Preface

“It is the long history of humankind (and animal kind, too) – those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed.” Charles Darwin

Collaboration is the key to survival. Just like individuals and mankind, business organizations also depend on collaboration for survival and growth. The concept of departments, committees, teams, meetings, feedbacks, conferences, et cetera, which are so fundamental to any organizational structure, culture, behavior, and performance, all point to the importance of collaboration. With globalization of economies and growth of information and communication technologies (ICT), the boundaries and scale of collaboration have moved from the intra-organizational to inter-organizational level. Two way people-people or business-business collaborations have given way to multidirectional collaborations involving multi-agents; primarily, individuals, organizations, technologies, and communities. Employee ownership, multi-partner global supply chains, collaborating competitors, and engaging customers are all imperative for the sustained growth of an organization today.

The past two decades have witnessed a drastic shift in the way business is conducted. Levels of hierarchy have reduced. Business processes have gone leaner. Continuous learning and innovation have become the norm rather than the competitive advantage. Though economic and legal reforms have been a significant contributor to globalization, it is due to ICT that such scales have been manageable. ICT has been instrumental in increasing the demand as well as supply of products and services by bringing together the buyers and suppliers from across the oceans and time zones. A key result of all such changes is the rise in entrepreneurial growth of business and competition, thus raising the bar of service and excellence and redefining the form and conduct of organizations. Business has gradually become e-business, and World Wide Web has become the playfield for business organizations.

Over these years, Web has evolved from read-only environment to a strong collaborative medium where users have access to a wide range of tools and resources. To mark the distinct stages of this evolution, many researchers agree with the versioning of Web; with Web 1.0 broadly representing the read-only Web; Web 2.0 representing the read-write Web or social Web; and Web 3.0 representing the Semantic Web and related developments moving towards intelligent Web. Though intelligent Web is still in fancy, wiki, blogs, tagging, social networking sites, and many such forms of collaborative Web tools have already paved their way into our lives on personal and business front. Individuals today spend a significant part of their day on the Web and social networks. Search engines, wikis, and blogs have brought in a paradigm shift from the culture of knowledge ‘management’ to knowledge ‘co-creation.’ While the earlier form of Web was first adopted by business organizations and entrepreneurs, and gradually accepted by individuals; the new age Web technologies have witnessed individuals as first adopters,
with business organizations following the suite. The evolution of open source and social networking
trends are forcing organizations to collaborate and rethink the way they innovate, create and execute
their strategies, products and services.

The making of Barack Obama (Nations, 2010) and Coke (Carlson, 2009) as the popular brands on Facebook and IBM saving huge money by hosting its virtual meetings over Second Life (Virtual World News, 2009) are the cases in point that highlight the fact that collaborative Web holds the potential for competitive advantage for individuals as well as organizations. The McKinsey survey (2009) reported the increasing use of blogs, podcasts, wiki, Web videos, really simple syndication and social networks resulting in innovation, better marketing, reduced time and cost thus improving the efficiency and effectiveness of internal as well as external collaborations and leading to emergence of networked organization. Virtual team interaction, customer’s surveys and feedback, talent hunt, knowledge sharing, and advertising are some of the areas where business organizations have started utilizing these tools. As a result, new forms of agile and learning organizations are evolving. Enormous speed, flexibility, knowledge, and connectivity resulting from this evolution offer immense potential to change the competitive landscape of individuals, business organizations as well as nations.

As embracing this change is becoming increasingly important as well as feasible for businesses, this change is also enabling more and more individuals to become virtual entrepreneurs in their own ways. An employee, rather than spending the whole life in the silos of an organization, can today reach out globally as an individual seeker or provider of knowledge. Every individual is a potential writer and publisher today. Imagine, an employee spending a part of its office time to exercise its freedom of voice over blogging, or adding to the collective wisdom of a consortium, or strengthening his/her professional network over, say, LinkedIn. Should businesses see this act as loss of productivity or an indirect gain in collective wisdom and growth? Should business policies control employees’ access to such community building or should they capitalize on the new technologies as well as the surplus abilities of the internet generation? In what way can these technologies generate more value for business? These and many such questions confront the organizations today as they experiment with the opportunities and challenges offered by the changing form of the Web.

It demands a different set of culture, organizational structure, and policies to reap out such benefits while controlling the side-effects. For example, while most forward looking organizations today create blogs to get customer feedback and also to propagate ideas and product knowledge, they face the challenges of managing 24x7 spontaneity and quick redress expected by the bloggers. They also lack the systems and processes required to manage such a large pool of gathered knowledge. The organizations desire that their employees get accustomed to new age work styles but then balancing productivity and organizational loyalty often become the conflicting issues. One can get a glimpse of such imbalances by looking at the statistics of bloggers who have been fired from their jobs. This obviously indicates a confusing situation for both – individuals as well as organizations because both are today operating on the no man’s land where the etiquette, ethics and rules are not well defined. Business and IS policy makers are yet to find ways to manage that thin line difference between individual versus business goals.

