

S U M M E R 2 0 0 5

Virtual leadership – a small school reality?

What impact can e-communication
have upon the role of a headteacher
in a small school?

Peter Ralley, Headteacher, Thomas Barnes Primary School
Tamworth, Staffordshire

Paul Cockcroft, St Mary's CE (A) Primary School, Market Drayton

Contents

Section one: questions:	3
i) Why “Virtual leadership – a small school reality?”	3
ii) The researchers	3
iii) The research context	4
iv) The enquiry	5
Section two: answers	6
i. What impact have increased e-communications had upon headteachers of an established network of small schools?	6
ii. Can increased use of e-communications have an impact upon the headteachers in a group of schools wishing to become a more effective network?	8
iii. What are the requirements for an effective small school network?	11
iv. What barriers stand in the way of small school headteachers using e-communications to network with other headteachers?	14
Overall conclusions	16

Section one: questions

i) Why “Virtual leadership – a small school reality?”

The question mark at the end of the title is very relevant. At the start of the study it was almost certain, in the minds of the researchers, that there would be no question mark and that virtual leadership, ie leading an organisation supported by a virtual networked communications system, would be attainable in all small schools. The successful North-South Network seemed to be living up to all it had promised, and it was only a matter of time before other groups of small schools could pick up on the idea and make it work for them too.

A question mark was added to the title when it became clear at the end of the second year of the North-South Network, and about half way through the research associateship, that events were taking the process in a different direction. Instead of showing how it works, it may be necessary to demonstrate also why virtual networks do not and cannot work in some circumstances.

If all the headteachers were talking together they could talk about how they have tried to improve the school life and then other headteachers could try as well. They could share improvements and with things that don't work as good, the other schools would know not to try it.

Oliver, Year 10, Bolton. Taken from *Why Networked Learning Communities?* NCSL, 2002

ii) The researchers

In the context of this piece of research it is important to understand the background of the two researchers. Both of us are serving headteachers in small schools, with a combined experience of nearly 15 years. We were brought together, along with two of our colleagues, at the request of Staffordshire LEA's Networking Advisor, with a view to submitting a bid to become a Networked Learning Community.

Both of us believe passionately in networking and how it can benefit small schools. Neither of us has a senior management team and therefore no one else within our organisation with whom to engage in dialogue at a similar level. After becoming part of a Networked Learning Community we both saw how networking could become an integral part of our school management and might impact upon all levels within the school community.

It became clear to us that the power of networking meant that the age-old mantra of “We are small schools so we don't have time or resources to do...” could be dismissed and that by “working smarter together, not harder alone” we could integrate our schools almost as one organisation and, with that, share significant benefits.

It was with this passion and foresight that we decided to embark upon this research – to discover how communication was developing within our own network and how it could be applied to other potential small school networks.

During the course of this research we were part of a working group invited by the DfES to help formulate policy for the future of networking, and were delighted when it was clear that our views had helped to form the principles of the newly introduced Primary Strategy Networks.

Three years into networking we are still as enthusiastic about networking as ever and have led the North-South Network through good times and bad. Our own schools in particular

have benefited from the joint work and commitment to the networking arrangements, and it has become firmly embedded within the culture of our schools.

Neither of us is a professional researcher, but what we have discovered has come out of deep immersion in the subject and the desire to share what we have learned on what has been a fascinating journey of inquiry.

iii) The research context

Small schools are very different organisations from larger schools. Within the context of this research, the term “small school” is defined as one having fewer than 100 children. These schools have as few as 20 children in some cases, with the average number of classes being four. The majority of classes are of mixed age, and within that mix there is a great variety from whole Key Stage teaching to cross Key Stage teaching. In this paper headteachers are the focus, so there will be little or no reference to the impact of networking upon the children.

In all the schools featured in this study the headteachers have some sort of teaching commitment. Some heads have no formal commitment but are called upon to cover staff and to run booster sessions. Many choose to take on a teaching role. The fact that management teams do not exist in most small schools means that the headteacher bears the weight of responsibility for all management decisions made in the school. Small school headship is a lonely position, and the weight of work is onerous, particularly for those heads who have a large teaching commitment. There is often a perception of isolation and loneliness and a feeling that there simply is no one to talk to and problems must be tackled alone.

