

Collaboration: The Digital Publisher's Secret Weapon

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Introduction

With technology solutions booming in nearly every industry, the widespread infusion of new tools presents an ideal opportunity for digital publishers, but with it comes the growing need for various departments to collaborate more effectively. This is especially true for commercial teams, where campaigns are becoming more and more data-focused and analytical.

With the fast pace of innovation, it can be challenging to keep everyone on the same page. Competing priorities, multiple stakeholders, and silos within the organization add complexity to each step of the process. And with work environments becoming increasingly digitized and dispersed, the need for project collaboration just keeps on growing.

While budget constraints and logistical challenges brought on by the events of recent years further complicate matters, the reality is that the evolution of customer expectations has not slowed down. Digital publishers seeking to maintain a competitive advantage must hone their internal processes to be successful. A fact that many businesses are becoming wise to, as according to **Forbes Strategic Initiatives Study**¹, “73% of organizations now plan on increasing collaboration in future, considering it vital to project success.”

One study of over 1,000 companies even showed that teams across functions who collaborate well perform as much as **5 times better**² than those who don't.

It's clear then that there's a need for strong collaboration. So with such concrete evidence to show the benefits, how can digital publishers go about building and developing better collaboration environments in the workplace?

In this guide, we'll explain the 5 "blind spots" many publishers miss when thinking about cross-team collaboration, as well as the 5 steps for better collaboration to help teams thrive together.

¹ http://images.forbes.com/forbesinsights/StudyPDFs/FD_AdaptingCorporateStrategy.pdf

² <https://www.i4cp.com/member/restricted?referer=%2Fsurvey-analyses%2Fpurposeful-collaboration-the-essential-components-of-collaborative-cultures>

5 common collaboration "blind spots"

One of the difficulties with a lack of collaboration lies in actually being aware of the issues. It's often difficult to see areas lacking support when you're part of the team yourself.

Since many teams will have a hand in many different layers of the business, blind spots might not always be easily recognizable. Here are some key pointers to look out for that might suggest your team collaboration needs fine-tuning.

1. Lack of accountability

Projects with multiple stakeholders across different functions can be challenging. There are endless requirements, objectives, deadlines, and success metrics to keep track of. Without a clear understanding of the project plan along with the roles and responsibilities of each contributor, confusion and frustration down the line are inevitable. In their recent presentation “Building an engine for digital subscriptions growth” for the [INMA World Congress Event](https://www.inma.org/modules/event/2022WorldCongress/)³, Canadian news and media company Torstar outlined the key challenges for accountability in their publishing teams:

1. Upper-funnel traffic is usually tracked and measured by multiple teams, meaning no single individual or team owns the growth. This could lead to stagnation without clear actions to expand in future.
2. Articulating brand strengths in a changing news world is complex and requires insight from multiple teams — but maintaining customer trust without an individual driving the initiative is difficult.
3. There are multiple points of view on design, from text layout to images and graphics — without a brand champion, this is a potential area for conflict.

Sound familiar? You're not alone, these are common issues every media and publishing business faces. This leaves room for lack of accountability to go unacknowledged or undiscovered without proper analysis or closer examination under the microscope.

In the above examples, Torstar decided they had to get out of team silos and collaborate better to find a resolution, starting with their team leaders. As we progress through this guide, we'll dive into ways to create cross-functional teams in this way.

2. Lack of common vocabulary

Unravelling the web of technical jargon, acronyms, and buzzwords connected with digital publishing can be difficult, to say the least. New words seem to emerge every day, and without a fundamental understanding of what these terms represent, teams may quickly find themselves lost or disjointed.

With studies confirming that **86% of executives identify ineffective communication as a major cause of failure in business**⁴, it's clear that a lack of technical jargon knowledge poses a significant barrier to success.

Acronyms and abbreviations that aren't understood lose their purpose, while staying well-informed on current terms gives teams the power to communicate quickly and effectively.

This fact doesn't just apply to the publishing industry. To help solve communication issues at our company, each of our new starters go through a training process, running through our internal technology and platforms, and getting familiar with common terms and acronyms used across

³ <https://www.inma.org/modules/event/2022WorldCongress/>

⁴ <https://www.salesforce.com/ca/blog/2014/08/how-soft-skills-are-crucial-to-your-business-.html>

the business. Along with practical training, we've found that keyword "cheat sheets" are an effective way to keep everyone in the loop.

Digital publishers can adopt a similar approach. To get started, here are some key industry terms to be aware of:

CRM

Customer relationship management. A process in which a business or organization administers its interactions with customers. Typically customer success and sales teams use this tool internally.

CDP

Customer data platform. A collection of software which creates a persistent, unified customer database that is accessible to other systems. Data is pulled from multiple sources, cleaned, and combined to create a single customer profile.

