

Social Computing to Improve Work Place Collaboration

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Introduction/Problem Statement

Working virtually can bring on new adventures, scheduling changes, organization, promptness, and many other attributes that you may have or need to be learned to help you succeed in today's technology world. What happens when you are grouped with other people you have never met, or you are grouped to accomplish a specific task where you don't know the people you are working with and whether you can trust them as a group member in the virtual world. When these virtual groups are created, who is responsible for introducing or creating the trust that needs to exist to get them to the final outcome? There needs to be a tool and time given for members to get know each other, to build trust and cohesion that is needed to make a virtual group successful. The world of virtual teams has many benefits in bringing together people of talent, providing international perspectives and saving a corporation travel dollars. Unfortunately, the team can't work as a team unless trust is established ("IBM Business Consulting Services," 2004, p. 1). A business or corporation can trust the collaboration tool being used, but they will need to decide whether the benefit of creating trust among team members is important to the function of their virtual teams.

Possible Solutions

Building trust and cohesion among virtual team members does not necessarily fall solely on the collaborative tool that is being used. The time that is given to a team to build a working relationship can be determined by the organization if that time is allocated into the project. The tool decided upon, or which is already in place, provides the virtual meeting room or tools and access for the members to perform the processes they need to reach their goal.

When trust and cohesion are being built within a team there needs to be an understanding and feeling of comfort with the tool being used. Teams need to be given time to train, explore, and research the positives and negatives of what can be accomplished within the collaboration software.

FacilitatePro is company that provides an online collaboration tool through the use of your browser. FacilitatePro believes in offering a "facilitator" for training to bring the cohesion and understanding needed to provide their customers with the knowledge and trust with their virtual tool. They use a webinar that was developed by Settle-Murphy, CEO of Chrysalis International, to build trust among team members. The webinars use interactive learning to bring team members together. She explains that "most webinars stop short of allowing the group participation that is a key aspect of learning. What's missing is the ability to develop ideas as a group and let participants add their own experience to the mix" ("Bridging the Distance", 2006). The research from the webinars shows that participants are more engaged; they contribute and participate, and leave having an experience on how to work in virtual teams.

Technology like FacilitatePro makes it possible for workers located in different places to communicate and collaborate effectively. And, it's equally important to pay attention to team norms, cultural differences and group dynamics. People, process and technology all have to be in sync in order for a virtual work to work ("Bridging the Distance", 2006).

What is nice about this tool is there is no need to install extra software or plug-in for your browsers and it runs on Microsoft products going back to Windows XP. Hardware needed is also minimal. It can run with very little memory and processor capacity.

Collaboration tools that are out there for companies to research seem to have comparable processes that provide tools for team members to build trust with each other and the group; web-conferencing, blogs, wikis, instant-messaging (IM), and sharing and editing documents. The tools are there for virtual team members to communicate and perform the functions that they need to build trust with each other and in the group. There are also companies that have taken this trend of working at a distance that provide training, team building, and how-to develop trust with virtual teams for organizations.

IBM has its own collaboration software called Lotus. Lotus offers the ideal tools, as well as other collaboration software, needed for success in a virtual team. Tools in Lotus include; calendar, voice, IM, video, email, document sharing and editing, wikis, team profiles, mobile collaboration, and wireless. But IBM's virtual team members are not alone when it comes to building trust and cohesion. IBM utilizes consulting at their Advanced Business Institute to build trusting relationships among virtual team members. Establishing trust among members of a virtual team is a prerequisite for being able to work as a team (IBM Business Consulting, 2004, p. 1). Peter Andrews, a consultant for IBM, wrote an essay pertaining to the information needed to build trust in a virtual team. He discusses personal traits that need to be obtained or team members should already have in place (IBM Business, 2004, p. 1).

IBM has 3 personal traits that they identify for teams; the first trait is the value that a person brings to their team. Individuals should make their qualifications available ahead of time, so other members can read and see the value of their backgrounds. They should be creative in expressing these in the form of a resume or web page. Members should read this personal information carefully to have a better understanding of each other, possibly identifying strengths and weaknesses. Members should not be afraid to ask questions of each other, almost as if they are interviewing one another through voice conversation or email.