The two headteachers who have compiled this paper are members of two separate small school clusters. Staffordshire has grouped small schools into geographic clusters which are expected to work on collaborative projects using a small grant given by the LEA. These clusters have been arranged purely on geographic grounds, rather than through headteacher choice. This has meant that the degree of success in collaborative learning varies from cluster to cluster. Some are very successful and have produced some excellent work. In 2002 we were asked by Staffordshire LEA’s small school advisor to attend a meeting run by the National College for School Leadership’s Networked Learning group. Following this meeting a successful bid was compiled, and so began the North-South Network, a group of 12 small schools made up of two clusters. The unique aspect to this twinning is that the clusters are 50 miles apart. This push against the geographic clustering resulted in a bid that used ICT as its core, not as a subject in its own right, but as a vehicle for communication: a vehicle to aid school improvement, sharing good practice and high quality communications. Thus the experience of being part of the North-South Network plays a large role in this research.

Following the positive impact of good communications within the network, it was decided that other small schools in Staffordshire should be made aware of what benefits could be gained, and all small school headteachers were contacted and asked to undertake a personal ICT self-audit which would determine their ICT competency, with a view to involving them all in virtual networking.

iv) The enquiry

Findings in this paper have come from three different sources:

1. From a questionnaire sent to all small school headteachers in Staffordshire, a total of 65. The questionnaire was adapted from a DfES ICT self-audit, and included questions on video conferencing. Headteachers were sent the questionnaire by post and by email, and had a choice of how they responded. The data from the questionnaires was used to analyse strengths, weakness and trends across the respondents.
2. From a group of headteachers who volunteered to take part in pilot virtual networking activity. Along with the covering letter which accompanied the questionnaire we asked for volunteers to take part in a pilot group. They were told that, should they opt to be part of the pilot group, they would be expected to:
 - increase the amount of ICT they used for communication
 - work with another group of headteachers designated by the researchers – sharing, formulating and supporting
3. From the North-South Network itself. By the time this report was being compiled, the researchers had been involved in small school networking for three years and were entering the final year of funding from NCSL. Great changes have taken place within the North-South Network which caused a modification in how the research was viewed.

Our enquiry asked four main questions:

1. What impact have increased e-communications had upon an established network of small schools?
2. Can increased use of e-communications have an impact upon a group of schools wishing to become a more effective network?
3. What are the requirements for an effective small school network?
4. What barriers stand in the way of small school headteachers using e-communications to network with other headteachers?

Section two: answers

i. What impact have increased e-communications had upon headteachers of an established network of small schools?

As has already been described, the North-South Network (NSN) was formed by the coming together of two successfully established networks. These networks, or clusters as they are known in Staffordshire, were made up of schools that are geographically close to each other, so communication was fairly easy and could take the form of face-to-face discussions as well as email or telephone.

Once the NSN came into being there was an added barrier: distance. The two schools that were furthest away in the NSN were 50 miles apart, and so a whole new strategy was needed, and this had to be at the core of the bid for NCSL funding.

It was decided that ICT would form the core of the bid. ICT has a duality as a subject; It is a curriculum area in its own right, where all the necessary skills are taught to enable the learner to be able to operate the hardware and utilise the software. Its second strand is as a tool, and in our case as a medium for communication. We were aware that in order for the second to be possible, the first should be given high status. ICT was therefore the focus for the initial work in the NSN as it was a way of breaking down the physical barriers to enable us to communicate efficiently, and by communicating efficiently ensuring that the ideals we had for the network were realised.

All the heads in the NSN were given an ICT self-audit to complete in the same way as the rest of the small schools headteachers in Staffordshire were. Their results were collated and the following found:

General computer competences:

- Confidence was very high in the core skills: (91% to 98%).
- The figure dropped slightly in the advanced skills: (55% to 91%).
- A much lower figure was present in the specialist skills: (34% to 59%).

Word processing

- Confidence was very good in both the core and advanced sections: (80% to 98%).
- There was lower confidence with specialist skills: (41% to 57%).

