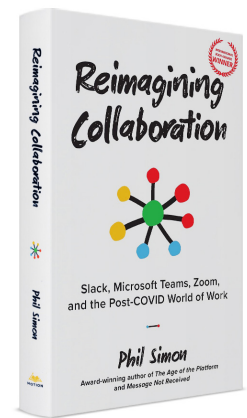


Reimagining Collaboration

Slack, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and the Post-COVID World of Work

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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Reimagining Collaboration introduces a fundamentally different model for workplace collaboration and communication. You'll learn how to think about these subjects, as well as technology and business processes, in a holistic way. You'll then learn how to put this new model into action, and how to handle people that are stuck in their ways. The fulcrum of *Reimagining Collaboration* is the hub-spoke model of collaboration, which allows for the stitching together of different applications without any coding. As a result, you'll be able to minimize rework, automate tasks, and quickly get on the same page as your colleagues. You'll also communicate and collaborate much better, too.

At its core, *Reimagining Collaboration* is disruptive. It forces readers to think differently about work. It advocates adopting new habits and technologies. Organizations will have to rethink legacy business processes and confront problematic and change-averse employees. But you'll learn how to maximize the chance that a new collaboration hub will take root.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How collaboration tools have evolved over time, and where things stand now.
- How technology can lead to enhanced collaboration power.
- How to move from the theory of collaborative perfection into actual practice.
- Why effective collaboration requires a spirit of lifelong learning, and how to instill it in your organization.

Introduction

When COVID-19 arrived, few companies and their employees were prepared to embrace remote work and, by extension, collaboration. The world of work is not returning to its pre-COVID-19 days. Effective remote work and the tools enabling it will become only more prevalent and critical for businesses to thrive. And more remote work increases the importance of collaboration.

So, are the current methods of collaboration meeting the needs of innovative, constantly evolving businesses? Not quite. Let's explore how collaboration really works in a work environment and how some of the things we think are enhancing our collaboration are already holding us back.

Collaboration in Context

We can't begin to effectively collaborate if we conflate different terms. In order to achieve this goal, it's essential that we fully understand collaboration first. Collaboration is not delegation or communication. It involves working, brainstorming, and problem-solving together—either physically in the same space or remotely.

Don't confuse collaboration with adjacent work-related terms, as this will only stunt your progress. Collaboration isn't some superpower encompassing all forms of work. Putting the adjective remote in front of it only makes it more difficult to attain.

Meanwhile, contemporary collaboration is multidimensional. One size doesn't fit all. As such, doing it well is far easier said than done.

The Benefits of Reimagining Collaboration

Effective collaboration can confer a number of significant benefits, from creating more innovative products and building trust among employees to helping retain customers, retain employees, and communicate better across your entire organization.

That said, if you think collaboration is some sort of magic elixir that will cure all ills, you're bound to be disappointed. But effective collaboration allows organizations to become more transparent, healthier, and less-stressful places to work. Firms and teams that collaborate well will be more productive than their collaboration-challenged counterparts.

Why Email Inhibits Collaboration

People who rely on email to 'collaborate' introduce super-

fluous friction. They make it harder for themselves and others to effectively work together. The word suboptimal comes to mind. Often, these tools make collaboration downright impossible.

Why? Because email was never designed for collaboration. Despite its limitations, many people simply tolerated it because of inertia and the lack of viable collaboration alternatives for many years.

Employees have traditionally stored essential knowledge, decisions, and information in their inboxes— all which effectively disappear when they leave their jobs. And over the course of the day, email saps your brain to an extent that modern collaboration tools do not. It's time to say goodbye to the traditional way we think about email.

Reimagining Workplace Technology

Over the last 30 years, the applications that allow us to exchange information and work together have become far more powerful than their antecedents. The word supercharged comes to mind. The market for collaboration software was already exploding before the pandemic. Then it went supernova. Now, collaboration hubs are more powerful, affordable, extensible, and user-friendly than ever.

However, even the best collaboration hubs don't replicate the functionality of dedicated productivity, project-management and enterprise systems. So what's the solution? It's the hub-spoke model of collaboration.

The Hub-Spoke Model of Collaboration

On any given day and depending on your role, you probably use at least ten software programs, apps, or websites at work. The odds that you use only one or two are remote. Even small businesses today rely upon a wide array of technologies.

Slack, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and their ilk are internal collaboration hubs. They allow people to easily connect to a wide variety of different applications, what you might call spokes. Put differently, hubs act as the home base for an organization, department, team, and even an individual employee. A hub can, and should, represent the default mode of internal communication and collaboration for all formal and informal groups. Which service acts as your 'hub' is up to you. Different activities, goals and situations require different tools. There is no magical application or technology that handles every conceivable work-related task or function and there never will be. The best formula-

tion of the hub and spoke model allows us all to automate many routine tasks with zero coding required.

How to Select an Internal Collaboration Hub

The introduction of a proper collaboration hub within an organization can represent a major turning point in a company's evolution. In many instances, it's no understatement to call it a step change, especially given the extent to which so many companies, departments, groups, and individuals have historically relied upon email.

Here are the questions to ask when choosing your collaboration hub:

- What specific business problem(s) does this software application attempt to solve?
- What business problem does this application not solve?
- Do your colleagues already use a similar tool?
- If so, then how does the new tool compare to the incumbent?
- Is now the right time to implement a new hub?

