Linking Behaviour to Bottom Line Performance

The Tension in Collaboration

There is a tension at the heart of our efforts to collaborate. This tension and its possible resolution is best captured by the following questions.

Should we be putting people first, before technology, in our efforts to collaborate?
Does collaboration benefit from a more formal process?
Can collaboration be encouraged in a replicable and systematic manner (as much as anything concerning people can be repeatable and systematic)?
Does the lack of a formal process for optimising collaboration hold back productivity and performance?

This article attempts to answer these questions and shine new light on what constitutes successful collaboration.

What is collaboration?

At the outset, it is useful to consider what we actually mean when we talk about 'collaboration'[1]. Wikipedia defines collaboration as "a recursive process where two or more people work together toward an intersection of common goals, for example, an intellectual endeavour that is creative in nature. In particular, teams that work collaboratively can obtain greater resources, recognition and reward when facing competition for finite resources." By way of contrast, Google offers us 26 possible definitions .

While wanting to avoid any jargon, what is most striking about the various definitions is how frequently the concept of informality is seen as being intrinsic to collaboration. By extension (and certainly from a management perspective), it is this apparent infor

	Examples	Perceived Strengths	Perceived Weaknesses
Informal Collaboration	Innovation, ad hoc projects, informal influencing, improvisation	Better use of resources, greater spontaneity, recognition and enjoyment	It is hard to control, measure and manage. Could be seen to undermine the status quo
Formal Process and Structure	Customer service, business process reengineering, auditing, surveys	Can be measured, systematically optimised and enhanced	Can be restrictive, too easily satisfied with the status quo. Could be seen to undermine efforts to change

mality that creates a paradox, or at least some significant contrasts around collaboration. The table below illustrates these ideas and the tension between collaborative ways of working and more formal approaches.

Whilst acknowledging that an organisation's preference is for methods of working that can be most easily measured and managed, the paradox of coll

aboration lies at the heart of knowing which way of working is most suited to the task at hand. Put another way, it is a case of more control versus less control, more spontaneity versus less, or even greater adoption of change or not. It is these contrasts and inconsistencies lying at the heart of how we choose to organise work that creates an apparent gap or tension in collaboration. This is then especially relevant

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for those who seek to encourage or promote collaboration within organisations.

Why collaborate anyway?

Whilst it is useful to acknowledge the informality of collaboration, at least when compared to more formal methods of working, it is also useful to examine why collaboration occurs in the first place. As with the formal/informal dichotomy, it would appear that collaboration happens for two reasons; the first because it just happens, the second because more formal working practices are introduced under the guise of 'collaboration', when in reality collaboration in its truest sense isn't taking place.

From a managerial perspective, collaboration is often encouraged on the basis that it delivers greater productivity than the alternatives . At the heart of collaboration is the ability of the group to contribute more to the organisation than the sum of the parts. It is also the case that collaboration is one of a number of different ways of working and in that sense, it is important to pick the right 'tool' for the job. By way of example, the following list illustrates activities with particular relevance to collaboration;

· Change Management
· Government & Organisational Design
· Innovation
· Learning and Development
· Marketing
· Project Management
· Software and IT

Reading between the lines, it would not be foolish to argue that collabora-

tion is not a vital component of any successful organisation. Equally, collaboration efforts have played a significant, if not essential role in the creation of open source success stories like Firefox , Wikipedia and Linux , amongst others.

Given the nature of collaboration and its current role in helping organisations (of various forms) achieve their objectives, it is perhaps worth revisiting the original tension in collaboration mentioned earlier. As before, an inherent contrast lies at the heart of organisational collaboration, namely how to manage and 'control' something that is by definition informal, ad hoc and spontaneous?

How is collaboration being encouraged?

Collaboration and its anticipated benefits are relevant to every organisation. By extension, the means of encouraging collaboration are extremely wide and varied. Perhaps the easiest way to explore this in more depth is to look at the classic People, Process and Technology mantra, in this instance however, the order will be Technology, Process and People.

