



Five Ways to Improve Work Group Collaboration in Virtual Meetings

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Collaboration is viewed by an increasing number of organizations as a key factor in improving enterprise-wide performance and innovation. Despite recognition of its importance, many organizations find it difficult to encourage collaborative, rather than competitive behaviour in the workplace, and none more so than in meetings.

In virtual meetings e-collaboration technology is helping people in different geographical locations to collaborate more successfully, cut travel (and carbon emissions) and improve workers' quality of life.

Features of e-collaboration

E-collaboration is defined as interactions that occur anytime there are two or more people engaged in complex problem solving over the Internet for a specific purpose or goal.

Typical characteristics are:

- Members share a few common objectives
- Members have a shared stake in their success
- Members are often bound by the parameters of a project
- Members are interdependent
- Membership is tightly controlled
- Membership is relatively small (2-20)
- Most members both read and write content
- Access and security are tight and often based on roles, groups, or projects
- New members get up to speed by reading the group "history."

How does e-collaboration differ from web conferencing?

While technology plays a critical role in enabling work groups to meet virtually, how effectively they collaborate in virtual meetings depends to a large degree on the tools, techniques and processes used to facilitate the social, cultural and political and environmental behaviour of work groups when engaged in complex planning, problem solving and decision making.

The right combination of tools, techniques and processes is fundamental to effective e-collaboration in virtual meetings.

Web conferencing tools dominate the virtual meeting space and have become synonymous with online presentations and document sharing in “one-to-many” meetings. These meetings focus on the delivery of information rather than the active collaboration by group members.

Gartner’s view of web conferencing is that *“Without effective meeting discipline, web conferencing can waste more people’s time across a broader geographic range than before. Group decision support tools can cure much of the dysfunction. ...*

We believe most organizations will benefit from combining GDSS and Web-conferencing technologies to enhance meeting performance and to reduce the number of dysfunctional meetings, regardless of the type of meeting.”*
(*Group Decision Support System).

E-collaboration meetings differ from web conferencing through their:

- Higher levels of interaction between leader and members
- Focus on collaborative knowledge building
- Use of GDSS
- Meeting structure designed according to the meeting objective
- Use of a process methodology to guide the group, e.g. Six Sigma, Strategic Planning, Project Management Self-documenting minutes

5 Ways to improve virtual work group performance

E-collaboration meetings rely on the application of soft skills, meeting processes and a set of software tools and techniques that facilitate deliberate collaboration. We have isolated five areas we believe contribute to better outcomes in virtual meetings.

People dynamics

No one can collaborate alone, so by definition, collaboration requires two or more people. Differences between people play a crucial role in meeting outcomes.

There is one argument that group member diversity stimulates critical thinking and idea generation more than team homogeneity. Choosing work group members from across a broad selection of stakeholders is therefore more likely to result in innovative solutions.

However, work group diversity can lead to dominance by a small number of vocal members and as the number of members increases, the amount of airtime each person receives is reduced. Quiet members often fail to be heard at all.

In e-collaboration meetings it helps to address decreased air time by changing the conversation from serial (one person speaking at a time), to parallel, where all participants have equal airtime through the medium of structured text-based discussion.

Parallel thinking also leads to the creation of more ideas and there is a positive effect on the quality of ideas generated and group size. Buy-in and commitment to decisions is also enhanced due to the active involvement of all members.

High levels of interaction

A major challenge in virtual meetings is enabling interpersonal interactions through the active engagement of group members. These interactions are taken for granted in face-to-face meetings but require special attention in virtual meetings.

Web conferencing tools focus on the delivery of one-to-many events. While activities that “broadcast” information are important, undue emphasis on them has obscured the benefits of group interaction, so necessary to achieving high levels of work group performance.

Interaction and collaboration are cognitive activities requiring willing people to think and share ideas about problems and opportunities and determine best courses of action. But how do virtual work groups apply critical thinking skills, express different opinions, deal with conflict, negotiate outcomes and co-ordinate its activities in productive ways?

