



WHITE PAPER

The Eight Wonders of the Collaboration World

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Collaboration platforms are cool. I know that. But for most of us, collaboration is something we do in our jobs. And unfortunately, lots of us have jobs that are decidedly uncool.

It's hard to get excited about social media tools for the enterprise or Web-based project management systems if we think of them primarily as ways to build a better widget.

Collaboration is so much more than that. It is, often, the center of magical, important and glorious work. When we work together, we accomplish great things. In fact, working together makes it possible for us to do extraordinary things that are, simply, impossible when we work alone.

All of us know this. But perhaps we don't think enough about the sheer magic that collaboration makes possible. In this white paper, I'm going to list what I see as the "Eight Wonders of the Collaboration World." Read it, and I trust you will agree that collaboration is about much more than finding efficiencies and improving performance.

It is, rather, about our capacity to do the wondrous.



1.

SETI@home

If you're of a certain age, as I am, you'll remember the extraordinary excitement of the race to put a man on the moon.

Little kids in the 1960s like me were obsessed with space. We knew more about the differences between Mercury and Gemini space capsules than we did about the differences between baseball and football.

We had astronaut lunch boxes, wore astronaut helmets to dinner and slept in astronaut pajamas. We eschewed soda and instead slurped Tang, solely because the folks on [television told us the astronauts drank it](#). Eventually, we grew up. And eventually, NASA landed men on the moon.

Then the whole thing sort of faded away. My generation fully expected to be living on the moon by the time we reached retirement age. But it turned out that the government just couldn't generate the cash to keep shooting for the stars.

Learning about space, it seemed, required a powerful government, thousands of scientists and an equal number of bureaucrats, the support of the voting public and an efficient tax-collection system.

Then, just as my entire generation began the long descent into senility by donning our now-ill-fitting space helmets and astronaut PJs and settling into profound depression, along came SETI@home.

SETI@home is currently the largest distributed-computer effort on earth -- and its purpose is to find evidence of intelligent life on other planets.

SETI@home isn't about sending humans into space. It's about finding whoever is out there and inviting them here for brunch or something.

By using the collaborative power of more than 3 million computers, SETI@home analyzes data from radio telescopes in a search for narrow-bandwidth radio signals, which are not known to occur naturally. By March of 2012, SETI@home had processed 2 billion such data points.

The theory is if we find such a signal in the data, it means we've found someone who can operate a form of electronic communications. Maybe SETI@home will stumble upon some alien TV show. Maybe it will find the galactic version of CB radio. Whatever. It will mean we're not alone.

Volunteers connect their computers to the SETI@home project through the hilariously named piece of software called BOINC, which is used by scientists, companies and universities in a slew of similar grid- or volunteer-computing efforts. BOINC uses your computer's downtime, so it doesn't interfere with crucial tasks like updating Facebook or gambling at online casinos.

If you're longing to collaborate in something more significant than whatever you do at work, connect your home computer(s) into one of the volunteer efforts. There's a lot of important work being done through BOINC, [including Stanford University's attempt to understand protein folding](#) and its links to disease.

But as for me, I'll be on the couch sipping Tang while my computer looks for E.T.





ReCaptcha

I'm sure you're familiar with that wacky Web process in which a site asks you to prove you're a human by correctly typing some squiggly words.

Turns out that the folks who created the original version, called Captcha, realized that having millions of people enter those words time after time and day after day was an extraordinary waste of time. In fact, Captcha had become so popular with webmasters that humans were wasting a combined total of 500,000 hours a day entering Captcha terms. So Captcha's inventor did something about it.

As Luis von Ahn, the [Carnegie Mellon professor who created Captcha](#) explains in [this wonderful video](#), he and his team have recrafted Captcha into [ReCaptcha](#), a massive, global collaboration project in which that annoying "enter the text" process is used to digitize books.



Now when you're prompted to enter text to prove you're human, you're asked to enter two words. One of those words is the "real" test of your human-ness. The other is a word scanned from an image of a book that is being digitized.

Remarkable as it may seem, humans, working collectively, are now digitizing 100 million words a day – opening untold volumes to search and free distribution.

