

## Communicating in a Changing World: Are You Ready?

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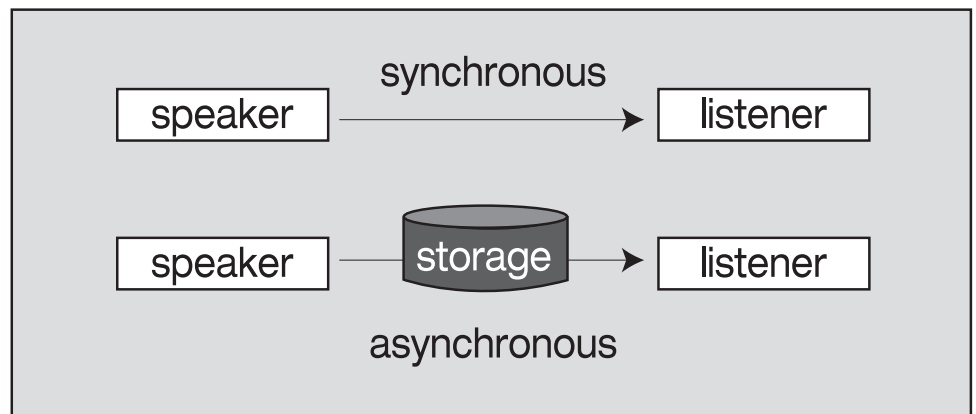
The Howe School Alliance has devoted several recent Roundtable meetings to managing the complexities of the virtual work environment through the use of the new communication tools, including social networking. In a similar vein, the Fall 2008 issue of this publication featured an article on how the virtual communication technologies can be used to overcome the potential for conflict in virtual teams. This article seeks to have you consider further the effectiveness of different modes of communication as they apply to today's changing business realities—and to your business.

Let's begin by discussing two fundamental modes of communication: synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous communication requires that one person be able to communicate with at least one other person in real time. A face-to-face discussion, a phone conversation or a video teleconference all represent synchronous forms of communication. Asynchronous communication, on the other hand, doesn't require the listener to be present when the speaker speaks or types. The information coming from the speaker is stored until the listener has an opportunity to see or hear that information. First class postal service, telephone answering machines, and email servers are all common forms of storage devices that enable asynchronous communication. These models are bi-directional, where the speakers and listeners can change roles to form a "conversation."

Let's explore the difference between these two forms of communication a little more. The most important difference is the requirement that the speaker and listener in the synchronous model be in real time. That means that they both must be willing to dedicate time that is synchronized to start and stop at times that work for each person's schedule.

For a meeting, teleconference, or web conference, those start and stop times are typically prearranged on each participant's calendar. For a phone call to be effective as a synchronous form of communication it must also fit into each person's schedule – otherwise it becomes asynchronous, with the storage medium being a secretary, answering machine, or voice mail system.

That form of communication may just be what is broadly being referred to as social networking. It comes with its own new bag of tools and techniques that are more common to the emerging generation than to those that are departing. If you think a tweet is only a sound that a bird makes, then you are probably representative of the latter. (A glossary of terms – taken from Wikipedia, of



There has been a strong preference for synchronous communication for many years because it is immediate and, apparently, efficient. That has led us to develop common calendaring systems that have broad access for those with whom we need to communicate regularly. Wouldn't it be great if we could all see each other's calendar and reserve times for those important phone conversations and meetings? Maybe not. Do you really want everyone else scheduling your work day? How much flexibility and privacy do you need to be effective at what you do?

Perhaps the best approach is a form of communication that automatically adjusts between synchronous and asynchronous depending upon your availability, capacity and interest...wouldn't that be cool!

course – appears on page 3).

So, do we need a new hybrid form of communication that can give us the immediacy we sometimes need, while also providing a shield against interruption overload? These are the questions we have to consider. How much interaction do you need to be successful? How broad are your communities of practice and interest? Do you work in a shop that builds piece parts to order or do you work in a global marketplace developing products with hundreds of suppliers and millions of customers?

Think about how the concept of a team has changed over the years. We used to think about functional business units, where the engineering team was pretty much autonomous from the marketing team – and we liked it that way. No need to talk to

those guys on the other team as long as we have a good set of requirements chiseled in stone. When was the last time you had one of those? Maybe the Ten Commandments?

