

A Coffee Room Application of Video Technology. A Story of How to Find the Solution not Solving the Problem

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I am proud of a small story of the video connection between two coffee rooms. I wrote the story not long ago. It was published Feb 18, 2003 in a business newspaper ("Taloussanommat" or "Business news").

The coffee room case demonstrates new methods for both companies and for journalism:

1. For a company it tells how to find a good solution not inventing it.
2. For a journalist it shows new ways to find a good topic for a story.

In the story I told of a Finnish data operator, "Kaukoverkko Ysi" that found original implementation for video conferencing technology. They arranged a continuous video connection between two coffee rooms in respectively two offices, in two cities Tampere and Naantali, located about 150 km or 100 miles from each other. Employees can, if they want, to look at colleagues in another office, show themselves and chat. A company found that work, too, improves. For example, people, meeting virtually, may remember of some unfinished work and can agree immediately how to finish it.

Patterns and Principles Help to Find Solutions and Stories

The story was a good journalistic piece:

1. It delivered news. Video conference rooms are common, but a video coffee room for a break and chatting is new and unusual.
2. It contained useful information that helps companies to increase return from video technology investment.
3. It was a funny and entertaining story how people can chat with colleagues in cyberspace.

It was certainly not possible to find a topic by trial and error. Neither any mystical news sense or nose for news can explain the result.

I sought ideas for stories using patterns ("Simplified TRIZ", see Rantanen&Domb 2002, 109-127). Among others I thought of increasing interactions ("Simplified TRIZ", 117-120) and a corresponding principle 28: Mechanical interaction substitution ("Simplified TRIZ", 166-168). They gave the idea to write of video connections.

I got also the angle. Video phone is not in fashion due to many failures in last decades. Patterns and principles, however, imply that video communication will come inevitably. TRIZ helps to get a trend-setter instead of a trend-follower.

The way to a story consisted of five steps.

1. First I wrote a story "Scifi tells the future of the television". I sold it to a news agency "STT". It was published in May 2002 in some newspapers. In the article I reminded of the idea that TV as a video phone will become viable and common in near future.
2. In autumn, while writing other stories, I continued to study the emerging video communication. I found the idea to write of video telephone.
3. I interviewed Harry Santamäki, a video phone and videoconferencing veteran who is now working in Nokia. He told that they in 1980s and 1990s found useful to make a "chat session" in Friday between Finland and California. E-mail was enough for everyday communication in most cases. But to understand how the business goes really, it occurred to be essential to see faces and gestures.
4. I told the anecdote to another expert, marketing and sales manager Tatu Sikanen in Xenex, who told me about the coffee room experience.
5. I sought people in the company Kaukoverkko Ysi and made interviews. They gave me the basic facts. I wrote the first drafts of the story.
6. I read the text to my wife and my friend. They helped to make the story interesting and understandable.
7. The editor polished the text finally.

About ten people contributed immediately to the story. We see that even the most lonely and individual branch of creativity, writing, is very collaborative.

Figure 1 illustrates strong collaborative features of journalistic work. The figure is inspired by the paper of prof. Reijo Miettinen (Miettinen 2000). His team has studied creativity in technology as culturally distributed work.

