

THE WORKPLACE

Collaboration not always good for problem solving

Or why you might be wasting your time on Slack and Google Docs



In a recent study on collaboration, teams that were the most interconnected did the best job of digging up information that could help them in finding a solution. But when it came time to actually decide on an answer, the most-interconnected teams did the worst. (TNS)

KIMBERLY WEISUL INC.

Collaboration is basically the grownup word for “playing nice together.” That makes it easy to assume that more collaboration has got to be better than less.

Unfortunately, collaboration doesn't always work. Sometimes, it actually shackles your ability to solve a problem. A new study shows that when you really need to solve a tough problem, collaboration is not the answer. You — and your employees — will have better luck closing the door and duking it out on your own.

The researchers, from Harvard Business School, Boston University's Questrom School of Business and Northeastern University, assigned 70 teams of 16 students each to solve various problems. The students used a customized collaboration software to facilitate their progress. Some teams were more interconnected than others, in that certain team members could share information with a more

players. Teams that were the most interconnected did the best job of digging up information that could, theoretically, help them in finding a solution. But when it came time to actually decide on an answer, the most-interconnected teams did the worst.

“We realized that the network structure seemed to have opposite effects for searching for information and searching for solutions,” says Jesse Shore, one of the researchers and an assistant professor at Boston University, quoted in Harvard's Working Knowledge newsletter. “That was sort of the aha! moment.”

The more-connected teams didn't dig up that much more information

than the less-connected ones. They tended to gather about 5 percent more data, mostly because the better-connected team members were less likely to unwittingly conduct duplicative searches.

But those more-connected teams also came up with dramatically fewer possible solutions than the less-connected teams. The less-connected teams came up with 17.5 percent more ideas, and, more important, they were more likely to come up with the correct idea. Shore says that's because the less-connected teams were less likely to end up duplicating a bad idea from a neighbor.

It's worth noting that the study had teams of students using exactly one collaboration tool, expressly designed for studies of this nature. My guess is that made the tool more helpful than it would have been in real life. After all, it's hard to be optimally aware of what's going on in Basecamp, Slack and Google Docs — to name a just a few popular collaboration tools — all at once.

Researcher Ethan Bernstein, of Harvard, says that the study results show the need for companies to be flexible — in the way they define teamwork, in their use of software and even in their architecture. You don't want to be encouraging your employees to be doing everything as a team when the best problem-solving tactic might be to close an office door and unplug. Shore connects his work to the current craze for open-plan offices, which are supposed to encourage collaboration. Those offices are well known to be challenging for introverts. But Shore says other employees will also need spaces where they can disconnect and concentrate on knotty problems — and leave collaboration behind.

INVESTING

A unique strategy to prosper from often-risky junk bonds

KAITLIN PITSKER KIPLINGER

Junk bonds appeal to investors who are willing to accept more risk in exchange for superior yields. But a subset of the high-yield universe — bonds that were issued with investment-grade ratings but have since descended to junk status — has delivered blissful results of late. Over the past five years, an index of these “fallen angel” bonds has returned an annualized 10.6 percent, crushing the broad U.S. bond market by an average of 6.5 percentage points per year and traditional junk bonds by 3.6 points per year.

A way to play formerly high-grade IOUs is Market Vectors Fallen Angel High Yield Bond ETF (symbol ANGL). The exchange-traded fund holds debt from 162 issuers.

Nearly three-fourths of its assets are in bonds that occupy the highest rung of the junk ladder (those rated double-B), more than twice that of the typical high-yield bond ETF.

“Weak balance sheets, poor management, a loss of market share or other troubles brought these fallen angels into the index,” says manager Fran Rodillos. “But the companies still tend to have valuable assets.”

Thanks to the collapse of oil prices, several energy companies earned their wings as fallen angels this year. As a result, the fund's stake in bonds issued by energy firms, such as Transocean and DCP Midstream Partners, has increased in recent months. Other top holdings include bonds of loan servicer Sallie Mae and aluminum maker Alcoa.

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1 YR Certificate of Deposit trend

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Public Announcement

AL Army National Guard (ALARNG) Mobile Organizational Maintenance Shop-28 (OMS-28) Administrative Record File

In 2005, site characterization and groundwater monitoring was conducted in association with an unrelated diesel underground storage tank at the ALARNG operated Field Maintenance Shop -28 (FMS-28) and a chlorinated solvents plume, primarily trichloroethylene, tetrachloroethylene and breakdown compounds, was discovered in the groundwater. Subsequent investigations were conducted between 2007 and 2013 to further characterize the soil and groundwater conditions and delineate the horizontal and vertical extent of chlorinated solvents contamination at the FMS-28 site. The source of the chlorinated solvents contamination has not yet been identified.

The FMS-28 is located in the manufacturing district of the Brookley Aeroplex in Mobile County, near downtown Mobile at 1622 South Broad Street 36615, between Interstate 10 and Mobile Bay. The ALARNG operates the FMS (formerly known as the Organizational Maintenance Shop and please note that all reports and administrative reference file will state the name of the facility as the OMS-28 as it was referred to during the findings) in the northwest corner of the Brookley Aeroplex on property owned by the Alabama Armory Commission. Mobile Airport Authority owns the property directly west of the FMS-28 site, and residential property is located to the north.

The environmental investigation at the FMS-28 site is being performed by the Alabama Army National Guard, in accordance with the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA), under the regulatory oversight from the Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM).

The ALARNG has set up an Administrative Record File at the following online location: <http://www.mobileoms28.net>

The purpose of the file is to hold all information the Army uses to determine a remedial action or cleanup action. Under section 113(k) of the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA), as amended by the Superfund Amendment and Reauthorization Act (SARA), 42 USC 9601 et. Seq., the Army is required to establish an Administrative Record File for every remedial or removal response action and to make a copy of the file available (at or near the project).

An information repository contains current and historical information, technical reports, and reference documents concerning the ongoing environmental investigation at the site. The OMS-28 information repository is available for viewing online at the website listed above or at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Mobile District Office, 109 St. Joseph Street, Mobile, Alabama, by contacting Melissa Shirley at (251) 690-2616 or via e-mail at melissa.l.shirley@usace.army.mil.

The public is invited to review the contents of the Administrative Record File and information repository. The online information repository will continue to be updated until such time that the cleanup is complete and no further remediation is warranted. If you have any questions about the Organizational Maintenance Shop, Administrative Record File, or information repository, contact the Alabama Army National Guard, Sheri M. Festoso, at (334) 271-8183 or email: sheri.m.festoso.nfg@mail.mil or U.S. Army National Guard, Brett A. Merkel, at (703) 601-7785 or email: brett.a.merkel.civ@mail.mil.