Next we decided that cross-functional teaming would help break down those walls between internal organizations by putting together a product or process team that had representatives from each part of the organization: marketing, engineering, production, quality and sales. It suddenly got a little harder to schedule meetings and get everyone together. Those in marketing thought they were wasting their time at the meeting whenever the engineers were talking, the engineers went blank when the production

fits of working with more resources without the requirement of a permanent relationship. So we looked for organizations with which we could form partnerships and others to whom we could outsource entire functions. Functional requirements became all the rage, giving our partners and suppliers broader control over the details. Systems engineering became a science wrought out of necessity because if you didn't get the process right, there was no chance that the product would come together and work. All of this came at the expense of more time spent on the phone, in teleconferences and in airports.

Just when we thought we had pushed the

second commercial to the world and promised a reward based on their success. That instantly created a crowdsourced product development team with no start-up costs and no managerial oversight, yet was enormously effective.

What's going on here?! Mashups and crowdsourcing? Doesn't anyone want to do anything themselves?!

That's not the point. The point is that with today's global economy, our traditional ways of doing business are being replaced by a whole new set of best business practices. With new business practices comes a new way of communicating – not synchronous, not asynchronous, but a continuum of everything in the middle.

We've got to accept that the old idea of synchronizing everyone's calendar for the purpose of having a meeting just isn't going to work on a global scale. Neither is using email for critical, time-sensitive interactions. Most of us have lived with phones and email for decades and have seen them both become less and less productive forms of communication. How about our offices? Are they necessary, or are they a historical artifact from a prior business model? We need to be in touch all the time, wherever we are. Like it or not, that is where the world is at.

So... ditch the commuting, close the office and make it easier to get in touch with those with whom you need to interact, and ignore those who are wasting your precious time. Arm yourself with the tools of the emerging generation – a 3G smart phone that has access to your cloud-based email account, your Twitter account, your Facebook page, Google and a browser to get to your corporate apps. See if your contacts list keeps score on whether each person is more accessible through microblogs, wikis, instant messages, emails or phone calls. Know when to use each tool to your best advantage. Send an instant message asking when a good time for a phone call might be. Send an email when an issue doesn't require immediate attention. Review the tweets of your colleagues to get a general idea of what is going on with any particular process or project. Participate in wikis when iterative collaboration moves you toward your intended goal.

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guys said they couldn't build it, the quality folks were discussing sigmas by themselves and the sales guy was on the blackberry selling the product before it existed. This was progress?

As our companies grew, we realized that we couldn't do it all internally, so we merged with companies that could enhance our capabilities and took over those that might be a threat. The big decision was whether to bring them into our culture of doing business or let them go on operating the same way as they had. Should we reorganize to make workflow more efficient? Should we move people so they are co-located with their business units, or do we need to install more teleconferencing systems? Does casual Friday mean the same thing in southern California as it does in Manhattan? Does a handshake in Atlanta mean the same thing as a nod in Hong Kong? Some mergers and takeovers succeeded as spectacularly as others flopped.

Maybe this cultural hurdle is just too tough to get right as you start trying to deal with more geographies, time zones and languages. Maybe we could still get the bene-

corporate envelope to its limits the model got turned on its ear. Did you ever wonder how Amazon grew from an online book seller to a one stop e-tailer for just about anything? It wasn't by growing its functional business units, developing cross-functional teams, mergers, takeovers, partnerships or outsourcing. They developed a flexible web-based platform for e-tailing, published directions on how to develop compatible extensions and opened it up to the world. Companies rushed to join in Amazon's success by jumping directly on their bandwagon, or in this case, their website. Amazon gets a piece of their sales, but doesn't have to develop one line of code while expanding their presence on the web many times over. A mashup of web-based retailers consolidated down to a single URL.

Did you watch Super Bowl XLIII? What did you think of the Doritos commercial? Apparently enough people liked it to vote it the #1 commercial for the show. Did Frito-Lay put together a market research team, a product development team or a production team to accomplish their goal? Nope. They simply published their requirements for a 30

Is that the answer? Probably not, but it is important to glean the message from all of this. The breadth of what we are working on will continue expanding beyond any traditional sense of an organization, and the way we communicate will continue evolving to help us deal with that breadth. If we're not ready to consider crowdsourcing and

The answers lie in the skills of those who use any particular mix of tools. A new hire out of college might be very good at building relationships with colleagues of similar age around the world, using the same social networking tools used in private life – IM, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, SecondLife, etc. A seasoned professional will likely feel

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social networks as legitimate business alternatives, we may be left in the dust.

