The Many Forms of E-Collaboration: Blogs, Wikis, Portals, Groupware, Discussion Boards, and Instant Messaging

"The Web is] an information space through which people can communicate, but communicate in a special way: communicate by sharing their knowledge in a pool. The idea was not just that it should be a big browsing medium. The idea was that everybody would be putting their ideas in, as well as taking them out.

—Tim Berners-Lee, in a talk at the MIT Laboratory for Computer Science (LCS) 35th anniversary celebration, April 14, 1999 [www.w3.org/1999/04/13-tbl.html]

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The true blossoming of Tim-Berners-Lee's idea of everyone putting ideas in as well as taking them out took almost a decade. The special type of communication he described strikes right to the heart of collaboration. Better ways to facilitate online collaboration are definitely on the minds of most knowledge managers and intranet Webmasters. Some collaboration initiatives are targeted specifically at communities of practice, helping them find specific information on a topic, share successes, develop best practices, replicate ideas, and identify experts. However, creating successful online collaborative communities isn't necessarily easy—or always necessary. Just because you can create an "online" dimension of community doesn't mean that you should. Technology should be a supporting player in any collaboration effort, not the driver.

Spend time at any intranet or knowledge management conference and you'll collect dozens of horror stories about failed online communities. You'll also hear about successful initiatives and thriving communities. Each story has a nugget of truth about what works or doesn't. Failures usually result from unusable software with overly complex routines, organizational readiness, governance, and communicating value to the individuals. Don't let these stories make you gun shy about adding collaborative tools to your intranet. Many employees and organizational groups are looking for collaboration tools to help support their efforts. If you haven't put in a suite of collaboration tools, it's probably time to do so. Most employees don't have the time or energy to select, set up, and maintain these tools. Nor do employees want to learn six different tools, one for each project team.

Chances are you will have a number of teams with very similar needs for online collaboration, while other teams will have unique requirements. If you think back a few years, this will sound familiar—the same situation occurred as intranets blossomed from one-size-fits-all to more customized and personalized information portals having a diverse range of specialized workflow applications. Thinking about online collaboration requires thinking beyond just one application to a suite of tools and solutions. The good news is that some low-cost, easy-to-install tools have been gaining traction with enterprises such as wikis, blogs, and instant messaging.
Online collaboration tools range from the simple to the complex, inexpensive to expensive, locally installed to remotely hosted, commercial or open source, large versus small. Fundamentally, the tools all offer these basic services:

• a way to communicate
• a mechanism to share documents
• some means to discover other members of the community

Optional services include integrated online calendaring, extensive user profiles and expertise finders; recommender systems, shared whiteboard; and multiple channels, including instant messaging, Web, and/or phone conferencing facilities.

WHEN YOU NEED AN ONLINE COLLABORATION TOOL

Are you working collaboratively with people who are not physically co-located? Even if they are in the same location, would online collaboration space help the project or work get done faster and more effectively? Often the answer is yes, but not always. Some very successful communities of practice thrive without any formal online community space. Other communities would not even exist without it.

Online collaboration tools can help teams collectively author, edit, and review materials in a group workspace. This speeds up the creating and review of project materials. These tools can also help move documents through the system faster by allowing all recipients, based on need, to have direct and secure access to a central repository.

Online collaboration makes managing project and other workflow exchanges easier. Without online collaboration spaces, everyone in a group is bombarded with unnecessary information and e-mail attachments. Group members spend too much time creating custom address book groups of whom to notify about what. Setting up a team or project area allows one person to manage the membership for everyone. An online collaboration tool can help you with the following tasks:

• Manage the control and access to your materials—who can view, edit, and add or delete materials or posts.
• Track what was posted when and who has reviewed it.
• Make your project debriefing meeting based on a record of what happened during the project life cycle. Collaboration tools also increase the efficiency and productivity of the team. You can save teams time by having one place to look for information on a project. You'll encourage and foster better decision making when access to all project-related work—planning documents, budgets, progress reports, discussions, and prototypes—resides in one place. You can also reduce the time spent in unnecessary meetings by allowing minor matters to be handled online and background preparatory work and information to be circulated before virtual or face-to-face meetings.

FLAVORS OF ONLINE COLLABORATION

Remember that choice is good and diversity sparks new ideas and approaches. Such is the case with online collaboration. Communities and their requirements will be diverse. There are many different tools to consider.

Some tools have existed a long time—their strengths and weaknesses are well-known. Despite its many drawbacks, e-mail is still a major communication channel for online asynchronous collaboration. It's often the first tool people learn to use. In fact, one of our challenges as intranet Webmasters is to wean people away from e-mail by making them aware of more effective collaboration tools.

