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Communication Management Between Architects and Clients

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Abstract. Architectural projects are initiated with the designing phase, that tends to translate and materialize the client's requirements and needs. This phase is highly and directly affected by the exchanged information and communication between architects with their clients. Nevertheless, despite of its importance, studies have proven that communication management, being a significant field of project management, is distinctly overlooked by architects in the architectural industry. Thus, this paper highlights the current practices and attributes of communication management in the context of architectural design phase. It outlines the different aspects' definitions of communication, as well as communication management standards and practices. By the end of this paper, the findings are expected to increase the communication management knowledge amongst architects to achieve success in projects by promoting the relationships between them and their clients. Finally, this paper uncover the architects' need for significant improvement of communication management as an insistent matter to ultimately fulfill project success.

Keywords: communication management, architects, clients, design phase

INTRODUCTION

Architecture practice is an evolving field and an active component of the AEC (Architecture, Engineering and Construction) industry and highly dependent on effective communication. The design process is the initial phase of the project execution based on the client's requirements, and significantly influences the project's value (Senescu *et al.*, 2013). Communication during the design process is a certain necessity, and it is fundamental to intensively communicate between the architect and client to avoid conflict, by determining the messages and information to be sent to the right receiver by the right sender in the right way by the right media (Kliem, 2007). It is essential to establish a convenient communication management system to overcome problems at the initial designing phase of the project. Communication management is a part of project management that deals with the process of systematic information exchange between project parties, which is essential to identify goals, requirements and objectives of communication, and to coordinate project participants effectively. This paper targets at introducing the proper knowledge of communication management among architects to improve and manage communication with their clients. Thus, this review is employed as a base background for a further study to be conducted among architects in Iraq, to investigate

the current practices of communication management and to propose improvement strategies of this significant area of knowledge to overcome communication dilemmas that affect the designing projects outcomes.

Communication

Communication is widely mentioned in literature as the basis of every human interaction; it is about creating common understanding. It is a dynamic process of opinions exchange among two parties: sender and receiver, who exchange the requested information in the chosen media through the channel. Following Lunenburg (2010), the term sender refers to the client who initiates the communication and encodes the message, receiver is the architect who decodes the idea, information is the outcome of the encoding and refers to the proposed design, and channel refers to the method to deliver the required design to the client. In terms of design, communication is the backbone of architecture as it refers to the messages exchange to transfer knowledge between clients and architects. As the ability to communicate is one of the significant factors that affect the project success, one of the critical skills an architect should obtain is the clear understanding of how communication takes place and how to use it effectively. Successful designs undertaken by architects is highly influenced by the mutual understanding between participants, where project outcomes increase due to effective communication. Effective communication is when participants assume that the desired messages and information have been well-understood and correctly processed to reach the required needs (Norouzi *et al.*, 2015). Factors of effective communication are represented in Table 1.

TABLE 1 Factors affecting effective communication

Author	Factor
Cheung <i>et al.</i> (2013)	Clarity of information exchanged between the client and the architect (The level to which participants understand the transmitted information by a specific method)
Kliem (2007)	Choosing the right media of communication and the message itself is clear and unambiguous to the other person
Tipili and Ojeba (2014)	Clarity of communication methods and channels
Ean (2011)	The importance of using the right media leads to effective communication

All projects need to share information as the specific methods on how to distribute this information may vary, where each project uses relevant methods and tools to its needs and environment (Mnkandla, 2013). Literature mentioned two forms of communication: verbal and non-verbal; verbal communication is the transition of messages by the use of written or spoken words, while nonverbal communication methods do not include words, such as signals, symbols and drawings. Selecting communication means depend on the project requirements. Xiao *et al.* (2014) recommended using various communication media when a task is performed because a single media of communication is sometimes incapable of transferring information and shared knowledge. In the field of architecture, communication methods between architects and clients during the design phase vary from verbal, computerized digital technologies, virtual prototyping, two-dimensional drawings, three-dimensional volumetric renderings and the notable of walk-through architectural technologies. Furthermore, meetings are one of the oral methods that significantly take place during all stages of the project to overcome the communication impediments and raise the efficiency level, so it is important to hold frequent meetings when needed. Thus, there is a significant need to solve dilemmas by improving the communication effectiveness between the parties involved. Therefore, Norouzi *et al.* (2015) declared that to obtain proper information exchange, it is the architect's responsibility to create a proper venue to discuss with the client, and architects should be more open to clients and keep them updated in regards of the project progress.

