Digital Collaboration:
Connecting People and Information

By Ashish Kumar, Avanade CTO, and Larry LeSueur, Avanade Vice President of Technology Infrastructure Solutions

The evolution of technology has been dramatic over the last ten years. The Internet has changed the way we do business, but the technologies fuelling that change have evolved in silos, at different speeds and for different reasons. Pulling these technologies together and enabling people to connect with each other and share information, digital collaboration, is the cornerstone for increasing workforce productivity and improving customer satisfaction.

Enterprises are now seeing the clear benefit of converging technologies into an integrated collaboration solution, one that unites web capabilities with fixed and mobile communication, business intelligence, and intelligent search. Distilling information that is created and held across the whole organisation is a key capability of digital collaboration: it enables business to cut through internal data clutter and locate documents, web spaces, and individuals.

Business is now pushing through the pain barrier to achieve digital collaboration. Recent research*, carried out on behalf of Avanade across Europe and North America, shows that organisations that have successfully implemented digital collaboration have done so by driving ownership of collaboration projects, clearly documenting their strategy, and strengthening their understanding of collaboration technologies. Our research shows that the technical and cultural challenges this presents are outweighed by productivity gains and increased customer satisfaction.

No strategy for digital collaboration

Only 34 percent of companies have a fully documented collaboration strategy, and in reality, Avanade is seeing a significantly smaller proportion of prospects and customers with projects in place. This can be the result of the lack of a single point of ownership. Without this, the direction of any collaboration project is both unnatural and unsuccessful.

Part of Avanade's role is to provide this central direction. At SABMiller in Colombia, one of the world’s largest brewers with brewing interests or distribution agreements in more than 60 countries across six continents, an Avanade team worked side by side with the team to develop a strategy and roll out the technology. The brewer now has a global 'collaboration toolkit' that enables staff to work together more effectively, wherever they are based.

The SABMiller collaboration toolkit combines Microsoft Office SharePoint Server (MOSS 2007), Live Communication Server (LCS 2005) and LiveMeeting. The technology enables the 60,000 worldwide staff to connect with each other in online ‘collaboration rooms’. These enable users to share documents and information via wikis and blogs. New instant messaging technology, combined with presence awareness, enables staff to locate colleagues, know whether they are available and communicate with them via the most appropriate medium. They can also use the ‘People locator’ to search for the person with the right skills to contribute to the project.
The recent brewery construction project in Colombia has used the experience gained from an 18-month benchmark project in South Africa. Using the knowledge, people and documentation contained in the collaboration toolkit, the new Colombian brewery is on track to be completed in just 12 months, six months faster than the benchmark.

**Companies are taking a departmental approach**

Where companies have embraced digital collaboration, a departmental approach has paid off, at least initially. Our research showed that 9 out of 10 companies that have introduced digital collaboration to a small part of the organisation have moved on to roll out the program to the rest of the organisation over time.

The most recent Microsoft platform provides enterprises with a great base from which to achieve digital collaboration. Sixty to 70 percent of the technology is available out of the box.

By starting with an individual department, the additional 30 to 40 percent of functionality that adapts off-the-shelf technology to the idiosyncrasies of the individual enterprise can be closely managed. Taking a “start small, go deep” approach makes developing unique functionality efficient. Key learnings and functions can then be rolled out across the organisation. It is important that this approach is done in context of the overall digital collaboration architecture.

**How can ownership be driven across the organisation?**

Within the enterprise, it is essential to create a desire for the technology, an internal pull. The widespread adoption of Web 2.0 tools like social networking applications (Facebook, MySpace, wikis, and blogs) is helping drive this pull. Users are now enjoying the benefits of online communication and collaboration with no regard for global boundaries. These techniques can now be built into business applications to help draw colleagues together, not just from different floors but different sides of the world.

