Forming and Managing Project Teams in IS Classes

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Abstract

Teamwork is critical to information systems (IS) projects. Since the development of the early mainframe software systems, IS professionals have emphasized the need for effective teamwork when designing and developing complex systems and software. Our IS graduates need to not only know how to draw technical diagrams and write program code, but also need to know how to develop and work in teams. At last year's ISECON conference, Joel Hodes from Ernst and Young talked about the characteristics that they look for in "eGraduates". One of the competencies cited was that an eGraduate must work effectively in teams and collaborate effectively across teams.

As IS educators, we all agree that our students need to learn to work effectively in teams. Therefore, in nearly all systems analysis and design courses and in many software courses, students are organized into groups and must work on a minimum of one group project each term. However, our students do not necessarily learn how to work effectively in teams just because a group project is required in a course. During a workshop on group projects in the classroom, two of the participants in this panel presentation recently asked an audience of college professors about the success/failure rate of their student teams. The professors in the audience, who represented various business disciplines, confessed that overall approximately 30 to 50 percent of their teams have significant problems. Many of them have devised methods for "divorcing" or "firing" team members. In such cases the students are primarily learning, by trial and error, how *not* to work in teams rather than learning about effective teamwork.

It is important for instructors to take an active role in teaching teamwork skills and techniques in order to improve the group experience and enhance project quality. Mennecke, et al (1998, 1997) have published research reporting that "... improved group cohesion and project quality was highest in teams that received both training and role assignments."

What help comes from our textbooks? Reviewing the index of several systems analysis and design textbooks shows that there may be three pages, at most, devoted to teamwork. In fact, most of the texts do not even mention teams or teamwork in the index.

Panel Topics

The purpose of this panel session is to generate and share ideas as to how IS professors can effectively teach teamwork skills and techniques to meet course objectives. We will also discuss how to manage student teams, so students and instructors have more successful course projects. Topics to be addressed by the panel include:

1. **Forming teams -** Assigning students to teams; Criteria used; Size of team
2. **Teaching team process -** Assigning roles; Stages of team development; Selling the benefits of teams
3. **Managing team progress –** Conflict management; Problem solving; Feedback

Each of the panelists will discuss her position on these topics and then encourage open discussion from the other attendees.