

REAL WORLD CASE 4

Lowe and HP: The Business Case for Swarming Collaboration

At global advertising agency Lowe & Partners Worldwide (www.loweworldwide.com), when an account executive in Hong Kong gets a request for a proposal from a prospective client, he opens up a collaboration space on his PC and invites in subject-area experts, planners, and other creative types from India to England. Each can invite others from his personal network, whether inside or outside the company. In minutes, a swarm of creative talent is exploiting the opportunity. Artists post relevant images; content experts surf the Web in unison to find useful sites; researchers drop in pertinent files; copywriters type or edit documents together in real time. “This has shifted the landscape of expertise,” says Ethan Schoonover, e-business director for the Asia-Pacific region at Lowe, “We’re discovering resources we didn’t know existed.”

On the other side of the world, HP Services (www.hp.com/hps), which provides business services, systems integration, and consulting at Hewlett-Packard Co., is also swarming. When an HP field consultant has an opportunity to bid on a big ERP project, he opens up a collaboration space and solicits advice from people he knows who have recently worked on similar projects. They each tap their own contacts, and so on, to bring the right people into the team space quickly to plan and then execute what needs to be done.

Swarming is a type of collaboration in which large numbers of geographically dispersed people quickly self-organize in a peer-to-peer network to deal with a problem or opportunity. It’s a fluid, shifting network with no central control or hub.

At Lowe, Schoonover was confronting an issue many global companies face: the need to match the agility of smaller competitors. “Clients want turnaround in a couple days with great ideas,” he explains. “How do we—a large, multinational organization—respond against small, creative hot shops waiting to eat our lunch?”

For Lowe, software called Groove from Groove Networks (www.groove.net), is facilitating a swarming approach that enables quick collaboration among internal and external talent. Groove gets around connectivity problems in Asia by chopping files into small pieces and sending them one at a time as the connection allows. That means high-bandwidth messages and even video files, which previously often crashed in midtransmission, can be safely shared, Schoonover says.

Prospective clients have asked to see how the team space works, and they’ve been invited to come in by downloading free trial software from the Web. “They became something more than prospects—they became collaborators,” Schoonover says, adding that swarm technology made the difference for at least two multinational client prospects who were concerned about Lowe’s ability to communicate with talent around the world. After they saw swarming in action, they signed up as customers.

Clients’ suppliers and other partners have also been brought into the collaboration space. “It makes it so much

simpler to bring together a diverse group of minds,” Schoonover says. Swarming has also saved on expenses such as international couriers, faxing, and travel. “It has paid for itself many times over in a half year,” he says.

At HP Services, swarming helps ad hoc teams around the world collaborate in pursuing deals and delivering on consulting engagements. “We’re connecting the right people faster, bringing them into the work stream, whoever they might be—company people or partners,” says HP Services Chief Knowledge Officer Craig Samuel, who works from his home on the Isle of Bute off the coast of Scotland. “You have a sudden deadline, and people self-organize. We’re getting proposals done faster and better.” At HP Services, thousands of workers who deal with partners and customers are hooked into the swarm. “We’re bridging organizations, suppliers, distributors—even corporations,” says Samuel. “We compete on some things and partner on others, and we can all mobilize in a common team space.”

Samuel says the return on investment from swarming mostly comes from opportunities that would have been lost without it. “What if you didn’t get the \$1 billion contract because you couldn’t find the people or mobilize fast enough?” he says. “That is a huge impact to the organization.” The ROI is as good as anything we do in IT today.”

As swarming catches on in business, it will bring management challenges along with opportunities, Samuel cautions. “If I’m a high-level manager and I’ve got a lot of people self-allocating to projects arising on the fly, keeping other things those people are doing on track starts to be a problem,” he says. “Some conventional-style managers will be getting new gray hairs.”

The solution will be increased communication, and a clear understanding throughout the ranks, of the organization’s top priorities, Samuel says. “You’ve got to give up a little control and trust your people.” Swarming enables collaboration beyond the organization in a way that hasn’t been possible before, Samuel says, adding, “If you’re going to be effective going forward, you’re going to need this kind of collaboration.”

Case Study Questions

1. What are the business benefits of swarming collaboration? Use Lowe Worldwide and HP as examples.
2. What are some possible limitations of swarming?
3. Visit the website of Groove Networks and experience their demo of working in a shared workspace. Would this support workgroup collaboration? Swarming collaboration? Why or why not?

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