

# THE NEW COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

## WEB COLLABORATION REACHES THE *TIPPING POINT*

After years of grassroots adoption by knowledge workers, the time has come for IT executives to build collaboration into their enterprise software strategies.

**Y**ou can almost watch the landscape of the global economy changing. Chains of loosely connected businesses collaborating across geographies and industries are replacing monolithic, vertically integrated businesses. Speed and flexibility are supplanting size as the defining characteristics of a successful organization. In this new world, the lead actors are knowledge workers. They create deals, analyze markets, develop new product ideas, manage partner relationships, and make the thousands of daily decisions that create success.

For IT executives, knowledge workers represent the ultimate opportunity to have a deep, dramatic, and lasting impact on their companies' ability to compete. Industry observers, including respected consulting firm McKinsey & Company, argue that businesses will derive lasting competitive advantage by supporting knowledge workers' interactions-based business processes.

Web collaboration solutions are emerging as one of the building blocks of those applications. For proof, scan the desktop of a successful, connected knowledge worker. You'll certainly find at least one instant messaging client, probably links to a Web conferencing application or service, and possibly a shared workspace tool. In an echo of the user-driven PDA invasion of the late 1990s, knowledge workers are independently adopting collaboration tools because they meet an inescapable need. Web collaboration solutions facilitate and strengthen communication across departments, companies, and geographies, help knowledge workers build closer connections with customers and partners, and support them in making faster, more informed decisions.

A successful IT organization in the global value chain will view collaboration as part of its DNA, but the true benefits of the technology will only materialize as the result of active IT participation. Despite the ease and enthusiasm with which knowledge workers have embraced Web collaboration, user-driven integration

can only go so far. It is imperative that CIOs take control of their collaboration deployments now and weave collaboration solutions deeply into the fabric of their business processes and enterprise software strategies.

### SHOULD USERS DRIVE INTEGRATION?

Web collaboration inspires a wide range of reactions from IT management. The good news is that many businesses encourage their knowledge workers to experiment with new tools, and have allowed them to adopt collaborative solutions

### COLLABORATION BUILDS BRIDGES

Building business applications from Web collaborative solutions changes the focus from the data that supports a business process to the connections between the people that actually make the process move. For example, consider the product bid and proposal process that companies go through every day. A business application based on Web collaborative solutions can bring together structured data (ERP, CRM), unstructured data (documents, collateral), and the proposal team into a single collaborative space. The application becomes a repository for all project information, and a place for team members to meet using instant messaging or Web conferencing as the issue demands.

A collaborative business application also enhances the relationship with the customer. An instant message from a customer contact cues the system to recall the most current data relevant to the relationship, like an outstanding trouble ticket or an overdue account. The knowledge worker can use that data to respond immediately and accurately to the situation, while calling on colleagues to contribute as necessary through the collaborative space.



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as needed. But integration driven by end-users can create problems. Knowledge workers are often technically adept, but they're not trained IT staff, and early adopters will likely spend an inordinate amount of time wrestling with software due to inexperience. In many cases, they may not activate or even discover key functions, and they may abandon an initially useful tool after a few frustrating experiences. Also, technology that comes in through end-users is likely to drive up support costs even if the business has a policy of not maintaining user-installed tools. Users will cajole support agents into providing help "under the table," and the tools may interfere with company-sanctioned hardware and software.

Finally, user-driven tools are almost never truly integrated into a company's business processes. Users usually only consider themselves when selecting a tool. Their needs may or may not coincide with those of their peers. As patchwork of software spreads across the company, even a single department can end up with multiple technologies and several ways of completing the same task. Discovering and developing best practices becomes next to impossible.

### THE PROMISE OF WEB COLLABORATION

Relieving end-users of the burden of deployment, integration, and support allows them to focus on their tasks instead of their tools. And by actively developing a collaboration strategy, IT management can focus on delivering business results instead of diagnosing individual transactions between users and systems.

For instance, the Imaging Systems Group at Canon U.S.A., an industry leader in professional business and consumer imaging equipment and information systems began by using WebEx Training Center to remotely train its 8,000 sales representatives on new software products. The program accelerated product rollouts and efficiently leveraged staff resources. With the utility

of the collaboration tools proven, Canon expanded their deployment, and the company uses the WebEx suite for product launches, customer meetings, remote support, and product demonstrations. While individual knowledge workers may have been able to achieve isolated efficiencies, building a larger deployment strategy has allowed Canon to effectively accelerate the entire business.

By focusing on business needs and processes, IT leaders can also systematically discover and capitalize on cross-business synergies. Some companies are already building composite business applications around collaborative solutions. These new applications take data from Web-enabled ERP and CRM

applications and present it in context with communications originating both inside and outside the knowledge worker's business (see sidebar, "Collaboration Builds Bridges").

No matter what the technology, developing a strategy allows a business to make better purchasing decisions. Bringing collaboration software strategy back under the wing of IT management opens several possibilities. For example, it's possible for the business to consolidate its technology investment: a single-platform solution can reduce administrative, training, and support costs. Centralizing resources also offers the opportunity to move to an on-demand solution, which can reduce both initial and long-term investment, increase security and simplify regulatory compliance. Finally, retaking control of the businesses' collaboration strategy offers IT management to select a technology partner instead of just downloading the latest cool tool. A partner like WebEx Communications, with a strong track record, robust international network, secure environment, and years of experience in web collaborative solutions greatly increases the chances of a positive outcome.

### THE PATH TO SUCCESS

Web collaborative solutions have matured beyond the era of experimentation. They are the tool of choice for millions of knowledge workers across the globe to accelerate business processes and improve business decisions. But grassroots movements cannot replace decisions about enterprise software strategy at the executive level, and no software tool will reach its full potential without active involvement by IT management. The most successful businesses in the global information economy will be those that deploy collaboration solutions in support of their knowledge workers. The time to develop the strategy for that deployment is now.