

Integrating Change Management Communications Into a Technology Project

By Martha J. Hudak, APR

Overview

Change management communications plays a critical role in the success of a new technology initiative from inception past rollout. It addresses the people issues in the technology change and incorporates elements of different organization functions. Most often cited as reasons for a technology initiative to fail are not technology issues. They are people issues – lack of sufficient executive sponsorship and poor communications to end users to prepare them for change.

A technology initiative has its unique characteristics that require special communications skills. Most of the time, Information Technology (IT) will turn to other resources to provide the change management communications support. All of these alternatives bring insight and benefits, but none alone meets the entire need. Too often, IT waits until training to announce the change and the next communication to end users is the go-live announcement. A special communications initiative is needed for each IT project, and it should be implemented in stages that parallel the project life cycle and project management stages as well as the organization's change management model.

This phased approach by project requires a dedicated communications expert. Rather than depend on other functions in the organization to meet the project's communication needs, IT should have its own professional communication team dedicated to IT initiatives. This team ideally combines skills from various functions, serves as the Chief Information Officer's "spokesperson" and develops and manages a structured communications methodology tightly integrated with project plans that have pre-determined measurements.

Many surveys cite communications as the number one contributor to IT project failure. A 2006 survey commissioned by iRise and conducted by Decipher found that 74 percent of U.S. business executives believe there is a communications gap between business and IT. A web poll released by the Computing Technology Industry Association found poor communications was the most often cited reason IT projects fail (28 percent), followed by insufficient resource planning (18 percent) and unrealistic deadlines (13.2 percent). The intent of this paper is to demonstrate how good communications throughout a project can help reduce the failure rate.

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1. What is Change Management Communications?

Change management communications is primarily targeted internally to employees impacted by an organizational change. Much literature in the universe about change management communications concerns organizational restructuring, mergers and acquisitions and human resource issues, such as benefit changes. While technology change is incorporated in the discussion, little is found specifically addressing change management communications for a technology initiative impacting end users and perhaps external audiences, such as customers, suppliers, partners and/or regulators.

Change management communications is *not* a directive or one-way communication. It does not use stock templates for technology announcements. Its purpose is to move people in a structured way to accept and engage in the change that will make an IT deployment smoother and more successful. This is also the end-goal of any change management model, in which communications is tightly integrated and plays an important role. Various research and communications techniques are used to engage people, and not just inform them. Change management communications also incorporates ongoing assessment of people impacted by the change, measuring where they are in accepting the change and using opinion feedback techniques (visioning, focus groups, one-on-one feedback sessions, surveys and employee blogs) to ensure two-way communications and continuous pulse-taking throughout the change process. An organization's internal communications program usually conducts such research less frequently and for program-wide, organizational purposes rather than a specific project with a defined start and end.

2. What is the role of Change Management?

Change management communications stems from the methodology and practice of change management, which is also related to the human resource discipline of organization development. In reality, change management communications emanates from all these disciplines, corporate communications and more with a specific focus. A succinct definition from LaMarsh and Associates is, "Change Management is an organized, systematic application of the knowledge, tools, and resources of change that provides organizations with a key process to achieve their business strategy."

