BUILDING BRIDGES

Advanced collaboration software bridges the gap between dispersed project teams, removing barriers to efficiency and communication.

BY JANIS RIZZUTO

Collaboration means to work together. As a concept, it sounds simple. In reality, bringing people together to accomplish a common goal is a complex, layered and political undertaking. It may be difficult, but that doesn't mean anyone can dodge the effort.

Strong business forces make collaboration increasingly critical in project management. Team members are often scattered across several states or countries. Given the rise of outsourcing, workers are both inside and outside the company. And the demand for faster time to market requires efficient and concurrent work by all involved.

Market experts say collaboration tools often offer two types of team support-asynchronous and synchronous. Asynchronous functions include e-mail, group calendars, document sharing and threaded discussions, while synchronous tools include chat capability, instant messaging, whiteboarding, electronic meetings and the like.

"The goal is to minimize dislocation and maximize proximity between people," says Mark Portu, vice president of collaborative technology, Open Text Corp., Chicago.

The tools can be standalone programs or embedded in enterprise project management systems. And many vendors emphasize particular aspects of collaboration. David Boghossian, president of PowerSteering Software, Cambridge, Mass., says his company's program fosters collaboration not just on single projects, but shares best practices widely to the organization.

Other vendors make a distinction between tools that simply connect people and those that advance collaboration. "True collaboration tools have some analytical ability, giving you insight into which interactions with others will have the most value," says Bryan Moser, president and CEO of Global Project Design, San Francisco. He says the tool his company sells uses proprietary technology to optimize teamwork.

Despite all the whiz-bang technology proffered by vendors, users would do well to remember this: "Collaboration is ultimately a human-to-human process," says Lewis Ward, a senior research analyst with Collaborative Strategies, a San Francisco-based management services firm. "You have to have the right people, process and technology for collaboration to work at peak efficiency."

Susan Vaughn is one project manager realizing efficiencies through collaboration software. The CEO of Indianapolis-based The Project Authority manages a diverse group of about 20 projects. She uses Bravelo by BitWise Solutions, Carmel, Ind., to work with people across companies and geographies. Vaughn, PMP, says calendar and document management tools are of particular help. "I can use my time for real project management functions, instead of nonvalue-added functions, such as resending documents or answering questions about how to reach team members."

POSITIVE MARKET TRENDS

Given the compelling business forces, prospects for the collaboration software market are rosier than other markets, according to Burke Oppenheimer, an analyst at Gartner Dataquest, Stamford, Conn. He forecasts an 8 percent compound annual growth rate in worldwide licenses for collaboration software over the next five years. "Those gains are in sharp contrast to the rest of the software industry," Oppenheimer says.

Collaboration product development is fast and furious. Vikas Sehgal, president of Projistics in San Jose, Calif., predicts changes in tool architecture in the near future. Use of Web services technology will enable different applications and networks at diverse organizations to communicate across the Internet and over firewalls. "It will make collaboration much more seamless," he says.

Also to come are additional wireless capabilities. Several vendors offer some integration with wireless devices, such as personal digital assistants and cell phones, and many are working to make full collaboration functionality totally mobile, experts say.

Another trend is the introduction of tools for vertical markets, such as pharmaceuticals or construction. For example, Open Text debuted nine products for specific industries in the past year. "We saw how different industries were deploying our software, so we began to make modifications to offer products based on what they need to do," Portu says.

TOUGH CULTURAL CHANGE

The demands on an organization during collaboration software deployment are steep. Vendors and analysts warn that the tools impact company culture in ways few customers consider.

"Collaboration requires a huge cultural change," Oppenheimer says. "Most failures come when the company's business practices and people do not adapt. It's difficult if a company or its people are not built to share knowledge or ideas."

Ward agrees: "It's hard to change the DNA of an organization. If it is not sharing critical information, like the FBI and the CIA, or employees are holding back information, then collaboration is stunted."

Some employees may perceive the tools as a way to monitor their activities because, for example, the tools can show which documents they've read, how they answered a question or when they were at work. "There can be a lot of negative connotations associated with these tools," Sehgal says. "An enterprise needs to address this before jumping in."

In the end, collaboration requires a philosophical shift. "If you give away a physical resource, it's gone," Ward says. "But information is different. If you share it, you still have it, too."

GOING SHOPPING

If you decide your organization is ready for collaboration, answer at least three questions before buying.

WHO'S THE VENDOR?

