

The collaboration conundrum.

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Introduction.

With technologies becoming more decentralised and disappearing into the cloud, is it also time for traditionally centralised and hierarchical organisation structures to follow?

Logic (and technology) would say yes, but human nature often stubbornly disagrees. A whole host of collaboration conundrums, challenges and contradictions rear their heads. This is because we have employees (and customers) who are connected by communication networks rather than real face-to-face ones.

Some organisations that have virtualised are now bringing people back together (at great expense to both the wallet and the environment). Employees can work anywhere, but many still come into an office and sit at the same desk every day. Social media means we can more openly communicate and collaborate with each other, but many efforts to introduce social media within organisations have failed. We work more hours whilst often becoming less productive. Diverse teams are more innovative, but are more difficult to manage because they can argue and fragment.

Technology is untethering us from our desks, but is our inner caveman holding us back?

Offering options as to how, where and when we work is a good thing. Classic psychology^[1] tells us that high demand and low control will result in a stressed employee. We can look at reducing workload but, as workforces become leaner, more work is often being done by less people.

Providing people with more control over the ways they do their work can have beneficial effects on health, wellbeing, motivation and productivity.

The more choices we give employees, the higher the risk of fragmentation. Organisations with lots of virtual workers may find that individual levels of productivity may go up but cohesion and trust between employees goes down (because no-one ever meets each other face-to-face). Co-location to improve collaboration isn't often a viable option either – it can lose you valuable talent who don't want to be tied to a specific geography or constant travel. Longer commutes can create grumpy and exhausted people.

And there lies the collaboration conundrum – distance reduces trust and cohesion but choice increases wellbeing and individual productivity.

Does it matter, though? Is collaboration actually that important to organisations?

If it is, how do we ensure that collaboration is central to the way that we architect businesses?

This paper is part of our WorkShift series on the future of work. Based on the latest academic research, it explores a number of these 'collaboration conundrums'.

Conundrum one: Too many cooks?

Is collaboration actually important?

One of my esteemed fellow futurologists has spoken about collaboration being a pointless obsession amongst large corporates. He points towards groups of hackers working very well as collectives without actually actively collaborating with each other at all. He may be right, collaboration may not be required in order to get things done. However, what he missed from the argument is that hacktivists often have a very strong collective goal which may well override the need for active collaboration.

The trouble with many organisations is that shared goals can be more diffuse, complex and, sometimes, not in evidence at all.

Collaboration is always easier when there is an obvious common cause – which is why crisis situations often generate more effective collaboration behaviours. I am not suggesting that we live our business lives in a constant state of crisis – that would be exhausting. But we need a common goal and identity in order to give us reasons to collaborate with each other^[2].

Research from MIT^[3] found that 94 per cent of high performing organisations instil this strong common sense of purpose amongst employees (versus 53 per cent of low performers). Recruitment company Randstad's collaboration research^[4] found that 61 per cent of employees believe that they collaborate more than they did five years ago. Eighty-seven per cent believed that collaboration was becoming increasingly important as technology changed the ways that we work. Although 60 per cent felt that they performed better in a team, 32 per cent said that they didn't need to collaborate to do their job. This tells us that employees think that collaboration is important but it isn't a requirement for all jobs.

It also needs to be recognised as being important in order for us to do it in the first place. Fifty-one per cent believed that collaboration had no added value to them unless their performance measures rewarded it. Seventy-four per cent of people in that same survey^[4]

believed that organisations should spend more time promoting collaboration.

There may well be a number of tangible reasons why this is a good thing to do. Organisations who reuse their knowledge better, typically have four per cent higher margins and 12 per cent higher revenue growth than those with below average reuse, according to MIT^[5].

Work by MIT's Professor Sandy Pentland^[6] has also found that effective flow of conversation accounts for almost half of the performance variations between high and low performing teams.

