

Strengthening Collaboration Amongst Professionals in the Public Sector in the Digital Era – an Exploratory Study at Northumbria University (NU) and Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS)

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Publication date

2023

Document Version

Final published version

License

Other

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Foster, M., van Middelkoop, D., Haddad, S., & Sasse, S. (2023). *Strengthening Collaboration Amongst Professionals in the Public Sector in the Digital Era – an Exploratory Study at Northumbria University (NU) and Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS)*. Northumbria University.

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Strengthening Collaboration Amongst Professionals in the Public Sector in the Digital Era – an Exploratory Study at Northumbria University (NU) and Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS)

Research Report

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This research project was made possible by Northumbria University internal pump priming funding.

Executive summary

In an increasingly complex world undergoing a rapid digital transformation and facing societal and economic challenges, professionals in the public sector play a quintessential role creating new solutions for these challenges. The professionals must collaborate in teams and learning communities, so that they combine talents and knowledge to deliver good work.

Based on earlier research at AUAS AMSIB on strengthening teams of professionals, a joint study between NU Faculty of Business and Law and AUAS AMSIB, funded by internal, seed-corn NU funding, has explored the collaboration between professionals in senior positions and how they manage collaboration in their teams in a fast evolving, post-pandemic world of digital transformation.

Framed by team theory and theory on organisational logic, the key findings from the study highlight a number of variables important for effective collaboration between professionals in the digital era, such as trust, shared norms, shared goals, and the importance of leadership. Rapid digitisation creates many upsides for efficiency and communication possibilities but also threatens meaningful relationships, work-life balance and time for reflection in teams.

The data from the study will inform a funding application for a full scale research on strengthening collaboration between professionals in the digital era, aided by a consortium of partners in research and practice from NU and AUAS.

1. Theoretical Background

The study is informed by the concept of agency and its determinants within the context of collaboration among professionals in the public sector. Professionals are highly valued due to their specialized training and problem-solving abilities. Their work complexity often necessitates collaboration with others, combining insights, talents, and knowledge to deliver meaningful and high-quality work. The agency of collaborating professionals is influenced by various factors. Their individual characteristics, including knowledge, backgrounds, skills, and expertise, significantly contribute to their effective performance. Additionally, the team or group characteristics such as shared goals, psychological safety, clear roles and tasks, and diversity impact professionals' agency.

Digitisation has had a profound impact on the conditions surrounding good work in the public sector. The reliance on the digital tools and technologies raises questions about what constitutes good work in this context. Sustaining good work requires nurturing highly competent professionals. This necessitates professionals embracing uncertainty, engaging in professional dialogue, reflecting on their actions, and seeking innovative approaches. Adequate training and supportive conditions are crucial to ensure the delivery of meaningful, high-quality work that meets the demands of an ever-changing society.

2. Methodology

This study was conducted following an ethical approval from Northumbria University. The research took place between April and May 2023 and adopted an interpretivist paradigm, as the nature of the research was exploratory.

The study focused on senior professionals who not only work in teams but also hold leadership and managerial roles framed by a rapid digital transformation. The initial sample for the study consisted of a total of 22 individuals who were contacted for participation. Out of the original pool, 18 senior professionals from Northumbria University and AUAS agreed to take part in the study.

Data collection involved conducting 18 semi-structured interviews with the selected senior professionals to obtain in-depth findings. The interviews were conducted in a cross-sectional manner, with nine interviews taking place in the Netherlands and the remaining nine in the United Kingdom. The interviews lasted 30-50 mins and were conducted using a mix of face-to-face and online formats through teams' software. A template analysis technique was employed, allowing for the identification and categorization of emerging themes.

3. Findings

The analysis yielded 3 broad themes of findings which are discussed in the subsequent sections below.

