

Four Years in The Virtual Firm

ABOUT THE NEW MANAGEMENT NETWORK

by James D. Collinson

Constant alertness to changing needs is essential. To delay or relax this awareness of change is high risk, and contrary to the notion of continuous learning and adaptations. Any thought of straying from the leading edge of change is like facing upward on an escalator going down and thinking at least the status quo is being maintained. Even the notion of keeping up with "best practices" is dated. Because change is occurring so quickly, adopting a practice that has proven out elsewhere may be redundant by the time it is in place.

The New Management Network is no exception. This past July after four years of operation and evolution as a "virtual firm", the group of consultants in the *Network* asked me to carry out a review of how well it was functioning and how it might shape itself for the coming challenges of globalization, growth, alliances, mergers, devolutions and downsizing. The work was carried out over the summer and fall. This article reflects some of the findings and perspectives that have served to make the *Network* a dynamic and exciting way of concurrently meeting client needs and growing both professionally and personally.

The strengths of *the New Management Network* differ according to the perspective taken.

To the client, the *Network* represents a unique assembly of management capacity embracing strengths ranging through organizational development, strategic thinking, diversity, information management and broad environmental and economic perspectives. A client in the "high tech" world recently remarked on the scope and depth of this combination of capacity and flexibility. This skill mix, when combined with members' belief in creative innovation and their dedication to drawing out the human spirit in organizations,

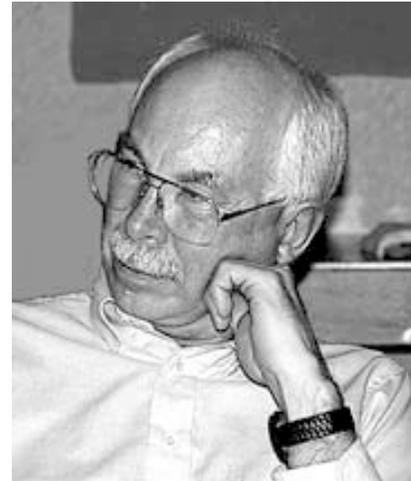
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offers clients unparalleled benefits on issues of corporate purpose, strategic clarity, company-wide alignment with direction, teamwork and organizational culture.

From the perspective of the *Network* member, the alliance has substantial professional as well as personal benefits. A major attraction of the *Network* is the access to colleagues who are always interested in exploring new questions. The friendships and trust that have evolved provide members a safe place to go to reveal themselves and their more embryonic ideas. Within the group, the skills, experiences and contacts are so wide-ranging that members go about their consulting activities secure with the knowledge that they are backed up by a formidable capability through their *Network* peers. They know they may call on them as needed to augment their own strengths. The contacts amongst this close group of peers means that all members have the opportunity to remain on the leading edge of a wide range of new management related issues, ideas and perspectives.

This is done through sharing at semiannual meetings and through bilateral and multilateral discussions throughout the year. A significant portion of each meeting is devoted to updates on interesting projects, new concepts and research and development work the group itself carries out. Ultimately, the client benefits, but in the meantime, the members are stimulated and confidence is inspired through the professional updates mutually shared.

The New Management Network was formed in 1991 by Don and Bonnie Fowke of Fowke Limited in Toronto, which owns the trademark and licences members to use it. This is truly the virtual firm—

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a network of highly skilled professional management consultants providing customized services to clients around the world. The fourteen professional management consultants providing customized services to clients around the world.

The fourteen professional management consultants who are members have their own private practices in eleven firms located in Toronto, Costa Rica, Cleveland, New York, Ottawa, Vancouver, Penticton and Sydney. Members serve clients in Australia, Canada, China, Costa Rica, Egypt, Indonesia, Kenya, Mexico, Peru, Thailand, United States and Venezuela.

The common ground in the *Network* derives from working to facilitate making things happen in complex organizations. Drawing on their experience in industry and government, members apply proven approaches in developing customized solutions for each unique situation. This is accomplished under a philosophy of welcoming constant change, and taking advantage of it. Each member has been selected for his or her unique skills, values and commitment to continuous learning through collaboration.