Technology and collaboration

While it is evident that encouraging collaboration through the use of technology has merit, it is also important to realise that successful collaboration in this day and age requires elements of technology, process and people. That said, recent developments with regards to internet based technologies have seen a proliferation of new collaborative technology emerge, many of

which can be seen in light of the recent Web 2.0 and Enterprise 2.0 memes. In brief, the creation of many free or low cost online applications has made sharing, editing, commenting and tracking group activities much simpler, aiding and abetting collaboration in the process. Examples of these programs include blogging, wikis and social networking amongst others.

While this new class of programs should be seen in the wider context of desktop (e.g. word processing, spreadsheet) and enterprise applications (e.g. CRM, payroll), it is their ability to share, comment and collaborate with others that is of greatest relevance. Such is the current popularity for collaboration in all things technology that even IT giants like SAP and Oracle have been doffing their caps in this direction.

While the recent emergence of Enterprise 2.0 technology has been well documented, how does this impact an organisation who wants to encourage greater collaboration? Clearly, technology facilitates greater collaboration , the possibility for more innovation and the better use of resources increases. As above, technology on its own doesn't guarantee success . Instead, people must be trained and the benefits of the software must be given an appropriate purpose.

Processes and collaboration

As we have already seen, processes are by definition an oxymoron when it comes to collaboration. On the one hand, processes imply consistency, repeatability and reliability, Six Sigma being an excellent example of this. On the other hand, collaboration excels

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when there are few, if any constraints in place, there is a place to develop informal working, innovation and spontaneity can thrive[2].

Where does this inherent contrast leave our efforts for greater collaboration? There would appear to be two broad themes that seek to boost collaboration efforts across business processes. The first evolves around the 'formalisation' or 'facilitation' of collaboration through various organisational initiatives and 'processes', examples of which include;

· Communities of practice
· Facilitation
· Leadership
· Matrix management
· Mentoring
· Self managed and virtual teams

The above approaches all aim to improve productivity and maximise the use of available resources. In a similar vein, another approach seeks to encourage and facilitate collaboration, raising awareness and supporting participation. While these methods may differ, they all share a common goal in terms of increasing performance and helping realise wider organisational objectives.

The second theme acknowledges the fact that within the realm of processes, there will always be an aspect of work or interaction that is beyond definition or easy measurement. In acknowledging the existence of such 'gaps' in processes, there is an implicit creation of informality and by extension, this creates fertile ground (no matter how small) for the development of collaboration. Various approaches have been taken to measure these 'gaps' and by

extension, their facilitation and development can be encouraged . Perhaps the best example of this is Social Network Analysis, or Organisational Network Analysis , an approach which measures interactions, levels of trust and frequency of communication within groups with the aim of understanding how work is really done, increasing efficiency and helping facilitate better collaboration. A second, related methodology is Value Network Analysis or VNA . VNA focuses on understanding and optimising the relationships through which commercial value flows.

Whilst the processes and approaches above seek to encourage collaboration, their strengths lie in providing support and facilitation for it, or in the case of SNA/ONA and to a lesser extent VNA, the strength lies in measuring and helping to find areas of an organisation that have a greater appetite for collaboration[3].

What appears to be missing from these approaches is a method to systematically encourage collaboration in a way that both enables people to work together in a genuinely collaborative manner, whilst retaining the inherent advantages of clearly defined processes. Combining these two abilities is particularly important when working on complex, large scale projects requiring the coordination of activities across multiple teams, divisions, projects or geographies.

People and collaboration

The third component of collaboration and by far the most important is that of people! Having explored the impact of technology as an enabler of collabora-

tion and processes as a way to measure and encourage collaboration, people themselves must be free to choose to collaborate and to then be able to act upon this choice. In essence therefore, successful collaboration is at its best when the following conditions are created;

· Training around collaboration raises people's awareness but genuine collaboration is often spur of the moment and is highly context specific, it isn't just about training
· People need to value collaboration, they have to want to put it into practice
· Sustaining collaboration requires trust and the alignment of behaviours, relationships and culture

While it is important that collaboration is valued, spontaneous and is trusted, facilitating and systemically encouraging collaboration is far easier said than done. The following examples illustrate some of these challenges and how other people have articulated them.

