

Can social networking help charities to maximise their collaborative experience?

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Earlier this year a survey on Collaborating in the Charity Sector was distributed to Charity Comms members. The survey was part of a Masters Dissertation on The Importance of Trust in Collaborations in the Charity Sector. A summarised version of the final dissertation is attached but key points are outlined below. Thank you very much to the people who took the time to reply and for all your comments.

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### **Collaboration?**

For the purposes of this survey collaboration was described as: *'when organisations work together on an objective that they could not achieve on their own'*. It can take the form of joint ventures, partnerships, networks, co-operatives, etc – the importance here is 'collaboration' not the formal structure or style that it takes. It also implies some form of reliance on partners in order to achieve objectives.

### **Collaborations in the Charity Sector – are they really successful?**

The results from the survey indicated a positive perception of collaboration in the charity sector. 69% of respondents said that their organisations' collaborations were successful, a significantly higher level than expected by private sector organisations.

In a 2007 nfpSynergy and Third Sector Survey 51% of their respondents used the word 'independent' to describe their organisation, a word seemingly at odds with the need for collaboration. However, when the respondents to this survey were asked why they thought collaborations in this sector were successful one of the key reasons was the need 'to collaborate or die'.

When asked why they felt the charity sector was more successful at collaborating than other sectors the reasons given were to do with the 'characteristics' of the sector - putting beneficiaries first, openness, willing to share and flexibility. There were concerns about the future with the pressure of increasingly competitive and sophisticated approaches being at odds with the current perceived characteristics.

Although the respondents saw their collaborations as being successful, only half continued past their original objectives, which seems a low continuation for such a highly perceived success rate. This could be for natural reasons – the aims have been achieved or are no longer relevant – yet there could be other opportunities for collaborating.

### **Success and Failure Factors**

The top factors suggested by respondents for both success and failure were the same:

- Trust;
- Communication;

- For success: clarity, clear aims and shared goals and for failure: poor planning and a lack of clarity.

These all stress the importance of the pre-collaboration and planning stages to the overall success.

### **The Collaborative Context**

Both current literature and the respondents of this survey see the sector as being extremely high in both uncertainty and risk. 90% of the respondents felt that collaborative performance can affect their organisation's reputation and 62% felt that collaborations could put their charities at risk. 80% indicated that their partners are also competitors yet only a quarter felt any uncertainty over their partner's behaviour or objectives and only a third of respondents said that their organisations tried to protect its interests from collaborative partners.

Collaboration in the charities sector illustrates the diversity of the sector with a wide range of organisation size, focus and type. 75% of the respondents indicated that their organisations were involved in more than 1 collaboration, and 59% of the respondents indicated that each of their collaborations involved between 2 to 5 other organisational partners. Each collaboration and each organisation involved will have its own objectives and goals, as will each individual involved at every level. The complexity of objectives and goals – hidden or shared – has immense implications for the resources of charities. Collaboration has evolved from cheque donations or one-off events to time and resource consuming marketing programmes. The survey results indicated clearly that the key success – and failure – factors for collaborations came from the pre-Collaboration and planning stages. But these stages take time – how much time do charity managers have for each collaboration they are involved in? Collaboration is challenging at the best of times but the more partners involved the harder it becomes to manage the different stakeholders' needs, perceptions and objectives. The drain on staff time is significant, particularly amongst the smaller charities who also manage multiple collaborations.

### **How do you measure success?**

Respondents indicated that their partners tend to vary in size and amount of power and that they tend to use different success measures and structures for each one. This healthy flexibility is cited as one of the reasons for such high success rates but it also suggests little formality in how success measures are identified and agreed. How many of the charities agree their success measures and also revisit these at the end of the collaboration to identify whether it has actually been successful for all the partners involved and what they have learnt from it? One organisation may be very happy with what the collaboration has achieved but are the other partners – and what are these other partners saying about their experience to other potential partners? Is this a factor in the low continuation rate of collaborations?

