



Interview with Tonya J. McGue, Communications Specialist, College of Charleston

The Importance of an Effective Communications Vehicle

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Effective communications is critical to ensuring project success. This is especially true for major technology projects such as ERP implementations. Unfortunately, all too often, institutions begin a project without a solid plan in place for how critical information will be conveyed to stakeholders.

At the College of Charleston, Communications Specialist, Tonya McGue prepared for the challenge of keeping stakeholders abreast by developing an electronic newsletter called *What's Up*.

In the interview below, she tells us more about how important the newsletter has been to project success at the College of Charleston along with insight and experience on what she's learned along the way.

How soon into the project did the need for a comprehensive communications vehicle become evident?

We anticipated the need from the beginning. *What's Up* was born the same month that we celebrated the BATTERY Project kickoff event in August 2008.

What has been the biggest challenge in communicating project details with stakeholders, team members, and the greater College of Charleston community?

Because there are many different teams and everyone is focused on his or her own responsibilities, the biggest challenge for me is making sure I stay in the loop and find out WHAT needs to be communicated. It also takes effort to translate the technical information into simple, easy-to-understand language.

How well has the newsletter been received? What difference has it made in keeping everyone up to date on project details?

I've received positive feedback about the newsletter from team members throughout this project, but I also took the opportunity to poll everyone for specific comments.

Readers said *What's Up* is a "good thing," "helps a lot" and "is a terrific, succinct glance at what's happening." A few said the newsletter "keeps people in the loop" and "keeps BATTERY (the project name) at the front of my mind."

They also like the regularity of the newsletter and how it helps them see their "small part in terms of the greater project." They said the timeline and updates build understanding of the "extremely hard work being done by quite a few participants." An IT employee said, "I print and post the newsletter on my door for all to see what is going on and how busy everyone is working on a project that will greatly improve the College of Charleston."

One Finance team member shared that the regular communications helped her because she became so entrenched in her area that without *What's Up*, she wouldn't be able to keep up with the progress other teams are making. Someone else agreed, "*What's Up* helps shine a light on the progress we are making."

The newsletter also helps fill in gaps. For example, a reader said that sometimes people don't get invited to meetings when they should because someone may not realize that the person would have valuable input. The person sees the calendar in *What's Up* and makes arrangements to attend the meeting. Not only does the newsletter keep everyone up to date, it creates a bond and a sense of teamwork.

What recommendations would you make to a campus just beginning an implementation and looking to maintain effective communications throughout the life of the project?

I recommend clear, consistent communications. I've seen several schools start with strong communications, but the formal communications flow soon turns to a dribble and then peters out to nothing long before the project is finished. As for content, McGue makes the following suggestions depending on target audience. For communicating to Team Members, she makes the following recommendations:

- 1. Weekly e-newsletter.** Develop a weekly e-newsletter that could include a calendar of meetings and events each week. Then consider rotating the following features: team member profiles (interviews work well), glossary of terms (especially in the beginning when there are so many new terms and acronyms), fun contests with the winner receiving a free campus lunch, photos, did you know updates, project news, and team news.
Keep the newsletter short and simple. Make it professional and fun.
- 2. Celebration Events.** - Mark milestones with luncheons and other celebratory events.
- 3. Effective Team Meetings.** The number of meetings increases significantly with a project the size of an ERP implementation. Therefore, ensure that teams have the skills and tools to hold effective team meetings and ensure they are efficient and effective.

For the Campus Community, McGue's communication recommendations include the following:

- 1. News Briefings.** Send campus-wide announcements as needed about specific implementation issues and changes – such as how to register for classes, how to enter time and leave reports, or how to sign up for training sessions.

- 2. Quarterly Broadcasts.** Quarterly communications are often sufficient for the broader campus community. Consider producing a quarterly e-newsletter that includes updated project timelines, photos, news, and other updates.
- 3. Public Project Website.** A public website provides continuous communications and a place to go for more information. The site could include news postings, lists of teams and team members, a glossary of common terms, frequently asked questions, timelines, briefings, broadcasts, and an avenue for ongoing feedback.

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