

Many organisations are now considering implementing collaboration platforms, but how do you establish a business case and the likely ROI? And how do you ensure successful uptake across the organisation?

Command, control or collaborate

Collaboration is the buzzword of the moment, driven by the revolution in the way we work. We're no longer in the office every day, with the same people week-in, week-out. Now, we work remotely; virtual teams form and then disband as projects come and go; operations are spread geographically; and staff from different cultures need to share ideas, documents and information. True collaboration supports this, using a variety of technology and channels to enable us to communicate and work together freely and seamlessly to achieve business goals.

In many organisations, there is one critical barrier to full collaborative working: a command-and-control management structure. In some instances, collaboration is seen as a threat to the status quo, which will unleash uncontrollable ways of working.

At the same time, a new generation of web-savvy individuals is making waves in the workplace. They're accustomed to sharing content and information openly in their social lives. Unless those at the top embrace collaboration, these younger workers will introduce it informally in an uncontrolled and undisciplined way. This presents more than a challenge to their management style: it also has critical implications for security and compliance. In short, collaboration in some form is inevitable: far better then that it comes in a planned way with senior buy-in.

The big picture

Collaboration is not like conventional IT implementations: it's introducing a sea-change in the way people work. There needs to be a powerful and convincing argument to demonstrate that it will enhance what is there already, and that it can be harnessed and disciplined to retain some measure of control.

To gain the top-level buy-in needed to achieve a successful collaborative environment, you need to start with the big-picture objectives and emphasise the business benefits. These must be based on the context of your specific business and the way you operate, in every office, branch and geography.

Discuss objectively what you want to do and how it can help alleviate the current pinch-points in the organisation. Lay out in broad terms which problems need solving, which end users will most benefit and which internal stakeholders must drive this project forward. Resist being drawn into the specifics of metrics and ROI (let alone going anyway near technology selection) until you've drawn up these strategic parameters and gained meaningful board-level buy in.

Being objective

With broad agreement on these overarching goals, then you can look at more specific details, metrics and costings. There is no framework that neatly encompasses this: it needs to be developed based on your own business objectives, examining issues including:

- Potential audiences and how they segment, both internal and external: partners, customers, teams, etc. Don't underestimate how critical the existing company hierarchy is, how many mini-hierarchies exist and how this will impact on collaboration.
- Current patterns of collaboration in your organisation: where it's already happening in a simple form and how these can be accommodated and improved.
- Diverse ways of working: different cultures work in completely different ways and collaboration has to mirror this. All too often the designers of collaborative working fashion processes in their own image, which simply won't work for everyone.

- Look at all the systems and processes currently in place that will need to be integrated, and the technology and tools needed to support this.
- Determine how you will measure success and where the responsibility for this will lie.
- Identify the key people who should be engaged in this process and consider the policies or guidelines needed to govern their participation.
- Agree a project timeline and how you will implement training, uptake and usage within this schedule.

Good workers also have good tools

Only now should you start to look at technology. In particular, consider how much access is needed for outsiders: partners, customers, etc. This will then raise the thorny issue of what information needs to be kept inside the corporate firewall and what can be safely located outside. This has particular relevance now, with the increasing attractiveness and cost-effectiveness of 'the cloud'. You can save significant amounts of budget by

focusing compliance and security restrictions only on your critical information.

Once you have determined the technology strategy, you can now turn to system selection. Microsoft SharePoint offers significant benefits for an integrated solution, providing powerful browser-based collaboration and document management. But it can also encourage exponential site growth, which may lead to hidden online silos. Light-handed but firm governance is required. Establish a careful balance between the freedom to create sites and too much control that could stifle uptake. Trust is needed: leave content-level control to site owners; keep overall control centrally so nothing gets lost.

You'll now be able to put together some measurement metrics and ROI forecasts, based on 'easy wins': for example, workflow process compression, obsolete infrastructure replaced by more agile solutions, cost savings from remote teams, and reduced security costs. But remember to keep the main focus on the business problems which can be solved by collaboration.

CASE STUDY: FUJITSU'S EXPERIENCE WITH COLLABORATION

Putting our money where our mouth is

Fujitsu, which employs 40,000 staff worldwide, has seen a significant change in the way it operates. Our previous, UK-centric computer-services operation has now switched to global delivery and, as we rely fundamentally on selling the expertise and experience of our people, we demand easy interaction and sharing of knowledge.

