Employee collaboration in the digital workplace
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Digital communication and collaboration

"The whole is greater than the sum of its parts."

Aristotle

Businesses aren’t stand-alone entities. In every organization, there are multiple parts that must work in concert to drive it forward. No single department or individual can run a business alone; without each part, businesses can’t function and will fail to achieve their goals.

Bringing together those ‘parts,’ whether individuals, teams, departments or offices, is key to achieving the greater ‘whole.’ When all parts work together to move the whole business in the right direction, that’s what we call collaboration.

According to a McKinsey Global Institute study, nearly 80% of senior executives describe collaboration as crucial for growth. Yet only 25% of those same executives see their organization as collaborating as effectively as they should be.

So what’s holding companies back?

While the basic principle of ‘working together towards a common goal’ remains the same, there is no such thing as simple “collaboration” anymore. In an age where work takes place mostly online and we all use the web to communicate, collaboration is changing.

The digital workplace forces us to reconsider how we work together and what we hope to achieve. Digital tools make collaboration quicker, smoother, more enjoyable, and possible on a scale that was never before imaginable.

However, they also bring new challenges, such as managing multiple applications and sources of data, or the impact of enterprise social networks on productivity.

Mostly, the changes are for the better. However, to get the full benefit for businesses, it’s important to think about the benefit and impact of digital collaboration when considering your internal strategy.

Our guide explores some of the barriers and challenges to digital collaboration, offering practical insights, solutions, and tips to help with your own project.
Defining collaboration

The Association for Information and Image Management defines collaboration as "a working practice whereby individuals work together to a common purpose to achieve business benefit."

The definition extends to outline two forms of collaboration:

**Synchronous collaboration**, according to AIIM, is "where everyone interacts in real-time, as in online meetings, through instant messaging, or via Skype." This form is mostly related to direct communication.

**Asynchronous collaboration** is "where the interaction can be time-shifted, as when uploading documents or annotations to shared workspaces, or making contributions to a wiki." This form typically involves working on shared materials.

Traditionally, these two forms of collaboration have been distinct from one another. Now, collaboration can take place from anywhere in the world and can be either immediate or delayed. Communication is no longer heavily weighted towards face-to-face interactions, and individuals don’t have to sit next to one another to work on a shared document simultaneously. With the movement towards digital collaboration, the boundaries have become far more blurred.

Collaboration: working across and without boundaries

For companies to achieve continuous growth in today’s economy, multinational expansion is often necessary. Globalization has accelerated dramatically in recent years and continues to form the growth strategy of many forward-thinking organizations.

To facilitate and support global growth, there must be a certain amount of cooperation among teams across borders. The **Trends in Global Virtual Teams report** from RW3 CultureWizard shows that 85% of corporate employees serve on global virtual teams, and almost 20% spend over half of their day interacting with these teams.

Moreover, telecommuting is a growing phenomenon. Gallup reports that 43% of US employees worked remotely at least some of the time last year, up from 9% in 1995. Flexible working and an always-on, technology-driven culture are seeing both employer and employee demand new and efficient ways to collaborate outside of the office.

Whether remote work and virtual teams are a consequence of globalization, technological advancements, or changing corporate cultures is irrelevant to the fact that both are becoming more common. Each comes with their own set of challenges.

Firstly, both change the mechanisms of responsibility and accountability among employees. Bosses are often not working side by side with their employees, and colleagues don’t necessarily work next to one another. Time zones may separate members of a team, making it hard or at times impossible to achieve synchronous collaboration. Asynchronous collaboration becomes the main method available, or in some instances, the only one.

When employees of an organization don’t work in the same building, this also lends itself to the challenge of silos. Workers might not know the other members of their team, let alone members of other teams within the company. It’s extremely challenging to collaborate with someone you don’t know or have limited experience working with. These silos can severely limit the knowledge and skills you have available to help you succeed, limiting productivity and innovation.
The role of technology in collaboration

Technology plays a prominent role in modern collaboration. It has opened opportunities for businesses, as well as addressing a number of challenges faced by an increasingly global economy.

Creating online digital workplaces for colleagues to connect, communicate, and collaborate with others enables them to share knowledge and expertise. Centrally hosted content keeps employees connected, regardless of where they are in the world. Even for those who do work in the same office with one another, digital collaboration platforms such as intranets can empower employees by breaking down team or departmental silos, connecting them with other skillsets, and providing a searchable, centrally located knowledge base.

