

Collaborative tools @work

Introduction

'Islands of information' is no longer an oft repeated phrase – it is reality because we tend to isolate information rather than collaborate with peers, colleagues, suppliers and customers.

So, what is collaboration all about?

Collaboration is defined as: "to work jointly with others or together especially in an intellectual endeavor" or "to cooperate with an agency or instrumentality with which one is not immediately connected."

Let us take an example to understand this – such as engineering design: it is a social activity requiring significant interaction / communication between the people involved. Good design, therefore, is the resultant of a participative and cross functional team that balances its roles, task and process with the end goals/schedule and scope.

In today's world, with time zones separating teams and cultural disparities, tools and methods assume a significant role given the complexity of communication, task synchronization, meeting management and sharing information to ensure everyone is on the same page.

Collaboration in a nutshell is all about using a standard set of methods, tools and techniques to ensure that disparate teams work together in a cohesive and cost effective manner to produce effective results.

Collaborative tools @ work

Collaborative tools work at different levels such as:

Communication

- Meeting management – e.g. GoTo Meeting, eRoom, Centra
- Email – e.g. Microsoft outlook
- Calendaring – e.g. Novell Groupwise, Netscape communicator
- Instant messaging – e.g. Yahoo, Skype, Blackberry
- Chat – e.g. MSN, AOL
- Video conferencing – e.g. Webex, Groove
- Data conferencing – e.g. Netmeeting

Information sharing

- Groupware – e.g. Lotus Notes
- KM tools - e.g. Sigma Connect, Manageability
- Internet forums – e.g. Wikipedia, Everything2
- Blogs – e.g. Blogger.com
- Social networking – e.g. LinkedIn, OpenBC, Spoke
- Requirements management – e.g. Telelogic

Activity management

- Project management – OneSpace.net 2005, Planonthenet.com, Onproject.com, Frametech.com
- Supply chain notification - Alventive
- E-Governance- e.g. Govt portals
- Marketplace- e.g. Sporteum
- CRM – Siebel, Peoplesoft, rightnow
- Presentation development – e.g. Presentek

Domain/industry specific applications

- Design/R&D- e.g. CATIA, AutoCAD, Solidworks

- PLM – e.g. Enovia for PDM, Delmia for Manufacturing process management
- Publishing – e.g. Check Point E-learning
- Decision facilitation & Operations management – e.g. Thales Systems & Neosapiens Inc
- Multi agency monitoring – e.g. Planner's workbench
- Software development – e.g. Rational

Collaboration needs discipline such as version management, security of information and adhering to common documentation standards. While selecting a tool or methods, these should be given enough importance. It is recommended to pilot some of these before adopting a full scale implementation.

Several organizations today build in collaboration into their IT/IS design and are able to see greater success and benefits. Good examples are community, defence, design and governance programs.

Rules of the collaborative game...

Tools should be inexpensive and should be easy to host, have good vendor support, easy to use & train, easy to scale and should allow the users to scale, re-group and specialize. Some advanced features to leverage include nested planning, resource allocation, statistical analysis, schedule modeling, progress reporting and benchmarking.

Beyond tools, there are also access devices such as the new generation smart phones which allow us to collaborate on the move. Social and industry networking is another useful example of collaborative tools that have helped bring people and information together.

There are several methods emerging that make the tools simpler to use. Examples are Agile and Scrum in the software world – interestingly, Scrum is used in sports to work out collaborative strategies for contact sports such as Rugby! Other examples include Lean manufacturing, CMMi and reference architectures defined around collaboration for specific business needs – examples include Alcatel's Real time communication service architecture and Telemangement Forum's NG OSS, which is an industry platform created by collaborative vendor effort.

The last word....

New methods, tools and technologies are great – however, it is important to choose what works for you or your organization and at what price point.

It is also important to understand the human element and use these in a manner that individual creativity is not stifled but actually offers an environment to share individual successes in a productive and cost effective manner.

So next time you use the internet, do remember that it offers you a powerful platform to collaborate!!

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