COLLABORATIVE OVERLOAD

Reclaiming Your Day

How Successful People Manage Collaborative Overload

Rob Cross
Babson College

Sheila Heen
Triad Consulting

Deb Zehner
Connected Commons

Introduction to Collaborative Overload

"The collaborative demands eventually wore me down. Constant email, international travel often to places that are difficult to get around, calls at all hours of the day and night due to the global nature of the role … I was exhausted when at home but, even worse, I just didn't feel good about myself. You begin to internalize all of the different collaborations and demands and it literally makes you into someone you don't want to be at home."

— Senior executive of a global technology firm

The collaborative intensity of work has exploded over the past decade. Reasons for this are numerous: transition to matrix-based organization structures, increased complexity of products and services, globalization, email proliferation, adoption of collaborative tools, growing importance of social media, and so on. To be sure, there are benefits to greater collaboration — companies can more seamlessly serve demanding clients, for instance — but the drawback has been that people's workloads have become overwhelming. Collaborative time demands have risen by more than 50 percent over the past decade, and most knowledge workers or leaders now spend 85 percent or more of their work time on email, in meetings and on the phone. As one distraught leader noted, "I have so many different kinds of topics demanding attention that the pressure feels enormous. It's overwhelming to switch from one to the other and make thoughtful decisions anymore."

To help address this critical issue, we conducted both quantitative and qualitative research over the past several years. First, we worked with 20 global organizations in a range of fields including software, consumer products, professional services, manufacturing, and life sciences to model the collaborative time demands that employees face. We employed social network analysis to quantify the costs of those interactions and their effect on productivity, engagement scores, performance and voluntary attrition. Second, to help find a solution, we conducted 200 interviews with this set of organizations – 100 men and 100 women overall. In each case we used the network analyses to identify efficient collaborators – those that provided the greatest impact in organizational networks but took the least amount of their colleagues' time. Our goal was to discover what these exemplars did that enabled them to perform and thrive in collaboratively intense work today.

What we found was surprising. To be sure, technology, demanding bosses, difficult clients and inefficient co-workers were problematic. But for most of those interviewed, these time drains were matched by another enemy — people's own beliefs and actions. The good news is that there are steps everyone can take to greatly alleviate collaborative overload. And they don't require heroic actions; typically doing just four or five things differently can enable people to claw back 18 to 24 percent of their collaborative time.

Understanding Collaborative Overload

Two Types of Overload

Who is paying attention to this phenomenon that is dramatically draining organizations and their employees? In most companies, the answer is "no one" despite the fact that consumption of a valuable resource (employees' time) has gone through the roof. (See insert 1: "The Costs of Collaborative Inefficiency.") In fact, most leaders are so swamped themselves — defensively trying to manage the next big corporate initiative, moving from meeting to meeting at a frenetic pace, and keeping their own email inboxes from overflowing — that they simply don't have the time or transparency to proactively manage the collaborative demands of their employees. The outcome is that it's up to each employee to take active measures to avoid becoming overwhelmed.

To combat collaborative overload, we first need to understand the way it happens. In our research, we found that the phenomenon generally occurs in one of two ways: in spurts (**"the surge"**) or as a relentless increase in demands (**"the slow burn"**).

Insert 1: The Costs of Collaborative Inefficiency

THE COSTS OF COLLABORATIVE INEFFICIENCY

Emails, meetings, phone calls and instant messaging can speed communication and enhance collaboration, but using them inefficiently can result in considerable costs to individuals, teams and organizations:

Diminished engagement and career satisfaction that spreads.

When collaborative overload overwhelms people and keeps them from work and personal priorities, employee engagement falters and burnout increases. Over time, dissatisfaction gets voiced, often igniting similar feelings in others.

Increased employee turnover.

Employee churn results in loss of human capital and disruption to people's work. When well-connected individuals depart, it's not just knowledge and human capital that walk out the door; how others get their work done through collaboration enabled by the departing individual is lost as well.

Explosion of an invisible cost structure.

Time spent in collaborative activities imposes a very real cost that is under-managed today. This cost includes not just time wasted (the salary and benefits of people involved) but also opportunity costs (when someone can't get work done by an overloaded colleague) and fixed-asset utilization inefficiencies (when decisions get slowed or derailed in overly inclusive cultures).

Reduced organizational agility and learning.

Collaborative overload diminishes an organization's ability to rapidly mobilize resources to either capitalize on opportunities or respond to threats. It also locks businesses into unproductive patterns that hurt organizational learning over time.

① *The Surge*

The surge can take the form of a role transition — often a promotion — where collaborative strategies must become more efficient to be successful in the new role. But it can also take the form of an assignment from a boss to take on a side project like fixing the on-boarding process in a global insurance organization, harmonizing compensation for partners in a consulting firm or delivering functionality in a software product required by a market change. Or it can occur via a request from a colleague or influential peer you do not want to let down – for example, helping stand up a call center, playing a subject matter expert role in a project that has you travelling for weeks, or providing graphics expertise for a new product launch. And, perhaps worst, surges can be a project you jump into so that you don't miss out, because you feel obligated to help or because you get a sense of worth and identity from being in the thick of things.

