Moving beyond team: 
The changing nature of collaboration in modern work

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Eating the dessert first...

Key takeaways

1. The world is dramatically changing... and that affects how we collaborate

2. Traditional, team focused approaches to collaborating may not match demands of today's dynamic, global economy

3. By studying changes, we are gaining insights into new approaches to collaboration

4. Research suggests we shift towards collaborations that are:
   - Focused not on who is doing the work, but focused on and defined by the work itself
   - Fundamentally embedded in, and interdependent on, their broader context and community
What we know...

- Most organizational tasks require collaboration...
  ...and teams are one of the most common types

- **Why?**
  ...because teams offer profound benefits for:
  - **Organizations:**
    - Boost flexibility
    - Increase responsiveness
    - Increase productivity
  - **Individuals:**
    - Shape perception & cognition
    - Stimulate learning
    - Motivate & control behavior

- This makes them well-suited for a world that is increasingly:
  - Fast-paced
  - Competitive
  - Interconnected
...but what if the trend towards more fast-paced, interconnected, and competitive work (that motivated use of teams in the first place) is moving us toward an environment for which “teams” are less well-suited?

Then relying on traditional teams will not match current demands...

...leading to inefficient, ineffective collaborations
How is the world changing?

- Work continually evolving, but globalization & new tech have led to a quantum leap
  - Becoming more fast-paced, interconnected, competitive

- Organizations shifting towards networks, markets, projects – to leverage:
  - Decentralized authority
  - Improved responsiveness and adaptability
  - Job design & employee motivation benefits
How is this changing collaboration?

Due to increased competition for resources...

collaborations increasingly share resources (including people)

Due to increased environmental dynamism...

collaborations increasingly shift in task & composition to adapt to rapidly changing external environment

Due to increased contextual variety and interdependence...

collaborations increasingly focus (and rely) on external context

Due to increased competition for resources...

collaborations increasingly share resources (including people)

Overlap

Contributors simultaneously work on multiple collaborations

Fluidity

Contributors change over time

Linking

Contributors’ contexts more varied and important

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Boundary disagreement
INCREASINGLY FLUID
Managing perceptions of membership

- We assume the teams shaping our behavior are clear and unambiguous...
  - Based on rosters, organization charts, etc.

- ...in reality, behavior is driven by our mental representations
  - based in our experience
  - frequently varying across contributors

**Awareness is the key:**

“...It’s very clearly defined... I think it is very clear.”

“...of course I know who are the members of my team”

- Resulting in:
  - Weak team identity
  - Inferior group memory
  - Conflict
  - Poor performance
Distributional configuration
INCREASINGLY INTERLINKED
Managing the configuration of distribution

■ All configurations are not the same
  - Configuration: *Arrangement of members across sites, independent of distance, time-zones, or individual differences*

■ Three issues to keep in mind:
  1. Power of subgroups
     *(Multiple members at different sites)*
  2. Impact of imbalance
     *(Uneven distribution across sites)*
  3. Benefits of isolation
     *(Members working alone)*
Distributional configuration:

**Power of subgroups**

- Team members categorize along sites: “us” (good) vs. “them” (bad)
  - Categorizations reinforced by teammates

“We got emails that were all signed as a group: ‘Thanks, Judy, Joe, and Jane.’

We could never tell who we were talking to. They were like a pack.”
Distributional configuration: *Imbalance and Isolation*

- Imbalance creates status differences:
  - Majority threat & minority resentment
  - Power struggles, conflict, withdrawal
  - Voting and poor idea evaluation

**Important caveat:**
- "Isolates minorities"
- "Lack reinforcement"
- "Too small to threaten majority"
- "Often outperform collocated teams"

"if push comes to shove, we can always outvote them."

"...if anything, he forced us to be more explicit about how we were going to work together to ensure that he wasn’t left out."
Multiple Team Membership
INCREASINGLY OVERLAPPING
Simultaneous membership on multiple teams results in:

- Increased flexibility, diversity, and cross-team learning...

...but also increased switching, stress, ripples, and coordination overhead

**“I think projects benefit from members’ being able to bring best practices and lessons learned from other projects to bear on their problems.”**

Affects productivity and learning at three levels

Requires active managerial intervention

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<td>Diversity of experience, mismatch, cost</td>
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<td>productivity, load-balance</td>
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Boundedness
THE COMMON THREAD
The common thread: Collaborations are becoming less bounded

- All these trends share a common thread: less bounded collaborations
  
  - Fluidity
    - Composition changes over time, thus boundaries differ based on when assessed
  
  - Linking
    - External connections mean boundaries are permeable
  
  - Overlap
    - Boundaries non-exclusive
Recombinant collaboration: A new approach to collaborating

- Findings suggest fundamental shifts in how we think about collaboration
  - From focus on groups of people working on a task...
    ...to process by which resources (including people) are dynamically mobilized
  - From teams as insular and self-contained...
    ...to interlinked and inextricably embedded in broader community

- F.L.O.W.S – Fluid, Linked, Overlapping Work Structures
An example: Patient care teams

- Patient enters a hospital complaining of pain
  - Effective patient care takes combined efforts of multiple doctors, nurses, technicians etc.

- While patient sees a team, medical staff see patient (task) as relevant unit

- F.L.O.W.S.
  - Task: Curing patient
  - Community: Hospital
  - Mobilized resources: Dynamically changing set of people, technologies, and other resources
Organizational examples

- Seeing evidence of this in organizational contexts

- “Dynamic Project Teams” at IBM
  
  (Matthews, Whittaker, Moran, & Yuen)
  
  - Matches core ideas of recombinant collaboration
  
  - Identified as increasingly common in recent study of collaboration at IBM worldwide

- 20% time and “Grouplets” at Google
  
  - “Free” time to pursue new ideas leads to collaborations dynamically organized around ideas
So where does this leave us?

- **World is changing…**
  - Becoming increasingly fast-paced, globally interconnected, and competitive

- **…and collaborations are changing with it…**
  - Becoming more fluid, externally linked, and overlapping
    - In all, less well bounded

- **Continued reliance on traditional forms of collaboration imposes constraints**

However, by studying these trends, we gain insights into new ways to organize that better match demands of today’s business environment.