

# Collaboration Engineering

Designing Repeatable Processes for High-Value Collaboration Tasks

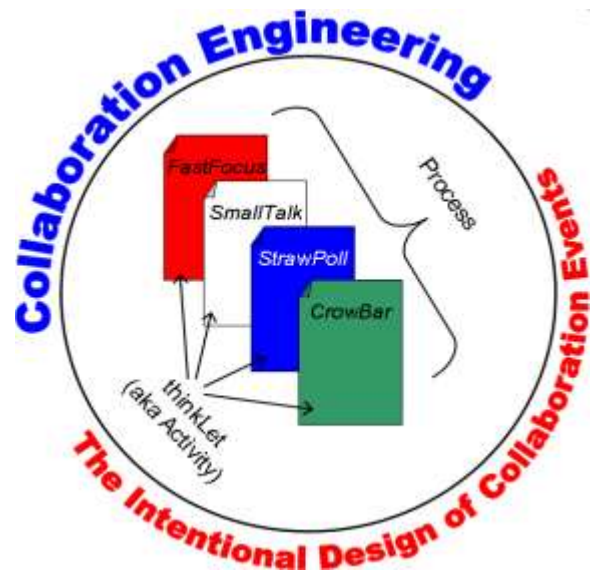
## Background:

Collaboration Engineering (CE) is the new discipline of designing reoccurring processes that are transferred to client groups for self-sustaining, repeatable work in these processes. Said another way CE is the creation and modeling of techniques and technologies into structured collaboration processes that support the execution of high-value organizational tasks and can be transferred to self-sustaining groups.

Collaboration Engineering first appeared in the Summer of 2001 when the leading researchers, Dr. Gert-Jan de Vreede of the University of Nebraska and Dr. Robert O. Briggs first came together to document what they later called thinkLets. Dr. de Vreede describes CE as a field that “models and deploys repeatable collaboration processes for recurring high value collaborative tasks for execution by the practitioners themselves.”

CE came about because many organizations do not have trained facilitators on hand to guide groups through meetings. Many of these groups must conduct events on a reoccurring basis. For example, a web development firm must spend time working with each client to uncover the clients requirements before they can design a website. Yet, this is just a small part of their business and is difficult to warrant hiring a facilitator to help them do this every time. Why not learn how to do it themselves? This is the problem that CE was created to overcome.

CE has firm ties to the larger IS research field. It addresses issues of technology design, transition, human technology



interaction and acceptance. Yet, it can be designed to be used without a technology interface, the manual way.

The goal in CE is to create simple, effective processes, built on tools and techniques of collaboration that can have some predictable success. These processes are designed in such a way that a clients group can use them without the help of professional facilitators for reoccurring tasks. According to CE Researchers reoccurring collaborative tasks include strategy formulation, operational risk management, crisis response, requirements engineering, document review and feedback gathering.

CE researchers believe they have succeeded in codifying the tacit knowledge of experienced meeting facilitators. A key focus within CE is the design and evaluation of re-usable and predictable collaboration design components called thinkLets. ThinkLets are what the facilitation community calls “activities”. In CE a thinkLet is the smallest unit of intellectual

capital required to create one repeatable, predictable pattern of collaboration among people. However, thinkLets contain more than just the process steps. Ultimately, CE Researchers hope to design out the need for hiring group facilitators for reoccurring business activities by replacing them with processes designed, trained, and monitored by Collaboration Engineers.

CE Researchers base their work on what they call the five general patterns of collaboration. They are:

- ❖ Diverge – to gather, build, or expand on data,
- ❖ Clarify – generate meaning from the data,
- ❖ Organize – group information into useful categories,
- ❖ Evaluate – Assess the value and usefulness of information, and
- ❖ Build Consensus – agreement toward action.

As each thinkLet represents a distinct intervention to make the group go through a particular pattern of collaboration, thinkLets can be combined to form collaboration processes. Each pattern of collaboration is made up of a number of possible activities. For example, Reduce (aka Converging) is an activity of moving from a large number of ideas to a few. This movement can take the form of judging, filtering, generalizing, abstraction, synthesis and creating shared meaning. These are similar concepts yet constitute minutely different approaches to accomplishing the same thing: reducing ideas from many to a few.

At the time of this writing there are currently around 60 recognized thinkLets, each having a mnemonic name that makes them easier to remember and to communicate (e.g. *OnePage*, *FastFocus*,

*StrawPoll*, *SmallTalk*, *PermissiontoLaugh*, *SnakeRules* and *CrowBar*).

ThinkLets frame the facilitation interventions in terms of three components: the tool, the configuration, and the script. Thinklets have been designed using computer aided Group Support Systems (GSS), but cases where the collaboration processes are conducted “manually”, using e.g. post-it notes, have also been reported.

### **Application:**

I see enough growing interest and value in CE that I believe it will catch on. Therefore it is important that the facilitation community participate in the development of these systems. Even if it’s only to protect our profession from other disciplines attempting to convince clients that group facilitation skills are not needed, or that they can be imparted in a handout. It is true that these skills can be imparted in others but not simply by designing thinkLets alone. The CE development process identifies 5 opportunities to impart the skills to the clients for each designed process delivered. Facilitators, trained as Collaboration Engineers, should lead the design and delivery of these collaboration processes.

### **Resources**

CE Workshop Report:

[www.hicss.hawaii.edu/Reports/39CE\\_Works\\_hop.pdf](http://www.hicss.hawaii.edu/Reports/39CE_Works_hop.pdf)

Library of thinkLet names:

<http://collab.blueoxen.net/cgi-bin/wiki.pl?PatternRepository#nid1ZC>

Delft Technical University article -

<http://www.sk.tbm.tudelft.nl/Onderzoek/Collaboration%20Engineering.htm>

[www.FacilitationCenter.com](http://www.FacilitationCenter.com)

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