

What is Your Collaboration Strategy? new technologies create new opportunities

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Web 2.0 technologies are moving us beyond e-mail and into the world of true collaboration. With “hot” consumer products from Google, MySpace, YouTube, Wiki’s, Blogs, Chat Rooms, and Instant Messaging, the business community is poised to make its next major technological upgrade. The new expectation is to bring all participants in the business process together with the information they need (at their fingertips) -- in a “single” virtual place. This is not so much a giant leap forward as it is a complete change in the way we think about managing activities and conducting day-to-day business.

Getting to the next level will take more than the implementation of a few new products and the adoption of some new technologies. It will also require a strategy and some real planning. Bringing more users and more sources of information together than ever before will, by its very nature, further complicate how we access our systems and processes.

The challenge will be in deciding which products, vendor platforms, and data sources are the best fit for your business. There is no single or simple answer, which is where PSC’s extensive collaboration expertise comes into play. We have the years of experience working with the major providers that can be put to good use in developing a collaboration roadmap that will best serve your business needs.

The E-mail Factor

Most of us would agree that business management is 90% communications. Before we had information technology, we communicated face-to-face, individually or at meetings. We gathered everyone in the same room, shared the same table, and communicated “in the moment.” While the verbal communications were good, the capture and archiving of supporting information, not to mention the effort in getting meetings scheduled, was time consuming. As we became a more mobile society, we started looking for alternatives. E-mail came to the rescue. We could now communicate from anywhere at any time. We no longer needed meetings. That was the good news. The bad news was that we stopped communicating and started archiving.

E-mail has now become, well, maybe not the enemy, but surely part of the problem. We just hit the “reply to all” button and hope to keep everybody informed, in fact, too well informed. Information is flying out and out-of-control, everywhere. It may get answered right away, next week, or never. Not only is messaging also filing up our databases at an alarming rate, but with so many duplicates and versions to keep track of, content management has become virtually impossible.

E-mail is outbound message distribution by design. The sender controls what is sent and to

whom, but not what the receiver may want or need, or how he or she may react. Because of time delays and lack of direct contact, the receiver may overreact or fail to take note, or just lose interest. Consequently, the proliferation of messaging has undermined the basic tenants of collaboration. In fact, for many of us, e-mail has become a way to avoid collaboration altogether.

Reversing the Telescope

The best way to reclaim collaboration is to reverse the direction of information flow and bring people to the information they need or to bring them to the people with the information they need – as and when they need it. This means re-establishing the practice of meetings, only this time without the inconvenience of time zones and physical presence. By making it easy for people and information to “come to together” through today’s collaboration technologies, we can “have our cake and eat it too.” We can all meet in the same virtual room, communicate and interact in real-time.

We can also gain some ground on the even increasing amount of information. By keeping a single source copy of documents and providing links instead of sending attachments, we can not only reduce the escalating expense of buying more storage devices, but we can also reduce the time and money spent on content management. You will always have the latest and most up-to-date information if it comes from a single source.

The Major Components of Modern Day Collaboration

The new collaboration model is focused more on individual behavior – meeting, talking, sharing, reading -- than on the enabling technology. While technology won't necessarily take care of itself, the technical solution becomes apparent once the business aspects are identified and addressed. So, let's make the business aspects more explicit and the technol-

ogy more implicit. This does not mean that IT is any less important, it just means that it shouldn't be the starting point.

We can organize our collaborative environment into the following six functional categories. Keep in mind that it is not necessary to start at any particular point. At different times of the day we have a need for all six functions with the ability to engage in any or all of the other five at any given time from our current function.

