Being Social and Collaborative

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There is a strong possibility that you are reading this between meetings. Right now someone is looking at your office calendar and having found an unallocated hour has invited you to a meeting. As humans we love meetings. We are sociable creatures. We like the pleasure of being in a group meeting that enables us to show off how much we know. At the end of meeting we look forward to further one-on-one meetings to solve the problems that the group meeting has not resolved, even if all we do is set up another meeting with a different group. We call that "progress" towards resolving the problem.

One of the current growth sectors is the creation of schematics about how collaboration should be organised, with arrows flying around stakeholders in a way that seems rather reminiscent of the Bayeux Tapestry. The objective of most of these schematics seems to be persuading organisations that adopting "collaboration technology" will solve all known business problems.

But there seems to be a problem that can't be solved. The adoption of collaboration technology is not as rapid and widespread as was predicted. Obviously the organisation has chosen the wrong technology vendor and finds another one. Many organisations now have multiple collaboration technology solutions and are proud of the fact. Fortunately they do not have any means of assessing whether there is a return on the investment or they would be very worried. The reason for the low adoption levels of collaboration technology is that the technology is not able to solve the problems of poor meetings.

Thinking about meetings
Meetings are so much a part of our working day that we rarely sit down and work out the level of effort and time we have expended in preparing for them, attending them and then taking action on the agreed outcomes. If we did it is probably reasonable that many of them were not as productive or engaging as they should be. I like the way that Sebastian Thrun distinguishes between horizontal and vertical meetings in an excellent analysis of the role of meetings

Ineffective meetings could result from poor leadership, poor meeting space and facilities, a lack of clarity in scope and objectives, a lack of engagement from some team members and the inability of attendees to make a commitment to an action without a further meeting. There are so many ways that a meeting can go well or go badly! You may be surprised to learn that there is a Cambridge Handbook on Meeting Science. In Chapter 30 John Kello, writing on the Science and Practice of Workplace Meetings, sets out how science can inform good practice. He suggests that for every meeting the following eight questions need to be asked:

- Why? Do we really need this meeting
- Who? If the meeting is justified, who really needs to be there (and who does not)
- How many? Size matters
- How? What agenda steps will we follow to achieve the objectives
- When? What is the best time and time frame for the meeting
- Where? What is the best location for the meeting and how should the meeting space (or virtual space) be configured
- How Managed? What is the process by which the meeting will be managed
- How Concluded? What are the action items, was the meeting constructive and what lessons can be learned

Virtual meetings are fast becoming the default meeting format. The RW3 consulting firm, based in New York, undertook a pioneering survey in 2010 to discover the extent of global virtual teams and to identify areas of challenge faced by virtual team members. The survey is now undertaken every two years. The Executive Summary of the 2016 report notes:

"Corporate teams are now almost entirely virtual, and 41% never meet in person. What is significant is that virtual teams are now even more global with members located in even more countries. In this year's survey 48% of respondents revealed that more than half of their teams include members from other nations. In 2014, that figure was only 41%, and in 2012 it was only 33%."

Perhaps the most challenging finding from the RW3 survey is that team leaders believe they are better prepared to lead intercultural teams than do those who are members of their teams. RW3 asked respondents who self-identified as leaders of teams to rate their own ability to lead effectively across countries and cultures. Nearly all of them (96%) rated themselves as either effective or highly effective! Moreover, 98% of respondents said they are comfortable leading multicultural teams (vs. local teams). Almost the same percentage (96%) said they are comfortable leading virtual teams (vs. leading co-located teams).

One of the world's most successful pharmaceutical companies provides managers with a two-day course on the management of virtual teams. At the end of the course participants:

- Know the critical success factors for leading virtual teams and be able to apply them to their own situation
- Know the appropriate strategies to implement leadership practices to support virtual teams
- Will be able to handle difficult leadership situations, interpersonal conflicts and lack of motivation
- Will become aware of the unique leadership requirements which occur around a virtual global environment in a matrix organisation
- Will realise the influence of regional and company culture issues and learn how to handle them
- Will become a member of a network of virtual team leaders and thereby support each other

This is a two-day course, not a one-hour course. Managers who have been on the course say that it has transformed the way in which they collaborate globally and yet the technology slot is an hour long and focuses mainly on the corporate audio and video-conferencing services.

