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Traversing the virtual landscape of a knowledge citizen

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Introduction

Lately, the essence of the word 'collaboration' has been on my mind, essentially because it is becoming more important in my world as a global custodian of organizational knowledge. Collaboration is one of those words that are bandied about by software vendors, management consultants and knowledge gurus to mean anything from groups of people meeting virtually to two individuals cooperating with one another for a shared outcome. The word is actually derived from the roots 'co' (meaning together) and 'labour' (meaning work). However, as I delved into the subject, an interesting question arose:

> 'Are organisations collaborating when they simply agree to share information
> with each other or does collaboration require some actual commitment to [the]
> sharing of organisational resources or [the] formal coordination of
> services?' (Hansberry 2005)

As a genuine knowledge citizen, my first instinct was to agree that collaboration is simply an agreement (often unspoken) to share information and knowledge, for example, communities of practice who gather to exchange and share knowledge on a common subject, whether face to face or virtually. However, I have to declare from tangible experience that collaboration is not always a simple engagement, particularly between people who do not know each other, who do not share the same culture, who are globally located, who do not share the same skill levels or expertise and who are perhaps intimidated by technology's ability to 'virtualize' their opinions and expertise through an online discussion group, for example.

In this article, I explore the drivers of collaboration, collaboration technology and the pitfalls of collaboration engagements and finally suggest options to consider for successful collaboration engagements.

Why collaborate?

The manner in which organizations collaborate has been identified as a major driver of business performance, and can be an extremely effective value generating organizational capability. A survey by Verizon and Microsoft (Gundry 2006) indicates that profitability, profit growth and sales growth are the performance indices most strongly impacted by collaboration, while customer satisfaction, productivity and product quality are the operational areas that are most strongly impacted by collaboration.

Non-profit organizations are collaborating more now than they were five years ago and the primary reasons are for mission fulfilment and funding opportunities. Change management

and collaboration are stronger influences on organizational effectiveness than they are on management procedures and board performance. Smaller organizations are more likely to collaborate and collaboration has a stronger influence on the smaller organization's effectiveness (Hansberry 2005).

Furthermore, the global economy is presenting organizations with new challenges, including the following:

- Globally, permanently connected customers, partners and suppliers requiring agile processes
- People mobile project teams, working in multiple locations, time zones and organizational boundaries, increasing the requirement to become transparent yet, at the same time, reducing the information risk competition for talent, as baby boomers move on, and the millennial generation moves in with constant technological innovation and new capabilities on offer.

Purpose of collaboration technology

Distributed teams are critical to a global organization's success because they allow knowledge to be shared across organizational boundaries and aid in the transfer of knowledge and skills. However, global organizations face challenges to effective performance, including coordination and communication barriers (Wierba, Finholt and Steves 2007)

In addition, virtual workplaces, international borders, time zones and multicultural teams with diverse skill sets make for an interesting challenge in terms of access to information and responding to business opportunities and coordinating challenges. Coupled with globalization, outsourcing, the retiring workforce and the entrance of younger workers, and simultaneous technology advancements, are drivers for the emergence of information workspaces that deliver contextual content, collaboration and e-learning to knowledge workers via hand-held devices, smart phones and other computing devices (Driver 2006).

Collaboration software and services aim to help people to work together more effectively by offering collaborative capabilities, for example, in integrated communications, collaborative workspaces, access to information and people-driven processes. Collaborative capabilities include instant messaging, e-mail, online conferencing, document creation and sharing, expert locators and search. Information workplace platforms have the building blocks of unified content, collaboration, portal and office productivity tools. Real-time collaboration includes Web conferencing features and instant chat.

Collaboration software serves as a central repository for project documentation and management and has the ability to use high-speed connectivity and the Internet to link people and information on a centrally accessible server.

Pitfalls of collaboration

The greatest hurdle in implementing collaboration technologies is convincing people to use it. Training and culture building is required to make people comfortable using it and often organizations employ incentives to encourage employees to contribute. The practice of collaboration should be encouraged where it flourishes of its own volition to gain the quickest return. Often, driving a standard practice of 'one size fits all' falls in the face of proper knowledge sharing and collaboration. The following points highlight potential problem areas common to collaboration engagements:

