

Collaboration Burrows into Biz Apps

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Collaboration tools are joining forces with enterprise applications, with the intent to streamline the workflow process and provide communication in the context of daily business flows.

Several vendors are leading this charge, launching offerings designed to inject collaboration into applications such as e-mail, portals, and CRM to speed product development, ease administrative burdens, and aid business decision-making.

The disconnection between collaboration and enterprise applications can inhibit the flow of business processes both internally and with customers and suppliers, says Dana Gardner, research director at Aberdeen Group, in Boston.

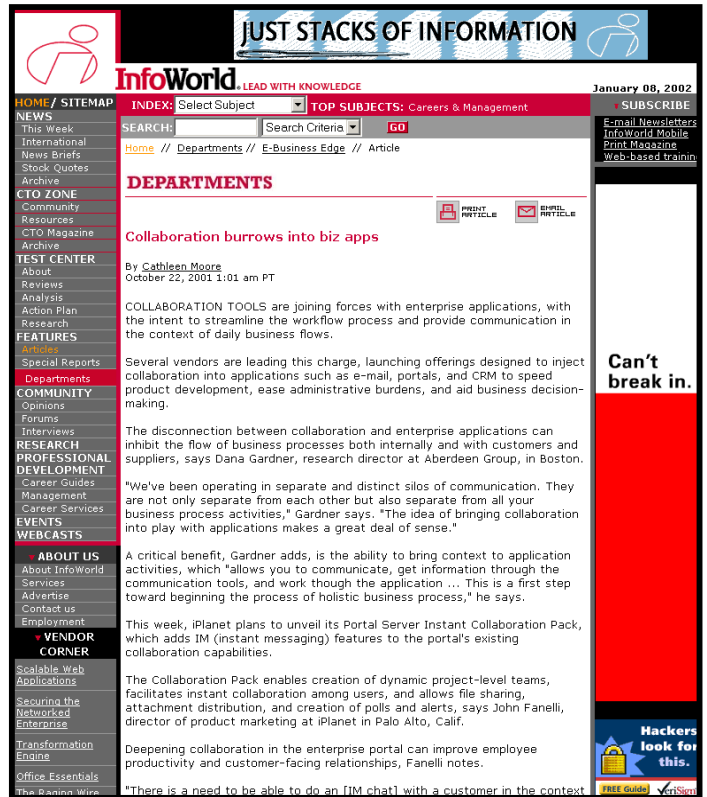
“We’ve been operating in separate and distinct silos of communication. They are not only separate from each other but also separate from all your business process activities,” Gardner says. “The idea of bringing collaboration into play with applications makes a great deal of sense.”

A critical benefit, Gardner adds, is the ability to bring context to application activities, which “allows you to communicate, get information through the communication tools, and work through the application ... This is a first step toward beginning the process of holistic business process,” he says.

This week, iPlanet plans to unveil its Portal Server Instant Collaboration Pack, which adds IM (instant messaging) features to the portal’s existing collaboration capabilities.

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The Collaboration Pack enables creation of dynamic project-level teams, facilitates instant collaboration among users, and allows file sharing, attachment distribution, and creation of polls and alerts, says John Fanelli, director of product marketing at iPlanet in Palo Alto, Calif.



Deepening collaboration in the enterprise portal can improve employee productivity and customer-facing relationships, Fanelli notes.

“There is a need to be able to do an [IM chat] with a customer in the context of what the customer is coming to you for,” Fanelli says. “You want to have [the customer’s] business information as part of the discussion, and the portal contains that context.”

To extend the collaborative power of e-mail, Tucson, Ariz.-based Automation Centre this month rolled out e-mail-based collaboration software designed to streamline project management and workflow. Dubbed TrackerOffice 2.1, the software integrates with Microsoft Outlook or Lotus Notes e-mail programs, allowing workers to collaborate on processes such as invoicing, purchasing, expense reporting, and project management, says Steven Birchfield, CEO of Automation Centre.

By collecting and collaborating on business-critical information where it often originates — in e-mail — workers can save time and create more efficient processes, Birchfield says.



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“The most difficult thing about information is collecting it. Suppose you could collect information every time someone started a project or requested something in e-mail,” Birchfield explains. “[TrackerOffice] allows people to execute collaborative business processes within a familiar application and in the natural flow of business.”

The IS department at Pioneer-Standard Electronics, a \$2.9 billion distributor of electronic components and computer systems, uses TrackerOffice to improve response to internal client requests and to help workers select projects with the highest priority and greatest ROI, says Mike Anderson, director of IS, quality training, and planning at Pioneer, in Cleveland.

The software blends into Pioneer’s Microsoft Exchange environment and appears to users as just another set of icons on the Outlook toolbar. But the software promotes collaborative project planning via improved visibility because “it gives you the ability to see what each division is doing and share solutions and communicate needs,” Anderson says. This ensures that “the right people who have to provide support for a project are involved in the planning.”

Brisbane, Calif.-based Intraspect Software recently unveiled a collaboration applications suite and a new version of its platform for developing and managing collaboration products.

Intraspect Applications 2 is intended to speed product development and improve the efficiency of communications in enterprises. The suite includes three applications: Product, Customer, and Services, each with process-specific collaboration modules, collaborative extranet, and dashboard modules.

These modules “put collaboration in context where business applications are used,” says Robert Schoettle, vice president of marketing at Intraspect. The applications create secure workspaces for streamlining product management, development, marketing, and support processes, he says.

“Organizations need to solve the problem of how to collaborate around specific business problems and information silos,” Schoettle explains.

Toronto-based Hummingbird also introduced a Web-based collaborative framework that integrates with the company’s document management and portal offerings. PD Accord speeds up project development by giving team members access to documents, discussion threads, task lists, and schedules via a Web browser, according to company officials.

Helping to keep workers in the collaborative Web even when they are not in the portal or document management applications, PD Accord also includes a notification feature that automatically sends messages alerting participants to project changes that occurred since they last visited the site.

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