Future of Work Enabler: Virtual Collaboration

Cloud-powered social and mobile tools can help break down traditional hierarchies and enable employees across disciplines to easily locate and share business-critical insights with experts inside and outside the organization’s four walls. This report is an installment in our multi-part series that explores the shifts necessary for future-proofing your company.
Executive Summary

In today’s knowledge economy, virtual teams are the norm. With expertise distributed around the world, teams “swarm” to complete a task and depart when finished. Knowledge work is not performed in linear, production-line fashion; it involves idea-sharing, iterative discussions and real-time modifications.

In traditional business, change was first agreed upon, then planned and executed. But in today’s world, change happens organically, thanks to the interconnectedness afforded by social networks and the Web, otherwise known as “wirearchy.” Roles and responsibilities – once carved into the org chart – are fluid and ever-changing. The most valuable contributor to a project may turn out to be someone you don’t even know. Leaders aren’t appointed or anointed by management; they’re recognized by the community based on the perceived strength of their contributions. Leadership is dynamic and changes during the lifetime of a project; the way forward is often determined by project role, skill and circumstance.

However, many companies are having difficulty adapting to the newly dynamic workstyle and continue to rely on old-fashioned collaboration techniques, characterized by e-mail threads, conference calls, intranet portals and document-sharing systems. Meanwhile, in employees’ private lives, dispersed people come together naturally, sharing information, expanding on ideas, discussing ideas, asking for advice and even planning flash mobs on social media platforms like Facebook, Tumblr and Twitter.

The time has come for businesses to rewire their technology foundations and rethink their process models to bring the dynamic, real-time collaboration that consumers enjoy into the workplace. Doing so will maximize efficiency, speed response time and optimize the knowledge and experience of all their resources. This is possible through virtual collaboration.
platforms, which support how businesses need to operate today by leveraging the new master IT architecture, which combines social, mobile, analytic and cloud technologies (the SMAC stack).

Virtual collaboration (see Figure 1) is one of the eight enablers companies need to consider when mapping their journey of reinvention for the new world of work, as described in our overview paper, “Making the Shift to the Next-Generation Enterprise.” In this installment, we will look at some of the drivers propelling companies to create virtual collaboration platforms, as well as the many choices and considerations they must make when enabling globally dispersed teams to work together more effectively.

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### Mapping the Enablers to the 3 R’s

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Figure 1
What Collaboration Looks Like Today

Collaboration today means overcoming the boundaries of both time and space, permitting easy real-time engagement between contributors who may never meet in person. It means sharing knowledge and information, not just documents, in real time. It means providing the tools so teams can come together quickly – without a lot of planning and calendar-checking – with the right expertise, to solve fast-moving business problems and seize fast-disappearing market opportunities.

Collaboration also means taking advantage of the “wisdom of the crowd,” wherever individuals may be, so that more stakeholders can be involved, meaning more expertise and faster resolution of the work product or project. These subject matter experts can continue to stay engaged – to hone ideas and clarify questions – because of real-time communication capabilities. This can take many forms in the workplace:

- Support teams connecting with product engineers to discuss common customer issues and unearth hidden ideas for new product capabilities.
- Sales teams sharing best practices and documenting these insights in easily accessed idea forums.
- Marketing and product development teams speeding time to market through threaded online chat forums.
- Collaboration with partners and customers on new product and service designs.
- Dynamic leaders emerging to move a project to the next step and passing the baton to another leader to carry forward.

Collaboration also means a different kind of rewards system, where ideation, task completion and subject matter expertise are honored through achievement systems, recognition and leader boards.

Considerations and Recommendations

When it comes to transitioning to a virtual collaboration model, many factors come into play, including the company’s maturity, appetite for risk, competitive stance, current IT portfolio, cost concerns, cultural considerations and strategic goals. Here are some of the top considerations and recommendations for enabling virtual collaboration.

- **Define an area or group to begin the implementation:** The best way to begin implementing virtual collaboration is with a small project group that is geographically dispersed but already works closely together as a team and would naturally benefit from increased engagement. Sales teams are a natural place to start, as is marketing or customer support. Choose functionalities that solve particular problems this area is experiencing, such as the need for remote sales people to share information with each other or for marketing to engage in more ad hoc, short exchanges (such as real-time chat) vs. planned meetings. It is also a best practice to start the virtual team by having a virtual kick-off session. This socializes critical success factors and timelines with the entire team.

