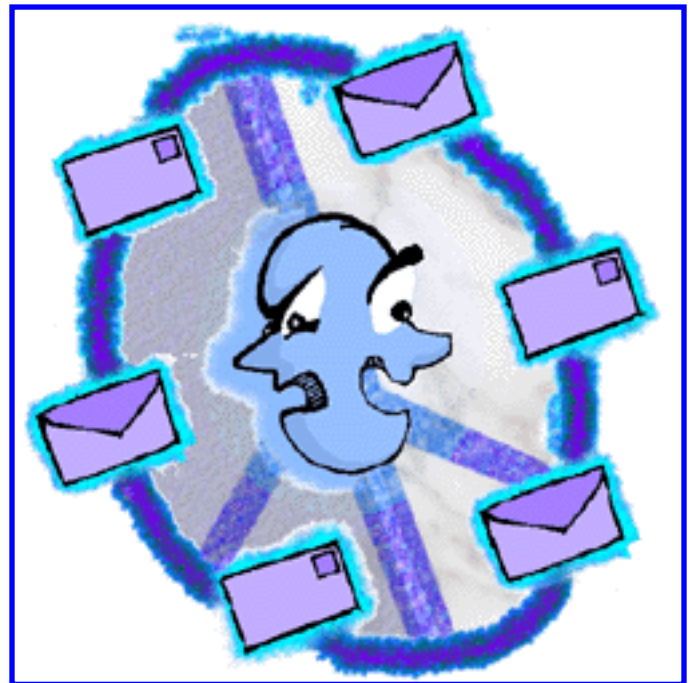


# Internet Collaboration: Good, Bad, and Downright Ugly

by [\*Lorrie Faith Cranor\*](#)

The Internet is often hyped as an excellent tool for facilitating collaboration between geographically distant people. Such collaboration occurs in a wide variety of areas including scientific research, software development, conference planning, political activism, and creative writing. Examples of projects made possible through Internet communication abound. Indeed it is unlikely that students from around the world would have gotten together to produce this magazine had it not been for the Internet. But lost in all the excitement are the stories of the trials and tribulations of Internet collaboration.



## An Impersonal Medium

One of the biggest difficulties Internet collaborators face is the inherent impersonal nature of the medium. Even with the aid of audio and video conferencing, it is difficult to capture the experience of a face-to-face meeting with a group of colleagues. Try as we may, we have yet to serve up a virtual pizza party with the ambiance of the real thing.

In order for a group of people to work together effectively it is important for them to understand each other. Typically this understanding comes through the type of informal interaction which is difficult to achieve electronically. But once this understanding is achieved it often becomes much easier for group members to reach a consensus, to compromise, to communicate with each other, and to understand each others' concerns.

Members of electronic groups who have never met in person are often unaware of other members' personalities. They tend to have trouble gauging group members' enthusiasm for an idea and easily

misinterpret others' ideas. Without subtle visual queues, a miscommunication can easily go unnoticed until someone takes issue with something which nobody meant to imply and a flame war erupts.

And flame wars tend to erupt frequently among Internet collaborators. People who normally behave quite civilly seem to forget that the target of their flame is another person. They routinely say things in their email that they would rarely or never say to someone in person. This may be due to the impersonal nature of the medium or the lack of entrenched social practice associated with online communication. Most adults have developed a sense of what is appropriate to say at a meeting, during a phone call with a colleague, or in a business letter. But many fail to apply similar rules of social practice to email. In the absence of such social rules, Internet collaborators often resort to childish behavior which goes a long way towards destroying any sense of community that had previously developed.

Some will argue that there are plenty of examples of people who have overcome the barriers of the medium and developed personal relationships over the Internet. However, in most cases these successful Internet relationships are one-on-one social relationships rather than group working relationships. My experience has been that good group relationships are much more difficult to foster over the Internet than relationships between two people, and that relationships in which the group is trying to achieve a common goal (besides having a good time) are the most difficult to develop.

## **Groups that Never Meet**

While it is certainly feasible for Internet collaborators to hold virtual meetings in a chat format or using audio or video conferencing software, in my experience these meetings rarely occur. It may be because of the difficulties involved in finding a convenient meeting time for group members who live in several different time zones. It may be because most Internet collaborators are volunteers who work on the collaborative project on their own time, or at work when their bosses aren't looking. It may be because it is so easy to communicate over the Internet without a meeting that we often forget the value of meetings. But I believe periodic meetings can be valuable, even if they are virtual.

Meetings allow all present to focus on an issue simultaneously -- to discuss it, to answer questions about it, and to resolve it. In the Internet groups I have been involved with, rarely do I get a sense that anything has been resolved. Discussions drag out over days, weeks, or months. If a decision has to be made, a vote is taken or someone makes an executive decision, but rarely do group members consider the decision to have long term consequences. The next time the issue is raised it is likely to be debated again as if it hadn't been previously discussed.

Part of the problem with not having meetings is that decision-making becomes a bursty, asynchronous process. Often someone will introduce an idea for consideration and then promptly leave town for a long weekend. By the time they get back their proposal has been misinterpreted in five different ways and a discussion is ensuing about an issue that the initiator never intended to propose. Eventually the initiator manages to get the debate back on track, and then, after a week or two, all debate stops. The initiator assumes that debate has ceased because there are no more objections to the proposal, and calls for a

vote. A handful of votes trickle in, far less than a quorum. At this point nobody is quite sure whether people are not voting because they haven't been checking their email, they don't really care about the issue in question, they don't have enough information to make up their minds, or they are opposed to the proposal and are hoping a quorum is never reached so that the issue won't get decided. Often the group doesn't actually have an official definition of a quorum and thus a debate ensues about whether the vote is binding.

