GIGAOM RESEARCH

Future of work: collaboration and the trust of teams

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Executive summary

We are going through a collaborative shift that is a paradigm change in the way we work and interact with one another. This shift is also causing new ways for distributed teams to work together. What is causing this shift—as well as some of the disrupting factors that are changing the way we work, the way we create teams, and how we make distributed teams more effective—is worth examination in today's workforce.

If you are an executive reading this report, you are probably wondering how this new vision of teams will affect your business and how to prepare for these changes. The three most notable findings from this report that you should be concerned with are:

- Teams are becoming more geographically and culturally distributed, yet they are being asked to do more complex work.

- Trust used to be the glue that bound teams together, but as complexity increases, it is a shared context that replaces trust on these distributed teams.

- The idea of a flash team is when one leader pulls experts from a group to form a team to protect the figurative village.

Introduction

First we will explore some of the many challenges teams face today.

Most meetings consist of three to five people. Most teams are usually made up of fewer than 10 people and are often composed of three to four people in the same geographic location with the rest of the team geographically distributed (occasionally around the whole world). Having hybrid teams like this (some distributed, some not) causes a variety of problems:

- Dealing with team members in different time zones

- Dealing with team members from other cultures

- Dealing with team members who speak a different language or English as a second language

- Dealing with accountability and coordination

- Cross-organizational teams

- Teams that have some consultants or freelancers on them

- Changing and evolving organizational structures that often don't provide stable platformsx for teams

A good example of how cross-organizational teams work can be found in the pharmaceutical industry. Often there are small biotech firms that come up with an interesting molecule. They develop it as much as they can all the way through animal trials, but human trials are a long and expensive process. So the small biotech firm creates a partnership with a large pharma company like Eli Lilly or Pfizer around this potential molecule. Big Pharma helps with the human trials and also, if successful, has first right of refusal on marketing the molecule as a new drug, at which point the small biotech gets some of the profits from the sale of the drug.

John Hagel III wrote in his book *The Power of Pull* that this is the same pattern we have seen in the tech industry for a long time. Each wave of new technology comes into the enterprise under the radar. People start using it without permission. The broadest adoption of enterprise 2.0 within the enterprise is by teams with a 6- to 12-month timeline without permission of the IT department. Even though it is not

officially sanctioned, they think, "Why not try this out?" It ends up being helpful to the team, but it does not spread. When that team disbands, much of what was learned is lost.

Some additional team challenges include:

- The concept of the workforce is evolving. The use of freelancers, consultants, crowdsourcing, and flash teams is changing the idea that a workforce is just from one organization and that flexibility in deploying people assets is a big benefit. Many of these assets don't just work for you but work for other organizations at the same time.

- Teams often take on the social structures of the organization they came from or who started the team. Most organizations run on typical command-and-control organizational structures based on industrial-revolution companies. But today teams are less about command and control and more about coordination and mentoring. A team leader is not a general but more of a coach, someone who helps team members work better together and removes obstacles for both individual team members and the team itself. However, the team leader is still the driving force behind the goals and outcomes everyone on the team has bought into.

- One of the most critical challenges a team faces is trust. With privacy eroding, identities being stolen, and the NSA watching our every move, it is hard to establish trust between and within a team. This paper will look at this problem in greater detail.

- Who is responsible for what work? What if no one wants to do some of the work that the team requires to complete the project? Assigning work to people is not very collaborative and fits more with a command-and-control structure. With increasing levels of respect for all team members, employees will often volunteer for the work they most want to do. Often there is work left over that no one wants to do, yet it must get done!

- Multi-generational teams can also be a challenge as each generation has a different style and technology for communicating; Boomers have the telephone, Generation X has email, and the Millennials (born after 1980) are more about video so their use of Skype and FaceTime has skyrocketed. How do you get this mix of generations to work together on a high-functioning team?

- Various reports show employee disengagement at 65 to 75 percent. Some of this may be due to our recent recession, in which people had to take a job, any job, just to pay the rent. These are not jobs

on their career path, so their level of engagement is not high. I am sure there are lots of other reasons for this high rate of disengagement, but that is not the focus of this report.

- How do teams track work? Most project management and task software does not do a great job of this and can often add quite a bit of overhead to the team, slowing its progress.

