

Collaborative Tools Use in Learning Networks and C3 LearnNet

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In this article, we will explore several collaborative tools and their use in the C3 LearnNet and more generally in learning networks.

Email

Email is still the reigning "killer app" in most organizations. The advantages of email for a learning network are accessibility, ease of use, and familiarity. However, members of forming learning networks can make the mistake of assuming that everyone has email access, and so it is important not to over-rely on email. The access issue can occur when a member is traveling or residing in a country with limited Internet access or speed. Therefore, even on the seemingly simple assumption of access, learning network members need to be mindful of email overuse.

Abuses of email are rife in the media and in organizational lore. In a recent study by Christina Cavanagh of the University of Western Ontario, 80 percent of those who receive more than 50 emails per day believe that email is out of control. Much wasted time is spent on sifting, filtering, or preventing unwanted email from flooding our inboxes. Many organizations are poised to send in the email SWAT team to train, or maybe curb is the right word, email offenders, but often the change effort is temporary and we creatures of habit return to old ways.

Email is particularly poor for managing processes that occur in stages or in multiple versions over long time periods, because the flow of decisions and documents is difficult to track through a linear series of messages. In one case with C3 LearnNet, two members spent a lengthy telephone call trying to track through a sequence of emails, the outcome of which had led each to completely opposite conclusions!

This problem is more serious in the learning network, where members must account not only for communication misunderstandings, but also for differences among organizations in their email environments. This is especially true if members use email with attachments as a document-sharing device. The problems that occur with attachments include: lack of firewall permission, incompatible software, faulty attachment processing, and just plain not noticing that the attachment is there. Likewise, everyone configures her email archiving scheme differently, so there is no standardization on document handling. This means that if a member leaves the learning network, no one will be able to access or likely make sense of his email repository, which could result in critical gaps in knowledge. Copying everyone in the network on every communication makes matters worse by creating a lot of unmanageable copies. C3 LearnNet members discovered a related issue: the more people who are copied on an email, the less individual responsibility each person takes for replying to it. In short, email can become a real impediment to learning network development if it is relied on for all asynchronous communications.

Face-to-Face Meetings

There is often a temptation in learning networks to idolize the face-to-face (F2F) meeting and regard any distance form of communication as a poor substitute. There does seem to be general agreement that if a business or organizational decision must be made, the F2F meeting is the place to do it most efficiently and effectively, if that is the purpose of the meeting. But keep in mind that everyone has had the experience of attending a F2F meeting, whether for one hour or three days, and emerging from it saying, "Now, what was that all about? What did we decide?" In other words, the F2F meeting is not some great lost art over which we must continually express our regret!

For the purposes of a learning network, F2F meetings are a rare luxury, and so have more social network-building purpose than a typical meeting that occurs within a single organization. Distance means can force us to be more precise, more time-conscious, more accommodating, and more attentive than live meetings in many cases. In the learning network context, it is not how to make distance communications make up for their shortcomings, but rather how to skillfully blend distance and face-to-face, synchronous and asynchronous communications, so that the network can form the social and intellectual bonds that support genuine learning.

C3 LearnNet began with annual F2F Summits, and after one year the group decided to move up to two meetings per year, one in the Fall and one in the Spring. The members found a good balance between the semi-annual F2F meetings and the monthly teleconferences and web discussion in the teamroom. In 2001, however, several member companies found that their travel was limited because of the combined effects of terrorist threat and budget cuts, and so videoconferencing was substituted for the Fall Summit. Members experienced a fair amount of dissatisfaction with this medium, and in Spring 2002 the group again held a F2F meeting. There was strong feeling in the group, based on tradition and experience, that the semi-annual F2F meetings were critical to the network's existence, despite the often good results from distance communication media.

