

Humanitarian Organizational Collaboration: Information Technologies as Necessary but Not Sufficient

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ABSTRACT

Organizations in the humanitarian relief field increasingly need to look outside their own boundaries and engage in a significant level of inter-organizational collaboration. In studying collaborative processes in the nonprofit context, researchers have used different theoretical approaches to investigate the motivations behind why organizations collaborate. Although these studies have contributed to shed some lights on these collaborative mechanisms, little is still known about the main factors that influence the decision of humanitarian organizations to engage into collaboration especially with regards to the implications of information technologies. In this paper, we explore factors for collaboration among members of the GlobalSympoNet, a network of organizations engaged in humanitarian information management. We analyze data collected through nineteen semi-structured interviews. We identified seven factors that could be grouped into three categories including structural, behavioral and organizational. Our findings also suggest that information technologies alone are not enough to motivate and maintain long lasting collaboration.

Keywords

Humanitarian organizations, inter-organizational collaboration, information technologies, collaboration decision.

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on a work in progress. It is part of a larger research agenda that seeks to understand how organizations engaged in humanitarian relief can organize themselves to promote higher levels of collaboration and coordination particularly in the domain of information and communication technologies. The context of the paper is a network of representatives from large humanitarian relief organizations. These representatives are engaged in this network because they are already involved in the information technology pursuits of their home organization. They have come together in this network to meet others and share best practices involving what we have come to call “humanitarian information management.” In some cases this network has led members to form collaborative relationships and projects drawing in various organizations into cross-organizational projects that involve information technology and humanitarian issues (Maitland et al, 2009; Ngamassi et al., 2010). We call the network in question the “GlobalSympoNet,” a community of interest of organizations engaged in humanitarian information management and exchange. In this paper, we investigate factors for collaboration among members of the GlobalSympoNet, paying attention especially on the role of information technologies. The data was collected through nineteen semi-structured interviews. This data collection took place during fall 2009 and spanned over a period of four months. We identified three types of factors including structural, behavioral and organizational. Our findings also suggest that information technologies alone are not enough to motivate and maintain long lasting humanitarian inter-organizational collaboration. Collaborations in which technological collaboration is paired with a collaboration involving shared goals, complementary skills and

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established trust relationships, among others, may end in a more successful collaboration.

BACKGROUND

Under the leadership of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), the GlobalSympoNet is a group of organizations interested in collaborating on humanitarian information management related activities. UNOCHA created this group in recognition of the high important role of information management and exchange to successful response to humanitarian disasters. The GlobalSympoNet is made up of approximately 300 professionals from the fields of information management (IM) and information technology (IT), as well as policymakers from the broad humanitarian international community including nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), inter-governmental organizations (IGOs), Governments, Private Sectors, and Academia. Approximately 120 international and national organizations are represented in the GlobalSympoNet community. The GlobalSympoNet seeks to foster collaboration on humanitarian information management projects and to disseminate best practices of information exchange. The GlobalSympoNet held two conferences (Geneva 2002 and 2007) and three regional workshops (Bangkok, 2003; Panama, 2005; and Nairobi, 2006). The main goals of the conferences were to take stock of achievements in the humanitarian information management and to document and disseminate best practices in humanitarian information activities. While the issues confronting the humanitarian community are global in scope, there are regional differences in both the types of problems as well as the appropriate solutions. Each of the three regional workshops focused on information initiatives and tools in their regional context, each region with its different vulnerabilities and response capacities.

METHOD

We used a semi-structured interview approach as the primary method of data collection for this study. The data collection took place during fall 2009 and spanned a period of four months. A total of nineteen (19) interviews were conducted with an emphasis on the factors of inter-organizational collaboration among members of GlobalSympoNet and the potential implications of information technology. The interviews were conducted over the phone and each lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Interview participants were asked to state the factors that influenced their organization's decision to engage in collaboration when another organization approached them with the intention to collaborate on a humanitarian information management project. A subsequent question focusing on the implications of information technologies was also asked. The interview data was coded using the analytic induction, a mixture of deductive and inductive approaches (Epstein & Martin, 2004).

