

Collaboration Toolbox

The use of online collaboration continues to grow, as organizations realize the benefits of leveraging the Internet for all types of virtual meetings. An overview of available types of collaboration tools.

By Bob Violino

Web-based collaboration enables participants to share information, communicate, debate, research, design, and develop products, evaluate job applicants, pitch customers, and conduct countless other applications—regardless of where the participants are located.

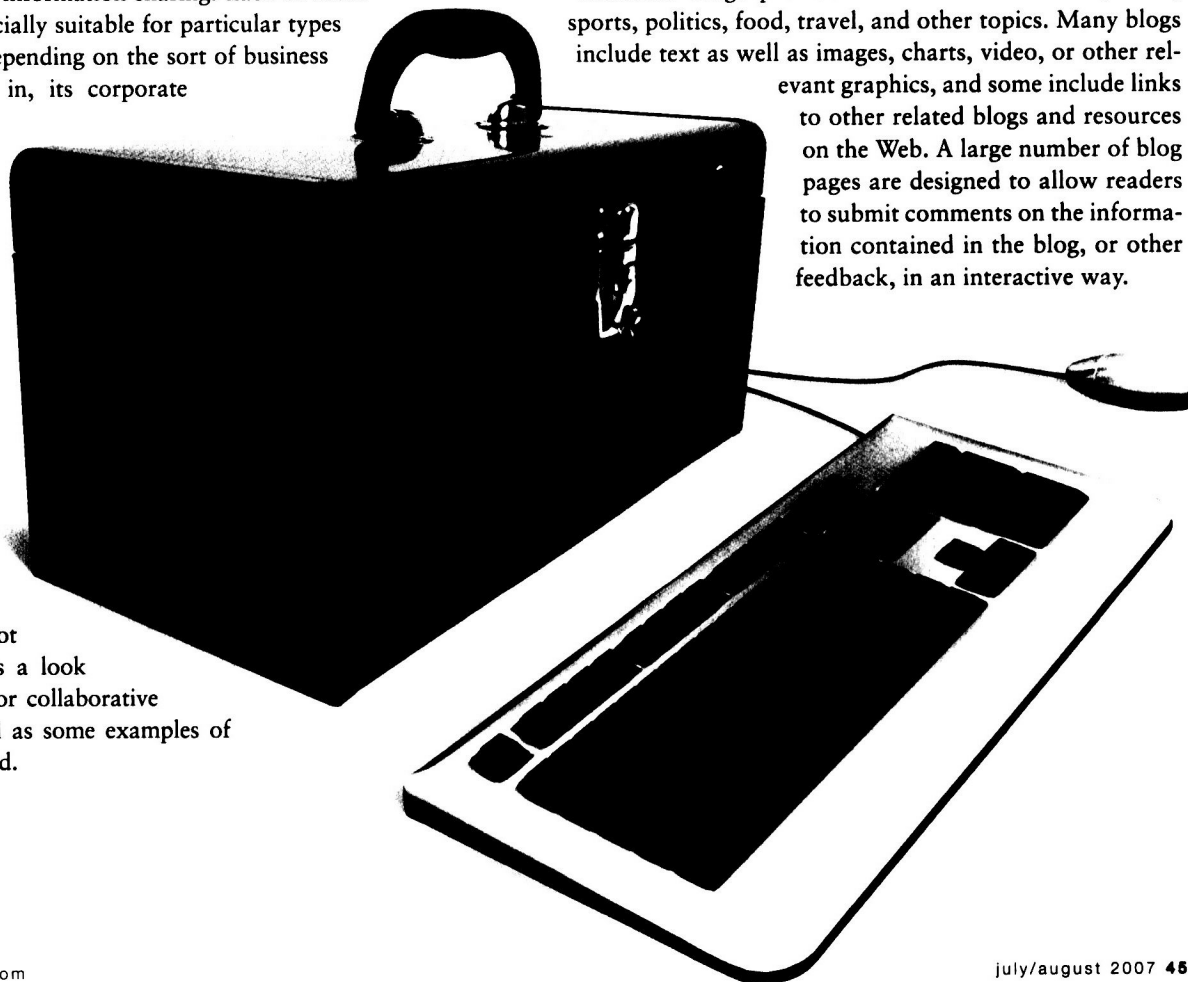
In recent years, a number of Web collaboration tools have emerged that can help organizations use the Internet and corporate intranets for information sharing. Each of these technologies is especially suitable for particular types of collaboration. Depending on the sort of business an organization is in, its corporate culture, and other factors, some of these tools might be more appropriate and valuable than others.

