
Creating cooperation through an innovation jam

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Abstract: This paper presents a case study of a technology-enabled Innovation-Jam within a traditional and conservative organization. We use Giddens' place/space metaphor to show that the locality, stability and constrained organizational presence of the organization, are temporarily replaced by an unbound, evolving and free space. The results are feelings of transparency, collaboration and innovation, as well as many firm-wide business innovations.

Keywords: Collaboration, Innovation, Technology-enabled Organization

1. Introduction

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) reduce the cost of sharing information in markets and public domains, as well as within organizations. Although social and organizational costs are not necessarily reduced, it has been suggested that command-and-control management will be replaced by a more flexible coordinate-and-cultivate approach^{i ii}. It will create decentralized organizations, with decision authority that are more distributed and hierarchies that are less rigid. Such structures will take advantage of the scale and knowledge efficiencies of large organizations, while enabling the freedom, flexibility, and autonomy that drive smaller firms.

This paper presents a mini-case study of creating an ICT-enabled coordinate-and-cultivate space within a command-and-control place. The space is an Innovation-Jam, a collaborative organizational effort to create, discuss and implement innovative business ideasⁱⁱⁱ. The place is a financial services organization, with about ten thousand employees and a conservative, hierarchical culture. We analyze this development through the place/space dichotomy^{iv v} that contrasts the localness, physical presence and stability of places with the boundless, virtual and free nature of ICT-enabled spaces.

The paper continues by presenting the place/space framework. Section 3 presents IBM's Innovation Jam, its adaptation to our research site and a place/space analysis of the organization and jam. Section 4 summarizes the results of the jam and a short discussion concludes the paper.

2. Place and Space

According to Giddens^{iv}, place and space are time–space configurations used to characterize some of the broad transformations occurring in social and organizational structures associated with the intensified use of ICT^v. Place is associated with a sense of boundedness and locality, while space has a sense of the universal, the generalizable and the abstract. ICT allow organizations to create new spaces, which cross the boundaries of place, engaging more employees in a simultaneous conversation that taps into the collective knowledgeⁱⁱ. We summarize the attributes of place and space in Table 1.

| | <i>Place</i> | <i>Space</i> |
|------------------------|--|--|
| Localness | A bounded locality with unique qualities in which traditions are important determinants of behaviour | A time–space configuration experienced as being boundless, universal and infinite |
| Presence | People and things are present and engaged in face-to-face relations | The dissolution of ties that hold local practices in their place, co-presence |
| Stability | Feelings of safety, stability, restricted movement, constrained growth and limited change | A sense of freedom in a limitless expanse in which movement and change are welcome and possibilities are endless |
| Organizational Context | The lowest levels of the organization emphasize localized range of action and shortest time span | The highest levels have the longest time horizon and broadest range of authority and concern |

Table1: place and space attributes (Adapted from A. Giddens^{iv})

3. Innovation Jams

An Innovation Jam is IBM's term for a massively parallel online conference used since 2001 as a way to unite its global operationsⁱⁱⁱ. The Jam is a group of interlinked bulletin boards and related web pages on IBM's intranet, centrally managed and seeking answers to pre-defined questions, during several days.

Bjelland and Chapman Woodⁱⁱⁱ report on the 2006 Innovation Jam that took place in two three-day phases in 2006. It involved 150,000 IBM employees and family members, business partners, clients and university researchers from 104 countries. The report concludes that the Jam uncovered, solved problems, and mobilized support for substantial new ways of using IBM technology. However, the Jam also encountered important difficulties, including the inability of conversations to move toward consensus and the difficulty in harvesting new ideas online.

Using IBM's ideas about Innovation Jams, the organization under study initiated its own Jam. As a much smaller and local organization, the goal was to create firm-wide collaboration, and subsequently to enable innovation throughout the entire organization. In addition, the Jam's focus was Efficiency, a subject that the management wanted to receive inputs from all employees as well as to communicate its importance during a financial crisis. The focus areas for the Jam were maximizing value to the customer and improving processes, green, purchasing and collaboration.

Table 2 analyzes the Jam at our research site with the Place/Space attributes. Following this, we expect that collaboration and innovation through the Jam to be much stronger than in the standard organizational setting.

| | <i>Place</i> | <i>Space</i> |
|------------------------|--|--|
| Localness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A financial organization with offices nationwide • Promotions are typically local | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Single web site for all business units and employees |
| Presence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classical office environment • Physical presence is mandatory | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Posts are identified by employee name • No business unit ID • Posts are persistent throughout the Jam |
| Stability | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conservative, stable, risk averse firm • Life employment is common • Strongly unionized • Promotion is slow | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Within the four focus areas, any input is welcome • New ideas and change initiatives are encouraged |
| Organizational Context | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hierarchal • Rigidly stratified • Distinct authorization levels • formal business processes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Firm-wide long term contributions are welcomed independent of function and rank • The web site located at the CEO intranet site • Senior management actively participates in Jam debates • Management do not limit or alter discussions and contributions |

Table 2: Attributes of the Organization and the Jam

4. Results

The Jam took place over a full week during 2009, involving over 40% of the organization's employees nationwide. The Jam's steering committee of forty member included top executives, specialists in relevant expertise areas, and employees from the entire organization. Discussions were conducted in four groups corresponding to the Jam focus areas.

The Jam included more than 2,000 threads. The steering committee sifted through the postings, extracted ideas and clustered them into coherent business initiatives. These initiatives were later discussed by experts and Jam participants before they were presented to the senior management. The results are presented in Table 3, using the Place/Space attributes.

| | <i>Space (Jam)</i> |
|------------------------|--|
| Localness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 40% of employees from every business unit, rank, and geography participated • Organization wide issues were dominant, very few threads focused on local grievances and issues • Threads relating to local initiatives were discussed and elaborated by discussants from other geographies and units • 137 Jam initiatives were found not to be new (already examined or implemented) and their existence were communicated to the entire organization |
| Presence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During the week long Jam, more than 2,000 discussion threads were accumulated • Rank and file employees have participated in post-Jam management meeting relevant to their contribution • Jam activity continued beyond office hours, starting very early in the morning and finishing very late at night |
| Stability | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CEO published an open letter to all employees encouraging Jam participation and culture of innovation • The Jam resulted in 255 initiatives |
| Organizational Context | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussions were considered by all participants as transparent, collaborative and mostly non-political • 41 initiatives were examined in four different authority levels • 7 initiatives were presented to top executives and are currently under detailed examination • 1 strategic business initiative has been approved and is currently under implementation |

Table3: Results

5. Discussion

The case study presented here demonstrates the ability of ICT-enabled organizational platform to remove, at least temporarily, barriers for cooperation and innovation. The results reveal a collaborative, transparent culture in the Jam space, as well as many innovative initiatives and better company-wide communication.

The place/space analysis helps to understand the reasons for these results. The sense of locality, stability and constrained organizational presence are replaced, during the Jam and through the technology, with a sense of unboundedness, change and freedom.

However, these achievements cannot be permanent through a week-long jam. Implementation of some of the jam initiatives, as well of frequent repetitions of the jam, or of similar spaces, is essential in order to diffuse collaboration and innovation into the daily life of the organizational place.

References

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