### **Does Power complicate things?**

Just over half of the respondents felt that collaborations between partners with unequal levels of power were more problematic than between those of equal power. Those who were concerned saw the problems being more to do with understanding the affects of power rather than any deliberate misuse of it. Interestingly, it was the larger charities that had more concerns.

## **Is Trust Really the Only Answer?**

Trust is seen as an underlying ethos of the sector and the results of the survey confirmed its importance to successful collaboration – 100% agreed that it was vital for success. 82% also saw trust as being the most effective partnership aid for collaboration between partners with different levels of power. However, trust is not the only answer as too much trust can also be damaging – over-reliance on a partner can limit an organisation's creativity and responsiveness, which are crucial in such a dynamic and uncertain environment.

Trust occurs at many levels – between organisations, work groups, individuals and also between these different levels. Trust at one level does not mean that there is trust at another. Trust is also an individual judgement and collaboration ultimately takes place between individuals. People don't trust because they are told to but because it feels right yet the sheer nature of collaboration takes people outside of their comfort zones affecting their own vulnerability and trust tolerance levels.

Reputations are also seen as increasingly important, particularly as a protection against time of crisis or uncertainty and the respondents rated it highly for collaborative success. A good reputation will enhance the trust held for an organisation and help carry it through the difficult times.

## **The Role of Social Embeddedness**

Social embeddedness refers to the extent that an organisation is integrated into its social networks. It refers to a 'shared history' and a common language and understanding. Such common understandings can save valuable time as managers can work from a shared foundation, this shared history of communication and common achievement. Although the survey respondents agreed that their social networks are vital for working in this sector, no one suggested it as an aid to collaborative success and only 44% saw them as a means of protecting their organisation's interests. Yet social embeddedness can do so much to enhance collaborative performance and protect organisation's interest – it can offer:

- The confidence that you can understand, and even predict partner behaviour;
- Established shared norms and language that facilitate speedy responses to change and aid communication;
- Knowledge of your partners so you can better protect your organisation;
- Increased trust – both through knowing each other and by deterring actions that will affect the shared wider social network;
- Less threat of power exploitation and greater benefit of doubt over partner actions;
- Commitment and pride of a shared history, not wanting to let the other down;
- Shared identity increasing the perception of interdependence and common fate facilitating shared goals;
- Clarity and familiarity enhancing transparency and monitoring;
- Developing shared values and mutual benefits;
- The willingness to let one partner achieve their objectives first as you know your organisation will get their turn next time/later;

- Improved planning through close cooperation and improved synergy;
- Cheaper monitoring and governance costs.

Social networks offer managers an excellent resource for sourcing and gaining information on partners as well as further collaboration opportunities. They also offer charities a means of protecting both their reputations as good partners and also their organisation's interests by deterring negative behaviour by partners. Only 29% of the respondents said that they used their social networks in such a way.

### **The Future and the Role of Social Embeddedness**

Charity sector managers work in a dynamic, uncertain and challenging environment with limited resources. Collaborations are part of their working life and take their time and attention as well as other core resources. Their effectiveness needs to be maximised and making their reputation and social networks work harder for them could be a positive step in developing success and protecting their organisations against increasing competitiveness.

The dissertation argues that social networks, if more formally organised and used, could help charities not only to identify creative collaborations and collaborative partners, but also help protect their interests and reputations. Contracts alone can be expensive and inflexible and in such dynamic environments cannot cover every eventuality. A strong social position and reputation will help the organisations to not only source and attract new partners but also maintain a strong bargaining position as objectives and structures are negotiated and agreed.

Although social networks could make a vital contribution to collaborative success there is an important balance to maintain. As with trust, too strong a reliance or integration can restrict an organisation's ability and/or willingness to monitor their business environment and identify other opportunities.

It must be acknowledged that the survey respondents can only provide answers from their perspective and experience. However the results from this survey has supported earlier findings that collaborations in this sector are perceived as being more successful. With increasing environmental pressures and competitiveness, charity managers will need to look at how they can maintain this success level and also maximise future collaborations – social networks can offer a valuable and under-utilised tool for this.