DMP

Data management platform. A software platform used for collecting and managing data. They allow businesses to identify audience segments, which can be used to target specific users and contexts in online advertising campaigns.

ID MANAGEMENT

Identity management. Also known as identity and access management, this is a framework of policies and technologies for ensuring that the right users have the appropriate access to resources.

For more help with the technical terminology and for a useful "cheat sheet" resource, download our **[Digital Publishing & Media Glossary e-guide](https://www.zephr.com/the-ultimate-digital-publishing-and-media-glossary)**⁵ to get a full run-through of everything from A/B testing to Zombie subscribers.

3. Opportunity left on the table

In digital publishing, time is of the essence. When a new article or feature hits, there is a small window of opportunity to quickly publish and drive readers before competition steps in and leads them away. In order to stay competitive, strong collaboration is required between editorial teams, rev-ops, marketing, and advertising, not to mention an infrastructure that allows non-technical teams to push forward and enact new ideas.

The New York Times famously spent 14 months building their paywall in-house over 10 years ago — time and resources many digital publishers simply don't have. If internal processes aren't conducive to identifying and deploying opportunities in a fast-paced market, it will be difficult to keep up with competition and opportunities will keep slipping away.

The key is to carve out time to scope out the project details in order to identify the opportunities and risks at hand. A good place to start is with a SWOT analysis. Adopting a simple tool like this and working with internal stakeholders can help teams spot opportunities early on and capitalize on them. This can be used as a regular check-in tool and help teams avoid missing opportunities, which may become a threat if competitors adopt them instead.

Whatever the chosen tool, remember that teams aren't aware of what they don't know. Conducting an effective analysis of available business opportunities can only be effective with input from multiple viewpoints. SWOT analysis or SOAR analysis (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results) rely on an effective marrying of fact-finding from various viewpoints, alongside the desires of relevant stakeholders.

⁵ <https://www.zephr.com/the-ultimate-digital-publishing-and-media-glossary>



Commercially-minded buyers may be well attuned to the value they see in a new solution but it is very easy for them to overlook the true cost of implementation. Often the integration team needs to deal with an extensive list of “details,” like security implications and performance ramifications, not to mention the actual development of any necessary integration. Where technology teams have developed an intuitive sense for the long-tail of work like this, the commercial buyer can often feel frustrated that the team is being pessimistic and adding friction.

Chris Scott

VP/GM - Product & Engineering,
Zuora

4. Inconsistent decision-making

In the current state of digital publishing, most strive to be data-centric, having data drive decisions around audiences, content, advertising and more. Digital publishers can't afford not to be data-driven. Without data, it will lead to teams disagreeing, relying on "gut feeling" and not taking the best course of action. With that in mind, it's clear that data is king. However, publishers also need to know what data to use, how to use it, and when to take action. This can be tricky, and requires expertise and the right tools in place. On the bright side, there is a solution.

Being able to make effective and consistent decisions that are aligned across the business comes down to communicating the importance of every data point as it is relevant to the respective teams. For example, content teams might keep track of engagement metrics but have no idea what their impact is on revenue. Being able to communicate internal metrics between teams means you can tie back data to relevant business outcomes, and better decisions can be made as a result.

It's essential to have a clear understanding of the goals and objectives of a project before making any decisions. Once these are established, the right data can be extracted, and from there, it should be easier to align everyone on the same page and make consistent decisions.

5. Conflicting expectations

Let's dive in...

Not everyone is as well-versed in technology as the tech team, nor should you expect them to be. Non-technical teams might not always understand the time and processes required.

In order to help align expectations, project owners must involve their tech teams from the start. With adequate notice, you can take the journey together and map out realistic outcomes for each of the project stakeholders.

5 steps for better collaboration

Now that we've highlighted some of the common blind spots associated with publishing, and some key areas of focus to help resolve them, let's next delve into the 5 steps for improving team environments and fostering an even more effective collaborative culture.

1. Form a "digital council"

To help solve many of the collaboration issues Torstar raised in the [INMA World Congress Event](#)⁶, they decided to launch a "digital council."

This council included people from data, product, marketing, editorial, strategy, and sales teams with the main goal to share the benefits and deliverables of upcoming projects, as well as make sure decisions and expectations were aligned throughout.

"As with any successful collaboration, the key is in a shared understanding. While this can be brought about through ad hoc conversations, aligned objectives — such as OKRs — can provide great common ground upon which to discuss the merits and drawbacks of a purchase or project. If a tech team can see that a solution clearly brings about a company OKR, then they will fundamentally understand the drive for the project."

