



5 ways to get people to collaborate

Collaboration is infamously difficult to foster in professional services firms. People are doggedly competitive and want to reap the full financial reward of their own intellectual and origination efforts.

Unfortunately, this works against the ambitions of the firms they are a part of. Today, individual expertise is effectively a commodity that clients can easily replace if they find another firm offering it at a better price.

Getting people to collaborate, on the other hand, means firms can offer multi-disciplinary teams that are able to tackle a client's most complex problems. And that joint expertise is both more valuable to the client and much more difficult to replicate or seek out in a rival firm.

But how do you get a group of individuals who have been trained since the beginning of their career to compete (and win) to share work and build collaborative teams?

'True multidisciplinary collaboration requires people to combine their perspectives and expertise and tailor them to the client's needs so that the outcome is more than the sum of the participating individuals' knowledge.' – [Heidi K Gardner](#), Harvard Business Review

1. Explain the benefits

Professionals have two core goals: develop their expertise and originate new business. On the surface, collaboration seems counterintuitive to both goals.

This is where education is critical. Building meaningful relationships with colleagues in other firms and offices broadens their word-of-mouth reach and, by building a trusted team of collaborators across the firm, also allows that individual to sell more complex work to their own clients.

Collaboration actually allows people to improve their expertise (meaning they can charge more for it) and bring in more valuable business. Effective teamwork also helps retain clients because firms can offer a joined-up service and tackle more complex assignments.

2. Manage 'dissensus'

'Expertise dissensus', a term coined by [Heidi K. Gardner of Harvard Law School](#), refers to the differing perceptions that team members hold about how much knowledge each other has. It's the opposite of 'consensus'. For example, one team member might think Sarah is brilliant at relationship management, while her other teammate might think she's only ok and third team member might not rate her at all.

This 'dissensus' leads to interpersonal friction, coordination problems and ultimately poor team effectiveness.

'If you assume that expertise dissensus does exist...then you can take steps to take that into account,' says Gardner. Team members should make their thinking clear and explain the rationale behind actions. This ensures teammates don't take decisions personally and provides an opportunity to speak up and challenge them when appropriate.

3. Lead by example

'In today's most successful ... firms, the role of managing partner has evolved significantly, from that of a "caretaker" trying not to rock the boat to that of a dynamic consensus builder and change agent,' argues [Law Practice magazine](#).

This step is simple but effective: senior management has to lead by example. So get your partners collaborating to better serve some of your most prominent clients if you want junior colleagues to follow suit.

4. Give them the tools

People need both processes and technologies that support collaboration. Provide case studies to show how, for example, a partner could learn more about complementary practices in order to spot cross-discipline opportunities in their own clients.

And don't leave them to make do with email and missed calls. Successful collaboration requires tools that provide easily accessible information, a way to share goals and a method for tracking team progress.

5. Revisit your reward system

Traditionally, compensation has favoured the lone wolf. The more people on a project, the more ways fees have to be split. So refactor your reward system to acknowledge successful outcomes of collaborative behaviour, such as client retention, growth in revenue and profits from existing accounts or acquisition in new target areas.

Also be sure to credit non-billable work, [as Gardner emphasises](#), that contributes to a collaborative culture, such as mentoring, sharing knowledge and giving advice.

Be patient

There are proven benefits to improving collaboration, but they don't come without their challenges. Shifting from long-established ways of working and isolationist attitudes is difficult and will take time. But it's time well invested.

As Gardner says in the National Law Review:

'Contrary to what many [people] believe, their clients are willing to pay for teamwork—provided that it clearly adds value as opposed to simply adding costs and time...[but] you have to be patient to collect on the investments in collaboration.'

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