One of the most amusing things about ReCaptcha is that users participate without knowing it. I have this sense of millions of really awful, terrible, hideous people doing this really wonderful thing to help get books to the world's poor. I'm sure it would infuriate them if they knew.

Interestingly the next big collaborative project from the team behind ReCaptcha requires users to know they are participating. [Duolingo aims to translate the Web into multiple languages](#) by taking advantage of people's desire to learn a new language. If that project weren't still in beta, it would have stood a good chance of making my Eight Wonders of the Collaboration World list.



GOOG 411

Another of these you-had-no-idea-you-were-part-of-this collaborations was Google's voice-assisted phone directory. The service is long gone. So if you never used it, you have to take my word for it: it was cool.

You just dialed 800-GOOG-411 and told the computer what you were looking for and in what city, say, Mike's Deli in New York. GOOG-411 would then start reading you the likely results. When it got to the one you wanted, you told it so. And GOOG-411 would dial the number.

In late 2010, Google disconnected GOOG-411 forever. That came as a shock to regular users. The service was popular, offered tremendous public-relations benefits to Google, and had the potential to turn into a paid service quite easily.

But Google had other plans.



GOOG-411 was never about being a phone directory. Rather it was the primary research tool that would be used to create the voice-recognition systems of Google's Android phones.

It turns out that the best way to make a voice-recognition system is to collect millions and millions of human-made sounds.

In particular, you need phonemes – syllables spoken by a particular voice with particular emphasis. For example, my Boston accent would pronounce "car" as "cah." Whereas a Californian might say something like "Carr." If I have raspy voice and a Boston accent, then "car" becomes "cagh," etc., etc. etc.

Google, it turns out, built GOOG 411 solely to "harvest" phonemes. And once it had enough, it hung up the phone.

The truth is that Google was always truthful about [GOOG 411 and its phoneme longings](#). But the whole thing feels a wee bit sinister, somehow.

And I can hold a grudge. So a few weeks ago, when I was shopping for a new phone, I remembered (pronounced "re-mem-bahd" in my accent) GOOG 411 and my phonemes and bought an iPhone, not an Android.



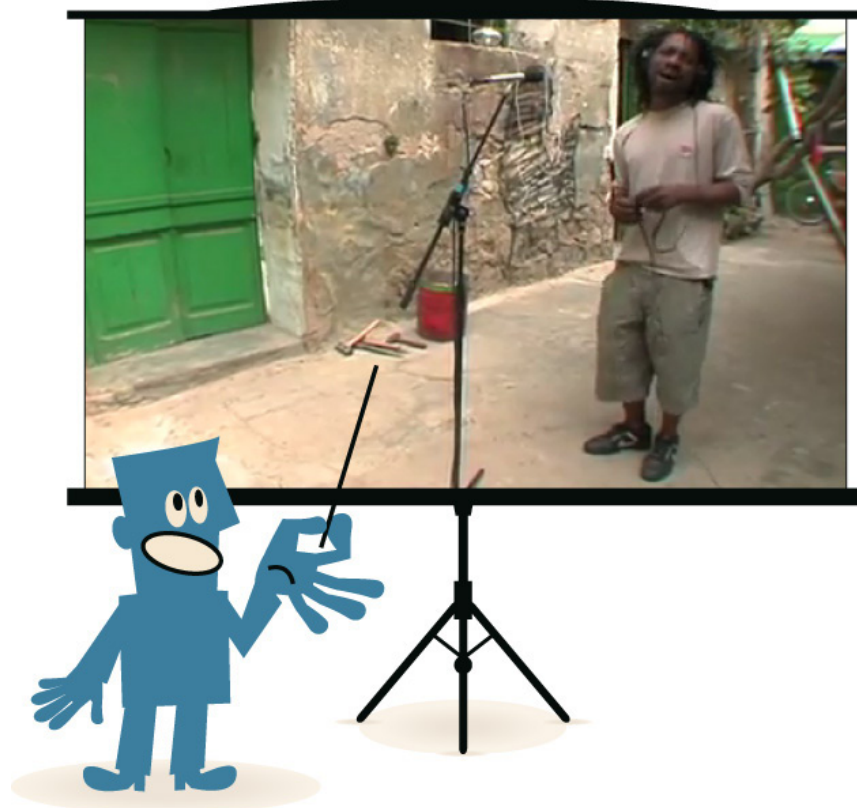
Stand by Me

If you're feeling a little bit of that
"Google stole my phonemes" fury right
now, I have the cure.