For years we have talked about gaps in our organizations – generation, culture, skill, knowledge and others. Well, don't look now, but another gap is upon us. It is the gap between those who can read body language and those who only know how to read another person's thumbs. If you grew up in a time when you only discussed serious subjects face-to-face and sometimes did important business at a restaurant, you know how important it can be to pick up on a little fidget here or an uncomfortable look there. You know that trust came from sharing stories about your kids or agreeing on a favorite bottle of wine.

How do you build trust 140 characters at a time? That's the typical length limit for text messages sent from cell phones. Business is all about relationships. What does it take to build a relationship? Texting, phone calls, emails, blogs, wikis, video conferences, and face-to-face meetings all have varying degrees of efficiency and effectiveness. What is the right mix? How much skill does it take to communicate effectively using each of these tools?

most comfortable relying on the social networking tools that served a similar age group throughout their careers – phone calls, emails, meetings, lunches, conferences, etc. What happens when the generations cross paths? Does the new hire have the skills to meet with a new client over lunch, discuss a wide range of relation-building subjects and read body language to better assess how the client is reacting? Does the seasoned professional have the skills to maintain a continuing dialogue via instant messaging with a set of prospective new crowdsourced suppliers from around the world, using only thumbs, emoticons and common abbreviations?

The answer is – probably not. We could be headed toward some very uncomfortable business relationship train wrecks unless we find a way to cross-train the gap out of our workforce.

I don't see our formal education systems providing the courseware, so it may be necessary to run training sessions in-house. Even there, getting qualified instructors may be difficult. Another approach could be mentoring programs. We typically think of associating the new hire with the seasoned

## **Glossary of Terms**

**Cloud computing:** a style of computing in which dynamically scalable and often virtualized resources are provided as a service over the Internet. Users need not have knowledge of, expertise in, or control over the technology infrastructure in the "cloud" that supports them.

**Crowdsourcing:** a neologism for the act of taking a task traditionally performed by an employee or contractor, and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people or community in the form of an open call.

**Mashup:** (web application hybrid): a web application that combines data and/or functionality from more than one source

**Micro blogging:** a form of multimedia blogging that allows users to send brief text updates or micromedia such as photos or audio clips and publish them, either to be viewed by anyone or by a restricted group which can be chosen by the user. These messages can be submitted by a variety of means, including text messaging, instant messaging, email, digital audio or the web.

**Social network:** a social structure made of nodes (which are generally individuals or organizations) that are tied by one or more specific types of interdependency, such as friendship, kinship, financial exchange, dislike, sexual relationships, or relationships of beliefs, knowledge or prestige.

**Tweet:** a micro-blog post on the Twitter social network site, or the act of posting on it

**Wiki:** a website that uses wiki software, allowing the easy creation and editing of any number of interlinked Web pages, using a simplified markup language or a WYSIWYG text editor, within the browser. Wikis are often used to create collaborative websites, to power community websites, and for note taking.

professional so some of those years of experience can be taught to the new hire. In this case, the teaching needs to be bi-directional. Both need to learn more about each other's tool set. Not just the mechanics, but the subtleties of their use.

Some of the most effective businesses have discovered how to work in our global economy by employing new types of relationships with developers, suppliers, producers, and sales from cultures around the world, using all of the communication tools available. Some have tried and failed. Others haven't tried and just don't realize that they will fail if they try to stay with their old ways of doing business. ■

### ***How about your business? R U ready?***

Post Script: As you were reading this article, were you thinking "this doesn't really apply to our organization because our IT shop would never allow us to use any social networking tools or websites?" Today's business realities for many companies are such that protection of intellectual property and security of transactions often take priority over ease of use and open access. The deal killer is the 3G smart phone that is emerging as the must-have appliance of our day. People that are dependent on their social networks and adapt their use to business requirements won't use those controlled corporate computers, networks and servers – they will 'go native' in the social underbrush of tweets and twitters whenever or wherever they happen to be. Corporate control may not be an option, making training of responsible business behavior a necessity.

## About the Author:



**Don Gulliksen** ([gulliksendon@optonline.net](mailto:gulliksendon@optonline.net)) is Senior Scientist & Policy Advisor for JTSi. He has spent his 40 year career applying sound academic and business principles to real-life situations that support the vision and goals of a wide spectrum of organizations.

He has been director of information services at a large Army R&D installation (ARDEC – Picatinny Arsenal), with broad control over areas such as the enterprise applications, supercomputers, servers, desktops, networks, phones, A/V and libraries. He conceived and organized a nationwide network of weapons developers using collaboration tools, models and simulations. He holds a bachelor's degree in electronics and master's degrees in computer science and engineering management. He continues his academic pursuits through collaboration with colleagues at Stevens Institute of Technology.

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