

Information Without Borders: Harnessing the Power of Collaboration

An Allstream White Paper



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Executive Summary

As organizations grapple with spiralling customer expectations and ongoing budgetary constraints, it is becoming increasingly critical to identify strategies to improve both service delivery and operational efficiency. In recent years, organizations of all sizes have found that collaboration represents an ideal way to achieve these goals.

Admittedly, collaboration can have different meanings for different people. Individual organizations may find they require a range of inter-related solutions to meet their disparate collaboration goals. To set a context for the purposes of this paper, collaboration refers to the range of tools organizations can use to streamline communication between employees, customers, partners and other key stakeholders.

This report discusses the various forms collaboration can take and the categories of technology that enable collaboration. It also provides examples of how organizations can use collaboration tools in day-to-day business activities and concludes with what you should take into account when considering implementing the next generation of collaboration technologies.

The Rising Popularity of Collaboration

Collaborative efforts form the basis of business interactions. In essence, we collaborate in three major ways to get work done:

- We have planned or unplanned conversations
- We form groups and teams to tackle projects and solve problems, and
- We exchange written information in various forms

With the advent of the personal computer, collaboration rose to new heights. As a result, organizations began to rely on collaboration as a strategy for improving business performance. While many organizations adopted knowledge management to aggregate and easily access organizational information, few were successful in their efforts. Today, however, collaboration is back on the business radar. That's because:

- Virtual teams are increasingly the norm as organizations decentralize and become more geographically dispersed
- The advent of teleworking options allows companies to attract and retain top talent, improve employee satisfaction, lower real estate costs and reduce their carbon footprint
- Many workers now prefer communicating via instant messaging and social networking sites rather than through cell phone calls and email
- Internet-spawned phenomena like blogs, wikis and social networks are spilling over from personal applications into business applications
- Advances in technology make it possible for people to collaborate easily and intuitively

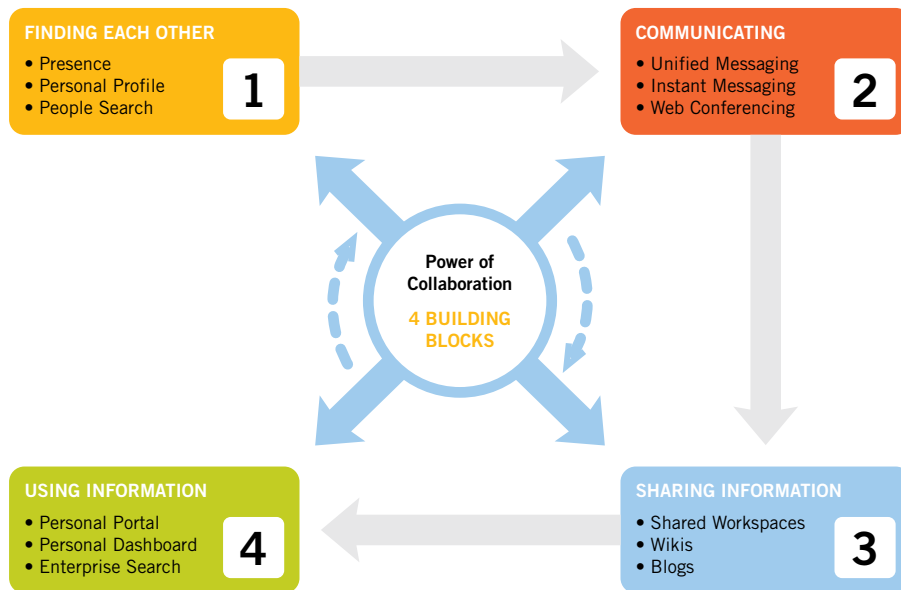
To truly benefit from collaborative technologies, however, organizations must learn from the lessons of the past as they work to build the information architectures of the future.

The Building Blocks

To meet your organization's collaboration goals, you need tools that support all the common methods of exchanging information. You must also be able to handle the various formats that information might take. Although point solutions for these functions exist, the new generation of tools seamlessly aggregates and manages different types of communication and information.

With unified communications or converged networks, for instance, you can communicate through a variety of methods, including voice, email, instant messaging and online forums. Similarly, federation lets you aggregate disparate information formats and sources, including documents, structured data, video and audio.

