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E-Collaboration and Government - Collaboration Using Virtual Teams In Law Enforcement To Counter Internet Crimes Against Children

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Virtual Teams In Law Enforcement To Counter Internet Crimes Against Children

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Abstract: Post 9-11 and Katrina hurricane, law enforcement in the United States like in many other countries is under tremendous pressure to improve collaboration among themselves and with other departments. In a tradition bound, locally focused, autonomous law enforcement that traditionally has not felt a need to work with others, one way to enable collaboration is by information technology. In this paper, a qualitative study of a task force, that has successfully used peer-to-peer computing to collaborate against internet crimes against children is given. A multiple case study methodology to determine the factors that contributed to the effectiveness of collaboration in this task force is presented. The results show that - by combining right organizational structure, processes, funding and technology - this task force has been able to effectively prosecute perpetrators of crimes against children using the internet. This model can be used by other law enforcement agencies and organization that are similarly tradition bound and hierarchical.

1. Introduction
In the aftermath of hurricane Katrina and the 911 tragedy, it is clear that there was no collaboration among the federal, state and local law enforcement agencies (Bhaskar, 2006) (Cohen et al., 2005), (Cassell, 2006), (Associated Press, 2006). The 9-11 commission report (9-11 Commission) noted that the collaboration efforts at the state and local levels, where most of the law enforcement actions are undertaken, are lacking. This is because any efforts to collaborate among law enforcement agencies have been driven by a handful of agencies that have not successfully collaborated to integrate information from local law enforcement agencies (Cohen et al. 2005) (9-11 Commission, 2005).

The overwhelming majority of the law enforcement in the United States is distributed across 13000 autonomous local police departments. There are 600,000 police officers at the local levels who have not historically felt a need to form virtual teams or collaborate as a part of de jure/defacto processes. In the pre-911 world, this situation continued without any expressed need to change the process. In the post-911 world, it is expected that local government units including law enforcement can easily be enlisted to share information to achieve national security goals while continuing to perform their traditional duties (Thatcher, 2005). One of the initiatives that successfully meet these expectations of sharing information among its members is the virtual teams formed among the local and state level ‘Internet Crimes against Children’ task forces.

The Internet Crimes Against Children task forces (ICAC task forces) program was created by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) under the authority of the fiscal year 1998 justice appropriation act, public law 105-119, and continued funding in fiscal years 1999, 2000, and 2001 (Thatcher, 2005), (Medrias and Girouard, 2002). As of March 2006, 46 regional task forces, involving 49 states are participating in this program. These task forces were initially set up as federally funded ‘traditionally’ functioning law enforcement units to combat internet crimes against children. In this model, the local jurisdiction was paramount focus with collaboration seen as a necessity in a few cross-country cases only. Now, most of the ICAC task
forces are connected to each other using computer networks and work with each other as a virtual team, at the national level, to solve cases in their local jurisdiction. The virtual team’s processes are driven by a steering committee formed by the senior law enforcement officers and their representatives from each team. What started as a small initiative to set up a virtual team on a voluntary basis has become a success in the short duration of its existence.

In the next section of this paper overview of the relevant literature is given. This section is followed by a description of virtual team and law enforcement in the section 3. The research methodology is described in the section 4. In the next two sections case analysis is given. In the section 5 descriptions of processes at individual ICAC task force is given. It is followed by the section 6 that has a cross-case analysis. Conclusions and implications are presented in the section 7 of the paper.

2. Relevant Literature

Most of the research on virtual teams compares traditional teams with virtual teams. According to Chase (2001), virtual teams often are assembled in response to specific needs of the organization and are short lived. In law enforcement, the virtual teams are also set up to address a very specific challenge. This is similar to business adapting to ever changing competitive landscape and customer requirements (Davidow and Malone, 2005), (Jarvenpaa and Ives, 2005).

It has been determined that subtle differences among team members from different regions of the same country may have negative impact on the successful processes in a virtual team (Robey et al., 2000). Similar issues may arise in law enforcement team members in a virtual team and belonging to different departments across the country. (Tan et al. 2005).

A major aspect of technology enabled virtual team is the importance of technology-task fit. Effective virtual teams are able to adapt the technology and match it to the communication requirements of the task at hand (Maznevski and Chudoba, 2005). In fact some of the authors believe that a lack of face-to-face interaction may be one of the central factors of success in virtual teams. As in global virtual teams that are defined as, “temporary, culturally diverse, geographically dispersed, electronically communicating group,” law enforcement virtual teams may also succeed due to the missing social influences. Like the global virtual teams, all participants have a chance to be judged by the teams as a function of their performance.

Work found in literature on virtual team enables to frame the virtual teams in the law enforcement. Next section gives details on the framework that is most relevant to the present work.

3. Virtual teams and Law Enforcement

Virtual teams in the law enforcement, in the context of present work, can be seen in terms of Lipnack and Stamp’s (1997) system model as used by Suchan and Hayzak (2001). It is reproduced in Figure 1 below.
ERROR: invalidaccess
OFFENDING COMMAND: --filter--

STACK:

/LZWDecode
- filestream-
[160 0 0 -135 0 135 ]
true
135
160
- savelevel-