

Reflections on Collaboration

The words ‘**COLLABORATE**’ and ‘**COLLABORATION**’ are appearing everywhere. When we look at the sales pitches and literature of many technology companies, one gets the impression that **COLLABORATION equals TECHNOLOGY**. This begs the question, What is Collaboration? and how does one **COLLABORATE**? Let us take a step back.....

Our trusty Webster’s Dictionary provides us with the following definitions for **Collaborate**: 1. to work jointly with others or together especially in an intellectual endeavor , 2. to cooperate with or willingly assist an enemy of one’s country and especially an occupying force, and 3. to cooperate with an agency or instrumentality with which one is not immediately connected .

So why is Collaboration so important? We all agree that early cavemen, could not have hunted the animals they did on their own, and the pyramids of Egypt was a huge effort by many people, on many levels.....so, **two or more people, working together to accomplish something**. In order to do so they will have to both **SHARE** and **COMMUNICATE**. How does one give more depth **SHARING**? The world and people around us are filled with information and experiences which may, or may not, be of value to those they are working with, or people further removed. We already suffer from **information overload**. Contrary to what many think..... **“everybody is entitled to MY opinion”** is not always of value to others, or appreciated. In the bigger picture, within an organization there are five collections of information which can be, or are of value. Whether or not they can be accessed is a security issue. How easily **searched** another.

1. Repositories, content management systems and libraries
2. ERPs and the enterprise financial operating systems of the organization
3. Email. The organization’s email is full of information and attachments
4. World Wide Web, which appears to be stretching the limits daily.
5. Tribal Knowledge. How can we, in borrowing form Star Trek, either do a Vulcan Mind Meld or like the Borg, know everything the rest of the group does (the collective). All the snippets of information of immeasurable value..... in other people’s heads..... How can they be accessed?.....social networks?

The flip side of this **SHARING** coin however is whether or not all the information people “Share” and make available, is in fact of value. For there to be a collaborative culture, on the receiving end, there has to be a thirst for knowledge. People must believe and subscribe to the model that a collective choice is superior to that of a single individual. This culture must be one of search.....one of asking.

From this thinking we arrive at the first measure of how ‘Collaborative’ an organization is, the **Velocity of Information**. How much information is created and how quickly do others find it and how valuable is it to them?

Collaborate, according to Webster’s second definition comes with an inbuilt contradiction.....2. *to cooperate with or willingly assist an enemy of one’s country and especially an occupying force*.work withyour enemy...?.....are you serious? Now we all know that is not the case in most organizations, but it adds an element of **caution**, especially when we collaborate across the firewall with our customers, partners and suppliers. If there is to be an agreement, many believe there will be a **win – lose**. For Sharing to happen, both internally and across the firewall, there has to be **fundamental trust** and the accompanying openness.

As human beings we build trust and openness through personal relationships. Do we believe what the others say? Will they do what they say? Relationships are built on frequency of communication, which traditionally has been face to face. With pockets of information and expertise scattered all over the country, or all over the world for that matter, the building of relationships has become more challenging. Face to face meetings are very time consuming and costly, so more and more this is done by means of new tools such as telepresence, and/or video/web-conferencing. Frequency must be increased. Along these lines, because everybody is so busy, coordinating meetings is increasingly difficult, thus we have a tendency to have many serial **‘one on one’** conversations and less and less group discussions, where greater value is created. This needs to be reversed. A collection of people brings together more information, will come up with better ideas and chose a better course of action. Calendars must therefore be accessible and trans-parent. On line “presence” of co-workers and teammates, tied directly to a web-conferencing platform, which in turn must have the option of having recordings of all conversations/presentations available for others who were not part of the discussion. With this we arrive at the second measure of how collaborative an organization is, the **Communication Intensity**, which is a function of both the frequency of communication, the number of people involved, and the number of people involved in each individual communication.

The nature of our work and the processes we use are the next layer or level which needs to be examined. Much work can be done by an individual, by themselves.....no collaborating required. Information and experience, however is important. The processes which benefit greatly from collaboration are those that are cross-functional and involve problem solving and ideation. These include R&D, project & account management, strategic planning and such. Technology tools become increasingly important when the teams are decentralized and have to operate **virtually** without spending, perhaps any time together.

As such, there is no “Silver Bullet” Collaboration technology tool. There are only tools which facilitate and/or enable collaboration. Many of the tools are multi-purpose and can be used for, or to meet different objectives.....they touch Collaboration. When trying to assess or improve an organization’s collaborative skills one cannot therefore look at individual tools on a stand-alone basis. Today there are a variety of tools which enable the **Sharing** side (such as; Repositories, CMSs, Project and Knowledge Management), and another set of tools for the **Communication** side of collaboration (telepresence, web-conferencing and other UC platforms). The arrival over the last two years of social media and community platforms has introduced a new set of tools which are now combining elements of both the sharing and communicating side of the equation.

In order to assess a group’s or an organization’s Collaborative Intelligence, one must therefore examine the usage of the tools across the Sharing/Communication spectrum. The introduction of an additional tool into the mix will change the usage of the other tools. The question is ...for better or for worse? With a better understanding of the collective use behavior and use of tools one can build a roadmap improving the organizations **COLLABOGENCE**. Now what all does this mean for Technology and Tools? It must be easy to contribute new information, in whatever format. Search must be highly evolved...(where is semantic?). Group communication must be easy, spontaneous, recordable and accessible. For groups of people there must be groups of technologies to meet their needs.....IACs (integrated application clusters).

Collabogence is an advisory firm focused on improving collaborative activity and performance, including the use of technology, especially in virtual/remote global teams and collaborating across the firewall with customers, partners and suppliers.