Taken together, these tools let you support the four major collaborative activities critical for modern communication: finding each other, communicating, sharing information and using information.



Finding Each Other

Given the pace of business today, large and dispersed organizations need the ability to locate people with the “right” skills and experience, even if they sit outside their immediate work group. Three collaboration tools make this possible: presence, personal profiles and people search.

Presence

Presence lets your people see other people’s physical availability – whether they are online, at lunch, busy or in a meeting. It also lets people display their preferred method of communication. This functionality enables you to see whether someone is logged into the network, regardless of their physical location; determine when your colleagues are on and off the phone; and establish rules and preferences for how to be contacted, for example, your preferred contact method can change from email when you are in the office to cell phone or instant messaging when you are out.

Personal Profiles

Personal profiles are similar to profiles on social networking sites, such as Facebook or LinkedIn. In the organizational context, profiles organize and display information about an employee’s skills, experience, affiliations and interests. This lets staff members post photos of themselves and their activities; display their position in the corporate organizational structure; list current projects and areas of expertise; and display non-work related information such as schools attended and hobbies.

People Search

In many organizations, it can be difficult to find someone unless you already know their name and where they work. By working with personal profiles, people search can help you find people with specific skill sets or necessary experience; map organizational connections to improve your prospecting efforts; and identify the potential contacts who are geographically proximate.

Communicating

While the standard office methods of communicating – phone and email – are not going away, new methods of interacting, such as instant messaging and Web conferencing, have joined the mix. As a result, organizations need a way to switch between communication methods without creating silos. Several options exist:

Unified Messaging

Unified messaging consolidates email, voicemail and fax into a single inbox. By eliminating the need to check for messages in multiple locations, using multiple devices, unified messaging makes it possible to send voicemail to email and vice versa; convert text to speech so you can access email via a cell phone; forward voicemail to external parties; and control phone calls from a computer - including dialling from an address book, transferring calls and initiating conference calls.

Instant Messaging

Despite the popularity of public domain instant messaging systems, such as MSN Messenger and Yahoo Messenger, many organizations are reluctant to sanction their use. Fortunately, several 'work-ready' instant messaging technologies allow enterprise users to compose and send short messages in real time; organize impromptu meetings or get quick clarifications; and receive instant acknowledgement of receipt and save conversations for later reference.

Web Conferencing

A third type of communication technology that organizations use to streamline communication is Web conferencing. With only a PC and Internet connection required, Web-based conferencing is much cheaper and more accessible than traditional conferencing facilities. At the same time, it delivers robust audio and video features that let you see a 360-degree view of everyone in a room; track the flow of conversation among multiple speakers; share presentation materials; and receive and answer questions via text chat.

Real life Allstream Case Study of a provincial government organization

With millions of provincial residents and a geographically dispersed work force, this organization needed a way to streamline communication among employees. Its aim was to give employees immediate insight into their co-workers' availability so they could determine whether colleagues were logged on, out of the office or busy.

After considering various options, this organization decided to adopt instant messaging (IM) as an alternative avenue for quick communication. Employees can now display their presence status, show their contact information and indicate how they prefer to be reached. If they are on a conference call or do not want to be disturbed, they can post notes that explain why they are unavailable or list the dates of an upcoming vacation.

Thanks to this instant messaging and presence solution, the organization reduced the volume of email messages and staff communication efficiency also improved as employees realized they could identify their colleagues' availability without physically tracking them down. As one staffer noted, "Messages by email can take anywhere from five minutes to two days to get a response. It's not a very efficient way to communicate if you need a quick answer to a simple question. With instant messaging, we save a lot of time and can quickly access the information we need."



Sharing Information

Even organizations with well established intranets tend to share information via email attachments. As a result, many copies of the same document are frequently buried in in-boxes and cannot be found, creating organizational inefficiency. Shared workspaces and their associated Web 2.0 tools can resolve this challenge by replacing linear information exchange with true collaboration capabilities.

Shared Workspaces

Shared workspaces give everyone, or just a specific group, access to a common workspace where they can share a single copy of a document. Depending on how you define permissions, members of the workspace can add and remove shared information; edit or change the contents of the workspace; check in or check out documents through a central repository; receive automatic alerts when information is added or changed; and share a group calendar and display announcements relevant to the group.