**The greatest sound-based collaboration that I've seen is
the touching cover version of Ben E. King's "Stand by Me."
Musicians from around the world who never met collaborated
on the piece as part of the **Playing for Change** movement.**

No other song, nor other version of this song,
before or since, has ever so perfectly illustrated the
magic of admitting our need for each other.

If you haven't seen the video, [watch it now](#).





Amelia Earhart and TIGHAR

When I decided to put together the Eight Wonders of the Collaboration World, I had reservations about putting the search for Amelia Earhart on the list. Chief among these reservations was, obviously, that she's still lost.

But let me explain.

TIGHAR is The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery, a non-profit organization that promotes "responsible aviation archaeology and historic preservation." TIGHAR doesn't own planes or operate a museum. Rather it's a think tank of sorts.

The best known of its work is "The Earhart Project," a collaborative effort aimed at "testing the hypothesis that Amelia Earhart and (navigator) Fred Noonan landed, and eventually died, on Gardner Island, now Nikumaroro in the Republic of Kiribati."

TIGHAR's theory is [that Earhart and Noonan survived for a time as castaways](#) on the island. It's a fascinating idea...and one that is directly counter to the prevailing theory that Earhart's plane crashed into the sea.

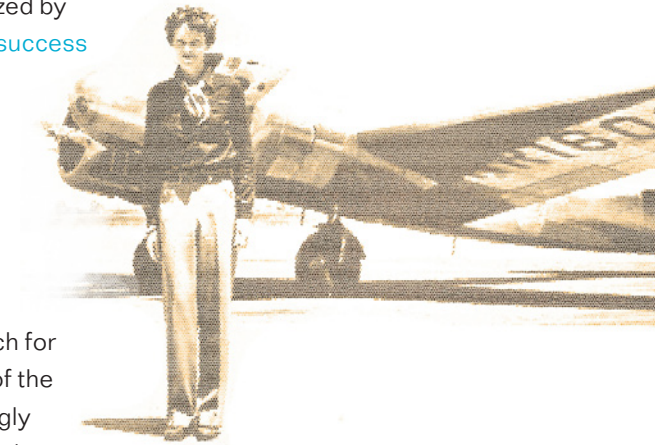
TIGHAR launched "The Earhart Project" in 1989 – decades before the rise of the collaborative computing power used by SETI@home. Bit by bit the project has grown more tech and Web savvy.

And there's [some indication that a breakthrough may be close](#). In particular, TIGHAR is looking for help from Web volunteers in identifying a bottle from the island that may be something called "Dr. Berry's Freckle Cream" – a skin lotion that Amelia used.

Should TIGHAR succeed in proving that Earhart landed on Gardner, it would solve a mystery that has haunted the aviation world for almost 75 years. It would also provide a welcome boost to collaboration in the search-and-rescue world – a place where the advantages of large-scale volunteer collaboration is being recognized by the Web community, [despite the lack of success in the search for Steve Fossett](#).

But the real reason I put TIGHAR's search for Amelia on the list of the Eight Wonders of the Collaboration World is it would be achingly perfect if – in a world where we're all a little nervous about how much Google and the other giants of the Web know about our private lives – someone's shopping habits and brand preferences were to solve the Earhart mystery.

So head down to Grandma's basement as soon as you can, and look for a bottle of Dr. Berry's Freckle Cream.





Collaborative consumption

Speaking of shopping habits, No. 6 on our list is the trend around new collaborative forms of consumerism.

From making purchase decisions based on the recommendations of strangers to opting to share rather than own, something has clearly changed in how we approach “stuff.”

“What’s Mine Is Yours: The Rise of Collaborative Consumption” is the title of a book by Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers. In it they document the start of a pervasive and global shift away from ownership and toward collaboration and the sharing of resources.

