Organizational Collaboration's Dirty Little Secret

Much of your company's collaborative success can be chalked up to only 4 percent of your employees. And those employees aren't too happy about it, according to researchers Rob Cross, Reb Rebele, and Adam Grant.

Everyone wants Vaani on their team. Her email, IM, and voicemail are jammed with urgent requests to assist with projects, take meetings, and supply much-valued input. She returns from lunch to find her keyboard bristling with sticky-note questions. Lately she's even gotten ambushed en route to the ladies' room by people hoping she can help them out.

Vaani tries not to turn anyone down because management frequently emphasizes the importance of working collaboratively. But it's a challenge to complete her own work, and her performance ratings are starting to dip. She takes more assignments home, and soon her personal life suffers too. She finds herself thinking about calling that recruiter back, and polishing up her resume...

Across companies and sectors, people are being told that collaboration and teamwork are critical to their company's future. The time spent by managers and employees in collaborative activities has ballooned by at least 50 percent in the past two decades.

But in fact, a small number of employees—like Vaani—are shouldering a very disproportionate part of the collaborative burden, according to the recent *Harvard Business Review* article "Collaborative Overload" by Rob Cross of the McIntire School of Commerce and Reb Rebele and Adam Grant of the Wharton School. In a study of over 300 organizations, the authors found that 20 to 35 percent of value-added collaborations are being generated by only 3 to 5 percent of employees.

Collaboration as a Learned Skill

Stress, burnout, and turnover have been shown to be higher among these helpers or "extra milers." In a related study of 20 organizations, the authors found that leaders regarded by colleagues as the most in-demand collaborators actually had the lowest engagement and career satisfaction scores. This is not only bad for these individuals, it's bad for the organization: extra milers become an institutional bottleneck. Work grinds to a halt until they've weighed in.

"Being a high performer is like winning a pie-eating contest and finding out the prize is more pie," quips Harold Strawbridge, agreeing with the authors' observation that top collaborators are often not recognized adequately. Strawbridge is vice president of Innovation and Continuous Improvement at Inglis, a Philadelphia-based provider of specialty nursing care and affordable housing for people with disabilities.

He asserts that many businesspeople lack the nuts-and-bolts skills to collaborate well, and believes collaboration should be formally taught in schools. "When I see somebody's resume cross my desk and I see MBA, I would love to... know that part of that master's has been how to effectively collaborate. You can't assume that has been trained, and you have to really look for it in folks," Strawbridge says.

Among the fundamental skills Strawbridge identifies is the ability to plan and run an effective meeting. He advocates for graphic facilitation: using imagery to lead meeting attendees

toward a goal. "I'm the one applauding when I see one of my colleagues step up to a flip chart page or whiteboard... Graphic recording makes visible what went on in the meeting, and it fuels going further, faster," Strawbridge says.

Cross, Rebele, and Grant also discuss the use of meetings for effective collaboration, pointing out that sometimes less is more. They cite a Stanford study in which managers at Dropbox eliminated all recurring meetings for two weeks. The exercise forced employees to reassess which meetings were actually necessary. It resulted in shorter yet more productive gatherings despite a greatly expanding workforce.

Strawbridge's point about the skills many businesspeople lack evokes the talent management challenges faced by today's chief learning officers. But professional development programs—especially when customized to a firm's unique situation—can be a powerful tool for building stronger, more equitable teams as well as retaining valuable performers who feel stressed by over-collaboration.

How Technology Can Help

The authors state that digital tools can make for better collaboration. They cite programs such as Slack and Salesforce.com's Chatter, which enable open discussion threads on various work topics and make information and social resources accessible to more employees. Other programs such as Syndio and VoloMetrix can help managers assess networks and make informed decisions about collaborative activities.

Catherine Shinners, principal and founder of Merced Group, a Silicon-Valley-based social business consulting firm, helps implement technology that supports collaboration and reduces over-reliance on meetings. "There are ways that people can use collaboration tools and enterprise social networks to stay connected and aware without having to be in a meeting," Shinners states.

She says that such technologies can also wean people from the inefficient use of emails, which causes versioning problems and broken conversational threads. "People's behaviors are still so stuck in the 1990s modalities of email communication with attachments...It is absolutely astonishing to me how much people are still using [this for] complex project workflows," Shinners says.

Shinners further recommends having employees maintain a profile on a company-wide network similar to LinkedIn. She says this lightens the load on frequent collaborators by making others within the company more visible as potential helpers. For example, an employee could search for someone with agile development experience, and a list of relevant co-workers would come up.

