Collaborative technology is all about people

But can it also be a source of business advantage?

By David Tebbutt, November 2008

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In a nutshell:

Beneficial collaboration cannot thrive in a command and control environment

Key points:

- Collaboration reduces the friction in business communication

- It provides a way to break out of 'group think'

- It accelerates business processes

- And it facilitates innovation and creativity

As the term suggests, collaboration is about people first and foremost. If they see no value in collaborating, they won't – and they cannot be forced to do it.

Just about everyone collaborates up to a point. But it is more likely to be within teams or communities of practice, rather than across the company, with external organisations or, heaven forefend, the general public.

Each company has to make its own decisions and these, to a large extent, will be a reflection of the firm's culture. A rigid command-and-control mentality is not conducive to the freewheeling Web 2.0 style of collaboration in which people of common interest find each other through social media and coalesce into working relationships and friendships.

To some companies, collaborative behaviour is threatening on many levels. Freeform Dynamics research suggests security, compliance and user distraction are the most commonly expressed fears.

At the same time, we know the same companies expect substantial growth in collaboration, both internally and with customers, partners and suppliers. The principal expected benefit is increased efficiency, although improvements in innovation show up strongly too. Just 15 per cent of medium-to-large firms expect neither benefit to materialise.

Participants, meanwhile, want to sustain existing collaboration through email, audio and videoconferencing. The latter may be enhanced with screen sharing and whiteboarding.

A lot of these elements are moving to the desktop, either freestanding or embedded in other applications. For example, Citrix Online's GoToMeeting is a dedicated application, while Mindjet's Connect adds online collaboration to mind mapping. Several applications embed instant messaging, which for many users is the principal function of Skype, rather than the free IP-based telephony.

Such applications are largely designed for existing collaborators – and you could say some wikis fall into the same category. People are invited to participate in a closed wiki, secure from prying eyes, where they can collaborate on the page, rather than having to rely on email and personal version controls.

Other wikis are opened up to anyone, or to individuals whose email address includes an approved domain name. This way, strangers can interpose themselves into the conversation and gain recognition for the value they bring. It is perhaps a double-edged sword, but spamming is unlikely to be much of an issue in a world where an IP address can be tracked easily.

At the further extremity of the collaborative world are blogs and social networking sites. Corporate bloggers – whether exposed to the outside world or not – are generally sharing their thoughts and expertise with anyone who cares to listen. Others can join the conversation by adding comments or writing their own blog posts and linking to the original.

Users typically subscribe to an RSS or Atom feed if they like the blog. Subscription keeps users permanently updated and individuals can track many blogs through a feed reader or portal, which aggregates all the feeds by category. Users can then skim the headlines at any time, drilling deeper only if something catches their eye.

Most readers allow users to define blog searches that deliver a feed containing all new posts that match certain criteria. Such a possibility, coupled with discovering relevant people through links inside posts, is probably the most powerful element of social computing.

The wackier, but popular, reaches of social computing include social networking sites, such as Facebook and mini blogs such as Twitter. Social networking sites can be bent to the corporate will by creating closed groups, where people can only be admitted if they are recommended.

Mini blogs are more of a free for all, in which anyone can jot up to 140 characters on any issue. Individuals can also send direct messages to other members.

Some users restrict their mini blogs to business topics; most say whatever comes into their head. Twitter, for example, provides a sense of community without a great deal of effort or commitment. Such networking is highly social and people often link to web sites, blogs and announcements that might prove of interest.

As mentioned earlier, security, compliance and time wasting are the main concerns expressed regarding collaboration software – and none more so than when the software is being hosted by a third party. While Facebook or a blogging platform has the advantage of being able to scale with demand, companies have to appreciate that they often will not know where potentially confidential communications are being stored – or to which country's legal jurisdiction they are subjected.

Finally, many vendors are pushing unified communications (UC). At heart, UC is IP-based telephony with many of the already-mentioned collaborative applications running on top. Presence is a key element and instant messaging programs generally have icons that show the status of contacts – available, busy or away.

UC takes presence to a new level and allows users to discover a person's location and ensure that all communications, of whatever kind, reach contacts in the most convenient way, such as mailboxes, mobile phones, homes or offices.

The move to collaborative software is not principally about technology, it is about people. And the people introducing social applications need to be sensitive to that reality if the strategy is to prove successful.

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