- Collaborating on tasks that do not need collaboration; the fastest way to get a simple task done is not to collaborate on it. However, if the task at hand cannot be done alone or if it will have more impact if done with others or more damage if not done with others, then collaboration is key. Decisions should be made on when it will be worthwhile taking the extra time to use a collaborative approach.
- Underestimating how much time it takes to collaborate, that isunderstand the goals that need to be achieved, decide on who will do what and when and draft a simple plan to estimate timelines. Understand that virtual collaboration will take longer and that global collaboration has the added dimension of language and culture to contend with.
- Lack of clarity of leadership − what can be done to ensure that issues of responsibility and leadership are determined at the start of the collaboration? How will the group make decisions and who will take responsibility for each task?
- Territory issues − *w*hat can be done in advance to move things forward while understanding that people's identities are often very wrapped up in the work that they do?
- Leaving out key people or decision makers.
- Lack of a common vision, that is lack of a common goal or differences in ideas about how to reach that goal are the most frequent collaboration pitfalls. Taking time to explore the vision and develop goals that everyone supports is beneficial in the long term.
- Lack of agreed-upon ground rules, that is not establishing ground rules everyone can agree on in the early stages of collaboration and it includes areas such as confidentiality, participation, time frames and leadership.
- Lack of dealing with conflict, that is conflict is inevitable in collaboration engagements and it can even be of benefit as it can help the group understand each participant's point of view. Good communication skills will go a long way towards resolving conflict and include listening skills, reflecting what another is saying, clarify understanding and expressing one's own thoughts and feelings respectfully.
- Lack of appropriate incentives, that is people often collaborate because they see the overall benefit and want to help. However, it is unrealistic to believe that people will put in too much time into collaborating unless they benefit in some way. Incentives help the collaboration process by encouraging people to join and participate.

Keys to successful collaboration

Collaboration is defined as a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more people to achieve common goals. Collaboration connotes a more durable and pervasive relationship, brings previously separated individuals into a new structure with full commitment to a common mission (Hansberry 2005). The following points highlight areas to focus on to achieve successful collaboration engagements:

- Develop partnerships that lead to mutually respectful relationships that allow for the development of trust. Identifying participants by name establishes trust, respect and inclusion (Black 2002).
- Assessing reasons for collaborating, that is clarifying reasons for working together and identifying the contributions that each participant can offer to the plan.
- Setting goals and developing a written plan, that is writing down the goals and steps to achieve them and indicating who will be responsible for each activity.
- Learning and practising skills, that is group members may learn new skills to facilitate collaboration.
- Celebrating the accomplishments of the group.
- Identifying targets for change, for example the adoption and use of collaborative tools need adequate support to ensure success (Wierba *et al.* 2007).
- A general need drives collaborative tool adoption in organizational settings to a greater

extent than specific need. The use of collaborative tools must meet the participant's needs above and beyond the cost of learning to use a new tool and should not add to organizational constraints and competing demands on the participants (Wierba *et al.* 2007).

- Collaborative tools must be clearly superior to existing practices to merit the effort of deployment, adoption and subsequent use, since the burden of learning and mastering a new tool in a demanding and fast paced environment may not outweigh the perceived benefits. Infrastructure deficiencies, that is poor network connectivity, can also lead to non-adoption (Wierba *et al.* 2007).
- Virtual collaboration is different from face to face collaboration and many of the factors that sustain collaboration are missing when one is remote, including personal knowledge of one's collaborators and clarity of coordination.
- Collaboration is highly dependent on a culture of openness, which includes the ease of talking to anyone within the organization, the regularity of cooperation between units within the organization and the accessibility of persons to those in other departments. A culture of openness is critical for knowledge-based and agile enterprises and includes four factors:
- Are the vision and goals of the organization compelling and do they attract commitment?
  - Does organizational commitment lend to individuals contributing what they can, irrespective of any direct reward? Conversely, participants need to feel that a collaboration engagement will fulfil both organizational and personal goals and that the reward for collaborating on teams and projects is equitable and aligned with their contribution.
  - A participant's perception of whether sharing their knowledge and expertise with one another is a source of personal risk and is dependent on the level of trust ascribed to others in the organization or group and the strength of mutual social bonds.
  - Visible, pervasive and rigorous organizational goals that allow participants to understand how their contribution makes a difference (Gundry 2006).

Conclusion

Collaborating and collaboration have become daily activities that knowledge citizens engage in. Whether this collaboration is simply about agreeing to share information or whether it requires more commitment from the participants is dependent on the circumstances requiring the engagement. While our ability to collaborate across oceans and across cultures (to name but a few options) has been advanced by collaboration technologies, we must keep in mind that humans are still the main focus of collaboration and that the same rules as well as new rules regarding virtual collaboration still apply.

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