

ALL IN

Collaboration is not about advanced technology; it's about communicating ideas effectively

Monday morning at the CHIP Office. Mohit, head of the Test Centre, is on the phone, haranguing a dealer about a new product that was scheduled for a test but failed to reach the office. At the same time, he is staring distractedly at his computer screen, trying to find the e-mail address of the CEO of BrainSoft Technologies, whose comments are required for another long-overdue story. Suddenly, up pops a dialog box on his screen: MOHIT!! None of the products in your flatbed scanner comparison test have the prices yet! When can we get them?

Illustration: FARZANA COOPER

The message is from Radhika at the copy desk, hardly fifty feet away. Thankful that he does not have to face the wrath of Raging Rads the very mention of whom is enough to make the bravest writers tremble in their socks he keys in his reply (The dealers haven't got back to me with the *&#\$# prices yet) which pops up on her screen.

This is an instance of Groupware at work. By making use of a collaborative tool such as instant messaging, Mohit and Rads were, in effect, multitasking by sharing information and coordinating with each other, and speeding up a process without disrupting other tasks.

Communication is an integral part of collaboration. A colleague who needs to convey a message to someone in your team can put it in a place that can be accessed by everyone. Web publishing and online discussion groups are examples of collaborative tools. These are known as the passive mode of communication. Messages can also be sent directly to everyone (through electronic mail, chat or instant messaging), which is active dissemination of information.

You have mail

When you think about network communication, you immediately think of e-mail. Electronic mail, the standard service that most messaging applications are built on, is a form of messaging where you post a message to people via a central server. The message is stored at the server until the intended recipient logs in and checks for any new messages.

E-mail is ideal for intra-office memos and notices. A record of all communication that takes place is automatically maintained, making it easy to track messages that have been sent and received. You can send a message to groups of people. In this case, however, you also have to be cautious about the messages you send not everybody on your list may be directly concerned or interested.

In an instant

Messaging by e-mail is like batch processing. A person has to sift through many messages at a time and respond appropriately. While this process may be super-fast when compared with snail mail, a collaborative environment demands real-time communication. This is where instant messaging steps in. Spearheaded by software such as ICQ and AOL Instant Messenger, instant messaging is catching on like wildfire on the Internet.

As the name suggests, messages sent via instant messaging software pop up on the recipient's computer screen immediately. This is a much more interactive and responsive way of communicating than through e-mail, and lends itself well to short one-to-one discussions. It is especially useful if the group is linked by a permanent connection such as a LAN, where you can talk to a person who is on the network, anytime you want. Though e-mail can get annoying if you find yourself wasting time reading irrelevant messages, it is in general a great way to improve internal communication.

distance telephone calls, which makes it ideal for long-distance interaction. Videoconferencing is impractical for short-distance communication. Wouldn't you prefer to just walk over to your colleague in the next building rather than set up a video link?

Most videoconferencing software have additional collaborative features. There is usually a text-based chat and a whiteboard where you can use your mouse to draw and sketch rudimentary objects. Some programs like MS Net-Meeting have application-sharing features (See Screenshot). For instance, during the annual conference of your growing company based in India, your colleagues in the US would be able to view and modify the presentation running on your computer.

Providing easy access to information enables people to look up what concerns (or interests) them, when they need to. Ways to do this are through discussion groups and by publishing to Web servers.

Group discussion

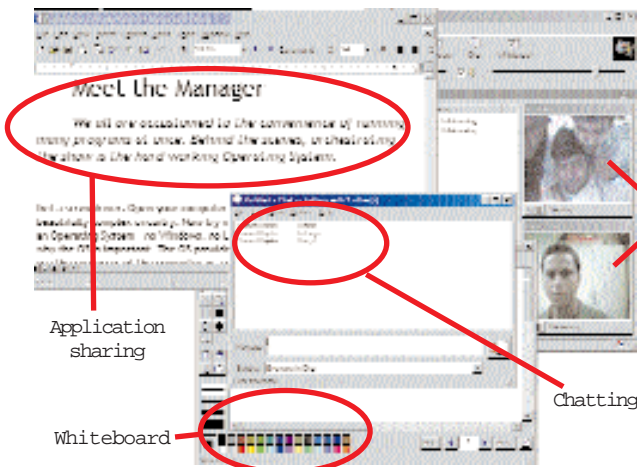
A discussion group is the best way to maintain communication that involves many people interested in a subject. When you have a large project to work on, for instance, there would be a number of aspects that involve many but not all the people in your group. Most popular e-mail clients including Outlook Express and Netscape Messenger can access discussion servers (also called news servers). Everyone who subscribes to the discussion group gets a list of all postings to the group. They can choose to read only those postings that interest them.

Replies to messages are threaded (cascaded, in most clients). So if there is anything interesting, group members can follow the complete discussion in chronological order. One can also post status updates and other information of interest to group members. Discussion groups are really useful when members of a group are separated by large distances and there is no immediacy to the discussion.