A few years ago I was part of a group that suffered from the problems of asynchronous communication, even though the group members never communicated electronically. This group of five was formed to complete a semester-long class project that culminated in the presentation in a 75 page report. Our group met once a week after class to divide up our responsibilities and report back on what each group member had been working on. Towards the end of the semester everyone wrote up their respective sections and gave them to one person to combine into the final report. A draft report was then printed and distributed to each group member. We all marked up our copies of the report and gave them to the group member in charge of making changes and corrections. However, it soon became clear that our suggested changes were so contradictory that few could be made without discussion. So we met to discuss the changes and after a bit of wrangling agreed to go over the entire report together line by line. The first few hours of this were the most painful. But after a while each group member began to develop an understanding of which sentence constructs didn't sound right to some group members, which conclusions some group members didn't feel comfortable emphasizing, and which statistics certain group members felt were absolutely essential to cite. We began compromising, offering to accept a change here if another group member would accept a change there. After several days of long meetings, a few pizzas, and many gallons of iced tea, we succeeded in completing a report that our entire group felt good about submitting. I am doubtful that we could have written as good a report if we had continued working asynchronously.

## **Tips for Effective Internet Collaboration**

While I believe strongly that electronic communication remains a poor substitute for face-to-face communication, I also realize that some collaborative projects would not be practical without it. So, in order to make the most of an often bad situation, I offer eight tips for effective Internet collaboration. These tips were developed based on my experiences over the past few years with groups that follow them and, especially, with groups that don't.

1. Appoint a single leader or a small group of leaders who are responsible for making sure everything runs smoothly. These leaders need not have any decision-making authority, but they should have administrative responsibilities such as: keeping debates on topic, setting and enforcing deadlines, maintaining the group mailing list, and keeping a group archive. They should also be willing to serve as a resource and answer questions from group members so that these questions need not clog the mailing list. These leaders must be diligent about carrying out their responsibilities and should seek assistance should they find themselves over burdened.
2. Establish a no flame policy for your group. Flame wars are destructive to just about any collaborative

effort. Group leaders should make a point of not involving themselves in flame wars, even if they are the target of a flame. They should also gently remind other group members of the policy. Some groups may wish to give a leader the authority to remove group members who repeatedly engage in flame wars.

3. Establish a policy of open communication between all group members. Members should keep everyone informed of the progress they have made in carrying out their responsibilities. If someone is having trouble completing a task they volunteered to do (due to lack of time, lack of expertise, or any other reason), they should inform other group members. If some group members communicate privately about a group matter, they should inform the rest of the group about the outcome of their discussion (being careful to say ``we recommend" rather than ``we decided" unless the group has given them the authority to make the decision). It is especially important for anyone in a leadership position to communicate with other members and make sure that the members are communicating with each other.

4. Establish a mission statement and set of operating procedures for your group. Depending on the size of your group and the duration of your project, this may be a short list of ground rules or a formal constitution. You should have guidelines and rules that cover the responsibilities of the leaders, the responsibilities of members, procedures for making decisions (including what to do in the event of a deadlock), procedures for appointing and expelling group members or leaders, and procedures for changing these rules. When working on a long-term, open ended project it is best to keep the ground rules somewhat flexible so that unanticipated ideas are not precluded and new group members don't feel stifled by a framework established by members long-retired.

5. Whenever a new and likely controversial topic is introduced to the group, have people respond to the original poster rather than to the entire mailing list. Then have the original poster collect all the responses into a single message (and if possible prepare an executive summary) and send that back to the group. You may want to repeat this for several rounds of discussion before opening the topic up for general debate. The idea here is to put all the issues on the table at once so that people don't start a debate before they have all the facts and a general understanding of the concerns of other group members.

6. Hold periodic virtual meetings. This can be done through a conference call, audio or video online conferencing software, an online chat room, or even an agreement that everyone will be online and checking their email at a specified time. Any of these formats should allow for a more or less synchronous debate followed, if necessary, by a vote.

7. If your group has trouble making decisions and is unable to get group members together for a virtual meeting frequently enough, try resorting to an electronic equivalent of [Roberts Rules of Order](#) in which the rules of debate are spelled out in great detail. (The nice thing about Robert's Rules is that they have been well established and thus groups can agree to adopt them without arguing over what they should be. Adopting a set of electronic rules for debate may be tricky if your group has to write these rules from scratch. But you may be able to get your group members to agree to adopt a set of rules written by a subcommittee or a neutral party.) Such rules might include the maximum amount of time allowed for a

debate before a vote must be taken, the amount of time members have to submit their votes, and the maximum number of words or separate email messages a member may send to the mailing list on a particular topic. I see this mostly as a method of last resort, and I don't recommend writing this into the group's constitution or ground rules unless you've tried it and found it to be effective.

8. Try to find ways for as many of your group members as possible to meet in person. Ideally you would fly everyone to a central location for a group retreat. But financial concerns often don't allow for such luxuries, so do the best you can. Encourage group members to visit their geographically closest neighbors in the group and to meet other members at conferences or when traveling. The more group members get to know each other, the easier collaboration will be. If possible, try to get the entire group together at the beginning of the project and at the end of the project (or for a lengthy project, after every major phase of the project has been completed). Getting the entire group together at the beginning will help the group establish a common sense of direction. Meeting at the end or after the completion of a major phase will provide a sense of closure and an opportunity for group members to evaluate what they have done.

## **Acknowledgments**

Thanks to Sara Carlstead for suggesting the virtual pizza party and to Chuck Cranor and Michael Ackerman for their valuable insights into the problems that arise during Internet collaboration.