

# ❖ Populating Collaborative Networks

by Kelley Johnston of TrialNet, Inc.

**Collaborative networking is a concept whose time has finally arrived, but legal technology sponsors must still address specific challenges to ensure successful implementation in law firms.** A

collaborative network is only as successful as the willingness of its users to add content valuable to other members. Unlike top-down legal databases or matter management systems, which push out data supplied by a select group of individuals or other systems, a collaborative network relies on its members to share information for future use. Users must be motivated to add content, and that content must be meaningful and easy to access.

## Meaningful Content

One of the first steps in building any network is to determine what your users want to see most and then seed the database with such content. Enlist a few key players to get involved in the launch and showcase their works. Develop a plan to publicize the network and the available content. One network sponsor enlisted his favorite “go to” law firm to contribute its “best practices” forms and briefs bank to the collaborative system. He then highlighted the firm’s contributions and prowess to other clients. Another sponsor utilized a high-profile firm which was successful in developing and using national experts to support a collaborative expert witness database and who provided editorial control over content supplied by others.

One of the most effective ways to increase usage of a collaborative system is to put essential information on the network and then provide access to that information only through the network, not through traditional channels such as e-mail, FedEx or fax. To ensure the content remains meaningful, post and enforce guidelines on how the network is to be used and what content should be uploaded. Appoint a strong editor to ensure the content adheres to guidelines and that it remains fresh and pertinent.

Seeding the database with meaningful content is only half the battle. How do you get users to continue to contribute? Mandating use has proven ineffective if the system has no means of measuring effort. Your system must include some tools to track user hits and uploads. Web analytics software, such as Webalizer, WebTrends or Google Analytics, enables the network sponsor to monitor use and reward those frequent users. These programs also enable the system administrator to identify the weak points in the network and either remove roadblocks to more frequent use or reassess the value of such functions.

## Motivators

Key players lead by word and by example. Your sponsors should not only be cheerleaders for the network, but also frequent users. At least one of the network sponsors should be in a position of power, such as a corporate client or lead attorney. Make sure that his or her footprints are evident to other users. If the corporate client responsible for awarding work to outside counsel is frequently posting conference room messages or consistently highlighting significant court opinions in the network newsroom and such contributions are prominently identified on portal pages, that sponsor is sending a clear message that participation in the network is a priority. Successful collaborative networks need sponsor involvement on a daily basis to instill network use as part of the group’s culture and to determine what changes, if any, should be made in the network design or functions.

## Incentives

Tying collaborative efforts to incentives is especially important for legal networks. The concept of a collaborative network conflicts with the business model of most law firms. Most attorneys are paid by the hour for what counsel consider unique and valuable work product. Attorneys may assume they will lose revenue if they share and recycle their work product, or their “unique” work products will become ubiquitous and their expertise devalued. It is important to build incentives into the network to overcome these barriers.

Corporate clients have used various methods to motivate their law firm users, such as awarding bonuses or new work to frequent users, recognizing them publicly and referring them to other clients. Others have published monthly usage “report cards” which are automatically e-mailed to all members, highlighting those users at the top and at the bottom of the list. Some have also used the network itself to trigger content upload. If the collaborative network is integrated with other systems such as e-billing, sponsors can use these systems to encourage, if not require, collaborative actions. If a law firm takes a deposition valuable to the entire network, the posting of an invoice covering the time the law firm incurred on the deposition can trigger an e-billing rule or a prompt to the client bill reviewer, requiring the upload of the deposition itself before the invoice can be processed further.

## Ease of Use

Time is literally money in the legal world. If users don’t see an immediate benefit in using the network, they are not going to schedule 30 minutes a day to search numerous

- databases, browse through new network features or upload new content. Look for systems that deliver essential information to your users' desktops and provide an intuitive design and functionality that fits well into your members' natural workflow.

Use Web analytics to identify and eliminate roadblocks to participation. For example, users can just click "view" to access content instead of downloading the most recent version of a specific video or audio software and taking five minutes to figure out bandwidth settings or signing up with third-party software providers. Simplify uploads as much as possible, limiting the amount of data to be keyed in by the user to identify the material uploaded. Look for systems that automatically gather metadata or other file and user information to identify content, streamlining the upload process further. Design personal portal pages, keyed to a specific user login, that immediately deliver the most meaningful or popular content to that user. This reduces the user's need to click into buried material.

Your goal is to create a streamlined, intuitive network designed to meet the specific needs of your group and which mimics the language

and the most efficient workflows of your best legal teams. If properly managed, collaborative networks can play an integral role in streamlining communications and reducing costs. While users may have to make cultural allowances in order to appreciate the full value of collaborative systems, the benefits of a well-executed network are worth those efforts.

About our author :: :: ::

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