Other research from MIT^[3] has also shown that high performing companies have workplaces that actively support collaboration (65 per cent versus 40 per cent in low performing companies), provide technologies that support anytime and anywhere collaboration (82 per cent in high performing companies versus 60 per cent in low performers) and use enterprise social networks to support social cohesion and collaboration (59 per cent in high versus 33 per cent in low).

So, although collaboration might not be vital to everyone all the time – it is important enough to warrant an increased focus on it within the majority of organisations.

Conundrum two: From command and control to connect and collaborate.

What skills do collaborative leaders need?

Forty per cent of the global workforce already work virtually^[7]. Trends towards partnering, shared services, outsourcing and offshoring means that virtual teaming has become integral to the way we work today. But when people are strangers, have spent little or no time with each other, and have very little in common beyond their ability to connect, they are unlikely to trust each other.

This is not an IT problem – technology can zip information around the world at the click of a button. The snag is that it relies on people being willing to share it in the first place. This tends to boil down to culture and leadership. Deep down in the collaboration conundrum lies a challenge between old power structures and new ones.

In the old world, leadership was about ‘seeing’ that people were working – offices were constructed so that leaders could survey their troops. If you aren’t seen to be in the office, you’ll be overlooked for promotions and good appraisals. Leadership was about command and control and knowledge was power.

A distributed model of leadership requires leaders to move from command and control to connection and collaboration.

Leadership is becoming ‘social’, as Professor Lynda Gratton from London Business School puts it^[9]. She doesn’t mean how many followers they have on social media (although that is part of it). New leadership requires a much more inclusive, trust-oriented, co-operative, participative and open approach – rather than a more passive “I can see people at their desks, therefore they must be working” one.

According to Pentland^[6], leaders need to be ‘charismatic connectors’ both within and outside teams. Charismatic connectors are the people in the organisation who ‘know people’ and connect them together. Future leaders may emerge from the dense connections between people and networks.

There is a double edged sword to this. Constant 24 hour connection and collaboration also carries the possibility of ‘collaboration overload’^[8]. The most knowledgeable and helpful employees can become the victims of their own success as they get a constant barrage of requests for help. The issue tends to be that because these charismatic connectors spend so long collaborating (which is often invisible to their managers), their individual output

goes down (which is visible to their managers). As a result of this, Cross, Rebele and Grant’s studies on collaboration^[8] have found that there is only an overlap of about 50 per cent between those that are top collaborators and those that are top performers. This is because individual performance tends to get recognised and rewarded more than collaboration behaviours in the majority of organisations.

When Pentland^[6] looked at team performance, he found that the largest predictor of success was by far the equality of group turn taking during exchanges – in both the physical and digital world. If a leader talks rather than listens, he or she may be inadvertently undermining effective collaboration. Listening and facilitating isn’t necessarily a skill that all leaders naturally have (or have been promoted for). Research from Gratton’s Future of Work consortium^[9] suggests that only one in four of us are naturally good at managing our personal networks up and down the organisation. The rest of us need help, training and encouragement to do it.

Research from MIT^[3] found that 94 per cent of high performing organisations instil this strong common sense of purpose amongst employees (versus 53 per cent of low performers).

There are some parallels with social networks here.

Social networks are typically only as good as the quality and quantity of people on them (a social network of one would be a terrible social network). Unfortunately, around 70 per cent of enterprise social networks fail because information is, by itself, not a motivator. Direct interaction using that information is. The value of a social network isn’t in the content alone, it is about the ties and connections that surround the content (this is ‘social’, not broadcast, media after all).

Strong connections produce action through social pressure, trust, reciprocity and recognition^[2]. In other words, if we identify strongly with a group, we tend to trust them more, share more and engage more. Real world interactions also tend to drive those on social media^[6], i.e. we tend to engage more on social media with people we already know in the real world. Real world connections are different from those that we know only from the internet. This is largely a product of ‘social ties’ – trust built from an investment in a relationship over time and as a result of a personal history of interactions.

