration Tools:** The most common of these in a project context tend to be internal Wikis, but these relate to any software that can make the co-authoring and version control of documents simpler, such as Google Docs. These are used either by project offices to maintain control over project documentation or by project teams to co-author key project documents

## Issues with social media in project management

- **Embedding:** Engaging colleagues to use social media is a challenge, as it is a change to established working practices.

  With small-scale internal social tools, the challenge is to encourage project personnel to use these tools instead of email to achieve their goals. For larger groups, (generally using 'discursive' platforms) the issue is building sufficient critical mass of contributors to make using the platform worthwhile.

  It is estimated that 90% of social platform users will only 'lurk', 9% will contribute occasionally and 1% frequently. This statistic highlights just how many platform users are required to create a vibrant community with a variety of contributors.

- **Time:** Most project professionals and teams are very time poor and as a result feel unable to spend the time required to develop a sufficient level of competence on social media to make its use worthwhile.

- **Privacy:** It is generally felt that even private groups on public platforms are not sufficiently secure to communicate sensitive information. This is often the key factor in decisions to use internal social platforms or not to use social media at all for a project.

## Solutions
Broadly, implementation of some simple best practice will tackle a number of problems with social media in projects other than the privacy issue noted above which generally necessitates binary decisions on what platforms can / can't be used.

- **Demonstrate value**: Demonstrate the platform's value by proving that it is used frequently, that new and interesting content is published on a regular basis and that questions are answered after submission to forums in a timely way. If they consider a platform valuable, project professionals are more likely to invest the time required to learn how to use it.

- **Appoint platform advocates**: Build social media usage by appointing advocates to trail blaze platform use; writing and posting content, responding to any discussion posts and leading by example, showing others how to use the platform.

- **Competitions:** Use competitions / rewards to encourage and promote platform usage

- **Add social media to project planning**: Ultimately, as a project manager using social media in a project, it is important to be supported by an organisational strategy and to build the use of these tools into communications plans. Having a strategy that helps define appropriate use for these tools and then a communications plan clarifying how a project will apply / use them provides the framework for their success.

  For example one could define that, for a particular project: a blog will be written to explain the coming business change, a Wiki will be used for technical team sharing, or a social media group will be used for progress reporting to stakeholders.

## Conclusion

It is clear that social media has a place within project management and is ultimately just another suite of channels to do things project managers have been doing for years.

However, it is important to highlight what kind of social platform are being used, and then to develop a strategy upfront addressing any potential pitfalls of that option.

Ideally, these pitfalls can be easily mitigated by a robust project communications plan and the use of advocates to trail blaze use of the platform and encourage engagement.

These steps can lead to social media becoming a powerful tool to accomplish a variety of project goals.

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## Web briefings

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