

Communicating Projects¹

Risk: the role for communication

By Ann Pilkington

PR and communication practitioners can derive huge benefits from adopting the principles of project management. One example of this is the area of risk. Projects also benefit greatly from involving communication colleagues in the risk identification process.

From a project manager's perspective, risk is often thought about in terms of risk to the project being able to deliver. This means that reputational risks to the wider organisation can sometimes be missed. This is where the PR/communication input is valuable. PR as defined by the UK Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) is all to do with reputation:

Public Relations is about reputation - the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you. Public Relations is the discipline which looks after reputation, with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behaviour. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics.

Damage to the wider organisation's reputation can impact on project deliverables – suddenly there can be angry stakeholders to deal with and the project's objectives can be questioned. Clearly these wider risks may not all sit on a project risk register and will need to be escalated, but flagging them up means that there should be no surprises for the wider organisation. It also helps the internal reputation of the project to be seen to be thinking at an organisational level.

Wider reputational risk can be spotted during a thorough PEST analysis and a good communication lead will want to start there, but it can be important to look more widely as a PEST may have been done very much with the impact on the project in mind – not the wider organisation.

A good communicator will be thinking about the political implications of the project – for example, are jobs changing/moving/going? An understanding of the political landscape is key here together with local context. For example, are jobs plentiful or is unemployment high? Are local politicians likely to want to get involved and raise their profile?

¹ This series of articles on effective communications and stakeholder engagement is by Ann Pilkington, founding director of the PR Academy (UK) and author of the book *Communicating Projects* published by Gower in 2013. Ann is one of the UK's leading experts on communications; she shares her knowledge with project managers and teams in this series of articles in the *PM World Journal*. Her author profile can be found at the end of this article.

Another area where communicators will have useful knowledge is of course the media. The media loves a trend and something that in isolation may not make a story can end up in the news if it is part of trend. Communicators understand how to monitor the media – both traditional and social - and should know what is on the news agenda.

Communicators can also bring useful knowledge from other parts of the business and from other projects. Project managers should encourage their communication lead, or team, to build relationships with other communicators in the wider organisation, and maybe externally too with others working in the same sector. This can also be particularly helpful when the communication lead is a single individual working only on that project. This can feel like quite an isolating position and relationships with other communicators can provide support and an input of ideas.

As I said at the start of this piece, PR and communication practitioners can benefit greatly from adopting project management principles and should be thinking about risk to their own activities. So next time your communication lead tells you they are planning an event for the project – check they have thought about the risks!

About the Author



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Ann Pilkington is the author of *Communicating Projects* published by Gower. She is a founding director of the PR Academy which provides qualifications, training and consultancy in all aspects of communication including change project communication and project management.

Information about Ann's book, [Communicating Projects, An End-to-End Guide to Planning, Implementing and Evaluating Effective Communication](https://www.routledge.com/Communicating-Projects-An-End-to-End-Guide-to-Planning-Implementing-and-Evaluating-Effective-Communication), published by Gower in 2013, can be found at [https://www.routledge.com/Communicating-Projects-An-End-to-End-Guide-to-Planning-Implementing-and/Pilkington/p/book/9781409453192](https://www.routledge.com/Communicating-Projects-An-End-to-End-Guide-to-Planning-Implementing-and-Pilkington/p/book/9781409453192)

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