

Facilitation Online

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Groups are now working across time and space using Internet technology, and facilitators are being used to facilitate online meetings of many different kinds. This chapter explores the evolving area of online facilitation.

Online groups

Groups form online around work, specific interests, communities of practice, and shared intention. They use email, e-groups, chat rooms, blogs, Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and other new forms of communication technology.

Nationally, regionally and globally dispersed teams save time and travel by using the Internet to share information, discuss issues and coordinate input. Virtual organisations, without a physical home other than a collection of laptops, do their work in different parts of the world in different time zones and hemispheres.

Areas of e-ducation, the virtual classroom, distance learning and online training have all embraced the Internet for their management and delivery. Similarly, online conferences, seminars and trade shows have become increasingly popular venues for people to network and conduct business. IBM's world jam online event saw a mind-boggling 50,000 people take part in a one-day meeting.¹ Outsourcing of call centre and helpdesk activity is also dispersed, with UK and USA companies outsourcing to India, New Zealand, Australia, the United Arab Emirates and the Philippines, among other countries.

Differing space and time

Online, many people in different places at the same (or differing times) across the world can communicate and cooperate in ways never before possible. With synchronous (same-time) communication, everyone can work together in the same context. Using video, audio, text and web tools a discussion can be focused on work that needs cooperation. With asynchronous (different-time) communication, everyone can see what everyone else is writing, and respond as

and when they choose. Multiple conversations on multiple topics often occur in the thread of this kind of group discussion. Using visuals, documents and text, a discussion can be built up over time and space. The diagram below illustrates synchronous and asynchronous activities.

	Synchronous (same-time)	Asynchronous (different-time)
Same place	Face-to-face meetings Group decision support Electronic meeting systems	Kiosk Interactive portals
Different place	Internet Relay Chat Web collaboration Tele & web conference Online events Global Virtual Teams Virtual organisations E-ducation	Email Forum Web collaboration Online communities Global Virtual Teams Virtual organisations Blogs E-ducation

Table 2.6.1. Time and space matrix of online facilitation

The facilitator online

Several new roles have emerged to improve group cohesion and online group effectiveness. These are the roles of the moderator, facilitator, instructor, technology mediator, domain expert, discussion leader, listserv owner and administrator. Of these new roles, the roles of moderator and facilitator have the greatest impact on a group's effectiveness.

Moderator

In the online environment, the moderator is the role that ensures an online group system is functioning. This may include monitoring discussion boards to ensure all postings meet guidelines and standards of behaviour, and organising discussion material. Moderators are usually responsible for many of the technical tasks required in assisting the group to participate, such as adding new members and fixing bouncing addresses. Moderators may also review posts to ensure they

are in alignment with the group purpose before they are approved for the group to see. Small changes are sometimes made, and some postings may be rejected if they do not meet the group's guidelines. Although this role can include some process suggestions, this function is increasingly being performed by a facilitator.

Facilitator

As a process expert, the role of the online facilitator is to guide the group process, help a group generate its purpose and culture or ground rules, address conflict, and make interventions to keep the group working towards its purpose. In this sense, it is similar to the facilitation of face-to-face groups. However, facilitators online experience some new challenges that relate to the less tangible nature of the medium.

Not being able to see participants means that body language, tone of voice, posture, mood and energy levels are difficult to assess, making it harder for a facilitator to gauge the subtleties of the group dynamic. There are also additional tasks required of an online facilitator. For example, there is often a need to act as technology guides as well as facilitators, and knowledge of technology and familiarity with an online set-up are imperative.² Often there is a lot of preparation involved beforehand, and the processes used may not be that effective, or may only work well for some participants and not others. For example, participants who do not have good access to broadband, are unable to type, are unfamiliar with the language used, or have special needs such as dyslexia or illiteracy will be disadvantaged.

Working online can be an effective form of meeting, sharing and working with others. The benefits become more obvious as people gain skills, experience and confidence in using online technology. As usage of online media grows, the possibility of richly diverse cultural communication in a connected world becomes a reality.

Technology benefits and issues

Table 2.6.2 Some specific communication tools

Asynchronous technology (different-time)	Benefits	Drawbacks
Email (webmail, MS Outlook, Eudora, Groupwise)	Easy to learn and use, file attachment, broadcast to many, platform independent, written record of conversations.	Slow response, easily misinterpreted, poor context, no visual or audio cues, lack of acknowledgement or feedback, long emails difficult to respond to.
E-groups (list serv) (yahoogroups)	One email address, quick and easy to set up, choice of communication style (i.e. emails, daily digest, web only, etc.), builds group knowledge over time, provides time for making thoughtful, in-depth responses, efficient knowledge sharing.	Tends to have few very active members and many silent listeners, large volume hard to manage, public misunderstandings, out-of-office replies can cause disruption, advertising imbedded in e-group systems.
Discussion forum (PhpBB, others. . .)	Threaded discussion, convenient, searchable, good for information dissemination and archive, file attachment, easier to manage multiple conversations.	Public misunderstandings, interfaces can be confusing, lack of visual and audio cues, poor context. Hard to follow multiple discussions.
Blogs (blogger.com, wordpress, bloglines, moveable type, drupal, multiply, w.blogger, buzznet, flickr)	Good for information dissemination and archive, thoughtful and in-depth postings, searchable, blog tagging assists finding conversations, builds narrative over time; tagging and linking of blogs helps people keep track of current conversations on topics of interest.	Discussion more controlled by owner, can be less relevant or less factual.