When employees work together online, transparency is also greatly enhanced. It’s easy to know what others are working on, and version control on documents means that they can work together without worrying about missing the latest changes. Top-down communication by managers and executives, blogging about company news or participating in discussions with employees, furthers this transparency and engagement.

There’s evidence that digital tools are very effective at promoting productivity too, not only by facilitating collaboration but by reducing time spent searching for information, streamlining processes and reducing dependency on email. According to another McKinsey study, social technology can raise productivity by 20-25%. It’s worth noting that that doesn’t only apply to remote workers. That benefit is across the board.

Improved communication and collaboration through social technologies could raise productivity.

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<tr>
<th>Interaction workers’ task</th>
<th>% of average workweek</th>
<th>Increased value-added time when using social tech</th>
<th>Productivity improvement %</th>
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<td>Reading &amp; answering emails</td>
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<td>7.0 - 8.0</td>
<td>25 - 30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Searching &amp; gathering information</td>
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<td>Communicating &amp; collaborating</td>
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<td>Role-specific tasks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>20 - 25%</td>
<td>20 - 25</td>
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How to empower employees through digital collaboration

If you are considering deploying digital tools within your organization to facilitate successful collaboration between employees, it’s important to consider where and how they can deliver value for your organization. Building a business case and planning the roll-out of new technologies can increase engagement and value, ensuring your tools deliver a return on investment – and don’t simply become one of the many applications introduced and abandoned in an increasingly crowded digital workplace.

These top 11 tips and insights will help you in the planning and implementation of your digital collaboration strategy.

01 Trust your employees to work together productively and not waste time.

Trust is one of the biggest barriers to productivity. Many managers worry that employees are prone to wasting time, be it online or by standing around the water cooler talking. Unfortunately, lack of trust severely hinders engagement and keeps workers from sharing knowledge and working together to further the goals of the organization.

The fact is that the majority of workers want to be more efficient and contribute. Encouraging them to do so through collaborative working helps them grow, and the team succeed. Enable your employees to maximize their productivity by trusting and then enabling them to create and tap into their networks.

02 Answer the question “What’s in it for me?” for the user

To justify adding any tool, you need to be able to identify and continually measure the business benefits. However, your tools need to put the user first, allowing them to understand:

- How the tool works so they can ‘pick up and play.’ Choose easy over complex and make the language it uses common to those using it
- How the tool solves tangible business challenges
- Why it is a more effective way to work than other methods

Make sure those who contribute with valid information are recognized – this might be as simple as a message on their profile wall saying thank you, or recognition in the CEO’s blog.

03 Don’t let language and time zones be a barrier

Language and time zones are often cited as the reason a project can’t get its best people together. It’s the reason we see many projects happening only in one country or created around a common language, rather than including all members of a global team.

Martin White of Intranet Focus states that 57% of people in virtual teams fear the primary challenge in managing their projects and employees would be “misunderstandings due to differences in culture, language, inability to read people’s expressions, etc.” However, Martin also identifies that with an effective team protocol this can easily be overcome – for example, by identifying common terms and creating best usage guidance.
Content should find people

Companies have various challenges and needs. In an effective enterprise collaborative environment, a lot of conversations will be irrelevant to certain people. However, everyone has had that moment when they accidentally discover information that was incredibly useful.

On a social intranet, this doesn’t need to happen only by chance. Through personalization, tailoring of content, or the use of personas, intranet software can sift through the noise to bring the appropriate content to a user’s attention. This can be aligned to a number of factors – for example, the pages they read, teams they are part of, or their personal and professional interests.

Individual users can not only be made aware of content likely to be of interest to them but also what they can contribute to, identifying them as a likely expert to help solve other people’s challenges.

Lead by example

If you want to create a behavior, lead by example, not by exception. If you want more people to respond to communications or share knowledge on your collaboration platform, show them how easy it is – even if you have to get a ghostwriter to help you out.

Ideally, this is an ongoing process. If management can lead by example and adopt collaborative tools on a regular basis, those behaviors are far easier to replicate and demonstrate to other employees.

If you ask for input, reply to it

We see lots of companies looking for employee input on various topics. These range from ways to improve productivity to product innovations, how to tap into new markets, and more.

Whatever you ask for, be sure to reply. There is nothing more disengaging than being given the opportunity to contribute and then hearing nothing back. Even if the reply is, “Thank you for your suggestion. Unfortunately, we are unable to implement that at the moment because of x, y, z” – always give a response.