Commitment is the second trait that needs to be delivered on the expectations of the project and the team. When members are working virtually, no one is there to tell you what to do or when to do it. This is where a calendar within the collaboration software comes into importance. Individual members need to keep track of deadlines demonstrating that they can be counted on in terms of a timely schedule. The calendar tool helps keep everyone on track; this is where individuals may need to strengthen their organizational traits, like promptness, and scheduling.

Being thorough is the third trait that needs to be established. While working virtually it is crucial that everyone involved be efficient and in control of the job had hand. Members may need to send an email, or make a phone call to double check on a dead-line or just to

check in. This shows and proves to other team members that individuals are concerned about their job at hand and the success of the team.

There are many consulting companies out there that focus on building trust in the working environment and today, virtual environments. Trusted Advisor and Associates is a consulting firm that offers training to obtain and create trust in teams. When we work in virtual teams, it's all too easy to forget that we are in fact working with real people who just happen to be 15 or 15,000 miles away, and trust in the relationship takes a beating (Styer, Sandy, 2010).

Trusted Advisor has broken down their trust-building into four components. They use these components to identify specific behaviors, or behaviors that need to be worked on or changed by members, to build trust through collaboration.

The first component from Trust Advisor is credibility. Team members need to express information about themselves to the other group members; they need to give more than resume information. Information needs to include what the strengths are they bring to the group that will benefit the overall goal. Credibility is the words we using in communicating to the team.

Reliability is the second component. The group should create a master schedule of individual and group tasks towards the overall project, or an individual needs to take the responsibility to make one. When a member posts a piece, they should refer back to the master schedule verifying the work is complete and that it for sure relates to the task at hand. Reliability is the actions that group members use when they add or post information to the collaboration tool.

The third component is intimacy, which brings a one's experiences or personal lives into the group. We trust those who are willing to take the small risk of revealing something about themselves; encourage it, especially by role-modeling it (Styer, 2010).

Self-orientation is the last of the components for building trust according to Trust Advisor. Group members need to practice good listening skills. Members need to stay on task, even when tempted to try and do other work while meeting virtually. They need to focus on the group and what needs to be accomplished for its success. This would be rude and distracting in a face-to-face meeting, the same is for a meeting virtually.

Recommendation

Although there are plenty of options out there pertaining to collaboration software and tools for companies to utilize for their business or purpose, the decision to create trusting virtual team members and bringing individuals together from across the globe solely depends on a company's own agenda. A company has choices; it can let team members evolve into a collaboration tool on their own, they can hire a team oriented consulting firm to work with and train employees to build trust within a virtual team, or they could create and establish their own virtual training department for the same purpose. In the end, cost and importance of establishing trust within the virtual realm need to be considered.

Companies who are using an established collaboration tool, the recommendation would be to keep the training and establishment of trust among team members within the company. IBM is a good example of a company who has established within their Lotus product for virtual team members, this should bring cost down because the need to hire a consultant is eliminated. Most collaboration tools offer a variety of communication

processes that can be utilized to establish trust and cohesion between team members. What the company needs to keep in mind is that there needs to be time spent to have employees practice and train with it's components to identify ways of establishing team unity and trust among members, and gain understanding of how the tool can be used. There is nothing wrong with having team members meet face-to-face in the beginning of a project to establish a working relationship.

For organizations who are deciding on a new collaboration tool need to look at what the tool has to offer in the form of; access, communication methods, document sharing, and what type of meetings can be held for team members. FacilitatePro has the offerings that organizations need to establish trusting relationships among team members within their product. The organization should look into the company that has produced and created the collaboration tool for guidance and possible consultation in forming virtual teams. Collaboration software companies may offer packages for training and team building when the software is purchased. This is a definite benefit for everyone involved. Yes, there is cost upfront, but for team members to become accustomed to the software and understand what the software can do will not only benefit the teams but the goals and success of the organization.

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