And as feel-goody as the idea of a world run through collaboration and the sharing of resources may sound, the fascinating thing about Botsman and Rogers’ book is that it is, at its core, nothing more than an endless list of for-profit companies that are engaged in such activity.

Botsman and Rogers detail three distinct areas within collaborative consumption. Each could have stood on their own on the Eight Wonders of the Collaborative World list.

They are:

Product service systems –

companies that give users the benefits of a product without requiring them to buy the product outright. Examples include car-sharing services like Zipcar and textbook rental services like Chegg.

Redistribution markets – taking things that are no longer useful in one location and moving them someplace where they have value. Examples include Craigslist, eBay and 99Dresses.

Collaborative lifestyles – uniting with other people to share time, space, money and interests. Examples include the co-working movement, crowd-funding outfits like Kickstarter and social-lending systems like Zopa.

In this video, [Botsman discusses the concept of collaborative consumption](#) and predicts that in the not-too-distant future our “reputations” on collaboration and sharing sites will be of more importance than our credit scores.

If that seems a little far-fetched to you, consider this: last year Time magazine set out to list 10 ideas that will change the world. No. 8 on their list – [share, don’t own](#).





Wikipedia

Does anyone even remember the days when encyclopedias were a) expensive, b) limited in the number of entries they published, and c) produced in opaque processes in high-rise office buildings by “professionals”?

Well I do. I’m old. And let me tell you something – those days were awful.

For all its flaws (and they are legion), Wikipedia is vastly superior to the encyclopedias of old.

Some of that superiority is related to Wikipedia’s distribution method and its economies, i.e., it’s easy to find and free. But the true key to what makes Wikipedia wonderful is the collaborative methods by which it is written and edited.

But everyone knows that by now. Wikipedia has become the grand old dame of collaboration. We all point to it as an example of how collaboration can work. Even the structure of Wikipedia is mimicked in a million collaborative wikis around the Web.

But it wasn’t the sheer ubiquity of Wikipedia, nor the influence the platform has on collaborative work, that prompted me to put it on the list of the Eight Wonders. The fact that Wikipedia works well and is scalable doesn’t interest me. The “how” of it is boring. It’s the “why” that fascinates me.

If you’ve never read Marshall Poe’s article, “The Hive,” from 2006 in *The Atlantic*, you should. Poe’s article remains the definitive piece on the man behind Wikipedia, Jimmy Wales.

Wales, as it turns out, was a denizen of the online fantasy gaming worlds known as MUDs, (for multiuser dungeons) – the virtual, computer-driven offspring of *Dungeons and Dragons*. He was also an early user of discussion lists, the email-based forums of the early 1980s.

What’s particularly illuminating is that Wales was also an early discussion-list moderator – taking the helm of a list about philosopher Ayn Rand. In that role he adopted a particular style of moderating that corresponded with his ideas about Rand’s ideas on personal freedom. That moderating style would later become the model for Wikipedia edits.