Spreadsheets

- Generally the confidence factor was much lower in this area.
- Core skills: (61% to 84%); Advanced skills: (34% to 54%); Specialist skills: (32% to 41%).

Presentation tools (PowerPoint)

- This section yielded the lowest confidence rating of all the categories.
- Total range was from 43% to 55%.

Electronic mail

- Core skills demonstrated high confidence: (61% to 98%).
- Advanced skills were mixed: (61% to 80%).
- Specialist skills were generally lower: (34% to 48%).

Internet/intranet

- Core skills demonstrated high confidence: (98%).
- Advanced skills were moderate: (52% to 57%).
- Specialist skills were lower: (34% to 50%).

Our conclusion was that ICT skills were generally very high amongst NSN headteachers, and that all headteachers in the network were capable of undertaking basic e-based communications.

During the first year of the NSN network operation, training was arranged for headteachers (and all teachers) that would improve their ICT skills.

In the second year of the NSN, schools engaged in shared projects and in learning where these ICT skills were used.

At the start of the third year, two questionnaires were sent to each headteacher in the NSN, one relating to how their ICT skills had improved whilst the other addressed issues around the effects networking had had on themselves and their school. They were invited to reply to these questions in a variety of ways; either by email, post or via telephone interview. Ninety per cent responded by email.

Findings

Headteachers say that have increased their communications with colleagues, particularly those in the network. This communication has taken the form of asking or giving support and sharing documentation, ideas and resources.

Increased communications via ICT have been seen as a positive and effective way of being able to communicate efficiently, easily and regularly with a number of colleagues. Telephone calls are seen as frustrating because different classroom commitments mean that the right person isn't always in the right place at the right time. Emails, on the other hand, remain in place until they are read.

When the network began, two headteachers were new in post, and they saw the communications between themselves and their experienced colleagues as a very important part of their settling-in process.

All headteachers stated that they had increased their use of ICT as a means of communication and felt that it was now a regular part of their leadership and management strategy.

One major advantage for small school headteachers is the feeling of belonging and knowing that they can gain reassurance from their colleagues, and that this has been made easier by increased e-communications.

Overall the impact has been very positive, and the headteachers have seen the benefit to themselves of increased e-communications. All the responses were very enthusiastic, and

this was backed up by the data which showed that incidents of using ICT as a means of communication had increased over the period that the network had been established.

It has been very apparent that there is a clear split in the NSN between headteachers who see the network as part of their school, and those who view the school as part of the network. If networking is viewed as just something else staff have to do, then it is much harder to maximise the benefits on offer. Some heads have dipped in and out of projects and worked the benefits into their own school context. Others have fully embraced the network and used it to increase and develop the capacity of the school to improve:

I am the head of a very small school, with four staff, so our staff expertise is spread among the number of people we have. For us it's a wonderful opportunity to work with people who have got expertise in other areas. (Primary Strategy Learning Networks, DfES 11-2004)

ii. Can increased use of e-communications have an impact upon the headteachers in a group of schools wishing to become a more effective network?

The pilot group

From the initial 36 respondents there were 12 headteachers who expressed an interest in joining the pilot group, a 33 per cent uptake. In line with the overall findings from the ICT audit, the pilot group subjects possessed a wide range of ICT skills, the lowest having a 50 per cent confidence, the highest being 90 per cent. We were therefore secure that we would not be working only with headteachers who demonstrated a high level of ICT expertise. The pattern of skills for the pilot group reflected the overall pattern for the five areas questioned.

It was decided to split the pilot group into two and compare the outcomes of working with two very different situations:

- Group 1 – a group of six headteachers who are already part of an established cluster with a desire to enhance their network via electronic means. The group felt they worked well together but could do better. There was also a new headteacher in the group who had very little experience of working in this way. They will be known as the cluster group.
- Group 2 – a disparate group of headteachers in schools that have little or no connection and are in the main serving isolated rural communities. They will be known as the isolates.

The pilot group for the research is made up of 12 headteachers. The gender composition of the group is 50:50. Whilst this is purely by chance, it is an interesting result and one which offers us the opportunity to investigate progress made by both genders at a later date should the opportunity arise.