With technology such as SharePoint adopting usability and techniques from those Web 2.0 tools, it is easier to get staff to adopt its use. Any initial resistance quickly evaporates when the user recognises tricks and techniques already familiar from using the web at home. In SharePoint, anybody can create workspaces and invite colleagues to share different content and experiences – just like inviting friends to Facebook or posting comments on a blog.

**The cultural challenge**

Our research also confirmed our impression that enterprises are now investing in true collaborative technologies. In the next two years, companies in North America and Europe are looking to increase spending on VoIP by 60 percent, on virtual workspaces by 50 percent and enterprise search by 42 percent. Ensuring that employees use this new technology is a big challenge technically and culturally, even for large enterprises with comprehensive IT departments.

There are two key cultural changes. Firstly, expanding on search as used in the home environment will recognise a wider variety of intellectual assets where information is held. Secondly, expanding the viewpoint of staff will enable them to see the whole organisation as available to help. Both these changes require a re-evaluation of approach and a degree of discipline by individuals – to look, think and work globally.

Improved and broader information tagging, creation of virtual teams and associated workspaces all demand a degree of discipline that quickly becomes second nature.
Enterprise search, virtual workspaces and SharePoint are key examples of technology that help expand localised thinking and searching to bring global information to a single point while VOIP enablement will expand how that information and associated owners can be connected.

However, the technology can only go so far and recognising where the existing culture needs to be shifted is difficult from inside the organisation. An external unit is best placed to recognise any disconnect and work through processes to create this broader thinking. Mapping the capabilities of the new technology onto everyday work and encouraging staff to adopt new best practice, much of which happens naturally.

Furthermore, buy-in at the most senior executive level is invaluable in ensuring that this cultural shift takes place amongst staff, and an enterprise is able to absorb the new capabilities and working practices that digital collaboration technology creates.

Better communication increases productivity

The SABMiller experience is a great example of how knowledge and experience can be shared to improve efficiencies. Cutting the time to build a new brewery by a third will save SABMiller tens of millions of dollars.

Other customers are looking to enable virtual teams incorporating a diverse workforce that has developed as a result of globalisation. Offshore departments, home workers and travelling executives are able to connect, share and work together on global projects. These technologies, once in place, facilitate teamwork that is vital to the agile business.

Bringing together people, hardware and data, and tagging each element, is key to developing search, and efficient search is key to improving productivity. For example, building a new brewery involves a wide range of assets: plans, budgets, designers, contractors, heavy building equipment, etc. Being able to search for each element and link to experts with specific experience can deliver huge savings in time and money.

Making tagging automatic and as simple as possible is particularly important. Software can handle complex tagging, ensuring that the tags added are assessed and all of them are taken into consideration by the search.

If you look at Internet search as one-dimensional, limited to just web pages, enterprise search offers a three-dimensional view: people, locations, stock, hardware and data are polled to create a complete picture. Despite that, businesses are still lagging behind in its adoption.

Customer satisfaction is the key

Raising productivity is key—it's a benefit that 86 percent of the organisations surveyed want to achieve. The only way to achieve it, though, is by investing directly in the people who make up that organisation. In today’s information economy, empowering the owners of information to collaborate with each other will be what drives market-leading performance.

The customer is always looking for a better interaction with an enterprise; meanwhile, companies are always struggling to differentiate themselves from each other. Empowering employees to react quicker and work smarter is the next step.

Ultimately, better collaboration facilitates an enriched experience and knowledge of a wider section of the enterprise. Making it possible for the information in people’s heads, on their computers and in the data centres to come together through a single portal is empowering. Individuals can make decisions faster, follow best practice more easily and provide customers with a better service.
About the research
403 detailed telephone interviews were completed by Coleman Parkes Research with CIOs of major enterprises (the top 250 – 300 companies in each region surveyed) during April 2007 on behalf of Avanade. All interviews were completed in the native language and controlled through the use of a detailed questionnaire leading to an interview of around 12 minutes.

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