

Book Excerpt

Reimagining Collaboration



**Slack, Microsoft Teams, Zoom,
and the Post-COVID World of Work**



Phil Simon

**Award-winning author of *The Age of the Platform*
and *Message Not Received***

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Reimagining Collaboration: Slack, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and the Post-COVID World of Work

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Praise for

Reimagining Collaboration

“Plenty of business books make us think. Some even inspire action. *Reimagining Collaboration* is the rare book that not only accomplishes both, but provides the framework to effect real change. It is essential reading for anyone leading or managing today’s rapidly shifting workplace. Business leaders should buy copies for all of their employees.”

—**NICK HUZAR**, OfferUp CEO

“An insightful perspective on the new world of work. Collaboration is more essential than ever, and Phil Simon provides the roadmap we need.”

—**DORIE CLARK**, author of *Entrepreneurial You* and executive education faculty, Duke University Fuqua School of Business

“We all collaborate, although some do it better than others. We all need to align our talent, technology, and technique appropriately for the times. Phil Simon’s *Reimagining Collaboration* will up your game, regardless of your current level of expertise or collaboration tool of choice.”

—**PROF. TERRI GRIFFITH**, Keith Beedie Chair in Innovation & Entrepreneurship, Simon Fraser University

“Phil Simon’s latest book not only defines collaboration with a depth and breadth never before seen, it defines the future of work in tomorrow’s successful organizations. *Reimagining Collaboration* is a must-read not only for those leading knowledge management and productivity efforts, but for every business leader in any organization.”

—**DOUG LANEY**, Innovation Fellow, West Monroe Partners and author of *Infonomics: How to Monetize, Manage, and Measure Information as an Asset for Competitive Advantage*

“You will love *Reimagining Collaboration*, a humor-filled yet perceptive journey into the remarkably collaborative future of work. Simon’s framework and practical tips will help your team move from good to better to best.”

—**DR. MARY DONOHUE**, founder of The Digital Wellness Center and author of *Message Received: 7 Steps to Break Down Communication*

“At one time or another, I’ve used many of the tools discussed in this book. I just didn’t fully appreciate the bigger picture. *Reimagining Collaboration* made me appreciate the true power of these collaborative technologies—especially when used together.”

—**BRIAN SOMMER**, technology industry analyst and author of *Digital With Impact*

“Solutionists believe that new technologies magically solve major challenges by themselves. Of course, they’re wrong. Effective collaboration is a nuanced, multidimensional problem—a point that Phil Simon makes in spades. Ultimately, *Reimagining Collaboration* delivers on its promise: To make readers not only think differently about this essential subject, but provide a framework for actually doing it.”

—**MIKE VARDY**, founder of Productivityist and author of *The Gift of Time*

*To the frontline workers battling COVID-19.
You are true heroes.*

*“Never attribute to malice that which can be
adequately explained by ignorance.”*

—HANLON’S RAZOR

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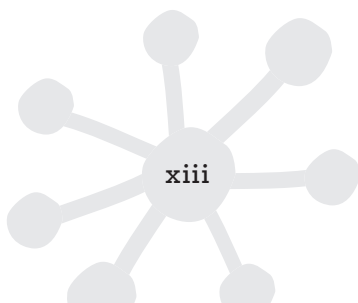
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Internal collaboration hub (n):

General-use software application designed to promote effective communication and collaboration. Ideally, all organizational conversations, decisions, documents, and institutional knowledge exist in a hub. Critically, hubs connect to different spokes. They enable automation with little-to-no technical skill required. Examples of today's popular hubs include Slack, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom.

Spoke (n):

Software application designed for a specific purpose. Examples include productivity, content creation, customer-relationship management, and project management. Spokes can easily exchange information with hubs, provide status updates, and more. As a result, employee, group, and organization communication and collaboration markedly improve.

Introduction

“You can write a 200-page book about Zoom?”

My friend Tess incredulously asked me this question after I told her that I’d signed a contract to pen *Zoom For Dummies* in April of 2020. (In fact, the book ultimately came in at twice that length because, as I came to learn, Zoom is so much more than a user-friendly videoconferencing application.)