A questionnaire

The questionnaire we administered is split into six sections, each relating to a particular area of ICT expertise. These areas are: general computer competence, word processing, spreadsheets, Power Point, electronic mail and internet. Headteachers were asked to fill in the questionnaires using a numerical weighting system. This number reflected their confidence when completing the named task and/or skill. A rating of 4 demonstrated that the individual had complete confidence in the task, whilst a rating of 1 showed inability to complete the task.

The results were then collated, giving us a range of contextual data. Each individual has a raw score (out of a possible 316) and a percentage score relating to all competencies. This data allowed us to highlight individual and group strengths and weaknesses very quickly. We also have contextual data for each statement within the questionnaire. (For example “open program using icons”). Again, this is presented as a raw score and percentage.

General computer competence

- Overall, this is an area of high confidence within the group. The average percentage confidence score for all areas is 86 per cent. The main areas of concern dip down to 60 per cent confidence relating to the deleting and copying of multiple items. This high level of general computer confidence is an encouraging factor, as these competencies transcend all other areas of our research.

Word processing

- This area parallels the levels of confidence found in the previous section. The overall confidence averages at 87 per cent. The results clearly show the level of usage by headteachers within this area of ICT. The main areas of concern dip down to percentages in the low to mid-70s when formatting rows or columns and creating new templates.

Spreadsheets

- This area showed much lower levels of participant confidence. The average for the whole section was 67 per cent, reducing to the mid- to low 50s in certain areas, namely to do with entering formulae and importing information. Spreadsheets are useful managerial tools, and we intend to raise proficiency in this area to enhance the use of such packages.

PowerPoint

- Only five skills were identified in this area, but nearly all pilot members perform poorly on this package. The average for the five areas is only 49 per cent, dipping to the low 40s when creating templates and linking work to other applications. We have already instigated some training on PowerPoint for our network, so will use this as a starting point to facilitate understanding and progression for the group.

Electronic mail

- General email skills are of a good standard within the group. This is essential, as a great deal of our research will involve e-communication. The average percentage for all 20 areas is 76 per cent, dipping to the mid- to low 40s for more advanced features such as digital signatures and delivery acknowledgements. Again, we have done some work with staff in the NSN on email, so can develop this to enhance skills within the group.

Internet

- Basic internet skills are of a good standard, with 98 per cent being able to enter a known web address to access a site. Website creation, use of chat rooms and video conferencing are the key areas for development. They are also some of the most powerful means of communication we have as headteachers of small schools. The overall competency for this area is 66 per cent. Our knowledge on video conferencing

and chat rooms, and its uses for staff and children, will prove to be invaluable in developing effective e-communication between our pilot group.

A handbook was produced which detailed the rationale behind the research and what we were expecting the heads to do for us. The first simple task was to send an email to a named school in the pilot group. This was to get the whole process rolling, to help the headteachers to get to know each other a little, and to show us that they would actually send a message and would be fairly compliant with what we were wanted from them.

Findings

It's about taking things up several notches...taking things on from sharing good practice. It is not just a question of working together but about doing a significant piece of work together. (Primary Strategy Learning Networks. DfES 11-2004)

This sums up the difference that has been found between our isolate group and our cluster group. The isolates see a network simply as a vehicle to share ideas and planning. They contributed very little, and were very poor at using e-communication to develop ideas instigated by the researchers. An example of this was demonstrated when a task was initiated by the researchers. The task was a simple sharing exercise, with each headteacher asked to contribute to a document before returning it to the researchers; only two of the group completed the task.

It is difficult to ascertain the impact of the virtual network on the isolates, as only two have completed the follow-up questionnaire. The lack of common ground and vision appear to be the main factors that have held this group back, but they fulfil the first element of the quotation above, seeing the primary use of the network as a vehicle to share good practice.