· Behaviours
· Boundaries and Silos
· Culture
· Relationships
· Shared Interests
· Sustainability and Value

Behaviours

Behaviours are critical to successful collaboration. While we may talk of altruism and training activities, successful collaboration often calls for changes in our behaviour. "People have to change the way they communicate and interact with others. The breakpoint of my PhD..."[4]

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Boundaries and Silos

The existence of boundaries and silos are particularly relevant when looking at more complex examples of collaboration, if an effort to collaborate crosses organisational boundaries such as departments, divisions or reporting lines, progress may slow. "We identify three key barriers to effective coordination and collaborative information sharing across organizational boundaries: intergroup bias, group territoriality, and poor negotiation norms."[5]

Culture

Related to the three themes mentioned so far, culture acts as a social 'glue' and helps inform behavioural norms, etiquette and protocol within an organisation. "The problems we face now and into the future will only increase in complexity and it will require teams of people within and across organisations to solve them. At the heart of the problem is collaboration culture. Does the organisation have a culture that supports collaboration? And if not, how do you change your culture to be more supportive?"[6]

Relationships

Similar to behaviours and culture, relationships determine the type and characteristics of our interactions. "Individuals may have previous relationships with each other or may be new to each other. Those with previous relationships may have positive or negative views of each other... What adds complexity to collaboration efforts is not necessarily the number of people involved. It's the number of relationships they have with each other."[7]

Shared Interests

If interests aren't aligned, or people feel that common interests don't exist, collaboration can falter. This is particularly relevant with regards to objectives and adopting a perspective that is larger than initially thought. "For example, negotiations might also incorporate parties' interests in the timing of information or of product sharing, consideration of short-term versus long-term needs, or the distribution of credit for joint outcomes. By identifying a broader set of interests and issues, it becomes easier for negotiators to make mutually beneficial tradeoffs that enlarge the pie of value."[8]

Sustainability and Value

Over and above the issues mentioned already, the concept of sustainability is also key to developing successful collaboration. Ensuring that collaboration efforts provide value in the short and long term is key. "Perhaps the single most telling issue that professionals have to resolve in effectively networking online is identifying where to focus efforts. When online networking is done in-house the issue is not so much where to network online, but rather one of making sure that the resource provided connects effectively to business strategy and plans, priorities and to business processes, and that it helps people find each other and connect to collaborate effectively across what might otherwise be impeding organizational barriers. Then the issue of networking quality comes to play superseding selection of where to network per se, and quantifying networking value is one of showing that this resource can be more than just a cost

center for the organization."[9]

While the issues above all illustrate the complexities that go with fostering and assisting people's efforts to collaborate, the role of trust as a catalyst in this cannot be underestimated. If anything, trust is the central theme , around which examples such as the ones above evolve.

Easing the tension

In attempting to resolve the paradox around collaboration, namely squaring its informal, ad-hoc nature with the means to manage and enhance it for the benefit of those involved and the relevant organisation(s), our themes to date have yet to reconcile them. While numerous approaches around people, technology and processes have been adopted, none seem to present a coherent resolution. As mentioned at the beginning of this piece, the following questions remain unanswered;

• Does collaboration benefit from a more formal process?
• Can collaboration be encouraged in a repeatable and systematic manner (as much as anything concerning people can be repeatable and systematic)?
• Does the lack of a formal process for optimising collaboration hold back productivity and performance?

