Remote Management of a Province-Wide Youth Employment Program Using Internet Technologies

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A province-wide network of Community Access Internet sites was supported during the summers of 1996 and 1997 by Wire Nova Scotia (WiNS), a government funded program to provide staffing, training and technical support for these centres. The program was managed remotely from an office in Sydney, Nova Scotia (Canada) using a variety of Internet-based technologies, including email, a web site, conference boards, real-time chat, and mailing lists. Remote management enabled the efficient and low-cost operation of a program involving 67 sites with field placements, plus six regional coordinators and the technical and administrative staff at the hub in Sydney. Effectiveness of remote management was enhanced when employees participated in an initial face-to-face regional training workshop. This training not only familiarized the employees with the communications technologies, but, perhaps more importantly, put a human face and personality to the messages that later came electronically over the Intranet.

[Note: For the benefit of those readers who may not be familiar with Internet technical terms, a brief glossary (Appendix A) is provided at the end of this case.]

BACKGROUND

Remote management as a key strategy for enabling new kinds of enterprise and other cooperative endeavours has emerged from the necessity of creating networked organizations to deal with the complexity and fluidity of the Information Age society. In the business world, the companies who are able to create effective virtual teams, particularly if they are able to collaborate with other companies that have complementary resources, are the ones who are thriving. For example, in 1995, three “arch-competitors” in the magazine business, Men’s Health, Esquire, and Rolling Stone discovered an opportunity to collaborate on a bid for a significant advertising contract, and in three short weeks managed, via rapid and effective use of electronic communication and virtual team...
building, to put together a bid that beat out the media giant, Time, Inc. for the contract. In Denmark, government policy encouraged small enterprises to create collaborative networks, and this has resulted in a significant increase in the success of these businesses (Lipnack & Stamps, 1997).

Note that it was not just that electronic media created more efficiency or enabled existing projects to be done more effectively. It created the possibility for an entirely different way of doing business. As Marshall McLuhan (1964) has told us, “The medium is the message.” Even if our initial motivation in using electronic media is to simplify or speed up existing routines, the nature of the medium inevitably generates secondary effects (Grundy & Metes, 1997), changing the way we work, the way we think, and the way we relate to other people and organizations. One impact of working virtually is that the old hierarchical models of the Industrial Age become transformed into a more interdependent networking model, where access to information and participation in decision-making is not limited to the upper echelons.


This creates a need to develop new management and leadership styles, new ways of training workers to collaborate effectively, and a readiness to work across organizational boundaries, whether in commerce (e.g., Sieber & Griese, 1998) or in not-for-profit organizations (e.g., James & Rykert, 1997). Moreover, the network that is built must be constructed in anticipation of rapid change, able to respond immediately to new realities and new opportunities (Motes, Grundy, & Bradish, 1998).

In the case described below, the initial motivation for using remote management via use of an intranet was to create a cost-effective way of coordinating a province-wide program, delivering technical support, and receiving reports. However, once the network was created, it became clear that it also had potential to enable types of collaboration that would not have been practical with conventional organizational structures. Despite the fact that there was a nominal hierarchical structure in place, with both central and regional levels of coordination, the universal access to information and to communications tools enabled both fieldworkers and regional coordinators to operate with a high degree of independence, and were able to use the intranet communications to brainstorm, plan and implement collaborative activities involving multiple sites. The existence of the communications network encouraged and enabled formation of temporary regional action networks, which have the potential to evolve into more permanent Community Enterprise Networks (CENs), described below (see also Gurstein & Dienes, 1998). Such secondary effects of remote management have great potential and should be considered in both the planning and evaluation stages of a project.

Governments, educational institutions and non-profit community organizations are increasingly becoming involved in partnerships for sharing information systems and intranets for collaboration and for delivering services. One excellent example is the Missouri Research and Education Network (MORENet). “The primary mission of MOREnet is to provide collaborative networked information services to its members and customers in support of education, research, public service, economic development and government” (http://www.more.net). Resources on their web site include technical support, discussion lists, and access to tools such as online databases. Its link to the Missouri Express project for supporting Community Information Networks (CINs) provides an online newsletter as well as contact information, instructions and templates for creating a CIN.

The Wire Nova Scotia (WiNS) case described below incorporates these ideas into its intranet, and adds the element of remote management of staff, including monitoring, reporting, documentation of the project, collaboration on inter-site projects, and technical support.

**SETTING THE STAGE**

In the summer of 1996, the associate chair in the Management of Technological Change (MOTC) at the University College of Cape Breton (UCCB) in Sydney, Nova Scotia, Canada opened