- **Assign an ambassador:** To generate enthusiasm, it’s important to assign an individual to communicate successes, publish results and encourage use of the collaboration platform. This can be anyone, from a project evangelist to a senior leader. The key is that it must be an individual who commands the respect of the team and is an active participant in ongoing collaboration activities.

- **Prepare to invest in a three-layer technology infrastructure:** Virtual collaboration requires a technology infrastructure that consists of a social computing/collaboration platform, mobile capabilities and the cloud:
Cloud-based computing: Using the cloud ensures that enterprise data and process are available globally, in real time.

Social collaboration platforms: Either built in-house or off-the-shelf from providers such as Jive Software, Inc., these Facebook-like platforms provide myriad ways for workers to connect, including virtual document-sharing, video tools, live chat, threaded discussions, audit trails, content management and integration with enterprise applications and databases. These platforms can enable users across the globe to connect effectively and efficiently on their day-to-day work tasks. Features such as blogs, micro-blogs and notifications help improve engagement among employees and connect them with internal experts in real time.

Mobile devices: Mobility provides a delivery mechanism for getting the right information to workers, wherever they are and in the form in which they are comfortable. While some companies provide employees with smartphones or tablets, it’s preferable to initiate and manage a bring-your-own-device (BYOD) program. Also, it’s important to ensure that these apps created are OS independent and work smoothly across devices to drive greater user engagement and adoption.

Workers will feel empowered to make smarter decisions when they have more information at the point of decision. With the consumerization of expectations, and the influx of millennials into the workplace, employees assume the enterprise will deliver information anytime, anywhere. A virtual collaboration platform hosted on the cloud and delivered via mobile provides that 24x7 access.

An example is PGI, a global leader in virtual meetings that uses a social collaboration platform to unite its global operations. In just six months, PGI had 94% global adoption with the platform, driving measurable, real-world benefits, including an accelerated sales training cycle. The company was able to reduce new hire onboarding by a week; realize 20% savings in sales support hours; reduce time to market for new products from two months to two weeks; and accrue 90% savings in internal corporate communication costs.  

Integrate with enterprise information: While using the capabilities of the social collaboration platform, most workers will often need quick access to information stored in back-end systems. Companies that make heavy use of applications such as ERP and CRM should build or buy a platform with integration in mind so that information from these applications can be easily accessed and converted for use with the platform’s tools. For example, when an opportunity is created in the CRM system, it should also trigger a micro-blog within a logical group or space in a collaborative platform. This ensures that qualified individuals are able to see that opportunity and can contribute to the sales cycle.

Enable live discussions and meetings: A key component of managing geographically dispersed teams is providing a way for them to engage through more mechanisms than just text. Seeing someone deliver a message, instead of just reading it, is powerful but more difficult to manage when teams are virtual.

Forward-looking companies are solving this problem using telepresence, video-blogging and micro-blogging. For instance, HOK, a global architecture firm, has used a suite of Cisco telepresence tools to drive productivity and cost savings from its distributed workforce. Project quality and efficiency were maintained, while cutting travel costs by $100,000 in year one and an additional $200,000 in year two. Meanwhile, PGI’s virtual collaboration platform provides instant video-
blogging of sales calls, sharing sales approaches, successes and best practices. The ability to connect in real-time through micro-blogging also enables faster response vs. checking each others’ calendars to find a suitable meeting time.

- **Enable idea-sharing:** Idea-sharing spurs innovation and connects people and experts, regardless of team and department boundaries. For instance, support teams can connect with product engineers to discuss customer issues, or consumers can be brought directly into the product development discussion.

Toshiba has been a leader in this area, using an off-the-shelf virtual collaboration platform to strengthen sales channels in a flat market and down economy. Toshiba eXCHANGE is the go-to venue for Toshiba’s dealers, making it easy for them to ask questions, exchange information, connect with experts and share best practices. eXCHANGE has enabled Toshiba to drive faster sales cycles; improve satisfaction of the sales channel; and enable faster and more unified dissemination of information about new products, services, partners and strategic initiatives.4

Additionally, apps like Zoom.US offer low-cost, cloud-based multi-party video-conferencing that can facilitate idea-sharing in real time.

