



Chapter XVI

Adding Reality to Team Projects: E-Business Consulting for Small Business Entities

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ABSTRACT

While hiring companies consistently emphasize the importance of communication and team skills for new IT graduates, students consistently emphasize their dislike for academic team projects. In an effort to make the team project a more interesting and valuable experience, an upper-division e-commerce course at Boise State University includes the development of prototype sites for actual businesses. In addition to concepts, strategies, and technical tools, students learn transferable consulting skills and improve necessary team skills. These skills groups are applied to real-world business problems, resulting in successful team experiences for the students and expanded horizons for the participating businesses. Part of the success is attributable to well-defined expectations, team-building exercises, and a structured client engagement process that serves the needs of the businesses as well as the student teams.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching electronic commerce in an IS curriculum is a challenge, primarily due to the cross-functional nature of the topic. While few would disagree that e-commerce requires a great deal of technology to make it happen, many functions within the organization impact an e-commerce project. When the author developed her first upper-division e-commerce

course in 1998, she found few textbooks or teaching materials and none that balanced business and technical aspects of the topic. Since that time, the quantity of e-commerce textbooks has exploded, yet most authors still emphasize either business or technology issues and vary extensively in theory versus applicable knowledge.

An additional challenge revealed by e-commerce research shows an increasing tendency for strategy and projects to be initiated outside the Information Technology (IT) organization, a trend we have seen with other technical innovations as well (Swanson, 1994). IT professionals must be aware of the potential for this phenomenon and understand the cross-functional implications. At the same time, many organizations claiming success in e-commerce, emphasize the importance of getting IT involved early in the strategy building process, before a functional business model is developed. In fact, formation of a new breed of IT professional that is business savvy as well as technically competent seems to be a critical factor for e-commerce success (Tabor & Wojtkowski, 2001). This trend supports what academics have been hearing from business advisory boards across the country — that general business knowledge, communication, and team skills are as important as the technology students learn in their degree programs.

To address this interesting challenge, the author searched the academic literature and also drew upon a 20-year business background in management and technical consulting roles. The goal was to find an approach that would improve team skills and the team experience, while better preparing IS students to contribute in our increasingly electronic business environment. After an initial try at small group projects of the teams' own choosing, and a virtual company project that had each class conceptualize a company scenario, working with live companies seemed to be an optimal solution. This method allows students to rapidly apply new skills to business problems, while still in learning mode in the classroom. In addition to being a more successful project effort, students contribute to the local business community by developing e-commerce models and prototype Web sites that help small organizations expand their horizons and explore the potential of e-commerce. This chapter outlines the issues and challenges of teaching e-commerce as a realistic collaborative project effort with the local small business community.

SMES AND E-COMMERCE

Primarily antidotal evidence tells us that small to medium enterprises (SMEs) are adopting e-commerce rather slowly. They typically have limited financial resources, rarely have the technical skills on staff to go very far toward building their own Web presence, and often do not have a clue as to whether or not their business would benefit from the electronic medium. If they think of e-commerce in relation to their business at all, it is often after seeing a competitor take the plunge, or in the hopes of dramatically increasing sales (Auger & Gallagher, 1997; Lederer, 1997). Other benefits an e-commerce model can offer organizations, such as transaction cost reduction, marketing, information retrieval, or strategic networking (Wigand, 1997), rarely come into their thought processes.

Many of those small- to medium-sized enterprises that have ventured forth, however, have found success and are showing profits. This segment of the new economy, labeled the “mini-dots” by *Business Week* (Weintraub, 2001), is predicted to grow to \$120 billion by the end of 2002 (Weintraub, 2001). In addition to expected business-to-consumer (B2C) models, SMEs are benefiting from participation in business-to-business (B2B) exchanges, where they

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