In contrast to this, the cluster group has made improvements in its e-communication. It has used this research opportunity to develop its ICT skills and enable itself to use it to successfully communicate and develop good practice. The overall task-specific questionnaires show the following results:

- 44% increase in use of email
- 52% increase in use of the internet
- 0% increase in use of video conferencing

This is a positive result both for the researchers and the cluster group. The email results are directly linked to e-communication between the group, and it "has had a positive impact on the way we operate, communicate and disseminate... Opportunities have arisen from this research that are starting to change the way we view our role and our position within the cluster... We are all disappointed that video conferencing did not take off, but technical problems have prevented this. We will be back in touch with the researchers once we are all on broadband to see if they can further enhance our e-communication" (member of cluster group).

The cluster group feels more confident in using ICT to communicate but, more importantly, the members can see the impact it is starting to have on their workload and are passing this on to staff. Although still at a very basic level, this group has realised the benefits of a little hard work and effort. The issue of video conferencing can only be resolved when all members of the cluster group are on broadband, as there are technical issues between connecting an establishment on broadband and one running on the ISDN line. They have common elements running through their strategic plans, are already working well together,

and are an ideal group to become a Primary Strategy Learning Network who could make excellent use of e-communication to facilitate their vision for school improvement.

A major impact can be gained by headteachers through the use of e-communication, but there has to be a commonality among the group. The membership has to be constructed in a way that allows connectivity through common issues and developments within individual school contexts. These individual contexts will then be explored by the group, developing ideas, sharing good practice and working collaboratively to facilitate the movement of learning on all levels.

Headteachers who view their school improvement and raising of standards in isolation to other school communities will find network and e-communication a major challenge. Those who are willing to embrace an ethos and culture of sharing and communicating between networked schools will succeed on many levels.

iii. What are the requirements for an effective small school network?

Our investigation and experience suggests that for a network to succeed its participants must:

a. Have an understanding of what networking is

It is obviously a fundamental requirement that schools understand what a network is. Networking will mean different things to different individuals and organisations. The NSCL Network Learning Group asks the question, "Why Networked Learning Communities?" Their rationale is:

Collaboration rather than competition is the motivation for hundreds of schools in this pioneering programme that will transform learning experiences for children, teachers and school leaders. Across the country, Networked Learning Communities (NLCs) are changing the way we think about learning at every level of the education system.

The North-South Network had very simple aims when it began formulating its bid. These included:

- to change the way in which small schools think and operate
- to work smarter together, not harder alone
- to build one large organisation from twelve smaller ones

This highlights one of the fundamental reasons for being part of a network: to share. Sharing goes both ways, and network members should be willing to share what they have with others and also be willing to accept what is being offered by network schools.

NCSL's Networked Learning Group has three simple statements that define Networked Learning Communities:

- Learning from each other
- Learning with each other
- Learning on behalf of each other

b. Have a willingness to make networking a fundamental part of the school and not see it as a “bolt-on extra”

What will stop the formulation of a network in its tracks is the idea that it is just another initiative. Networking, if embraced fully, will fundamentally change the way the school works, and schools need to decide if they are willing for this to happen. It can be quite a threat to feel that the school will be opened to others in a way not done before, and that control for some areas may be taken out of the hands of the headteacher. However, if this is seen as a positive move then the move to networking is much easier. One aspect of small school headship is that the head is responsible for so many areas of management because there is simply no one else to do it. Within a network there is, in effect, a whole new management structure, and one where the strengths of the members can be utilised. This idea of distributed leadership is one that should be fundamental to networking. All headteachers have strengths in certain areas and weaknesses in others. They all have to open the same post and fill in the same forms. In a network, some of this work can be shared so that the overall amount of work done by individual headteachers can be reduced.

If networking is not seen as an integral part of school life, it will not succeed as effectively as it could do. It is not suggested that networking should totally dominate the participating schools, but a recognition that it can help to play a great role in the running of the school is a must. To see networking as a bolt-on extra is to see it as extra work, and this totally goes against the principles of networking.

