

Bill's Building Blocks

The Missing Connection

Sometime between midterms and finals university students tend to lose their focus on academics. This year seemed particularly bad with Covid-19. My best students slipped in their grades, while my struggling students disappeared altogether. They were late with their assignments, did poorly on their quizzes, and stopped making comments on Zoom. In my case, the professor has only the university issued email address with which to make a student connection outside of Zoom lectures. The assumption is that since the student has made an investment to buy this education, the onus is on the buyer to do the work and make the connection. Here is the rub. Sometimes the student may be overwhelmed with balancing family, work, and studies; or sick; or unemployed with small children; or food insecure; or taking care of an elderly family member; or missing a high speed Internet connection; or trying to get by with just a smart phone. When a student does not answer repeated attempts at email, the connection is broken. Student advisors with phone numbers and work email addresses then have to attempt to reestablish a connection.

There can be some parallels in the connections within your supply chain. There are two extremes in the architecture of connections between a buyer and a seller. When you hear the excuse, "I could not get back to you sooner because we are implementing a new system", you should worry.

One extreme is more like a diamond shaped relationship. Here the buyer's purchasing connects directly with the seller's sales, the buyer's engineering connects directly with the seller's engineering, the buyer's supply chain connects directly with the seller's supply chain, the buyer's payables connects directly with the seller's receivables, etc. The downside with this arrangement is that it is difficult for the buyer's program management to coordinate multiple, sometimes conflicting conversations.

The other extreme, called a "bowtie" relationship forces all communication through a account manager at the seller. This person may or may not be technically oriented. All purchasing, engineering, supply chain, accounting, and sales issues are routed through the account manager acting as a bi-directional conduit for all information and transactions. The downside of this arrangement is that the account manager becomes overloaded especially when one person is responsible for a dozen accounts. The account manager's bandwidth shrinks in its capacity for specific buyers. Then, like an academic advisor, senior management has to step in to attempt to re-establish communications.

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