Many communities and teams migrated from personal e-mail distribution lists to mailing lists. With the right software, mailing lists can be archived online, providing a threaded and/or sequential listing of posts and full-text searching. Vital communities develop and flourish around well-managed mailing lists. Many of us belong to lists for professional development; these are an easy first step for many distributed organizations to take.

Some teams and groups require more than just a mailing list—they need more focused discussions. The ability to have several forums, regularly monitor a few, and occasionally see others can be advantageous. Often online discussion boards offer more advanced security for levels of viewing, and the centralized management of user accounts reduces the burden of list management. Participants can upload documents to the board, reducing the burden of the e-mail system. Some portal suites also integrate RSS channels as the means of tracking documents through an approval process as well as version control. Some portal suites also integrate RSS channels as the means of tracking documents through an approval process as well as version control. Some portal suites also integrate RSS channels as the means of tracking documents through an approval process as well as version control.
costly. Portal suites are usually “bet-the-farm” endeavors, requiring heavy, upfront investment before you see whether people will effectively use the collaboration areas. If you work in an enterprise that has rolled out one of these suites of tools, you will often have several choices on hand for collaborating online.

**BLOGS AND WIKIS**

Using Weblogs for online collaboration has garnered a lot of attention in the past 2 years. Initially, the focus on Weblogs was on the Internet, but their widespread adoption and success of Weblogs at spreading ideas quickly, as well as connecting loosely joined communities, was noticed by many as valuable inside the firewall. Some organizations encouraged senior executives to start blogs and individuals with specialized expertise to start posting preliminary thoughts and ideas in order to foster discussing and information sharing both inside and outside firewalls. Companies including Sun, Microsoft, IBM, Disney, GM, Ford, Weatherbug, Salon, and the Guardian use Weblogs. One individual usually publishes a Weblog, but teams and groups can create Weblogs for information sharing. The added user benefit is an RSS feed to notify them of new posts.

Wikis are also gaining traction, particularly for project teams in organizations that need to create a knowledgebase. Wiki, a term that means “quick” in Hawaiian, was originally developed by Ward Cunningham to allow users to freely add and edit content with a Web browser. Wikipedia is a well-known public Web site that is a collective effort to build an online encyclopedia. Wikis are founded on the notion of open editing—anyone who has access can click “edit this page,” and change the content and/or the organization of site.

Wikis are particularly good tools for research, information technology, and customer service areas that need to build a shared knowledge repository. IT departments and intranets often find wikis to be an excellent tool for creating documentation. Inside the firewall, wikis can be restricted as needed to particular teams, groups, or departments.

**KNOW YOUR ENVIRONMENT**

When choosing a collaboration tool, you need to know your workplace culture and environment. What IT infrastructure is in place already that you can leverage? Are there financial and human resources available to purchase, install, and maintain an application? You need to know the users and their requirements. Are they early adopters of new tools? Will they take a chance and invest a bit of time? Are they skeptical and risk-adverse? Do you need to start with a leaner, easy-to-use tool to build demand for more advanced features, or is your user community demanding more granularity, security, and workflow options? Who are the stakeholders and champions? Can they communicate the value of the new collaboration tool?

**DEFINE YOUR REQUIREMENTS**

Three requirements are paramount in choosing the right collaboration tool for your environment—communication, sharing, and management.

How frequently do people need to communicate? What types of communication is preferred—asynchronous or synchronous—text, voice, or video? What access is needed to previous communications?

How often do groups want to share documents and other digital objects? Do they need to do this in real time, or can material be shared in a document repository? Is it a community of trust? Can everyone see and edit all materials, or how granular do your permissions need to be? Is there a complex approval process or a simple one? Will documents be created collaboratively in the online space or with external desktop applications that are added to the system? Is version control needed?

How many users will be involved in more than one group or collaborative space? What degree of standardization from group to group is required?

**COLLABORATION AND SOCIAL SOFTWARE**

Collaboration tools such as Weblogs, wikis, and instant messaging open up the possibility of allowing organic self-supporting and self-organizing to form beyond the firewall. Many organizations aren't ready for a bottom-up approach in which individuals seek to affiliate with others of similar interests. Think about how we use IM. We add our buddies, create our own groups, and organize them to meet our personal and work goals.

Your intranet team will need to carefully assess your workplace culture to find a good match between collaboration needs and the different collaboration tools. Sometimes bottom-up tools such as wikis and Weblogs will work best. In other cases, a bulletin board or commercial product developed to cater to the needs of communities of practice or portal toolkit is the best match. Keep in mind that you probably will need to provide a suite of tools. It's unlikely that one tool will work for all. Take time to explore new collaboration tools so you're ready to help out the next team or group that wants an online collaborative space.

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**MORE RESOURCES**


Jotspot—The Application Wiki [www.jotspot.com/].