Collaboration technology

So just what is the role of "collaboration technology"? In my view it has no role to play in optimising the conduct and outcomes of physical or virtual meetings. Its only role is to maintain information flows <u>between</u> meetings, managing the artefacts of meetings.

There is no lack of technology solutions available. The [Real Story Group](#) is a US-based consulting firm providing vendor-independent assessments of software products. In its report on Enterprise Collaboration and Social Software Products it profiles the solutions from twenty-three vendors in over four hundred pages of analysis and there are many more solutions available that are not yet covered by RSG. However, in most of these applications, developed by US companies for the US market, there is usually poor support for multiple language management.

In selecting new IT applications usually there is a period of defining user requirements, translating them to a specification and then evaluating potential suppliers against the specification. My experience over the last couple of years suggests that brand strength trumps rational analysis as managers who should know better rush to have the latest offerings from Google and Facebook. It reminds me of Boy Scouts collecting badges.

Social language

Socially we tend to use language in a very different way, and this presents a substantial challenge to effective search. At the [IntraTeam](#) event in Copenhagen in March I was impressed by many of the presentations from multi-national companies in which users were free to choose which language they used for internal social media. This is important because everyone wishes to express social emotions in a language they are very familiar with.

An aspect of the social use of language is that many languages have significant regional variations. [Latin American Spanish](#) is a good example, and the differences between [Brazilian and European Portuguese](#) are not just in terms of words but also grammar.

The use of non-native language also has an implication on creating expertise profiles and sharing knowledge. In the UK my professional qualifications of FRSC and FBCS are reasonably well recognised but outside of the UK they are largely meaningless. I have two different business cards, with these qualifications only on the UK card. When employees have to write out their expertise in a second (usually English!) language do they have the skills to write even a reasonably "accurate" profile? Sharing knowledge is also a problem. Results from a [recent study](#) in a Finnish company show that the use of a non-native language can make knowledge sharing an ambiguous and costly process, eroding some of the benefits of knowledge sharing.

Over the last few years there has been a substantial amount of research into how multinational organisations manage the use of multiple languages. All this research suggests that a lack of awareness by senior management (who invariably are very proficient in English) of the issues that arise from employees having to work in languages other than their native language can be very divisive and can result in considerable workplace stress.

Implications for search implementation

Going back to the Copenhagen conference, no mention was made of the problems of searching this social content in multiple languages. In discussions outside the conference room all the presenters admitted that social language search was a significant problem. As an example, how easy is it to search across discussion threads? I might post that I have experience of working in pharmaceutical companies. Someone else in my company might respond, "So do I." How does this work in the context of searching for people in my company with expertise in the pharmaceutical sector? Will the results of a search be presented so that the implications of this comment in the thread can be appreciated?

The first decision to be made is whether to have a specific search application for social media which has the language management modules and ranking options that will result in an effective search of social applications, especially around collaboration and knowledge sharing. If this is regarded as important then consideration has to be given as to how the results from this search can be integrated into a search in an enterprise-wide application. If I search for "pharmaceutical projects" will I pick up the person who made the "So do I" contribution above?

If the decision is taken to create a combined index of both document and social text then the indexing, ranking and presentation implications need to be worked through in detail, considering queries run across test collections of related document and social material. There are also crawling implications because employees will assume (trust me – they will) that social content is being indexed in real time.

The view seems now to be that companies may benefit from having more than one social network application. I'm not going to comment on that issue! In my view the challenges of searching across multiple social networks and integrating the results into a sensible ranked presentation are probably going to increase as a power law. Writing a strategy is only the start – it will be essential to test the options out in practice, and for a multinational firm that means every region with a distinct social language.

Welcome to Babel Land

For the last six months I have been working with a team of four German managers on an enterprise search project. They all speak and write excellent English but there have been many times during our meetings where they have spoken to each other in German as they search for the "right" English phrase that is the equivalent of a German concept. Previously I had worked for a global professional services firm which had decided that it wanted to be "bold" in the way it developed its business, totally unaware that the English concept of "bold" cannot be rendered into a single German word. The quite substantial German office teams were not impressed. The apparent ubiquity of English may well mean

that we are not as conscious of language-related issues as we should be. The more social we wish our organisations to be we need to take active steps to support the use of social language.

This article is based on *Working Together – Making teams work* (May 2017)

More of Martin's excellent reports are available from his IntranetFocus web site.