Consider two executives (from different companies) in our research. In the beginning, Kathy's and Mike's experiences were very similar. They were both tapped by their bosses to take on significant, new responsibilities in addition to their already full workloads. Kathy, a call center manager of approximately 200 people, was asked to manage one of her peer's call centers as well, immediately doubling the number of people she would need to manage. But how could she say no? It would free up her peer, also a friend, to commit 100 percent of her time to a major company transition. Kathy knew her workload would skyrocket, but also knew it would be the right thing for the business, and after all, "she was not a 'no' person." Her peer's team was strong and if she could just "keep the train on the tracks" for a year or so, there would be a huge payoff for the organization on the other side. Always looking at the bright side, she thought, "It would be a good stretch opportunity and a great chance to learn about other pieces of the business."

Mike was already managing multiple streams of work — one in particular had the entire team working day and night, seven days a week, to turn around a segment of business — when he was approached by his boss, who was the primary sponsor of a new project. Would Mike lead a stream of work to help build out a new unit that would provide a single face to the market? Mike's skills were exactly what were needed: a mix of customer-facing commercial, network and medical experience. In addition, it was an opportunity that would give him great exposure to senior management while developing new skills. Although he was excited to be nominated for this challenging role, he knew he had to be there for his team who had been working so hard; he could not let them down. He felt he had no choice but to try to make both jobs work.

② *The Slow Burn*

The slow burn is perhaps more insidious. It is a product of incremental increases in the volume, diversity and pace of collaborative demands over time as personal effectiveness leads to larger networks and scope of responsibilities. As we become more efficient, we often develop a pattern of taking on more work, and our identity starts to get intertwined with accomplishment. We derive a sense of purpose from helping, or identity from being in the know. We tend not to question what we are doing as we add tasks or work late into the night on email. And, of course, this identity and way of working are welcomed by our colleagues; as our reputation for ability and responsiveness develops, people in our networks bring more work and requests to us.

Consider Ellen, who had worked for a Fortune 100 technology company for 18 years. She was fiercely driven, took pride in her work and was used to executing fast. She liked being successful and outperforming those around her. As she describes it, "I always felt I had to do more. I had to go further. I had to be the best. I had to save the day." She liked her peers and became the go-to person for them since she was good at problem-solving and cutting through the bureaucracy to get things done. As a result, she would "become their life raft and then would almost drown." Over the years this mentality, combined with a list of projects that were "beyond the realm of doable," left Ellen feeling burned out and exhausted. In addition, she was gaining weight and her health was in decline.

Patty's experience was very different from Ellen's. As a young single mom, her primary motivation was to be a good provider for her son. She took an admin position at a bank to work herself through college, passed the Series 7 securities exam to become a registered investment representative, and advanced into positions of increasing responsibility over 10 years. The position was demanding, the culture was cutthroat, and senior management had zero communications with the staff — a toxic environment overall. Patty worked non-stop, always in survival mode. She knew what it was like to go hungry and didn't ever want her son to experience that. But work took a big toll on her, leaving her miserable and depressed. She lacked a sense of purpose in her job. However, a good paycheck and close relationships with some colleagues kept her on the "hamster wheel" at the bank. She felt she had no choice.

Tackling Collaborative Overload

Making Decisions and Taking Actions

The first lesson our research revealed is that although we may not always feel this way, the reality is that we often have far more control over our work and choices than we might think. Both Kathy and Mike learned a tremendous amount by suddenly taking on their enormous new responsibilities. They had to learn to work differently or they would drown. Even though the overall volume of collaborative demands rose exponentially, the actions they took made them 20 to 30 percent more efficient. As Kathy said a year after the experience, "The volume of collaboration has gone up, but proportionately my workload has gone down. If I didn't start operating differently … there's no way I could have managed through that surge in work."

The situation was markedly different for Ellen and Patty. As it turned out, Ellen decided to quit; in between jobs, she took time for deep introspection to figure out how to balance her life. For one thing, she now has clearer boundaries; she will give all of herself 12 hours a day, Monday through Friday, but won't work nights or weekends. Moreover, she is now much more willing to say "no." When she helps others, it is in very specific ways that have maximum impact; she no longer becomes their life raft. In fact, as she puts it, "I learned that 'no' was not a binary word. Rather, I help people see the priorities I am managing and then ask them 'when?' Giving them transparency into my competing demands, and also some ability to influence how we get things done, has been a game changer for me."

For her part, Patty was laid off due to a restructuring and came to the realization that she would leave her career in finance. "It was not who I am," she recalled thinking. Like Ellen, Patty used her time away from work to figure out what she wanted from her next job. She ended up joining a large media organization to work in its cutting-edge learning and development area, with a boss who was empowering, fostered creativity and provided a sense that what Patty was doing was critical. She was quickly promoted into a position where she could have a direct impact on people's lives; today she is fulfilled by helping others find

their purpose. Like Ellen, Patty is now much more aware of her work-life boundaries and is unapologetic about saying "no" at her job to make time for herself and her family. Still, the balance between her professional and personal lives is not always easy to maintain. "It's an inner struggle I have," she says, "and I don't know if it will ever go away."

Almost universally, people like Kathy, Mike, Ellen and Patty who have become adept at working collaboratively told us stories of making profound changes in their lives. They put up boundaries to work, anchored in groups outside of work, managed their role differently, leveraged technology to become more efficient, and engaged in a set of practices to streamline collaborative work. In aggregate, these actions fall into three broad categories that people can adopt to significantly decrease their collaborative overload: challenge beliefs, impose structure and alter behaviors.