The purpose of GDSS tools is to support and nurture the group decision making process. Meetings that use GDSS tools may follow a structured meeting process that enables the problem or opportunity to be fully considered using brainstorming, categorizing, voting and action planning activities to achieve outcomes with buy in and commitment.

GDSS can improve the productivity of decision-making meetings, either by speeding up the decision-making process (by up to 4 times), or by improving the quality of the resulting decisions, or both.

When GDSS is used with web conferencing tools in virtual meetings the range of applications becomes extremely broad and includes such complex planning tasks as strategic capability planning, business process improvement, risk management, Six Sigma and Lean. Without GDSS these tasks would be impossible to accomplish virtually.

Using integrated GDSS with web conferencing software has enabled a global organization to conduct 400 hours of virtual meetings over 3 months and re-engineer and integrate the business processes of multiple sites in two countries.

Knowledge building

A shared space provides areas for collaborators to share context, content and processes. Shared spaces also provide the point of focus for collaborators.

In a real time virtual meeting, participants, led by a facilitator, work together in the same space. The shared space changes according to the activity or in some cases two shared spaces may be simultaneously active. For example, a presenter may be showing slides while participants simultaneously brainstorm answers to questions in the presentation.

In a standard brainstorming activity the shared space is the collective area where participants' ideas, created in individual but visible, MySpaces, collect for review, discussion and further processing, for example, prioritizing and action planning.

Implicit in the concept of shared space is the notion of awareness. The software tools that allow simultaneous, parallel input also include keystroke-by-keystroke display to all members during the idea creation stage as well as its display after submission to the shared TeamSpace. Not only are all members aware, all the time, of who is contributing to the knowledge base, but the effect also encourages greater participation. The temptation to respond to emails is removed.

Brainstorming keystroke-by-keystroke also encourages idea synergy and the active "stealing" of other members' ideas. Contrary to discouraging such theft, it is actively encouraged because the integration of several members' ideas often leads to major breakthroughs in thinking outside the square.

Keystroke-by-keystroke input also produces a positive "buzz" that is difficult to achieve using standard Chat which is more likely to result in idea display lag and lost attention while waiting for individual ideas to reach the shared TeamSpace. .

Overcoming cultural differences

Interestingly text input has proven to be a major benefit in virtual meetings particularly in situations where members have limited skills in the language being used at the meeting language, but strong written skills. In these situations the cultural barriers can be a source of embarrassment and limit discussion and interaction between members, putting at risk achievement of meeting outcomes. When members "speak" through their keyboards, the opposite is true.

Results from e-collaboration meetings across international boundaries have been very positive, especially where members are required to communicate in a language other than their own. Actual experience by a major global organization includes a comparison of audio conference meetings where female participants remained silent, to data and audio conferencing meetings where all participants have been highly vocal and participative through their keyboards. Meeting outcomes and individual satisfaction levels were exceeded.

Structured problem solving and planning

Group members need some knowledge in the area of the objective. This may be knowledge similar to other participants or quite dissimilar knowledge.

In highly creative decision making meetings existing knowledge passes through several stages of idea generation, dissemination, concatenation and elaboration which can result in an exponential increase in quality and the creation of new knowledge.

E-collaboration technology designed with integrated GDSS and web conferencing tools allows work groups to share information about the subject and follow collaborative processes that move the group from information-sharing to new knowledge creation, and better decisions.

A typical meeting process might start with a presentation of objectives and agenda, review of reference documents, discussion of the key issues followed by text brainstorming, prioritizing, idea elaboration and action planning. The formatted text report and survey results would be downloaded to members before closing the meeting.

Conclusion

A future where even the most complex relationships, transactions and interactions take place millions of times a day regardless of time and space has become a reality. Leaders that foster the concept of real time decision making will reap the benefits and by removing the barriers to effective collaboration will create more dynamic, responsive organisations.

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