Chapter VII

The E-Collaboration Paradox

Paradoxical Results

This chapter advances a new explanation for some of the apparently contradictory findings discussed earlier in the book, which, in turn, reflect fairly well the body of mixed findings associated with academic and industry research on e-collaboration during the last 30 years (that research was usually conducted under other banners, such as computer-supported collaborative work and group support systems).

Those mixed findings suggest, although seemingly contradictorily, that: (a) people seem to consistently perceive face-to-face communication as posing fewer obstacles to effective communication than other, particularly electronic, media; and (b) when groups conduct collaborative tasks using e-collaboration technologies, they often present the same level (or better levels) of performance as (than) groups accomplishing the same tasks face-to-face—which, let’s face it, is paradoxical in light of (a).

I argue here that the evolutionary history of humans suggests strongly that modern humans must have been largely “hardwired” for face-to-face communication, which, in turn, explains our perceptions favoring the face-to-face medium. Nevertheless, I also argue that human beings, when faced with communication obstacles, invariably try to compensate for them by changing
their behavior in relatively predictable ways, which often leads to no negative impact on task outcome quality.

Later in this chapter, I will illustrate the explanatory power of these hypotheses based on evidence from an empirical study of business process redesign pairs, or groups of two individuals (sometimes referred to as dyads). The empirical study provides evidence that not only strongly supports the two hypotheses, but also cannot easily be explained otherwise, without resorting to the hypotheses and the underlying human evolutionary ideas that form the basis for the hypotheses.

Research on E-Collaboration

Particularly since the 1980s, e-collaboration has become an important topic for industry practitioners, and consequently, interest in the topic has been renewed among researchers. Several related fields of research, linked to particular groups and called different names, have addressed e-collaboration issues in the last 30 years. As mentioned before in this book, but which is worth emphasizing, the term e-collaboration is being 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, and, more recently, the so-called field of knowledge management.

The mid and late 1970s saw the development of the first personal computers (PCs), which were later connected to each other through the development of what came to be known as local area networks (LANs). Novell Corporation and later Microsoft played a major role in the shift from terminals connected to mainframes to PCs connected through LANs with the development of the first commercially available network operating systems. This led to the development of many synchronous and asynchronous e-collaboration technologies in the 1980s.

Some of these e-collaboration technologies, such as Information Lens and the Coordinator, extended the basic features present in early e-mail systems. Others provided support for decision-making meetings, such as GroupSystems, Teamfocus, and MeetingWorks. Still others, such as Lotus Notes and Domino, were suites on which customized e-collaboration systems could be developed to support group processes. Much industry-oriented and invention-based