Interestingly, those who became effective collaborators by making important changes to their lives initially did so with great trepidation, only to discover their worries were generally unwarranted. "People adapted around me immediately," recalled one participant in our study. "To be honest, it was a scenario where I said, 'Why didn't I do this a year ago?' … but it was also shocking to understand how little people actually needed me and ways they could work around me." The lesson here is that most of us have stories we tell ourselves — often unconsciously and deeply rooted in our identities — that get us in trouble in terms of collaborative overload.

To be sure, there's no silver bullet — no technology, management practice or self-help principle — that can solve collaborative overload for everyone, as people's needs differ by personality, hierarchical level and work context. But the problem is not intractable. The trick is proactively focusing on a set of practices across these three domains: challenge beliefs, impose structure and alter behaviors.

Challenge Beliefs

People often are not fully aware of how beliefs around their identity, reputation and need for control can create unnecessary collaborative demands. Yet most of us can recall situations in which we debated with ourselves about whether to jump into some project, and, despite having strong reservations at the time, did so anyway. Then, three

weeks later, we were left wondering how we allowed ourselves to get pulled into the extra workload. Overload in these situations is self-imposed and not driven by email, meetings, demanding bosses, difficult clients and overly inclusive cultures. To combat that, we must create an awareness of the one or two personal drivers that cause us problems.

18 To 24 percent of your time can be reclaimed using these three levers.

Challenge Beliefs
- Assess Identity & Reputation Influences
- Manage Anxiety & Need For Control

Impose Structure
- Orient to North Star Objectives
- Adapt Role & Interdependencies

Alter Behaviors
- Ensure Channel Efficiency
- Create Efficient Interaction Norms

---

❶ *Be Cautious of Pursuit of Accomplishment*

Overload can be self-generated when people consciously or subconsciously take on excessive collaborative work or help others, often because of a sense of pride or gratification from accomplishment. For many, this is an implicit thought process — tightly tied to their identity and sense of self-worth — that guides their choices to take on work. It happens on both a large and small scale, with the tendency being particularly difficult to combat when smaller, incremental requests and activities provide short-term boosts of satisfaction, such as from giving direction on a small project when time should be focused on more ambiguous or challenging work where one can add unique value.

What to do:

- Engage where you have the greatest unique value to add. Be wary of a sense of accomplishment from answering emails in great depth or providing solutions to routine requests for help. Rather, give partial direction, create a connection for the requestor, and then remove yourself from the interaction to free your time to pursue work that's important to your objectives and to build capability around you.

- Anchor your day-to-day decisions in the axiom that saying "yes" to something always means saying "no" to something else (e.g., competing work, longer-term professional objectives, personal goals, family and friends). Bring this

calculus to the forefront of your decisions to combat the tendency to always say "yes."

- Change how you derive your sense of purpose and worth, shifting from being recognized for your own expertise to helping others develop and become valued for their own capability and expertise. This transition can be especially difficult for first-level leaders who often have been promoted due to their reputation for expertise and accomplishment in specific domains. However, it is critical and one that all efficient collaborators must make to ensure that overload doesn't short circuit their careers. In the words of one leader: "It's more about growing my people than growing me now. … I have grown to love this aspect of my work but it was not natural at first."

❷ *Circumscribe the Limits of Your Expertise*

People trap themselves when they place too great a premium on proving their worth by knowing all the answers. An unwillingness to take risks with ideas and to admit, within reason, when they don't know the answer but can find out drives a number of unproductive collaborative activities. For example, this tendency will often lead people to spend hours preparing for meetings or writing bulletproof emails that do not engage others or co-create solutions. An excessive fear of being wrong can also drive people to use email and other forms of communication to cover their bases, which then consumes the time of many others

unproductively. This can be a difficult trap for less-secure junior employees or those just learning to navigate client demands, but it can be just as hard for new leaders who insert themselves as experts rather than ask how they can best contribute to and support a team's efforts.

What to do:

- Very early in a group's lifecycle (i.e., immediately) make clear what you feel you do and don't know relevant to the work. Research shows that identifying the boundaries of what you know is important for getting people to trust you in the area you claim competence. This also creates space for you (and others) to safely say when you might not have an answer immediately but can find out.

- Whether junior or senior, have the courage to ask how you can best contribute to an effort. Be authentic and do not let patterns get established that keep you from being able to engage productively. For example, one leader in our study always starts a transition into a new role by setting up multiple one-on-one meetings with employees so that he can learn their aspirations and greatest pain points. He then makes it his top priority to remove some of those pain points and finds one opportunity that helps each person on his team develop in a way that he or she desires.

❸ Beware the Desire for Closure

People differ in their desire for structure and closure. Sometimes too great a pursuit of closure can result in sending partially thought-out emails or in making poorly structured assignments to move work off one's plate. Clearing out emails late at night can yield a sense of accomplishment or closure, but it can also become problematic when the tone or content results in unnecessary stress for the recipients, when it leads to their pursuing misaligned objectives, or when a lack of clarity results in the recipients repeatedly asking for more information.