Trust is an underrated currency in many organisations. Strong social ties imply

trust – and this is a currency most easily earned when we meet people on a face-to-face basis and get to know them better. Strong social ties promote idea flow largely though the social pressure of not letting people you know well down. This is why teams with well-established relationships, even if they are distributed ones, work better than teams that are newly formed.

Gratton and Erickson^[10] found that in teams with pre-established relationships, between 20 to 40 per cent of team members had stronger networks and stronger collaboration from the beginning.

Similarly, Pentland^[6] has found that the effects on behaviour are four times more powerful when ties are strong than when they are weak.

In virtual teams strong ties are much harder to build – weak ties are the norm in most businesses now. Virtual teams need a new type of trust – what Gratton and Erickson call ‘fast trust’^[10]. This requires leaders to trust people upfront (on credit, if you like), build a common language and brand, establish

reliability and competency, be open and recognise diversity.

Weak ties can be good for innovative activities, though. Weak ties can introduce diverse thinking into the process and introduce novelty, which is essential for new ideas to be cultivated. Leadership in areas where there are weak ties needs to be far more about creating connections between people^[10]. This isn’t the problem with teams with strong ties who are fuelled by familiarity and trust. Leadership in a strongly tied group needs to be far more about creating common purpose, clarifying goals and roles and monitoring output.

Traditional leadership is being challenged by these new ways of working. Leaders can’t rely on strong ties in teams to get them through anymore – because most ties are weak now. They need to create and encourage collaboration behaviours. They need to understand the dynamics of their teams and reward and recognise collaboration behaviours without creating collaboration overload amongst their best people.



Conundrum three: Diversity, size and selfishness.

Motivating collaboration behaviours.

The quote above sums up the next conundrum. Most large, global organisations are very reliant on teams of highly talented, distributed and diverse individuals who, because they are highly talented, distributed and diverse are less likely to naturally display co-operative and collaborative behaviour towards each other.

The easy answer seems to be to build teams that are co-located and similar to each other. Unfortunately, Pentland's Social Physics research^[6] has shown that such strong ties in non-diverse teams don't result in higher productivity or better results. Instead you get an 'echo chamber' effect where the lack of diversity just means that the same views and ideas echo around and around.

More diverse teams tend to bring far more to the table than non-diverse ones, particularly when it comes to complex and innovative tasks. Research on distributed and diverse professional services teams^[11] has shown that they typically attract a higher annual revenue from their clients because they offer something unique and can take on more complex tasks.

However, by focussing solely on billable hours, the incentive for individuals in these teams to collaborate together is significantly reduced. Knowledge is regarded as a chargeable asset rather than something that should be shared for free. This reward system can significantly skew collaborative behaviours.

Many studies^[2] have shown only about 30 per cent of us behave selfishly in normal collaborative situations.

Fifty per cent of us behave co-operatively (either conditionally or unconditionally). If we target individual contribution (in the form of utilisation) over common purpose (e.g. customer value), we are more likely to behave selfishly^[11].

Size matters here as well – especially as large and complex projects tend to require large, distributed teams often in ecosystems of partnerships. Small is generally beautiful in the world of teams (teams of around 20 are the most effective). As team numbers increase, collaboration tends to decrease, co-location becomes more difficult, agility and speed goes down and the possibility of innovation plummets. This is where collaboration technologies come in as they can offer the ability to rapidly scale and mobilise collaboration over channels like video, audio or chat. The key is establish 'common ground', in physical space, virtual space or a combination of both, to allow people to come together wherever they happen to be^[17]. Enabling diverse platforms and cloud services to talk together is as essential as getting diverse and virtualised people to do so.

However, we may feel that we are in a co-operative and collaborative culture without actually knowing how to be collaborative (only one in four of us are good at managing networks up and down, remember). The examples are out there in enterprise social media as many people are condemned as 'show offs' because they are attempting to share their 'knowledge' and 'achievements' with others who are less appreciative of their efforts (did we all really need to know that someone else's team meeting went well or whether their train journey was productive?)