As individuals and as a team, *the New Management Network* supports clients to position their organizations for immediate and future realities. Members are not committed to promoting a particular approach to management (the flavour of the week theory). Rather they analyse each case on its own merits and through close association with management and staff help develop a customized solution appropriate for that particular situation.

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The emerging realities of the new millennium often defy any textbook solution. Markets are different and need to be analysed in a global context. Financing no longer follows the old routes: partnerships; alliances; contracts for specific products, components or processes; new offset arrangements to more fully utilize capacities that might otherwise sit temporarily idle; are examples of the new reality. Innovative approaches to human resource management, including drawing on the often latent human spirit within organizations, offer means of achieving objectives and targets more effectively and efficiently. Sensitivity to change; response flexibility; consensus building; resolve and commitment; maintaining focus;

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and new approaches to open communication for constant regeneration of human resources are assets necessary in today's complex business environment, where all the variables are in a constant state of agitation.

This "customized" approach to problem solving and meeting challenges is made possible with the range of capacities of members of *the New Management Network*.

Based on strong independent practices, the *Network* brings an entrepreneurial flair to the global challenges of management. This

Professional support ... a powerful antidote to the loneliness of private practice ... all this without the bureaucratic processes!

capacity is needed by even the largest corporation, where adaptability relies on independent judgement and empowered action. Indeed, *the New Management Network* is a model of integration of diverse interests. Having no command and control structure, the *Network* enhances

coordination by building relationships in its own internal community through the power of knowledge, experience and an evolving set of "traditions" in place of rules or procedures.

Although some members have worked together recently on major contracts, and all have worked with others in the past, the commercial aspects of the *Network* tend to be focussed within the individual firms of the members. Productivity, however, is enhanced by the option to draw on others' expertise, by peer review of difficult or sensitive work, and by the elimination of "professional isolation" that can devastate small firms in times of rapid change, or narrow their scope to compete at the leading edge, thereby rapidly increasing the risk of losing touch with wider issues over time.

How can a group of "independents" function without a structure? Interestingly, very well. The lack of a formal organization structure for the *Network* was regarded as

positive by members. Constant efforts are made to ensure each member is aware of the strengths of the others, and given the differing backgrounds, each has strengths applicable to any situation, whether it be substantive or process oriented. In the absence of a formal

organization, the *Network* has found communication is facilitated by having members meet twice a year to share experiences, consider new R & D ideas, discuss approaches and contacts and develop marketing strategies as appropriate. Membership is by attraction and invitation, and as there are no fees, members are responsible for their own costs of participation. Members find the *Network* most beneficial if they attend at least one if not both meetings each year. This facilitates opportunities to work together on contracts or on

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topic groups to improve understanding amongst members.

Although the *Network* is not actively seeking new members, it welcomes top professionals with compatible interests and a willingness to contribute to the *Network* vision. The professional support inherent in this association provides each independent practitioner with a powerful antidote to the potential loneliness of private practice through informal yet immediate access to the type of professional collaboration available in large firms: all this without bureaucratic processes!

The *Network* will continue to evolve, review and renew itself. This more formal review is only one step along the way. This "progress report" represents a snapshot of the *Network* at this point in time. The regular meetings of the members will continue to shape the evolution of this "virtual firm."

The New Management Network

The New Management Network specializes in empowering leaders to make things happen in complex organizations. Drawing on experience in industry and government, the Network puts proven transformational change technology to work.

The New Management Network

We support executives to act quickly, directly and profitably, on what needs to be done for success.

The New Management Network is a distinctive peer group of independent management consultants who share common professional ideas, understand creative innovation and are dedicated to releasing the human spirit in organizations.

Members of the network serve clients on issues of corporate purpose, strategic clarity, company-wide alignment with direction, teamwork and organizational culture.

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