Chapter 14

Selecting Appropriate Communication Tools to Support Teams’ Creative Processes in SMEs

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ABSTRACT

Accomplishing creative tasks collaboratively is particularly problematic when team members who are attempting to achieve the creative results are geographically dispersed throughout the globe in a virtual team. Therefore, sound communication tools are needed to ensure communication does not hamper team creativity. This chapter highlights the communication tools available for doing creative work, offering a short analysis of the most relevant synchronous and asynchronous communication tools. Some rules and tips are given to allow for a better choice of the communication tools to use according to both the nature of the team and the work it is performing in terms of creative processes in SMEs. This chapter also presents how knowledge experts and knowledge-based companies consider whether it would be any benefit to apply Web 2.0 in their organisational architecture to strengthen collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

In collaborative work, communication is essential. If there is faulty or no communication or inadequate information exchange, team creativity is hampered. Accomplishing creative tasks collaboratively can become particularly problematic when the very team members who are attempting to achieve the creative results are geographically dispersed throughout the globe in a virtual team.

This chapter highlights the communication tools available for doing creative work, offering a short analysis of the most relevant ones. We start by pointing out some of the challenges faced by virtual teams when team members need to communicate with each other before digging into an analysis of synchronous and asynchronous communication...
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tools. We then proceed to offer some general rules and tips to select the appropriate communication tools and after that we examine the situations when those tools are used. Before the final remarks, some words on creative work are said.

The main purpose of this chapter is to provide some general insight into the existing communication tools to allow the best alternative according to both the nature of the team and the work it is performing in terms of creative processes in SMEs.

**BACKGROUND**

The following background defines what a virtual team is and its importance for the integration of IT in SMEs. It explains the collaborative process, with the knowledge workers being at its center. The term virtual is fairly new and is associated with concepts such as the virtual knowledge network, the virtual organization, the virtual team, the virtual community of practice, and the virtual workplace, to name just a few. Basically, the virtual team is defined as a group of knowledge workers who are geographically dispersed but not necessarily distributed across expansive geographic locations. They are working together toward a common purpose and goal and using electronic communication as their primary medium. The virtual team is interested in explicit and tacit knowledge management using integrated technologies from synchronous and asynchronous communication, knowledge management functionalities, discussion forums, and much more. The virtual team may have little or no face-to-face contact. Therefore, it must build a foundation of teamwork and trust for collaboration to truly happen and for performance to be achieved. Among the characteristics of a virtual team is the type. Fisher and Fisher (2001) define the type based on three criteria: time, space, and culture:

1. **Time** refers to *when* people work. Virtual team members may be assigned different hours, different shifts and different days to work. They may also work at the same moment but in a different time zone.
2. **Space** refers to *where* people work. Virtual team workers may work in close proximity to one another or be quite remote. They may share the same office or a different one on the same floor or another floor in a given building. Or they may also be located in different buildings, in different cities, and even in different countries.
3. **Culture** refers to *how* people work together—the ways in which they deal with each other. Elements of culture include languages, races, nationalities, professions, and education, as well as religious, political, social, and economic factors. In a way, even gender can influence culture.

For their part, Duarte and Snyder (2001) present seven types of virtual teams based on boundaries and membership:

1. The virtual corporation lacks clear boundaries with the organization and has a fluid membership; that is, members come and go as needed.
2. The parallel team has clear boundaries and distinct membership and works in the short term to develop recommendations for an improvement in a process or system.
3. The project or product development team has a fluid membership with clear boundaries and a defined customer, technical requirement, and output.
4. The work or production team has a distinct membership and clear boundaries, where members perform regular and ongoing work, usually in one functional area.
5. The service team has a distinct membership and aids in ongoing customer and network activity.
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