

Teamwork Issues in Virtual Teams

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Over the past few decades, there has been much interest in various forms of participation in the workplace and in its impacts on learning from work for individuals and organisations. Teamwork has been the object of much attention in labour economics, in sociology of work, as well as in human resources management (Tremblay, Rolland & Davel, 2000; Davel, Gomez da Silva, Rolland & Tremblay, 2001). Collaborative work and learning have also been the object of much attention in HRM and organisational learning debates, as well as in education circles (Henri & Lundgren, 2000). Much of this interest stems from gains that organisations can expect to obtain from interaction between workers in terms of quality of products, innovation, productivity, and the like. Knowledge management has also spurred interest in recent years, partly on the basis of these expected gains from a better management of the knowledge hidden within organisations. More recently, the concept of communities of practice has been put forward as a form of knowledge management which paves the way to attainment of the various organisational objectives: productivity, quality, innovation, and so forth. In our view, this last concept is closely related to teamwork issues, and we will show how in the following pages.

Teamwork and Learning through Interaction at Work

Teamwork is a flexible configuration that can be adapted to many production and organisational contexts. Its diversity and conceptual polysemy (Durand et al., 1999; Salerno, 1999) are due to the different theoretical approaches to groups in organisations, but also to the different societal contexts that are, to some extent, transforming the theoretical model (Tremblay & Rolland, 1998). Moreover, it should be recognised that its polysemy stems from the fact that

this expression is used to describe diverse realities and, in particular, teams functioning at different hierarchical levels. Management teams, production teams, support staff teams, project teams, continuous improvement groups, and client service teams are but a few illustrations of the variety of groups that firms use in their day-to-day operation (Hackman, 1990; Cohen & Bailey, 1997), and we could add to this list communities of practice, since their objectives are often similar.

Forms of Teamwork

In the late 1970s, interest in teams became identified with the *quality of worklife* movement which favoured the transformation of the workplace through labour-management cooperation, as well as the development of knowledge through interactions at work facilitated by the creation of semi-autonomous groups of production workers. Individual satisfaction as well as organisational advantages were the objective of this configuration of work, as is sometimes the case with communities of practice.

It should be pointed out that even if the establishment, operation, and social relations within the work team are far from homogeneous and uniform (Lévesque & Côté, 1999), many authors are in agreement about the core of team-based work organisation; in our view, this can be adapted to the communities of practice context.

Thus, to make up a team, members must have a minimum of: (a) task interdependency among members, (b) shared responsibilities, (c) team identity, and (d) power to manage the relationship between the team and the organisation (Hackman, 1987; Guzzo & Dickson, 1996; Sundstrom, De Meuse & Futrell, 1990; Cohen & Bailey, 1997; Savoie & Mendes, 1993). These elements appear interesting, and in our view, they could be transposed to CoP experiments and other forms of collaborative work and learning through interacting.

This vision can be used to distinguish teamwork from the Taylorist and Fordist systems of work organisation. Teamwork allows members to achieve a level of multi-skilling, to share information, and to be more responsible for quality and productivity (Marx, 1998), as well as providing less rigid and disciplinary supervision. Even when supervisors tend to change their hierarchical role in order to become facilitators, coordinators, or even resource persons, firms do not always eliminate certain forms of control such as performance indicators (Salerno, 1999).

The Distribution of Responsibilities in the Context of Teamwork

The involvement expected of workers in firms that are structured into teams goes far beyond the simple execution of predetermined tasks, which was the norm in the Taylorist and Fordist systems. Workers grouped into teams are, in principle, given the incentive to manage their unit in addition to accomplishing their work. In other words, teams (usually referred to as autonomous and semi-autonomous) should determine not only when and how to accomplish the work assigned to them, but sometimes also the work pace.

According to Marchington (1992), teamwork is the most advanced form of the reconfiguration of tasks and responsibilities, since it allows for an extension of responsibilities that is both horizontal (workers execute more tasks at the same level) and vertical (workers are made responsible for more tasks that previously came under other hierarchical levels, that is, under foremen and supervisors), and leads to learning on the job that is more complete than in traditional contexts of work. Thus, teamwork includes not only the delegation of tasks, but sometimes also the transfer of part of the control over tasks within the team.

Unions often maintain that responsibilities are assumed in various ways and at different stages when carrying out tasks. According to them, in any teamwork there are two types of tasks that are absolutely essential and inextricably linked, that is, technical tasks and social tasks. Technical tasks are those directly related to work execution and production. They concern the definition of production goals,

the planning of activities and establishment of deadlines, the choice and examination of material means, the assessment of staffing needs, the definition and allocation of tasks between team members, the development of work schedules, the evaluation of costs and preparation of budgets, and the evaluation of results.

Social tasks include the exercise of leadership, training of members, health and safety, specific programs, the definition of communication channels, and team meetings. They have a decisive influence on the quality of life within the team and make the concrete expression of the values shared by its members possible. They also make trust possible between members as well as with the team leader. Autonomy will increase over time, depending on the evolution and maturity of the team, the dynamics of the relationships between teams, and the agreed-upon rules in the collective agreement (Tremblay, Rolland & Davel, 2000).

All this is also observed in the development and analysis of CoPs, but it is the process of fostering team responsibility or interaction which appears to be most challenging.

The Process of Fostering Team Responsibility and Interaction

Even though teamwork obviously requires the transfer of responsibilities to teams, this transfer alone does not explain the involvement and interaction between team members. According to a number of authors, the effectiveness of teams and their willingness to interact with each other and undertake new responsibilities are influenced by a whole set of factors. Savoie and Beaudin (1995) link the effectiveness of team interaction to functional components such as: (a) interdependency in terms of the environment (feedback from clients, supervisors, team mission, inter-team coordination, management support); (b) task interdependency of team members (skills development) and consequences (sanctions based on results); and (c) the quality of transactions between team members (interpersonal relations, production energy, shared effectiveness, and group cohesion).

Some authors underline that the process of fostering team interaction will achieve the objectives of

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