In order for schools to be fully committed to networking the headteacher, as principal leader in the organisation, must be fully committed, and his or her enthusiasm must be communicated to the stakeholders in the school. If this is lacking, networking will fail. This has been proven by in the North-South Network where headteachers who are not committed have not enthused their staff, and as a result networking has been ineffective or non-existent in their establishments.

c. Be willing to give something up to allow networking into school

If networking is seen as something outside of the normal working of the school and not embraced as suggested, then it will almost certainly be seen as an unwanted addition. In order for networking to work, something might have to be set aside to make room. This has two major effects. Firstly it suggests a greater commitment to networking, and secondly it gives staff the idea that it has value and that their workload is being taken into consideration.

d. Be willing to initiate, promote and participate fully in the setting-up and running of the network

In the North-South Network the initial bid was compiled by four headteachers, one-third of the total involved. However, in retrospect it would have been more advantageous for all headteachers to become involved. The notion of ownership plays a very important role here and links in with the idea of networking not being a bolt-on extra. Being involved in the initial bid means ownership, and ownership means members are more likely to be committed to it. Failure to engage everyone in the inception and formulation of plans that will determine the nature and direction of the network will result in members being less than fully committed.

e. Set targets that are realistic, achievable and challenging, and that offer a clear gain to the schools

Setting up a network involves action planning and, if adopted by the schools, will become an integral part of the school development process. In the North-South Network, 75 per cent of the schools integrated the networking not only into their School Improvement Plan but also

their performance management process. As with all action planning, realistic targets must be set so that the initiative can be introduced at a pace that is challenging but realistic.

f. Fully involve all members of the community, adults and children in the process and activities

Continuing with the notion that ownership of the network is important for headteachers, this also applies to school staff, pupils, governors and parents. In the experience of the North-South Network, involving all these stakeholders at an early stage will inculcate a sense of belonging and will certainly help to cement the idea as a good one in their minds. To be able to communicate the advantages of being part of a network is very important, and this involvement of others is essential.

A sense of community is an important indicator of the social cohesiveness of an online group, just as it is in the physical context.

Virtual Learning Communities, Robin Goodfellow, Institute of Educational Technology, Open University.

g. Make a conscious effort to think of how what they do, or intend to do, can be of benefit to all schools in the network

In the North-South Network there have been many instances of excellent networking where a school or group of schools have produced an idea or programme that has been broadcast and shared with the rest of the network. On the other hand there have been times when this has not happened. This is because the network has not been seen by an individual school as part of their own school life. A school fully committed to networking will always consider other schools when undertaking work, and will actively encourage the rest of the schools to share their work and even amend or improve it. The North-South Network has found that there is a direct correlation between commitment to the principles of networking and the amount of active sharing they are prepared to do. The schools that will benefit the most from the network will be those that relish the prospect of working with those outside of their own school and are prepared to give and receive good practice and ideas.

h. Be willing to share, receive from others, and ask for and offer advice

These are basic aims of the North-South Network and are regarded by the researchers as an essential element of networking in general.

i. Use technology to break down the physical barriers between the schools and make networking more achievable

This is a basic principle of a virtual network, ie that headteachers turn on their computer, regularly check emails and respond accordingly, and that headteachers use e-communication to instigate discussions, ask questions and share documents online.

Findings

Headteachers need to show commitment and dedication to the network and the use of e-communication in order to succeed. It is clear that there has to be an appreciation of what a network is and how the school fits into the vision of the network. Headteachers have to make use of the technology and be willing to commit to regularly checking emails, responding, and instigating dialogue around which the network can move on the learning of all members.

Headteachers and staff have to embrace the network, seeing the network as part of their school and not the other way round. It is important that the decisions are made by all stakeholders and that people feel confident in the network membership in order to say that a project or discussion is not appropriate for their school at this particular time. An honest and open network will flourish and develop far more quickly than one where members feel obliged or even pressured into taking part in all activities.

iv. What barriers stand in the way of small school headteachers using e-communications to network with other headteachers?

It was clear from the results of the initial ICT self-audit that ICT competency levels vary greatly across our county.

Thirty-six headteachers responded, a return of 55 per cent. Responses were given a numerical value which resulted in confidence scores for the various areas of ICT covered by the audit and for overall confidence. The conclusion is that the vast majority of headteachers, if not all of them, do possess the necessary skills to undertake the basic ICT forms of e-communication. The skills are clearly there, so the lack of willingness by some headteachers must be due to other circumstances. It seems from the experience of our network that one of the biggest barriers that stands in the way of effective e-communications is simply a lack of positive disposition towards e-communication by headteachers.

