Knowledge in Action

Issue 16

Creating a knowledge-sharing culture to maximise internal collaboration

As teams have become more diverse and geographically scattered, effective collaboration has become more of a challenge.

Research from Henley's Knowledge Management Forum identifies the most important factors for successful internal collaboration and offers key solutions to help organisations build a knowledge-sharing culture and collaborate effectively.

Knowledge Management Forum

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> "Collaboration in a structured hierarchy has its challenges. People want to share and collaborate. They are intelligent about how they do it and how they build relationships, so we tend to have a shadow organisation which gets things done, but not necessarily in the way the structure would dictate."
>
> Susan Frost, CIO capability exploitation – strategic information-led innovation: research and development, Ministry of Defence

It wasn't so long ago that the average team was simply a group of people working near one another who came together to share knowledge face-to-face. Now they may be geographically disparate, temporary groups who may never actually meet. Creating an environment where knowledge sharing can flourish within these teams is therefore far more difficult.

Managers need to understand the most important factors in successful internal collaboration, and how to ensure the team has the communication and collaboration tools (including instant messaging and wikis), training, support and freedom they need to optimise their knowledge-sharing potential.

Research by Henley's Knowledge Management Forum draws on successful collaboration at a number of organisations, including Unisys, Faithful+Gould, IDeA, a government department and a group of adult learners at Henley. It uses these examples to pinpoint the three components required for collaboration.

The right tools for the task

Having the right tools for the task has traditionally been considered the key to collaboration. The research found that having a number of tools available, and allowing team members to select the most appropriate one for each job, is more effective.

People who collaborate using a variety of technology tools – with or without face-to-face contact – have a better understanding of how to work together effectively and efficiently than people who work only face-to-face. Teams at Unisys, for example, collaborate almost 100% virtually. They are very experienced in using the tools and always use the right one for the task. If they have a quick question, for example, they might use instant messaging or email.

By contrast the government department has a strong face-to-face culture and no technology with which to collaborate. As a result, it seems slower and more inefficient. This suggests that organisations should give people access to a range of face-to-face and technology tools for collaboration, and give them the freedom to choose which tool they use for each job.

Discussions around collaboration

The second key component is effective communication over how these tools are used. People who use a variety of tools are almost forced to talk about how they would use them, partly because they are new. Compare this with face-to-face collaboration: nobody talks about how to have a meeting because everyone thinks they know how to do it.

Collaboration, insight … practical value

Co-ordinated by Judy Payne of Henley Business School, the insights into internal collaboration described here originated in a research project carried out by members of the Henley Knowledge Management Forum. It was spearheaded by Judy Payne and Paul Hancock from Henley Business School, Susan Frost from the Ministry of Defence and Adrian Malone from Faithful+Gould. The findings were drawn from the experiences of over 25 Forum members including organisations as diverse as Unisys, IDeA and QinetiQ.

Research framework
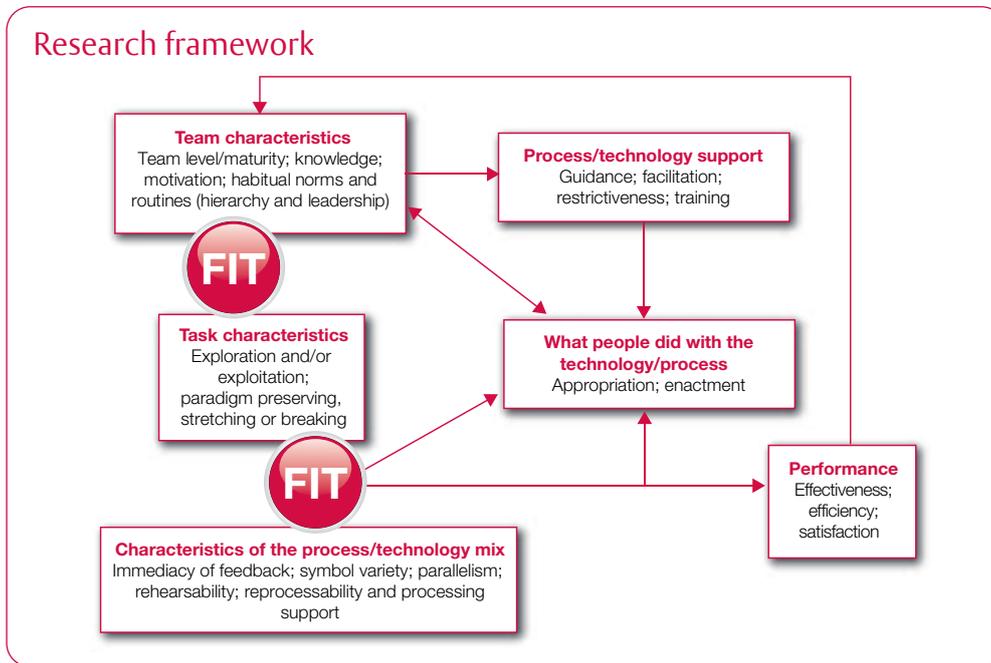
The mature teams that use technology for exploratory tasks (Unisys, Henley and Faithful+Gould) all have discussions about how to behave. The zero-history Henley team has written 'rules of engagement' for technology and processes, although the rules are not always followed.

