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Does Distance Matter?

by Jim Ware and Charlie Grantham

In December we completed our three-part series “[How Come Distributed Work is Still the Next Big Thing?](#)” (link to a consolidated white paper containing all three parts). In the course of our research for the series one of the topics that we bumped into several times was the subsidiary but equally important question, Why aren’t people making greater use of all those wonderful collaboration technologies that are now available?

As we’ve thought more about that question, and discussed it with a number of our *Future of Work* community members and colleagues, it has become apparent that technology may have more to do with the continuing skepticism about distributed work than we realized.

So this month we want to extend the conversation by taking a closer look at collaborative technologies – the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Our first challenge, however, is how to even think about “collaborative technologies,” and, more basically, about collaboration itself. Part of the challenge we all face in making sense of the tools we use to coordinate, communicate, and collaborate is that there is no common understanding of what tools and technologies we’re even referring to, how they enable (or disable) collaboration, and what impact they have on productivity and organizational effectiveness.

For example, when we searched Cnet (www.cnet.com) for product reviews on collaborative tools, we discovered that *Cnet doesn’t even have a category for collaboration*. The closest thing we could find was “Groupware” – and as far as we could tell, the Groupware products that Cnet tracks are all hardware servers. That’s not at all what **we** mean by collaborative technologies. Yes, there is one (one!) videoconferencing application listed under the Software category, and there are a few Voice over IP (VoIP) products listed, but as nearly as we could tell Cnet doesn’t really pay much attention to Collaboration Technologies *per se*.

Last June Jim was a featured speaker at the Collaborative Technologies Conference in Boston, sponsored by CMP, another technology analysis firm. At least at that event there were several hundred IT professionals and others who were talking about collaboration tools, and there seemed to be a general consensus about what tools – and business processes – they were talking about. However, it’s also interesting that CMP has just announced that they’ve renamed the Conference the “Enterprise 2.0 Conference,” trading, we presume on all the hype about Web 2.0 (which in our humble opinion – had to sneak that in – is just as ill-defined as “Collaboration Tools”).

At least there is growing awareness that new levels of communication and collaboration are at the heart of organizational success in this so-called "Information Economy." Witness this excerpt from CMP's announcement about the name change:

"The concept of Enterprise 2.0 is about a new way of work: faster, globally connected, and collaborative," said Eric Faurot, Senior Vice President, CMP Technology. "The technologies that enable this competitive advantage include everything from large scale enterprise application suites and communications infrastructure to lightweight web-based applications. The Enterprise 2.0 Conference helps IT and business leaders understand how to use technology as a strategic advantage in the global, accelerated world."

The press announcement ("[CMP's Collaborative Technologies Conference Renamed 'Enterprise 2.0 Conference'](#)") goes on to list the following as "collaborative technologies":

- Unified communications applications and infrastructure
- Integrated collaborative environments
- Team workspaces and team collaborative applications
- Group messaging software
- Wikis, blogs and other lightweight web-based team applications
- Web and video conferencing
- Web-based office applications

That's a start towards defining what collaboration and its tools are all about, but in our mind it's only a start. We believe there is a crying need for a more detailed, more behaviorally-based, way of sorting out these tools and their value (which, no surprise, we offer below).

So here's our perspective. Let's begin at the beginning. First we need to get very clear about the differences between *Communication*, *Coordination*, *Cooperation*, and *Collaboration*. We believe the differences, while subtle, are important and have a significant effect on which tools are required, and what features matter. Next we'll consider how those activities are affected by time, space, and task requirements (and we'll argue that distance **does** matter – there really *is* a fundamental difference between being together and being separated by either miles or minutes). Finally, we'll identify an inventory of the tools we think are important, and we'll ask some tough questions about how those tools affect the quality and productivity of the interactions and understandings they're designed to support.

Bear with us; that's a lot to cover in a short space (and you'll discover we couldn't do it – there's going to be a sequel to this article too). But we'll also point you to some other resources for deeper digging.