If collaboration is critical to organisations, Gratton and Erickson^[10] suggest that we need to recruit, encourage and create cultures of collaboration.

They propose five steps to achieve this:

1. Hire natural collaborators
2. Actively encourage people to interact with people beyond the boundaries of their teams
3. Leaders must lead by example. As Gratton's research found^[9]: "A culture of cooperation cannot spread through an organisation unless it is preached and practiced at all levels"
4. Understand collaborative mindsets – most people are 'givers', 'takers' or 'matchers'^[9]. 'Takers' like to get more than they give; 'givers' tend to give more than they get; while 'matchers' strive to preserve an equal balance of giving and taking. An organisation with a 'taking' mindset is unlikely to be one that collaborates well. 'Giving' is the most successful strategy for people hoping to build long and productive working relationships.

Create a 'belonging', inclusive culture, involving a strong sense of common purpose.

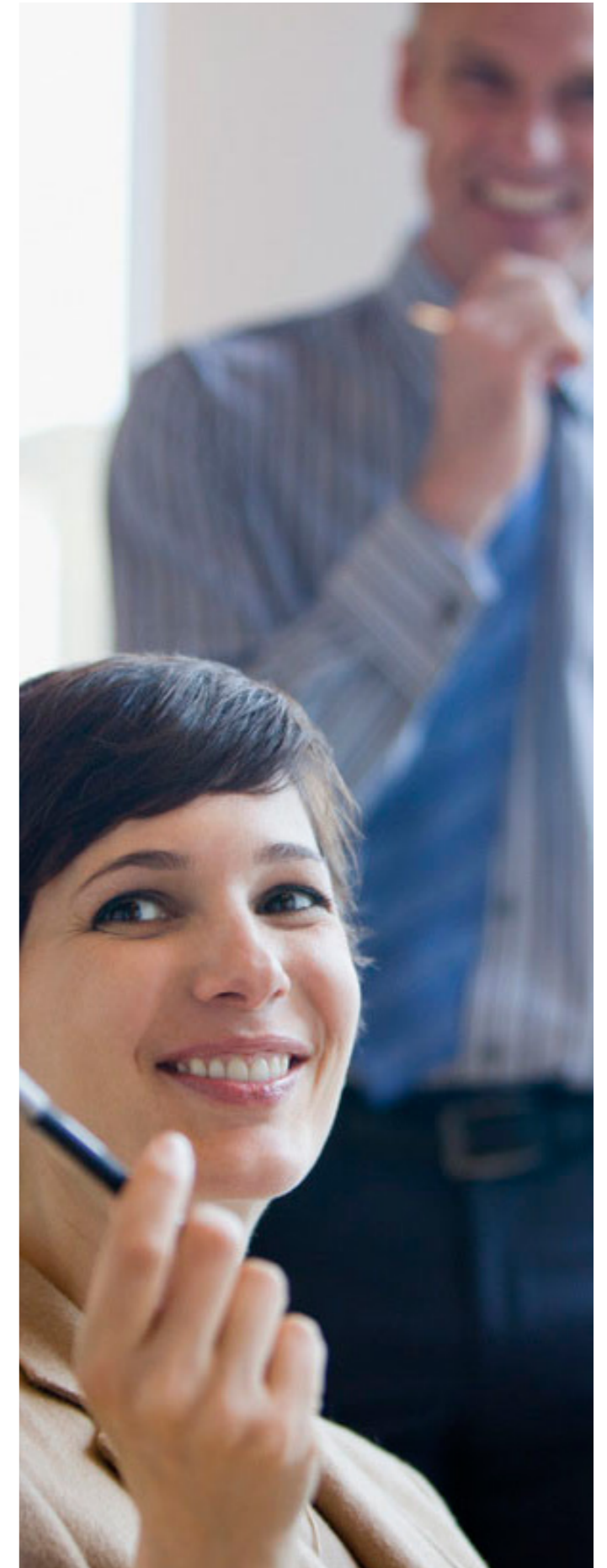
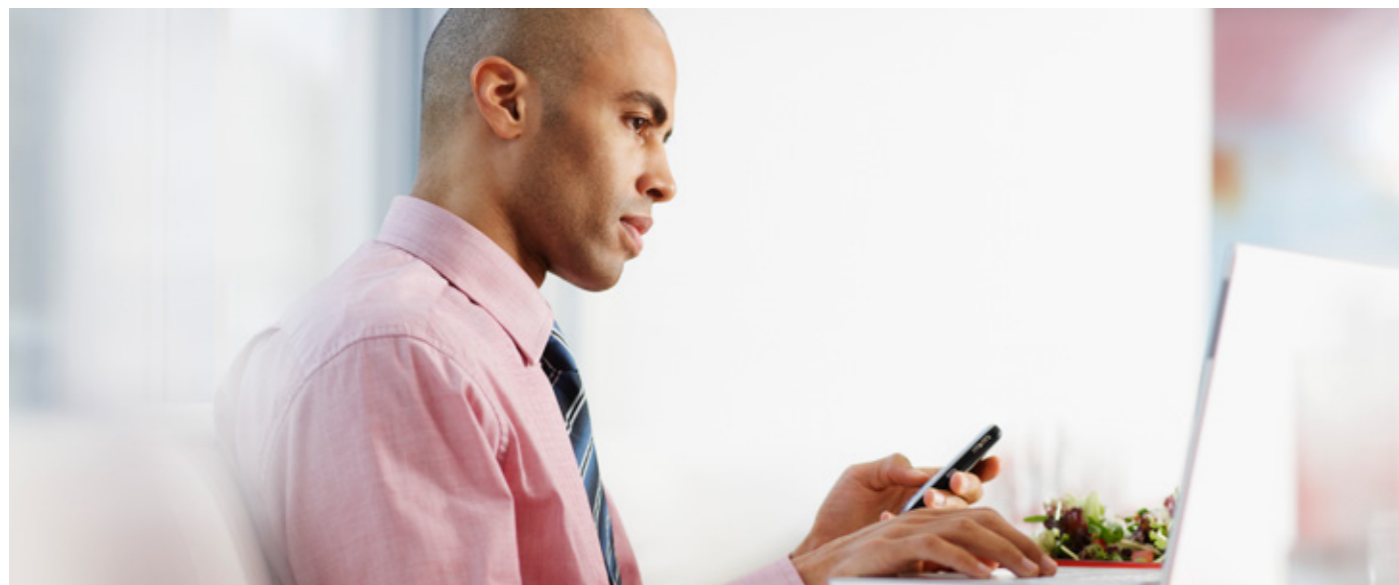
It is clear that a combination of trust and a collaborative mindset is essential for collaboration to be effective in a world where most work ties are weak.