What to do:

- Remind yourself that closure — or an empty email inbox — is not the goal. Let non-priority work or requests either wait or fall off your radar screen altogether. Give yourself permission to not answer all emails or attend all meetings. See if people find ways to execute around you or if they persist with a second request to you, and adapt your

work accordingly. As one leader noted, "I used to go to every meeting on my calendar because I thought that was important. I have come to the realization that if they really need me they will come find me. I am probably skipping 30 percent of my meetings now and work seems to be getting done just fine without me."

- Don't let your personal desire for closure result in you forcing a solution. Instead, value the tension of alternative viewpoints that might result in improved solutions. People with a high need for closure and structure can often come into a meeting (or send emails) to solve a problem in a way that decreases their own cognitive burden. Although this process might make them feel better, it can result in solving the wrong problem, which in turn will increase downstream collaborative demands and have a negative impact on project success, team morale and engagement.

❹ Learn to Tolerate Ambiguity

Efficient collaborators tend to have a greater tolerance for ambiguity. They are comfortable being directionally correct, moving work ahead in early stages of projects and adapting as new information comes in. Embracing ambiguity helps them initiate progress more efficiently, with fewer collaborative and decision-making interactions — many of which can later prove worthless as experience derails, or reveals the flaws in, overly detailed plans. As one executive advised, "You cannot be too worried about getting the right decision as there are always big unknowns. The key is to make a 'roughly right' decision, move ahead, and manage adaptive processes."

What to do:

- Look to produce a solution in 20 minutes that helps move a plan ahead rather than spending three hours and consuming others' time to get to a more accurate solution or employ a more thorough process.

- Push yourself to make more decisions in the face of ambiguity. When possible, explore possibilities, initiate solution development and learn as progress unfolds, rather than trying to perfect a plan in the early stages. Too often, the seemingly easier course is to put things off and request more information, which then creates churn, gridlock and disengagement in the network around you.

Impose Structure

A second way that more efficient collaborators claw back time is by imposing structure in their collaborative activities. This can come in the form of clarity on "North Star" objectives — the strengths they want to employ in their work and the values they want to live through their career — that they calendar around each week. Or it can come through more carefully specifying role demands and setting expectations of collaborative interdependencies around them

— shifting decision rights, information requests and portions of role to bring them into those collaborations where they add unique value. Rather than cede control and fall into patterns dictated by other people's objectives, the more efficient collaborators build structure into the network to streamline their collaborations.

❶ *Deploy a Network Strategy*

Broadly speaking, people can play either offense or defense through the approach they take to building a network. Offense means having a North Star and progressing to it over time through the connections that an individual initiates. It also means building non-insular networks — those rich in boundary-spanning collaborations inside a company and investments in relationships outside the organization. Research shows that less insular networks are critical to our confidence to say "no" and not simply relinquish authority to others. This is because, in part, less insular networks help prevent our identity from being tied up in any one group, a result that makes us unidimensional and susceptible to fluctuations in that sphere of life. We know that even if a decision hurts our opportunities in one context, we'll have other opportunities through the various contacts in our greater network. Playing defense typically means allowing our network interactions and collaborative demands to define us. It often results in our getting unidimensional in work, caught up in politics trying to please influential members of a group and living reactively. As one leader put it: "Playing defense sucks. You are always reactive and living in fear. The only way to get out of it is to get clarity on who you are and what you want to do, and start forging a path and network that enables you to get there."

What to do:

- Be proactive in network development and focus on spheres you should invest in for depth or complementary expertise. Start with people you know for introductions, or reach out to those you don't know with a request to explore overlaps or complementarity in work. Then, seek to engage highly connected people. One easy strategy is to always end meetings by asking, "Who else should I be speaking with and can you connect me?" A large proportion of the time these second steps will get you to the true influencers in networks. Although only a small number of these interactions might yield fruit, the ones that do are often career defining, as you'll benefit from well-connected peoples' networks, influence and legitimacy. One leader in our study reserved two hours every Friday for network activities. During that time, she first identified and initiated potentially valuable connections in her current network and through LinkedIn. Then she publicly thanked people in her group for modeling certain collaborative behaviors, encouraging others to adopt them rather than funneling all work and decisions through her.

- Build non-insular networks through external connections and boundary-spanning collaborations within your organization. In general, four categories of ties are important from a performance standpoint:

  - ties to adjacent expertise for innovation
  - ties to those in similar roles but in different functions, geographies or even companies for sharing best practices
  - ties to those in similar roles for career advice and development
  - ties to those who can inform on the political landscape (that is, ties to people who know a group you are trying to influence or work through and thus can help you position your ideas or engage influencers)

People with less insular networks see the world and their influence in it differently. Building a rich, non-insular network will provide you with a sense of influence and power, enabling you to more easily decline certain collaborative requests so that you can plot your own course. Moreover, you'll be able to tap into your network for "plan B" if your current role is no longer satisfying (or is eliminated). In contrast, allowing insular networks to develop around you and focusing excessively on politics, power and influence within a given group will have the opposite effect in terms of the breadth of possibilities you see and the influence you feel you have over your own work decisions and life. One good tip here is to take 30 minutes every week to look through LinkedIn for ties that you've not leveraged in a while. Dormant ties with valuable expertise might be at your fingertips but are often forgotten.

