

INTO THE LOOP

Some Thoughts on Communication and Change

THE CHALLENGE:

- to sustain the process of regeneration begun at Wigamog;
- to increase access for those still "outside the loop" of renewal;
- to provide the big picture for those heavily involved in specific areas, allowing for the cross-fertilization of ideas.

THE CHANGE AGENT:

THE LOOP, a virtual corporation on hard disk. An interactive instrument of universal access and empowerment.

This ELECTRONIC BULLETIN BOARD SYSTEM (BBS) would reside on a single computer, connected to the existing network of roughly 400 Macintoshes and 100 DOS machines in the corporation. The software proposed is called FirstClass, and while it has many features that make it desirable, its foremost purpose is that of a public forum.

On its most basic level, a BBS is a public e-mail system, where messages can be posted to a subject area or forum, rather than a specific person. This allows for public access and commentary on the message. Series of messages on particular subjects can be identified as threads, and these threads can be the basis for new sub-forums which would exist as folders within the larger forum.

AN EXAMPLE: WIGAMOG

The Wigamog process could be split into 6 folders corresponding to the breakout groups formed last November.

One of these folders, Internal Environment, could contain folders corresponding to the various sub-committees arising out of its mandate.

The folder for the sub-committee on Internship could contain:

- minutes of past meetings;
- a discussion of the agenda for the next meeting;
- task-specific discussions between members assigned to particular objectives;
- threads exploring possibilities not yet raised *in camera*;
- (your suggestion here).

Certain threads would wither for lack of interest; others would develop a life of their own. Once a thread became long enough, it could command its own folder, either within its parent, or in a whole new area.

Using this FLOW DIAGRAM MODEL, the entire Wigamog initiative could be mapped on disk and accessible to all, according to their assigned security level.

-->Those wishing to get involved could see who was doing what before committing themselves in a particular direction.

-->Those already involved could broadcast appeals for ideas, or contribute suggestions of their own in other areas.

-->Senior members of the organization could track the overall success of Wigamog by being able to take a macro-microcosmic view of the process.

-->Optional modems would also allow access from outside the building by phone line. Former employees and other stakeholders could then take part in the process.

THE LOOP: OTHER DIRECTIONS

The Wigamog initiative is only the most obvious example of operations that could be enhanced by this organic form of communication.

SOME POSSIBILITIES:

(more inspirational than exhaustive or prescriptive)

Looking In:

- ACTION FOLDERS:** forums where immediate input is vital to swift and satisfactory resolution of the issues
- an **ANONYMOUS FORUM** where people could raise controversial issues without fear of victimization (This experiment has proved very productive in other organizations)
- private** forums with limited access for **confidential** discussion of company business
- a supplement to QuickMail (cheaper, and integrated with the BBS)
- Org: an ONLINE VERSION**
 - >"hot" news and announcements could be fast-tracked online
 - > classified ads could be posted and removed immediately
 - > a biography bank of all the employees (editable by the employee, with or without an accompanying picture) could replace the current one-time-only spotlight on individual employees
 - > reduced printing costs and paper consumption
 - > back issues instantaneously available
 - > an index of past articles
- Departmental Forums;**
 - > structure, personnel
 - > policies (e.g. Human Resources)
 - > news (new projects, awards, etc.)
- MENTORING:** a free flow of information, experience, and expertise, from those who have to those in need
- FILE EXCHANGE:** useful templates, forms, letterhead...
- resurrect the **Production Facilities Report** for those who mourn its passing from the Org;
 - >include a section on **upcoming location shoots** that other productions might be interested in piggy-backing

-a **JOB BANK** of upcoming contracts and secondment opportunities, as well as a list of people looking for such opportunities within and without the corporation

-CLUBS and SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS:

- >computer users help group
- >environmental groups
- >Bicycle Users Group (BUG)
- >conversational French club (FSL)
- >conversational English club (ESL)

-an **EMPLOYMENT EQUITY FORUM**

Looking Out:

-remote contact with the network for employees in Ottawa, Sherman Laws, and other areas around the province

-a public access point for audience feedback (using modems)
-->live chat sessions
-->e-mail comments on shows

-a **MARKETING TOOL:**

- >brief on-line ads for TVOntario product
- >linkage to Membership: online pledging?
- >advertising online in other educational BBS's worldwide through e-mail gateways

-an electronic **VIPS catalogue**, accessible by educators across the province, and searchable online

-DISTANCE LEARNING

-an **ONLINE VERSION** of **SIGNAL**

-scheduled interactive chat sessions with several people online simultaneously (the software supports this).

- >resource people like those who spoke at Wigamog could confer with interested parties at TVO from their own offices
 - >no transportation costs
 - >an automatic written record

-remote access from home for files at work

THE SOFTWARE: (FirstClass)

- looks and acts like a Macintosh desktop
- currently allows DOS access and will soon have a Windows interface almost identical to the Macintosh
- was locally developed for Scribe, the BBS of the Scarborough Board of Education (800 users, 9 phone lines)
- is used by Apple Canada for its MAGIC BBS
- sample business clients: Dupont, Eastman Kodak, Agfa, Motorola, General Electric
- sample Education clients:
University of Texas, Syracuse University,
University of California, San Francisco State University
- sample Public Services and Government clients:
NASA, US National Institute of Health,
US Fire Department (can be accessed from the fire trucks)
- has been sold in over 25 countries and now comprises over 100,000 mailboxes and over 20,000 conferences
- can be demonstrated either by an emulation demo or by signing on to a BBS using the software

SOME FUTURE CHALLENGES:

(should the software be adopted)

ACCESS:

- not everyone has access to a computer
- many who do scarcely know how to turn it on
 - > set up new computers in common areas identified through the buildings
 - > hold orientation workshops in lunch hours, where facilitators can sign new users onto THE LOOP and guide them through the early stages of getting to know the software. This would also help advertise its existence
 - > use THE LOOP itself as a training tool, with online help and Q&A forums

BILINGUAL CONSIDERATIONS

- the sheer impossibility of human translation of all the material on THE LOOP
- the problems of isolation within separate forums
 - > post messages in either French or English
 - > if you see a message that seems interesting but you can't make it out, ask online for ad hoc point-form translations (similar to what is done in face-to-face meetings)
 - > check out translation software

SECURITY

- who to allow what access; sensitive material
 - > software has a complete hierarchical access system (Scarborough B of E allows students limited access online with sensitive material in inaccessible folders)
- racism, sexism, obscenity, libel, unconstructive negativity
 - > denial of access for offenders
 - > federal and provincial laws apply
 - > let's give ourselves some credit!

IN PARTIAL CONCLUSION:

This system could be up and serving the current network very quickly, at little cost. Access for those without a computer is a thornier problem but, given the will, can be overcome. In the meantime, those fortunate enough to have access should not be denied a tool that could revolutionize and rejuvenate the corporation.

Computer penetration at TVOntario has reached critical mass. A system like THE LOOP could be the key to unlock the collective potential that has been seeking outlet for years. The creative explosion resulting from this empowering technology could be instrumental in our future survival.

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