By way of an attempt to answer these questions, perhaps the best starting point is to look at the work around 'Small World' networks and in particular that of Uzzi and Spiro[10]. Small world networks are defined as "a network structure that is both highly locally clustered and has a short path length"[11].
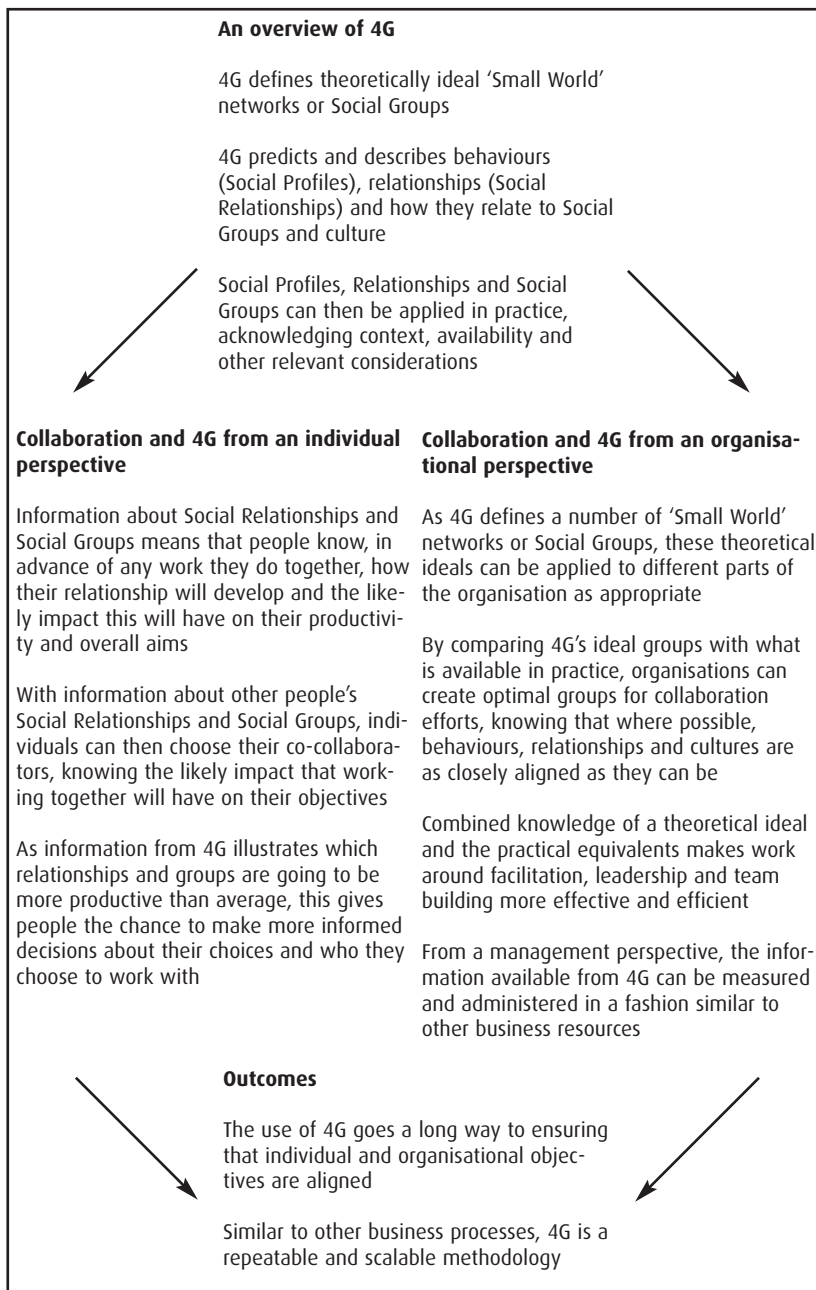
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In other words, people's connections in the network overlap with one another and the links or paths between people are small, people are tightly connected. The significance of 'Small World' networks in helping collaboration cannot be understated. Uzzi and Spiro write "Small world networks have been shown to arise in a surprisingly wide variety of organized systems, from power grids to brain cells to scientific collaborations. The high incidence with which they occur has led to the speculation that there is something fundamental and generalizable about how they organize and govern success in biological, physical, and social systems alike." They then go on to state that "the varying 'small world' properties of the systemic-level network of these artists [Broadway Producers] affected their creativity in terms of the financial and artistic performance of the musicals they produced. The small world network effect was parabolic; performance increased up to a threshold, after which point the positive effects reversed."

If we assume, like Uzzi and Spiro, that small world networks do play a major role in the success of social and organisational systems, "how do they arise and evolve? What factors lead to the formation of a small world as opposed to another type of network?"[12]

How 4G can help

From our own work with behaviours, relationships and cultures, a number of theoretically optimally collaborative groups or networks are defined via 4G which would appear to be 'small world' in nature, but which also create conditions that are highly conducive to col

An overview of 4G

4G defines theoretically ideal 'Small World' networks or Social Groups

4G predicts and describes behaviours (Social Profiles), relationships (Social Relationships) and how they relate to Social Groups and culture

Social Profiles, Relationships and Social Groups can then be applied in practice, acknowledging context, availability and other relevant considerations

Collaboration and 4G from an individual perspective

Information about Social Relationships and Social Groups means that people know, in advance of any work they do together, how their relationship will develop and the likely impact this will have on their productivity and overall aims

