

There are a lot of Web 2.0 applications out there purporting to give collaborative muscle. But which ones are right for your business? And is it possible to organise the so-called chaos of the socially networked world – to get around the confusion to where the promised rewards can be reaped?

More than a fad thing?

The technology landscape is changing in a fundamental way: unified communications, Web 2.0 and social networking – all point to a tangible revisiting of collaborative platforms touched upon in the early 1990s. Indeed, Forrester Research has tracked this trend for the past 20 years and noted that companies in North America and Western Europe have traditionally spent the vast majority of their IT budgets on transactional systems. That is until last year, when there was a telling upsurge in investment of tools for knowledge workers. When asked if a collaboration strategy was a major technology initiative for their organisation, 34% of IT professionals answered that it was a priority, with a further 15% saying it was a critical need. And this related to establishing collaboration in 2008.

The problem is keeping up with the changes. Will the tool a company invests in turn out to be a Friends Reunited or a Google – a fad or a forever?

The key driver for change is the new generation of web-savvy individuals, the so-called digital natives, who are now entering the employment market. They use new patterns of communication, sharing information and content openly with everyone. Whilst many organisations are asking themselves how to recruit the best of the next generation, they are also concerned with how such an open way of working can sit alongside their traditionally closed-off business approach.

This represents both a major opportunity and a major cause of tension.

Getting better business value

As collaborative technologies develop and grow, investing millions in today's best-of-breed platforms can be a dangerous tactic. Some industry experts have found that a more effective approach is to make much smaller investments – thousands rather than millions – and apply them to a specific business scenario, such as handling proposal management, workspace activity or content maintenance. The adoption process should involve interaction across business units and IT to establish and measure accuracy, quality, usability and efficiency changes. This understanding of how they will work across the organisation will mean subsequent larger investments can be made with confidence.

But what of the culture of openly shared information? Interestingly, the Web 2.0 phenomenon has actually forced financial services and pharmaceutical companies to become early adopters precisely because their high-risk profiles (client data, intellectual capital, privacy issues) meant they had to provide a viable, controlled alternative. They needed to act rather than react.

The different perceptions of collaborative technologies at different levels of a company are significant but should not hamper adoption. There is a tendency for any organisation to have a clique of workers who will be early adopters of new technologies, just as senior decision-makers will most likely be less inclined towards adoption, simply because of time constraints and the ease of staying with what is known. The knowledge to make effective change is there in any organisation. It's a case of opening up the communication channels.

You have technology experts who can manage the specifics of adoption and your early adopters will have advanced knowledge of what tools do and don't work – use them. When embarking on its own collaboration journey, Thomson Reuters set up a C-level blog to collect decision-maker opinion, linked to RSS feeds presenting the industry buzz around related topics and providing a wider context to discussion. From these discussions, it was clear a ten-year adoption plan would not work, nor could they rely on a one-size-fits-all tool. Instead, they used the knowledge experts in the organisation to quantify their decision.

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Ease of use

How do you capture the knowledge in people's heads? One way is to set up a virtual suggestion box, a simple place for employees to go to voice their opinions. And this is exactly what Bell Canada sought to do, reinventing its operations after the arrival of Google wiped out Bell's billion-dollar revenue from the Canadian Yellow Pages.

The resulting ID-ah! initiative was designed to collect the ideas and experiences of Bell Canada's 40,000-strong workforce with a simple company-wide blog. Using a simple feedback and voting function, popular ideas were easily established. All grassroots contributors and senior executives then met in a purpose-built refinement 'co-lab' to hone the ideas for business application, a process that often incorporated unpopular ideas, which had proven to be effective but slightly ahead of their time.

Did the older generations know they were involved in a system that was harvesting their collective wisdom? No. They were just given a new way to put forward and rank ideas in an intuitive way, at the click of an edit button. Very clear objectives made this ID-ah! a successful collaborative initiative, and the informality of the environment meant that all employees felt they could take part and interact, including those otherwise not inclined to engage in such discussions. Compared to a formalised system designed to collect 'knowledge artefacts', ID-ah! has been very successful because it is uncomplicated and encourages off-the-cuff opinions and proposition rather than stiff, lifeless presentation. ID-ah! is not a blog for blogs sake, it has a specific business purpose and set about achieving that purpose as simply as possible.

