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EDITORIAL

Several years ago I spent an interesting evening while attending a conference in Fredricton in conversation with a member of the Provincial Government. Concerned by the loss of their young college graduates to other Canadian provinces with a broader job market, decisions were made to encourage the growth of "Information Age" businesses within the Province. In pursuit of that goal New Brunswick has made a concerted effort to connect every building in the entire Province to the Internet, and make Internet services affordably available.

New Brunswick is also been a leader in distributed and distance learning. In this month's paper, Rory McGreal discusses the "people problems" inherent in the development of broad-scale distance delivery networks. This article, based on Dr. McGreal's dissertation offers suggestions valuable to those involved in similar endeavors.

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TELEEDUCATION NB: PEOPLE PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS IN A CANADIAN PROVINCE-WIDE DISTRIBUTED DISTANCE LEARNING NETWORK

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ABSTRACT

TeleEducation NB (TENB) is a province-wide distributed learning network that assists educational institutions and private sector companies in delivering distance education. As an example of a province-wide distributed distance learning network, TeleEducation NB can serve as a model for those planning the implementation of similar projects. This analysis of the people problems encountered by TENB staff, administrators, instructors and students provides distance education (DE) professionals, implementers, and policy makers with a guide for working in a distributed distance learning system. Principal people problems encountered are categorized into the following: those caused by bureaucratic processes, those surrounding different approaches to course development; concerns about quality, duplication, problems relating to the attitudes of institutional participants, and the problems students had in accessing courses and participating with TENB. Recommendations for those involved with similar initiatives are included.

TeleEducation NB: People problems and solutions in a Canadian province-wide distributed distance learning network

TeleEducation NB (TENB) is a province-wide distributed learning network that assists educational institutions and private sector companies in delivering distance education (DE) in New Brunswick, a small maritime province on the east coast of Canada. TENB provides a network of distance learning centres, knowledgeable advisors, technical support, and site facilitators to help students, instructors and administrators. Over six years, the network has facilitated the delivery of more than 600 courses to over 12 000 students. As an example of a province-wide distributed distance learning network, TeleEducation NB can serve as a model for those planning the implementation of similar projects. This analysis of the human resource problems encountered by TENB staff, administrators, instructors and students provides distance education (DE) professionals, implementers, and policy makers with a guide for working in a distributed distance learning system.

The people consist of the central staff, the site facilitators, and the users: administrators, instructors, and students. Without the commitment and patience of all these different participants, TENB could not have succeeded. The personal help provided through the collaborative efforts of many different parties is a significant factor in all facets of the operation.

Another key factor is the patience of the instructors, students, and administrators who participated in the effort. One administrator described it this way: "Everybody helps everybody. It is an excellent working system." A student noted, "Human resources are part of TENB's major strength." A staff member emphasized the principal strength of TENB, "The people! A network of people out there offering their expertise and services on a day-to-day basis" (McGreal 1998b, p.249). The people participating in the TENB initiative include TENB coordinating committee members, central staff and site facilitators, instructors, administrators, and students.

The principal people problems encountered are categorized into the following: those caused by bureaucratic processes, those surrounding different approaches to course development; concerns about quality, duplication, problems relating to the attitudes of institutional participants, and the problems students had in accessing courses and participating with TENB. These problems are recurring and any solutions tend to alleviate the problems without really solving them.

BUREAUCRATIC PROBLEMS A major bureaucratic problem for TENB staffing is associated with functioning in accordance with government regulations and policies. A coordinating committee member who sees TENB hampered by government regulations commented, "I feel somewhat disappointed that TENB is not a bit further from the arm of government" (McGreal 1998b, p. 245). This is one manifestation of the "cumbersome bureaucracy" and "lack of empowerment" phenomenon identified as a key obstacle by the New Brunswick Community College Distance Education Focus Group (Department of Advanced Education and Labour 1994). While government regulations and processes are implemented to ensure fairness, acting in conformance with government requirements consumes TENB resources and stretches the implementation period for new initiatives.

For example, in government an elaborate procedure exists for hiring personnel. This procedure involves operations department personnel who are not directly involved in the TENB initiative. Moreover, these individuals are also responsible for enforcing regulations that are government-wide and are not necessarily appropriate for either the Department or the TENB initiative in particular. As one staff member noted in referring to departmental hiring practices, "You have to have your 'i's' dotted and your 't's' crossed. The rules have been tightened even more" (McGreal 1998b, p. 262).

