Foreword

On May 24, 1844 a man sat before an odd-looking technical contraption in the quiet chambers of the United States Supreme Court (Howe, 2007). As distinguished onlookers watched he announced that he would be sending a message, almost as if by magic, to someone located forty miles away. Remarkably he required no pen, paper, printing press, or postal worker. Even more astonishing was that virtually no time would elapse between the sending and receiving of his message. With drama perhaps more fitting for a prestidigitator than an inventor, he was about to become the first master of space and time. The man at the center of the room was Samuel Morse, the device was the telegraph, and his carefully chosen message hinted at the ominous new world they were entering—What Hath God Wrought.

While we do not of course use telegraphs anymore, the achievement that day nevertheless marked a technological transition point in history whose significance was rivaled perhaps only by fire, the printing press, and flight. Humans could exchange ideas instantly, and physical distance became meaningless. Every innovation in communications technology since Morse’s time has simply enabled us to share more complex messages, through different types of media, more effectively. The telephone added voice, the fax sent text, and cameras shared pictures and video. Satellites and fiber optic cable brought contact to every inhabitable place on the globe. Computers and the World Wide Web synergistically capitalized on all of these technologies, and as Thomas Friedman cleverly observed, the world is now flat (Friedman, 2007).

The answer to Morse’s original question in terms of modern communications technology is one that every professional discipline is now coming to terms with. That is what makes the following book of essays on distributed teams so important. Work itself has been fundamentally transformed in this brave new world. Since physical proximity now has much less to do with performance and production, business managers themselves need to become the new masters of space and time. They must have grounding in the latest theories and research on why the most effective teams are now often distributed, virtual, or physically separated from each other. They need to understand the capabilities and limitations of the emerging tools and practices of the communications infrastructure that enables these distributed teams. Finally, they must know how to re-skill the workforce to take advantage of these opportunities and become leaders in this distributed and flattened world. The nineteen essays that follow achieve these three goals as the insightful scholars explore the theory and research and emerging tools and practices behind distributed teams, and the importance of re-skilling the workforce.

On a personal note, I have existed in this distributed frontier of work now for so long that I almost forget what it is like to sit down with colleagues in the same room. I simultaneously teach for two universities, one on the east coast in Virginia and the other on the west coast in Seattle. I live roughly in the middle, in Ohio, though my location really does not matter at all. In fact I have never actually visited either of the universities that employ me. I go to work each day either in my home office, or for a change
of scenery drive out to the woods to my permanent campsite where my laptop and Droid tether effortlessly to keep me within my distributed network. “Where” I am, simply ceases to have meaning anymore.

I often tell my students that not only is this distributed educational environment an important new way to learn, but it also presents a training ground for how they will interact with co-workers in their careers. Our asynchronous discussions and their distributed team projects mimic the ways in which things get done in the world of work today. The content of my courses hopefully has some value, but the medium itself is a training ground for how they will increasingly conduct themselves in the future.

As I sit bathed in the glow of my two monstrous flat screen monitors late at night discussing history and business with students scattered all over the globe, I sometimes reflect on Samuel Morse. He clearly got his first message right. What indeed hath God wrought? Kathy Milhauser’s expertly conceived collection on Distributed Team Collaboration in Organizations teaches us all how to cope with virtual teams and how to leverage their strategic potential. It is a book that only needs to be read by those whose work lives are impacted by the ramifications of collaborative work. I can no longer identify many people who do not fit into this category.

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REFERENCES


Mark D. Bowles is an Associate Professor of History at the American Public University System. He earned his PhD in the History of Technology from Case Western Reserve University (1999) and an MBA in Technology Management from the University of Phoenix (2005). He also has a Master’s in History and a BA in Psychology from the University of Akron. He has written over 10 books, and his most recent for NASA won the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics’ 2010 History Manuscript Award, which is presented each year for the best historical manuscript dealing with the impact of aeronautics and astronautics on society. Dr. Bowles is the founder of Belle History (www.bellehistory.com), a public history company. He is currently writing a textbook on The United States from 1865 to the present. He has been married to his wife for twenty years and they are raising a nine year old daughter and one year old twin girls in northeast Ohio.