

A Work Flow Fairy Tale

In most libraries, when a work group, team, or task force is created, the work flow goes something like this:

Once Upon a Time, a task force was created with the charge to produce a work product. The group met for the first time to discuss their charge. They brainstormed some ideas about the question they were asked to answer. Each member was assigned an aspect of the problem, and they went their separate ways. Individually, they conducted research, and they each sent the team an e-mail with their findings. During this research period, e-mails were flying around with attachments and links to documents, Web pages, articles, PowerPoint presentations, forwards from listservs, and anything else team members thought was important. These items, if the committee was lucky, got filed in a folder titled with the committee's name, but they were ordered by date, which was not very helpful.

Eventually, the group had enough documentation, and they scheduled another meeting to discuss their findings. They discussed. They debated. If this group lived in a healthy organization, the conversation was open and honest. The group decided to continue the debate over e-mail. The e-mails soon became disjointed. Members who did not constantly check their e-mail were likely to be left behind. Soon, members on opposite sides of the debate were e-mailing only each other, and sneaky uses of Cc: and Bcc: started occurring. E-mail made the debate worse, and the group again met in person.

An outside moderator, in the form of a goblin (this is a fairy tale, after all), was called in, and the group aired their grievances. The

goblin sorted out the problems, and the group reaffirmed their goals and were set again on the right path. With a renewed sense of purpose and with some of their dysfunction solved through the f2f mediation, the group assigned different parts of the report to different members. Soon, multiple versions of the same report were floating around. Merging the document was a pain, but it was completed through some hard work and a lot of time on the committee leader's part. The task force met one more time to review the document. One of the members made some final changes, and the report was presented to the Library Board. Everyone was exhausted, but had no time to dwell on that; there was work to do!

The End

Our task force could have had many fewer headaches, spent less time in f2f (face-to-face) meetings, used less e-mail, and been more productive if they had properly used the technology available to them. When chosen and implemented well, technology can enhance almost every aspect of the work environment. In fact, limiting workers to only traditional models of work can be harmful to a library, because the employees will not be able to benefit from and participate in the pool of global expertise.¹ The task force in the story needed lessons in virtual team management and in the tools that could have made their committee work feel fun again.

Note

1. Arvind Malhorta and Ann Majchrzak, "Virtual Workspace Technologies," *MIT Sloan Management Review* 46, no. 2 (Winter 2005): 11-14.