Social Media for Project Managers, Elizabeth Harrin

A Book Review by Taryn van Olden

Love it or hate, it, social media is here to stay and rather than resist its power, you can harness it for positive results in your project environment. This is the core message behind project manager, journalist and Blogger extraordinaire Elizabeth Harrin's second book, Social Media for Project Managers (Project Management Institute, 2010). The content is as straightforward as its title and Harrin's easy style and logical structure make more sense of the subject than almost anything else I have seen in print or online.

Working from the premise that social media in a business environment is collaboration and communication with purpose, she explains the strategic value of social media and how this can be applied appropriately and with thought and structure by project managers.

This book is ideally suited to those project managers who understand the value of transparent project communication management and want to circumvent the pitfalls of social media to find the combination of channels that will realise their goals in terms of improved communication, collaboration, change management and possibly cost savings, within their projects.

For those not yet sold on the value of social media, Harrin challenges readers to acknowledge that the rate of change in project management (in terms of adapting to 21st century business practices) is slower than in other areas of business. With its origins in construction, project management's 'old' ways of working are often out-dated and inappropriate to the kinds of projects now being run. This may, in part, account for the high rate of failure consistently experienced on projects around the world. Discovering new tools towards running successful projects should be motivation enough to pick up a book like this.

In twelve chapters (and an easy-to-digest 153 pages) Harrin sets the scene for why social media and project management is a logical match, unpacking its relevance to the separate but related functions of team management and communication in the project management lifecycle.

She explores the various types of social media technologies and their associated pitfalls and benefits, the different categories of project communication and the purpose behind each kind, overcoming user resistance, developing social media policy, security considerations and practical suggestions for measuring the effectiveness of social media initiatives.

There is a comprehensive explanation and review of ten different types of social media technology, namely: blogs, collaboration tools, instant messaging, microblogs, podcasts, RSS (really simple syndication), social networks, vodcasts (video podcasts), webinars and wikis. Amidst this Harrin has included anecdotes, interviews with industry experts and case studies to illustrate both appropriate and inappropriate use of said technologies, to clearly reinforce her point.

It even addresses the hard-sell that is sometimes required to obtain permission to apply social media strategy, in a chapter titled 'Winning over Management'. Finally, looking outside of the project environment, another highly useful chapter is dedicated to using social media to develop your own personal brand. Harrin addresses the strategic value of building a solid personal brand as something that could aid professional development and set you apart from other project managers.

Not only has Harrin demystified the concept of social media and how it can be applied to project management, but through a combination of her natural flair for communication and background in information technology, she explains a range of related technical concepts this reviewer once found a little confusing.