BOOK REVIEW

E-Collaborations and Virtual Organizations

Reviewed by:
Ana R. Del Aguila-Obra, University of Malaga, Spain
Antonio Padilla-Meléndez, University of Malaga, Spain
Ned Kock, Texas A&M International University, USA

E-Collaborations and Virtual Organizations
Michelle W.L. Fong (Ed.)
IRM Press, Idea Group Inc.
2004 copyright * 300 pp.
1-59140-285-9 (h/c)
1-59140-231-X (s/c)

Underlying the idea of virtual organizations is the belief that the primary resource tapped by organizations to generate sellable products is the knowledge held by their employees. Since knowledge is increasingly held in a geographically distributed fashion, and e-collaboration technologies allow geographically dispersed individuals to collaborate to accomplish common tasks (Kock & Nosek, 2005), it makes sense to think of e-collaboration and virtual organizations as closely related notions.

The book E-Collaborations and Virtual Organizations, edited by Michelle W.L. Fong, is an attempt to bring together the related topics of e-collaboration and virtual organizations, presenting them as complementary topics. E-collaboration technologies are presented as providing the infrastructure on which virtual organizations can be created and successfully operated.

The editor rightly points out in the book’s preface that the creation of e-collaboration-based virtual organizations and the adoption of related business models do not lead, per se, to business success or superior performance. Taking into account the existing organizational and technological infrastructure, it is necessary to redesign business processes so that they are effectively run with the support of asynchronous and synchronous e-collaboration technologies, and to put in place a culture that promotes cooperation, trust, commitment, and mutual understanding.

Overall, the book offers a relatively comprehensive review and discussion of issues in connection with the use of e-collaboration technologies as a basis for running successful virtual organizations. Its 12 chapters come from 30 authors from 11 different countries. This variety is one of the main strengths of the book, along with the good timing. Academic interest in both e-collaboration tools and virtual organizations is perhaps at its peak now.
This interest is reflected in the founding of the *International Journal of e-Collaboration* and the forthcoming publication of the special issue on expanding the boundaries of e-collaboration of the *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication* (Kock & Nosek, 2005), both in 2005. The special issue on expanding the boundaries of e-collaboration is the second special issue addressing e-collaboration since 2001, when the first special issue on the topic was published in Australia in the *Journal of Systems and Information Technology* (Kock et al., 2001).

Fong’s book is made up of an introductory preface followed by 12 chapters. Chapter I reviews a number of computer-supported cooperative work techniques available to support organizational knowledge sharing and analyzes a case study in which a related methodology is employed. Chapter II provides practical guidelines for implementing effective e-collaboration in organizations and includes a useful and relatively thorough review of the e-collaboration literature. Chapters III and IV focus on more technical content; the former addresses Web services standards for business-to-business integration, and the latter focuses on peer-to-peer computing architectures. In Chapter V, the notion of collaborative engineering communities is explored, with discussions regarding the creation and success factors in connection with those communities.

Chapter VI marks a noticeable change in orientation in the book, from technical to organizational issues, by investigating how virtual organizations can be strategically used to enable new forms of organizational socialization. This is followed by the study in Chapter VII of two cases of virtual organizations in Norway and by the analysis of virtualization as a process of transformation (Chapter VIII). Chapter IX incorporates an interesting discussion of negative Internet-related externalities and related solutions to problems caused by undesirable uses of the Internet.

The book goes back to a more technical tone again in Chapter X, with a discussion of problems and associated solutions related to the conduct of effective multi-party conferencing. Chapter XI addresses design and implementation issues in connection with a groupware system adopted by the Munich University of Applied Sciences. Finally, Chapter XII concludes with the discussion of e-school administration systems (i.e., integrated systems that combine school administration, course delivery, and virtual student community building features).

It is still difficult to find specific research bringing together e-collaboration and virtual organization issues. This is a noticeable gap that is filled, in part, by this book. However, even though the book addresses a narrow set of issues, the title of the book could create some confusion among potential readers, as those readers may not be able to ascertain whether the book relates to technological or organizational issues in connection with e-collaboration technologies and/or virtual organizations. Moreover, the term *e-collaborations* in the title looks a little odd, and it is unclear what it means. Perhaps a better choice would have been *e-collaboration technologies*, or simply *e-collaboration* (in the singular form).

Even though Fong expresses in the preface the importance of jurisdictional issues in cross-border activities and the necessity of effective security and privacy standards for protecting data and network integrity, it is difficult to find these themes in the book. Only one chapter is dedicated to related topics such as government regulation and policy issues (Chapter IX).
The order of the chapters does not contribute much to the logical flow of the ideas, from general to specific, and technical to non-technical. Since the book includes a number of contributions from different fields, a careful ordering of the chapters and perhaps the inclusion of a high-level organization structure (e.g., book parts encompassing related chapters) potentially could be useful for readers. A possible high-level organization structure could include the following main parts: foundations and conceptual issues, technological issues, organizational issues, and case studies. This easily could be accomplished in future editions of the book, without much change in the content of the chapters.

About two-thirds of the topics addressed in the book are likely to be as relevant five years from now as they are today, which is a good thing. Other topics, particular the more technical ones, will require an update in a few years to be current, which can be achieved through a second edition.

All in all, the book is a good contribution to the e-collaboration and virtual organizations literatures, especially given the dearth of published volumes bringing together these two important topics. It is recommended reading for both academic researchers and practitioners interested in an introductory and relatively broad view of how e-collaboration technologies can be used to enable virtual organizations.

REFERENCES


Ana R. Del Aguila-Obra is an associate professor of management at the University of Malaga (Spain). She holds degrees in business administration (BA, major in management) and business administration (PhD). Ana has authored various books, edited by RA-MA Editorial and Alfaomega Grupo Editor, and has published in different journals including Technovation, Facilities, Journal of Global Information Technology Management, and Internet Research, Electronic Networking Applications and Policy. She has published chapters in reviewed books edited by Kluwer Academic Publishers and Idea Group Inc. She has also published in Spanish reviewed journals such as Investigaciones Europeas de Dirección y Economía de la Empresa, Economía y Empresa, Estudios Turísticos, Economía Industrial, Alta Dirección, Esic-Market, Boletín Económico de Información Comercial Española, Revista Asturiana de Economía, Revista Europea de Dirección y Economía de la Empresa, and Información Comercial Española. Her research interests include Internet technology adoption, business to business electronic commerce, inter-organizational trust, and supply chain management.

Antonio Padilla-Meléndez is an associate professor of management at the University of Malaga (Spain). He holds degrees in economics and business administration (BA, major in management) and business administration (PhD). He is managing director of the research team “E-business: Electronic commerce and teleworking” financed by the Andalusian government. Antonio has authored various books and published in different journals including Technovation. The