Microsoft Small Business

Business Collaboration:
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Many businesses today can't imagine a life without email, but that's only half the story. There is a growing plethora of additional collaborative tools on offer to help your business flourish.

Small companies have just as much to gain as large enterprises, too: collaboration today means team working not just with colleagues, but also with customers and suppliers, to get the job done. Jacob Morgan, Principal and co-founder of Chess Media Group, and author of 'The Collaborative Organisation', says "With collaborative tools, you're essentially connecting the most important assets you have in the company: your people and your information. When you can connect your people and your information anywhere, at any time, on any device, that's a very powerful thing. Everyone in my company is aligned. I can be sitting in a cab and see what my team is working on. I can invite customers to join us in virtual workspaces and share documents. We're always up to date, and that generates competitive advantage. In the past three months, in my own company, I have seen our email use drop to practically zero."

What is wrong with email, though? For all its power, email is incidental. It connects people 'in the moment', but without binding them together around the common outcome of a project or a deliverable piece of work. In virtual workspaces, you can share

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contacts, task lists, calendars and documents. Business activity is logged around a timeline or milestones, and progress can be documented and measured. We all know that collaboration is helpful for bringing geographically dispersed teams together, or cutting travel time and cost; but the real source of competitive value for small businesses is that it forces a focus on results, and the workflow required to get there.

There is a perception, however, that opening the company's door wide, to suppliers, freelance staff and even clients might represent a commercial risk. What about your intellectual property? Roger Bromley, Visiting Professor of Innovation and Collaboration at Huddersfield University, scotches the myth. "Intellectual property in its legal sense means a patent, a copyright, or a piece of property. What matters commercially, though, is intellectual capital. I mean the knowhow, the insight, and the capabilities of the people in the business. If I watch someone play the piano, that doesn't mean I can do it myself. The intellectual capital is wrapped up in the pianist's experience and effort. It's an old-fashioned approach and a great waste of opportunity to believe that, by sharing, the crown jewels of my business are going to be stolen."

Even the largest companies see sharing of information, resources and talent as central to

profitability and delivering a result. However, Morgan cautions, "Value is different to return on investment. Before you buy a collaboration suite, you must decide what you want to achieve in the business – is it better communication with clients perhaps, more efficiency, or widening your pool of talent? Include the rest of your team in those decisions. Then, you need to be disciplined to make it work and jump any initial hurdles to adoption. It's easy to fall back on old bad habits, like relying on email for everything."

Luckily, the new generation of Cloud services mean that even the smallest business can install collaborative tools without complex upfront investment, and allowing time for new systems and processes to bed down. Cloud tools like Office365 cost only a few pounds per user per month; you can pick and choose the elements which will add most value to your business, and then always switch more on (or off) later, as your needs change.

HOW MICROSOFT CAN HELP

Microsoft Office 365 brings together online versions of the best communications and collaboration tools from Microsoft. Subscribe to web-enabled tools that let you access your email, documents, contacts, and calendars from virtually anywhere, on almost on any device. Microsoft Office 365 is available from £3.90 per user per month for up to 50 users and from £5.20 per user per month for 50+ users.

Case study: The Advertising Doctor

The Advertising Doctor is an agency specialising in online advertising, like pay-per-click advertising and social media. It's a high-impact business, but don't let the glamour deceive you: online marketing is nakedly competitive, and every opportunity for leanness and efficiency counts.

The company's CEO, Chris Baber-Davies, says "Our consultants are spread across the UK and they are also constantly on the move. Using hard drives and USB flash-sticks became extremely restrictive, plus there was the potential for duplication and a multitude of different versions of each file."

"We installed Office 365 because it gave us access to all our emails and calendars, plus instant messaging between colleagues and the ability to share and access shared documents, all in one package." Staff have been rewarded with instant benefits: no more out-of-date files, and no more wasted time phoning back to the office to "get someone to zip up a file and email it over."

Says Chris Baber-Davies, "We know this is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of what Office 365 can do. In particular, we'd like to take full advantage of the SharePoint intranet site internally to take our team interaction and productivity to the next level!"