Expertise Locators and "KM Agents"

Expertise locators and "KM agents" are a class of search, filtering, retrieval, and people-linking software that deliver needed content and connections to a personal portal. KM agents allow organic and automated connections to be made based on the topics/expertise/areas of interest that people in the organization are currently working on. KM agents are now a class of tools that are being integrated into suites of tools comprising enterprise information portals (EIPs) or knowledge portals.

While this new class of tools is being adopted and used inside leading corporations, including some members of C3 LearnNet, none of the vendors has yet come up with a cross-organization application that would be useful to the learning network. In the near future, however, expertise locators and affinity "bots" may help learning networks to form. That is, a possible scenario would feature a highly-secure, privacy-protecting website (for example, run by a professional society for its members) that would collect the interests of members by bots that comb their email repositories. Then, the natural affinities of these society's members could be "discovered" and new working groups or

learning networks could be formed. There are many technical leaps that would need to occur to make this scenario a possibility, but the more we understand that the knowledge we need may lie outside our own organizational boundaries, the more interest and potential profit there will be in creating cross-organizational “agents” to discover that knowledge.

Teamrooms

Teamrooms are web-based, secure collaborative spaces that enable a team or network of people to communicate by posting messages and documents that can be accessed at any time from any place with Internet access. Teamrooms host a whole suite of features, including threaded discussion, shared documents, chat, calendars, application sharing, and project management tools.

Teamrooms can complement and in some cases are intended to replace the use of email. That is, members engage in threaded discussions in the teamroom rather than sending out email messages to the entire learning network. The advantages of posting in the teamroom are that everyone has access to the space and can see the sequence of messages in the teamroom free of other email traffic. Also, anyone who is entering the discussion at the midpoint, such as a new member, can instantly see the full flow of the discussion. For document sharing, the teamroom is vastly superior to individual email archives, as mentioned above.

However, in order to make the teamroom really work as a central collaborative space for a learning network, several factors need to be in place. First and foremost, teamrooms really require broadband access to work effectively (some teamroom designs include an "offline" version, but these often do not capture the entire teamroom content). The second teamroom challenge is focused on the agreements, incentives, and sanctions that the network puts in place around participation. Members can default to visiting the teamroom only when they receive a reminder email to do so. The email reminder system can be a trap, undercutting the "pull" nature of the teamroom system and subtly encouraging members to fall back to using email only.

C3 LearnNet members have tried multiple strategies to encourage teamroom use: email reminders, incentive systems, invitations broadcast and narrowcast, and others. In looking over three years' use of teamroom technology, members concluded that:

- the teamroom did become the central collaborative space, and it was relied upon for information on the network activities
- the frequency and individual participation numbers never reached the level that members wanted it to
- there were intense periods of interchange, which were exciting and helpful, and long periods of "no action"
- new members could browse the teamroom and find a lot of useful information
- access and firewall issues would arise with some frequency, but were typically resolved without too much hassle

- once the teamroom became the source for information, complaints about its shortcomings lessened, in other words, acculturation took place
- the chat feature was never really used, nor were graphics (except presentations) or fancy text features. In effect, the teamroom was used like an email and document repository to a large extent.

Teleconferencing

The humble telephone emerges as a hero for the support of learning networks. Now that user-led teleconferencing with advanced features is possible, other media cannot rival the nearly universal accessibility and ease of use of the teleconference. First, even without the availability of the newer features, teleconferencing allows the energy and immediacy of real-time interchange, with virtually no need for a learning curve, no intrusiveness of the technology, and no worry about organizational firewalls or protocols. Beyond the simple multiparty phone call, advanced user features allow recording for later playback by calling an 800 number; recording onto CDROM; direct private link with the operator; and participant muting, among other features.

C3 LearnNet used teleconferencing on a monthly basis to share best practice case studies. These conferences were one hour in length, and are accompanied by a Powerpoint presentation or short document or graphic. They created high energy and interchange among members, the height of which usually occurred in the last five minutes of the teleconference! It is important to have a strong facilitator in these teleconferences, as there is a tendency for some participants to go off-topic. While open exchange is good, C3 members found it was important to get through the material that was being presented each month. Over time, members found that from 2-5 Powerpoint slides were the right amount for a one-hour call.

