



Communications for major infrastructure projects

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The importance of communications for major infrastructure projects

For successful infrastructure development, the impact of a well-crafted communication strategy cannot be overstated. Effective communication is the cornerstone of successful project execution and stakeholder satisfaction.

Communication in infrastructure projects involves more than just the exchange of information. It's about building trust, ensuring transparency, and fostering collaborative relationships. Effective communication strategies help in navigating complex project landscapes, mitigating risks, and aligning diverse stakeholder interests.

Communication is vital for major infrastructure projects because it aligns diverse stakeholders, prevents costly errors and delays, enhances safety, builds trust, and ensures projects stay on time and budget by clarifying goals, roles, and progress, turning complexity into coordinated action. Without it, projects face confusion, rework, and potential failure, while strong communication fosters collaboration, accountability, and successful outcomes.

Understanding the community and stakeholder landscape in which you operate is the first vital step in developing projects. Detailed stakeholder mapping to gauge not just the demographic make-up of communities, but the connections, sentiments and concerns that could influence how stakeholders feel about your project.

Reputational Risk

Reputational Risk resulting from undertakings was not taken seriously for a long time in the infrastructure sector. There were not-infrequent cases of companies winning auctions to construct gigantic hydroelectric or nuclear power plants, highways, or railroads, only to later be surprised by local community's resistance to the works. This resistance often led to campaigns by environmental organizations or even legal action to halt the project.

Facing new demands for transparency, social commitment, and reputation, companies have had to find answers in the form of stakeholder engagement efforts. Their goal with these activities has been to change communication and reputation management's centre of gravity and run the business with a focus on strategic audiences.

The first great asset communications adds to this new approach is improving reputational risks audits and helping create plans to mitigate them. Mapping communities and cities affected by infrastructure projects cannot stop at the economic, social, and environmental perspectives, although these are the most palpable. This analysis must identify all the stakeholders related to the issue, as well as what drives them. After that, the question is simply whether the present narrative connects company or project purpose with the wishes of all stakeholders.

Companies need to keep in mind that any infrastructure project, whether it be constructing a subway line or a port or airport concession, goes through several phases in engaging with the public, each requiring a different approach. There was a time when a civil construction company's local engagement plan was concerned only with the people directly neighbouring the structure under construction. Now, it is not enough to send flowers to the neighbours and apologize for the noise. Today's public is much more interested in the project's effects, and it expects much more. What impacts will the work have on local mobility and traffic? Does the

construction company treat its employees properly? Have the safety issues (both environmental and workplace) been identified and managed?

Questions arise for every type of initiative, whether a new airport, On or offshore wind farm project, or a privatised motorway that plans to collect tolls. Stakeholders are increasingly demanding for them all. They want answers.

For these reasons, this new universe of infrastructure is also changing the logic behind its communications strategy. Proactivity is an increasingly valued element in engagement efforts, but it needs to be anchored in specialized sector knowledge and a deep understanding of people's concerns and demands.

Social License

Effective communication with the public and local industries is essential for project permitting and long-term social license.

Social license to operate is becoming ever more important to successful infrastructural development. An infrastructure project's success is directly related to how it responds to stakeholder concerns and expectations. Thinking about business from the perspective of internal shareholders alone is no longer a sufficient long-term relationship strategy.

Major infrastructure companies are beginning to realise they need to engage in dialogue with their stakeholders. They know this dialogue is far from easy, but rather than just listening to them, public and private sector agencies and companies need to include them in the equation that underpins any infrastructure project.

Communication is a key element for obtaining a social license, but there are several new challenges to overcome if we are to understand the complex universe of infrastructure and the relationships between a project and its various stakeholders. These publics are increasingly interrelated and interinfluenced. The authority that grants the concession; regulatory agencies; the local communities and residents affected by the project; civil society; elected public representatives; shareholders and investors; end users; and more are all linked. Fund managers – another strategic public – are beginning to define and create indicators that give tangible form to matters such as diversity, sustainability, and governance.