To be fair, Tess’s skepticism wasn’t entirely unfounded.

As I would soon learn, she was no outlier. Many people didn’t—and still don’t—fully appreciate the true power of today’s collaboration tools—and not just Zoom. My previous book, the equally hefty *Slack For Dummies*, had evoked similar reactions. Some long-time Slack and Zoom users posted online reviews, noting that my book taught them a great deal about what those technologies could do. Even some employees at each company echoed that sentiment.

I have spent the last quarter-century at the nexus of management, collaboration, technology, and data. As a result, I have learned a thing or six about each. For the purposes of this book, people generally use workplace collaboration and communication tech in limited capacities. New applications

arrive, but they tend not to alter our habits, and certainly not immediately. And I'm hardly the only person to observe as much.

Meet Eugene Fubini

Eugene Fubini (1913–1997) immigrated from Italy to the United States in 1939. During his career, he helped create U.S. policy during the Cold War. He is perhaps most famous for codifying four principles. *Fubini's Law* states that:

1. People initially use technology to do what they do now—but faster.
2. Then they *gradually* begin to use technology to do new things.
3. The new technology changes how we live and how we work.
4. These changes to how we live and work ultimately change society—and eventually change technology.

The operative word here is *gradually*. As a general rule, when it comes to workplace technology, people of a certain age tend to fight change as long as possible. It takes a black swan for them to fundamentally change how they work.

COVID-19 was such an event.

The Struggle (to Adapt) Is Real

Go back to March of 2020. Think about how you and your colleagues responded when your employer suddenly shut its doors. Did that transition go off without a hitch? If so, then, congratulations are in order. You're one of a relative few.

The struggle to adapt to the new normal was real. It still is. I saw firsthand how woefully unprepared even a purportedly innovative institution was for such a dramatic shift in how its employees work and collaborate.

By way of background, during that surreal period, I was finishing my fourth year as a full-time college professor at Arizona State University's W. P. Carey School of Business. My home base was the Information Systems (IS) Department.

Three facts about COVID-19 and ASU will provide the requisite context. First, oodles of international students attend the school. In 2017, that number approached 14,000, more than any other public university.¹ At any point and depending on geopolitical winds, roughly one in five ASU students calls a country other than the U.S. home.² For a long time, ASU and other state universities have heavily recruited foreign students for obvious reasons: These students typically pay fees two to three times higher than their in-state counterparts.³ Chinese students are particularly prevalent in Arizona.

Second, for the last six years, *U.S. News & World Report* has named ASU the most innovative school in America.⁴ Its powers-that-be have never been shy about sharing that accolade with the world. On the contrary, that tagline prominently adorns its website⁵ as well as many local buses and billboards. In one example of how it touts its innovation, the school proudly announced that it had procured an enterprise license for the popular collaboration tool Slack in January 2019—well before a single documented coronavirus case anywhere in the world.

Third, media outlets such as *The New York Times* reported dozens of coronavirus cases in China as early as June of 2019.⁶

Brass tacks: COVID-19 was coming to American universities including ASU. It was a matter of *when*, not *if*.

Let's take a step back and summarize:

1. The most innovative university in the country sports a large international contingent.
2. Many of these students are Chinese and had returned from their homeland in January of 2020, after the winter break.
3. ASU had recently purchased a powerful new collaboration tool.
4. University leadership conservatively had more than three months to war-game the inevitable arrival of COVID-19.

Against this backdrop, surely ASU could shift all of its courses online with minimal disruption to faculty and students alike, right?

From the outside looking in, you might think so.

And you would be spectacularly wrong.

