

# The Collaboration Imperative

## An Opportunity Not To Be Missed

insight

Shiv Singh | November 2006



Many a company has tried to solve the collaboration puzzle. From organizational behavior specialists to information technologists, everyone has had a perspective on how to get employees to collaborate electronically and seamlessly. In fact, it was back in 1966 that the Harvard Business Review first introduced the notion of a paperless office and highlighted the potential of collaboration. Look around your desk today and you'll know that in 40 years we haven't made as much progress as we could have. But now with competitive pressures from countries like China, India and Brazil, companies have a renewed urgency to foster collaboration so that stronger ideas are generated and products are brought to market more quickly and cheaply.

**Problem:** The need for collaboration among employees is now stronger than ever due to competitive pressures from other countries.

**Solution:** Intranets that incorporate collaboration functionality provide the seamless, consistent user experience that employees demand.

**Benefit:** Efficient collaboration between employees so that stronger ideas are generated benefits both employees and companies.

### What's Changed?

So has anything changed in 2006? Is fostering collaboration getting easier? Has technology made a difference or are we still loath to collaborate with each other in the workplace? Yes, a lot has changed. For starters, the technology allowing us to create, manage and share information electronically has improved dramatically. Employees exchange hundreds of documents over email and via file servers every day. Sharing information electronically has become commonplace. And finally, actually collaborating on the creation and evolution of a document or an idea has taken hold.

We have the internet to largely thank for this change. As the web evolved from being a publishing medium to a participatory one, employees in the workplace too have become more comfortable with sharing information and collaborating. Blogs, wikis and social networking sites aggressively encourage their users to contribute their thoughts, opinions and personal experiences. These very users are employees by day when they go to work in the morning. While at home they exchange photographs online via photo websites, participate in discussion forums, instant message with friends and post to blogs and wikis. And when they come to work in the mornings, they wonder why their intranets and collaboration solutions are so restrictive. They are demanding more.

## Looking Ahead

A new generation that is much more familiar with technology is entering the workplace as well. They're driving this change in how we use, interact and collaborate while we work. But more than just driving the change, this generation of 20 something's is influencing how senior managers should collaborate and share information as well. We're all learning from our new employees. We are also discovering that the collaboration can take place in a similar, participatory, open ended, trusted fashion as it does on the broader web. In fact, we are realizing that it is easier to collaborate in the workplace as there are protocols, guidelines, policies and cultural factors that serve as a safety net and protect the employees. And most importantly, as companies promote and reward the team players, employees are realizing that they have to collaborate to succeed.

So where is this collaboration actually happening? Is it in email or on the intranet or somewhere else? Increasingly, this collaboration is taking place on later stage intranets that incorporate collaboration functionality. With workforces becoming increasingly mobile, employees cannot meet in person anymore. The later stage intranets include collaboration spaces whether they are password protected sections of their intranets or via Documentum eRooms integrated into the intranet. Workplace solutions from IBM and Microsoft play a large role here. Many intranets are increasingly using Microsoft Sharepoint solutions allowing the easy publishing and sharing of documents. The next version of Microsoft Office includes significantly more collaboration functionality allowing employees to write, edit and extend documents remotely and discuss them in real time all via Microsoft Office or a SharePoint based intranet.

## Conclusion

Collaboration has a bright future in the enterprise and especially on later stage intranets that incorporate collaboration functionality while maintaining a seamless, consistent user experience. Broader social media trends are fuelling this change. But at the end of the day, collaboration is dependent upon the culture of an organization and its existing communication flows. If a company does not value or reward collaboration, the employees will still collaborate but they won't use the company administered and directed tools. Instead, they will depend upon more informal, grassroots solutions like wikis and blogs that allow contributions from people outside the company as well.

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## About the Author



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