In cases where one hub meets most of your needs but is missing a killer feature present in another, don't panic. Chances are, the other collaboration hub platforms will quickly take notice and implement a similar or identical feature.

Among the most important factors that organizations should consider when selecting an internal collaboration hub are cost, security, compliance, company culture, and the need to collaborate with external partners.

Remember—all else being equal, it's easier to deploy a collaboration hub in a 'green field,'—a space that's already thriving or at least surviving.

Why Collaboration Hubs Can Disappoint

Success with any new enterprise technology is hardly a given. Internal collaboration hubs are no exception. But with rare exception, collaboration hubs disappoint or fail because of people-related issues, not from any deficiencies in the underlying technologies or applications themselves.

Looking to avoid these failings? Holding formal training classes signals to employees that the collaboration hubs is an essential workplace tool. If leadership takes it seriously, then everyone else is more likely to do the same.

Reviewing Implementation Strategies

Organizations that want to deploy internal collaboration hubs can opt for one of three approaches: bottom-up, top-down, and middle-out. You can either start at the top of your organization with adoption, or the opposite. You can also begin with middle management and expand from there as time allows—when the 'field is green.'

Each strategy inherits different costs and benefits. There is no single formula for determining which one is best. Experienced and tech-savvy change management consultants can help organizations choose and implement the best tool and approach. In turn, the firm will minimize the hub's downsides and maximize its benefits.

Reimagining Business Processes

Equipped with new tools, a new mindset, and collaborative colleagues, you can dramatically improve inefficient business processes at your company. Don't minimize the importance of transforming simple business processes like the way you collaborate. Companies have been transformed by far less. Plus, doing so sets an important example one that others will hopefully follow.

Remember—the older the process, the less likely that it has changed, and the more likely that the hub-spoke model can improve it. That means that your most entrenched processes aren't the ones that should be protected, they're the ones that may be the most ripe for a change.

Collaboration Killers and How to Handle Them

If you're going to initiate a transformation in the way you collaborate within your team or organization, you should be aware of the ways that it can go wrong. One of the worst? Pushing too hard, too fast. Trying to transfer your entire workforce over to an entirely new collaboration tool or series of tools all at once may backfire.

Remember that some very smart folks at your organization will probably still resist adapting to more collaborative methods and tools, no matter how nicely you attempt to make the transition. Meanwhile, micromanagers are generally allergic to true collaboration. The hub-spoke method won't change that fact on its own. Prepare to exhibit patience along the way.

The Myths of Collaboration

Collaboration isn't binary. There are degrees. It also may rise or drop over time. By itself, the use of an internal

collaboration hub guarantees nothing. In fact, companies can use Slack, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams in ways that are downright abusive.

Finally, it's important to note that small-scale collaborations tend to go more smoothly than larger ones because fewer people are involved. Sometimes, however, even one-on-one interactions don't go as well as either party hopes. Some people will invariably refuse to reimagine collaboration.

Reimagining Communication and Human Resources

Reimagining collaboration isn't likely to happen by itself. It may require changes to existing jobs and business processes. Fortunately, they need not be the big ones.

While the jury is still out, hiring a Head of Remote Work may help increase collaboration in an organization. If that seems like a superfluous job position, considering that in the fact of even minor scandals or employee dissatisfaction, companies will create the role of Chief Diversity Officer to ensure fair and equal hiring practices.

If employees won't willingly wean themselves off of email for internal communication and 'collaboration,' then companies may need to take drastic measures and enforce the use of specific hubs.

Why Effective Collaboration Requires Lifelong Learning

What, exactly, is the point of collaboration? At its essence, collaboration is about benefiting from the expertise, per-

spectives, and creativity of people other than yourself. So for collaboration to succeed, everyone involved must be open to the fact that another person's perspective has something to add to their own. If you believe that you've already learned everything you need to know about a given topic, then collaboration won't be of much use to you.

That's why a lifelong learning mindset is so important in collaboration, particularly when adopting the hub-spoke method. You should always be open to new ways of thinking, collaborating, and creating—even if you've been doing things a certain way for a while. If you're a manager or leader, this becomes doubly important. The openness and willingness to innovate that you display will inspire your organization to do the same.

The Future of Collaboration

What will collaboration look like five, ten, or fifteen years down the line?

Collaboration hubs will become smarter, more automated, and more immersive—allowing for even better collaboration and freeing up more human creative power to respond to complicated problems with novel solutions.

Meanwhile, plenty of innovation and useful collaboration features will stem from emerging startups.

Finally, the future of work will be even more remote and collaborative than its past. The sooner you, your colleagues, and your organization realize it, the better off you will be.



Phil Simon is a frequent keynote speaker, recognized collaboration and technology authority, and college professor-for-hire. He is the award-winning author of eleven books, most recently *Reimagining Collaboration: Slack, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and the Post-COVID World of Work*. He helps organizations communicate, collaborate, and use technology better. Harvard Business Review, the MIT Sloan Management Review, Wired, NBC, CNBC, BusinessWeek, and The New York Times have featured his contributions. He also hosts the podcast Conversations About Collaboration.

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