

Collaboration Comes Together

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With e-mail teetering out of control as an effective collaboration tool, a number of technologies are converging around end-user collaboration in an attempt to move it into the mainstream.

New collaboration options, including peer-to-peer technology, e-mail application delivery, and integration with portals and enterprise applications — as well as future Web services — are all approaching the problem of improving enterprise business processes and productivity.

Using collaboration to handle certain document-sharing tasks and project or planning discussions serves as a kind of release valve for taxed e-mail systems, experts say. Instead of creating long chains of e-mail replies, collaboration applications give enterprises a central location where people can come together, sometimes in real time, and use tools such as whiteboarding, document sharing, and IM (instant messaging). The payoff is efficiency, productivity, and access to information.

“E-mail is being pushed to do much more than it was equipped to do,” says George Paolini, chief marketing officer of Zaplet, a collaboration application company in Redwood Shores, Calif. “It’s kind of like an engine for a Honda Civic [being] put into a Boeing 747 and we’re asking, ‘Gee, why can’t this thing get off the ground?’”

The question is what will it take for collaboration to hit the big time. Success of collaboration initiatives hinges on changing end-users’ daily work habits and reconsidering existing business process, users and vendors say.

Ryder System, a global transportation and logistics management company based in Miami, uses Lotus’ Sametime instant messaging and QuickPlace tools for individual and team collaboration in tandem with its knowledge management portal for organizational-level knowledge.

“Our approach has been to first focus, do some workflow analysis, and try to understand the organizations that are going to be using these tools. Then we try to apply the tools,” says David Baildon, group director of product and knowledge management at Ryder. “The benefit is streamlining operations and better utilization of the transportation network.”

Still, it wasn’t easy to get employees to change the way they work

The screenshot shows the InfoWorld website interface. At the top, there's a banner for 'Hackers see this: STOP' and the InfoWorld logo with the tagline 'LEAD WITH KNOWLEDGE'. The date is February 13, 2002. The main content area features a 'SPECIAL REPORTS' section with the article 'Collaboration comes together'. The article text is partially visible, discussing the challenges of collaboration and the role of various technologies. A sidebar on the right includes a 'CHOOSE YOUR NEWS' section with categories like 'CTO Source', 'E-Business Pulse', and 'Security Adviser'. There are also links for 'E-mail Newsletters' and 'Web-based training'.

and move to collaboration. When Ryder rolled out the technology in September 2000, some saw the new tools as a nuisance, Baildon says.

“It took my team ... kind of hounding them and facilitating meetings with people so they were comfortable using the application sharing,” Baildon adds. “Companies absolutely have to focus on driving the cultural change. They can’t just put collaboration on somebody’s desktop and expect it to be used properly.”

WHITHER ROI?

Although new technologies are shaking up collaboration, there is still a struggle to demonstrate its ROI. Zaplet’s Paolini says many businesses still see collaboration as “a ‘nice-to-have,’ not a must-have [system]. No one will view it as a must-have until they realize that the current way we’re collaborating is actually costing companies instead of saving.”



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Collaboration's ROI lies in benefits including opening up communication bottlenecks, improving information redundancies, and combining disparate knowledge — all of which are nearly impossible to quantify with hard numbers, says Brennan O'Hara, offerings manager for Lotus Advanced Collaboration at Cambridge, Mass.-based Lotus Software.

At Quaker Chemical, a Conshohocken, Pa.-based developer of custom-formulated chemical products for the steel and metalworking industries, the collaboration door first opened through a knowledge management initiative designed to capture and retain the industry-specific business knowledge within its work force.

Despite its soft ROI, the power of collaboration really came to light when the company's restructuring two years ago from regional to global sharpened the need for collaboration tools, says Tom Baker, manager of business intelligence development at Quaker Chemical. The company uses Intraspect Software's collaboration application, a Web-accessible platform through which users can set up collaboration spaces by setting up secure user IDs and passwords and sending out a URL.