- Invest in outside networks. Spend time with at least one and usually two groups outside of work that pull you into different domains and help you value activities beyond work. Our research showed over and over again that these outside activities can be just about anything, including community efforts; physical activities; intellectual pursuits; social groups (e.g., book clubs) or other endeavors that "feed the soul" like music, religion, art or poetry. The important thing is that the activities be with other people – not just burning off steam by yourself on a treadmill – to pull you into groups that care about different things in their lives. These investments help you become less unidimensional and keep your self-esteem from being tied solely to work. In turn this results in people taking more courageous and well-informed actions over time that pull them to their priorities.

❷ *Conduct Periodic Calendar and Email Reviews*

We all fall into patterns of attending meetings, accepting requests and providing expertise and information when we could have limited our involvement. Sometimes this happens due to inertia, when we are overly accustomed to attending meetings or making certain kinds of decisions. At other times it occurs due to personal obligations we feel to people in our network. And at still other times it results from concerns we might have about the signal we send when we don't show up to a given meeting or engage with others in a certain way. In isolation, these collaborative demands do not seem like a big deal. But in aggregate they can cumulate to significant amounts of time that can invisibly absorb our days. Periodically reflecting on these demands and offloading those that we don't add value to, as well as those that do not provide value to us, is critical to becoming collaboratively efficient.

What to do:

- Look back four months in your calendar. Scan through each day with an eye to recurring activities or meetings that you can shift to less-connected people as a developmental opportunity. (Note: Do not simply look back one or two weeks because people have a natural tendency to justify every activity when they are too close to it.) Push yourself to question your involvement. If you can't identify opportunities to let go of routine activities and meetings, consider tapping a coach, team member or significant other to help you.

- Reflect carefully on the nature of the decisions you are getting pulled into. Very often, routine decisions become embedded in organizations because someone once made a mistake and the kneejerk reaction was to create a policy, process or procedure that consumes an enormous amount of collaborative time. To reduce this kind of collaborative time burden, try to identify four or five opportunities to shift a process or nominate alternative go-to people for routine decisions.

- Finally, reflect on calendar items and subject lines in emails to identify routine informational requests or times when people were seeking you out for expertise in areas that are no longer central to your success. Often people develop a reputation and trusted network connections that result in others continuing to seek them out for expertise in domains that were important in prior roles but not the current one. In some instances, helping someone can be important to maintaining a key relationship. But in many other cases, it can impose a significant collaborative time sink. This can be avoided by designating colleagues as go-to people (especially talent you are trying to develop or newcomers you want to pull into the network) or by making information and your vision widely consumable via a website or blog.

❸ *Proactively Shape the Expectations of Others*

In most organizations, roles are not prescribed in detail. What people perceive to be their role demands is often heavily influenced by inertia and the perception of others' expectations in the network. For example, people often feel they must respond instantaneously to a leader's requests. Proactively managing such expectations for response times can help decrease collaborative overload, but the expectations must be set ahead of time. Alternatively, people often fall into a trap of believing they need to comment on all the work or ideas of others to show their engagement and appreciation. In measured amounts this can be valuable, but it can also set off rapid response cycles and expectations that a person will always comment or engage. Proactively setting expectations on the level of engagement and clarifying that a non-response does not mean a lack of interest or appreciation can help stem this type of overload.

What to do:

- Identify spheres of your work where you are engaged in non-value-added activities driven by inertia or expectations of others (e.g., reports, status updates, routine meetings). Consider stopping some things and see if people notice or if they can get information or help in other ways. For example, one mid-tier leader in our study was feeling overwhelmed when she inherited new responsibilities after a peer quit. But she used that as an opportunity to question whether she should continue doing a time-consuming report she had been regularly preparing for years because the president was used to seeing information in a certain way. She told her boss that she couldn't continue preparing the report, and after she dropped it no one even noticed.

- Consider whether you might be overly responsive to others' requests. On select items it's obviously important to be very responsive, but when rapid response becomes too onerous a norm, it can drive collaborative demands and stress levels deep into the network. Get ahead of this by setting up meetings to clarify the response times needed and prioritization guidelines.

- Set expectations that you value those who solve problems collaboratively and independent of you (versus those who need your approval or face time). In meetings and group communications, informally recognize such individuals to celebrate that kind of problem-solving. Also, look for opportunities to distribute work and collaborations in the network in a way that might avoid collaborative demands coming to you. For example, consider pairing high and low performers; this can help deflect demands coming to you by better leveraging the expertise of the team while also providing developmental support to the lower performers.

❹ *Align Tasks to Network to Scale Work Beyond You*

Efficient collaborators do not think of work as self-assigned tasks. Instead they:

1. envision a project or opportunity as a set of activities
2. have rich awareness of others' expertise and map activities onto those in their network
3. enroll people in those activities by knowing each individual's aspirations
4. step out of the way or engage only when they have unique value to contribute

By thinking of the work and network simultaneously, efficient collaborators even at the most junior levels can scale accomplishments beyond their own abilities.

What to do:

- Invest time to develop an awareness of others' expertise and aspirations. This can be done by scheduling network development into your calendar as a structured part of work, holding one-on-one meetings with employees and colleagues, and using social media to keep up with

people. Efficient collaborators understand this is a critical contributor to success. Knowing expertise in the network broadens the way you conceptualize problems and solutions. Consultants are better able to propose solutions that clients can implement successfully; bankers can deliver more holistic financial solutions than their competitors; software developers are able to write better apps because of a broader and deeper knowledge of the business requirements; and so on. In addition, knowing people's aspirations informs how best to enroll them and diffuse your ownership (and collaborative burden) of a project.

