



The Power Of Collaboration

Web 2.0 Touts The Power Of Communities—Are You Ready For The Next Digital Wave?

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As the line between home and work increasingly blurs, consumer technologies are entering businesses at a steady clip. A stunning example is online communities and collaboration platforms, once considered the domain of restless teenagers and high-level researchers.

The growth of collaboration applications falls in line with the theory that we're entering the era of Web 2.0, a phrase coined by O'Reilly Media in 2004. The publishing entity noted that Internet services have grown up into second-generation versions that focus less on surfing for information and more on collaborative technologies such as wikis, Web-based communities, blogs, and social networking sites.

For enterprises, this focus on connecting people together has led to a boom in applications that boast multimedia, security controls, and shared online spaces for discussion and work. Those companies that haven't yet explored collaboration are likely to run into it soon, according to research firm Gartner, which noted that in 10 years, 80% of all work will be collaborative rather than independent.

■ Apply Yourself

Rather than wait a decade for collaboration to get in full swing, enterprises of any size can take advantage of the wealth of applications and technologies now available in the marketplace and jump into Web 2.0 now rather than later.

Choices abound for SMEs, including Scalix (www.scalix.com), eTouch (www.etouch.net), Microsoft (www.microsoft.com), WebOffice (www.weboffice.com), Groove Virtual Office (www.groove.net), and many others.

A popular option among small enterprises is Microsoft SharePoint, which integrates

Office applications, file sharing, data storage, user-specific access privileges, and IT management tools. Collaboration is possible through schedule sharing, online discussion spaces, and even picture libraries.

For Linux users, Scalix has a robust, extensive small business edition that brings together email, calendars, and messaging that tie together with content management, CRM, and ERP applications. Users can share access to calendars and messages with administrators and colleagues.

Groove Virtual Office also focuses on bringing together teams for online meetings and project management and offers file sharing and online discussions. The company emphasizes its ease of use for small businesses and boasts that because it is desktop software, it can reduce IT intervention through built-in security and intuitive controls.

Also worth investigating is the next generation of wiki technology applications. Once just shared online spaces, wikis have evolved into distinctive enterprise collaboration platforms that have all the functionality of a multilayered company intranet. The benefit of a wiki is that it can be accessed from anywhere there's an Internet connection and doesn't need to reside on a company's network the way an intranet does.

Wiki aficionados may want to check out TWiki (twiki.org), an enterprise collaboration platform and knowledge management system that's structured specifically for project management. It has a document system, groupware tools, and the ability to reside either online or on a company intranet.

■ Support Challenges

Integrating more collaboration technology into the SME can boost productivity and communication among employees, but it can also create a new set of support issues, including allocating resources to online troubleshooting and, especially, working with devices and new education initiatives.

Because employees will have different levels of technology savvy, IT should create unique training sessions that focus on a hands-on approach to learning. Some employees may not have explored the world of social networking and wikis, while others might be quite familiar. Giving them small collaboration tutorials can save on support time later, says Ron Perry, a professor of information technology at the Rochester Institute of Technology who has also done corporate training.

“Break training groups into small classes and mix up the employees so you have a range of ages and experience levels,” he says. “And, most of all, make it fun. People remember more when they enjoy themselves, so don't think you have to be serious just because you're in a corporate environment.”

A large part of the introduction of Web 2.0 will be collaboration technology on mobile devices, and as younger employees continue to enter the company, it's likely they'll expect to have application access on the go.

“Budgeting for wireless has become mandatory, but companies need to break those budgets down into smaller segments,” says Jeff Kunst, vice president of marketing for MobileAccess (www.mobileaccess.com). “There will be multiple wireless and mobile computing needs within the enterprise, and IT should understand how those wireless devices are being used and at what level.”

Much like laptops, devices such as BlackBerrys are now crossing the line between professional and personal as people take them home and check personal email, chat with friends, and possibly download games or other software.

In boosting the potential for collaboration in a company, an SME will have to be increasingly aware of device support and plan for repairs, training, and regular replacement, Kunst says.

Web 2.0 can be a beautiful thing, its advocates believe—imagine a world where people might not get along offline but can collaborate with ease in the digital realm. But when that theory becomes reality inside a company’s walls, it’s time to allocate more resources to support and education. ■