Chris Scott,
VP/GM - Product & Engineering, Zuora

Torstar's digital council was formed with these key objectives in mind:

- Get all relevant team members together (no matter how dispersed they are)
- Easily exchange and brainstorm new ideas to avoid missing new opportunities
- Gain a real-time review of project / daily progress across departments
- Ensure everyone understands the true project requirements
- Ensure everyone does exactly what is required
- Strategically reflect on results, barriers, and resourcing
- Create a place to pitch new ideas
- Enforce roadmap priorities
- Bring aligned recommendation to CEO

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Make sure the marketing department becomes more tech-savvy, and the IT department better understands marketing. Coming together around the consumer and customers will help to break down internal silos and align agendas. Upgrading their skills will help both departments make better decisions about technology and understand its impact on business outcomes.

Glen Hartman⁷

Global Managing Director,
Accenture Interactive

⁶ <https://www.inma.org/modules/event/2022WorldCongress/>

⁷ <https://hbr.org/2013/08/the-dangerous-tension-between>

Digital councils don't always have to take the form of a new team with specific individuals. At our company, we run regular bi-weekly commercial briefings and product roadmap sessions instead. These sessions work in a similar way to the digital council created by Torstar, but include everyone from the business to align expectations across various teams.

2. Draft out guiding principles, training, and roadmaps

As mentioned in the previous section, we run regular commercial briefings as well as product roadmap sessions to make sure all teams are aware of what's happening in the business and how it might impact them.

We also conduct thorough training lessons for new starters, running through our internal technology, and getting familiar with common terms and acronyms used across the business. This helps ensure each person understands the tech required to make the business work, and what each bit does. Having this inherent understanding of what we're working with is incredibly valuable when it comes to adopting and communicating ideas across teams.

This inherent understanding, along with clear guiding principles is what makes teams work together effectively. Drafting guiding principles is about setting alignment guardrails to keep everyone on track. This means identifying key areas of focus, key training, and core topics to keep up to date on.

Here are some of the key guiding principles Torstar chose to help aid their collaboration:

- Maintain a shared goal of an agile and rapid response to challenges
- Journalism will be at the core of decisions
- Attain clarity on business objectives
- Communicate with a consumer-centric approach
- Foster a culture around asking questions
- Ensure that data drives business, product, and editorial decisions
- Track, measure, and report results
- Cultivate and enforce a test-and-learn environment
- Find ways to make it easier to use benefits

Having guiding principles written down ensures a higher chance of adherence. It becomes much easier to communicate and set focus on shared goals when everyone is clear on the foundations.

3. Use technology that supports collaboration

Tools are frequently chosen and implemented in a silo, resulting in things falling through the cracks at critical points. A dev-ops team may use one system to record bugs while IT uses another application to work on internal issues, and a product team may utilize a third tool to work on product development.

In many cases, these teams unfortunately require features and capabilities only available in certain applications. But there are exceptions where tools exist that could be shared and trained across departments, or can at least integrate with other tools already existing in the business. Failure to employ these tools or provide access to other teams, results in frustration, misalignment, and the business slowing down.



To overcome these issues, it helps to eliminate the issue from the source — the technology itself. Taking a best-of-breed approach to technology and pairing with technology-agnostic vendors means multiple teams can get the tech they need without extensive hard work. Being able to feed data directly from one platform into another saves countless steps in the middle of the process that would otherwise slow things down.

When considering which provider to use, consider the user experience of the new technology from various perspectives. Is the platform intuitive? Can commercial users get what they need as easily as technical users? Keeping these in mind will help avoid bottlenecks and expertise reliance in the future.

When technology is chosen correctly, the impact it can have on team collaboration is extraordinary. According to **IBM Center for Applied Insights**⁸: “61% of leading businesses said that [the right] SaaS products offer them increased collaboration, both internally and externally.”

Once new technology is chosen with a holistic viewpoint in mind, Scott Brinker of Chief Martech gives some further **tips for ensuring the best outcome across multiple teams**⁹:

1. Make sure people are allocating space in their responsibilities to learn new tools, technologies, and approaches.
2. Once a business has the tools and people know how to use them, the next step is to determine where the constraints are and work to see how to overcome those constraints by working collaboratively.

4. Prioritize team feedback loops

Most publishers feel like they have a firm grasp on subscriber health because they can see how customers use their products and gain insights from their engagement data. But while publishers might be able to estimate satisfaction levels by looking at the data they have, customer retention requires more. Retention needs the right talent to manage and maintain happy customers. Namely, utilizing a feedback loop with customer success teams.

*Harvard Business Review*¹⁰ famously estimated that it’s “5-25x easier to sell to an existing customer than to a new one.” With this in mind, keeping existing customers happy and collecting feedback must be a big priority.

