Editorial Preface

Collaboration: New Ways of Working in MIS Research

Have you done any collaborating lately? In many ways, academics working on joint research projects have pioneered collaboration as a way of working. Within the last five years, we have invented ever more ways to support our collaborations through information technology. The number of support technologies has grown so rapidly that entire academic conferences have been devoted to a critical appraisal of these technologies (Kendall, Lyytinen & DeGross, 1992). These methods include humble, yet widespread technologies such as faxes and voice mail, and they reach all the way to sophisticated, multi-million dollar rooms for Group Decision Support Systems (GDSS) as originally conceived by DeSanctis and Gallupe (1987).

Even CASE tools such as Excelerator (Intersolv) or Navigator (Ernst & Young) emphasize what is done by the team, how the team can review their results, and how they can subsequently help each other improve solutions for their clients. This means that the ways we are teaching our students to work are tangible departures from the old, solitary ways of proceeding. In the past, even though we talked about systems analysis and design teams, we had to fall back on tools that were much easier for a lone individual to use (manual drawing of data flow diagrams is a good example of this dilemma).

Collaboration Enables Research Teams to be Greater than the Sum of their Parts

Contrast today’s perspective with that of times past, when solitary genius was vaunted and collaboration was unsupported. Now we find that our work and our research must feature collaboration as a prime mode of working. Collaboration takes full advantage of the capabilities of each researcher, who may bring to the relationship new paradigms, new methods, or new ways of viewing the world including: gender differences, ethnic variety, or international perspectives.

Collaborations make us more than the sum of our parts, and often better than we are alone. Writing with a person from a different field is an eye opener. It’s a challenge. They don’t have all of the assumptions, sacred cows and taboos of our field (they have their own). However, I would argue that they can help us critically examine the ways in which we proceed, the tests we use, even the questions we ask as we go about doing research.

Collaboration Opens both the Scholarship and Practice of IS

Ever since Macy’s Santa Claus shocked the public by recommending its arch competitor Gimbels department store to a harried shopper unable to find the item needed within Macy’s (in the movie Miracle on 34th Street, 1947), organizational cooperation has been eyed suspiciously as some rare and crazy notion. But organizations have learned to cooperate to compete.

Many strategic information systems require close cooperation with vendors and suppliers and sometimes competitors. This opens information systems and other organizational practices up to great scrutiny. It is this general opening up of information that pushes democracy and fairness ahead. Closed systems connote the potential for sabotage, spying, intelligence reports. But if we are co-opted into a system (as users in end user computing most surely are) we have only to strive with each other to improve ourselves.

And I believe we are getting better and better at collaboration. Those of you who have tried it once and were unhappy with the results, I urge you to try again. The technological support is available now. The problems we face in research and practice beg for collaboration. These are not easy times. Our specialization’s tend to run narrowly and deeply. Yet we frequently require an interdisciplinary team to fully understand the multifaceted problems we face in new and complex areas such as end user computing and expert systems. Only as we start to work across disciplines with colleagues who are unlike us, will we be able to make progress on the larger problems we face. Only then will our individual thinking be revealed as too constrained, too emotional, too unquestioning, too egocentric.

Collaboration Can Lead to New Methodologies
The unorthodox manner in which your work with colleagues progresses may even become part of a new methodology (Kendall et al., 1992). While on sabbatical at the University of Cambridge last year, I had the good fortune to collaborate with two faculty at London School of Economics. Our working habits turned out to be innovative enough that we wrote a paper on them, together devising a methodology for forecasting that we dubbed SEER (for Scenario Exploration, Elaboration, and Review) which is the opposite of the Delphi technique. It is a methodology that celebrates differences, seeking strengthening of opinions, rather than compromises. (Some problems we face do not need compromise, or consensus. Instead, this class of problem demands the four or five best solutions possible. Then others will use another method to decide among the strong alternatives generated via SEER.)

An Extraordinary Collaborator

A prime example of collaboration is the life of the famous Hungarian mathematician, Paul Erdős, who has written with over 250 co-authors. They energize him. He energizes them back. His contribution and intellect set him apart as a remarkable genius, yet his work thrives within the collaborative relationships he establishes. He prides himself on the huge number of co-authors he has had and his life’s work depends on it (Hoffman, 1987).

A mathematician’s heart is gladdened if they can claim to have an Erdős number of 1, a code phrase for collaborating directly with Erdős. If someone claims to have an Erdős number of 2, it means they collaborated with a co-author who wrote a paper with Erdős. If your Erdős number is 3, you collaborated with someone who collaborated with someone who collaborated with Erdős, and so on. Einstein had an Erdős number of 2. My Erdős number is 6.

Collaborating for the Journal of End User Computing

Renaming this periodical the Journal of End User Computing places it squarely in the path of several groups who have been working and thinking about technology and the people who use it including anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, communication experts to name but a few.

On a very basic level, cooperation is also good for keeping an academic’s ego down to a tolerable size. There is not just one way to solve a problem. Yours is not the only way, it may not even be among the best. Collaboration will put your ideas through a crucible before you try them untested on a journal, a class, or a client. In closing, let me encourage you to collaborate. Walk down the hall, get on e-mail, share your interests and talents with a colleague in the next department (or half way ‘round the world). Collaborating will help you to grow in ways that you would not have imagined possible. Cooperative work has never been easier or more rewarding. And the products of collaboration will surprise you with their superiority, strength, and originality.

References


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Dr. Julie E. Kendall is an assistant professor of MIS in the School of Business, Rutgers University, Camden, New Jersey, USA. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Nebraska. Professor Kendall has had her research published in MIS Quarterly, Decision Sciences, Information & Management, the Journal of Microcomputer Systems Management, and many other journals. Additionally, Dr. Kendall has recently collaborated on a college textbook with Kenneth E. Kendall, Systems Analysis and Design, second edition, published by Prentice Hall. She is an associate editor for the Journal of End User Computing and is on the editorial boards of the Journal of Management Systems and the Journal of Database Management.