"When we went global, the collaboration aspect of the software became invaluable to us. It let us see how everyone else within our organization does business and allowed us to talk right away with people around the world and have access to the same tools," Baker explains. "For the first time, we could all speak the same language."

FRIEND OF E-MAIL

Zaplet targets ROI by placing collaboration within e-mail. Although this may seem like a step back into the e-mail quicksand, company officials say it actually helps enterprises embrace collaboration because it puts the new functionality into a familiar form.

Zaplet uses componentized sets of collaboration application building blocks to allow the creation of specialized business process applications on the fly. The newly created application is then sent via e-mail, or "app mail," into the recipient's inbox; clicking on the building blocks launches the application and a view of the real-time changes being made within it. Version 2.0 of Zaplet's collaboration solution, which is due out soon, will include "full integration of enterprise applications on the back end," Paolini says.

Use of pre-existing e-mail structure also plays a role in Automation Centre's TrackerOffice collaboration software, which integrates into corporate e-mail systems to automate business processes and serve as repositories for the information used and created in discussions. A new version of TrackerOffice will be released in January, including the SupportTracker collaboration application targeted at IT help desks and IT managers.

Pioneer-Standard Electronics, a \$2.9 billion distributor of electronic components and computer systems, employs TrackerOffice to improve the effectiveness of its IS department. Mike Anderson, direc-

tor of IS, quality training, and planning at Cleveland-based Pioneer, says the company first eyed collaboration as a means to improve the ROI for IS department projects. The e-mail foundation added further usefulness.

"Our desire was to put a front end [on e-mail] that allows us to capture our client requests and select those projects that are the highest priority and offer the greatest return on investment," Anderson says. "Every step of the way, [we can] understand the requirements of a project and the benefits."

PEER PRESSURE

Peer-to-peer networks are a natural for collaboration because they can easily connect groups of people sharing files or documents and can support many sessions at once. Although it presents a different kind of network configuration between devices when compared to traditional e-mail, p-to-p is most powerful when combined with a management presence — a model that fits collaboration's form and one which companies such as NextPage, Collusion, and Groove Networks are trying to take advantage of.

"Nobody in reality wants to collaborate for the sake of collaboration," says Darren Lee, senior vice president of NextPage in Lehi, Utah. "We're finding it only has significant value when it's combined collaboration with mission-critical information, attached to a business-processing context."

NextPage's Matrix application combines collaboration and business-process integration with the company's NXT3 p-to-p foundation. The peer technology allows users to see all of their projects in the same view and helps aggregate information for doing collaboration within the context of a business process.

"The value of peer is, many times, going to be derivative of where it fits in with existing systems," says Andrew Mahon, senior director of product marketing at Groove Networks in Beverly, Mass. Groove's separate collaboration client allows users to form a secure peer network between those invited into a Groove Shared Space, enabling application sharing and real-time collaboration.

Groove also recently announced Version 1.2, which integrates with Microsoft's Windows Messenger so users can move directly from that instant messaging program into a Groove Shared Space.

"If you bring something like Groove into play with a platform, or with a wider Web service like MSN Instant Messenger, then you have the ability to know who you're dealing with and a centralized apparatus for creating the relationship you want to enter into," says Dana Gardner, a research director at Aberdeen Group in Boston. "The marriage between p-to-p and platforms or Web services is where that real catalyst takes place."

Wireless application support, now making its way into collaboration suites, will extend real-time collaboration to more environments



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(see related article, below). But the next step for these applications may be contextual collaboration, says Bethann Cregg, offerings manager for Lotus Advanced Collaboration at Lotus.

Contextual collaboration embeds collaboration into other applications, such as portals, to give them “the edge they need and take away that impersonal feeling you have when you’re looking for something and you’re not able to see what others have done,” Cregg says. Lotus has already embedded elements of QuickPlace and Sametime into the WebSphere Portal Server and Lotus CaseStation portal, as well as other products.