When ASU announced the indefinite suspension of in-person classes in the middle of spring break of 2020, utter chaos ensued. It took only a few days for orderly processes, normal activities, and established deadlines to devolve into widespread confusion. Specifically, and in no particular order:

- The administration's hastily arranged Zoom and Slack training classes didn't staunch the bleeding. Many professors skipped them because they had other fish to fry. No surprise here. It's impossible to fix the plane while it's in the air. Overall class quality and student learning plummeted.*
- Department-wide webinars left faculty members with more questions than answers.
- ASU discouraged thousands of students from returning to their dorms. Some of them could not even retrieve their textbooks.
- One student filed a class-action lawsuit claiming breach of contract and demanding tuition and housing refunds.⁷
- Administrators' guidance to faculty was anything but clear. As but one example, some professors subsequently offered their students pass/fail options. Others refused.
- Students clamored for exceptions, extensions, and do-overs—some legitimate, others because coronavirus ate their homework.

Lest I paint an overly negative picture of my former employer, a few disclaimers are in order. First, every institution of higher learning struggled in the immediate wake of COVID-19. It's not like there was a playbook to follow. They weren't opening a local Subway or Arby's. School presidents were making things up on the fly.

* Department chairs broke precedent and intentionally ignored student evaluations when making decisions to extend offers to existing non-tenured faculty.

Second, let's say that every ASU professor had been proficient in Slack and Zoom. Managing the situation still would have been challenging, given the school's massive student population: 90,000 in-person and 38,000 online at the end of 2019.⁸

The Bill for years of Inertia Finally Comes Due

Since the fall of 2017, I had used Slack in all of my classes.* I had encouraged my colleagues to use it as well, admittedly without much success. During my tenure at ASU, only a handful of my IS colleagues had warmed to it. I suspect that professors in the Philosophy and English departments sported even lower adoption rates.

"We shape our tools, and, thereafter, they shape us."

—MARSHALL MCLUHAN

Although disappointing, at least the party line was consistent. A few times since I had started, I asked department decision-makers why we relied exclusively on '90s-style email and attachments for internal communications, especially after ASU had purchased a far better tool. After all, we were the IS department, damn it. Shouldn't we be setting an example for the rest of the university by embracing Slack?

They hemmed and hawed. Fundamentally, they didn't want to learn new programs and change their antiquated business

* Read my post on the topic at <https://bit.ly/hsc-slack>.

processes, conditions that I had diagnosed many times in my consulting career. Professors and staff kept using their email for internal communication and “collaboration.”

McLuhan was right.

The Revelation

Fast-forward to mid-April of 2020. As finals approached, all things considered, my semester was progressing fairly smoothly, especially in comparison to those of my colleagues. In part, I could thank my proficiency with Slack and my decision to continue using it at the beginning of the semester. I didn’t have to introduce my students to a new communication tool in the midst of the chaos. (Also, in the interest of full disclosure, the department had assigned me four online classes that semester. I had already recorded my requisite videos in January, well before the shit hit the fan.)

Outside of the classroom, I was knee-deep in researching and writing *Zoom For Dummies*. At that point, I used Slack, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams daily in different capacities—the three most popular collaboration hubs in the world.

I had noticed how the three applications were far more similar than dissimilar. Indeed, they shared much of the same core functionality. It occurred to me that the specific tools that organizations, groups, and individuals use to collaborate certainly matter, just not as much as most people think. (The only caveat: As long as they don’t attempt to “collaborate” via email, but we’ll tackle that topic in Chapter 4.)

Focusing on the features of a specific application certainly made sense when writing a *For Dummies* book. In

a way, though, that approach obscured a more important reality: As I witnessed firsthand at ASU, fusing new tools with antiquated habits and business processes didn't magically make groups, departments, or entire organizations more collaborative. By themselves, applications don't rewire our tried-and-true habits.

Let me draw a golf parallel. Say that your swing is horrendous. When you take the club back, you don't know where the ball will ultimately land. Buying a pricey new driver won't make you any less of a hack. You might even hit the ball *farther* out of bounds. Rather, to become proficient or even competent at the sport, you'll have to break your bad habits and learn new techniques.

At that point, the big idea at the center of this book began taking shape. Compared to my last two, I envisioned a shorter, tool-agnostic text that would offer manifold benefits.

