

Leveraging Existing Assets to Collaborate

Contributed by Keith Walters
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Though the La Madeleine by SMU was a convenient place for Marc Hoppers and me to meet to grab a cup of coffee, we certainly stood out;

two of the lone business types amongst the buzzing college student and faculty crowd. Marc had it all tuned out, deep into his email, when I arrived, displaying the sure signs of today's entrepreneur — passion, focus, dedication and the ability to set up office anywhere.

Marc's company, Cogent Company, (www.cogentcompany.com) focuses its services on the collaboration space — helping clients implement collaboration in their workplace. Now, "collaboration" is one of today's overworked words, almost as overworked as "innovation". But, it is a passion of mine and of Marc's as well. For me, because of my experiences, the picture painted in my head around "collaboration" involves enabling groups of highly disbursed individuals to work together; i.e. creating cohesive teams between the US, India and China. But the discussion with Marc brought a better grounding to the image, meaning and application of collaboration.

While much of today's focus on collaboration looks at it in a grand scheme; Merriam-Webster's simple definition may put it best: "to work jointly with others in some endeavor". This is what goes on every day in every organization. Well, maybe not. This is what is hoped to happen. Collaboration has to happen at the simplest level of business for business to succeed. The order taker at the drive-through window has to collaborate with the kitchen and the cashier in order to get the fast-food order taken and delivered promptly and accurately. This collaboration is a now-standard business process that is aided, in most stores, with technology. And, in cases such as the fast-food restaurant, it is aided by specialized technology.

My initial plans were to talk with Marc about how organizational culture can hinder collaboration, even with the most robust collaborative tools in place. Instead, I found our conversation going down the path of how readily available common technology is today to increase productivity and effectiveness of existing, ongoing collaborative efforts and to find new ways to collaborate. Two of Cogent Company's offerings are Collaborative Services and Business Process Automation. This duality is necessary from a marketing perspective. But, in essence, they are close to the same thing; in most organizations the base business processes require collaboration.

What struck me most in our conversation is how readily available the technology needed to automate collaboration is. Most organizations can leverage a high degree of technology-enabled collaboration without any additional technology expenditure. Businesses today, large and small, typically have a Microsoft technology backbone powered by MS Server; use a fairly new version of Microsoft's Office products (Word, Excel, …) and use MS Exchange/Outlook for email. The base functionality of Microsoft's collaborative product, Sharepoint (Windows SharePoint Services), is imbedded in the new MS Windows Server. And, Microsoft's other products have been developed to integrate together and with Sharepoint. Automated collaboration, and the increased productivity it brings, is only a knowledge gap away.

That's where Marc's company comes in. For many organizations Cogent Company can come in with an accelerated business solution and automate a repetitive collaborative task in a matter of days. The savings from that type of collaboration can potentially be measured not in hours, but in FTE equivalents. And, once this type of collaboration is proven on known activities, its natural progression is to expand it to market differentiating activities, creating opportunities for the organization to stand out in the marketplace.

One example of a repetitive and time-consuming collaboration process is the employee evaluation process. Many people (employee, supervisors, co-workers, etc.) must collaborate on assessing the employee; providing input which much be collated, judged, filtered and disseminated. Often, this process becomes such a burden it doesn't happen in a timely fashion, if it happens at all.

Imagine though, applying collaborative technology to this process. Employee evaluations are automatically calendared via Outlook collaborating with the personnel database. Six weeks prior to the scheduled review an evaluation packet is automatically disbursed to the employee being evaluated, their supervisor, and others. The employee can choose co-workers to forward the packet to for peer-level evaluation. The technology tracks the personnel doing the evaluating and

routinely sends reminders to complete. In the designated time frame the evaluations are securely routed back to the collaborative site where the inputs are automatically merged and the compiled set of input is available for the supervisor to do evaluation meeting preparation. At the same time the collaboration technology automatically schedules the evaluation meeting for the supervisor and employee. Now the manual part – the supervisor has to read and understand the input; tracking down any additional information needed and the evaluation meeting is held. The automated collaboration process then gathers and files the review results, and schedules any follow-up activity or the next evaluation process trigger.

Does it sound doable? I know it is since I've seen it done in one of my businesses. In doing so we drove out much of the overhead cost of gathering information for the review and reduced the supervisor time for review, outside of the review meeting itself, to less than one-half hour per person. And, even more importantly for the personnel, evaluations started being held on time.

So much for the basic business collaboration; what about a collaboration process that differentiates you in the marketplace? How about collaborative process that vastly decreases the time to propose new work to your prospective customers using a collaborative database of all your marketing and proposal assets? Your sales person goes out on a client call or to an RFP meeting. During the meeting the sales requirements are wirelessly communicated with the collaborative environment. At the end of the sales meeting the sales person takes a memory stick and inserts it in the prospect's computer and prints off the proposal; ready for the client's signature. Talk about differentiating from the competition that needs a week to respond with a proposal.

The beauty of it all, as Marc points out, is that the technology to do much of this already exists in most environments. It's a matter of understanding how the technology can be applied to basic business needs. Marc's passion around the topic of collaboration is contagious. It's the sign of an entrepreneur on his way to success. Or, it's too much caffeine. Who knows, maybe they're the same.