The move from UK-centric to global service delivery was a driving force behind the move to greater integration across the group. This was a key corporate objective and underpinned our initial steps into collaboration working.

Senior management had already recognised that collaborative technologies would support new working practices and patterns. For example, cross-border working has driven up costs: a bid being made in Germany resulted in staff from different geographies being flown in and located there for months at considerable expense, with all the associated environmental concerns.

At the same time, many staff were frustrated by outdated tools that hampered their productivity. As web-based technologies had become increasingly fundamental to their social life, they naturally questioned the logic of not having something similar in the office.

While these different issues didn't add up to an ROI case for collaboration, they highlighted a number of specific business challenges that could be solved through effective and structured collaborative working. It was the impetus needed to move to the next stage.

Proving the case through pilots

Driven by the IT department, a small programme of pilots was introduced to trial collaboration. Pilots were started in areas where collaborative working could improve existing activities, rather than selecting the technology and then seeing what it might support. We then chose Microsoft SharePoint and OCS to support these pilots: this would provide the right mix of browser-based collaboration, document management, instant messaging, audio-video conferencing and web conferencing.

In effect, the pilots enabled 'safe experiments' across the organisation, across different geographies, departments, projects and teams, enhancing current practices and extending some existing, tentative attempts at collaboration.

The outcomes of these pilots were used to build a business case for full implementation. The business case also linked collaboration to some key corporate programmes: for example, a recommendation from the relevant team that a new accreditation initiative for technical architects should use collaborative technologies. It also highlighted how collaboration would reduce the overwhelming burden of email, an issue senior decision-makers would recognise as individuals. This helped their understanding of its potential value: in short, it made it real.

Once collaboration had received the green light, we moved slowly to full collaborative working. It continued a rolling launch to teams or projects, with word-of-mouth often triggering demand before any formal initiative was started. A programme continues to communicate ideas and improvements, and to identify how collaboration can help specific projects or processes, as Fujitsu moves to full collaborative working across the organisation.

A middle-out approach

Collaboration must be implemented within the context of your organisation, and, in the case of Fujitsu, buy-in was required from both the top and the bottom levels. Generally speaking, take a middle-out approach that appeals to both: emphasise to the former its value in strengthening key business processes and activities, and to the latter its ability to streamline the thousands of individual interactions that happen every day. It needs to mirror and enhance what you already do, not impose new structures.

In addition, collaboration is not just about giving technology tools to staff and leaving them to get on with it. There needs to be ongoing communication, training, guidance, case studies, workshops and tutorials to support and encourage take-up. This is particularly important for those resistant to change: they will need ongoing help to persuade them that these tools can change working practices for the better and deliver real business benefits.

To achieve buy-in throughout the organisation and therefore derive the greatest value from its implementation, it's not a question of just proving ROI: it's about demonstrating the widespread benefits collaboration will bring to your working environment as part of your overarching corporate objectives.

Lessons learnt

Fujitsu's experience provides some lessons for anyone embarking on collaboration:

- Microsoft SharePoint offers significant benefits for an integrated solution but can also encourage exponential site growth. Implement a simple but rigorous process for staff to follow when requesting a new site, so that you can build a comprehensive formal site directory.
- Establish a careful balance between the freedom to create sites and too much control that could stifle uptake. Trust is needed: leave content-level control to site owners; keep overall control centralised.
- Collaboration is not just about giving technology tools to staff and leaving them to get on with it. There needs to be ongoing communication, training, guidance, case studies, workshops and tutorials to support and encourage take up.
- Collaboration must be implemented within the context of your organisation. In the case of Fujitsu, it had to appeal to both the top and the bottom levels: emphasise to the former its value in strengthening key business processes and to the latter its ability to streamline the thousands of interactions that happen every day.

Oliver Marks and Graeme Mackay, from presentations at Fujitsu's Breakfast Briefing: Gimme, gimme, gimme – how to get the most value out of collaborative technologies, 20 November 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 more about enterprise collaboration and the practical lessons for how it can be implemented, our next collaboration event, entitled 'Tools of the trade – a practical examination of implementing collaborative technologies', will be taking place on 22 January 2009. The event will take place in central London. Please visit our website for more information.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you require any further information, please contact us via email

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Alternatively visit <http://www.fujitsu.com/uk/services/microsoft/index.html>