The breakdown of trust and the rise of context

I used to think trust was enough for collaboration, but over the past few years, I have come to find it is not. Look at any standards committee: There you have a lot of people representing competing companies, so there is not a high level of trust, and yet they do produce a new standard or a new version of a standard all the time. So trust does not seem to be the critical piece that ties a team together. It is more about shared context.
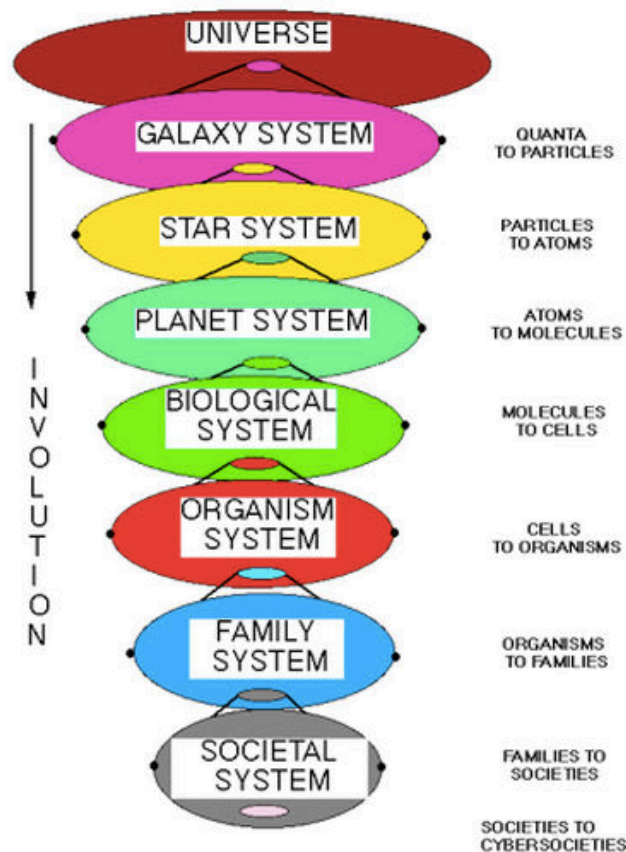
One of the effects of this increasing complexity is the lowering of trust. Consider, for example, a team working on Projects A, B, C, D, and E. Someone working on project A could only be working on parts D and E, while another person could be working on parts A and B. Without transparency, discussion, and a view of the whole project for everyone working on it, it is hard to engender trust.

This is why shared or common context is the critical base for any type of collaboration. Companies could have the best collaboration tools in the world, but if one employee speaks English and another German, not only would we have a time zone issue but also a language issue. In looking at the research project success rates at NIH in 2013, out of 8,310 projects awarded and a total of $3,513,047,712 spent, only 16.8 percent of these projects were successful.

So why is common context so important? Because it is a way to share the same information in the same perspective in order to provide shared understanding. Dr. Pamela J. Hinds from Stanford talks about local context in a *Harvard Business Review* article she co-authored titled, "Walking Through Jelly." Local context is composed of many separate contexts:

- **Personal context**. What is going on for you personally: Are you sick, having money issues, not liking your job, thinking about your kid's birthday?

- **Work context.** How many other projects are you working on? Will you be getting a bonus? Do you think others are out to get you (office politics)?

- **Company context.** The company you work for has strict security policies, so you can't tell anything to anyone (which begets poor collaboration).

- **Project context.** How many individuals are on the project team? Do you like all of them? Is the project manager good? Will this really happen, or is it someone's pipe dream?

Understanding all of these contexts for the members on a distributed team makes the team successful. Although it may not exactly be trust understanding, these contexts about other team members enable you to collaborate and work together more effectively, even in complex situations. That is why context is replacing trust in a society that is growing more complex by the day and in which we have less security and never know who might be spying on us. So how do members of different types of teams deal with trust?

- **Traditional teams.** Often there is a low level of trust from the team leader and members, so these teams will fail — not for lack of tools or resources but for lack of trust.

- **Enterprise teams.** These groups generally trust one another to some degree as they are all part of the same organization and something about them is known.

- **Cross-organizational teams.** These are more popular today as companies work with consumers or other entities. However, there is often mistrust between people at different companies because they have different cultures and agendas.

- **Cross-cultural teams.** If a person from a low-context culture works with one from a high-context culture, there can often be miscommunication (even if they are speaking the same language) as the words have a different meaning for each culture.

- **Cross-generational teams.** Millennials often work in different ways from Generation X or Boomers; their communication preferences are different, and how they interact with one another and their assumptions about themselves and others can be very different.

Why flash teams are the next big thing

Today we can get work done in a few different ways:

- **Project team.** A team that is part of a company working on a project. These are usually highly skilled people who may be geographically distributed or work for other organizations.

- **Crowdsourcing.** This group consists of a large number of people who work on simple or micro-tasks. They are generally geographically distributed, but there may be issues with the quality of the results.

- **Freelancing.** Elance and oDesk have a huge number of people with specific skills and expertise, but they often work by themselves on specific projects.

- **Flash teams.** These combine the best of all of the above but have some unique challenges.

What is a flash team?

According to Daniela Retelny, a PhD student in the Department of Management Science and Engineering at Stanford University and a collaborator at the Stanford HCI Group, flash teams are "modular and elastic team structures that can be replicated and recombined. Flash teams are designed to be dynamic so that both the members and structure of the team can adapt as the needs of a project evolve. Theoretically you could create a whole organization by replicating and recombining flash team structures."

Ultimately, the objective of flash teams is to quickly bring experts from the crowd together for large, complex tasks.

