



By Don Abney

Systems as Storytellers: Connecting People and Technology to Boost Collaboration

Integrating and sharing data is often cited as the answer to the public sector's cross-system collaboration problem, but the real difference is made by connecting people. Yet, for an industry so focused on the importance of this human connection, we don't build systems that facilitate it.

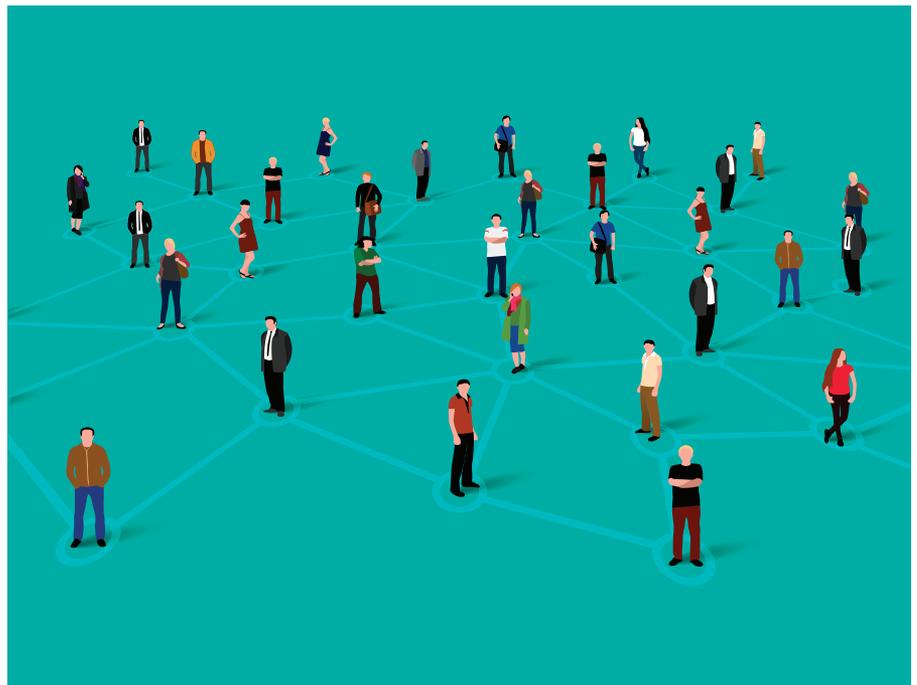
Each program has its own system with rules built to satisfy its own reporting and compliance requirements, with little or no focus on what workers need to best serve families. Further, each system holds bits and pieces of a family's story that workers are trying to understand and react to, creating an inefficient environment for collaboration across programs and sectors.

Government agencies spend millions to provide services in silos—solving one problem at a time, instead of looking holistically at the family.

Are We Collaborative?

Consider a family whose support ecosystem includes the behavioral health, child welfare, economic assistance, and judicial systems. There are three main friction points for the team caring for this family:

- **Access:** Workers from each program will rarely be in the same place at the same time to have real-time, in-person conversations. Each person is juggling a busy schedule and always on the move, meaning they'll have to resort to playing phone tag or emailing back-and-forth to discuss case details. This makes it difficult to make informed, timely decisions with the family.



- **Information:** Since the different chapters of a family's story are spread across systems (therefore collected and organized according to that specific system's rules), workers struggle to sort through the noise and surface the most relevant, meaningful information they need. Further, there's no good way of tracking that releases of information are current and valid, prohibiting workers from efficiently sharing details as needed.
- **Behavior:** Each program has unique goals, policies, and constraints, which drives different behaviors. For example, a child welfare worker who needs to understand a family's whole story supports sharing as much information as possible, whereas

a therapist who has promised to protect client confidentiality may disagree. It's not an issue of right or wrong, but the varied perspectives can lead to a standstill.

What's the Future of Collaboration?

Albeit slowly, a tectonic shift is happening in human services. A landscape is emerging with both money and desire to build more worker-centric systems. Technology is starting to help reduce friction and facilitate smoother interaction across programs and people.

We're moving toward machine-assisted social work, where emerging tools like case discovery help workers connect the dots to understand a

family's whole story. In this future, workers won't be required to sort through different systems, applications, or channels to find what they need; instead, the information that's most timely and relevant will be presented to them through a single pane of glass.

What we're describing is not just connecting humans but creating a true partnership between a family's care ecosystem and the technology they use every day. To me, that's the truest form of collaboration we could hope to achieve.

Call to Action: Connect People, Not Just Systems

We can start doing a few things today to make this future vision a reality.

■ **Complete the cycle of information.**

The best way that technologists can help agencies foster true collaboration is to build systems that don't just store and report on information; they analyze, curate, and present it back to workers in a way that's

digestible and usable when making decisions. Let the system become the storyteller—uncovering history, prompting questions, guiding decisions—to elevate the incredible work being done.

■ **Encourage best-of-breed thinking.**

Practitioners must recognize that no one piece of technology is going to single-handedly solve all their collaboration problems. Similarly, technologists should look for industry partners to create solutions that do not fall into the old habit of siloed systems.

■ **Get educated on what's possible.**

Program leaders have historically been limited by what couldn't be done. It's time to shift the mindset. Immerse yourself in learning about new tools that support the practice in ways you've never imagined. Even better, provide experience and input to take them to the next level and show IT folks the opportunities we have yet to consider.

■ **Shift from human-centric to worker-centric.** Human-centered

design is obviously important. However, it's not just any human's experience that applies when developing collaboration tools. It's the individual workers who will use them to better serve families. Frontline workers must participate in the development and implementation of these tools, instead of others making assumptions on their behalf.

■ **Meet the workers where they are.**

As workers are always on the move, technology must keep up. After all, collaboration doesn't just happen in the office, but also with families, in the field, in court, or in the car. The tools and systems we build must work how and where a worker does.

Together we can create sophisticated systems that promote true collaboration and achieve collective impact. **P**

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