One of the maxims upon which the network was based was that we would dispense with the long-held notion that small schools could not undertake certain initiatives, could not innovate, could not do more because the headteachers do not have the time or do not have the resources. It has been proved that increased use of ICT can vastly improve communications and give headteachers of small schools the ability to work effectively with others. Those headteachers who embrace networking and all the benefits it can bring will naturally see that, in order to communicate with each other, ICT needs to be utilised.

This study has shown that headteachers who have common ground and understand the power of networking will embrace technology. During formal and informal discussions it has been evident to the researchers that the bigger picture is far more beneficial than daunting, and although it takes time to make ICT and e-communication a part of school life, the realisation that this can have a positive effect on personal and school performance is worthwhile. One clear obstacle for the cluster group was the difference in technology between schools. The group were disappointed that they could not communicate through video conferencing, since schools are connected in different ways (ISDN and broadband), making certain communications impossible.

For the isolated group, the barriers were more problematic. The feedback highlighted the main problems:

- They felt e-communication was impersonal.
- ICT was not a major part of their school improvement plan.
- They viewed present levels and styles of communication as already being good.
- They didn't have the time.

The final statement, expressed by 72 per cent of the isolated group, suggests that e-communication will not benefit every headteacher. Some do not have the mindset or the desire to fully develop virtual leadership.

Findings

“What barriers stand in the way of small school headteachers using e-communications to network with other headteachers?”

Of the four questions, this has been the easiest to answer. It is simply the willingness on the part of headteachers to participate in e-communication with other schools.

What separates those headteachers who take part in effective communications and networking from those who do not is their positive disposition towards the notion. A forward-thinking headteacher will see that, although it will take some extra time in setting up these new relationships with schools, the overall gain will far outweigh the initial input of work. Our view is that the headteachers within the North-South Network who have embraced the networking ethos have gained far more from the project than those who have been passive members.

Simply stated, the barrier that stands in the way is not the technology but the person. There is a simple equation: if a headteacher sees the advantages of working as part of a network, he or she will see e-communications as a boon and not a barrier.

Overall conclusions

In this enquiry, the term “virtual leadership” is used to describe a style or approach to leadership that takes place and evolves outside of a physical environment. It was an enquiry that would lead us to realise that vision, commitment and an inherent understanding of the processes involved in networking were key for individuals to succeed and improve their small schools.

In our case we were involved in what seemed to be a potentially very successful Networked Learning Community. We had been involved with networking for almost two years and were confident that by modelling effective networking, the other small schools in our network would follow suit. As our network progressed, so did the research. When we started we had the vision that we could bring together a fairly random group of schools and encourage them to become a coherent and effective network.

Whilst the initial enthusiasm for our network was very high, it soon became evident that some headteachers weren’t actually doing anything. We were both very committed to the notion of bringing small schools together through e-communication. We could see that by sharing and being open we could give and receive a tremendous amount in terms of support and shared expertise. In order to do this, one must be able to let go of one’s commitment only to one’s own school and open up to a commitment to the group. The simplest way it can be described is as “getting it” or not. If you get the idea of networking you will see the massive benefits and embrace the notion totally. If you do not get it, it does not happen.

In conclusion, we are drawn back to our original title “Virtual leadership – a small school reality?” The overriding factor has hinged on the inclusion of the question mark. Is the question mark really necessary? Our enquiry has concluded that the question mark is only necessary for those headteachers who cannot see the benefits of networking. If the school is part of a network rather than the network being part of the school, then virtual leadership can only exist at an elementary level.

If the question mark is removed, we are left with a clear, decisive statement. This, we have concluded, reflects the headteachers who have willingly embraced networking and all that it brings. These are the headteachers who will develop the network through their school improvement planning, instigate change, and lead initiatives on numerous levels. These headteachers find common themes, address barriers as challenges, and look to contribute positively to the collaborative work. They gain the benefits of virtual leadership and in turn talk passionately about the “positive effect being in a network has had on my school” (headteacher of NSN school).