Alter Behaviors

Challenging our beliefs and imposing structure on our collaborative work are two crucial processes, but people also must make those changes stick by breaking bad habits and altering behavior (See insert 3: "Seven Habits of Highly Inefficient Collaborators."). Specifically, effective collaborators adjust their use of different communication mediums and channels, and they promote efficient network norms to increase the efficiency of their collaborative work. They will, for example, offer people only half the meeting time that's been requested. Or they are quick to abandon email when they sense disagreement. That said, simply altering one or two behaviors in isolation will only lead to small, incremental gains. The most effective collaborators alter their behaviors in context with challenging their beliefs and imposing a structure to streamline the time spent on collaborations.

① *Use Different Communication and Collaboration Mediums Judiciously*

Many people's calendars are consumed with meetings. Research shows that work output and efficiency are greatly improved when those meetings follow an appropriate degree of structure and process for the task at hand. Time spent on email can also be a significant source of collaborative overload. The ability for people to reach out across units, hierarchical levels, geography and even organizational lines through email creates an enormous collaborative burden that is often invisible to all but the recipient. As an alternative, instant messaging (IM) can be very effective in efficiently getting information quickly from others but only after those relationships have been established. The informality of the technology enables one to send a quick request, where an email might take three or four times as long to draft and proof, or a phone call might consume 10 to 15 minutes including catch up or personal connection time. Finally, virtual collaboration tools like videoconferencing can yield tremendous benefits but they must be used for the right purpose at the right time.

What to do:
- With meetings, it's important to have pre-reads so that face-to-face or virtual time is spent on the best use of attendees'

- Engage others in co-creation of solutions early on so that they feel ownership and can begin building collaborative relationships that will allow you to step out of the middle of the network. One leader's steadfast rule is: "I never do anything alone." He consistently brings people to meetings, client interactions and lunches to engage others early on and to diffuse ownership of work that might emerge from these interactions. This stands in contrast to less effective people who hold onto an idea until they think it's developed and then must invest time and effort to get others enlisted, up to speed and connected to the right people in the network.

expertise. Norms should also be set for people to be fully present (not answering emails or texts) and contributing concisely and on point or not at all if they disagree (rather than contributing solely for the sake of status or visibility). Meetings should end five minutes early so that you can help ensure that all participants are on the same page. Follow up with email on agreements, commitments and next steps. Consider scheduling regular standing meetings, which can be very effective in promoting collaborative efficiency (by reducing excessive one-off requests) and reducing collaborative costs (by making team members aware of each other's expertise). It's crucial to establish important norms — such as pre-read requirements — at the very beginning of a group. If you wait and hope that things will go smoothly, any problems will become harder to address later.

- With emails, establish norms throughout your group on format and organization (e.g., maximum length and the use of outline structure with bullets, as opposed to full-text paragraphs). Also, set guidelines to advise everyone when to switch to a richer medium (e.g., if people don't have alignment after two emails they should use the phone or meet face-to-face). Recommend reasonable response times; otherwise groups can become "trained" into a frenzy due to the belief that a rapid response means someone is working hard.

- With IMs, you should use the technology selectively for short, transactional kinds of exchanges. If an exchange goes on longer than three or four texts, use the phone to clarify so that misunderstandings don't persist.

- With virtual collaboration tools, employ richer mediums for collaborative work that is more exploratory (e.g., defining a problem space or brainstorming solutions) or integrative in nature (e.g., points where people with different expertise, perspectives or work assignments need to produce a joint solution). Use videoconferencing for periodic status meetings that match the rhythm of a group's work, and employ tools that increase alignment through screen sharing or any capabilities that allow members to work collaboratively on a common document, work product or prototype. A range of technologies support this kind of work both synchronously (e.g., screen sharing applications in

SEVEN HABITS OF HIGHLY INEFFICIENT COLLABORATORS

1. Trying to accomplish too much through email:

- Spending too much time trying to perfect a lengthy communication that others are forced to respond to (or don't read at all)
- Including too many people and not having a clear request or action
- Communicating during times that cause excessive turmoil for others (e.g., late at night or over the weekend)
- Persisting with email dialogue when misalignment or conflict suggests the communication should be moved to the phone or a face-to-face meeting

Tips: (1) Use email for transactional purposes and to confirm agreement on action items after a meeting. (2) Avoid email in early-stage problem-solving or when brainstorming; better to generate solutions and engagement in person or on the phone. (3) Fight the tendency to use email when issues are thorny. You might see it as more comfortable to use when conflict is present, but this is the time to make a quick call. Voice-to-voice or face-to-face, you can communicate without losing the nuances contained in vocal inflection or physical expression — characteristics that become particularly important when multiple perspectives arise.

2. Running ineffective meetings:

- Inviting people who don't need to be there and failing to create opportunities for those that do
- Not having clear objectives, roles for attendees, and process for the meeting
- Conducting meetings without an agenda and failing to reach a conclusion on next steps and action items
- Ending meetings without defining firm action steps or creating a framework for follow-up

Tips: (1) Identify who can contribute knowledge or complete tasks without attending. (2) Require each meeting to have an owner and an agenda. Circulate it beforehand to prompt ideas and actions ahead of time. (3) Later, provide a summary of decisions and actions (email is great for this).

