

What Does the Collaboration “Field” Look Like?

Over the years, I’ve thought a lot about how to describe my “profession.” I usually describe myself as someone who “helps people collaborate more effectively.” People usually either give me blank stare in response, or, they jump to a wrong conclusion. (The most common is that I sell some sort of software.)

This hasn’t simply been a branding exercise. It’s been about looking systemically at what we need to do to improve how we collaborate, understanding what people in my “field” already know about this, and figuring out how to do it a lot better.

What I discovered very early on was that there was an awful lot of great knowledge about how to collaborate effectively. The problem was that this knowledge was largely locked in silos. Ironically, the people who best understood collaboration were not collaborating with each other.

One side-effect of this balkanization of practice is that many of these communities have gotten rigid in their practices. Fundamentally, organizational development professionals, for example, care about the same things as [design thinkers](#), who care about the same things as [“social business”](#) consultants, which has largely evolved from social practices that emerged on the Internet. They are all trying to get people to work together more effectively. Moreover, they all start from the same philosophical place. Said simply: People matter. Start there.

Despite these commonalities, there has been almost no cross-fertilization between these fields. That’s a huge problem. If we’re to create a world that is more *alive*, that is capable of addressing its most urgent challenges while celebrating our

essential livelihood, we must learn how to work and be together more effectively. It is a need-to-have, not a nice-to-have. If the people who have devoted their lives to this problem are not themselves practicing this, what hope do we have?

When I first got into this space, I was blessed with ignorance. That allowed me to learn from different fields without any particular bias for how things were “supposed” to be done. My Groupaya partner-in-crime, [Kristin Cobble](#), took a more “traditional” path than me, but she arrived at the same place. We both believe that group work is a systemic practice, that we need to approach it with an open mind and heart, and that the wisdom for how to do it well is fragmented across multiple fields. If we can learn how to integrate these practices, we’ll have taken a huge step toward a world that is more alive.

That’s what we’re trying to do at Groupaya. We’re trying to integrate the best of all these related fields – organizational development, design thinking, [free culture movements](#) on the Internet, [Web \(and Enterprise and Gov\) 2.0](#), community organizing, and so forth.

Network Analysis of the Different Collaboration Fields

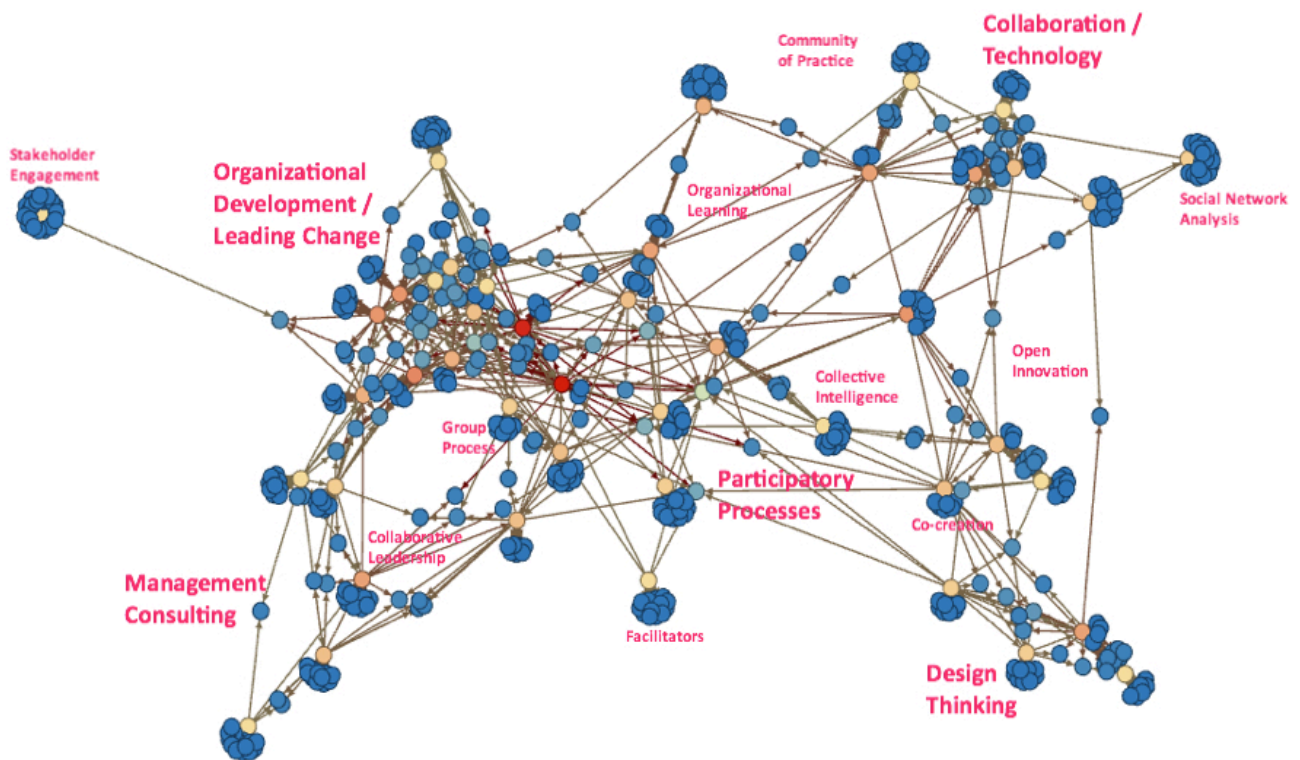
Recently, I decided to try and test some of my beliefs about the state of the “field.” I thought about where I could find data about different professions and how they might be interlinked, and I decided to poke around on [LinkedIn](#). In addition to being an amazing service, LinkedIn is sitting on top of an enormous repository of human-generated, real-time data, which they have started to expose in lots of interesting ways.