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Although teams that are large, virtual, diverse, and composed of highly educated specialists are increasingly crucial with challenging projects, those same four characteristics make it hard for teams to get anything done. To put it another way, the qualities required for success are the same qualities that undermine success.

Gratton and Erickson^[10].

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Conundrum four: ‘We’ versus ‘me’.

If we are constantly collaborating, when do we have time to get anything else done?

According to Harvard Business Review ^[8], collaborative activities in organisations have increased by 50 per cent in the past 20 years. This means that we are increasingly working with others rather than working individually. The danger starts to be that we spend all our time talking and no time actually doing anything –we’ve probably all been involved in ‘death by meeting’ days.

Constant collaboration does not necessarily equate to productivity. We’ve already seen in conundrum two that people with in demand skills can become victims of their own success as collaboration overload ^[9] kicks in. Cross, Rebele and Grant’s studies ^[9] claim that 20 to 35 per cent of the value collaboration added within many organisations comes from just three to five per cent of employees. These employees can spend so much time collaborating that their individual task performance declines, they become bottlenecks to progress and, potentially, they become both stressed and disengaged as a result ^[1].

The conundrum is that we tend to reward individuals who look as if they are productive (it’s telling that most people’s diaries are filled with meetings instead of individual work), rather than those who are just getting on with things. Partially, the problem is around what ‘productive work’ actually is in the first place. The most visible part of the ‘we’ versus ‘me’ conundrum lies in the construction of one of our key collaboration tools: the office.

The original concept of the open plan office was very much about collaboration. Forcing people together certainly makes it more likely that people will collaborate. Professor Thomas Allen’s classic study of researchers at MIT, showed that the frequency of interactions between people declined exponentially the further apart they were (often referred to as the Allen curve ^[12]). If teams were separated even by a corridor, their informal collaboration declined. Put them on another floor and they may as well be in another country. This is probably one reason why the amount of square feet allocated to the average worker has shrunk from 225 square feet per worker in 2010 to 190 square feet today (although the cost of office space is the main reason).

This doesn’t necessarily translate into a magical transformation in collaboration behaviours – in fact it often does exactly the opposite. The lack of privacy associated with getting the maximum number of ‘bottoms on seats’ can cause people to have less conversations. It’s great to have a spontaneous discussion with a colleague at their desk but the rest of the office is also party to that conversation, whether they like it or not. The expectation that all activities can and will be observed can significantly distort behaviours ^[13]. This, of course, also applies to online behaviours – with people tending to ‘act out’ on enterprise social media and other online collaboration tools, only publishing uncontentious material or blatantly showing off a desired public image to senior managers and peers.

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The problem of the future will not be that we cannot connect – it will be that we cannot disconnect.

Kevin Kelly, Wired.

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Research by Steelcase^[14] has shown that office design has to go beyond the notions of physical privacy, noise cancellation and allocation of personal space. The most effective spaces bring people together and remove barriers whilst also giving people opportunities to have private chats.

Lack of privacy also has a negative impact on the ‘me’ aspects of work. Research by Harvard University^[14] has shown that the number of employees who say that they can’t concentrate at their desk, has increased by 16 per cent since 2008 (and the number of people that say that they don’t have access to quiet spaces has gone up by 13 per cent). Seventy-four per cent of employees are also more concerned about privacy than they were ten years ago^[14].

This emphasis on collaboration in office designs has ignored the fact that, during an average working day, we may also need to do individual tasks, concentrate and contemplate. These activities tend to get all mixed up in the spaces where we are communicating and collaborating. That results in a horrible distraction machine where one-size-fits-all fits no-one.

Our brains are wired to monitor any new stimulus in an environment – the possibility of a sabre toothed tiger striking may be minimal in an office environment but our brains don’t know this. Unfortunately, it means that we are infinitely distractible. Interruptions, which can (according to research from London Business School^[9]) come at us every three minutes lead to us switching our attention to other tasks to the one at hand.

Cognitive load (how much our brain has to juggle) is an issue here. We are either attempting to battle on through the noise or we are diverting valuable cognitive resources towards listening to it. For creative and innovative tasks, rather than routine ones like doing our email, there is evidence that our brains need a little less emphasis on noise and more ‘down time’. It isn’t a coincidence that people say that their ‘ah ha’ moments tend to come when they are out for a walk, early in the morning, late at night or in the bath^[15].

Oddly, some degree of office buzz can make it ‘feel’ productive. A study sponsored by an app developer last year found that simply pumping the noise of a coffee shop into an office could create a more productive environment^[16]. Some offices are broadcasting ‘pink noise’ (similar to white noise) which provides sufficient interference to drown out people’s conversations but not enough to be distracting in itself.

Research by Steelcase^[14] has shown that office design has to go beyond the notions of physical privacy, noise cancellation and allocation of personal space. The most effective spaces bring people together and remove barriers whilst also giving people opportunities to have private chats. Privacy is about people’s ability to control information (both personal and professional) and stimulation (any sort of interruption or distraction – which may, of course, vary from person to person and task in hand)^[14].