3. Holding on to a central position in the network instead of delegating to others in a way that creates clarity and engagement:

- Scaling work through themselves rather than around themselves
- Getting only limited engagement as colleagues do work for them rather than for a mutually beneficial pursuit or higher sense of purpose
- Ignoring the goals, aspirations and talents of team members and direct reports
- Triggering unnecessary email exchanges, in-person contact and delays

Tips: (1) Invest in knowing employees' goals and interests and match assignments to them. (2) Establish the "why" in the work so that people can see their efforts in service of a larger purpose. (3) Invite employees to validate the importance of the work and then co-create with them, as appropriate, the desired outcomes. (4) Grant latitude to express trust. Focus on the "why," before the "what" and "how."

4. Being rigid instead of adapting behaviors — theirs or others — to promote the effectiveness of interactions over time:

- Participating in meetings or conversations without a clear purpose of what they want from the interaction
- Seeking permission from others rather than offering a plan
- Seeing value and status in air time and showing how smart they are by, for example, talking three to four times longer than needed in interactions

Tips: (1) Identify the goal of each interaction. (2) Seek feedback rather than permission. (3) Be willing to coach others on how and when to use your time.

5. Failing to put structure into work through strategic calendaring and "to do" lists:

- Ignoring or resisting technical solutions that could manage their collaboration better
- Allowing unblocked time to be filled by other people's requests, emails, meetings, calls, IMs and pop-ins
- Email and work in non-work hours; burning people out with preventable "emergencies"

Tips: (1) Consider using tech-based apps such as Slack and Sync, calendars, time trackers and notes as well as "to do" lists available in platforms like Trello, Outlook and Gmail. (2) Block time for meetings, tasks and free thinking. Determine your limits and learn to say "no." (3) Establish off hours when you will neither send nor receive work communication.

6. Using IM or social media excessively:

- Instant messaging (IM) or texting others and expecting instant responses
- Sending long paragraphs that are more appropriate for email or phone
- Insisting upon a team communication messaging system before ensuring it's a good fit

Tips: (1) Turn off IM during periods of concentrated work. (2) Ask yourself if an instant question or answer is necessary, especially outside work hours. (3) Keep messages brief. (4) Match real-time collaboration platforms with team needs before implementing widespread use.

7. Holding on to counterproductive beliefs — often driven by fear, identity and power — that result in becoming overwhelmed by network demands:

- Becoming a bottleneck by requiring frequent review and approval
- Sapping others' confidence by requiring many rounds of minor changes
- Focusing on the results desired without communicating the "why"

Tips: (1) Be explicit when assigning tasks. (2) Grant ownership to show trust and reduce check-ins. (3) Keep minor revisions to a minimum when possible. (4) Galvanize teams around a single purpose.

videoconferencing) and asynchronously (e.g., technologies that enable users to edit documents and track revision histories). Unfortunately, people are quick to default to what they are accustomed to; email is often inefficiently used as the default mechanism for keeping teammates informed and for sharing work in progress.

❷ *Pull Instead of Push*

Effective collaborators employ a "pull" philosophy that draws people to them by co-creating, giving status or appreciation, building a narrative of joint success, and creating a sense of purpose and energy around an outcome. This approach contrasts with a "push" philosophy, which typically involves convincing people to do something by using logic, expertise, formal authority or mandate, or informal influence. But going to people only when you need help, trying to persuade them based on your expertise and logic, or trying to coerce them based on influence or mandate, will only yield compliance at best. Instead, engage people in a way that draws them to an idea or possibility via co-creation and establish a mutual win. This makes them more willing to help at the point of need and much more likely to contribute time and effort downstream in an efficient fashion.

What to do:

- Identify people central to your success in a role or project and initiate relationships before you need help. Consider those people who will consume the output of what you are doing, but just as importantly think carefully about those who will or could support your work. Reach out early to introduce yourself and explain where you will likely need to collaborate in the future. Then move to co-creation and see if they envision different ways of interacting that are good for both of you, or if they have preferred ways of working.

- Seek to give first in interactions — status, appreciation, resources, help, etc. — to invoke a norm of reciprocity and to seed trust. Focus as much time on what the other person needs to be successful as what you need out of the interaction. Create a compelling outcome that will enable you both to win and that will achieve some larger purpose than your own self-interest. This later step of co-creating the "why" in the work is critical to obtaining commitment and energy from others.

- Identify formal stakeholders, informal influencers and even naysayers and engage them early on. Seek input to expand how you are conceptualizing both the problem and concurrent possible solutions. In early interactions, don't tell others about your plan but instead explore the different possibilities and options that might leverage their insights and experience. For some, it can be uncomfortable to share work in progress, but failing to do so can generate excessive rework and collaborative demands to obtain buy-in at the end of the project. At one organization, a leader intentionally placed a naysayer on a team that had been formed to revise a time-consuming process. The group

benefited from her perspective, and the implementation of the new process proceeded more smoothly than anticipated due to her support.