Videoconferencing

In the 1990s, videoconferencing was a breakthrough technology that offered real-time visual and audio connections with any point on the globe where the technology was available. In many corporations, standing videoconferenced meetings with branch offices or partners are a way of doing business. In the learning network environment, creative use of videoconferencing can add to the feeling of connectedness between members. Unlike the standard business use, however, which is typically point-to-point conferencing, the learning network by definition is almost always multipoint (three or more videoconferenced locations linked together). In the multipoint scenario, the complexity of videoconferencing use can detract from the experience, because of the need for careful facilitation, extra fees for a bridging service, increased possibility of lost connections, and varying levels of equipment capability.

In the case of the C3 LearnNet, videoconferencing was used when face-to-face meetings were not possible, but with mixed results. Objections included the cost of the videoconferenced sessions, the difficulty of scheduling the videoconferencing room, the need to spend too much focus on the medium and not on the meeting content, and sometimes poor picture quality. On the other hand, videoconferencing does allow document sharing and spontaneous discussion, and if facilitated properly can

accommodate real interchange among peers, rather than lectures by one talking head to an audience.

Web conferencing

Web conferencing has taken the business world by storm. The technology promises sessions that allow each participant, while sitting in his office, to view a presentation, participate in sidebar chat, and hear a live presentation via telephone. Participants who miss the session can access an archive that sequences the presentation slides with the audio presentation, and includes a full transcript of the chat discussion. These tools are undeniably powerful and engaging, and are being used extensively by training departments, human resources, and other parts of organizations to link together branch offices for presentations, thus saving money and avoiding the need for "road shows" and training lag time.

For the cross-organizational learning network, however, members of C3 LearnNet quickly found that even when firewall barriers were said not to be a problem, they were. Also, the spontaneity of some of the monthly meetings was compromised because of the need to upload presentations 2-3 days before the web conferencing session. Many members like to "tweak" their presentations at the last minute, and web conferencing does not offer that flexibility. For web conferencing and home use, there is a requirement for two lines, one to use for the teleconference, and one for the web-based presentation. Web conferencing works best at high bandwidths, so there is a de facto need for a broadband connection and a phone line. While some members could parse the chat, presentation, and teleconferenced input very nicely, others found the chat window distracting. There is also a cost for web conferencing and for the teleconferencing connection, and those costs have continued to increase despite the drop in long-distance costs over the same period of time.

For these reasons and more, after using web conferencing steadily for about a six-month period, C3 LearnNet members decided to share their presentations on the teamroom, from which everyone could download the presentation and view on their own desktop or in print, and accompany that with a teleconference. This method was found to be much more flexible, and members spent much less time paying attention to connectivity and tools, and more time paying attention to content. Members did lose the ability to access the audio and presentation archive, also an additional cost, but most found that the meeting summary notes and the presentation were sufficient.

Websites

As the Internet has evolved, the fundamental functions of global connectivity - to disseminate and share information - have gotten a bit lost in the onslaught of marketing, pop-up ads, spam, and flash animations. However, in the case of the learning network, a website is a powerful tool for both dissemination and orientation for new or prospective members. A public website can act both as a repository for accumulated knowledge in the network, and a place to refer others who are curious about the network activities.

There is a mysterious inverse relationship, however, between the cumulative value of a site - how it grows and evolves over time - and the frequency with which learning network members visit it. In short, the website can become invisible to the network unless there is a facilitator who continually reminds members "have you checked the website?" In a similar vein, network members or those interested in network activities will not find all the great things posted on the website unless they know that those items are there. The learning network will need a "what's new on the website" process, but it is not so useful to have the "what's new" information solely on the website (since long-term members visit the website less and less, etc.)! So, in the case of C3 LearnNet, links from the teamroom to the website, and occasional reminders during teleconferences, were used to call attention to new website features.