

Chapter II

Inter-Organizational E-Collaboration in Education

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ABSTRACT

In the world of education, many occasions necessitate interorganizational collaboration. Geographical distance and time constraints are challenges that prevent education professionals from meeting face-to-face to complete a collaborative task, provide ongoing technical assistance, or engage in dynamic professional development. Using electronic tools to bridge distance and overcome scheduling difficulties can be effective; however, research indicates that for these endeavors to be effective, there is a need to consider the purpose, tools, participants, and support structures. This chapter presents an overview of recent research surrounding these issues and its application to electronic collaboration (or e-collaboration) between education professionals.

INTRODUCTION

Who engages in electronic collaboration? Anyone who needs to work with others, but faces the challenges of geographical distance and time constraints. Most educators cannot leave their schools or organizations to travel to another location during work hours and still fulfill the rest of their job responsibilities. Consider the following scenario:

A university's school of education has just won a bid to create an assistive technology guidance manual for the state department of education. One of the grant requirements is that there are classroom teachers and school building administrators involved in creating the resource, with representation from different grade levels as well as different regions across the state. Funding is available to compensate participants for their participation, but not for travel, food, or lodging.

It has been proposed that a virtual team develop the guidance manual.

The first issue to be addressed in this situation is how to select participants for the virtual team. There are hundreds of educators who might be interested in participating in this collaborative project; however, the group must remain of reasonable size to complete its task. Personal characteristics such as expertise with the subject matter are natural to take into consideration; personal interaction styles and experience in using collaborative technology tools might also be important here.

The project coordinator is a member of a statewide group of educators interested in assistive technology. She has already contacted several of the group's members that she knows fairly well and asked whether they might be interested in being on the team. To the teachers and administrators who showed interest, she e-mailed a short questionnaire that asked about the kinds of work styles they preferred and communication technologies with which they were comfortable.

Early in the process, the roles of team members will have to be considered, including whether a formal leadership role will be created or whether the team will be self-managed. In this case, the project coordinator may be a natural leader for the group. Discussion of policies and procedures will have to be facilitated by the leader or negotiated by the team; these will affect the development of trusting relationships between team members. Additionally, structures must be created to help the team negotiate the task and construct a final product that reflects their shared knowledge.

Who else engages in e-collaboration? In the world of education, effective professional development and technical assistance is often provided not by a single agency, but by a team of specialists who offer a range of expertise across a wide geographic region. The following is a typical

example of collaboration across school divisions to create just such a group of experts:

At a recent regional meeting of directors of secondary instruction, several members from small school divisions across the state decided to pool their resources and create a series of after-school, high-quality professional development sessions for newly licensed and alternatively certified teachers. The potential professional developers will include one highly skilled teacher from each division, supported by several specialists from state and regional education agencies. The directors decided that all of the professional development sessions would be presented in some kind of distance education format, with recertification points offered by each school division.

As in the assistive technology scenario, the directors must find a tool to connect the professional developers to the regional and state specialists, to one another, and eventually to the teachers they will be training—all without removing them from the classroom to travel to another location or attend extensive meetings.

The directors need to consider what kind of tools will suit their purposes. They should carefully consider with what kind of e-collaboration tools their potential professional developers would be most comfortable. The directors will try to address potential barriers to communication and structure the tasks in a supportive way so that anyone who may not be “tech savvy” will be able to complete the collaborative planning and deliver the professional development with a reasonable output of time and effort.

Both the assistive technology workgroup and the potential professional developers will have to consider whether to try to arrange face-to-face interaction, and if so, when and how those interactions should occur to have the greatest impact. This chapter presents recent findings indicating that e-collaboration is effective when the right tools, tasks, participants, and structures are in place.

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