Wikis

Thanks to the success of Wikipedia, wiki technology is well understood in the public domain. In the corporate context, however, wikis can also be used to let several people add and edit shared Web content. This supports collective and collaborative contributions to a specific task. For example, imagine a wiki where new employees create their own orientation guide, based on what they find most helpful in learning how to navigate their new organization. In practical terms, wikis can keep a log of who has posted what; be organized neatly through links and tables of contents; require approval before a posting gets added; and be used by anyone without training.

Blogs

As the Internet evolves, blogs have become a standard feature for sharing information. Within organizations, blogs can play a similar role by allowing individuals to post about particular topics or groups to maintain collaborative threads of information. In addition to replacing long strings of email, blogs let you organize information by displaying the most recent posts first (at the top); open comments to anyone or to specific authorized people and keep track of the number of comments; track how often a posting has been read; and categorize and archive old items.

Using Information

Creating information and knowledge is a critical component of collaboration. Yet collaboration can only reach its full potential if you retrieve the data you've created. Fortunately, information access and retrieval have matured considerably in recent years. Today, users across your organization have the ability to personalize what gets delivered to their desktop and to use single, simplified queries to search across multiple data and information repositories. Here are some of the tools making this possible:

Real life Allstream Case Study of a healthcare agency

This healthcare agency provides specialized public health laboratory services to support health surveillance, infection control and communicable disease information; centralized support for professionals in the field; and emergency preparedness assistance and support through scientific and technical advice. Its collaboration solution unifies communication within an information portal and allows the secure and rapid exchange of information. This is extremely important in serious circumstances, such as the outbreak of potential epidemics, where it is essential to locate appropriate experts and share epidemiological data.

The new collaboration portal allows field specialists to transmit patient information via online forms, using their mobile devices, so it becomes immediately available to anyone using the shared workspace. Remote workers with no immediate internet access can store information, which is automatically synchronized to the portal once they are back online. Enhanced communication capabilities let lab technicians use speech-enabled commands to respond to email and voicemail, so they don't need to remove their gloves. Overall, the portal provides improved quality of service, reduced travel costs and higher productivity from scarce resources.

Personal Portals

Personal portals allow users to create their own homepage within an intranet and determine what gets shown on the page. With sophisticated versions, users can incorporate data feeds from relevant business applications to display. For example, the number of vacation days remaining for an employee. Although organizations generally choose the functions to pass to employees based on their corporate policies, personal portals can provide news feeds from external sources, to track topics of interest; notifications about new documents added to departmental or corporate repositories; updates about changes to colleagues' personal profiles; and links to frequently used document libraries.