"There is a highly visible and pervasive trend toward consolidation among vendors," Oppenheimer says. "Half the software companies that sell collaboration will disappear by the end of 2004 because of mergers, acquisitions, divestitures or demise."

Given this reality, you must ask tough questions. "The first point of any sales meeting is financial viability of the vendor," Portu says. "My coffee isn't even cold before potential customers ask the question." Inquire, too, about managers and investors' backgrounds, experience and past successes.

Get several customer references and investigate the nature of their relationships. Vendors should act

like partners. "Vendor service time shouldn't be for installation or configuration," Moser says. "It should be spent toward analyzing and solving customer-specific project challenges."

HOW'S THE PRODUCT FIT?
Be a bit unbending. The tool should wrap around you, not the other way around. "Ask yourself whether the tool is easily adapted to your business processes or whether your systems have to change to fit the tool," Sehgal says. Programs should be flexible and integrate with legacy applications.

Fit is easier, too, if you match user capability to tool sophistication. Vaughn went with a program with fewer bells and whistles. "Given the variety of people I knew would be using the tool, I wanted something basic and straightforward," she says. "I went for simplicity."

WHAT'S THE RETURN?
Sehgal says customers want returns in the first 12 months or less. So you may want to seek an "out of the box" solution with lower entry costs. Do the math when weighing ASP arrangements versus client-server technology.

In addition, identify what you can cut from the travel budget by having more electronic meetings via the tool, Boghossian says. "A lot of the savings are pretty squishy, such as the tool will make the team happier and more efficient," he says. "But travel savings can be expressed in hard dollars."

Even though launching the software broadly may appear to offer the biggest return, vendors advise against it. Most recommend starting with a pilot in a certain department to prevent cultural upheaval. "Enterprisewide deployment should happen naturally based on value and enthusiasm," Moser says.

10 Rules for Collaboration Success

1. Find a collaboration champion-the higher up in management, the better. Getting a top manager's hands on the keyboard means more support for you.

2. Pick collaboration software based on a specific business problem that has not been solved successfully using traditional methods.

3. Make sure the software you pick fits with existing systems.

4. Manage expectations. No product can do it all.

5. Don't expect vendors to offer you all the services you need. You may need to use internal people or consultants to ensure success.

6. Apply the solution to a selected project before you do an enterprise rollout. Pick a well-defined, visible project with team members who embrace technology and innovation.

7. Measure productivity factors before you start the project.

8. Measure productivity factors after the project has started. This is a good way to justify technology costs.

9. Listen to the people involved in the pilot. They are experts on what can be done to improve the process. Adjust accordingly.

10. Collaboration technology changes the corporate culture. Plan for it. Be prepared for resistance. Applaud those willing to change.

-Adapted from Collaborative Strategies

Collaboration Software and Systems

PRODUCT	FEATURES	PRICING
Artemis International ViewPoint www.aisc.com	Comprehensive portfolio, project and resource management solution offers optional collaboration function for customized workplace communication and coordination. Features include collection and linking, document sharing, threaded discussions and commenting, full-text and metadata search, universal subscription, Web and e-mail distribution, and access control and security.	Contact for information.
Business Engine BEN www.businessengine.com	Collaboration/knowledge management platform supports portfolio, budget, project, resource and relationship management suite. Web-based user interface allows information to be shared across internal and external teams. Capabilities include customizing views, documents management with check-in/out and version history, threaded discussion, and role-based user support, reporting and security.	Contact for information.
Documentum eRoom Enterprise www.documentum.com	Recently acquired by Documentum, digital workspace solution can be customized for specific projects or processes. Real-time features include on-demand and event-based scheduling; public and private chat; dynamic control assignment;e-mail and alert invitations and requests;file,application and desktop sharing; and HTML presentation rendering. Integrates with documentum enterprise content management platform.	Contact for information.
EDS Team Center Project www.eds.com/plm	Web-native solution enables cross-discipline teams to create workplace to plan and manage projects by synchronizing tasks, schedules and resource allocations in real-time. Capabilities include interactive schedule views, histograms that highlight over or underutilized resources, document level controls, executive summaries, event based notices, threaded discussions and role-based security.	Contact for information.
eProject Enterprise 5.0 www.eproject.com	Web-based suite of applications enables companies to customize project collaboration through calendar views and document management. Links document, tasks, discussions and issues in single location; provides real-time interaction, including issue management capabilities, threaded discussions, news tracking and team polling and voting.	Average seat: $395 per year. Lower rates available on bulk purchases.
Intuit QuickBase www.quickbase.com	Web-based service includes enhanced project manager application to manage and share information as well as closely monitor budgets and progress. PM features include time and expense tracking reports, customizable reports, automatic e-mail notifications to team members, document management and role-based permissions.	$249/mo., 10 users per database, with 15 standard databases (500KB each), three large databases (10MB each)
LoadSpring CAM Console www.loadspring.com	Multimodule collaborative Application Management console allows users to access, share or modify information and hold meetings online in real time. Applications can be deployed from a secure central location and accessed remote arrangement to host Primavera Expedition solution.	$150-$200 per seat per month, depending on applications and other conditions.
Meridian Project Systems Prolog www.mps.com	Comprehensive project management suite for architectural, engineering and construction sectors includes hosted solutions. ProjectTalk.com offers online access to project information through centrally located databases. GigaPlan.com allows Web-based scheduling and resource management. Also, Prolog Web site capabilities include access to meeting minutes, requests for information and submittal register.	Contact for information.
Metafuse Project Insight 3.1.1 www.projectinsight.net	Web-based project management application allows virtual teams to access, update and use project data through a centralized information and communication point. Features include Microsoft Project file import and uncluttered, intuitive dashboards. Installed and hosted versions.	Hosted $10k license, $250/month/10 logins. Installed $25k/server, no additional fees.

