

# C is for Collaboration

Do we really need yet another role in the C-suite?

Today's organizations are too complex to operate effectively in silo mode; businesses are increasingly focused on cross-selling products to existing customers and innovating through the recombination of existing technologies. The imperative to collaborate is now so deeply embedded in the strategic goals of companies that some believe effective collaboration can no longer be expected to develop without explicit guidance, no matter how well it is supported by corporate culture.

"The problem with collaboration is that no one owns it as an enterprise issue," said Robert L. Cross, associate professor at the McIntire School of Commerce of the University of Virginia. "It either gets housed in IT as some kind of social media solution or in HR as a talent or organizational initiative. Too often these solutions end up overloading already busy employees rather than producing the anticipated organizational impact."

Morten T. Hansen, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley School of Information, believes that what is needed is an executive responsible for integrating the enterprise — a chief collaboration officer. "In most companies today, senior executives are still responsible for their unit — sales, marketing, HR, division A, division B," he wrote in a recent *Harvard Business Review* article. "Yes, they are told to be team players and work with their peers, but that is often not enough. You need someone to [take] a holistic view of what is needed to get employees to work across silos."

Hansen and co-author J. Scott Tapp,



executive vice president at Premier Global Services (PGI), a Web conferencing and collaboration company, do not see the CCO as an entirely new position, but rather a role to be adopted by an existing member of the C-suite. CEOs, they say, are not candidates — they have too little time and too high-level a view. Instead, they suggest a number of other potential candidates: the CIO, who already takes

an enterprisewide view in seeking to leverage information, which is the lifeblood of collaboration; the head of human resources, whose emphasis on creating incentives and developing talent would serve well in creating a culture of collaboration; the COO, whose role is already one of coordination across silos; the CFO, because collaboration is first and foremost about creating economic value; or

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the CTO, because collaboration is increasingly enabled and defined by technological innovations.

Whoever it were to be, the CCO would need to have both a deep understanding of the company's strategic objectives of collaboration — such as integrating channel sales, improving customer service or optimizing the supply chain — and a keen awareness of the mechanisms, structures and technologies that would facilitate collaboration at the operational level.

“My gut says that the C-level marketing, strategy and technology officers are in the best position to [have both perspectives], since they are most familiar with aligning strategic goals with operational tasks in a cross-departmental manner,” said Hyoun Park, a research analyst at the Aberdeen Group, a business research provider.

“My vote would be for the CIO,” said Whitney Johnson, president of Rose Park Advisors.

“The CIO has the skill sets to not only analyze data, but to galvanize people to work together.”

While it is true that each of the extant C-suite roles represents a skill set that is crucial to effective collaboration, none of them, by themselves, represent the total package. In fact, it could be argued that all of these candidates for CCO would be handicapped by seeing the nature of collaboration through their own particular prism. What is more, there is a question whether time constraints would allow any member of the C-suite to play both his or her own role and that of CCO well. These considerations lead some to doubt whether the idea of a CCO is workable.

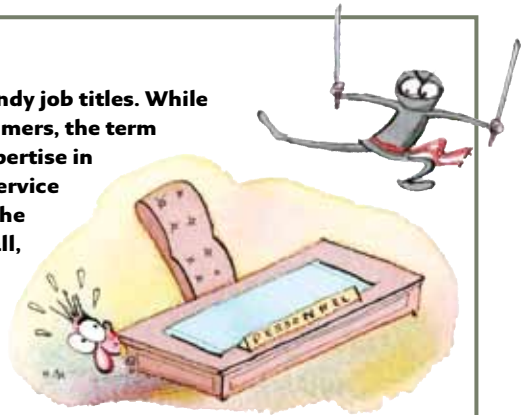
“I tend to believe that a CCO role cannot exist in most companies, as they are spread across several business units and can have conflicting objectives,” said Louis-Pierre Guillaume, head of enterprise collaboration at AREVA T&D (now ALSTOM Grid), a French energy transmission and distribution company. “I am in

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*Source: Wall Street Journal, 2010*



favor of a collaboration advisory board of C-level executives to set direction [and] an implementation committee, nominated by the board, to carry out recommended practices. I have initiated this model in my company.”

Others wonder whether a CCO role is essentially antithetical to the nature of collaboration. Steve Ardire, a business strategy consultant, had this response to the notion of a CCO: “Oh boy, not another needless C-level cheerleader position. Smart, open-culture organizations should already be collaborative.” Ian Gotts, the founder and CEO of Nimbus Partners, a company that offers cloud computing process solutions, said, “You need clearly defined and adopted processes so staff members understand interactions across silos. Then collaboration occurs normally. It is the means, not the end.”

Still others acknowledge the potential usefulness of a CCO, but do not think the person to fill that position is to be found currently in the C-suite. “I don’t believe that the search for a CCO should be based on a title,” said Peter Osborne, a branding and strategy consultant. “Rather, it should be based on a person’s track record of driving collaboration outside of a title.”

Indeed, rather than focusing on specific titles or skill sets, a company may do best by assessing the number and strength of a candidate’s connections

within the organization to determine who is simply the best collaborator. To that point, Robert Cross’s work is particularly germane. For more than a decade, his research has focused on identifying informal networks within organizations and particularly those employees who are “central connectors” and “brokers” of information flow. He has consistently found that those networks do not correspond to formal organizational charts.

In a recent article in *MIT Sloan Management Review*, “The Collaborative Organization: How to Make Employee Networks Really Work,” Cross and his co-authors wrote, “Although organizational charts and standardized processes can provide important underpinnings, they are not flexible enough to support the types of collaborations that companies need to maximize value.” The authors went on to explain how network analysis can identify which organizational leaders drive collaboration.

If the role of CCO is to be viable, then, it will be less about title and more about the ability to tune in to an organization’s informal patterns of collaboration; it will be less about having specific skills in strategy, human resources, product development, marketing or information technology and more about having the essential qualities that foster collaboration itself — empathy, emotional intelligence, diplomacy and negotiation. 