TENB addresses this problem in various ways. In the startup period, the new executive director was unfamiliar with the Department, its regulations, and its culture. Recognizing this, this individual co-opted departmental human resources personnel to help with the interviewing and initially hired a professional officer from within the department who was familiar with the procedures, regulations, and culture of the department. This individual took charge of the hiring processes for most of the other candidates. Subsequently, some of the important work of the network that had to be started quickly was done through either partnering with institutions to hire needed personnel according to their hiring practices, contracting out to temporary staffing agencies or to private sector companies, and giving personal contracts for short periods.

Another bureaucratic problem as perceived by some is interference from the funding agencies. A coordinating committee commented, "They have too much say. They persistently seek control" (McGreal 1998b, p. 254). Another commented that TENB maintains so close a tie to government that it is highly influenced (McGreal 1998b, p. 262).

The bureaucratic problems of existing within government must be balanced against the advantage TENB enjoys as an insider, being in a position to affect government policy and promote change both within the Department of Education and in other government departments.

COURSE DEVELOPMENT AND DELIVERY PROBLEMS A major problem for TENB in its relations with institutional personnel is their fixed attitudes. For example, many faculty use the "Lone Ranger" approach to course development. This term was used by Bates and Santos (1998, p.28) as a descriptor for faculty who develop distance education (DE) courses on their own without help except for an occasional graduate student playing the role of "Tonto." Faculty are used to working alone and taking full control of their courses, including both the course materials and the delivery media. It is difficult for them to adapt to a more team-oriented approach working with instructional designers, technicians, and programmers.

Complaints regarding the effectiveness of the instructor and the organization of the course are sometimes made to TENB. As a neutral agency, TENB only facilitates the delivery of courses and has no control over the quality of teaching. Moreover, TENB has no right to interfere in the relationship of students with their instructor or institution. Site facilitators conduct informal evaluations of each course, focusing on the role of TENB, but advise students to address problems with the instructor or the institution directly. As one administrator stressed, "TENB facilitates the offering of courses" (McGreal 1998b, p. 242) and is not responsible for the quality of the course content. Participants in a focus group supported this policy, maintaining that TENB should provide quality, but be neutral in order to promote and facilitate learning (Centre for Learning Technologies 1998).

This is not a serious continuing problem. Generally, ineffective instructors do not enjoy teaching at a distance and do not return after trying one course. Instructors who continue enjoy the experience and become more effective with time. DE instructors often comment that their on-campus classes also improve as a result of the structure and organization that they build out of necessity into their DE courses. One instructor commented, "Well, I'm a better teacher, quite frankly" (McGreal 1998b, p. 255).

Traditionally, there is also very little collaboration among instructors, either within or across institutions. As a result, one site facilitator commented that some institutions are not totally ready to support DE because of this. A coordinating committee member noted that "a lot of time is needed to bring new and alternate players up to speed." An instructor commented, "Speaking of training and professional development of instructors in using technology, we are not there yet" (McGreal 1998b, p. 252).

Another problem identified by instructors is the time commitment that is required to implement a new DE course. One instructor notes, "I work full-time during the day and I'm just tired of putting in the additional work it requires to do it without some sort of additional compensation." Another instructor noted, "I don't think that I can honestly say that I was paid for even half the time that I've put into the course. It's a wonder that I am still married" (McGreal 1998b, p. 262).

QUALITY PROBLEMS Many institutional administrators and faculty continue to raise the issue of quality in DE courses. The belief that DE courses are inferior to face-to-face courses is widespread among teachers and administrators. This problem is addressed somewhat successfully by TENB. On-site workshops and online conferences are arranged with faculty in which this and other issues are raised. Russell's (1998) bibliography of more than 200 research papers demonstrating that there is no significant difference in achievement results between DE and face-to-face is used effectively to convince many faculty that DE must be taken seriously. A condensed version of this work is available at <http://teleeducation.nb.ca/nosignificantdifference/>

RESISTANCE TO CHANGE These quality concerns represent examples of the broader phenomenon among faculty of resistance to change. Even faculty who embrace DE bring with them traditional habits and attitudes that do not help in adapting easily to the new media. TENB has addressed these problems through individual consultations, training workshops, focus group meetings, and online consultations. An overall inertia is pervasive within established faculty and institutions. One DE instructor puts it this way, "People get locked in to certain ways of thinking and get territorial" (McGreal 1998b, p. 261).