On Shinners's blog "Cathexis: Collaboration in Context" she notes that companies with teamwork problems actually may have deeper issues for which over-collaboration is only a symptom. These include poor interaction and knowledge management practices, and vague or irregular governance. Some firms don't recognize that these persistent issues are eating away at their progress and productivity. Corporate culture begins to erode, and the business finds itself at a competitive disadvantage.

Savvier firms realize that professional development is essential to strengthen their executives' competencies around collaboration. A good executive education partner program can be invaluable for helping leaders root out and address what's actually causing the perceived "collaborative overload."

Virtue Is Not Its Own Reward

Improving collaboration should be addressed at the individual level too, say the authors. Managers can empower overburdened collaborators to filter and prioritize requests, say no sometimes, or bring in a colleague. Managers can also let them help in ways that energize instead of exhaust them. The authors found that at one Fortune 500 technology company, 60 percent of collaborators wanted to reduce one-off requests, but 40 percent were open to increased coaching of others.

And rewarding good collaboration with positive reviews and pay raises is critical. Today's performance evaluations are skewed instead toward individual achievement. The authors found that roughly 20 percent of organizational "stars"—

the individuals who get the praise and the promotions—hit their numbers but contribute nothing to their colleagues' success. This phenomenon takes an even greater toll on women's careers than men's, the authors add, since often women are expected to behave helpfully and communally for less recognition.

Overall, Cross, Rebele, and Grant ask us to consider a model from professional basketball, hockey, and soccer teams: "They don't just measure goals; they also track assists. Organizations should do the same."

Leaders can find out more about how to navigate the complexities of collaborative work at Wharton Executive Education. There, luminaries including Peter Cappelli, the George W. Taylor Professor of Management and director of Wharton's Center for Human Resources, create partnerships with firms to deliver in-depth knowledge for immediate impact. Cappelli's thought leadership has been published widely, including in the *New York Times,* the *Wall Street Journal, Forbes, Harvard Business Review, The Atlantic,* and the *New Yorker.*

The programs at Wharton Executive Education teach high-performance teamwork that cuts down on wasted time and energy, distributes collaborative work effectively across organizations, and boosts companies' overall performance. Invaluable frameworks, models, and practices—which can quickly be applied to a firm's unique challenges—empower executives to manage the increasing speed of change in a volatile environment.

Of Wharton Executive Education, Cappelli observes, "The learning you get here makes sense. It's not theoretical—it's based on what we see going on in the world."

Peter Cappelli, DPhil
George W. Taylor Professor of Management;
Director, Center for Human Resources,
The Wharton School

5 Ways to Boost Your Firm's Collaboration Skills

"Gettin' good players is easy. Gettin' 'em to play together is the hard part."
—Casey Stengel

Start by gathering data about the collaboration requests at your company using employee surveys, electronic communications tracking, or network analysis. Where are the requests coming from? Who's receiving them? How frequent are they? Then use the tips below to implement the organizational change you want to see.

1. **Empower overburdened collaborators to push back**
   Show the most hardworking "extra milers" how to filter and prioritize requests, say no sometimes, or bring in an equally knowledgeable colleague. Reset norms across the organization about when and how to initiate email requests and meeting invitations.

2. **Introduce digital collaboration tools to make information instantly accessible to all**
   Platforms such as Slack, Salesforce.com's Chatter, and others enable open discussion threads so employees can simultaneously share informational and social resources. And programs like Syndio and VoloMetrix help managers assess networks and make good decisions about collaborative activities.

3. **Create buffers against demands for collaboration**
   Reduce seemingly endless approval requests by granting lower-level managers broader decision rights for small capital expenditures or travel. Also, consider designating "utility players"—employees with general knowledge and competencies—to respond to collaboration requests from other departments. This role could be rotated among team members.

4. **Reward strong collaborators, not just solo performers**
   Measure and recognize collaborative contributions by linking them to positive reviews, promotions, and raises. Ensure that women and men get equal credit for collaborating: often women's contributions go unnoticed because it is assumed that women are naturally helpful and communal.

5. **Give your leaders professional training in collaboration and teamwork**
   Wharton Executive Education offers real-world solutions tailored to your company's unique needs. Notables such as HR guru Peter Cappelli will partner with your leaders, co-developing the strategies, tactics, and tools to solve your most daunting talent management challenges.

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Business leaders seek knowledge from other proven leaders, and the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania—one of the world's leading business schools—is an engine of positive change. Each year, more than 10,000 executives worldwide choose Wharton Executive Education to navigate change and advance their leadership at every level.

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