FINDINGS AND ANALYSES

A total of seven major factors for collaboration that emerged from our investigation of humanitarian inter-organizational collaboration on information management and exchange among members of the GlobalSympoNet. They include mandate/goals, skills, trust/reputation, funding, size, geographical proximity/language and processes. Almost all of these factors are among those that are consistently identified in the literature on inter-organizational collaboration (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Powell, 1990; Alter & Hage, 1993; Thomson, 2001).

Borrowing from the framework developed by Ngamassi et al., (2010) to analyze factors that hinder inter-organization coordination and collaboration among humanitarian organizations, the seven factors identified in this study could be grouped into the following three categories: organizational, structural and behavioral. The organizational category would include factors related to the mandate/ goals and the processes. The factors in the structural category would be skills, funding, size and geographical proximity. The last category, behavioral, would include factor related to trust and reputation. This categorization allows to have another perspective of the influential drivers of inter-organizational collaboration in the humanitarian relief field. Figure 1 below, depicts the aggregated loudness of factor per category.

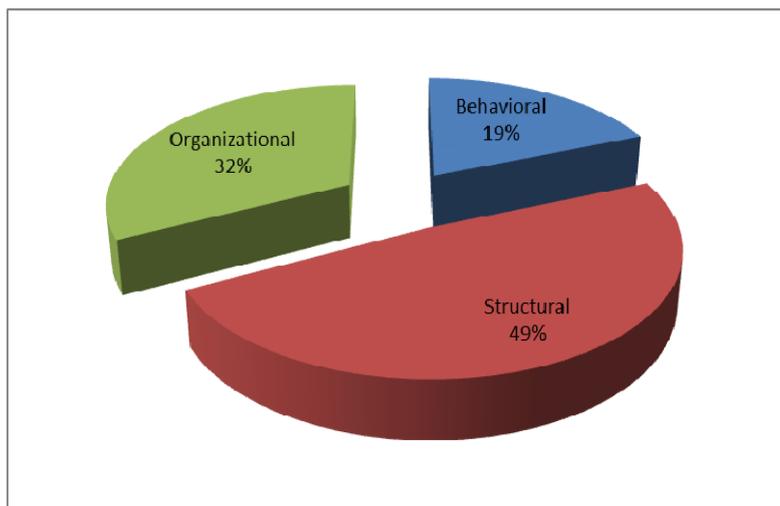


Figure 1. Loudness of Collaboration Factors Grouped per Category

It is important to note that nearly half of the reasons to collaborate are structural. This is important because these structural factors are the ones most likely to be supported and affected by the use of information technologies. The use of this framework helps to highlight the fact information technologies have important potential to influence inter-organizational collaboration relationships among humanitarian organizations.

Information Technologies: Necessary But Not Sufficient

As mentioned earlier, survey participants were also asked to give their opinion specifically on the implications of information technologies on inter-organizational collaboration among members of the GlobalSympoNet. Approximately seventy percent (68.42%) of the interviewees shared their opinion on this issue. We registered a wide range of diverse point of views. Some participants, roughly thirty one percent (30.77%) of those that answered the question, had a very positive opinion about the implications and especially the catalytic role that information technologies play in fostering humanitarian inter-organizational collaboration. The vast majority (69.23%) however, expressed mixed feelings.

For the participants that had positive opinions, information technologies served as an important catalyst for inter-organizational collaboration in the GlobalSympoNet community. They argued that if without information technologies, effective simple communication is difficult, collaboration would be even harder. Participant number five for example reported that:

Subject#5: I think that information technology is extremely important because we basically need to communicate to all these different communities in as many different ways as possible.

They also believed that the use of information technologies is instrumental in quickly gather analyze and disseminate humanitarian information leading to effective disaster response. Below, we illustrate this point of view with quotes from three participants, number six, seven and eleven.