One of the most frustrating expressions of this phenomenon is that of total agreement with the change proponents after which no action is taken. In New Brunswick, this is particularly apparent, perhaps because of the strong support for information technology from the premier of the province and others in the political leadership. Recalcitrant bureaucrats, rather than voicing their concerns, kill initiatives by agreeing to them and then doing nothing. The DE Focus Group identified the "unaligned bureaucracy," referring to the fact that new initiatives are encouraged, but no empowerment given. They identified this as a critical impediment to progress in implementing DE initiatives within the Department (Department of Advanced Education and Labour 1994). This phenomenon is evident in government departments that supported the recommendations of the Premier's Task Force on the Information Highway (Government of New Brunswick 1994). Departments identified concrete steps that they could take in implementing online initiatives, only to ignore them once the spotlight was removed.

DUPLICATION OF EFFORTS Institutions that proactively implement DE initiatives face other problems. TENB was set up because institutions did not have the resources to establish their own unique networks. TENB is a direct result of the willingness of provincial institutions to share resources. Promotion of collaboration among institutions is a high priority (TeleEducation NB 1998b). Nevertheless, despite significant progress, there remains a pervasive unwillingness of

administrators and instructors in institutions to collaborate, particularly in course development.

This lack of collaboration results in serious problems with duplication and is a significant impediment that is noted in a DE report for the Department (Edgett 1995) and by the government for educational services in general (Government of New Brunswick 1993). Different institutions and even different campuses of the same institution develop DE course materials covering the same subject areas and levels. For example, both the University of New Brunswick (UNB) and Saint Thomas University (STU) developed a first year Economics course. UNB and Mount Allison University (MtA) developed first year psychology courses. Several campuses of the New Brunswick Community College (NBCC) developed similar courses in academic upgrading, multimedia, and World Wide Web (WWW) course design (TeleEducation NB 1997).

Content development funding is allocated to discourage loner projects and duplication. Applicants to a federal/provincial Programme Development Fund (PDF) must have a team in place for course development. Those who apply for funding for projects in content areas that others are working on are advised to work in collaboration to ensure that no duplication occurs (TeleEducation NB 1993).

On the other hand, two coordinating committee members identified partnerships as a major weakness because they tended to slow TENB processes down, making quick decisions impossible. Too many diverse decision makers made it hard to build consensus at times. However, they also consider partnerships as a strength with the slowness as a downside (McGreal 1998b, p. 250).

ACCESS PROBLEMS Another significant "people" obstacle is that of ensuring DE opportunities for students. Van Kekerix (1986) notes that ensuring geographical access to DE is often not enough. Other obstacles to participation in DE for students include financial barriers when tuition rates and living expenses are too high and time constraints when students are working at other jobs or are looking after young children. Not surprisingly for students in provincial DE programs, 64% identified their rural location as a major barrier. Course costs were identified by 37% of TENB students as another barrier. A few identified time restraints, family care and other factors, while 64% identified DE as reducing or removing these barriers (Labour Market Analysis Branch 1996).

Other obstacles to access for students include the lack of independent learning skills, which are required much more in a DE class than in a traditional classroom. One student comments, "DE requires more of a mature student with more self-discipline" (McGreal 1998b, p. 253). Another identifiable obstacle is a lack of motivation from learners who have previously dropped out of the school system (Department of Advanced Education and Labour 1996).

OTHER PROBLEMS Sometimes, enthusiastic DE instructors and site facilitators have difficulties in ensuring a real "buy-in" from the administration of the participating institutions. TENB staff identify this as a high priority problem to be addressed (TeleEducation NB 1998b). One instructor commented, "I don't think the administration has any appreciation or any kind of commitment to DE." The instructor further noted that the administration does not understand the potential of DE. An administrator confirms this by commenting (in reference to the top levels of the institution), "I don't ever have any interference from the institutional administrations." One can assume that the "non-interference" is perceived as positive, as there are no expectations that leadership and vision would be provided (McGreal 1998b, p. 262).

TENB champions the cause of DE students in lobbying at all levels of government to ensure that tuition for DE students remains at the same cost or lower than fees for on-campus students. When the Atlantic University consortium considered extra fees for DE students (ATi Consulting Corporation Inc. 1995), TENB lobbied to ensure that they were not implemented (McGreal 1995).