Communication is not Coordination is not Cooperation is not Collaboration

We may seem overly pedantic about the distinctions we make between these four "C's," but we are convinced that understanding how a given group is functioning and making decisions is fundamental to determining which tools will be most effective in supporting the group's work.

Here's the way we think about these four levels of group work. **Communication** involves the transfer of information from one person or group to another. It can happen in real time, during a

face-to-face meeting, or across both space and time. But by itself communication does not ensure any level of group coordination, cooperation, or collaboration. And as most of us know all too well, many forms of communication seem to create more *mis*-understanding than anything else.

When a group is **Coordinating** its various activities, group members are informing each other of their respective activities, and there is a strong sense of “being in touch.” However, coordination in and of itself does not mean, and it certainly does not ensure, agreement, approval, or effectiveness. It’s entirely possible to coordinate your work with someone else with whom you do not agree, or even approve of. There may be value to each party in knowing what the other is doing, but their work activities can remain largely independent.

When a group’s members are **Cooperating** with each other, you generally see higher levels of mutual understanding, respect, and even affection. There is a strong sense of equality among members, and they typically have clearly understood common goals. However, there is also often an equally strong commitment to individual needs and goals, and sometimes even a reluctance to compromise for the greater good.

In contrast, **Collaboration** involves an even more intimate level of communication and mutual caring. Members work actively together to ensure that the most critical goals are met, even if some members have to sacrifice their own priorities. There is also a much greater sense of personal commitment to achieving what is best for everyone. And perhaps the most significant component of collaboration is a strong sense of interdependence; what I do depends directly on what you do – and vice versa. In fact, when collaboration is at its best, it’s often difficult to separate out individual contributions (think of an energizing brainstorming session, for example, or a basketball team that’s “flowing” and whose members in complete harmony with each other – it’s something beautiful to behold).

As we will see shortly, the most commonly used “collaboration tools” provide plenty of support for basic communication activities, and even for coordination and cooperation. But true collaboration, because it requires deeper and more active relationships and interactions among group members, works best when there is a level of “presence” or intimacy within the group that even the most advanced technologies rarely produce (the tools are getting better at simulating and even creating a sense of presence; but, as they say, the future is still ahead of us).

Time and Place as Key Variables

One of the basic reasons that collaborative technologies exist in the first place is that so much group work takes place when people are separated by time and/or place. Interestingly, research on the “value of presence” by our own *Future of Work* Senior Fellow [Terri Griffith](#), Professor of Management at Santa Clara University, shows that project team members who are all “housed” in the same building typically meet face-to-face as a group only about 17% of the time (or less than one day a week). Even more interestingly, distributed teams (spread out over different buildings or cities) meet face-to-face an average of about 12% of the time – not all that much less than co-located teams.

The best way we have found of thinking about the implications of time and space for group work and decision-making, and to relate various collaborative technologies to group needs, is a

simple framework that we first learned from **Bob Johansen** of the [Institute for the Future](#) many years ago. Bob's model places time and space on separate X-Y axes, ranging from "Same" at one end to "Different" at the other end of each axis, leading to a classic two-by-two:

Time	Same	<i>Same Time</i> <i>Same Place</i>	<i>Same Time</i> <i>Different Place</i>
	Different	<i>Different Time</i> <i>Same Place</i>	<i>Different Time</i> <i>Different Place</i>
		Same	Different

Place

"Same Time/Same Place is what most of us call a "face-to-face" meeting. "Different Time/Same Place" describes a situation where team members pass through a common space but at different times. The classic example would be a "team room" that members use over time, perhaps storing work products (flip charts, product prototypes, etc.) in the room so others can see them at a later time to understand what has happened, and so on.

Where distance really matters (and technology becomes essential) is of course in the right-hand column – "Same Time/Different Place" (telephone, video conferencing, web broadcasting, on line chat rooms, web-based whiteboards and team rooms, and – almost – Instant Messaging) and "Different Time/Different Place" (email, shared file repositories, recorded broadcasts, podcasts, even snail mail).