What You Should Know From the Get-Go

I believe in truth in advertising. To this end, know this: *Reimagining Collaboration* provokes and challenges its readers. It intentionally questions conventional and deep-rooted assumptions about how we communicate and collaborate at work, such as:

- All text-based communication is essentially the same, irrespective of the application used.
- The tools that people use to communicate and collaborate are inherently personal and don't affect others in the organization.

- Asynchronous communication and collaboration are just as effective as their synchronous counterparts.
- It's technically demanding and time-consuming to stitch together different applications.

Chapter 12 explores these myths in far more depth.

I want you to look at communicating and collaborating through a very different lens. If you do, then you'll reevaluate a number of things. First up is your existing relationship with workplace technology. Why do you keep switching back and forth among different applications? Why aren't all of your tools connected—or at least most of them?

Beyond that, in all likelihood, you'll never view your existing business processes in the same way. I suspect that you'll want to redesign many of them.

In short, this book asks if we can do better.

Reimagining Collaboration is conceptual in nature. In this way, it represents a vast departure from my recent forays into the *For Dummies* world. Because of the rapid pace of software updates today, my last two books are on burning planks. This one, however, should hold up for the foreseeable future, regardless of vendors' changes to their user interfaces.

In a similar vein, this book is technology agnostic by design. The following pages are equally relevant for employees who work in Microsoft, Google, Slack, or Zoom shops—or even if their companies have not deployed one as of now. If you're looking for tips on how to use those internal collaboration hubs, you won't find them here.

Who Should Read This Book?

In no particular order, I wrote *Reimagining Collaboration* with these audiences in mind:

- Your team, department, or employer sucks at collaboration and internal communication. You're searching for a better way to work with your colleagues and partners.
- You mistakenly believe that effective collaboration entails hitting "Reply All" on an email thread.
- Your organization has deployed Microsoft Teams, Slack, Zoom, or another internal collaboration hub. Six months later, however, collaboration is still wanting.
- Your organization or team is thinking of deploying one of these hubs.
- You have adopted new, collaborative technologies and processes at work. You want your colleagues to do the same.

If you fall into one of these groups, then *Reimagining Collaboration* is right up your alley. I don't guarantee results, but you will look at collaboration through a new lens.

What Will You Learn?

This book does not lack ambition. *Reimagining Collaboration* introduces a fundamentally different model for workplace collaboration and communication. You'll learn how to think about these subjects, as well as technology and business processes, in a holistic way. I don't just introduce a new model,

though. You'll learn how to put it into action—and how to handle people who are stuck in their ways.

Plan of Attack

Part I of this book (“The Collaboration Imperative”) provides an insanely brief history of collaboration, technology, and the workplace. It contrasts collaboration with adjacent work-related terms. I make the case that collaboration today matters more than ever. Only by eschewing email can we realize the benefits of true collaboration.

In Part II (“Better Collaboration Through Technology”), I explain how a new breed of tools that I dub *internal collaboration hubs*—hence, this book's subtitle—makes it far easier for employees to work together. The big three are Slack, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom.

I also introduce the fulcrum at the center of this book: the Hub-Spoke Model of Collaboration. You'll learn how to easily stitch different applications together without any coding. By doing so, you'll minimize rework, automate tasks, and quickly get on the same page as your colleagues. Oh, and you'll communicate and collaborate much better, too.

At its core, *Reimagining Collaboration* is disruptive. It forces its readers to think differently about work. It advocates adopting new habits and technologies. In that vein, Part III (“Moving From Theory to Practice”) explains its major consequences: Organizations will have to rethink legacy business processes and confront problematic and change-averse employees. I also offer suggestions about how to maximize the chance that the new collaboration hub will take root.

As you'll learn in the following pages, neither collaboration hubs nor their spokes are static. They evolve in interesting ways. To this end, Part IV ("What Now?") puts a bow on the book. I offer advice on how to quickly learn new tools—and new features of existing applications. I also chime in with some predictions on the future of collaboration technologies. The internal collaboration hubs will become only smarter, more connected, and more powerful. I end with some tips designed to improve collaboration and a call to action.

I hope that you enjoy *Reimagining Collaboration* and learn a great deal from it.