One of those ways is a [skills database](#), where you can search for specific job skills and find people in your network who have listed those skills on their profiles. What's even more interesting is that it derives a list of related skills based on the other skills those same people list on their profiles. It amounts to the world's most accurate taxonomy of skills, because it is based on what people are actually doing and how they describe themselves.

I decided to come up with a core list of skills that we practice – organizational development, leadership development, facilitation, design thinking, leading change, knowledge management, group learning, etc. – and to capture all of the related skills that LinkedIn listed. My core list of 45 skills had 878 related skills. Sometimes, these skills pointed to each other. More often, they led in entirely new directions.

I then decided to perform a network analysis using an open source tool called [Gephi](#). Basically, my goal was to map the relationships between these different skills visually, so that I could look for patterns. This is what the resulting map looked like:



Each circle represents a skill. The colors of the circles represent “degree” or connectedness, ranging from blue (least number of connections) to red (most number of connections).

You’ll notice a bunch of small clusters of blue-colored balls, often clustered around a ball that is yellow or orange. That reflects the methodology I used. Each core skill on my list had about 20 related skills, which meant it automatically had at least 20 connections, and hence would lean toward the red side of the color spectrum. Most of those related skills had zero additional connections, hence the blue.

There are several patterns here worth noting. First, the network is complete. In other words, there is a path from one skill to any other skill in the map... barely. The stakeholder engagement cluster barely made it.

The densest cluster is the organizational development cluster, which is left of center. There are a bunch of skills here that are tightly interconnected, largely centered around leadership development, coaching, and group transformation.

The other large, dense clusters – management consulting, participatory processes, design thinking, and collaboration / technology – are largely distinct, although there is some bridging, mostly around learning-related skills. This makes sense: A high-performance group is a group that learns, a conclusion that you should draw regardless of your starting point.

I was disappointed, but not surprised, that “collaboration” as a skill was mostly lumped with technology skills. Folks in the Enterprise 2.0 space, for example, have almost no overlap with organizational development professionals. It’s a troubling trend. Although people are fond of saying, “It’s not about technology, it’s about people,” there’s not much practice validating that mantra.

On the flip side, it’s disappointing that organizational development professionals have stayed removed from some of the amazing trends in the technology sector. Kristin suggested that the field has traditionally been suspicious of technology, because of a belief that it is fundamentally dehumanizing. There may be some truth to this belief (the philosopher, [Heidegger](#), [claimed as much](#)), but using this as an excuse to avoid this area entirely is tremendously misguided.

Any guesses as to what the two bright red circles – the two skills that had the most connections with other skills in the map – are? You get a (virtual) cookie if you guessed [Action Learning](#) and [Appreciative Inquiry](#).

In a perfect world – the world we want to create – I’d like to see a map that is more evenly distributed, with many more cross-connections. This map validated our belief that there is a lot of bridging that needs to happen if we are to learn how to work together more skillfully. It also showed how rich of a research resource LinkedIn can be. Maybe one day, this process will also help me describe the work that I do without resulting in blank stares.