In large corporations, changing the management focus from shareholders to stakeholders also creates communication challenges when it comes to developing narratives that can effectively argue in favour of a project.

Why a good communications strategy is critical for large-scale projects:

- **Complexity:** Major infrastructure involves numerous parties (engineers, contractors, regulators, public), each needing specific, timely information.
- **High Stakes:** Miscommunication can lead to massive financial losses, significant delays, and severe safety incidents, making robust communication a necessity, not a luxury. If a decide-announce -defend (DAD) strategy is adopted, this may soon turn to decide-announce-defend-abandon (DADA).
- **Long Timelines:** Consistent communication bridges gaps over long project durations, keeping teams aligned from start to finish.

In essence, communication acts as the central nervous system for major infrastructure, transforming complex requirements into actionable insights and a unified path to project success.

While effective communication is a critical contributor to project success, project plans often focus on actions, but at the same time neglect to provide formal structures for communication management including stakeholder engagement. As project complexity and collaboration increase, the right communication protocols and principles help ensure that the right people receive the right information at the right time.

In Ireland, there is a significant focus on infrastructure delivery as part of the National Development Plan. Several major initiatives are underway to enhance the country's transportation, utilities and public services—including the commencement of the Metrolink, DART+, Bus Connects, Cork Area Commuter Rail programme, Water Supply Scheme and multiple energy projects including offshore wind and upgrading the national electricity transmission system. Several major projects are also in the pipeline for waste treatment, healthcare, including the National Maternity Hospital, while numerous large-scale housing initiatives are underway, albeit at a frustratingly slow pace to date.

As we enter this phase of mass infrastructural development, we must take stock of what it entails. Globally, large-scale infrastructure projects are notorious for cost and time overruns, yet the same mistakes are often made and risks taken on repeat.

Effective communication is the backbone of successful construction projects. It fosters seamless collaboration and coordination among various stakeholders, including project managers, contractors, subcontractors, architects, engineers, and clients. When communication channels are clear and open, everyone involved can work towards a shared vision, ensuring that tasks are executed efficiently and deadlines are met.

Leaving communications to chance and risking simple facts get distorted or overlooked may lead to conflicts. Stakeholder mapping is critical as is communications planning for both internal and 3rd party participants. More controversial projects must have buy in from local communities, the general public and politicians at local and national levels.

Effective communication is candid, clear, at the right level of detail, timely, relevant to the interests and needs of the participants, involves the right people, and ensures mutual understanding of content and conclusion. Formal communication should have a written result that documents issues, understandings and action plans. Yet, even when project performance is an integral part of an organization's life, there may not be an established project management communications infrastructure. It is often necessary to create a temporary infrastructure to support management and performance of the project.

An effective communications strategy should be designed to not only ensure a thorough understanding of project benefits among all stakeholders but also to effectively manage potential risks.

Innovative communication strategies will bring clarity to the most challenging circumstances, guiding major projects to success.

Effective communications in projects requires sensitivity to cultural and individual needs, planning, and disciplined execution of the plan. A comprehensive communications plan creates

a solid foundation for project performance. Again, the 3rd party stakeholder environment is critical to the success of any major project.

Don't view communications planning and communication as an extra to be sped through or avoided to get to the real work as quickly as possible. If you wait until you need information before you plan how to obtain it, store it, retrieve it and distribute it, you risk far more delay.

Positive approach to communications

Project promoters and delivery teams should cultivate a unified and positive stakeholder culture. Prioritising people, behaviour and culture makes it far more straightforward to enable collaboration, transparency and knowledge-sharing, ultimately achieving improved project certainty (costs, risks, time) and ensuring the delivery of project objectives. Imbed collaboration across all internal and external stakeholders by sharing goals, objectives and knowledge. Effective communication and transparency on project progress can help avoid an adversarial culture, remove constraints and bottlenecks, and provide a unified focus on the target project deliverables. Such mindset changes will benefit and counteract the shortfalls and project failings on major capital projects. Applying a simple checklist to the documented failings shows us that, in many cases, the outcomes would have been quite different from a time, cost and quality perspective had these mindset changes been applied.

