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On the Edge

Not your father's collaboration

By Kishore S. Swaminathan, Chief Scientist, Accenture

Much as the automobile was initially regarded as little more than a horseless carriage, today's collaboration technologies have usually been seen as mere enablers of electronic communication. However, recent developments in these technologies—and the ways in which people are beginning to use them—suggest that collaboration has evolved beyond its utilitarian stage and is now poised to become a major force in the corporate world.

Indeed, more and more companies are beginning to see collaboration technologies as “killer apps” they can harness to transform their companies and, ultimately, to power innovation.

Way back, we collaborated through face-to-face meetings, office memos, snail mail and informal conversations at the proverbial watercooler. Over the years, as the pace of business quickened and companies became more dispersed, various technologies—fax, e-mail, imaging, workflow, conference calls, videoconferencing—were introduced to support communication across a geographically distributed workforce.

But in each case, the technology simply “electronified” a well-understood, existing communication channel. In fact, experts often invoked a framework to describe collaboration technologies, suggesting that the Holy Grail in this realm was to achieve “telepresence” (see chart, page 3). In other words, the goal was to replicate the effects of co-location and face-to-face interaction.

New ways of working

Today, we're starting to realize that the real promise of collaboration technologies lies in supporting new ways of working and interacting that simply were not possible or feasible through traditional means. That's a shift with huge implications for corporations.

Tactically, it means that by systematically introducing appropriate technologies to support collaborative processes, companies can improve communication among their knowledge workers while simultaneously reducing the overhead of reading and responding to e-mails. Strategically, the implications are far greater: With new collaboration technologies in place, companies

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To understand where collaboration technologies are headed, consider a very different framework that characterizes collaboration in terms of two new attributes.

- **Reach:** an individual's ability to identify and effectively collaborate with the right people wherever they are (geographically and organizationally).
- **Awareness:** an individual's ability to maintain continuity of information flow with one's collaborators (see chart, above).

Content creation

Wikipedia, which has content created entirely by volunteers and is now the ninth-most-visited site on the Internet, exemplifies one type of expanded reach: the ability of an individual anywhere in the world to collaboratively create content with tens, sometimes hundreds, of others.

Although, in principle, a group of people can create content by using traditional word processing software and then e-mailing edits to one another, what distinguishes wikis (the technology underlying Wikipedia) is that (a) the group of contributors is not predetermined, (b) the collaboration takes place in an open forum visible to all, and (c) as a result, anyone with expertise in the subject area can join and contribute.

This open model of collaboration introduces the current group to a new contributor and the contributor to a new collaboration opportunity, amplifying the reach of both parties. Some organizations, including several US government agencies, are embracing wikis for more structured collaboration in lieu of e-mail. In one documented case at a large investment bank, wikis have report-

edly reduced overall e-mail traffic by 75 percent and made meetings much more efficient.

Although many companies have just begun to embrace wikis as a viable means of collaboration, industry analyst Gartner predicts that they will become mainstream tools in at least half of all companies by 2009.

Flickr, YouTube and dotSUB exhibit another type of reach: the ability to take content created by a stranger and add value to it—through tagging in the case of Flickr and YouTube, and through language translation in the case of dotSUB. Social networking sites such as LinkedIn demonstrate yet another flavor: expanding one's social network in preparation for potential future collaboration.

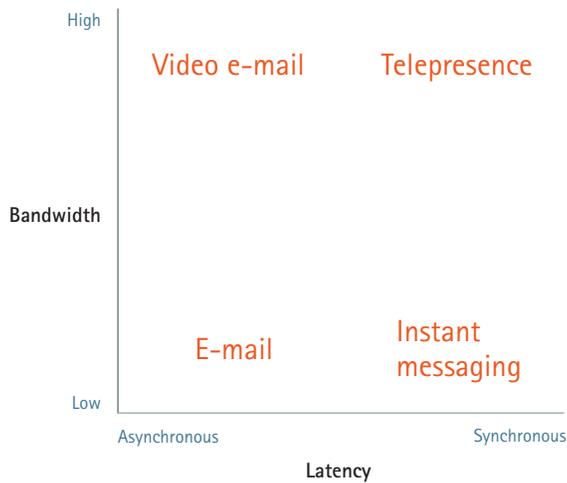
Applying these uses to the enterprise is a logical next step—a means that companies can use to quickly identify subject matter experts, connect customers to the right resources or locate implicit knowledge within the organization.

As for awareness, Really Simple Syndication (or RSS) illustrates how individuals can maintain awareness of new developments in their areas of interest: They subscribe to specific topics, blogs, podcasts or newsfeeds. As new material in their areas of interest is published, that material is proactively forwarded to them.

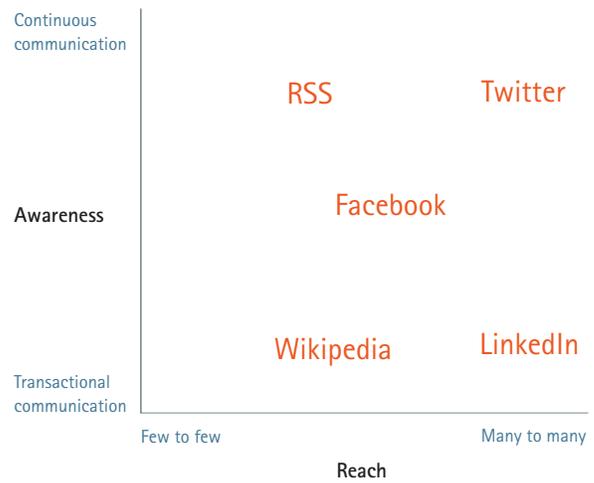
Twitter represents another particularly interesting technique for supporting awareness: Subscribers continually “twitter,” contributing short messages (known as “microblogs”) about whatever they are doing, and the messages are then channeled to interested parties. From a corporate perspective, a globally distributed team can use the “twittering” approach to ensure that team members continually stay aware of one another's activity, which nurtures constant communication and collaboration.

A fresh perspective

This traditional framework for describing collaboration technologies focuses on the characteristics of the communication channels.



This framework for understanding today's collaboration success stories focuses not on the technology but rather on the new capabilities.



Source: Accenture analysis

Facebook and MySpace provide a range of mechanisms for increasing both reach and awareness by building and expanding social networks and staying in constant touch with what is happening within those networks.

Corporate innovation

The combination of awareness and reach may be ideally suited for corporate innovation. In fact, several recent studies have found that a major stumbling block for innovation is poor communication across different organizational units within a company.¹

When employees' reach and awareness are enhanced, information flows faster and more frequently, which, in turn, means that across

R&D, product development, strategy and marketing, promising ideas are aired and refined sooner—and less promising ones get culled faster. In addition, open collaboration restricts the power of negative “gatekeepers” or naysayers who may prematurely reject an idea or act as communication choke points across organizational units. (For a related story, see “How to capture the essence of innovation,” *Outlook*, January 2008.)

The result? Companies cultivate new and better ideas, and then bring them to market—or not—more quickly.

Although corporate adoption is in its early stages, emerging collaboration technologies may turn out to be the most potent tools companies can wield for managing their

¹ Rob Cross et al., “Together We Innovate,” Business Insight, *Wall Street Journal* Report, Sept. 15, 2007; Polly Rizova, “Are You Networked for Successful Innovation?” *MIT Sloan Management Review*, Spring 2006.

innovation capabilities. Or as John Seely Brown, the director of Xerox Corp.'s Palo Alto Research Center during its heyday, put it: "You can't manage invention . . . but you can manage innovation."

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