The tools that most of us are most interested in clearly come to play in these latter two situations, when individuals and teams are in different places. And the goal of most of those tools has always been to make it "just like being there."

Well, like it or not, so far that just hasn't happened yet. In spite of the fact that the tools are getting better and cheaper, there is still no substitute that we know of for physical proximity. And although more and more of us are "meeting" more and more frequently in a distributed fashion, we all know in our guts that there's something powerful (and, frankly, more natural) about being physically in the same place.

In fact, we were reminded recently that the root source of the word "company" is the Italian "compagnie," which when taken apart to *its* roots, "con pane," translates as "with bread." Thus the meaning of the word "company" is almost literally "to break bread together." And in our experience, as in most of yours, there is no better way to bond with someone or a group than over a meal. A little wine never hurts either!

And even if teams don't meet face-to-face as a group all that often, there is clearly plenty of value to being together.

Here's a descriptive comment by a member (identified only as "CR") of a sometimes-distributed team that says it all:

. . . our experience has been that it is very difficult to keep remote workers productive over the long term. . . . I'm beginning to think that impromptu face to face conversations/brainstorms with white boards, pen and paper flying, wild gesticulation, and general excitement are the moments that really fuel inspired work. I've never really been able to recreate those moments with phone, IM, or virtual office type applications.

That's from an undated Comment on the [Signals vs. Noise blog](#) in response to "[Why are you not hiring remote workers?](#)" posted December 15, 2006 (thanks to **Andrew Mahon** of Nokia for alerting us to the post). There is also some extended commentary about this topic on our own blog at "[More on Distributed Work – and Hiring Remote Workers](#)," December 20).

Now, while we are sympathetic to CR's viewpoint, we also believe there is a strong case to be made for working much of the time in a distributed fashion. And of course, we all do exactly that whenever we're working alone, in conversation with someone on the telephone, or using email or instant messaging. One reason for these seemingly conflicting perspectives is that no matter what kind of team or project you are working on, the kind of brainstorming that CR is describing above is only one of the many kinds of activities that you engage in over the life of the project – and only one kind of collaboration (of course, those critical "f2f" moments can - and often do - make or break a project).

So the basic answer to the question we posed at the beginning of this article, "Does Distance Matter?" is, "Yes it does." But we don't think it matters as much as conventional wisdom still believes. While we're hardly in the camp of True Believers who swear by the collaborative tools now out there in the marketplace, we do think there is a time and a place for distance collaboration, which is often more efficient and far less costly than bringing people together every time they want to collaborate. And we're not alone; it's very clear that more and more of us are spending more and more time communicating, coordinating, cooperating, and at least attempting to collaborate, at a distance.

And the tools we need and want *are* getting better – and cheaper. Desktop video conferencing is a reality, and it's not at all bad. Shared file repositories are common. And online "team rooms" for multimedia presentations and even joint document creation and editing are springing up all over the place, even if they aren't being all that widely used yet.

Thus, the next set of questions, which we will take up in a future article, include these: "What tools are we using today?" "How effective are they?" "What features and functions would we really like to have?" and, most central to our research, "Why aren't the available tools being used more widely?"

Additional Resources

If you absolutely can't wait for the next installment, take a look at "[Understanding Distributed Work](#)," a white paper we prepared a couple of years ago (it's more conceptual than practical, but it's a good starting point). And check out several recent posts on our weblog, www.thefutureofwork.net/blog. In particular, scan the "[Distributed Work](#)" and "[Collaborative Technologies](#)" categories for some insights into what others are doing and thinking about right now.

Stay tuned. As usual, once we start thinking about a good question, we always seem to end up with even more questions. But that's what learning – and growing – is all about. Ain't it fun?

As usual, your comments and reactions are more than welcome. As always, please send your thoughts to us at comments@thefutureofwork.net.

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