Share knowledge

Persistent information is definitely not a strong point of message-based commu-

COLLABORATING USING NETMEETING



Seeing is believing

Most of us will be familiar with the term videoconferencing. One of the requirements for this means of communication is a high-

Real-time
Video
confer-
ence

speed connection. A company or organization that has branches worldwide, or even a member of your family who lives abroad, will find videoconferencing far cheaper than long-

nication. Information that needs to be referred to frequently has to be accessible all the time. The simplest way to do this is to store the files on a network file server, but this has its limitations.

A better way to share documents is to put them on a Web server. Converting documents to HTML and putting them up on a Web server is very simple. Excel even allows you to export a spreadsheet to HTML, take it off the server, allow a colleague to modify it and replace it on the server. AutoCAD plug-ins let you view the document inside your browser, straight off the Web server. Similarly, many file formats have viewer plug-ins. But the strength of publishing documents on the Web is the ability to cross-reference information. Relevant information can be linked to the main document, making it very convenient to find what is needed.

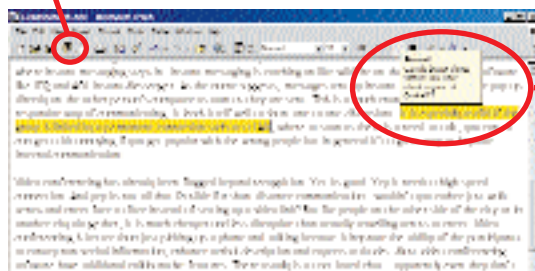
Communication apart, working together involves collaboration on the job itself. The means are usually incorporated into the same applications that you use while working alone.

Otherwise, work processes need to be built around Groupware solutions. Enterprise Groupware products such as Lotus Domino/Notes and MS Exchange provide complete platforms for enabling enterprise-wide communication. Custom applications are written around these platforms for specific workflows within the company, maximising automation and communication.

Track changes

Both word processors and spreadsheets are becoming increasingly collaboration aware. When a group of people work on a document, it is essential that all of them have access to the latest updated copy. It is very difficult to maintain synchronisation if there are multiple copies of a docu-

Save versions



Sharing information in your Office documents

THE HUMAN FACTOR

Groupware is a tool for solving problems that involve people working together towards a common goal. In a nutshell, groupware works towards finding the person or document that has the knowledge to solve a problem, eliminating duplication of effort (various people tackling the same problem) and improving coordination and communication.

While the technology behind groupware can be interesting, focusing on the people part of the issue is critical to its successful adoption in an organisation. And people interaction can be far more complex than any technological problems you may come across. Even if a particular

technology solves a collaboration problem, if the work culture does not support it, the deployment will fail. If the economic costs of groupware are not justified, adopting it is not recommended even if the work culture is all for groupware. There are many small-scale groupware solutions available at a nominal cost or even for free.

The most important factor, however, is politics. If there is plenty of turf-defence and other shenanigans going on in your organisation, groupware cannot help you. The success of groupware in any organisation depends, in increasing order of

ment on the network; everyone should ideally work on one document.

The ability to track changes is a basic feature with such applications. Every person who makes changes is assigned a different colour. Changes can be accepted or rejected anytime in the editing process. Similarly, spreadsheets can be made available for concurrent access. As people make modifications, others are able to see the spreadsheet getting updated. The modifications made to a cell can be tracked easily; this again simplifies the process of collaboration.

Another nifty feature lets you add notes to selected portions of documents. Notes are stored in the document but are not part of its linear flow. In a spreadsheet, notes can be assigned to individual cells or even the entire range. Reviewers and readers can use notes to comment on and exchange information about the document. A new feature in MS Office 2000 is the ability of have a threaded series of notes (in effect, attaching notes to notes). This is similar to having a discussion group within a document.

Note pops up when mouse pointer is held over

It is a date!

In any organisation, teamwork essentially

requires other members of your team to know what you are working on and vice versa. So, what you need is a group-aware calendar application for

managing your collective time. In such an application, you can enter tasks to be performed and set deadlines. The schedules for days, weeks and months can be planned. The project administrator can assign tasks to group members, which get automatically added to the concerned member's task list. The member can then update the completion status of that task. The administrator and other members of the group can track the progress of tasks within the group. Interdependent tasks can thus be scheduled and synchronised. Since schedules of all the members are available, the best person for a new task can easily be selected. Finding a common free time and setting up meetings among members of the group becomes much easier too.

It has been said that effective communication leads to effective collabora-

SITES TO VISIT

You can share calendars, contacts and groups through these free Web calendar services.

BUSINESS

- WebEx www.webex.com
- Daytimer Digital www.digital.daytimer.com
- Magical Desk www.magicaldesk.com
- Yahoo! Calendar calendar.yahoo.com
- Schedule Online www.scheduleonline.com

PERSONAL

- MyFamily www.MyFamily.com

which in turn leads to increased productivity. Thus, by maximising efficiency and reducing effort on a group scale, the same task can be accomplished with much less effort.

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