
Collaboration - get it together

'Enterprise 2.0': Not as easy as it sounds

By Dale Vile, June 2009

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Effective workplace collaboration doesn't just happen on its own. This Inside Track offers some advice on how to get it right.

Getting your people collaborating more effectively is a laudable goal. If you listen to IT vendors and pundits, the rewards are high if you get it right. You'll benefit from greater innovation as you unlock the potential lying latent in your workforce, and create a more flexible and responsive business by freeing up the flow of information and unblocking those cumbersome decision making processes.

And from the end user perspective, individuals thrive and develop leading to contentment and happiness all round.

And all you need to achieve this is the right technology. Whether it's content management engines, interactive portals, unified communications systems or all of that new fangled social networking stuff that goes by the name of 'enterprise 2.0' when applied in business context, we are not short of vendors and service providers ready and willing to sell it to us.

It's a nice thought but just like all 'magic bullet' technology propositions, things aren't quite as straightforward as that when you move ideas from marketing brochures and PowerPoint slides into the real world.

For one thing, some organisations are really not ready for all this stuff from a cultural perspective.

In a study conducted by Freeform Dynamics and MWD, it was interesting that while 38 per cent of the 201 respondents interviewed put the culture that exists among their managers and professionals at the 'highly collaborative' end of the scale, 28 per cent said they were at the opposite extreme, with the remainder somewhere in the middle.

And in some industry segments, most notably the retail and public sectors, around half of respondents alluded to a highly individualistic culture in which minimal sharing occurred.

The point here is it is unrealistic to expect dramatically positive results from implementing collaboration solutions if you are dropping them into an unreceptive culture, whether it exists at an overall organisation level or within a particular department, function or division.

Unfortunately, the line we hear from enterprise 2.0 advocates in particular - that if you give people the facilities, the individual spirit will shine through and people will just automatically get on and collaborate - is not always realistic.

For instance, in a highly political and partisan environment, in which turf wars and defensive behaviour between different parts of the business are par for the course, sharing ideas and

information is often viewed as the equivalent of giving up your edge or exposing yourself and making yourself vulnerable. Sad, maybe, but true.

Even if you have a naturally collaborative work culture, introducing some of the technologies mentioned above still needs to be done thoughtfully and objectively if the full benefits are to be realised and associated risks properly managed.

As many a youngster has found out after making an inappropriate posting on Facebook, sharing can sometimes be taken too far and come back to bite you.

There is also the problem of potential time-wasting, not just by those who take sharing to an extreme and step beyond the bounds of usefulness, but those on the receiving end who are already swamped with too much information and to whom superfluous communication just adds to the nuisance.

Then, of course, there is the risk dimension, whether it be inadvertent dissemination of confidential information, or problems arising from the mixing up of personal and business-related activities.

Interestingly, the key to dealing with all of these issues, whatever your cultural starting point, is to be clear about your business objectives and the scope initiatives associated with the introduction of collaboration technology in as focused a manner as possible.

It might be, for example, that you want to encourage a more collaborative approach to selling, product development, case management or some other process or function.

Whichever it is, rollout of solutions will be much more successful if you prescribe the way in which you expect collaboration to take place in that context, and define guidelines along the way to deal with the kind of risks we have mentioned.

Apart from the technology itself, an important ingredient here is some kind of framework, which will typically be based on a range of templates, canned workflows and other components that will not only act as a starting point to seed activity in the right way, but also help to create some consistency of approach, which can help to prevent confusion as activity scales up.

While some of this may seem counterintuitive, particularly if you take your lead from enterprise 2.0 purists who emphasise freedom of expression and collaboration without constraints, a more objective and structured approach will drive better initial results.

If the culture is currently closed, directing and encouraging people to collaborate in very specific ways will gradually open things up and will start to shift the culture in the right direction. At the opposite extreme, if the environment is already very collaborative, there is less risk of losing control through an explosion of unstructured activity that is simply a distraction to the business.

The ultimate aim is to create a culture in which sharing and collaboration happen quite naturally but in a responsible and business-focused manner. That's not to say you get heavy-handed with rules and policies, as that will either stifle progress in the more closed environments, or send things underground or off into cloud-based public services if the workforce is already naturally collaborative.

The trick is not to either dictate or leave people to their own devices but lead them appropriately in the direction you want them to go.

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