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Team Collaboration: What does it really mean?

If there's one thing that all business leaders should know about surviving in this tough economic business world, it's that team collaboration is essential to their success. According to [this article](#) [1] in the Harvard Business Review, "there's a world of difference between merely working together and truly collaborating with one another. Collaborative activity is the "secret sauce" that enables teams to come up with innovative new products or creative, buzz-worthy marketing campaigns." Indeed, many seem to have the wrong idea about what collaboration is really about and often confuse "collaboration" and "communication." In order to succeed, organizations must understand that collaboration and communication are two different things. Communication simply refers to the flow of information, and is a one-way thing. Collaboration is always interactive and can only occur when two or more people work together towards a common goal.

Why is team collaboration important?

The old saying "two heads are better than one" is often true, especially in the business world. Many corporations today encourage teamwork within the office. Studies have shown that team collaboration aids with productivity, problem-solving, and superior solutions within the workplace. Forrester reports that for organizations who implement Web 2.0 collaboration tools, 77% gain faster access to information, and 60% reduce their communication costs. By working in teams, employees can also learn from each other and build on existing ideas. When teamwork is put in place, it often better results at a faster pace; not to mention that it is often more cost-effective.

Team collaboration today: A whole new culture

Team collaboration has always been an essential part of any project, especially when it comes to product or project management. When ideas are exchanged, organizations can meet their goals faster. However, the concept of "team collaboration" these days is not the same as it used to be even just a couple of years ago. Changes in market demands, technological advancements, and the increasingly fast working pace in today's bustling corporate environment have caused the meaning of team collaboration to change.

A decade ago, team collaboration was document-driven, with no set collaboration technique. Information was drawn from all available "single sources." As the [Learning Generalist](#) [2] explains, "There was a time when we believed in single sources of good information. Popular authors, popular textbooks, popular magazines, popular news channels, popular radio stations, all led to

the birth of mass media. People believed these authentic sources of information because the people that created information were hugely qualified and apparently quite talented in their field.”

The same concept applied when it came to sharing information within an office. “Even when it came to project documents, it was either the tech-lead, business analyst or the project manager who created these and the rest of us just looked at them in amazement and were passive users of these documents.”

Today, team collaboration is a whole new culture. Today’s increasingly difficult global economy is causing company CEOs to adapt to new ways of collaborating with their colleagues, business partners, and even customers. Businesses today are starting to learn that customer interaction is the key to succeeding and outperforming their competitors. Realizing this, many companies have had no choice but to find ways to collaborate effectively. Thus, many businesses are now using some type of collaborative document management system.

As information-sharing evolved, the success of online collaboration sites such as Wikipedia have influenced corporations to adopt the use of social components such as wikis within the workplace in order to share information with each other more effectively. Thus, many companies have turned to collaboration software that allow organizations to easily share information and interact with all stakeholders no matter where they are in the world.

Web 2.0 Collaboration is taking over

In hopes of being able to create a stronger collaboration culture within their organization, many companies are starting to turn to “virtual” collaboration, that is, taking their collaboration strategy one step further by using online collaboration software. Today, we find that an increasing number of companies are starting to turn to modern Web 2.0 collaboration software to help streamline their business process while enhancing collaboration.

Web 2.0 collaboration tools allow companies to strengthen their teamwork culture, and because the corporate competition growing tougher and tougher, the need for team members to stick together and always be on the same page is more essential than ever.

The term “web 2.0 collaboration tool” is very broad. Today’s new generation of technologically-inclined workers has a large array of different types of collaboration tools to choose from.

A couple of years ago, we first saw many organizations that needed to speed up communication turn simple messaging tools such as Skype, MSN Messenger and Yahoo Messenger.

As the need to collaborate more tightly evolves, so does the technology. These days, with the emergence of wikis and blogs we are seeing more and more tools that allow for asynchronous communication and group collaboration. For example, Google docs and Wikispaces allow teams to share ideas and information in centralized documents. In [this article](#) ^[3] by Business Management Magazine, Whitney Tidmarsh, VP of Marketing, Content Management and Archiving Division at EMC explains “We find ourselves at a period of confluence where new, flexible, browser-based tools such as wikis, blogs and team workspaces are available to address those traditional business needs to do things faster and more efficiently. To add additional incentive, this is now even more critical to organizations faced with financial belt-tightening in the face of new global economic challenges.”