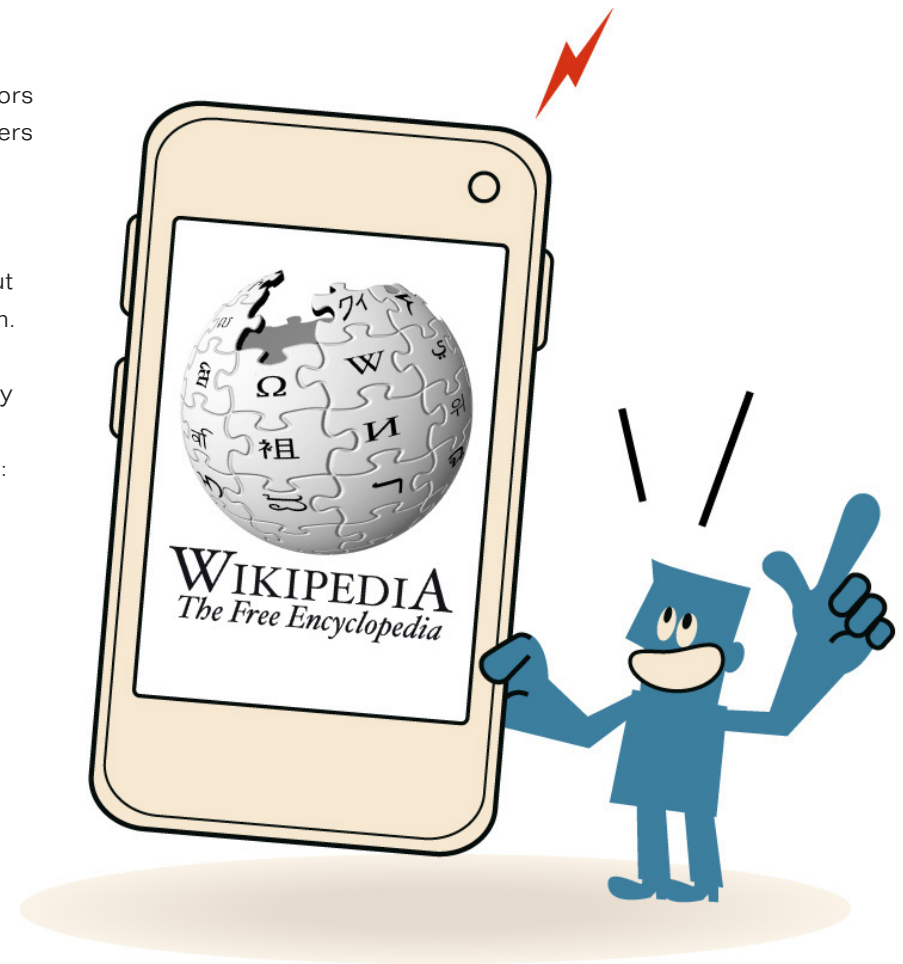
As Poe describes it, decades before Wikipedia, Wales was an advocate of what is generically termed “openness” online.

An “open” online community is one with few restrictions on membership or posting—everyone is welcome, and anyone can say anything as long as it’s generally on point and doesn’t include gratuitous ad hominem attacks.

Equally illuminating is the serendipitous manner in which Wales wound up launching Wikipedia. In brief, it was an attempt to work around a flaw in an earlier venture. That earlier offering, called Nupedia, used the same step-by-step editing process used by publishers for centuries, i.e., “no stage of the editorial process could proceed before the previous stage was completed.” The plan was to offer a wiki to Nupedia contributors that could break the editing “bottleneck by permitting volunteers to work simultaneously all over the project.”

And those two factors – Wales’ vision of what a moderator should be like and a let’s-just-try-something-new attitude about editing – give us the core of modern, Web-based collaboration.

Because in 2012, when we talk about collaboration we’re really talking civil, non-competitive and non-hostile communication combined with asynchronous contributions to a common goal: exactly the sort of thing a nice college boy who liked D&D and individual freedom would want.





Me, you and the rest of us

Jimmy Wales' genius is that he understood what is required if people are to collaborate effectively. First, they must feel "safe." No one wants to participate in a project where hostility is the norm. Second, they must sense that they are "free." Everyone wants to feel their individual approach, unique style and personal strengths are appreciated, that their contributions are solicited, not coerced.

Collaboration, in other words, works best when individuals are treated like human beings.

That should come as no surprise. Collaborating is exactly what made us human beings.

Biologists, theologians, anthropologists and philosophers disagree on much of why humans are what they are, and behave how they do. There's lots of room for disagreement here. Why do people do awful things? Is it a result of our survival-driven, one-upmanship chemistry? Why do people also do wonderful things – particularly when there's no evolutionary advantage to doing so?

I don't have the answers. Nor do you.

So let's just stick to what we know to be true.

Tens of thousands of years ago, a Neanderthal received a terrible blow to his skull. The injury probably blinded him. It did cripple him, causing one side of his body to wither. And yet, he survived for many, many years.

His skeleton was found in a cave near what is now Shanidar, Iraq. Officially, this Neanderthal is known as Shanidar 1. But scientists have nicknamed him Nandy. We know a fair amount about him. But the thing we know about him that is the most important, most wonderful, most extraordinary is this:

He was kept alive.