As with any type of technology that's shared by many people, organizations would do well to develop clear procedures and guidelines for how best to use these collaborative tools—and how not to use them. Here's a look at some of the major collaborative technologies as well as some examples of how they can be used.

Blogs

Blogs (or Web logs) are likely to become increasingly important components of social networking and online communities. Blogs are articles or journal entries that contain insights by one or more authors, generally presented on the blogger's website in reverse chronological order so that the most recent entry is listed first.

Countless blogs provide comments on business, news, sports, politics, food, travel, and other topics. Many blogs include text as well as images, charts, video, or other relevant graphics, and some include links to other related blogs and resources on the Web. A large number of blog pages are designed to allow readers to submit comments on the information contained in the blog, or other feedback, in an interactive way.





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Collaborative blogs are a fast-growing type of Web log in which multiple users can post their ideas and insights. Oftentimes these blogs are based on a particular topic that is of interest to all the participants. Some collaborative blogs are by invitation only, limited to a select group of bloggers who contribute to the site. Others are open to anyone who is registered on a blogging account.

Organizations can use blogs to enable executives and staff to post insights and comments on a variety of subjects. The blogs can help generate publicity for the organization as well as address the specific needs of customers and business partners.

Desktop Sharing/Shared Workspaces

Individual users and groups have the capability to share desktop PCs using Web-based software products that enable remote access to a specific computer from other devices. With desktop sharing technology, users can log onto systems from remote sites and conduct real-time collaboration.

The use of desktop sharing technology along with multimedia applications such as audio, video, and graphics can allow people to collaborate in what becomes a virtual meeting place. Among the possible applications of desktop sharing are presenting product information to business partners or customers and showing them how they work; sharing files among coworkers on a project team; performing IT help desk support and maintenance functions on remote PCs; and delivering training programs for new software.

Another form of collaboration that involves sharing is shared workspaces. A shared workspace site on the Web is a way for co-workers to collaborate on designs, documents, projects, and other endeavors. Users can meet on a shared site hosted on a Web server, performing real-time activities such as editing documents and communicating.

Shared workspaces present an alternative to sending email attachments to collaborate on files, because participants can access and interact with documents at the shared site. Meeting sites can be used to store content such as documents, lists, Web links, conference schedules, blogs, and other items, for access by individuals or groups.

Discussion Forums/Bulletin Boards

Among the more popular ways to share information on the Internet are online discussion forums or bulletin/message boards. These Web applications enable participants to post content and hold discussions on various topics.

Online forums have been around since the 1990s, and discussion groups have been created for many different subject areas. Generally, visitors to discussion groups must register before using the service, and in some cases, they can create profiles and usernames. Forums typically have moderators who monitor the content and ensure that participants abide by a set of rules.

Some discussion forums have features such as email notification, which lets users know when a discussion thread has been updated. Unlike collaboration tools such as instant messaging and chat rooms, discussion forums do not require participants to be online at the same time in order to collaborate.

Organizations can use discussion forums and bulletin boards to post information that can be viewed by a large number of users regardless of where they are located—provided they have Web access. These sites can serve as a central clearinghouse for the sharing of knowledge, ideas, and resources, such as documents.

Subjects are often categorized and searchable, so users can find information on a specific topic or subtopic. Because there is generally no need for immediacy with these tools, users of discussion forums can take their time responding to a post or creating a new one. The information on the forums can be archived for future reference.

Instant messaging (IM)

The growing popularity of instant messaging has changed the way many people communicate and collaborate online. Instant messaging is a type of synchronous collaboration, in which two or more people exchange information over the Internet at the same time via typed text. Whereas email communication can happen on a delayed basis—with participants sometimes not responding to messages for hours or days—instant messaging takes place in real-time.

Individuals or groups can subscribe to an instant messaging service and gain access to IM through any device that is con-

nected to the Internet. Among the key benefits of IM is that it enables people to collaborate online in real-time; interactions are more like natural conversations. With instant messaging, participants are aware of who else is online and connected to the service at any given time, enabling them to reach out to specific individuals.

Some of the newer instant messaging services offer video conferencing capabilities, voice over IP, desktop sharing, and other features that enhance the collaborative experience for users. One of the latest trends is mobile instant messaging, in which IM is available on handheld devices such as mobile phones.