This book aims to explore the practices, strategies and emerging patterns with respect to use of such new generation technologies in business organizations. To remain focused, we have restricted our explorations around collaborative nature of business and the potential or actual use of emerging Web technologies therein. However, we refrain from any attempt to bring out the distinction between various versions or names given to such technologies. For the purpose and context of this book, we prefer to use the term collaborative Web to encompass all technologies that have evolved after the initial read-only
Web environment or Web 1.0. Simply said, collaborative Web allows its users to communicate, with each other as well as with other technologies, and communicate intelligently towards creation of better products, services and knowledge thus leading to business and economic growth.

Though, we believe that any research is less likely to generate a structured model for use of Web due to the inherent unstructured nature of the business environment, the situation certainly warrants an initiative to identify and bring together the evolutionary multiple threads characterizing the changing business patterns. This edited book is an endeavor to bring forth such multiple threads, identify the current practices and future possibilities of making collaborative Web as a tool for business. It also presents the opportunities and challenges confronting organizations in the light of such emerging trends.

The book presents a set of sixteen chapters grouped into four sections. A brief outline of the sections is included here. A detailed sectional preview has been provided at the beginning of each section.

**Section 1. Towards Collaborative Web** sets the tone of this book. It is agreeable that the conventional business wisdom cannot be applied to use new tools and techniques without first understanding the nature of such technological changes. Thus, it is imperative to start with an understanding of the characteristics of Web today and appreciate the need for embedding collaborative Web into the business model. Three chapters grouped in this section together bring out the evolution of Web and e-business and suggest the integration of the two to have sustainable organizations and economies. Real life examples have been sprinkled appropriately to provide glimpses of changing business needs and formations.

**Section 2. Collaborative Applications in Business** portrays a diverse set of business applications of collaborative Web. With the help of seven chapters, this section showcases the tools usage in information intensive industries notably in journalism and Web-services as well as in resource intensive industries such as oil and natural resources and agricultural sector. These chapters, with the help of examples collectively illustrate a generic pattern that collaborative Web tools and technologies have already started penetrating into the core business processes of different industries, affecting their collaborative value chains. Though, the adoption of these tools is still in small pockets, there is increasing clarity that they hold the potential to make a significant contribution to improvise business collaborations.

**Section 3. Organizational Aspects of Collaborative Web** highlights the fact that there are far reaching effects of collaborative Web on the structure and culture of business organizations. Online ways to collaborate have introduced speed and dynamism in business relations; as a result the external as well as internal business partnerships are getting more dynamic and fluid. Employee loyalties are shifting from organizations to virtual communities. With the help of three chapters grouped in this section, we aim to sensitize the organizations, business managers and of course researchers to think through the risks of this fast emerging trend. Some strategies to convert these risks into opportunities are also covered.

**Section 4. Blending Real and Virtual Worlds** brings home the essence of making judicious choice of tools and technologies for next generation businesses. Each of the three chapters included in this section illustrates the use of virtual reality for making business collaborations more human and sensory. Real life examples have been included to illustrate the options and usage patterns in conducting virtual meetings and business events. This section prompts the readers to go a bit creative and augment their business reality with virtual one thus creating a business world that is seamlessly collaborative.

The flow of the sections, moving from section 1 to section 4 clearly establishes the increasing degree of collaboration across the value chain and also increasing pervasiveness of collaborative Web technologies across the value chain. Students, practitioners and researchers can draw hints from this flow to strategize their business models which are more collaborative and seamlessly connected. When we first set out with the theme of this book around a year ago, the most commonly heard and read stories about
the use of collaborative Web for business processes were around internal communication, marketing and customer feedback. With the help of this project, our implicit target was to delve deeper into identifying specific business processes and their linkage with the collaborative Web, while understanding the related implications for individuals, organizations and society. Thanks to our chapter contributors who joined us from different industries, professions, and geographies and helped us in compiling a piece of knowledge to showcase diverse applications and effects of collaborative Web. Well balanced on academic rigor and practical insights, this work also aims to set future directions for strategists, managers, academicians, researchers and students in any area of business and management.

Dear reader, we hope that our carefully selected set of chapters adds more practical insights, improves your understanding of the subject, and also gives you future directions for research and experimentation. We will be privileged to receive your feedback to take this subject knowledge forward in the best interest of theory and practice of Web-enabled businesses.

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REFERENCES