3a Impact of digitisation on collaboration

The interviews have highlighted a number of impacts of digitisation on collaboration. According to interviewees, it offers several advantages, such as the increased efficiency and flexibility of collaborative work. Digital tools enhance organization, communication, and ultimately lead to improved outcomes. Digitisation also facilitates building and maintaining networks, enabling collaborations with individuals and organizations worldwide. However, the interviewees at NU and at AUAS pointed to potential disadvantages such as a loss of personal connections and spontaneous interactions that the interviewees cherish. Limitations in non-verbal communication can hinder the ability to accurately assess emotions and body language. Information and communication overload can impact productivity. Additionally, the reliance on digital platforms may lead to more individualised work, reducing face-to-face collaboration opportunities.

3b Necessary factors for collaboration

The research explored the necessary team conditions in order to foster successful collaboration in the digital era. Based on team theory, some common elements were highlighted by interviewees from NU and AUAS including sharing a clear goal or vision, having trust, and respecting one another. However, the emphasis was really set on emotional intelligence. The senior professionals interviewed stressed emotional intelligence including empathy, understanding, active listening, and valuing one another, as the core factors needed

to foster successful collaboration. They regard a professional's awareness of their surroundings as crucial to initiate and develop successful collaboration.

The interviewees at NU and at AUAS discussed the structural conditions needed to bring these team factors to life such as effective communication, an open atmosphere, transparency, and support systems. The largest theme, however, was to create and standardize norms or frameworks to set a quality standard for collaboration, so that the act of collaborating would professionalize.

Key differences between the NU and AUAS interviewees included the necessary team-factors and structures to ensure successful collaboration. The interviewees at NU put a focus on the role of leadership in fostering high quality collaboration, while the interviewees in the Netherlands stressed the role of the individual professionals in fostering successful collaboration. This suggests the UK may be more top-down, and the Netherlands bottom-up, which makes cultural theory and organizational hierarchical theory relevant in how collaboration is initiated and where the responsibility of the quality of collaboration lies. Moreover, interviewees at AUAS largely emphasized the importance of professionals themselves being aware of the importance of collaboration as well as being themselves intrinsically motivated to collaborate. This can be considered a desired shared team-condition.

3c Future of Professional Collaboration

The final theme was exploring the current and/or future challenges regarding collaboration. Most professionals in the UK and in NL perceive digitisation as a current/future challenge. This includes the influence of technologies on our daily working lives, the way we interact with people, the way we structure our work, and our approaches to technological change or technology-induced change. To overcome the challenge, the interviewees suggest performing professional trainings and setting up frameworks/guidelines of digital uses in order to create working standards that guide and facilitate successful collaboration in a digital era.

Furthermore, work-life balance and work pressure were also commonly mentioned in the UK and in the Netherlands. This theme refers to the high workload and pressure experienced by professionals, which hinders their abilities to (successfully) collaborate, in addition to the increasingly blurred boundaries between work and personal life as many professionals also work from home (or in hybrid ways). The UK interviewees emphasized the added challenge of (acquiring) funding to support collaborations.

In the Netherlands, inter-departmental or inter-institutional collaboration was mentioned as a challenge in education and in the wider public sector. Some interviewees linked this challenge to the lack of a culture of collaboration within the public sector. This reflects the theory of professional versus organizational logic, with the incumbent organizational logic as largely hindering collaborative initiatives. The implementation of professional logic is perceived as a way of relieving and rendering more flexible collaborative processes, and ultimately overcoming the current/future challenge.

4. Conclusions, limitations and future study

In summary, this study extended the team theory and the organisational logic theory as it points to a number of variables important for effective collaboration between professionals in the digital era, such as trust, shared norms, shared goals, and the importance of leadership. The influence of digitisation presents many upsides for efficiency and communication possibilities, but also threatens meaningful relationships, work-life balance and time for reflection in teams.

There are a few limitations, namely, the research took place in two selected universities as a basis for future collaborative research. Interviewees in different sectors (i.e. youth care, municipalities) would likely produce additional and/or different results. Finally, this study explored the views of professionals in managerial roles, therefore a future study should aim to involve the views of professionals at varying levels, including teaching staff as well as professional services teams.

The findings from this study merit more research and a joint effort in a wider consortium of universities to understand the challenges faced by professionals in the public sector working in teams in a context of rapid digital transformation. Especially the different focusses on respectively the role of the individual professional (NL) and leadership (UK) are of importance for the future of successful collaboration.

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