An example of the flash team structures for one of the MOOC courses described below
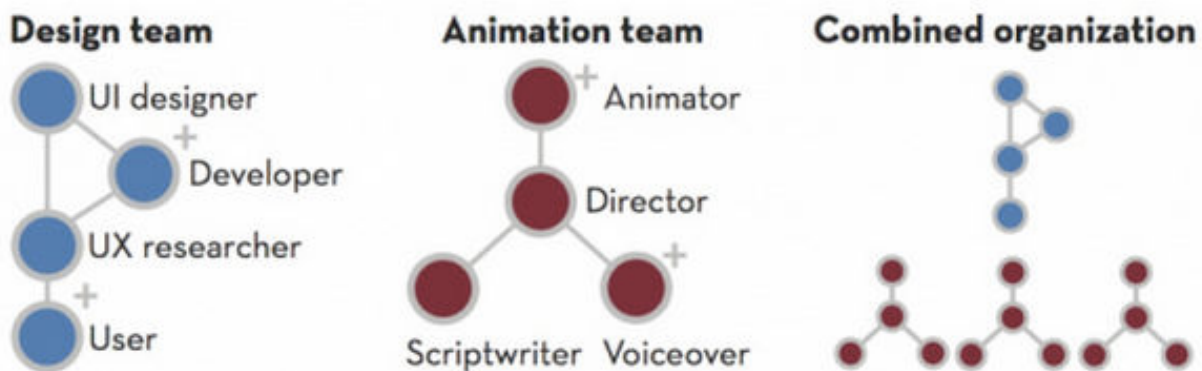
These abstractions illustrate a design and an animation team, each of which has one or more crowd experts filling specific roles. The combined organizational diagram above shows how the flash team structures can be replicated to create larger organizations capable of working simultaneously to complete highly complex and interdependent tasks.

Flash team structures consist of a set of experts from the crowd and a workflow that identifies the set of tasks, handoffs, and interdependencies between members, with the goal of multiple members (or teams) working simultaneously and interdependently on a complex task. The team members and workflows can grow as needed. Need an expert logo designer or another software developer? You can hire them from the crowd of experts available through crowdsourcing.

Some of the challenges of flash teams are:

- It is often hard to find the right people with the right expertise, at the right rate, and available at the same time.

- Although the idea of flash teams could theoretically eliminate a manager, someone has to take responsibility for the outcome. This person is often called the directly responsible individual (DRI).

How does one choose or find the DRI? Here are some issues to consider:

- Enterprises must consider what to do with complex problems that are not easily broken down into individual tasks that can be assigned to a person but instead work as a process that can be replicated.

- The biggest tradeoff is the tension between efficiency and quality. Workers care about their rating, but as a requester, if you want a prototype in a short period of time, you don't want or expect a complex work of art that took many years like the Sistine Chapel.

- Security matters. The idea of flash teams is transparency, so everyone on the team can see what everyone else is doing. Today, one way to be more secure would be to obscure that transparency and only let each team see what their team was doing, but that could potentially take away from the productivity.

What is the future of teams?

At the beginning of this report, I talked about a collaborative shift that is changing both the workplace and the way we work forever. Organizations are evolving to become flatter and more permeable while also using more outside workers, but what will teams look like in 2020?

Most organizations will be made of a core team of two to 200 who own the brand, positioning, intellectual capital, and many of the other functions. Operations, research and development, marketing, sales, customer support, and training will all be outsourced to smaller companies that specialize in these areas. These smaller support companies will have a population of freelancers who will have specific expertise or experience (and who don't want to work for a large organization). They will be placed on flash teams to do specific projects or workflows, much like a crew of subcontractors do in making a movie. Services in smaller companies will also be provided by traditional teams that are made of employees who have expertise and experience and work in one area for a long time.

An example of a future organization with a core surrounded by a variety of experts, advisors, and workers

As a leader, how do you prepare your organization for this collaborative shift that will not only encompass the nature of teams but also most likely the structure of your business? Below are a few bullet points on what might help ease this transition or paradigm shift.

- Learn to let go: Not everything is under your control. Although corporate cultures tend to take on the personalities of their CEO (i.e., Larry Ellison at Oracle, Steve Jobs at Apple), making your organization more transparent and less hierarchical is a good way to start moving in the direction of this shift.

- Be more transparent: Don't be totally transparent but enough so that anyone working on a team or project has enough information about others on the team and the work they are doing. This is where Microsoft SharePoint falls down; only those involved in the specific site have access or can view what is going on.

- Work with sales and marketing first: They often have processes that have great collaborative leverage and are often willing to try something new, especially if it results in getting a proposal to a customer sooner, a new product getting learned by the sales force more quickly, or facilitating secure work with partner companies and outside consultants.

The future of teams is mixed, and, as in any shifting point or paradigm change, some teams will stay the same while others evolve into new structures that can tackle the more complex problems of today with greater expertise, in a much shorter time, and with a greater level of success.

About David Coleman

David Coleman has 25 years of experience as an industry analyst and consultant in the collaboration, online community, knowledge management, and social networks area. As the founder and managing director of Collaborative Strategies, he focused on helping vendors of collaborative tools with marketing and sales strategies, product roadmaps, product marketing, business development, webinars, white papers, custom research, competitive analysis, etc. He has also worked with user organizations to develop collaborative strategies that are implementable and successful. David has been a senior analyst in collaboration and social technologies for Gigaom for the past three years. He can be reached at david@collaborativeshift.com.

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