Subject#6: You cannot do it without information technology. Gathering information, managing information, analyzing information, distributing information, really you cannot do all this without information technology. So I think the question is kind of obvious.

Subject#7: Information technology essentially supports what we do. It helps in sharing information, mainly transporting information around, maintaining our communication.

Subject#11: I think the information technology is key of cause, because without proper systems in place, you will not be able to do that.

The participants who expressed mixed feelings about the role of information technologies as catalyst in inter-organizational collaboration believed that taken alone, information technologies would not lead to better / more collaboration. They gave a number of reasons that could be grouped into two main categories. The first category of reasons was related to the information technologies infrastructure. Participants argued that more often, organizations in the field do not have the necessary technology tools either because they were destroyed by the

disaster or because they did not even exist in the first place. They also talked about the discrepancy in term of infrastructure between organizations based in developed countries and those in the developing countries. They argued that people in developed countries often enjoy latest technologies but the reality in developing countries, scenes of most humanitarian disasters is quite different. Participant number twelve for example reported that:

Subject#12: when you get out on the fields you see that the most basic important tool is paper map and a pencil. And I think we have got to really recognize that fact. [...]You know we do this information technology that we love where they follow the latest systems and the fastest processor and stuff like that and we really like to paddle ourselves on the back on what we are able to do here in Washington DC. And then you get out on the fields and everyone is using paper maps and a pencil.

Finally they talked about the fast pace of change in technology which makes it difficult for organizations to have and especially keep the technical staff that possesses adequate knowledge to make use of these new technologies.

Subject#6: as the technology changes, it is hard to find the people that have skills that are up to date.

The second category of reasons concerned the management of information. Participants believed that without proper standard for humanitarian information exchange, the technology will be of no effective use.

Subject#5: I think yes, continue to explore all the new technologies that are available but at the same time realize that in the end what it really comes down to is quality information and information that is based on facts and that's credible but people actually believe in. So I think we should not be allowed to be measured by technology if the content is not there.

Subject#14: One is developing some basic standards, and some basic platforms for information exchange.

They also believed that the humanitarian field needs better processes and well trained staff in order to make good use of the technology.

Subject#8: I think there are certain organizations who think that technology can solve all the problems, so they don't have a proper appreciation and understanding of the information management challenges and obstacles, but at the same time there is probably some information, people who are very skeptical about technology and do not sort of realize the value that it has.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our first observation is that, in general, our findings corroborate previous research that has investigated motive for inter-organizational collaboration (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Powell, 1990; Alter & Hage, 1993; Thomson, 2001). Almost all of the seven factors that we found in our study are among those that are consistently identified in the literature. For example, need to secure resources has been found to be one of the driving factors for engaging into inter-organizational collaboration (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Structural factors such as organization size and skills have also been identified as influential factors for organizations' decision to get into an inter-organizational collaboration (Kogut & Singh, 1988; Alexander, 1995).

Our second observation is that information technologies alone are not enough to motivate humanitarian inter-organizational collaboration among members of the GlobalSympoNet. The vast majority of interview participants expressed a mixed feeling about the catalytic role that information technologies would play in fostering inter-organizational collaboration. Given the discrepancy in the information technologies infrastructure among members, and the lack of basic standards and processes in the community, most of the participants tended to say that technology would rather hinder inter-organizational collaboration. Information technologies are often seen as necessary to supporting inter-organizational coordination, but never as the sole purpose for that coordination. As mentioned earlier, this has significant implications for efforts to create inter-organizational collaboration, in that, based on evidence from our previous studies, collaborations based solely on technological sharing are likely to fail. On the other hand, collaborations in which technological collaboration is paired with collaboration involving shared goals, complementary skills and established trust relationships, among others, may end in a more successful collaboration.

Finally, our study has used a framework that divides factors for collaboration in three categories including organizational, structural and behavioral. This framework helps to highlight the fact information technologies have important potential to influence humanitarian organizations decisions to get into collaboration. We believe that more research is needed to better elucidate the implications of information technologies on inter-organizational collaboration in the humanitarian relief field.

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