Communication Management

During the architectural designing process, huge and comprehensive amount of information is exchanged between architect and client. Thus, it is a major requirement to obtain a coordinated management of data exchange among the participants. Communication management is an emerging field and a significant knowledge area of project management with growing interest to study (Zulch, 2014). It has high value to any project or organization, and it includes the required processes to ensure appropriate and in-time generating, planning, distributing, retrieving and managing project information (PMI, 2013a). It is the planning process that takes a systematic way of executing, observing and reviewing the involved channels of communication. Communication management is the part of project management to be studied among architects, that concerns planning and distribution of design information in a convenient way according to the clients' requirements and agreement. Shen (2011) noted the loss of a proper

mechanism to manage the requirements and guide the clients to review solutions and feedback of the design. Therefore, it is essential to adopt proper planning for project communication. Experts of Project Management Institute (PMI) recommend to create a communication plan that assures the project information is properly communicated using the right methods and delivered to the right persons. It ensures the fulfilment of the clients' needs, tracks and report the project performance, and to document the project results in a formal way.

The overall project management plan is the main provider of project information, and it comprises many sections, including the project communication management plan. Communication management plan (CMP) is a project-related document that determines project communications framework, and defines communication requirements and objectives to assure the process of communication exists and self-sustainable during the whole period of the project. CMP is a platform to obtain mutual understanding among project participants that describes the project communication needs and expectations, in regards to the format, time and frequency of which information is communicated.

Generally, communication management plan is carried out in the early phases of the project to keep an obvious direction to involved parties, as well as to assure convenient resources are properly assigned to the project communication activities. However, it is a constant evolving and modified blueprint of the project, and regularly revised during the project period (Bilczynska Wojcik, 2014). It assigns the responsible individuals for communicating the accurate quality and quantity of information within the accurate time in the right format. Also, it aims to obtain the correct information by choosing the proper medium and deliver it to the right audience at the right time. Communication management plan manages obstacles and limitations that impact the communication flow, and appoints relevant project documents and templates to be employed for communication. Thus, developing a communication plan guarantees that scheme of effective communication between architects and clients is established for the purpose of design delivery as requested by the client.

Standards of Communication Management

Architectural practice generally follows the project-based approach for carrying out its projects, so, a full project understanding is required by performing adequate management. Applying standards is a significant improvement method for increasing project management effectiveness. Setting the specific components of standards as a checklist to be used by organizations aims to determine the completion level of the approaches in terms of activities and principles. Initiating standards enhances uninterrupted improvement, while it is sporadically re-evaluated and updated to assure proper implication of best practices. High considerations of the project management standards are significantly increasing, due to the value brought to the contemporary organizations. The major standards in the area of project communication management include: Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK), established by the Project Management Institute (PMI), IPMA Competence Baseline (ICB[®]) established by International Project Management Association (IPMA), and Project in a Controlled Environment (PRINCE 2), established by Office of Government Commerce in United Kingdom (GOC). In this paper, following Samáková *et al.* (2013) that PMBOK is the most engaged standard in the area of project communication management. According to PMBOK, communication management employs three process; plan communication management, manage communication and control communication.

Plan communication management is a process of developing an adequate approach and planning for effective and efficient project communication according to the stakeholders needs and requirements. Inappropriate planning of project communication causes issues and progress dilemmas in a form of messages delay, misunderstanding of communicated messages and wrong audience communicating. Many considerations must be taken into account; who needs information, authorized people to access information, the time they will be calling for information, where and in what format to store information and how to retrieve them. The output of this process is the project communication management plan, as a major component of the overall project management plan.

On the other hand, managing communication is to create, collect, distribute, store, dispose and retrieve project information according to the prior-established communication management plan. Managing communication process guarantees that the communicated project information is well generated, received and understood. Additionally, this process offers the stakeholders to request information, explanation and discussion. The output of this process is to set project communications, and the sufficient updates for the previously established project communication plan, project documents and organizational processes assets. Tools and techniques of this process include the appropriate selection of communication technology which varies according to the type and phase of the project, the relevant communication models that significantly affect the effectiveness and efficiency of the communication process, to manage and exceed

the identified barriers. Moreover, information management system is implemented with the use of some tools, such as hard-copy document management; letters and reports, electronic communications management; e-mails, telephones, video conferencing and websites, and electronic project management tools; project management software, meeting and portals.