- **Encourage use through gamification:** One way to encourage people to use the collaboration platform is to use gaming techniques and achievement systems, such as leader boards that recognize people who have helped others. Other techniques include the ability to earn points and increase recognition status. For instance, heavy users may gain “senior contributor” status or earn badges that they can cash in for real-world prizes. (To learn more about gamification, see our white paper, “Gamification: It’s all About Process.”)

- **Think “broad” when it comes to communities:** With virtual collaboration platforms, communities can extend beyond your work teams, and can easily incorporate customers. For instance, Toyota has developed a private social network for owners of Toyota cars that will be accessible through PCs, tablets and smartphones, giving Toyota customers the ability to connect with their dealerships, Toyota itself and even their cars.

Migrating from point-to-point communication to collaborative communication means changing the day-to-day operational culture. That’s always going to be the greatest challenge in managing truly transformative change.

Meanwhile, Astra Zeneca, a leading pharma company, uses a partner community to source collaborative ideas in an ongoing collaboration activity called Ideas Forum. This forum provides an ongoing venue for bringing innovative marketing solutions to the company to overcome challenges that many of its brands face.

- **Manage cultural change:** Migrating from point-to-point communication to collaborative communication means changing the day-to-day operational culture. That’s always going to be the greatest challenge in managing truly transformative change. For virtual collaboration to succeed, it needs to be driven by top management. Senior management needs to understand the impact of unleashing evolutionary forces in the workplace, but just as important is managing the changes expected of staff resources. Workers need to understand and accept the new realities of working in this more collaborative and engaged way.
Business leaders need to answer key questions about how to prepare the organization for organic change: What are the possible outcomes? Which outcomes do you want to encourage vs. avoid? How should the management structure change?

Managed well, transformative change is a huge opportunity. Managed poorly, transformative change is an existential risk. These are not just technical changes but also cultural changes that strike at the very heart of how your enterprise defines itself.

**Adapt work policies:** At a more granular level, senior leadership needs to examine and adapt work policies to fit the new enterprise. In traditional companies that are accustomed to rigid, hierarchical policies, senior leaders will need to understand and then embrace the collaborative way in which most millennial-minded people work. This means leveraging cloud-powered social and mobile tools that bypass traditional hierarchies and enable team members to engage experts via more time-effective wirearchies.

A good example is the BYOD phenomenon. Companies cannot expect employees to adopt more virtual ways of collaborating while forbidding the use of their smartphones in the workplace. With more and more people of all ages relying on their mobile devices nearly 24 hours a day, it is only natural that they would blend both work and personal activities on their smartphones. Not to mention, most companies could not afford to arm workers with the latest and greatest devices that support the new modes of real-time collaboration. Companies need to explore the many options for managing BYOD in a secure and cost-efficient way. (For more on BYOD, see our white paper, “Making BYOD Work for Your Organization.”)

**Call to Action**

As dramatic as the eventual transformation will be to virtual collaboration, there is time to get ahead of it. Part of it will be cultural change, part will be business model change, and part will be technical change.

Once you know what kind of enterprise you want to be in the future, a trusted partner can help you get there. You need to understand how prepared you are in areas that matter most, and where you have strengths and weaknesses related to your strategic business priorities. It is wise to target specific areas where improvement is necessary and build a strategic roadmap to drive necessary change in a purposeful, effective manner. Additionally, establishing metrics can guide decision-makers to where to build out virtual collaboration capabilities and the obstacles to avoid.

The benefits of virtual collaboration are real, built on a solid foundation of mature technologies:

- Ubiquitous mobile platforms.
- Stable cloud-based service offerings that host core business applications.
- A wide range of collaboration platforms, designed to integrate across your enterprise.
- Mature and practical unified communications and telepresence technologies.

Virtual collaboration has the potential to upend much of what you know about how your business operates, driving dramatic, sustained change. In a very real sense, virtual collaboration introduces evolution as a force within the enterprise.
Footnotes

1 Wirearchy is an emergent organizing principle for a new environment defined by interconnected networks of people. For more information: http://wirearchy.com/.


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