- To do this effectively we need to understand how our brain pays attention to things. Neuroscientists have defined three basic modes of attention^[14]:
1. **Controlled attention:** complex tasks that require thought and/or the ability to write coherent or meaningful prose. Distractions during this kind of task can cause huge dents in productivity. For more complex tasks it can take between twelve and 20 minutes to get back into the train of thought that got rudely derailed.
 2. **Stimulus-driven attention:** this is typically those moments when we have welcome distractions to interrupt boring, mundane and routine tasks – filling in spreadsheets, doing e-mail or scheduling meetings. Many people often come into the office to do these tasks. The trouble comes when everyone around them is in mode one.
 3. **Time out:** our brains are not built to concentrate for eight hours a day^[15]. Typically we work in 90 minute cycles, after which periodic brain breaks are needed. Different things work for different people – checking Facebook, going for a walk or having a chat can all be effective as brain detoxes.

The need to control stimulation as we switch among the three modes, means that we require a variety of workspaces that give us a balance between ‘we’ and ‘me’.

In truth, office spaces need to be as ‘theatrically fluid’ as the tasks being done in them. Many offices are responding by offering flexible activity-based designs – where spaces are designed to support the activities in them and people move around, depending on what they are doing. Others are forming ‘co-working spaces’ (or ‘coffices’) where people can work alongside like-minded others somewhere between the home and the formal office.

Tracking down employees who could be anywhere and working anytime can make things more difficult. Fred might not be working a nine to five day at a desk on floor two anymore. To find Fred you need presence technologies that give you an idea of his availability, his diary and his current location. However, if this information is abused by leaders and used to gauge whether people are working or not, Fred is unlikely to freely share it.

Conclusion.

It's difficult to change the world on your own. Collaboration is a team sport. It would be difficult to collaborate by yourself – so the ability to collaborate clearly isn't a pointless obsession amongst large corporates, as some futurists claim. It is good for employees and it's good for the bottom line.

Technologies allow us to collaborate in many different ways and change the ways that we work. Unlike Kevin Costner in 'Field of Dreams', though, if you build it, people may not come. To change the way that we collaborate, we need a better understanding of how collaboration works.

Like any great party, you need a reason for people to get together. You need a physical or virtual 'common ground'^[17] to gather them on. You need to make sure that everyone knows each other so that they can start to talk, create and build 'fast trust'. This is why leaders need to become perfect party hosts rather than making sure that the beatings continue until collaboration improves.

We also need to acknowledge that, although most of us think collaboration is a good thing, we aren't all naturally good at it. Recruitment needs to emphasise collaboration as a key skillset, but leaders also need to recognise and reward contribution (and be good at it themselves). We also need to make sure our top collaborators don't spend so much time collaborating that they burn out.

We also need to recognise that work isn't exclusively about collaboration. We need to balance 'we' and 'me'. We need to give people the time and space that they need to do individual work. This means that a one-size-fits all solution to work doesn't necessarily work anymore. We need to give an increasingly diverse workforce choices as to how, where and when they work. This includes rethinking one of our key collaboration tools – the office.

If we start to view work as an idea distribution factory, would we engineer the way we do work in a different way?

We would need to nurture and value ideas. We would need to give people the space to develop them. We would need to get contributions from teams of people who know stuff to make them happen. We would need leaders to invest and champion these ideas. We would then need customers to value these ideas. Collaboration and collaboration technologies would be central to the business model of such an organisation. Most organisations are now in the ideas business, especially as innovation and agility become key to survival.

If collaboration is so core to business success, the final conundrum is: who owns it?

Internal comms should encourage it. HR might recruit for it and reward it. Property might design it into the physical infrastructure.

IT will put in enterprise collaboration tools to enable it. Finance might fret about productivity costs. In most companies, though, no one actually owns it, co-ordinates it, or really understands how it happens. Maybe we need to have a new breed of executive to make sure collaboration really works for the future of work – perhaps we are looking for Chief Collaboration Officers^[8] to take on these collaboration conundrums?



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