Abstract

Reaching effective and efficient collaboration is a complex but necessary task for organizations, especially now collaboration is increasingly distributed. Group support systems (GSS) are designed to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of group work and are a sine qua non for distributed settings. Experience and theory shows that implementing technology alone seldom is the answer to effective and efficient collaboration (Briggs, Adkins, Mittleman, Kruse, Miller and Nunamaker, 1999). Facilitation is one of the key success factors for effective electronic meetings.

The requirement to develop effective information systems that support facilitation becomes more critical than ever as decision making groups are larger and globally distributed. Developing technologies to support a facilitator is a promising avenue for creating even more successful (distributed) GSS use. Supporting the facilitator with technologies is addressed frequently in literature. The emphasis is often on the effect of different facilitation situations on group performance rather than on developing supporting technologies for the functions facilitators have to perform. The choice for
which facilitation aspect to support does not seem to be guided by a framework, theory or data. This paper presents an approach into attaining valid information for determining which facilitation functions are most challenging and require support from information technologies.

The approach is multi-pronged; first literature on facilitation functions is reviewed. Then a questionnaire is designed to collect data from over 300 facilitators around the globe. This questionnaire collects information on facilitation functions that are perceived as most demanding by facilitators. Finally the data is analyzed and presented for discussion.

Facilitation functions have received considerable attention in the literature and there are many lists of functions. Ackerman distinguishes three stages in a collaboration process pre-meeting, meeting and post-meeting. In this research the focus is on the meeting stage: facilitation during the collaboration process. Clawson and Bostrom identified these functions as the functions for which facilitators want to be trained the most. This research followed de Vreede, Niederman, and Paarlberg (2002) and combined the many lists of facilitation functions into one list. The resulting list was critically evaluated to include only facilitation functions that have the potential to be supported with information technologies. This resulted, for example, in the exclusion of personality aspects such as self-awareness.

Once the list of facilitation functions was developed, a comprehensive questionnaire was built. The questionnaire was designed to collect information on facilitation functions that are perceived as demanding by facilitators. The functions a facilitator performs can be demanding for several reasons, including mental effort and time required to prepare and execute a session. One goal of this research is to increase understanding of facilitator functions and develop technology to support facilitation. The questionnaire consists of four parts. The first part of the questionnaire contains descriptions of each of the facilitation functions and settings that are used in the questionnaire. The second part asks for background information from you such as the number of group meetings you have facilitated. The third part of the questionnaire focuses on facilitation functions in face-to-face meetings, without taking into account aspects such as the group size or pattern of collaboration.
Prior to mass distribution of the questionnaire a pilot study was run with thirteen facilitators, six from the USA and seven from the Netherlands. The initial results are reported in Hengst and Adkins (2005). In addition to completing the questionnaire, respondents were asked for any feedback with regard to the questionnaire. Modification was made to the original questionnaire based on the feedback.

The questionnaire was posted on a university website in June 2004. Participants were sought from personal contacts as well as from communities who were willing to contribute to facilitation research. For example, the International Association of Facilitators is one such community that published the link to the questionnaire on their website. The cooperative attitude of many fellow researchers and facilitators has allowed data collection from over 300 respondents, representing facilitators from over 30 countries in Europe, Asia, Far East, Africa and North America.

Data collection will stop on December 31, 2004. The final step will be to analyze the data, discuss the results and present conclusion. A full overview of the results will be published shortly.