



# CLI Whitepaper

## Strengthening your Organization's Collaborative Potential



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# Executive Summary

This paper will focus on the changing workplace, the changing workforce, and the implications that they hold for your organization's collaborative potential. We review the current literature to determine how these shifts will likely impact collaboration in your organization. Then we consider common sense and not-so-common sense approaches to increasing the collaborative potential in your organization. Finally, we sum up key lessons learned.

## The implications of a changing workplace and workforce

The work landscape is changing, and technology and workforce demographics are responsible. As author and business strategist Don Tapscott sees it, the train has left the station. The horse is out of the barn. We are moving toward a highly collaborative world that will increasingly rely less on face-to-face meetings and more on efficiencies like web-based meetings, wiki's and micro-blogs. Some of us will be pulled kicking and screaming into this new collaborative environment and some of us are early adapters and are already there. What implications does the changing landscape of collaboration have for the generations at work?

## The Changing Workforce

As the baby boomer generation approaches retirement age, there will be an insufficient number of workers to replace them. As a result, some economists and researchers think that this will pose a serious threat to the world economic performance, despite the technological advances anticipated over the coming years. (Villoso et al, 2008).

Older workers can anticipate some interesting challenges. Some will want an early exit from the labor market, while it is anticipated that others will want to continue working, but on their own terms. Others have to continue in work for financial reasons and will face age discrimination. (Winkelmann-Gleed, n.d).

According to Peter Cappelli, organizations need older workers more than ever: They transfer knowledge between generations, transmit your company's values to new hires, make excellent mentors for younger employees, and provide a "just in time" workforce for special projects. Yet more of these workers are reporting to people younger than they are. This presents unfamiliar challenges that--if ignored--can prevent you from attracting, retaining, and engaging older employees. In *Managing the Older Worker*, Peter Cappelli and William Novelli explain how companies and younger managers can maximize the value provided by older workers. They say that the key is in recognizing that boomers' needs differ from younger generations. He gives the example of leading with a "mission." Cappelli has found implication for younger leaders of older followers. As employees age, they become more altruistic, so leaders can emphasize the positive impact of older workers' efforts on the world around them. Older workers should be encouraged to forge social connections because many older employees keep working to maintain social relationships. Younger workers can anticipate challenges ahead as well. Younger leaders will be leading older workers. In most institutions this is a reality already. In the United States Marines, junior officers team with older subordinates to allow knowledge transfer. Cappelli suggests that young leaders should always acknowledge the depth of experience and skills of the older worker, and ask key questions to improve the outcome of any project, such as:

- What problems are we likely to face?
- How do you recommend we proceed?
- How would you do it?

The older worker becomes the teacher, feels appreciated, and all workers and the company score across-the board wins.

# The critical role of collaboration in your organization

What role will collaboration play in assuring effective performance execution with these changing demographics in mind? In today's competitive environment, sharing information and expertise will be critical in driving both individual and organizational success. Collaboration not only fosters learning, it also builds the innovative muscle in an organization. Changing the corporate culture to one of collaboration and interdependency will be an increasingly important priority, and encompasses some unexpected challenges.

## Increasing collaboration: Common sense findings

A 2008 IBM Study found that approximately 75 percent of CEOs say that collaboration is very important to their innovation efforts, but only a little more than half say they practice collaboration efforts in their organizations. If that is true of most organizations, it will be important to make collaboration a front-and-center priority.

## The shift to collaborative technology

Most organizations make use of collaborative software and social networking tools for employees. The use of web conferencing tools are clear indicators of the changing nature of collaboration. According to IBM researchers, as technology has evolved, knowledge has been transported from private conversations to public conversations—from telephone, e-mail and instant messaging, to shared bookmarks, wikis and blogs. We live in unprecedented times, when the speed of technically driven information far outweighs our own

ability to comprehend and process. One suggestion we came across from an IT director was to keep the collaboration software as easy to use as possible. No one wants to struggle to achieve a collaborative approach technically. What other attempts have organizations made to increasing collaboration? Changes in workspaces offer another possible assist.

## Workspace makes a difference

Certainly the rise in public conversations is also supported by workspaces that are designed to allow for impromptu meetings that breed information sharing. Herman Miller Corporation, the office environment company, found that there's been a seismic shift toward collaborative work in the last 30 years. In 1985, just 30 percent of an individual's output depended on working within a group; by 2010 that figure was up to 80 percent. No wonder private offices are unoccupied 75 percent of the time and workstations sit empty 60 percent of the time.

These figures represent the on-going shift toward collaborative work. Herman Miller has found that co-location, proximity, and visual access allow employees to share information in a fluid way. This has obvious benefits for knowledge sharing and picking up information that is relevant to work. Herman Miller found that Stephen Kosslyn, a professor of psychology at Harvard University, has added to their understanding of workspace design needs.

Stephen Kosslyn has noted that, "people often grapple with problems in groups, be they formally designated teams or casual huddles around the water cooler." Some organizations find that scheduling coffee breaks to allow for informal talk is also useful. Others hold informational town hall meetings or use an open space approach for impromptu meetings.

# The role of trust in fueling collaboration

In a 2012 IBM study, leaders cited collaboration as the number one trait that leaders are seeking in employees. Over 75 percent called it critical, and most see technology as the most important enabler of collaboration. Since collaboration fuels creativity and innovation, increasing collaboration and its potential will be an important focus for more organizations in the future.

Karen Stephenson is a researcher and author who studies social networks in organizations. She has found that trust relationships in organizations can be mapped. Her research suggests that knowledge sharing is made possible when strong, reciprocal bonds exist between workers. These bonds are more powerful than, say, authoritative or hierarchical systems. The implications for any organization are huge. Trust, open communication and cooperation will serve as the bedrock for collaborative potential, creativity and innovation. The capacity of trust, the skills involved in communicating openly and learning collaboration skills can be enhanced through training programs. Recent research suggests that building trust can also be enhanced by casual contact. Many organizations setup coffee breaks, pizza lunches, and offsite get-togethers that promote casual conversations and decrease the anxiety levels of employee relationships.

This white paper has reviewed the importance of collaboration as a muscle to build creativity, innovation, and knowledge sharing. We have found that the data suggests that many factors contribute to effective collaboration.

# Key Takeaways

- Workforce changes, including age and other demographic trends (such as gender, race, and education which are beyond the scope of this paper) affect the level of collaboration in your organization.
- Knowing how to manage these workforce changes allows you to increase collaboration between age groups.
- Collaboration software is increasingly critical to collaboration
- Workspace considerations that allow knowledge flow are important
- Trust and collaboration go hand-in-hand

# References & Further Readings

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