

Messaging and Collaboration

Collaboration Boosts Productivity, Efficiency



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Online collaboration tools are transforming the way people work together and keep up to date on projects. Among the biggest benefits for companies: improved employee productivity and greater efficiency.

Some of the biggest measurable productivity gains come in areas such as customer problem resolution, development of sales proposals or marketing campaigns, and product launches, says Ted Schadler, vice president and principal analyst at Forrester Research in Cambridge, Mass.

"If you get down to that level, you start to see some hard benefits in terms of productivity, time savings and reuse of assets," Schadler says. In general, electronic collaboration products allow people to work together in effective ways when other means of communicating aren't effective. "I would advise people to think about specific situations where tools such as the phone or email are not working very well," he says.

Burr & Forman, a full-service law firm in Atlanta, uses several technologies to improve collaboration. The firm has used Microsoft's SharePoint 2007 as a content and document repository for one of its practice groups for three years and will soon deploy a new electronic content management (ECM) system based on SharePoint 2010 and Office 2010, says CIO David Michel.

"The new SharePoint ECM was designed in a such a way that every matter or 'file' has its own folder structure so that all electronic information can be created, saved and searched in a very easy way through Outlook," Michel says. "This includes email, voicemail, documents, PDFs, electronic transcripts, etc. Our current document management system did not offer any flexibility and was originally designed only for documents and PDFs, so it's usability was much more limited."

The new system will make it easier and faster for users to share and find the documents they need. "We will also be able to very quickly, easily and securely provide clients with access to those documents when the situation calls for it without having to create entirely new systems," Michel says.

SharePoint ECM "will allow us to consolidate nine different document libraries into a single 'Burr' library, which means that all forms of electronic communication related to client matters will be easily available and highly searchable to everyone in the firm," he adds.

Another resource the firm uses is an enterprise collaboration service from YouSendIt. Until recently, Burr & Forman used the service primarily for large file transfers, but now it will also use the new enterprise Workstream offering, which allows the firm to send files and content directly from its SharePoint libraries into a shared folder for clients to see.

"YouSendIt [allows] us to more quickly share large amounts of information with clients and outside resources in a secure and auditable way," Michel says.

Another collaboration tool, AdobeConnect, provides online training so the firm can train multiple people in different

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offices at one time. "We also use it for continuing education training, where input is required to prove that the student is watching the entire session," Michel says. The product has made training easier and more widely available, he adds, which helps users become more proficient with the software they use to do their job.

Finally, Burr & Forman uses Cisco System's Tandberg video conferencing system for internal meetings, depositions, interviews and other events. Michel says the firm has benefitted from decreased travel costs as a result of using video conferencing.

Saving Time

Using collaboration tools also can help slash the time it takes to complete projects. For example, Daiwa House, Japan's largest homebuilder, deployed a project management/collaboration application called Concerto from Realization Technologies to speed up a massive SAP ERP implementation that was months behind schedule.

"The project lead time was shortened by more than 25 percent in the programming phase, as well as in the testing phase," says Kyoji Kato, head of the Daiwa House Information System department. This was due to the fact that roles were more clearly defined; the structure of meetings was more effective and problems during execution were revealed early on.

"Concerto made me feel confident about what to focus on to maneuver the project," Kato says. "This tool helped us to focus on how to [complete tasks] quicker. Before introducing Concerto, we were focusing on why delays occurred in the past. Now our attitude is future-looking."

As the lead time of the project shortened, the reduction of project costs was dramatic, he reports.

"Because project members have access to Concerto, we did not have to make separate data [sheets] for progress/problem sharing and reporting for various meetings," Kato says. "All we cared about was keeping the system up to date. Then, anybody was able to capture the project situation and priority."

Increasing Profit

Another company, Ellegro Learning Solutions, a provider of customized corporate training and development programs in Schaumburg, Ill., uses collaboration tools to increase efficiency, streamline operations and increase profitability, says Rob Stevens, vice president.

One tool from LiquidPlanner helps project team members work more efficiently. Since 2007, Ellegro has used the LiquidPlanner product for efforts such as developing new e-learning programs, says Lisa Statland, project manager, whose department typically balances 20 to 30 projects simultaneously.

"The company needed a portfolio-level approach to project tracking," Statland says. "We needed to see priorities, resources and timelines across multiple projects and clients. We also needed to dynamically adjust the plans and see the forecasted results, such as timelines, resource constraints and delivery dates."

By having access to real-time updates on project development, Statland and other managers can quickly shift priorities as needed, ensuring that the most important or urgent projects get the attention they need.

LiquidPlanner allows the company to consolidate project-related information in one place, so developers and programmers, consultants, managers, senior executives and customers can easily access information and collaborate on developments during the course of a project.

The tool has sliding schedule and packaging features that allow Statland to prioritize tasks across multiple projects. It also provides a project portal that staffers use to share documents, such as audio scripts and other content for classes. From this portal, team members can have ongoing conversations, and review feedback, status reports and documents in real time.

Ellegro is also using the WebEx online conferencing platform for real-time collaboration and meetings, as well as to demonstrate learning programs to customers. The company, which needs to regularly share and demonstrate courseware and technology tools, and perform troubleshooting, leverages WebEx for those purposes, Stevens says.

Online conferencing enables the company to reduce the need for travel. "It used to be that if you wanted to demo something, you had to go to the client," Statland says. "Now we don't have to do that. WebEx doesn't [entirely] replace face-to-face meetings, but if you need to explain something or talk through something with a client, WebEx definitely facilitates doing that without having to travel."

The company estimates that WebEx saves it about \$8,000 per project through reduced travel and other expenses. Furthermore, employees save time by not having to plan and take trips, which adds to their productivity.

Since 2001, Ellegro has also leveraged an internally built development suite that gives project teams a development platform to create e-learning courses and assessments. It also enables internal and external collaboration, and It's working on a proprietary collaboration tool for the Apple iPad.

Using online collaboration tools can present some challenges, Forrester 's Schadler says. Among the issues companies need to address are confidentiality, privacy and data protection. "You're empowering your employees to use collaboration tools, but do you also trust that they're going to do the right thing?" he says.

" A few years ago, the starting point for IT was that we didn't trust them," Schadler says. "But there is enough inevitability around social collaboration that IT professionals have realized the best way to deal with the issue is to have an information-sharing policy that human resources, marketing, corporate communications, IT and legal work together to create." For example, the policy would state what types of information should never be shared.

Another challenge is getting employees to use new collaboration tools, which, in most cases, they're not eager to do, Schadler says. "You might have a few enthusiasts, but you won't have mainstream adoption," he says. "The majority of employees are going to use email."

Consequently, managers need to identify and overcome the technological, motivational and cultural barriers to collaboration, Schadler says.

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