



# HORIZONS



Insight

## The Heartbeat of On-line Collaboration “Giving a monkey a scalpel doesn’t make him a surgeon”



The use of Web 2.0 and social media is rapidly evolving within the Government of Canada. Recent experiences, however, have proven that a number of critical assumptions about these tools are not supported. As a consequence, new ideas are emerging that support better application of collaborative on-line processes.

For example, “*if we build it, they will come*” is not sufficient to ensure success in an online project, traditionally; the platform developed to engage participants has been blamed if a project fails. But a platform is just that – a platform, a tool intended to support a process. Ensuring success is far more complex and requires a culture shift and guiding behaviours that build an engagement model that encourages collaboration and participation.

Policy Horizons Canada has developed a methodology that understands that working on a collaborative project is often only one part of someone’s responsibilities. Setting up a virtual space and expecting the work to be done through the wisdom of crowds is not sufficient. In fact, it would appear that collaborative projects need three elements to succeed:

- A community – team members;
- A place where content can be accessed and built upon – the platform; and
- Work-related activities to produce content – the heartbeat.

### A Community of Dedicated Team Members

A collaborative community needs a goal and set deliverables to succeed. Ideally, these need to be developed and accepted by the community – a shared goal. While a management team or project manager can set parameters for the deliverables, all members of the team need to buy into the process. Members of the team must also be honest and communicate what they need from the process and how much they can commit (time, ideas, and resources) to the team.

Projects run by Policy Horizons Canada have shown that for every action that the team members are expected to undertake, circumstances must be created to support its completion, such as encouraging the team to respond to questions and engage in conversation. It is also important to remember that in any collaborative team power laws exist:

- *Lurkers*: People, who read, but never really contribute (90%);
- *Contributors*: users who read and casually or intermittently post (9%); and
- *Core users*: users who contribute regularly and are the backbone of any user group (1%)

The project management team must adjust their tactics according to the level of activity they expect or require from their group. With aggressive interaction and stimulation by the project management team, participation numbers can be improved. For instance, Policy Horizons Canada's *canada@150* project, 10% were lurkers; 75% were contributors; and 15% were core users.

## The Platform

The platform is an enabling technology that provides a space for team members to post documents and work together. The actual technology is not as important, but training is vital and often a team will not succeed if there is a lack of understanding or experience with the tool. Not all participants will be technologically savvy and project managers may be required to adjust the approach to level the playing field.



Policy Horizons Canada has found that pairing up users can speed-up training by providing one-on-one support at the team level. Allowing a group to set norms together (language of wikis, editing practices, etiquette and expectations) is another important aspect of the training that Horizons stresses. The platform doesn't matter, what is important is that the team decides together how they want to and need to use the technology to support their work plan. This conversation should also include how the team wishes to manage misconceptions that might arise because of the virtual nature of the collaboration.

## The Heartbeat

Horizons characterize activities in a collaborative process as a pulse, or the heartbeat of that process. Activities, including specific milestones and deliverables, should be equally spaced throughout the project's duration. Activities build upon each other and should lead to the project goal or output. A project manager needs to schedule critical activities to ensure a regular pulse – the heartbeat.

Horizons has found that building up to complex activities takes time. At the outset content must be easy to read, digest and seek reasonable contribution by participants. Posting long background documents often provides no value-added, but synthesis documents or summaries of conversations highlighting core ideas have been well received. The process acknowledges

that often participating in a collaborative horizontal project is not necessarily a core function for all participants, but rather requires time “*off the side of their desk*”. For this reason, it can require extra time and care to begin slowly, establish relevancy and credibility, while increasing expectations in terms of contributions over time.

## Conclusion

Working in a Web 2.0 environment is very much like working on any other project. Finding the right vision or objective for the team to coalesce around, supporting them and seeding their activities, and providing spaces for them to come together all ensure a successful project. The only difference is the nature and relative newness of the tools and technology.

## Reference

Nielsen, Jakob. 2006. [Participation Inequality: Encouraging more Users to Contribute](#).

This article was a collaborative effort lead by Blaise Hébert with input from Tabatha Soltay, Greg Wilburn, and Steffen Christensen.