The problem of time constraints for students is addressed by institutions offering most courses in the evening hours. Generally, this is acceptable. For individuals with constraints that include a job and personal commitments, TENB supports delivery of a growing number of asynchronous DE courses available on the Internet.

Another serious obstacle to access for students in small communities is the policy of institutions that limits participation to sites that have at least three students. This policy is based on the institutions' need to recover telephone long distance costs in order to justify delivery to any particular location (Labour Market Analysis Branch 1996); McGreal 1998b, p. 252). This problem is addressed in collaboration with institutions that allow classes to be delivered to one or two students at a site, when they have larger numbers at other sites. Tuition paid by students at larger sites subsidizes delivery to smaller sites. This creates the paradox where delivery of courses to students in the larger urban centers is sometimes necessary in order

to ensure access in the smaller communities. In addition, on rare occasions, TENB makes special arrangements with institutions to ensure delivery to sites with one or two students.

TENB negotiated a favorable long distance rate with the New Brunswick Telephone Company (NBTel), and continues to negotiate for even better rates. In fact, the rate has been reduced from C\$0.275 per minute (US\$0.18) to less than C\$0.20 (US\$0.13) per minute for calls anywhere in the province (New Brunswick Telephone Company Ltd. 1998).

Moreover, TENB experiments with Internet telephony between the community college and university campuses. Course delivery over normal phone lines remains at 56K. To date, the quality of real time multi-point audio via the Internet is not good enough for consistent course delivery. Tests continue with delivery of several courses to different sites that use the Internet.

The lack of significant K-12 students' involvement with TENB is a major concern. In comparison with the rapid growth of activity in other sectors, the low participation rate of the K-12 sector is disturbing. The assistant director of computers in education, Kevin McCluskey (personal communication, September 23, 1998), noted that the lack of participation by the K-12 sector can be partially explained by the preoccupation of the schools and the Department of Education (DofE) with ensuring that the computer and telecommunications infrastructure was in place and teachers were adequately trained. There is now more interest as evidenced by the rapid rise in activity in the past year, particularly with participation in the Internet based Information Technology course (McGreal 1998a). TENB works closely with K-12 teachers and offers training sessions on Internet use for course delivery.

Apart from a few courses delivered to French-speakers in other Atlantic provinces, such as the Université de Moncton (UdeM) MBA program, and a few English language courses delivered to New Brunswick from Nova Scotia universities and community colleges, there is very little regional activity (TeleEducation NB 1998a). This is a disappointment to TENB staff and to some members of the coordinating committee. One member commenting on the lack of collaboration with Nova Scotia noted, "Originally, we were working to develop an agency without boundaries" (McGreal 1998b, p. 263).

In summary, while the people obstacles continue, they are being addressed and alleviated. People problems are frustrating, but must be resolved. >From the beginning, a crucial role has been played by the TENB staff and by enterprising participants, whether they be students, instructors, or administrators. These individuals are responsible for their own success in overcoming problems. Problems include bureaucratic obstruction, duplication, traditional attitudes, quality concerns, the lack of resources, barriers to access, and other priorities. Nevertheless, no "people" obstacle surfaced that became a serious impediment to the progress of the network.

RECOMMENDATIONS >From the TENB experience of people working together to build a distributed province-wide network, the following recommendations have been formulated: 1. When hiring staff, focus on individuals with people skills. It is easier to teach friendly, outgoing people technical operations than to teach unfriendly technical people how to be nice.

2. Have a person in the loop. Avoid self-teaching programs unless there is an added human component. The completion rates of self-study courses, even with multimedia, is not impressive.
3. Ensure support from top individuals in your organization. Serious changes should not be attempted without this support.
4. Do not compel instructors to participate in DE. There are usually enough people, who are very interested in trying out new teaching methods. Work with them.
5. Keep students informed of problems that might occur. Help them with any problems they might have.
6. Encourage students to help each other and work together. Their mutual support is crucial to success.
7. Pace students. When students have no guidance on how fast they should be working, they may not complete the course.

CONCLUSION A distributed learning network depends for success far more on the people than on the organizational structure or the technology used. The active participation and ongoing cooperation among the TENB staff and the different users have been essential elements in the development of distributed learning in this province. The problems described and the solutions proposed demonstrate how one DE network has approached the building of a network. The recommendations

can serve as guides for others contemplating building similar networks.

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