A number of vendors have introduced “enterprise instant messaging” products, which are designed to allow organizations to use the technology broadly across their networks. Many of the social networking software products and online conferencing products and services offer instant messaging as a collaboration feature.

IM can be especially useful for collaboration among people in geographically dispersed locations. Project teams and departments such as IT and support services can use instant messaging to exchange information with colleagues when calling is not practical or available.

Podcasts

Organizations can reach a broad audience with podcasts, Webcasts in which digital media files are distributed over the Internet for playback on portable media players and PCs. Podcasters can send out audio and video presentations to subscribers.

Podcasts are not presented in real-time. The content is recorded for download to subscribers, who can listen to or view the podcasts whenever they want. Podcasts are typically published in RSS (a family of Web feed formats that is used to publish content such as blogs), and subscribers can use special software

called an aggregator to access all or portions of the podcast.

These types of presentations can be used for a variety of collaborative or promotional efforts. For example, podcasts can be used for training programs, in which an instructor records a podcast on how to operate a certain machine, perform a particular process, use a software program, or some other topic.

Podcasts can also be used to make sales presentations or instruct customers on how to use products or services. For that matter, they can include testimonials from satisfied customers who are already using the products and services. Podcasts can be used to present sessions of a conference, annual meeting, or other event.

Senior executives such as CEOs can create podcasts to inform employees, business partners, customers, or other interested parties about the latest corporate developments. The executives can either make direct presentations or conduct interviews of other people on a variety of topics. Employees could record podcasts to voice their concerns about issues or make suggestions on how to improve the business. Finally, product development or other teams could employ podcasts to share ideas.

Web Conferencing

As never before, the availability of online conferencing systems and services gives organizations the ability to collaborate electronically. Using this technology, organizations, departments, project teams, and other users can conduct group meetings and provide live conferences on the Internet. Companies can hold seminars or “webinars” for current and prospective customers and business partners, and inexpensively conduct training courses for employees located around the world.

Online conferencing typically involves holding live meetings that are either synchronous or asynchronous. Synchronous collaboration involves two or more people exchanging information at the same time, while asynchronous collaboration is an

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exchange of information in which different people might receive information at different times.

While Web conferencing might lack the personal quality of a face-to-face meeting, it does offer a number of advantages. One of the biggest advantages is that online conferencing can reduce or eliminate the need for people to travel to meetings. As a result, organizations can save a lot of time and money. Participants of online conferencing can be located anywhere in the world where there is Internet access. This high level of convenience means Web conferencing often draws a large turnout of participants.

There are many conferencing products and services available, which offer a multitude of features such as document sharing, multimedia presentations, online polling, wikis, blogs, discussion forums, and instant messaging.

Wikis

Groups and individuals have been using wikis on the Internet for some time, and wikis have become more commonly used for collaboration by businesses. According to online encyclopedia Wikipedia—itsself one of the best-known examples of the format—a wiki is a website that allows users to add, delete, and edit content.

Wikis can include links to other websites that are related to terms mentioned in the wiki, to help visitors better understand the meaning of the term. The ability for people to easily interact and use wikis makes them effective collaboration tools. Because wikis are inherently open, anyone who has useful information to share is free to contribute. Organizations can use this technology to more easily tap into the knowledge base of employees, business partners, and others.

Perhaps the most effective use of wikis for companies is on the corporate intranet, where they can serve as a collaborative platform to manage information about multiple topics that are of interest to employees, business partners, and others who have secure access to the intranet. One of the potential applications of intranet wikis is for sales and marketing executives and staff to share the most up-to-date information about the company's products and services, as well as marketplace developments and buying trends.

Using wikis, co-workers could share best practices for different processes, such as product development and customer relationship management. Wikis could also be used to post work schedules, meetings with clients, and other events and activities. Managers and staff could use wikis to post topics they would like to see covered in a staff meeting, and then update the agenda on a regular basis. In addition, project managers could use intranet wikis to update team members on developments.

A major advantage of intranet wikis is that they can be revised any time and from any device with access to the network. That freedom also means that someone in the organization must monitor wikis to make sure the content does not present legal, regulatory, or competitive problems for the organization. Organizations might want to limit access to certain wikis and carefully decide how much oversight is needed for content. ■

Bob Violino (bviolino@optonline.net) is a freelance writer and editor who has covered information technology and communications, comments on collaboration trends for the Expert Corner at www.edocmagazine.com.