Chapter I

Introduction

Management Thinking and E-Collaboration

One cannot help but admire the accomplishments achieved by organizations over the years, and their impact on society in general. While some may argue that we have become too urbanized and materialistic, it is undeniable that today most of us can buy many more goods and services than our great grandparents could (at a lower price relative to inflation), which seems to make our life easier and more comfortable. Of course, that makes us more prone to buy things that we don’t need, and feel unhappy about the results. But that is not the fault of progress; we should blame our inability to deal with progress.

Underlying the above accomplishments are management ideas, which have over time been associated with management schools of thought that received specific names (e.g., scientific management and total quality management). When one looks at how management schools of thought evolved, from the early specialization and division of labor ideas in the late 1700s to the emergence of the humanist movements in the early and mid-1900s, that evolution seems to have a particular direction. Work has been structured more and more around group collaboration.

Interestingly, the idea that successful group collaboration is important for organizational performance was quite well established already in the mid-
1900s during the post World War II period. Technologies were available to support e-collaboration, mostly in the form of mainframe-based systems. However, the use of e-collaboration tools to support group work in business took some time to catch up, often because the cost of computer technologies was too high for those technologies to be used by anyone other than nerdy types (often called the “computer folks”) working in central data processing departments.

The above situation, of course, has changed substantially over time, especially after the 1980s, when there was an explosion in the use of computer networks, and when computer equipment became relatively cheap, allowing for increasingly decentralized access to computer resources. The nerdy types lost their monopoly on computer resources, and many central data processing departments were dissolved and replaced by information technology support departments, most of which today are big help desk operations.

Interestingly, the above mentioned loss in monopoly was accompanied by a slowly increasing involvement of computer experts in highly successful entrepreneurial endeavors, which led many of the previously called nerdy types to become extremely wealthy and assume different organizational titles, such as president and chief executive officer (CEO)—does the name Bill Gates ring a bell?

With the explosive growth of the Internet and the Web in the 1990s, most computers became interconnected, which led some to see the computer as less of an autonomous processing unit and more of an entry point to a vast pool of network-based resources. The increasing use of e-collaboration technologies led to many possibilities; one of the most exciting was the ability to conduct collaborative tasks interacting at different times (i.e., in an asynchronous manner) and from different places (e.g., different cities or countries).

This book focuses on e-collaboration technologies that enable group-based interaction at different times and from different places, and the impact that those e-collaboration technologies have on business process improvement groups. The term e-collaboration is used here as an umbrella term that comprises several other closely related fields, commonly known as computer-mediated communication, computer-supported cooperative work, groupware, group support systems, collaboration technologies, or, more recently, the so-called field of knowledge management.
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