Developing a Communications Plan

Creating a plan to improve communication for construction projects is important because external stakeholders need to be engaged. Communicating with them will lower the number of complaints and create a positive attitude towards what you are doing.

The communication plan that you make for your construction project needs therefore to include all stakeholders, both internal and external. This shows you how to create a solid plan in five steps.

Create a stakeholder map

Identify all the stakeholders that are directly or indirectly involved in the construction project. Use a contact management database-type tool (e.g. ms excel, LEMS)

Stakeholders can be tiered or classified depending on their particular interest in your project. The main classification may be Internal (project delivery team) or External (property and landowners, residential, commercial, communities, general public, political, statutory and non-statutory bodies and agencies).

The stakeholder map forms the basis for your stakeholder engagement plan. It lists all the parties involved, big or small, internal and external and direct or indirect. Therefore, it is key that you complete this step at an early stage of the project.

Prioritising stakeholders

Once you have a clear idea of the size and build-up of your entire stakeholder group, the next step is to prioritise them in terms of influence and interest. You want to identify their

motivations and the possible risk they may pose, if any.

Understanding the values and expectations of stakeholders is a pivotal step in securing approvals for projects and investments – both from a legislative and social license perspective. Where communities see value and feel heard, the path is much smoother with better outcomes for all.

Communication methods

Each group requires different communication methods, some examples are:

- Townhall meetings, (smaller, rather than large numbers recommended), Statutory & non-Statutory public consultation events
- On-site discussions with individuals and small groups with Project / Community & Landowner Liaison, possibly accompanied by project manager or engineer
- SMS-messaging
- Email messaging
- Door-to-door letters
- Project brochures, website and social media updates
- Progress meetings (possibly a project monitoring group representing key stakeholder groups)
- An informative stall in the marketplace or a community space,
- Visits to local schools and clubhouses

Stakeholders with a high interest in your project require personal communication more than stakeholders with a low interest. The same for stakeholders who can greatly influence your project. This can be a much more sensitive group, requiring a different strategy from those who pose a smaller risk.

Message to communicate?

The communication plan for your construction project is now taking shape. It is now time to decide what and how you want to communicate with each stakeholder group.

For example, road closures and possible other types of nuisances to the community should be communicated with the local residents and business owners. Updates about the budget or changes in the schedule, you might only want to communicate with the relevant internal stakeholders. Sharing project accomplishments and milestones with everyone involved is recommended; this provides confidence among external stakeholders and creates a sense of pride and accomplishment for 3rd parties.

In the construction industry, effective communication is essential to achieving successful completion of projects on time and within budget. Yet, despite its importance, communication in construction often faces significant challenges. This makes the role of communications management professionals within infrastructure companies even more strategic.

Some key lessons to consider for communicating major infrastructure projects

Plan early

- If communications on an infrastructure project are an afterthought, then you are creating an unnecessary project risk. The communications lead must never be a passive member of the team.

- Something may be the best engineering or political approach but if it doesn't hold up with the public then sentiment towards any disruption and the reputation of organisations involved may suffer.
- The process of identifying your channels is not static but should grow and evolve along with the project messaging. To know what is right to say and where, you need to be in the room (be that physical, virtual or both).
- Have a plan and ensure it is understood by the wider project team, but don't let it become the enemy of effective communication.

In Summary

Communications for major infrastructure projects are crucial for aligning diverse stakeholders, managing expectations, mitigating risks, and ensuring project success by using clear, consistent messages across multiple channels (digital, verbal, written) throughout the project lifecycle, from planning to completion, focusing on transparency, feedback, and active listening to build trust and collaboration. Key strategies involve clear chains of command, stakeholder mapping, tech integration, and tailored approaches for teams, communities, and leadership.

References include: Majorprojects, PwC, RPS, PM Network, Sonar engagement, Oneteam, Lucas Wijntjes, Matthew Trigg.