It is impossible that Nandy (or the other "elderly" creatures whose remains have been recovered from the same era) could have hunted. Nor could he have traveled great distances on his own. Rather, his social group fed and transported him.

Erik Trinkaus, an anthropologist, and Pat Shipman, a professor of medicine, say it as clearly as can be in "The Neanderthals, Changing the Image of Mankind," their seminal work on the Neanderthals: "a one-armed, partially blind, crippled man could have made no pretense of hunting and gathering his own food. That he survived for years after his trauma was a testament to Neanderthal compassion and humanity."

Somehow, for some reason, and no doubt with considerable difficulty, these ancients began to collaborate to help the weakest among them.

This is something well beyond collaborative hunting – even sharks do that. These cave-dwelling proto-humans did something that no other species could have done – they changed themselves in order to protect the weakest.



Look past our flaws. Look beyond our shortcomings. And see the human race for what it is. We are the product of an overlap between morality and collaboration. We carry the DNA of creatures that took turns dragging a crippled old man from campsite to campsite.

We are a race of collaborators. We are a race built for collaboration and built by collaboration.

Together, we have tamed a planet, visited the moon, cured dozens of diseases, created a comprehensive Web-based encyclopedia, designed voice-recognition software and digitized billions of words.

We are the Eighth Wonder of the Collaboration World. We are the wonder of the world, period. And sooner or later we'll figure out what happened to Amelia Earhart.



Conclusion: There's a flaw in the piece you just read. I'm sure you've spotted it. But just in case, let me say it openly here: The Eight Wonders of the Collaboration World is written by one man.

Weird, huh?

Why would a piece about collaboration have a sole author?

That's a good question. And there's no good answer.

**So let's fix it. Create your own list.
Get together with your coworkers and
friends and collaborate on a list too.**

And don't limit yourself to the past. Ask if there's something amazing, extraordinary and magical that could be done through the power of collaboration. Do you want to solve a problem? Answer a question? Cure a disease? Solve a mystery?

Good.

Now find some like-minded folks to collaborate with, and go change the world -- together.

Meet Paul Conley

Paul Conley entered journalism at the age of six. Too young to be hired as a paper boy, he convinced a neighborhood teenager to subcontract his route. Since then, Paul has continued to rewrite the rules of the content world as a reporter, editor, bureau chief, producer, executive and entrepreneur.

Paul has held senior positions at Knight-Ridder, the Economist Group, CNN, Primedia/Prism and Bloomberg. He serves on the professional advisory boards of College Media Advisers, the national group that works with student journalists, and Northwest Missouri State University's Mass Communications program.

His clients include New York Times Digital, IDG, Amazon, SmartBrief, Whatsnexx, Vance Publishing, Penton and others. For more information about Paul, please visit PaulConley.com



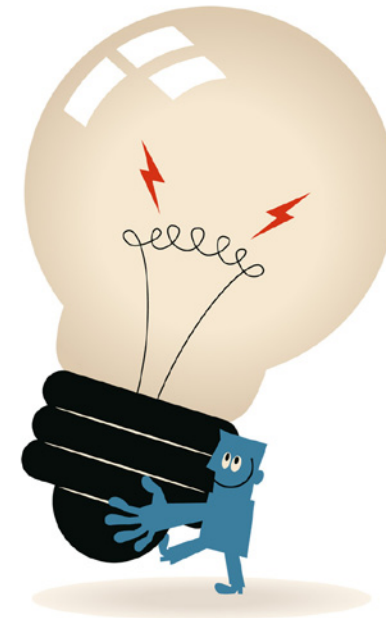
About Central Desktop

Central Desktop helps people work together in ways never before possible.

Our social collaboration platform connects people and information in the cloud, making it possible to share files, combine knowledge, inspire ideas, manage projects and more. Our SocialBridge collaboration solution centralizes the way people work, teams collaborate and managers lead.

Central Desktop serves half a million users worldwide. Key Central Desktop customers include CBS, Harvard University, the Humane Society of the United States, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, SK+G Advertising, Rhea + Kaiser, Upshot, WD-40 and Workday.

Founded in 2005, Central Desktop is a privately-held company with headquarters in Pasadena, California.



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