

# **Communication and meeting practices**

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1.4	13.4	Kenneth Haglund	Current update (DE)
1.3	23.3.2003	Kenneth Haglund	Current update (IP3)
1.2	6.2.2003	Kenneth Haglund	Current update (IP2)
1.1	26.11.2002	Kenneth Haglund	Current update (IP1)
1.0	28.10.2002	Kenneth Haglund	Draft and PP experiences

## Introduction

Communication is essential in a Software project in which several subgroups or members participate. In a project as the one we are currently involved in, communication is even more important because of the nature of the project members' lives; we are mainly students that study different subjects, currently taking different courses and some maybe also work beside their studies. This makes up a totally different environment for the project, when compared to projects that are done within a company, where the group of people works 8 hours per day in the same physical location and have a lot easier to arrange time for meetings when such are needed.

## Background

A set of main variables can be investigated as factors that have an effect on the outcome of communications and meetings: [1]

Dependent variable: communication effort

Independent variables: organizational distance, physical distance, familiarity.

Out of these, the group can actively try to improve the familiarity among the group members, in an attempt to improve the success of communications and meetings. The other variables are more static and cannot easily be changed, and these variables are the ones causing the problems that can be found with the communicational aspects of a project group's success.

The total success of the communication is a sum of the dependent and independent variables. If one wants to reach a good enough level of communication, the dependent variable communication effort is therefore directly affected by the independent variables, forcing the effort to be more than it should need to be. This is easily understood in practice since it takes more effort to get good communication if the independent variables make the communication harder.

## The group's communication methods

Due to the limited set of resources, i.e. the available time, for the project, it is also of the utmost importance that communication can be done serially instead of in parallel, in the sense of the group members having some way of discussing matters of the project in a central place, on different times. E-mail has been used a little too much in the project planning phase, probably because it is easy to write emails and not use a different system. This has had a notable negative effect though; some e-mails containing important information from parts of everybody involved in the project, did not reach everybody that would have needed them. For this reason, a private forum has been started on the web, giving a chance for a central place to do this sort of

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communication (ideas, to-dos, suggestions, questions, and so on) and also a central place to store documents at, documents that will be needed throughout the project. The communication methods of the group have therefore had to be adjusted to fit the independent variables of the communication; it takes more effort to create good communication within the group.

### The group's meeting methods

Meetings need to be well organized to work properly, especially in a group with limited time resources like ours. It is important that, although the group should have a good team spirit, the meetings should be held in a concrete and efficient manner. Everybody that participates in the meeting should know not to take up too much time for something that is not very important. It is also too easy to go on and on discussing a certain subject, without getting anywhere or getting any decisions done, so the participants in the meeting need to strive to look at the big picture and be able to compromise to get things moving. Although the role of a chairman is often needed or useful, we have tried and will also in the future try not to emphasize the official nature of the meeting, by having a less prominent role of the chairman; the project manager is the natural choice for this role.

Because of the group members' different lives, studies and schedules, a seemingly simple task of arranging a meeting turns out not to be trivial. Compared with a similar project group in a company, the members of which normally work at the same place and at the same time, this project group needs a lot more effort to find suitable meeting times for the group. This has been helped by a tool created by the group, a specially made timekeeping system on the web, where every group member can and should input which days and hours are available for group meeting (in practice, they don't always do so; for the first weeks, repeated admonitions were required to ensure that everyone inputted their available hours into the system). When this information is processed, it is easy to find the most suitable times for meetings, although they might not be – and rarely are – suitable for everyone. With this approach and this increased effort, the meeting outcome becomes approximately the same as the comparison with a similar project group in a company.

### Experiences during the first phases

Due to the different types of the first two phases of the project (the planning phase and the first implementation phase), communication and meeting practices have also been notably different. Several of the members of the project group found the planning phase to contain too many large meetings that were uncalled for and sometimes even nonproductive, and this has improved during the implementation phase, as only a few meetings among the whole group were held. Instead, during the first implementation phase, meetings and communication were naturally done within the subgroups of the project, and the leaders of the groups who are in charge of the architecture communicated more concisely between themselves in a fully working manner.

Meetings have evolved to become more concise and compact, since it has been noticed that they very easily run haywire. This has been corrected by decreasing the size of the meetings, and naturally also the nature of the later meetings have been more technical, with certain problems to be solved and areas to be planned. This kind

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of meetings will likely be used in the later phases as well, possibly also improved by some more shorter meetings with the whole project group, that give a good idea of how the project is going along and what the different subgroups currently are doing.

Communication has also evolved; even though the discussion forum was installed early during the planning phase, it was not much used. During the first implementation phase, it has found its place as a good way of keeping track of both the documents written, as well as a good distributed discussion of the different areas of the project. Communication still needs to be improved for the upcoming phases, since it still happens too often, that information about the project course doesn't reach everybody, either at all, or just too late for the information to be of any use. This is a problem that probably is caused by lack of time and too many things up in the air at the same time. If this is true, it is possible to correct simply by making people aware of the problem – to pay more attention and more effort on the distribution of information to other members of the group.