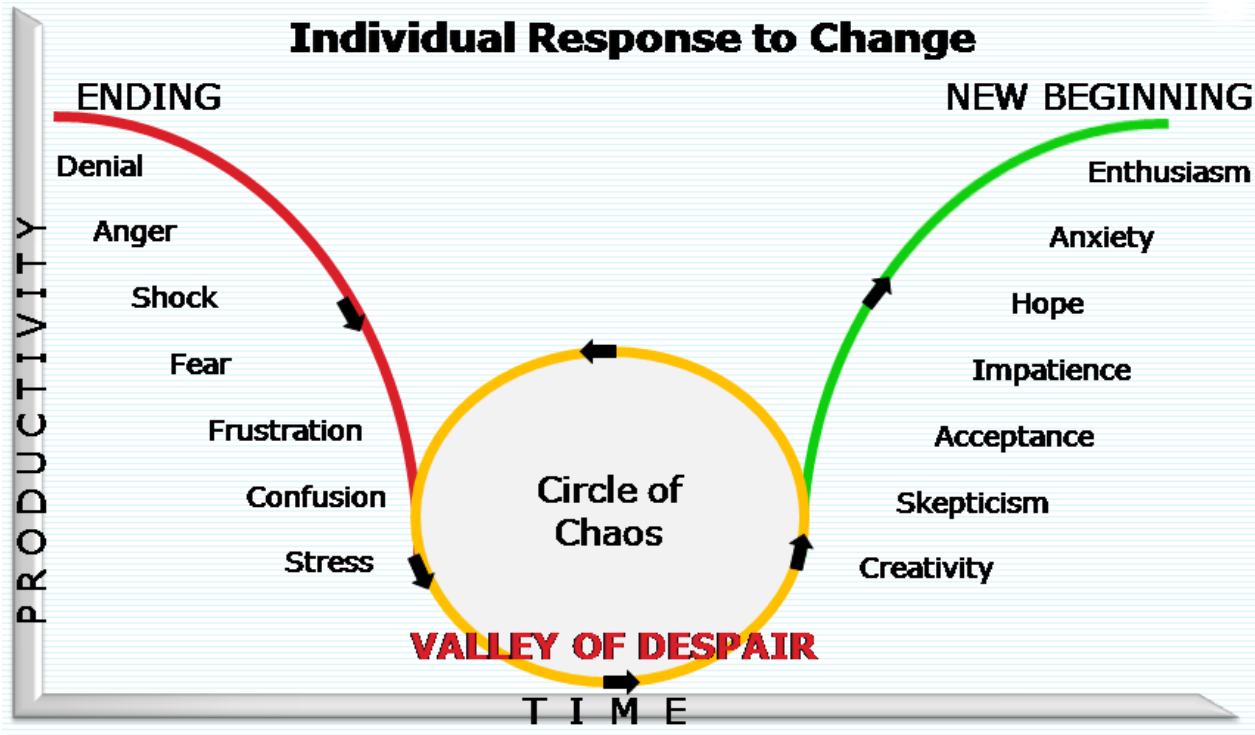
Tech Target adds, "A somewhat ambiguous term, change management has at least three different aspects, including adapting to change, controlling change, and effecting change. For an organization, change management means defining and implementing procedures and/or technologies to deal with changes in the business environment and to profit from change." *Wikipedia* further sorts change management into three types: systems engineering, people and IT Service Management.

Interestingly, *Wikipedia* talks of IT Service Management change in the same way Prosci (a leading change management methodology) talks about the people side of change: "Change Management can ensure standardized methods, processes and procedures are used for all changes, facilitate efficient and prompt handling of all changes, and maintain the proper balance between the need for change and the potential detrimental impact of change."

There are different change management methodologies, such as: Prosci's ADKAR, McKinsey's 7-S Model, Lewin's Change Management Model and Kotter's Eight Step Change Model. According to Prosci, "If we are not successful to enable people to change on how they'll be doing their job, is it possible for us to achieve the business objective?"

Many larger organizations have a change management methodology in place with assigned roles and responsibilities. Where the role of change management falls within an organization varies, but most typically within human resources or organization development. When a technology impacts change among employees, IT may turn to human resources for the training and corporate communications for the communications, or worse, not even think about communications until a week before rollout.

The Valley of Despair is an earlier and frequently referenced model that shows the stages of productivity decline and resurrection during a change, and at the bottom is the neutral zone where chaos exists. The key is to get out of the cycle of chaos—or the Valley of Despair—quickly so the climb back up can accelerate. Prosci states, “Change management activities that are launched at the beginning of a project can be more proactive in addressing the people side of change. When change management is brought in as an add-on late in the project, it is typically to ‘fight fires’ and help with damage control.”



3. Why change communications doesn't belong in the PMO.

The business analyst or Project Management Office (PMO) may inherit some or all of the different elements of the communication responsibilities, particularly if they are responsible for the organization's change management process. What they bring to the communications process is an understanding of the technology change processes and IT project stages. A communications function may be part of this, but people in these roles usually do not have the understanding or experience to effectively enact communications to change people's attitudes and behaviors with end users. They are focused on facilitating communications and documentation among the project team to meet business goals and project milestones.

Typically, the type of communications a PMO may use becomes directive and one-way based on assumptions from a technology perspective, not the end user. The PMO may not use communications to move employees along in a disciplined way to embrace change, counsel leadership and conduct the requisite research. Not only will the business analyst and PMO Lead not have the professional communications background, but they may not have time to focus on a complete communications program that targets end users.