The Cloud comes to your desktop: Collaboration in Office 2013

If you want to work more closely with colleagues, suppliers and partners, you'll no doubt already be aware of a host of cloud-based services which help you share and work together online. However, Microsoft is already blurring the line between 'cloud' and 'desktop'. Microsoft Office is the world's most successful productivity software, but it's no longer focused exclusively on you and your personal computer. Office 2013 is all about working together in a connected environment. Here are just three of the standout tools:

1. Presence

Those who have played with Microsoft's Instant Messenger or Skype will have experienced the messaging features which are now fully embedded in Office. Attached to your Windows Live ID is your name and a status (called 'Presence') such as 'online', 'busy', etc. You might already use these for messaging, but a collaboration interface now appears within most Office documents' editing window.

If you are working on a document and another person opens it (perhaps you and your accountant are working on that exciting tax return, for example), their Presence information will appear on-screen. This means you can open a chat conversation with them. As with Skype, you can move seamlessly from messaging to voice or video calling. In this way, several people can be working on the same document at once, with a shared conversation window open all the time.

2. Editing and Reviewing

'Track Changes' is often best described as a tennis match – documents are batted back and forth, either on a network drive or (most usually) by email. Office 2013 therefore includes some updates to the way the Comments function works; again borrowing from an experience most of us are familiar with: online groups. Comments are now threaded, with remarks shown in conversations, and indented to show replies. When any reviewer looks at a document, they can see the workflow so far, clearly and comprehensively in the right hand margin.

3. A new home for your documents

All this collaborative activity cannot require you to open your PC's hard drive to all and sundry. Sure, network drives are fine for sharing documents within a business, but that won't support external sharing – plus most small businesses and one-man-bands don't have servers or network drives.

In Office 2013, the default home for your documents is the Cloud; either Office 365, Microsoft's all-in Cloud service (for under £4 per month) which includes SharePoint for managing files and their access, or SkyDrive, which gives you a healthy dollop of free storage and integrates perfectly with your existing computer. Both make sharing incredibly easy.

Incidentally, there are some great side-effects of cloud storage. You'll get automated backups – you no longer need be responsible for copying your stuff to other hard drives, flash drives or pesky DVDs. And your documents will be accessible, again seamlessly, on any device; so if you move from office PC to mobile to tablet at home, that's no problem: your documents will simply follow you around.

Three Collaboration deal-breakers - and how to beat them

Michael Sampson, Collaboration Strategist and author of 'Collaboration Roadmap' and 'User Adoption Strategies';
http://www.michaelsampson.net/

There are challenges to the broad adoption of any new technology – when cars first appeared, they were the scourge of those without a car, yet they have become ubiquitous. There are plenty of horror stories about collaboration tools too not being adopted in organisations too, but with a sound strategy, they can become an equally normal and useful part of your business day. Here are three key watchouts from my experience with larger enterprises; and how to avoid them in your business.

Collaboration is not an end in itself. It's great to be collaborative, but businesses exist to make money. Collaboration technologies allow us to do many common work activities in better ways, such as sharing documents, managing meetings and engaging with outside clients, suppliers and experts. However, if those functions do not generate market advantage or help your people work effectively, you have wasted your money. Put these tools to work with clear objectives.

Technology alone won't make an organisation collaborative. If you have people who just can't get along, don't think that technology alone will solve the problem. Similarly, these tools are an adjunct, not a substitute, for human contact. If, for example, you bring a group of people together for the first time on a project, nothing will be more effective in helping them to gel as a team than putting them together in a room (followed by some good old-fashioned socialising).

Indeed, face-to-face contact (or a phone call) is probably the best way to ensure that the technologies you then implement will work in the long run. Let people build real relationships first, and then cement them with technology after. The relationship gives a context for the technology; not the other way around.

Your tools must work how you work. Failing to integrate new collaborative approaches into the everyday workflow of your business will just create resentment and stymie adoption. If the 'new way of doing things' is perceived as yet another burden on already busy people, and they cannot see how it will contribute to their work, then it should be no surprise that they dig their heels in, and refuse to play ball. In smaller companies, this can be a particular challenge, because often nobody has ever actually written down 'how we do things' before.

It takes strong leadership, but this can be the ideal opportunity to start to formalise processes in a growing business. Stop operations for a day and work out what can be done more efficiently; and particularly whether any lessons can be learned from past experience. This is, frankly, a worthwhile exercise in good management whether you're implementing new tools or not.

Do be aware that implementing new approaches to and systems for work will reduce efficiency at first. There are always hiccups, and it takes time for users to acclimatise to new ways of working. It's essential that your team sees how your new tools will positively impact their own work in very simple terms, in order to get engagement and adoption.