

CATALYZING THE LEARNING PROCESS

Collaboration takes people willing to share information and knowledge. Technology can help.

By Darin Hartley

One of my favorite traditional learning experiences was a workshop conducted by Dave Meier on accelerated learning. **It gave me ideas for driving innovation and creativity.**

One of the notions discussed was the fact that “collaboration” was actually an accelerated learning method. Meier’s idea of collaboration was to discuss information with peers and other learners so that, collectively, each individual learned quicker. I have always been a fan of establishing ways that learners can collaborate to heighten the effectiveness of solutions.

What is collaboration? What are some organizational issues associated with collaboration? This article will describe collaboration technology, identify some tips for implementation and maintenance, and discuss the notion of computer-supported collaboration.

According to Dictionary.com, collaborate means “to work together, especially in a joint intellectual effort.” In the world of computer-enabled collaboration, there are three primary types of human interactions: conversational, transactional, and collaborative.

Conversational interactions include those day-to-day conversations that increase the discovery and build relationships. Instant messaging, email, phones, and other similar technologies are examples of conversational interactions, which drive communication.

Transactional human interactions enable people to transfer items of value for services of relative equal worth—online transactions for books, magazines, or learning courseware.

Collaborative interactions include tools and systems used to augment the team

goal. Imagine software that allows a team to cooperate on a new software code or product or track progress on a team or organizational project. These are all examples of collaborative interactions.

Preparation

While some of the benefits of collaboration, especially among learning organizations, may seem self-evident, collaboration is not always viewed equally among various individuals and groups within organizations. When I was with my last Fortune 50 company, we were investigating the potential for a couple of different knowledge management systems to help harness some of the organization’s historical knowledge as well as help catalyze knowledge sharing. Surprisingly, many folks held information tightly. Asking some people to collaborate for the greater good would have been a major undertaking.

When considering the use of technology-enabled collaboration tools in an organization, you also should launch communication, marketing, and change management initiatives. If possible, work with measurement specialists in your organization to help identify the potential return of leveraging good collaboration practices across the company.

One other issue to consider is the potential legal issue associated with threaded

communication tools, such as wikis and blogs. If clear ground rules are not established and baseline user training has not been conducted for the end users, then your company may find itself open to a potential lawsuit. For information on the use of blogs, read *Naked Conversations*, by Robert Scoble and Shel Israel.

Communication tools

There are several key types of collaborative software, including communication tools, electronic conferencing tools, and collaborative management tools. Communication tools include any tools that enable people to send messages, text, files, documents, or data between people, such as voicemail and instant messaging. Electronic conferencing tools enable the sharing of information by technology such as telephony, application sharing, virtual meeting, and online chat rooms. Participants often can work in real time to create real products—such as documents, project plans, and proposals—with simultaneous communication and feedback. Some of these tools, especially the virtual meeting tools, have ways to archive sessions or to enable asynchronous viewing by participants who could not attend the live meeting.



Where would we be without our communications tools? I would wager that very few of you reading this article do not own cellular phones. If you are like me, you panic if you don't have access to email at your home or office. There are multiple software options for email or instant messaging, and web publishing can be accomplished with simple hypertext markup language (HTML) tools that are combined with file transfer applications and hosting services.

In the world of workplace learning and performance, there are numerous learning content management systems (LCMS). As technology explodes, the expectations for LCMS systems will continually rise.

Electronic conferencing systems are becoming very popular. Video sharing and 360 cameras enable participants to see the entire classroom. Internet forums allow people with similar interests to share ideas, discuss job openings, and solve problems. Virtual meeting technology is becoming a ubiquitous form of communication for some organizations.

Collaborative management tools facilitate and manage group activities, and include tools such as workflow systems, electronic calendar systems, project management systems, knowledge management, extranet, and social software. All of these tools, when used properly, can help manage collaborative efforts for individuals across teams and organizations.

Electronic calendars are often integrated into mail applications such as Microsoft's exchange server. Time management applications can be used to track individual and organizational time and to provide reports for team leaders and managers. Project management systems enable teams and organizations to manage the time, resources, and project scope with tools such as eProject, Quick-Arrow, and Primavera. Knowledge management systems help track, manage, and share organizational knowledge.

There are differences in the way knowledge management systems are used—some require intense front-end loading of information in the beginning; some are built with information in real-time in an additive fashion from the

target audience. Extranets are used typically to share information with external user groups, such as customer care sites for customers, project status sites and working documentation sites for clients, reseller sites to enable third-party sales organizations to get the requisite information, and tools to sell for the parent company. Social software, including Friendster and LinkedIn, can manage the social relations of groups, or just identify people with similar interests, which ultimately can aid in organizational collaboration. It is important to note that collaborative software can be either web- or desktop-based.

Implementation

As with any new application or technology that is implemented in an organization, adoption is key to its ultimate success. In many companies in the early- to mid-1990s, there were rampant and often heated discussions about whether or not to implement email systems in organizations—What is email? Why would we ever need email? Should we just give email access to management? Should we just give email access to management's administrative staff? How are we ever going to train everyone on such a potentially large enterprise application?

These questions get answered after implementation and through real-life implementation activities, but they are representative of similar questions that arise with any new technology adoption in any company. Even though there were lots of questions when these systems were implemented, these same organizations would most likely feel completely unprepared for daily work without email connectivity.

Often, when people or organizations have issues about technological efficacy, they often stem from a lack of skills or a perceived lack of skills, which minimizes the likelihood that people will want to use these tools. This can be overcome with appropriate training, management support, and technology updates. Also, if people can see the value of the new technology they are much more likely to use it; that is, give them a reason to use it.

When I worked at Dell, I bought my mother-in-law a desktop computer and

sent it to her house in Washington state. Several days elapsed, and I was starting to worry about whether or not she had actually received the computer. After the fourth day, curiosity got the best of me, and I called her.

"Mary, did you get the new computer?" I asked.

"Yes," she said.

"How do you like it?"

"I don't know. It is still in the box," she said.

"Why is it still in the box?" I asked.

"Because I don't want it to get that 'I love you virus' that I have heard about," she said.

I replied, "You don't have to worry about it jumping through the box." We both shared a good laugh.

Shortly after, I had my brother-in-law get her system set up and show her the basics of email and web browsing.

Several months later while we were visiting Mary, her first online order was delivered to the house. This story, while humorous, illustrates the points I made earlier about minimizing skill deficits and providing reasons for people to use the new applications you are providing.

A key message to remember is collaboration cannot occur with only collaboration technology. It takes people willing to share information and knowledge, leverage best practices, and support collaboration processes in tandem with the technology to make collaboration really buzz in an organization.

Your job as the learning and training professional is to help catalyze the buzz and nurture your organization's collaboration ecosystem as it grows.

Darin Hartley is director of client development at *Intrepid Learning Solutions*:
dhartley@intrepidils.com.