
Do SMBs have less of a mobile and collaboration need?

If not, perhaps SaaS is a way to plug the gap

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Yahoo!'s [decision last month](#) to axe home working prompted a lot of debate. Common reactions ranged from outrage, through incredulity, to the sad shaking of heads on the basis that CEO Marissa Mayer is clearly out of touch with the modern world. Some of the reasons cited for this controversial move, however, are worth noting. The internal memo is reported to have said: "Some of the best decisions and insights come from hallway and cafeteria discussions, meeting new people, and impromptu team meetings."

Whether the new policy will deliver on this expectation and work out well for Yahoo! in the parallel universe of Silicon Valley remains to be seen. Back in the universe the rest of us live in, though, the outcome is somewhat academic because pulling everyone together under the same roof is simply not practical in many cases, even if you did believe that totally (re)centralising your workforce would lead to better insights and decisions.

The reality is that both business operations and the talent pools you need to dip into when recruiting are frequently distributed across multiple locations, even multiple countries. Add to this the fact that many organisations have employees working from customer sites, satellite offices, and/or on the road, and it's clear that we need to think about the problem of enabling natural and productive interaction a little differently.

It's therefore no coincidence that many large enterprises and big public sector institutions have invested heavily in their business communications infrastructure over the years, and are continuing to do so. Whether it's rich-function IP-based telephony, enhanced multi-media conferencing, or full blown unified comms and collaboration solutions, those with enough employees to justify the spend on technology and skills have been able to facilitate more effective distributed working.

The difference is that "cafeteria discussions, meeting new people, and impromptu team meetings", along with more structured forms of collaboration and interaction, take place virtually rather than physically. Maybe not quite as good as dealing with your colleagues face to face, but when you don't have that option, modern solutions and services that enable everything from ad hoc instant messaging to full HD quality multi-party video conferencing, are not a bad substitute nowadays.

But what about smaller organisations? When looking at this part of the business sector, it's easy to focus on the local retailer, independent restaurant or company running out of a single office on the trading estate for whom everyone working in the same location is normal. But in the small and medium business (SMB) space, distributed operations are actually the norm rather than the exception. In one [Freeform Dynamics study](#), for example, within a balanced sample of mid-sized

Western European businesses (50 to 1,000 employees), over 60% said they operated across more than one site.

Beyond this, we don't need to quote research to highlight the degree to which mobile working is relevant to smaller businesses as well as larger ones (though there's lots of material on www.freeformdynamics.com if you need convincing). In fact in an SMB environment where key people often perform multiple roles and don't have the luxury of clocking off at 5:30pm, or declaring that they can't be contacted for several hours because they are out of the office, being able to work effectively from the field or at home is arguably more valuable, even critical.

But facilitating genuinely effective distributed collaboration, and dealing with the mechanics of remote and mobile working, can be a challenge when you have limited skills and resources. Even in a self-selecting research sample (biased towards more progressive organisations), the majority of SMB respondents participating in [another study](#) we conducted recently indicated limited or no adoption of more 'advanced' comms and collaboration capability. This included functions such as instant messaging, various forms of conferencing, and IP telephony. Furthermore, the gaps seem to persist despite the overwhelming majority openly declaring they could do a lot better at supporting flexible and distributed working practices.

One of the reasons for the ongoing shortfall in this area is because it's generally a lot harder to justify infrastructure level investments in a smaller business environment. SMBs, on the whole, tend to put new IT and communications systems in place on a reactive basis, e.g. when something breaks or runs out of capacity, or when a new business need arises.

Against this background, gaining commitment to upgrade the email server infrastructure or PBX can be challenging enough. Getting the Managing Director or Financial Controller to approve spending on a unified comms and collaboration system is an even tougher sell, especially when you include the new server hardware, network upgrade, beefed up security tooling and professional services needed to implement and operate the new system properly.

It's in areas such as this that Software as a Service (SaaS) options come into their own. Offerings now exist that provide a fully integrated suite of capability for allowing distributed teams and workgroups to operate effectively. This includes email, instant messaging, office tools, document-centric collaboration, pretty much every form of conferencing, and even IP telephony in some cases.

Why is SaaS particularly relevant here? Well for one thing it overcomes the infrastructure investment hurdle. It's not that you can forget the infrastructure side completely, e.g. [as research has shown](#) you still may need to pay some attention to your comms, but nowhere near to the same level as putting an advanced collaboration system in place on premise. And from a resourcing perspective, while effort needs to be allocated to the migration of things like email boxes and document repositories, there's a lot less to do at a basic systems integration, optimisation and ongoing operations level.

The other attraction of cloud in this area is that whichever way you cut it, if you have people collaborating at a distance, then secure central storage, secure and robust comms, and flexible access through web interfaces and mobile devices are all an essential part of the mix. Delivering on these requirements is a core competence of SaaS providers, who have the economy of scale to throw state of the art equipment, best practices and specialist skills at the problem. This means a lot less really hairy stuff for you to worry about, or to drag you out of bed at night when something goes horribly wrong.

Of course overriding all this is the question of trust. Even if you believe that the SaaS provider can hold your data securely, reliably and provide flexible access to it, you need to be comfortable with its legal and commercial terms, and, not least, its business culture and approach to support.

SaaS may therefore not be right for everyone looking for enhanced comms and collaboration capability, but for smaller businesses willing to take the plunge, it does represent a potential opportunity to close the gap between you and your larger competitors.

Interested but still not totally sold on the idea? Well let's finish off by highlighting that you can be very selective about the way you adopt SaaS options. If you see the attraction of hosted email, but would rather your office tools stayed on the physical desktop, that's not a problem. If you like the idea of cloud-based collaboration but want everything to do with email to stay where you can see it in your own computer room, that's OK too. Such 'hybrid' options offer a lot of flexibility. Provided you select the right solutions, with portability and integration in mind, you are always in control of how far and how quickly you move.

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