Microsoft Corp. Project Server 2002 www.microsoft.com/project	Used in conjunction with Microsoft Project, provides a central repository to publish project and resource information. Enables team members and stakeholders to access, update and analyze information through Project Web Access. Features include Web-based time sheets, status reports and document libraries. Extensible technology platform to develop and integrate current and future systems.	Contact for range of licensing programs, volume discounts.
Open Text Livelink www.opentext.com	Highly scalable, Web-based solution for development of intranets, extranets and e-business applications. By leveraging myLivelink collaborative knowledge portal, provides customizable, single point of access to corporate information, e-mail, conferencing and team discussions. Integrates with multiple information repositories and legacy systems through Open Interchange Architecture.	Contact for information.
PlaceWare Conference Center www.placeware.com	Recently acquired by Microsoft, Web conferencing solution accommodates large or small meetings, from thousands of attendees to a few. Users can set up interactive rooms with restricted access for projects, teams and customers. Participants can add content, make comments and review action items. Scalable, secure browser-based architecture. Available as a hosted or on-site service.	Contact for information.
PlanView PlanView www.planview.com	Part of comprehensive prehensive PM suite, workforce, portfolio and personalized Web portals enable users to share content, reports and discussions according to role. Features read-only access for non-PlanView users, check-in/out, version control, alerts and review reminders. Interfaces with Microsoft Outlook to support PDA, other wireless devices. Portal sites can be set up without programming tools.	Contact for information.
Primavera Systems TeamPlay www.primavera.com	Scalable, role-based solution geared to construction and IT projects. Team members can access customized assignments, and report time, issues and requirement. Project dashboards update critical activities, milestones and pending activities. Executive dashboards update stakeholders on performance, statistics and status. Other capabilities includes resource modeling and leveling, and critical path analysis.	Contact for information.
Projistics Projistics 1.0 www.projistics.com	Web-based suite enables distribution team collaboration and planning through holistic real-time view of tasks, issues, risks, timesheets, and knowledge, resource and portfolio management. Features include personal and executive dashboards user-defined fields, customizable workflows, delegated administration and template-based approach. Integrates with third-party tools such as MS Project.	$200 per seat.
SiteScape Enterprise Forum 7.0 www.sitescape.com	Web-based, flexible, integrated solution offers threaded discussions, document sharing, tasks, workflows and calendars. New Forum eMeeting module is available for Web conferencing, white boarding, application sharing and voice/video over IP. Solution does not require additional firewall holes.	Enterprise Forum: $99 per user; eMeeting: $99 per user, or $999 per concurrent user.
Welcom WelcomHome 3.0 www.welcom.com	Web-based collaboration tool offers live schedule views, item management and document management through a centralized location. Digital dashboards give executives up-to-date metrics. Schedule information from Open Plan and Microsoft Project can be accessed and remotely updated. Custom reports can be extended to interface with other systems.	Licenses start at $15K for 25 named users.

THIS CHART IS A SAMPLING OF COLLABORATION TOOLS
THIS INFORMATION IS NOT MEANT TO BE ALL INCLUSIVE.