❸ *Break Inefficient Patterns*

Relationships can quickly fall into inefficient patterns. Unfortunately, we often don't consider how to improve these interactions, or we don't think that we can without offending others. Connecting on a non-work front — at whatever level is appropriate in the context and history of a given relationship — is a precursor to trust that can yield significant efficiency and effectiveness. Left unchecked, however, norms can evolve within a given relationship that consume enormous amounts of time unnecessarily. For example, extroverts typically view interactions as social opportunities, and so they may naturally desire more time than is needed. We can counter this by offering them half the time they request, and teaching them to start with the purpose of the discussion. Others may be overly inclusive and engage us in excessive emails as well as more (or longer) meetings than necessary. These people can be coached on how we can contribute to a collaborative effort in smaller and more targeted increments of time.

What to do:

- Consider whether you are consuming other people's time efficiently. Always ask: "Am I clear on what I want to accomplish from a meeting or conversation?" Although this might sound like seemingly simple advice, it's amazing how often people get drawn off point or allow the flow of conversations or meetings to obfuscate what they need to accomplish. Maintaining this orientation helps you to stay focused and increases the likelihood that you leave with the outcomes needed. Also, consider how you frame your requests. Offer solutions and don't lead by asking for permission because doing so can easily make people risk averse. When you schedule a meeting to review an idea, people will feel compelled to comment and make suggestions, which will in turn drive additional work.

- Coach others on how best to consume your time. If you are overly responsive or helpful, particularly in the early stages of a relationship, this can persist in a tendency for people to seek you out as an easy outlet for all questions. To change this pattern, engage colleagues with resources and solve problems together so that they know where resources are and receive the subtle message that they need to act more independently. You can also help colleagues be focused in their meetings with you by asking early in the interaction: "So that I use your time well, can you quickly let me know what you hoped to accomplish together?" Finally, consider making transparent the kinds of issues you should and should not be involved in due to the collaborative demands you face, and employ buffering mechanisms like administrative assistants or calendaring to filter people's access to you.

④ *Allocate the Appropriate Time*

The typical response when asked for a meeting is to schedule an hour or 30 minutes due to calendaring norms and software. More efficient collaborators seek to reduce that commitment when possible by offering half the time requested, or more thoughtfully allocating time based on the needs of the interaction. They also employ hard stops (e.g., communicating that they will have to depart on time to make another call or meeting).

What to do:

- A norm of offering 50 percent of the meeting time requested buys back an enormous amount of time, often with very little appreciable loss. Humans are incredibly adept at morphing their behavior to the time allocated. Rather than filling time unnecessarily, look to leverage this capacity by shrinking meeting times to promote efficient interactions.

- In select instances (e.g., at the beginning of a project, or when working with a distributed team on an ambiguous task) consider either doubling the time or halving the time between meetings to ensure momentum is not lost. Sometimes it's more efficient to drive through to a solution in a two-hour meeting rather than across a series of one-hour meetings, particularly when momentum lags and people have trouble getting back up to speed.

⑤ *Develop Trust and Instill Safety*

People who create contexts of safety and trust around them enjoy more efficient collaborations over time. This does not mean that these individuals simply agree to what others want to do, or that they celebrate all ideas. People are trusted because they are viewed as authentic and over time stick to principles larger than their own self-interest. They disagree but do so in a way that keeps criticism from becoming personal. Rather than say, "That's a bad idea," they'll say, "Given what we're trying to achieve, here's an alternative solution." By separating disagreements from the people involved and by making their own logic transparent, efficient collaborators engage with others in ways that produce results, while also creating an environment that encourages people to take prudent risks and to act without feeling the need to check in or get input on small decisions or mundane matters.

What to do:

- Consider how you react to bad news or setbacks. Obviously, someone who blows up or is quick to blame others will generate fear and excessive interactions as people engage in additional work to provide cover for themselves. But signaling disappointment more subtly — slumping shoulders, a couple of sharp questions, etc. — can also unintentionally create excessive collaborative demands as people become trained to avoid risks and to check early and often. Clearly there are times when stern messages must be sent. However, be careful to refrain from doing so early in relationships and be wary of letting your frustrations seep out, especially when you're feeling overloaded.

- Be thoughtful in how you deploy your own expertise. At the extreme, some people use their expertise more to establish superiority and status in an interaction than to solve problems in a way that engages others. More subtly, when people's identities are enmeshed with their being an expert in a certain area, they can have difficulty resisting the urge to jump in when help is needed. Remember that letting others solve problems for themselves helps create ownership and capability – both of which keep future collaborative requests from coming your way.

- Consider how your own actions might be directly affecting your ability to create a trusted network. Reflect on these five questions:

  1. Do you act with discretion and hold others accountable for doing so as well by, for example, reproving those who gossip?

  2. Do you do what you say you will so that people can trust that you'll deliver on your commitments?

  3. Do you stand for principles larger than your own self-interests?

  4. Do you allow yourself to be vulnerable and take educated risks at times to show others that they can do so as well?

  5. Do you show that you care about others? As one leader in our research put it, "People do not care how smart or effective you are until you have shown that you care about them."

Reclaim Your Day

The recent explosion in the volume and diversity of collaborative demands employees experience is a new reality that is here to stay. Unfortunately, the invisible nature of these demands means that all too often no one in an organization is managing collaborative activity strategically. Rather, it falls to individuals to focus on a unique set of activities that can reclaim 18 to 24 percent of their collaborative time. There is no silver bullet to this problem. But we have found that focusing on three spheres — challenging beliefs, imposing structure and altering behavior — can produce a context where people are able to perform and thrive in their work.