

Collaboration is Changing— and Companies Need to Get on Board

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As companies become increasingly dispersed, with more and more people working apart from their colleagues, managers and direct reports, the very nature of collaboration is changing. But it's not just *how* people collaborating that's different; it's the fact that they are more *inclined* to collaborate in the first place. While much has been made of how social networking is blurring the lines between public and private, it's also done something else: encouraged information sharing and open collaboration in a way not seen before, at least not among far-flung friends and co-workers.

That's a big change. It's safe to say that for as long as companies have been doing business, they've been looking for ways to increase and improve collaboration. That's especially true in a knowledge economy, in which information, ideas and execution are what separate winners from losers.

Today, the challenge of simply talking to people has grown as the workplace has become more virtual. Just getting employees to *connect* can be difficult, never mind getting them to do something useful once they get there. The need for better collaboration is driving new ways of communicating, which has led to significant trends in the communications market: Voice over IP, conferencing, instant messaging, unified messaging and unified communications are all popular because they make it easier for people to know when someone's available, then interact with him in the most appropriate and effective way. The goal is to get the right information into the right people's hands at the right time—thus speeding decision making and improving business processes.

But just getting people talking (or chatting, or conferencing) doesn't mean they're going to collaborate in a meaningful way—one that helps the company achieve its goals and improve its bottom line. That requires a willingness and desire to put teamwork ahead of individual success—a recognition, if you will, that working together for the good of the group is better than hoarding information and using it to advance to career of the individual.

The so-called digital-native generation gets this. Certainly, they are comfortable using next-gen technology such as IM, videoconferencing and social media. But more important, they use the technology to share information in an increasingly open and valuable way. Their status is based on sharing information: personal details about their lives, to be sure, but also helpful content, links and advice to those who seek it. In this new world, reputation, not information, is power—and that *reputation* is built through collaboration.

Now, businesses need to figure out how to take advantage of the shift. First, they must change their policies and practices to reward collaboration over individual success. Second, they must give all employees access to technology—tools like video and web conferencing—that supports and encourages not just communication, but true collaboration.

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