

Chapter 7

Challenges in Online Collaboration: The Role of Shared Vision, Trust and Leadership Style

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes a multi-year study on how online collaboration could be effective in the design of a research equipment sharing lab with university and industry partners. More specifically, this chapter focuses on the “soft” challenges of how to establish a shared vision of the project goals, trust among diverse partners, most of whom had never collaborated before this project, and the different leadership model that was required for effective online interactions. Internal obstacles included differences between academic and industrial organizational cultures (publication/patent tension) and the difficulty in establishing trust through online interactions. External obstacles included differences in leadership style (commanding vs. collegial agreement). While there were also logistical issues in the actual sharing of resources, the focus was on online interactions that crossed disciplinary boundaries (amongst university partners) and competition (amongst industrial partners). Collaboration models were useful in assessing online collaboration effectiveness.

INTRODUCTION

Collaboration is a challenging undertaking. The original example of collective pooling of resources that are then shared by a community was the shared commons (Hardin, 1968). The tragedy of the commons refers to the fact that a shared resource can only be effectively shared if everyone “behaves” in a non-selfish manner. Should any one individual over-consume, then the resource may be destroyed, thus depriving everyone. Also referred to as the shared economy or collaborative consumption, the only way effective resource sharing can occur is if everyone shares the value that the common good is greater than the individual gain of any one participant. This principle of synergy, that more value is produced

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by the whole than the simple addition of all its parts, extends to any collaboration, including online collaboration. The overall research objective in this study was to design and implement a way of sharing expensive research equipment across different universities and companies. What proved to be the “scarce resource” with respect to online collaborations between the different partners was the information resources that the university researchers discovered. These included scholarly works on best practices as well as benchmarking studies on how other universities worldwide had designed their resource sharing systems. The “Information Commons” has become the new shared pasture (Rao et al., 2004).

Collaboration that is co-located in the same physical location and that occurs in a face-to-face simultaneous mode has become somewhat of a luxury in our global and fast-paced workplace today. As a result, increasing use is being made of technology-mediated interactions in order to collaborate online. While this is not necessarily novel, there are contexts in which online collaboration may prove to be particularly challenging. One factor is when the participants have not worked together extensively or not at all in the past. Others include not being able to realize that everyone does not have the same shared vision, understanding of their roles in addition to having different personality, communication and leadership styles. To this end, an opportunity presented itself when a research group was formed with six universities and five private sector companies. Each was in the same city but not in close proximity. The majority of interactions occurred online with one or two face-to-face meetings in each year of the project. While the companies were all in the same vertical industrial sector, the universities spanned different disciplines and languages.

This chapter addresses the research question of how online collaboration could be effective research equipment and expertise sharing with university and industry partners. Historically each participant purchased their own research equipment and, often, the exact same equipment. The project was conducted over a four-year period and included face-to-face and online interactions. More specifically, this chapter focuses on the “soft” challenges of how to establish a shared vision of the project goals, trust among diverse partners, most of whom had never collaborated before this project, and the different leadership model that was required for effective online interactions.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

This section presents a literature review on collaboration and online collaboration, as well as insights in potential barriers and success factors for online collaboration.

Collaboration

Bardach (1998) defines collaboration as

any joint activity by two or more agencies that is intended to increase public value by their working together rather than separately (p. 8)

whereas Lawrence et al.(1999) see collaboration as a

cooperative, interorganisational relationship that relies on neither market nor hierarchical mechanisms of control but is instead negotiated in an ongoing communicative process (p.282).

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