Keep on moving

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an open mind and test what does and does not work. Google, the indie behemoth now cresting the Web 2.0 wave, operates 20 beta software builds every day. The whole beta concept is founded on collaboration: if the thousands of monitored users don't click a function button, Google removes it. Within 24 hours. Such is the art of always moving forward.

The knowledge of the crowd, when properly captured as with Bell Canada, can fuel this movement forward. If left alone, it can cause problems. For example, a US company dealing in the purchase of ski resorts was front-page news recently when it emerged that salient points regarding the viability of its resorts, such as whether a link road is covered by ice below a certain temperature to render it impassable, were being discussed in an open forum by locals who knew the slopes. Why front-page news? Because these discussions revolved around billion dollar acquisitions.

The subsequent face-saving exercise driven by the company IT Director involved closing off the public domain but maintaining and encouraging the knowledge share that had grown up on the open forums. There weren't compliance issues either, as existing governance was easily reiterated to reflect the new technology. And it could capture experiences and knowledge from the very seasonal workers who would then be employed by the resorts in question. This controlled forum is a fine example of accidental learning – the serendipitous discovery of a unique business community, with knowledge that could make or break a major business decision.

Serendipity and the global knowledge share

Accidental learning is a strong theme running through many stories of early collaborative adopters. One powerful example is Earth Knowledge, a wide-ranging online research network concerned with the effects of building development on adjoining water sources and facilitates communication between the scientific community, developers, and business and community leaders around the world.

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Initially, Earth Knowledge was a small community established with quite narrow but very prescriptive intentions. Each report filed was determined by very specific tasks guided by elements of both strict control and public interest. However, within this context, experts from all over the world were logging on to the Earth Knowledge site via RSS feeds, growing the community to include specialists whose input was only possible through Web 2.0 technologies. And suddenly researchers from Switzerland were interacting with developers in Nevada and providing vital information and experience

that would ultimately help avert a major problem. This was never something that Earth Knowledge had set out to achieve but it had established a task-oriented collaborative workspace that inadvertently captured business-critical insight from around the world.

Living a Second Life

This advanced Web 2.0 application is allowing some organisations to take the next step in communicating their products, data or services in three dimensions. It is an elaborate approach to improving usability, with customers and employees being able to see and interact with a virtual representation of the organisation. This virtual world has been put to good use by an architectural institute that replaced its expensive CAD/CAM software and solved its storage issues with brick-by-brick Second Life representations of each of their designs. Clients could then walk through their proposed building and offer their feedback from within the building itself and see what difference their suggestions made. This approach greatly enhanced the quality of the user experience with all feedback gained being quickly actionable.

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Similarly, Thomson Reuters has established an exact replica of its headquarters in Second Life with a dedicated SL team inhabiting and interacting with the environment. In addition, the Second Life office has provided a more interactive place for developers and project managers to collaborate, transposing the traditional teleconferencing and email communications regardless of time-zone. Second Life is even being used as an induction tool, with new starters visiting the virtual office to view products and interact with audio and video.

Rob Koplowitz and Michel Gelbart, from presentations at Fujitsu's Breakfast Briefing, Organised chaos: achieving collaboration in a socially networked world, 7 October 2008.

WHAT NEXT?

Want to engage in collaborative business but need help with how to get there?

Struggling to understand:

1. The best-practice approach to collaborative technologies?
2. How to harness user trends?
3. The business value and application of these tools?

Get your organisation fully connected by contacting Fujitsu Services at mspractice@uk.fujitsu.com to discuss the most effective and appropriate collaborative business tools for your organisation.

In addition, if you are interested in understanding how to make the business case for enterprise collaboration and how Fujitsu itself has adopted collaborative technologies, you are welcome to attend our next breakfast briefing on ROI and collaboration. The event will take place in central London. Please visit our website for more information.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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