Web 2.0 tools are not the “magic solution” to an organization’s problems. According to Tidmarsh, “Companies can obtain the optimum benefit by utilizing these creative tools within an infrastructure that provides a secure, self-managed team workspace model.” That being said, there is an increasing number of collaboration tools that cater to every type of business model. For example, there are collaborative CMS/social software such as IBM connections, and Confluence; collaborative help desk software like ZenDesk and Helpspot; Collaboration project management software like Basecamp, Redmine and Zoho Projects.

While each of these tools serve for different purposes and all look very different, collaboration tools all have one thing in common: social features that allow teams to work together more efficiently for example instant messaging, group chat, wikis, blogs and real-time updates.

The beauty of using Web 2.0 collaboration applications is that they can be accessed at anytime, and its social nature, allows the meaning of collaboration to shift from a “single source” working style to a “crowdsourcing” one. This way, team members can easily share knowledge, learn new things faster, and create an online knowledge base that they can refer to in the future. A decade ago, it was up to the higher-ups to create the knowledge base and make them available to the company through documentation. In this social age, characteristics of Web 2.0 collaboration tools make it possible for the whole team to contribute to the knowledge base. It is now everyone’s responsibility to share valuable information with their entire team.

So, who should use Web 2.0 collaboration tools?

Many businesses often rush and implement Web 2.0 collaboration tools without knowing if it’s the right solution for them, and what they hope to accomplish by doing so. Most companies who have achieved success through the use of collaboration tools all started using them with a specific goal in mind.

Collaboration is quintessential in the business world, and Web 2.0 collaboration tools are ideal for almost every type of company. For example, small teams who are in the same location can save time by simply sharing documents online through document sharing tools like Google docs and eliminating the need to email back and forth.

Companies who work with dispersed team members and external stakeholders may choose to use a tool that allows them to have continuous conversations about specific projects or items, and clarify uncertainties early-on. Tools that have built-in discussion forums alongside business applications such as Zoho are helpful for these types of teams.

Collaborative tools that have customer service features such as Jive and OneDesk are greatly useful for companies who want to improve their customer service by being able to interact with customers and get feedback from team, instead of conducting one-way surveys that often yield little to no results.

According to a [case study by IBM](#) [4], Berlitz Corporation wanted to break down traditional communication boundaries and find a better way for its employees around the world to communicate and learn from each other. They also wanted to accelerate the development of higher quality products. Thus, they are using IBM’s portal, SPACE, social networking software for businesses, and real-time collaboration solutions. As a result, Berlitz has transformed into a global, agile company and has increased customer satisfaction worldwide.

In a case study [5] conducted by OneDesk [6], LifeLearn started looking into the use of collaboration tools because they “needed to have tight communications, not lose things, and be able to know exactly what the other people needed.” They found that the collaborative aspects of the software helped open communication between the team and the community, and help them stay on top of the multiple projects going on at the same time.

The advantages of using collaboration tools are numerous. They can help with decision-making predicting potential pitfalls, foreseeing future trends, maximizing the customer experience, and so on. Along with a goal, a steady workflow system, and a team that is willing to learn and work together, Web 2.0 collaboration tools can be the ideal asset for companies who want to improve efficiency and stand out in the marketplace.

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Links:

[1] http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2012/10/how_to_collaborate_in_a_virtua.html

[2] <http://www.learninggeneralist.com/2010/01/collaboration-20-theres-shift-happening.html>

[3] <http://www.busmanagement.com/article/The-Importance-of-Collaboration>

[4] [http://www-01.ibm.com/software/success/cssdb.nsf/CS/CCL-8E63C2?](http://www-01.ibm.com/software/success/cssdb.nsf/CS/CCL-8E63C2?OpenDocument&Site=lotus&cty=en_us)

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[5] http://cdn.onedesk.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/08/LifeLearn-Case-Study_v5.pdf

[6] <http://www.onedesk.com>