

# Electronic Workspaces

The better management of intellectual capital – people – and intellectual property assets – what those people create – is said to be of paramount importance to business success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Better risk management and corporate governance have also become an imperative. Building and sustaining business relationships, a principal objective of marketing, is more important than ever. In the world of professional services and if used intelligently, technology can genuinely assist businesses to meet all these needs.

Management gurus have been telling us for years that people matter. The fact is that in an economy driven by ideas and a close understanding of what consumers want, it is only real intelligence, the kind that machines can't provide, that matters. Rather than people being 'designed' (or, more euphemistically, trained) to work with machines, machines, or more precisely the software applications that make them useful, are now being designed to work for people.

How so?

We are entering a new world of collaborative computing. A world in which the interactions between people can be encouraged, their ideas, opinions and innovations shared, utilized, treasured. In the world of professional services this means working alongside clients and other service firms on a much more intimate basis – 'shoulder to shoulder' as opposed to 'at arm's length'.

The essential technology components that make this all possible are the Internet; the ability to provide access to web based software applications hosted by the site provider rather than on the users own systems; and collaborative working tools and practices. The management of knowledge, processes, relationships and communications can now be rolled into one and accessed anywhere, anytime, '24/7/365'.

Perhaps the most important change is the simplest – the ability to bring together all work product and communications in a single 'project' or 'matter' workspace where it can be all be viewed chronologically, just like in a good old paper file.

Corporate knowledge bases and rules are too often ignored. By defining the nature, purpose and scope of activities to be conducted in a workspace, and with the flexibility to adapt that definition as a matter evolves, relevant knowledge, forms, and process rules can be presented and accessed where and when they are required. This will increase knowledge utilization and observance of standards simply because it is made easier. Once integrated into the operations of a business, the result is a fully searchable cumulative database of experience where acquired knowledge can be viewed in its experiential and historical context.

The new generation of systems also automate the routine filing, retrieval, compilation and collation of correspondence and other data. Paper files that are traditionally relied on to capture the entire history of a matter can be matched or replaced altogether by the complete electronic record maintained in each workspace.

Removing or reducing routine administration and records maintenance means reduced overhead and greater utilization of skilled resources. For service firms, these efficiencies offer greater profitability as well as faster and better service delivery; for clients they offer better internal resource allocation and better value for money from outside firms.

Using a common platform for correspondence and sharing of information inevitably promotes closer and more rewarding working relationships. The constant need to transmit, copy, and share information with everyone concerned with any matter represents an immense drain on resources and is all too often the cause of delay, confusion and error. The new generation systems will substantially remove these unnecessary constraints on effective collaboration within and between organizations.

Then there is the all-important question of controlling fees. By using a common workspace, and an in-built time recording system, it is possible to set an alarm to notify all concerned that budget limits are approaching. This can head off the often damaging division caused when budgets are overrun.

These benefits may seem rather mundane, but they are absolutely critical to relationship management. Think of a service relationship in four components: functional, financial, intellectual and emotional. It is problems with the first two of these so often undermine the others. It is not enough to deliver good service, one must

be perceived to be doing so. Perceptions, built up over years can be damaged at a stroke. They must be sustained and renewed from day to day. At long last technology has developed to the point where it can support that objective.

Like it or not, we are entering a new era of collaborative working facilitated and perhaps driven by technology. This inevitably brings with it increased transparency and intimacy which, if embraced in the proper spirit, will serve to build trust and confidence which will forever be the foundations of long term and mutually rewarding service relationships.

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