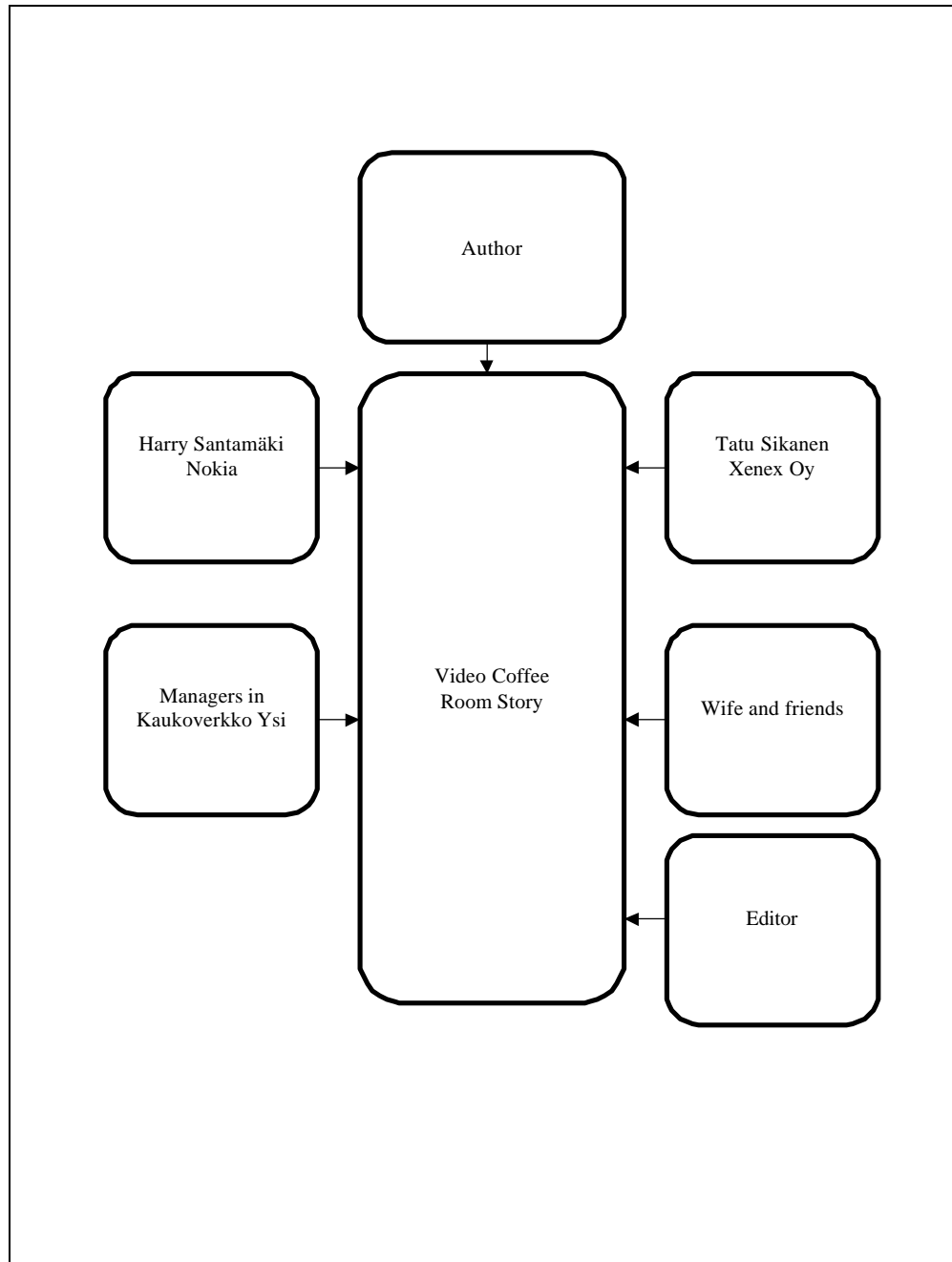


Figure 1. A single author, too, works with an invisible team.

We can compare the example with advices in journalist's textbooks and handbooks. There are usually guides to hot ideas. For example, Christopher Browne lists personal experience, health, beauty, money, new technology, sport, pets, and relationships as fruitful areas to cover (Browne

1999, 29-34). Another journalist, John Hines, writes that the majority of subjects fall into three categories: money, health and sex (Hines 1988, 11-14).

Yes, a story of the video coffee rooms falls to the categories of "new technology" and "money". The advice: write of new technology and money, however, is not enough. It is too general.

Patterns and principles helped to find more precisely the topic. They directed to an unexpected solution. It was planned serendepidity.

From problem Solving to Solution Finding

I didn't invent a video coffee room. I found it.

We need to get results quicker and with lower cost. That's why finding a ready solution from another place or branch is often preferable. In many case it is possible, if we use cross-disciplinary tools of TRIZ.

Many people who need to solve real-life problems have developed or are developing methodologies that allow to avoid constructing the solution from zero.

One of the most prominent followers of Altshuller, Semyon Litvin, speaks with great enthusiasm of "solving the problem without solving it". He and his team have developed solution finding technology for big and demanding projects. Their success are based on two prerequisites:

1. The rigorous, cross-disciplinary, TRIZ-based methodology
2. A large scientific network of more than 7 000 experts

For example, they have developed new technologies for non-invasive glucose monitoring, telecommunication switches and absorbent paper production. More information and examples you can find on the web site of Pragmatic Vision: www.pragmaticvision.com

In small projects patterns and principles are powerful enough. And teams of less than ten persons are big enough.

Summary

- Patterns and principles can be used for finding ready solutions, not only for inventing new ones.
- To find solutions you need both a good methodology and intensive collaboration with many people.

References:

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