4. Why not the existing internal (or employee) communications function?

The next natural place to turn for communications support is the internal or employee communications function within corporate communications. The professionals in this function understand communications methodology and use of the various communications channels. They may also work with the human resources department or the organization development discipline on change management initiatives.

What they may not have is the understanding of change management in a technology environment, and more specific, how to integrate a communications plan with an IT project plan. The traditional internal communications professional is responsible for disseminating information from and representing the opinions of executive leadership. Two-way communications and feedback may be part of their responsibilities, but to inform leadership—not necessarily for the purpose of change. Also, internal communications professionals have a broad understanding of the organization, but not the technology or project management background to know how to effectively communicate throughout deployment or sufficient background to translate complex technology into user-friendly language. They, too, do not have the time needed to focus on a specific technology initiative and provide the level of communications needed for a technology initiative.

5. How about outsourcing the communications role?

Outsourcing is a good option to start if internal resources are not available, particularly if you can find someone who has experience with planning and implementing a change management communications plan for a technology initiative. This person would bring the ability to translate technology into user-friendly language and understand the stages that a technology initiative moves through. There is still ramp-up time to understand the specific technology, but that is shortened if the person has already worked in technology environments.

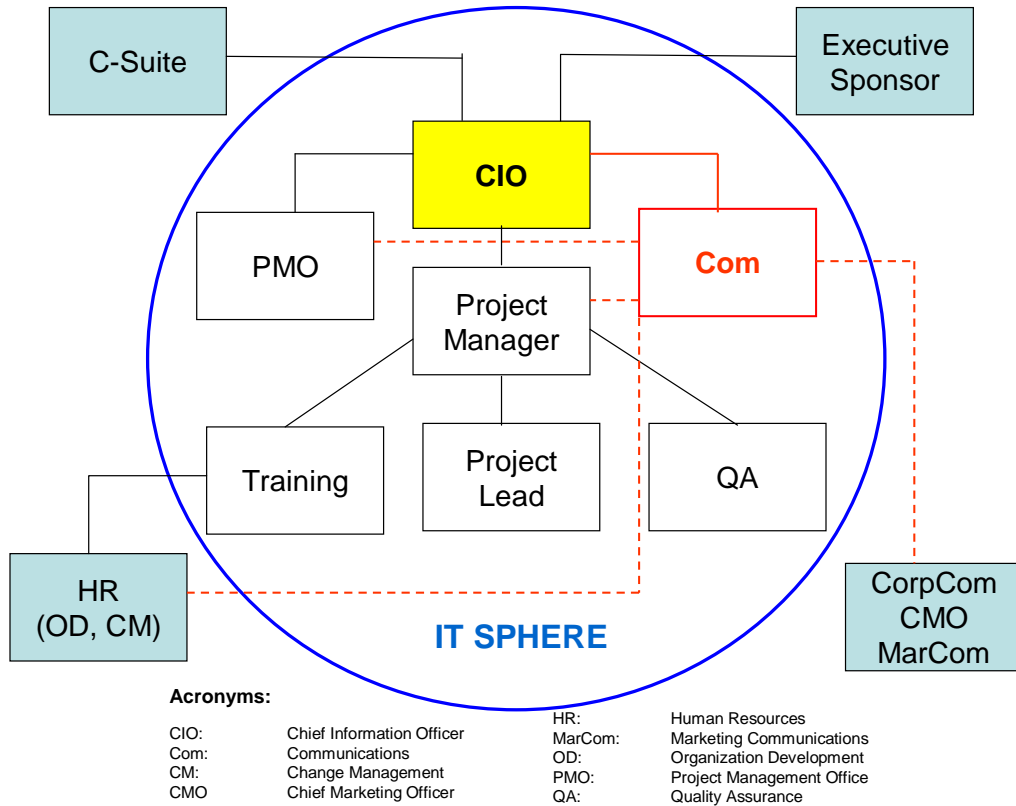
The downside of outsourcing each time a company deploys a new technology is that the communications professional is in continual ramp-up mode to learn the people, culture, communications channels, products and politics of the organization as well as the technology and project plan. It still requires IT to lean on human resources or corporate communications, who are usually short-staffed and time deficient, to provide a dedicated go-to person to inform the communications professional on these matters. However, a consultant with this experience also can build the bridges of understanding among all these disciplines that shortens the ramp-up time.