Synchronous technology (same-time)	Benefits	Drawbacks
Internet Relay Chat (ICQ, MSN messenger, Yahoo messenger, PalTalk, AIM, AOL)	Efficient and immediate response, easy to see who is online, good for side conversations (back channel) and informal conversation, useful for ad-hoc informal conversations, often include additional tools (whiteboard, games, avatars).	Available times may inconvenience one or more group members, poor context, lack visual cues, can have one dominate the conversation, interface can be confusing, irrelevant information, multiple conversations occurring simultaneously.
Audio conferencing (Skype, freeconference, hotconference)	Real-time interaction, richer context with voice cues, greater sense of connection than text, familiarity with telephone interaction, immediate response, can include special features (file sharing, profiles and built-in IRC).	Cost, voice lag or echoes, best with broadband connection for everyone, unequal participation, low stability (as yet), participants need plenty of advance notice, meeting times constrained by participant time zones.
Video conferencing (Skype, Yahoo messenger, MSN messenger)	Real-time interaction, richer context with voice and non-verbal cues, greater sense of connection, gives some contextual setting.	Video can lag behind voice or voice echoes, unfamiliarity, requiring adjustment, difficult to read visual cues, requires high-speed broadband connection for everyone, special facilities, low stability (as yet).
Web collaboration (WebIQ, WebEx, Facilitate 4.0, HotOffice)	Same time and place can be combined with different time and place, can make meetings more structured, can have anonymous feedback and voting, increased creativity, more participation in decisions, outputs in electronic formats (txt, MS Word, MS Excel, audio etc.).	Unfamiliarity of interfaces, can force decision-making down one path, can limit creativity, linear data entry modes (choosing, polling, preference scales) tendency to groupthink, requires clear facilitation, often required to teach tool and facilitate meeting at same time, requires preparation (pre-planning).

Specific issues

Group beginnings

As with any group, emphasis is needed on the initial relationship development process. Strong relationships between members mean more effective groups, and this is even more important online. After introductions, it is valuable to use Internet Relay Chat (IRC) software or to share Skype addresses. Using these can create opportunities for informal, spontaneous communication between team members and the facilitator. These informal encounters create a common context and perspective that support group interaction and group work.³ Other useful approaches are to create peer or buddy systems, share personal stories, share photographs and images of personal objects, discuss hobbies, sports groups, and share family stories or other aspects of members' lives. These all help to build a picture of each other that is helpful when interacting.

Group support

The online facilitator is often required to fill the extra tasks of preparing specialised technology for group access and training participants in its use. A learning curve is involved, and participants' abilities to use and learn complex online tools differ. Other tasks identified for the online facilitator can include mentoring, mediating, coordinating, monitoring, innovating and directing.⁴ It can be useful to create illustrated 'How to' documents for using tools, such as showing members how to create mail rules and folders within MS Outlook, or how to set up Skype, and online 'field trips' or tutorials can also be organised. It is also good practice to create an alternative mode of communication in case the technology doesn't work.

Purpose and culture

Purpose and culture are as important in online groups as they are in face-to-face groups. As online groups begin, they tend to orientate to an initial task focus and participants will be looking for clear structure from the facilitator. It is important to be clear about what the purpose of the group is and for everyone to align on it. Include the group's purpose in any documents you email to members. You can

also put the purpose in your email signature each time you email the group. This keeps it uppermost in participants' minds.

It is important that everyone is actively involved in creating and aligning on creating a culture that will enable all to participate fully. Particular things you may want to address in the culture of an online group are:

- Appropriate timeframe for responses.
- Notice period for real-time events.
- Cultural differences.
- Assuming goodwill from others.
- Checking out assumptions.
- Appropriate netiquette.
- How acknowledgements will be done — individually or in a group.
- Notice for upcoming events.
- Confidentiality.

Cultural differences

Cultural differences are likely to be more significant online, and they are not always obvious due to the lack of emotional cues and feedback. Team members and facilitators will interpret the group language through their own cultural understanding and perspective. Sometimes different participants will use the same words, but they will have a range of understandings.

Always assume goodwill

Messages and their meanings can easily be misinterpreted online. Inflamed conversations can erupt based on the words that were said, argued and justified rather than what was intended (known as 'flaming'). Assuming goodwill is a good counter to these triggering conversations. People are likely to have differing assumptions about behaviour, and different expectations. Conversations that are normal in your own context may be alien or offensive to others in their context. Assuming goodwill interrupts this type of flaming conflict and assists the group to move forward.

Tools and processes

As the facilitator you will need to choose appropriate tools and adaptable processes so that all participants can be involved in creating the purpose of the group and its culture. If the group cannot meet at the same time you may need to use asynchronous email or a discussion forum as the tools. Some things may take longer to do asynchronously. There may be a need to offer a combination of ways in which the group can contribute to the conversation. For example, some members may not have strong textual skills and may prefer to use audio or video conferencing.⁵

References

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