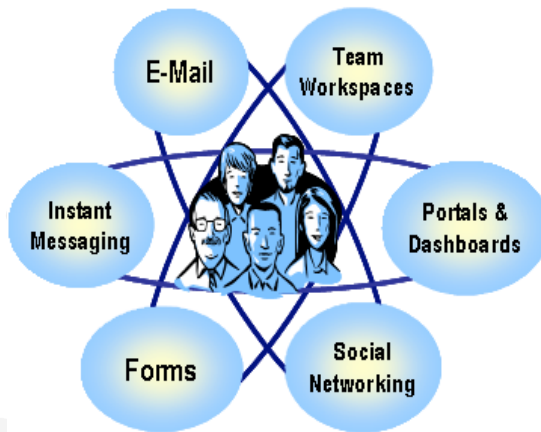
1. E-mail. At the core of collaboration lies the enabling infrastructure of our legacy messaging. Whether is it Outlook, Lotus Notes, or Group-Wise, e-mail and the Internet form the foundation for the way we communicate today. E-mail is the way we disseminate, communicate, and create a permanent, searchable record. It is the underpinning of our collaborative infrastructure.

2. Virtual Meeting & Team Spaces. Although you can meet on-line with Instant Messaging, a virtual workspace offers a common place to gather all at once or separately, share and archive information, conduct structured activities, manage projects, and share expertise. Team workspaces offer a secure environment for all stake-holders and their intellectual property. As with portals, there is no waste. All of the information and the people who need it are in one place. Make a change, add some new information, or schedule a meeting and the other team members are immediately notified. No lost time searching and waiting, the information let's you know when it is ready for you to access it.

3. Portals and Dashboards. Collaboration involves humans and humans need a visual interface to collaborate. Visual access to and presentation of information is absolutely essential to the expanding community of customer and suppliers as well as internal personnel. Portals and dashboards are the antidotes

for e-mail. They provide a single, secure access to the information to those who have the need. There is no waste. The inefficiency of searching and sorting through thousands of e-mail is eliminated.

4. Social Networking. Getting the people together on a project or just a simple task is becoming increasingly difficult as we move toward a globally economy. The combination of outsourcing, and mergers and acquisitions is making many of us a team of strangers. The solution is to provide an efficient mechanism to identify the resources we need. Resources that may have never met or even know about can now be found in a “yellow



pages” for people. This is how we will manage our resources and get to know each other at the same time.

5. Forms. Because most forms of collaborative communication are unstructured, there has to be one function that brings order to what may be otherwise considered as chaos. Forms is that function. Forms provide the structure that is needed to make sure we are all collaborating “on the same page.” They are ideal for project management, product development, day-to-day administration, systems operations, and coordinating activities and events. Forms can be the perfect component that makes for perfect collaboration

6. Instant Messaging. While e-mail is designed to organize your thoughts and create a record, it is not a substitute or a quick conversation. Instant messaging is truly “in the moment.” You can send a text message, check availability, use it to get people on the phone, conduct a chat session with one or more colleagues, attach messages, and use it for a Webex or web conferencing. With emerging Voice over the Internet (VoIP) technologies can be easily added.

Building Your Strategy

There are overlapping aspects of the six functional categories. They are also interrelated. Does an e-mail create the need for a quick response? Do others need to be brought into the “conversation?” Shall we use the Team Room to set up a formal task force? Who else do we need to get involved? Do we have all of this functionality at our fingertips? Is there a company procedure that needs to be implemented?

Each business is different, yet all businesses are, in many ways, the same. They all operate on the sharing of information and they all involve people. The key is to not just operate, but to interoperate, to collaborate efficiently for the great good. You can't do this by implementing a collection of products. You need to take a strategic approach if you are going to advance to the next level.

Collaborate well and you will have better command control of your information. You will also have a better handle on your business, particularly your day-to-day operations. Collaboration will raise the level of awareness. Collaboration can also help provide you with the business intelligence that is becoming so important in today's highly competitive global economy.

Next Steps

Start with the big picture and think about how you are working today, how much time you are wasting, and why you are not getting the results you wanted or need to survive. Next, checkout and understand the available technology and how it works together. Get some expert advice, and then put your roadmap together before you start working on any of the parts. Collaborate with all of those involved to make sure you meet everyone's needs. That is what collaboration is all about.

It's all in the way we listen.®



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Alex has been working with collaboration technology for nearly 15 years. His experience spans a broad array of industries, business solutions and technologies.

As a frequent speaker at large collaboration conferences and as a reputable blogger on the topic, Alex has been helping companies with collaboration strategies for over a decade.

Alex has degrees in Business Administration and Computer Science and has also served as an instructor at St. Clair College in Windsor, Ontario.