Public relations firm Ketchum integrated eRoom collaboration software into its Plumtree corporate portal to give workers interactive tools in a personalized environment. Paul McKeon, partner and chief e-business officer at the New York-based firm, says the collaborative tools bring a sense of unification to Ketchum’s distributed company.

“In the old days, I’d attach a document to an e-mail, get comments back from people, then sort through and make the changes,” McKeon says. “Now I invite people to the document to make changes or comments. It’s more efficient and easier to track changes.”

A WEB SERVICES FUTURE?

Web services may end up being the thing that links all these technologies battling it out in the collaboration realm. Adding Web services to p-to-p and collaboration provides the chance to better automate relationship creation.

The current Web services debate is about who should control the aggregation of Web services — an enterprise, a group of enterprises, or a third party. The discussion centers around the same core goal: to “reduce friction, bring services in line with data and applications, and make them easily accessible so people can take action,” Aberdeen Group’s Gardner says. “And they’re all very much in line with communications. ... In effect, the development of communication into collaboration is a huge and important component to getting people into the idea of portals and Web services.”

In the meantime, vendors are targeting immediate pain points.

“Collaboration usually is aimed at the long-term efficiency and effectiveness of a group, but that’s not how people behave — they behave in their short-term best interest,” Groove’s Mahon says. “E-mail and instant messaging are great short-term problem solvers; collaboration software at large is a really good long-term problem solver. We need to get those two to meet.” ♦

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Wireless collaboration deepens value

As wireless devices increase in number and importance in the enterprise, extending collaboration tools to PDAs, mobile phones, and handheld computers can yield tangible productivity improvements to corporate work forces.

Taking wireless e-mail a step further, mobile instant messaging and document sharing are poised to further boost the effectiveness of mobile workers.

Early adopters of wireless collaboration, primarily enterprises with many mobile workers and multiple office locations, are exploring the benefits of on-the-go collaboration.

Transportation and logistics management company Ryder System saw a need for collaboration tools to extend out to field workers and to remote locations, according to David Baidon, group director of product and knowledge management at Miami-based Ryder. Ryder uses Lotus QuickPlace and Sametime for team and individual collaboration among workers charged with everything from renting single trucks to managing fleets of trucks and supply chains worldwide.

The ability to use collaboration tools wirelessly is vital to support Ryder’s distributed nature and global work force, Baidon says.

“When you’re responsible to make customer deliveries and meet just-in-time manufacturing delivery commitments and those kinds of things, you really need to be able to collaborate quickly with your work force - with your truck drivers, with people in the warehouse,” says Baidon, adding that wireless collaboration helps speed up and streamline the flow of business.

Key to mobile collaboration is the ability to work offline, says Andrew Mahon, senior director of product marketing at Groove Networks.

“The fact that when I disconnect from the network I can still use my software, that’s a pretty big deal,” Mahon says. “It’s not just a mobility factor, but an ownership component.”

As mobile workers begin to tap early benefits of wireless collaboration, vendors are ramping up efforts to deepen the effectiveness of interaction and improve ease of use.

As part of an increased focus on wirelessly enabling its collaboration suite, IBM’s Lotus Software this year introduced Sametime Everyplace, which extends secure IM (instant messaging) and online awareness to wireless devices. In addition, Lotus is currently developing a mobile version of its QuickPlace team collaboration software, dubbed Pervasive QuickPlace. The technology is designed to enable document sharing and collaboration on handheld devices.

“The ability to access something like a QuickPlace or Sametime IM session from a mobile device is important,” especially as more companies allow telecommuting, says Bethann Cregg, offerings manager for Lotus Advanced Collaboration. “I can certainly see it becoming a requirement in the next several months, for people to have that [wireless collaboration] ability.”

Meanwhile, in an effort to make mobile instant messaging easier to use, messaging vendor Jabber.com is working with speech technology provider Nuance to voice-enable mobile instant messaging for business users.

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