Personal Dashboards

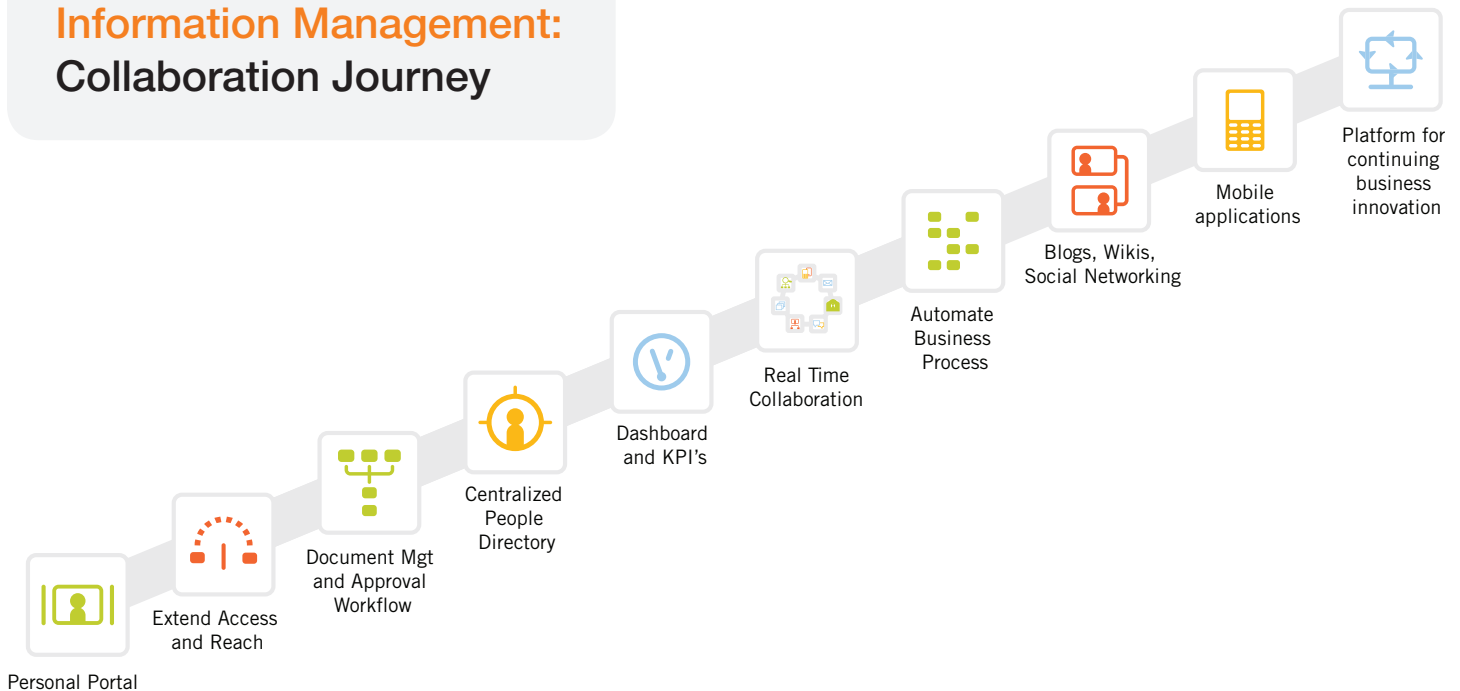
A dashboard can appear on a personal portal and it can be used as a standalone tool. Although generic dashboards that display standard lists of business measures and their current status can be commonplace, new technologies allow users to personalize their dashboards by mixing and matching from a list of available measures; specifying the frequency of the dashboard updates; using predefined rules, such as the day of the week or business cycle, to vary information displayed; and selecting how to display the data, such as via a chart or graph.

Enterprise Search

Enterprise search lets users conduct fast, wide-ranging searches across the organization's disparate data and information repositories, without the need to know where the information is stored or in what format. By mirroring the simplicity of Internet search engines, this new generation of search appeals to novice users too, while still enabling you to:

Optimize a search engine to align with the needs of a particular type of business or industry. For example, in the health care industry, users can retrieve a patient record as a set, even if it is composed of different files in different formats; deliver best bet results, or suggestions of related or similar documents that could be useful; and use tag clouds that let employees choose their own subject labels for information.

Information Management: Collaboration Journey



Key considerations

Tackling a collaboration initiative is similar to any undertaking directed at enhancing information worker productivity. To succeed, you must take people, technical and organizational governance considerations into account.

People Considerations

To be effective, new collaboration capabilities must be embraced and incorporated into how people work day-to-day. Since we are creatures of habit, change often causes anxiety, which leads to resistance. Some aspects of collaboration that may cause concern are:

- **Central, shared document storage.** Most organizations have policies governing the storage and preservation of electronic documents and information on well-organized network drives, but an alarming number of documents live on personal hard drives and are 'shared' by routing them via email. Successful collaboration rests on changing the work mode to sharing links and connecting to shared workspaces, rather than using the old hierarchical electronic file folder structure.

- **Presence.** Although email can find you anywhere if you have a PDA, the sender may not know whether or not you are online. By expanding the avenues for communication, presence can sometimes be perceived as intrusive. Organizations need to understand policies about how and why to use presence capabilities and communicate the benefits of presence to the users.
- **Working more collaboratively.** The habit of collaborating does not always come naturally. There must be a clear value proposition before employees will change their work habits. This 'what's in it for me' message must be tailored to specific roles and circumstances, not just presented as a general business benefit. Workers need to learn how to be productive in an online collaboration environment, as much as they need examples of scenarios that describe and explain new work methods. Pilots and proof-of-concept projects can help demonstrate this value.

Real life Allstream Case Study of a manufacturer

Although this manufacturer's headquarters are in Ontario, it has 3,300 employees spread across global locations. This makes it very challenging for colleagues and teams to communicate and collaborate. Email messages could sit in an inbox unnoticed for several hours because of the differing time zones.