Finally, control communication is to observe and control the communication during the complete project time in the pursuit of meeting stakeholders' needs. This process requires the discussion project parties to allocate the most relevant way needed to update project performance and to comply stakeholders' information requests. These discussions are facilitated through different types of meetings, as an important method of communication. Moreover, PMI (2013a) indicated many skills of communication to be held by the project management practitioners to fulfil effectiveness. In this study, it is proposed for the architects to occupy these competencies to improve the communication management with their clients. These skills are included but not limited to: listen effectively and actively, question and investigate the ideas and conditions to guarantee greater understanding, determine expectations and manage them properly, convince people to accomplish an action, as well as motivate and encourage them to communicate effectively. Additionally, solve issues that hinder good communication and debate skills to reach mutual agreements accepted by the project's participants, and finally, to set and summarise the next steps to be achieved.

As a result, architects can use the PMBOK processes of communication management as a framework included to their agendas of communicating with their clients, to assure messages and information are well-communicated and understood.

Practices of Communication Management

Studies were undertaken to investigate and evaluate practices and implementations of communication management in different firms. Samáková *et al.* (2013) investigated the role of communication management in industrial firms of Slovak Republic. The studied sample was interested in project communication management standards, although high percentage did not follow communication management and international project management methodologies, and the majority of firms did not have the project communication written documents. Communication management practices include immediate oral communication, management technology, communication technology to store and retrieve information, and daily-used synchronous and asynchronous communication. Muszynska (2015) distinguished the practices of communication management into four categories according to the practice objectives: strategic, informational, practical and emotional, as represented in Table 2.

TABLE 2. Communication management practices

Category of communication management practice	Communication management practice
Strategic (involves communication planning and project environment)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clear lines and responsibilities established up front - High-quality communication planning - Good public relations - Adopt common working language among members - Well-defined client authority - High process visibility for clients
Informational (generating, collecting, storing and retrieving project information)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Shared virtual space, websites, project tracking software - Instant messenger, e-mails - Traditional phone calls - Using various communication channels
Emotional (regarding relationships and trust building)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Face-to-face communication, audio and video conferencing, more than written communication - Support members to communicate informally with social media - Kick-off, review and stand-up meetings - Feedback from members
Practical (clear, positive communication and behavior rules)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Employ basic rules for communication - Eligible attitudes and behaviors - Short, asynchronous communication loops

Briefing

Briefing is the process where clients formally or informally inform their needs and requirements, while the brief is a formal document that amply defines the requirement and objectives of the clients. It is a communication mean of interacting between clients and architects, and it also builds the dialogue regarding the design proposals value and quality. The general client requirements consist of some building issue such as spatial dimensions, flexibility and security. Briefing document in designing processes of projects gives a clear overview of the project budget, needs and aspirations of the client. It is a reference document of future audits in different stages of the project, and it is an evaluation criterion to guarantee the optimal resolution of building problems (Bogers *et al.*, 2008). According to Lupton (2002), briefing is divided into two stages correlated to the design process developing: strategic briefing and project briefing. Strategic brief is a document that covers the technical, managerial and design requirements, and how to be achieved. Whilst the project brief defines all requirements of the design, and it is considered as the basis for the design development and its measurement guideline. Furthermore, a checklist consisting the tasks needed to be completed by the end of the strategic briefing is proposed by Lupton (2002) that includes four categories: general, planning and building considerations, environmental and financial, as shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3. Strategic brief checklist

Category	Information
General	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Quality standards• Life expectancy of building and components• Security requirements• Health and safety policy• Site history, topography and exact location of boundaries• Spatial relationships and orientation, plans for future expansion
Planning and building considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Constraints arising from previous consents or conditions;• Impact of local development plan;• leasehold/freehold interests and party walls, rights of light, access
Environmental	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Services below ground• Parking requirements
Financial	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Funding requirements or restrictions• Approximate cost per square meter

Sufficient time must be spent on a briefing between clients and clients. However, briefing process can be compressed on the domestic-scale designing projects, while architects should work on it thoroughly without leaping to rapid design solutions that may not fulfil client's requirements. Studies reviewed that architects see briefing as inconvenient restrictions and it limits their creativity, whilst interviewed architects by Bogers *et al.* (2008) acknowledged that briefing is usually underestimated, yet it is considered to be one of the essential documents of the designing process.

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