6. How to integrate a change communications program into IT.

The number one failure of mismanaging change, according to Prosci, is lack of the CEO and appropriate sponsors to motivate employees. Other research cites communications as the first or second reason IT project deployments do not meet goals. Many times, communications is treated as a separate issue when a problem is lack of involvement by the executive sponsor, but often communications plays a key role in helping the executive sponsor lead change. These top project failures can be ameliorated with both a strong executive sponsor and an ongoing communications process integrated into the project life cycle at the Business Requirements stage.

Change management and change management communications are most successful when integrated into the project plan in the beginning. Diagram 1 demonstrates an organization structure for integrating a communications professional into IT. Other functions with communications, change management and organization development responsibilities are still involved in an advisory capacity with the communications professional having “dotted line” responsibilities to these functions. This ensures that the IT communications is smoothly integrated into the entire organization and provides assurance that the IT project communications plan incorporates overall culture, messaging and planning. This reporting structure still holds true if the function is outsourced.

Diagram 1. Basic organization structure with a communications professional dedicated to IT



The communications professional should report to the top of the IT organization to help mitigate the lack of involvement by senior leadership and appropriate sponsors to motivate employees, which is often cited as the top reason for end user adoption of a technology change. This means the communications expert reports directly to the executive sponsor or project leadership, or if a permanent position, reports directly to the Chief Information Officer.

To further ensure that communications is tightly integrated throughout a project plan—early and often—two steps in the initial planning process should be taken once a communications professional is brought on board:

- Integrate measurement of communications into the project plan through Functional Reporting Requirements to measure the people side of change.
- Budget appropriately for communications professionals and activities from start to past the final deployment.

Plans, measurements and budgets should extend three to six months beyond deployment to measure the speed of adoption, utilization and proficiency of users.

A common four-step communication model is quite similar to most change management models cited earlier. The common communications model to change option follows these four stages:



A change management communications strategy for a technology initiative also identifies the roles that sponsors, agents and targets play throughout the project; and it segments user groups into specific audiences requiring different messaging and communication channels. This type of pre-planning is developed into a target audience matrix. Now the plan integrates the change management and communication stages and target audience matrix into the IT project phases:



In an ideal world, an organization with ongoing technology changes should have a full-time communications professional dedicated to IT. A dedicated person combines a background in communicating technology and understands the phases of an IT deployment as well as change management, organization development, internal communications and general communications methodologies. A full-time, permanent communications professional assigned to IT builds a rapport and trust with technology leaders over time, understands them and how to translate their intentions outside IT in addition to knowing the organization culture and how to work with non-IT functions. The person's learning curve is then focused on the project from the beginning to understand the technology, process changes and end user groups for that project.

Additionally, a communications professional knows how to create messaging that is understandable to end user groups, who should deliver the message and what communication channels are appropriate for each message. This is especially important when different target audiences require different messages. Messaging is devoid of technological terms common to IT, and instead, complex messages are translated in a way to make them understandable to users. None of this is a "cookie cutter" approach.

7. Return on investment by integrating change communications into an IT project.

Quantifying the failure or contribution of communications to a company or project generally is difficult, because communication intertwines with all functions and elements. However, a research report from the International Association of Business Communicators, called "The Human Element," says that highly engaged employees are more profitable, accounting for one to 10 percent of earnings.

A proactive communications program for an IT initiative can prevent employees from falling into the Valley of Despair in the change cycle and reducing productivity, support for the change and individuals from sabotaging a project before it is deployed. Positive, engaged employees are a great contributor to successful deployment of the technology change, and their feedback throughout the project helps identify potential barriers that can be addressed early and less expensively for other areas, such as technology enhancements and business process changes.

Much research shows that IT initiatives fail—not because of the technology—but due to botched communications, miscommunications, rumors that sabotage success and resistance to change resulting in lack of end user use and support. A good, ongoing communications program is not the "end all and be all" of success for an IT initiative, but the investment in communications is a key ingredient to ensuring success.

Author: Martha J. Hudak, APR, is a communications professional with an extensive background in all communication disciplines. She has spent several years in technology environments undergoing considerable change at Fortune 500 companies. She used her marketing communications expertise in market segmentation to lead the change communications program for a large utility company, impacting 3,000 employees in 60+ work groups. Accredited in Public Relations, she has studied PMI project management methodology and change management methodologies.

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