To resolve this challenge, the company decided to implement a unified communications solution that incorporated instant messaging, presence and IP Telephony, as well as audio, video and Web conferencing. As a result, the company vastly improved employee collaboration. Now, when staff members need to contact each other, they can determine who is online and available or who can be interrupted. Employees set up personal profiles that let them control how colleagues contact them, based on time of day and location. They can also set different levels of access depending on who contacts them. For instance, they can route calls from supervisors and spouses to a cell phone, while routing other calls to voicemail. Similarly, they can set up their profiles to make themselves available at home, but only in case of emergency, or only accessible by their supervisors.

By using instant messaging, the company reduced its volume of email, which had a positive impact on bandwidth and server capacity. There is less email for employees to clean up and less that needs to be archived. While IM still needs to be archived from a legal standpoint, it takes up less space and resides only on servers, rather than both on workstations and servers.

Technology Considerations

Many collaboration technologies rely on real-time protocols, which put demands on networks to minimize latency and jitter. That's why assessing your IT infrastructure in advance can help determine the communication paths that follow.

Depending on your organizational structure, you will need to answer the following questions:

- Can your current IT infrastructure support a distributed architecture (e.g. network access for remote locations) from a staffing and systems perspective?
- Will your underlying network infrastructure support your bandwidth requirements for audio-video conferencing and Web conferencing?
- What security and compliance architecture will meet your policy requirements?

In addition to provisioning adequate bandwidth, you need to define appropriate service level targets and build an accurate and consistent contact database. You can address this issue by selecting and maintaining a single authoritative directory that includes users' full names, email addresses, telephone numbers, IM addresses, etc. This ensures accurate system interaction as you set up a single user identity.

Organizational Governance Considerations

While collaboration implies sharing ad hoc and unstructured information, you must still incorporate some structure to ensure business compliance and mitigate risk. This doesn't mean the new world of work must be constrained, but it does require organizations to think intelligently about where and how to categorize, store and archive collaboratively-generated information. If your organization lacks an information management strategy, it's time to build one.

To automate information retention and disposition, you need records management, document management and content management capabilities. To succeed, it's essential to automate your information management policies and processes. Collaboration necessarily increases the volume of information shared electronically and it is not practical to rely solely on manual data entry to apply retention schedules and data indexing.

While tag clouds are an effective feature, they are no substitute for a taxonomy. Taxonomies, or structured classification schemes, categorize information in an appropriate business context and make it easier to navigate large volumes of information. To develop appropriate taxonomies, consider capturing and analyzing search terms being used internally and using the data to fine-tune how you index and classify information. It also makes sense to rely on statistics that can tell you how often information is accessed.

When adopting collaboration technologies, most organizations recognize the need for new or adapted policies and procedures. For example, while employees can be contacted around the clock through converged networks and presence, organizations must define their expectations around staff availability. They should also provide clear guidance on appropriate times to use particular forms of communication. For instance, this might include specifying that documents links should be contained in email messages, not the document itself, or that instant messaging should be used as a substitute for a short phone call, but not a substitute for email.

Despite being conscious of the governance implications of collaboration, there is no need to be concerned that it increases risk or poses unknown dangers. All quantitative and anecdotal reports to date indicate that the next generation of collaboration capabilities deliver substantial business benefits and are the “new normal” for how we work.

This should come as good news for organizations interested in improving service delivery, enhancing efficiency and meeting the needs of increasingly diverse workers, suppliers and citizens.

About Allstream

Allstream is a leading national communications provider that works exclusively with businesses of all sizes.

An industry leader in delivering innovation, Allstream is focused on unifying and elevating all the ways that businesses connect and collaborate to serve customers, to drive workforce and partner productivity, and to get payback on networking and IT resources.

Headquartered in Toronto, Allstream leverages the entrepreneurial spirit and skills of 3,000 employees across Canada. Our portfolio features advanced capabilities including: network connectivity and infrastructure, managed network services, and unified communications solutions.

Our portfolio is provided across an extensive national broadband fibre optic network that spans some 30,000 km. We supply international connections through strategic partnerships and interconnection agreements.



To learn more about Allstream please visit

www.allstream.com

Allstream

200 Wellington Street West
Toronto, Ontario M5V 3G2

Call or visit:

1-877-288-7253

www.allstream.com/services/uc/collaboration