The teams that don't use technology as heavily don't have the same discussions about how to work together. At IDeA, where the teams are short-lived and under-developed, there are no reported discussions about internal working processes, and apart from well-developed organisational norms around BlackBerry use, little shared understanding of what tools and processes to use when.

Discussing ways of working can lead to new, improved collaboration processes. This can be more important than having the right tools for the job. Teams within Faithful+Gould, for example, talk a lot about how to collaborate. They don't have access to perfect tools, but because they talk so much about the way they work together, they overcome this.

On its own, giving people used to face-to-face working access to technology won't necessarily help. Within IDeA, people have the tools but don't talk about how they use them, so everyone just uses their preferred tools. Giving people access to technology, reducing their opportunities for face-to-face working and encouraging discussions about working processes might solve this problem.

"We have a lot of good tools, but for this collaboration we had a limited number available, and they weren't ideal. However, the team had such a desire to communicate, they found a way to make it work. Technology and tools can help make it more enjoyable and efficient, but ultimately it's about a desire to communicate."

Adrian Malone, head of commercial research, Faithful+Gould

Reaction to technology varies

The third finding is that different teams faced with different sorts of technology react in different ways. Take mature teams who know each other and are used to working with each other. If they are experienced with technology and given a range of choices, they will choose the right one for the job.

If they are less expert in technology, they will be less likely to choose the best tool for the job. They can be helped with facilitation or other process support as they practise using technology tools.

Teams at early stages of development will have varying levels of familiarity with the technology. They run an additional risk that those who are more proficient technologically will be perceived as leaders, purely because of their technical proficiency. These teams benefit from process support such as facilitation to make sure those with technological experience don't take over.

Knowledge sharing in practice

This research shows that for successful collaboration, individuals should be given access to a range of ways of collaborating to enable them to select the right tool for the job. In addition, teams must be encouraged to discuss how they are using the technology and how it best aids collaboration. They also need the support that will enable them to use it effectively, and the freedom to choose.

Knowledge managers' primary aim is to create an environment conducive to knowledge sharing. Focusing on the points above should help them contribute to positive change by giving team members the tools and support they need.

The role of hierarchy in internal collaboration

The research also shows that successful collaboration is extremely difficult within hierarchical, command-and-control environments, such as that exhibited by the government department. The research highlights two characteristics of successful collaboration in strongly hierarchical organisations. The first is that people have to break the rules and depart from accepted behaviours in order to collaborate.

The second is that collaboration within a strict hierarchy can be effective when senior people are prepared to behave as equals when collaboration necessitates it. At Faithful+Gould this is managed successfully and it reinforces positions in the hierarchy because people like the way senior people behave.

However, it also pinpoints an additional obstacle to effective collaboration in command-and-control environments. Teams are unlikely to be allowed tools that enable them to collaborate without management being able to see what they are doing, which means they may be deprived of the right tool for the job.

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Henley Knowledge Management Forum
The Henley Knowledge Management Forum, founded in 2000, is an internationally recognised centre of excellence in knowledge management. As a membership-based community, it is a magnet for leading business practitioners, world-class academics and thought leaders who collaborate to develop insights, understanding and practical guidance on knowledge management.

To discuss the benefits of membership for your organisation, contact Professor Jane McKenzie +44 (0)1491 571454 or Dr Judy Payne +44 (0)118 947 4652.

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