

Alert! Magazine October/November 2012 Online Collaboration: Working Together Regardless of Distance

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By Priti Verma

Globalization has been a hot buzzword for a decade and many organizations now have operations worldwide.

With the distributed workforce, one of the biggest challenges multinational companies face, is the lack of personal connection. There are multiple ways to build stronger relationships within and outside the organization, but the effects of the initial interactions can have a lasting impact on the success of any organization. Though face-to-face interactions play an imperative role in conducting business, it is just not feasible to limit all collaborative projects to personal meetings.

Budget constraints and restricted technical support make it imperative for most small and medium-size organizations to give desired output. The Internet has enabled a growing disseminate workforce to work on one platform and it is a common phenomenon to see people working globally. The first step to get maximum output from relatively few people is to enable them to work together in real time, no matter how distant they actually may be.

Collaborating online is the perfect way to shrink the distance between employees. When they collaborate online, they can work together on the same documents, at the same time, as if they were all sitting together in the same office. This means that the productivity of employees is much more; projects can be done much faster, as there is no need to send documents back and forth between offices and the communication between employees is improved.

If we put it in other words, online collaboration lets a group of people work together in real-time over the Internet. People engaged in online collaboration can work together on any document, presentation, word processor documents and even brainstorming, all without requiring being present in the same room at the same time.

Online Collaboration Tools

There are many great online collaboration tools available, which can help the enterprise's teams

in fulfilling their goals and objectives. Most of these tools have security features that assure anybody who is not invited to join the collaboration tool will not be able to see the document which is being worked upon. In addition, most tools offer encryption; an added level of security that makes documents indecipherable to those with malicious intentions. A good, secure tool lets the owners of the online collaboration workspace set authorization levels for all collaborators. The authorization level allows some people to only read the documents, others who can make changes, and still others who can delete the documents.

There are many applications with online collaboration; collaborative editing, synchronizing across computers, sharing multiple files and discussion boards, and sharing windows and documents on the spot.

Online Editors

These are Web applications that allow the user to create and edit documents, spreadsheets, and presentations online through their Web browser. This application does not require any installation and it can be used in offline mode when there is no Internet connection.

Documents can be shared with other people by entering their email addresses and inviting them to collaborate or just view the documents. Multiple collaborators can edit the same document at the same time with the option of adding inline comments by any collaborator. Version management features let the collaborator retrieve earlier versions of a document in case the final outcome is not as expected.

Synchronization Services

These let the collaborators work with their desktop applications as usual, without having to learn a new interface or work through their Web browser. This service automatically saves folders and files to the computers of all the collaborators as well as to the Web, keeping everybody in sync. All collaborators must register, download, and install software.

To collaborate with others, users just need to enter the email addresses of those they wish to collaborate with. Once the invitation is accepted, the shared files and folders can be viewed and edited. When someone makes a change, it syncs across the documents of all the other collaborators and notifies them of the change.

Sharing and Collaboration Spaces

Sharing and collaboration websites are spaces which allow the collaborators to upload, share, and discuss files and links. It does not require any installation and files are stored only on the Web – not on the computer (unlike with synchronization services.) Collaborators can preview files online, comment on them, and download them without registration.

Sharing and collaboration spaces can be used in the following cases:

- A non-simultaneous collaboration solution where registration is not required, e.g. reviewing the work of a subordinate.
- Sharing of multiple files between two users where one of them does not have any collaboration software installed.

- Collaboration is not required on a regular basis and the organizations do not want to invest time installing and teaching how to use a collaboration tool.
- To discuss documents and share links, rather than just share documents.

Ad Hoc Simultaneous Collaboration

Few Web applications let the users create a space for simultaneous collaboration on the spot, where the document spaces can be set up instantly and installation or registration is not required.

In ad hoc simultaneous collaboration once a document is uploaded, a session can be launched and people can be invited to join. Participants see the window of the session manager and watch the manager draw on and scroll through the document. Once the session is over, the results can be saved as a PDF.

This collaboration can be applicable when:

- The files are required to be instantly written or displayed in real time.
- There is no time or ability to register and install software.
- Real-time ad hoc collaboration is required, but not formatting options.
- Collaboration with non-technical people is required or the collaboration is not frequent.

Benefits of Online Collaboration

Collaboration in Dispersed Locations

The first and foremost benefit of online collaboration is that it allows people from dispersed locations to work together on a project. Many organizations have offices in multiple cities and/or countries, making it important to find ways to keep all the people working on a project informed and engaged.

With Web connectivity, team members can work from anywhere, making it possible for a dispersed team to work in an organized way. It also keeps the employees connected on the project even if they are away from the office, allowing them to contribute to any project as if they were at their desk.

Easier Project Management

Online collaboration makes team projects easier to manage. When a project needs to be completed with information from multiple departments, e.g. marketing, sales, research and development, a good online collaboration system makes it much easier to generate a report than a traditional approach.

Online collaboration tools have a variety of project tracking applications which make it easy for collaborators to see the evolution of a project from day one. The application allows the team members to see the documents and the latest changes that have been made to it. It also allows viewing of what the document looked like before the changes.

Centralized Data Storage

Centralized data storage makes it easy for all team members to have access to essential documents, irrespective of their location. This negates the need for employees to save documents

onto a USB stick or other storage media when they have to work on a document from a remote location. Centralized storage of data also helps to see the updates to a document immediately. There is no longer a need for different versions of a document to be emailed back and forth. The collaborators know at all times where to find the latest version of a document.

Quick Actions

With an effective online collaboration tool, the need for organizing a meeting or setting up a phone call is not required. Documents can be uploaded into the collaboration tool and collaborators can be automatically notified through email that documents have been uploaded. Reviewers can then interpret the document, make essential changes and inform all team members that the document has been reviewed and is ready. These quick actions make it simpler to keep a steady and organized work flow on a project.

Issues With Online Collaboration

Information Security

Online collaboration applications are secure – certainly more secure than most traditional means of collaboration. However, it is still imperative to verify security in the cloud. Organizations should make sure that their collaboration is maintained in a high-quality data center and that their business collaboration solution respects the standard of security that their business needs.

Managing Ideas

Team efforts bring individuals and their ideas together. With accurate business collaboration tools, organizations can centralize these ideas for the entire team. When team members come to a common platform for discussion, ideas keep generating. It is imperative for organizations to keep in mind that these ideas should not be overlooked. A mechanism to track ideas so that they can be managed properly, is recommended.

Conclusion

The focus of Web applications on collaborative efforts is growing day by day. It is very difficult to find a web-based application that does include the ability to share a link to a public document or image. There are many productivity applications, especially on the desktop, which offer multiple collaboration features.

Organizations are beginning to understand the need to collaborate on a regular basis. With the increasing usage of Web-friendly operating systems, there is an increased interest in Web-based, collaboration-centric applications. Collaboration has been made easier than ever and has improved quite a bit, but still has a long way to go.

Priti Verma is the President of ResearchnConsulting, a full service market intelligence agency based in Bangalore(www.researchnconsulting.com).

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