Customer success teams obtain plenty of qualitative feedback about subscription packages and user experiences on a daily basis. Their unique perspective should be taken into account across multiple teams, and considered as a core function for marketing, editorial, product, rev-ops, and engineering.

Using this internal resource effectively, digital publishers can construct a rich internal feedback loop that informs product planning by combining qualitative information from customer success with real-time customer data. This will give way to businesses shaping their product in a more meaningful way that benefits their subscribers.

“The product feedback loop allows relevant teams to collect customer feedback continuously and improve a product based on these insights. To build the best possible product for customers, you need to validate different solutions based on feedback. It’s a non-stop process. Well-defined feedback loops are not to be underestimated. They help you store valuable information, make necessary changes, and build a product that subscribers will truly use and love.”

Sean Gray, Product Manager, Zuora

⁸ <https://ibmcai.wordpress.com/>

⁹ <https://scratch.simplecast.com/episodes/how-to-make-martech-work-for-your-team-with-scott-brinker-of-hubspot>

¹⁰ <https://hbr.org/>

5. Transform data into useful information

At the core of cross-functional collaborations lies reliable customer data. To produce effective subscription products that help retain customers, it's important to first comprehend customer demands right now and use that to anticipate their needs in the future.

It's no secret that collecting first-party data from users is incredibly valuable for digital publishers. But what's even more valuable is the surprising effect sharing this data with other teams could have on business outcomes. With more insights about user preferences and behaviors, there's less confusion, conflict, and differing opinions on the best course of action between teams. This helps make decision-making more efficient and agreeable.

But sharing raw data alone doesn't always yield useful results. For example, tracking average page views might be a great "vanity metric," but it does little to actually move teams toward business goals. Instead, thinking about how that data can be used to improve content in the future is a far more powerful way of using data. (e.g. tracking which types of content receive the most page views, when, and how can be used to customize subscription packages and boost revenue).

"We marry monetization analytics [with other parts of our business]. Comparing session RPM, article by category, writer by topic, and any other way that we can slice it to create trends. This is shared with the editor-in-chief so we can analyze the direction of content output and how it's actually translating into monetization for the business. By looking at those trends, we're able to say, 'Okay, if I know that my food content has my highest RPM overall, that's an initial indication to invest more in that type of content.'"

Justin Wohl¹¹, CRO, Salon.com

In any case, teams should aim to remove as much guesswork as possible from their internal experts by improving processes with actionable data. That means demonstrating a direct outcome as a result of a particular change. Not only will this way of working and data sharing result in better decision-making, but also better cross-collaboration and improved team environments too.

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It certainly has been helpful to foster an overall team spirit amongst leadership [by sharing key data in this way]. I think it's gone a long way to making it a stronger, more collaborative environment in our team. And I hope that more organizations do fold in cross-department analytics in this way to work better overall.

Justin Wohl
CRO, Salon.com

¹¹ <https://zephhr.buzzsprout.com/1015900/6091288-ep-22-justin-wohl-salon-com-creating-a-publishing-strategy>

Putting it all together

When collaboration is done correctly, digital publishers see benefits across the entire brand — including higher team morale and a sharper ability to understand audiences.

In general, here's a recap of some of the benefits we covered in this guide, and some quick snapshot takeaways you can use to help achieve them:

- 1. Competitive edge:** By utilizing knowledge across functions, publishers can reveal insights that competitors might not have. As revenue and marketing teams work much more closely with content and newsrooms, it becomes much easier to identify areas of focus which may have previously gone unnoticed.
- 2. Increased customer satisfaction:** Personalization is an essential part of a strong strategy. Without it, users lose interest, or worse, become frustrated and disappointed with the experience your brand offers. To make personalization work well in the age of digital transformation, marketing, customer success, and tech teams need to work together by purposefully turning moments of friction into opportunities for collaboration and enlightenment.
- 3. Improving productivity:** Leveraging the right tools that support cross-functional collaboration leads to a more aligned and focused strategy. When choosing new technology, look for intuitive interfaces that make it easy for a variety of teams to use to help avoid bottlenecks.

Ultimately, finding balance and fostering healthy collaboration takes dedication, communication, and intent. Digital publishers that take a proactive and thoughtful approach to collaboration by enabling partnerships between commercial and technical teams are likely to create better solutions and achieve their goals faster.

When teams have opportunities to learn from end users and grasp the whole picture early, it leads to better solutions from the start, and more efficient, invested teams. While it may be an added step to invite individuals off of their "islands" to gather data and collaborate on solutions, requirements, and scope, the investment in the long-term will lead to better subscription products, higher team morale, and more satisfied subscribers overall.



Speak to an expert to find out how the right tool
can help with collaboration.

Speak with our team



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