New starters – forming behaviors and embracing new ideas

Every company has new starters who represent a massive opportunity that most companies miss. New employees have a host of expectations and ideas from previous roles or experiences. Collaborative tools allow them to have an impact earlier. They may see business problems they can answer or identify new opportunities to drive the business forward, but might not yet have the tools to make those contributions.

Their first experience should feel engaging. Having tailored content for this demographic, such as New Starter homepages on the intranet or an assigned area containing everything they need for their first few weeks, is tremendously valuable. With the support of a People Directory, searchable by skill set and department as well as name, new starters can easily find and connect with individuals who can support them. Areas such as forums or discussions provide an accessible, searchable platform to seek out answers and put forward ideas – reducing dependency and resource drain on their immediate manager or HR, for example.
08 Allow people to contribute to news, as well as read it

The majority of companies have a news stream, which is an excellent way of keeping employees informed. However, what makes the news often depends on who is writing it. Traditionally, this responsibility lies with senior management or an internal communications team, making for an exclusive platform that may breed silos or isolate particular individuals in the business.

Allow everyone to contribute news, even if it is first submitted to an editorial team. This will give a broader picture of what is happening for everyone in the company. This again empowers people and increases their level of engagement, as well as their ability to collaborate effectively.

09 Make it easy

Adoption is rarely unilateral. For every early adopter, there is likely to be a technophobe. While the tools must be familiar to your more technically aware users, it must also be easy enough for those intimidated by new technology to understand and begin to use at their own pace.

The most effective way to gain mass adoption is to have a tool that is easy to use and understand, reflecting technology users have in their day-to-day lives. Tools which utilize widely known social media functions such as @mentioning and #tagging will be recognized by your employee population who will then understand the context they should be used in, and how to maximize their benefit.

However, you also need to ensure you train the less technical users on how these new tools work and what is in it for them. You may choose to run a series of training sessions, catering from the absolute novice to the intermediate users who are keen to maximize the value they can gain from your platform.

10 Recognition incites engagement and contribution

Whether your company runs employee excellence awards, monthly recognition, or ad hoc rewards, it’s in the knowledge that recognition and rewards encourage people to go above and beyond.

This extends to your digital collaboration platforms too. When users receive acknowledgment of their efforts, they are more likely to repeat that behavior – helping to embed collaborative practices into the culture of your business. You could even supplement your recognition program with tangible rewards as an added incentive to get users engaging and contributing regularly.

11 Best practices should be evolutionary, not static

Processes, policies, and procedures inform employees how they should act and how to complete tasks compliantly. However, these are not always applicable to the real, everyday challenges workers face.

Enabling commenting allows people to participate in this process democratically by engaging the person who drafted said procedures. Collaborative tools move these conversations from local to enterprise-wide, which ensures everyone has a chance to give input and share ideas.
As technology continues to infiltrate the workplace and the way we work becomes more and more agile, digital collaboration will continue to grow. However, as with any new tool or process, it requires careful planning and execution to be effective. When rolled out successfully, the rewards of collaborative working can be far-reaching, driving increased productivity, innovation, staff engagement, and bottom-line benefits. Without a plan, your collaboration tools could quickly become another source of digital noise or simply become obsolete.

If you are considering how to maximize collaboration in your business, protect your investment. Before introducing new technology, answer the key questions:

- Why do we need collaborative working?
- Where are there collaboration ‘gaps’ in our organization that need addressing?
- What are we looking to achieve with these tools?
- How can we support our employees in utilizing this technology effectively?

Beginning with the end goal in mind will support your collaborative goals and ensure a return on your investment.

Looking to build a business case for your own project? Why not download our free template, 'Building an Intranet Business Case' to get you started.

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**About Interact**

Interact is a global enterprise software company that serves intranet software to over one million users across more than 800 organizations. We specialize in solving internal communication and collaboration challenges by combining our sophisticated intranet software with outstanding professional services, focusing on developing long-term strategic partnerships with our customers.

Interact has offices in Manchester and New York, and operates across the whole of the US and Canada, EMEA, and Australia.

Enjoyed this eBook? Why not explore the rest of this series on social collaboration technology? Earlier in the series, we explore:

01 **WHY do I need social in the workplace?**
Making the case for social and collaborative technology

02 **HOW to get the boss to say ‘yes’**
Securing stakeholder buy-in for your project

03 **WHICH social collaboration tool is right for my business?**
Understanding social technology, and choosing a platform to meet your needs

04 **Intranets: are they still relevant?**
Exploring the role of the intranet in today's digital workplace

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