With information about other people's Social Relationships and Social Groups, individuals can then choose their co-collaborators, knowing the likely impact that working together will have on their objectives

As information from 4G illustrates which relationships and groups are going to be more productive than average, this gives people the chance to make more informed decisions about their choices and who they choose to work with

Collaboration and 4G from an organisational perspective

As 4G defines a number of 'Small World' networks or Social Groups, these theoretical ideals can be applied to different parts of the organisation as appropriate

By comparing 4G's ideal groups with what is available in practice, organisations can create optimal groups for collaboration efforts, knowing that where possible, behaviours, relationships and cultures are as closely aligned as they can be

Combined knowledge of a theoretical ideal and the practical equivalents makes work around facilitation, leadership and team building more effective and efficient

From a management perspective, the information available from 4G can be measured and administered in a fashion similar to other business resources

Outcomes

The use of 4G goes a long way to ensuring that individual and organisational objectives are aligned

Similar to other business processes, 4G is a repeatable and scalable methodology

laboration, namely the greater likelihood of peer support, clear communication, trust, respect, shared values, balancing formal and informal ways of working and offering critical feedback. 4G makes this information available in terms of optimised, 'small world' or Social Groups and this can then be translated into practice. By profiling relevant people, understanding the spec

ific relationship dynamics in a group, the underlying business context and making this 'small world' information available, two outcomes are possible.

From an individual perspective, people are free to self select colleagues and peers to collaborate with, knowing their relationships are likely to be more productive, successful and sustainable

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than average. Knowing this information in advance increases the chance of successful collaboration occurring and individuals and organisations benefiting accordingly.

From an organisational perspective, the information generated by 4G can be used to encourage and develop existing efforts around collaboration. This ranges from creating 'ideal' groups to form teams or communities of practice, through to helping better understand existing efforts at collaboration, enhancing facilitation and further developing existing collaborative projects.

The key to both individual and organisational outcomes is that the information from 4G helps replicate and enhance (if chosen) the small world effect via theoretical 'ideal' groups and the means of predicting and implementing their practical equivalents. The diagram above outlines and summarises how 4G helps the collaboration efforts from both an individual and organisational perspective.

Conclusion

At the heart of the collaboration dichotomy is the idea that the formal processes and structures employed by organisations only sporadically achieve the inherent benefits or opportunities from true collaboration. More often than not, because the organisation is not accustomed or prepared for these instances, the potential benefits are lost in the organisational machine. By using a selection of the techniques mentioned above alongside the power of 4G, it is possible to square this circle and benefit from the replicability and predictability of processes, combined with the innovation, problem-solving and accelerated productivity developed from an organisational structure which taps into collaboration in its truest form.

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Footnotes and references

1. Thanks to Guy Tweedale, Mike Tierney, Steve Dale and Tim Platt whose input helped shape and inform this article.

2. This contrast, with particular reference to Six Sigma is, to some extent, already recognised and being worked through. The following post explores this in more detail
http://tinyurl.com/5e37l4

3. Having measured aspects of an organisation through SNA/ONA/VNA, one great by-product is the ability to facilitate collaboration as part of a change in process or organisational design. This outcome is clearly very valuable and it is perhaps a moot point to argue if it is a. solely the act of measurement, or b. implementing changes as a result of the measurement that makes the promotion of collaboration a direct outcome or not. An example of this can be found at this page
http://tinyurl.com/5umakv

4. Review of "Let's Have a Talk About Collaboration" - slide 39
http://tinyurl.com/6ywzm7

5. Boundaries Need Not be Barriers: Leading Collaboration Among Groups in Decentralised Organisations - links to a pdf
http://tinyurl.com/5qc2jm

6. Collaboration consulting—fostering a collaboration culture
http://tinyurl.com/ywfj5n

7. Seven Sides of Collaboration: Relationships
http://tinyurl.com/6jerz2

8. Boundaries Need Not be Barriers: Leading Collaboration Among Groups in Decentralised Organisations - links to a pdf
http://tinyurl.com/5qc2jm

9. Private correspondence with Tim Platt

10. Collaboration and Creativity: The Small World Problem
http://tinyurl.com/5ggvmx

11. ibid

12. ibid