Chapter 10
Optimizing Team Performance: Collaborative Virtual Writing

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ABSTRACT
Increasingly, collaborative writing occurs in distributed work environments. Collaboration is essential for technical writing teams that develop and share, or single source, content using content management system (CMS) technology. Technical writers must be proficient not only in developing content that can be shared but also in carrying out complex writing tasks virtually. However, research indicates that asynchronous-distributed collaborative writing can lead to productivity losses unless teams implement explicit processes for interacting and using computer-mediated communication (CMC) technology. With highly structured processes to guide their efforts, teams are more likely to see productivity gains. To achieve these gains, effective collaboration must address six key areas: (1) targets to guide team performance, (2) assessments of collaborative writing skills in virtual teams, (3) role delineation, (4) process scripts to promote efficient virtual collaborative writing, (5) a training framework, and (6) performance measurements and a recognition framework for reinforcing team accomplishments. Organizations must be willing to create a culture that supports a team environment committed to these specific areas. This chapter explores how to establish an infrastructure that promotes collaborative writing efficiency in virtual settings.

INTRODUCTION
An Unplanned Collaboration

Consider a team of four writers who have worked together successfully for a few years, revising a set of documents for a well-established computer product. When the documentation is ready to be revised, each team member ensures that the book she has been assigned is updated to reflect new or changed product features. In this scenario, the writers are able to revise the documentation efficiently. Now imagine what would happen if the process for
making updates changes dramatically, and only one writer fully understands the new process. Under these circumstances, the chance for success could diminish rapidly depending on the team’s ability to learn and adapt to unfamiliar tasks and to redefine their interactions with each other. That is, team members could flounder when the writers do not have an expected set of assignments and a defined approach to revising content. They could waste time trying to carry out tasks that other writers might have implemented or disrupt each other by trying to carry out the same tasks.

A scenario like this overwhelmed a team of Hewlett-Packard Company (HP) writers, who unexpectedly were forced to update individual chunks of content that would become the source material for a set of documents. Team members working in different locations were required to work collaboratively when one team member prematurely divided whole books into small, modular pieces of content that then could be reused, or single sourced, across the documentation set. While this writer thought she would improve the efficiency and quality of the content by making this change, she did not realize how difficult it would be for the team of writers to learn how to collaborate with one another under these circumstances, how to coordinate an effective flow of tasks, and how to adjust to an entirely new process. She made decisions about how the content would be updated as if she were working on her own and without understanding the consequences for the team at the point when the content would be shared. The consequence of this decision for the rest of this team was that the once-familiar experience of a single writer owning and updating a complete book would not be possible.

Although sharing reusable pieces of content had been a goal for HP writing teams, plunging a team without preparation into the process of reusing topics in different books was never the intent. In the end, the writers could not adapt quickly enough, and the only way to avoid delaying the shipment of the product was for the content management administrator to reverse the writer’s actions—to unlink the referenced topics and embed them into separate books.

This scenario revealed important information about the nature of collaboration. While teams of writers working in the book paradigm collaborate with each other, the type of collaboration employed typically is serial or parallel collaboration, not collective collaboration as described earlier in this volume. The experience also underscores the need to establish an environment that enables writers to collaborate collectively within distributed work settings. This type of environment must provide explicit, scripted processes to address the unique challenges faced by virtual collaborative writing teams.

Retrofitting the Book Paradigm

Working individually on a piece of writing has been a mainstay strategy in technical writing for many years. Before technology made automated reuse possible, writers typically took ownership of whole books and the updates within them (see Chapters 13 and 15). From this standpoint, collaborative writing entailed the assignment of particular books across a writing team, which in this volume is defined as serial and parallel collaboration (see Chapter 1).

As the practice of single sourcing increases, so does the need for collaborating virtually on writing projects. Under these circumstances, writers no longer are expected to own whole books. Yet their inclination to seek out familiar roles rooted in the book paradigm persists, leaving writers wondering how to find effective frameworks for collaborating—how to have multiple authors write topics that can be reused across many books. Assumptions still linger that information grows sequentially, that writing is essentially a colocated, solitary activity, and that “owning” a complete document is the natural order of producing documentation. An instinctive response to this situation involves attempting to retrofit topic-based writing into
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