## Experiences during Implementation Phase 2

The general collected thoughts and opinions of the group members regarding the success and problems of the communication and meeting practices during Implementation Phase 2 can be concluded in two points: we are *\*still\** using too much time on meetings, and communication works better and better. Currently, when this second implementation phase is nearly over, we have used a total of 100 group hours on meetings, and 190 hours on programming. This means not even two hours of programming ("actual work") per hour of meetings, which could easily be interpreted as inefficient. This may be an opinion that is incorrect, due to our limited experience of projects of this caliber; it may even be normal and acceptable that the time used for meetings accumulate enough to create an intuitive inefficient feeling. Still, we have gotten better at conducting efficient meetings and this fact – or feeling – contradicts the feeling of having too many meetings.

As in the first implementation phase, there has not been as much a need of communication within the whole of the group; instead there has been increased communication within the subgroups, which has worked very well. Amazingly well, actually, but this may be due to a clear division of the tasks so that everybody knew their areas that needed work. That, and the ease of arranging subgroup meetings whenever something more problematic arises, has more than likely been the reason for effortless and "invisible" communication whenever needed. Programming has at times as well been conducted in groups of two or three, both to solve bigger issues, and to create an understanding of the current situation and what needs to be done. In short, communication has been efficient regarding the more practical matters.

## Experiences during Implementation Phase 3

Implementation Phase 3, being the last true phase in which programming work is done, has at the time of writing this evaluation – four days before the phase ends – been remarkably efficient. Most of the meetings that previously, by some of the project members, have been seen as inefficient and nonproductive, haven't been arranged during this phase. IP3 has so far used 32 man-hours on meetings and 151 man-hours on programming which is a much higher degree of efficiency than the corresponding numbers from the previous phases. This is easily explained, it is

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perhaps not due to a better insight by the group as a whole regarding when meetings are required and how they are held, instead it might just be less need for meetings since the group naturally in this last true phase knows what needs to be done, how and by who – more so than in any previous phase. However, the few meetings that have been held, have been shorter and more precise, which I would claim comes from the experiences from the previous phases. Fewer customer meetings have also been arranged, which has been perceived as positive and is natural since the project group should know what is expected of them by now. As one of the group members stated, "[the last phase has contained] a good atmosphere and matter-of-fact meetings", which sums it all up from the project members' perspectives.

The communication has continued to be more concentrated and occurring more within and between the two subgroups of the project group, as could be predicted from the two previous implementation phases. This has been seen from the used communication methods, which have again gone back to email! The web-based discussion phorum ("Phorum") which was started during IP1 was used as the main communication tool during IP1 and IP2 but has now lost its meaning for personal communication. The Phorum is still used as storage place for documents and things that everybody need to have access to, but as was already mentioned, email has been used to communicate what has been done, what needs to be done and what problems have been noticed. This seems to have been a natural change, and the project group hasn't even discussed the matter, which probably means that the communication needs have been more suitable to email due to everybody knowing what needs to be done, and these concrete things can be sent by email to the person or the persons that need to know about it, instead of the whole group. At least one of the group members thought the Phorum should have been used more than it was, so the opinions differ on what the best communication method is.

However, there have also been incidents that show that dividing the project group into two major subgroups also increases problems arising due to tasks "bouncing off" from one group or person in another direction, causing nobody to take responsibility for a bug or similar. Only when these issues were actively discussed, were the responsibilities accurately defined which solved the problem – which indeed was a communication problem. This has only had a small overall negative effect. More serious have the problems been where some people's tasks have been needed for other people's work to continue, it is not clear whether this is only due to lack of time or if lack of communication (communication indicating the true need of getting certain things done quickly) is the villain, but the problems in this area should have been addressed more quickly, to create a project that possibly could have been more efficient and progressing more quickly.

## Experiences from Delivery Phase

The Delivery Phase has from a communicational and meeting point of view contained no major surprises, as the programming that has been done has only been trying to get things to work more properly – mostly features that were implemented earlier but now needed final tweaking to get finished properly. Few meetings have been held, and most communication within the group has been through email, due to its simplicity. The Phorum has yet again been even less used, which is probably because there has been no apparent need for such communication, which has been handled just as well

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or perhaps even better through email. Nobody from the group has even commented on this fact, it has been a natural change in the communicational development.

As the project has been close to finished during this last phase, one could interpret the effort put on communication and meetings as being too low and that it would have been good to consciously try to arrange communication a little better to get the last things on the to-do list done more efficiently. This just did not happen, and my guess is it was due to the project group running out of juice, not having the energy – nor time – to do much more than the most essential things, as the project has now been going on for over half a year and is about to finally end.

## Summary

A summary of the development of communication and meeting practices throughout the project would be that the intuitive communication and meeting needs probably should have been taken more seriously and discussed as one of the earliest points in the project, and then maybe planned a little better and used more consequently. Although communication and meeting practices were not optimal, it is hard to put ones finger on exactly which parts would have been much positively influenced by more active and thought-of communication and meeting practices. All in all, the project has from a communicational point of view worked out all right.

## References:

[1] C.B. Seaman, V. R. Basili: Communication and Organization in Software Development: An Empirical Study

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