

Where Does Collaboration Technology Go Next?



Getting employees to use and, more importantly, accept online collaboration technology is like trying to get a child to eat a new vegetable—you can explain it tastes good and is healthy, but when the time comes to eat it, perception is everything.

Many people have the perception that new technology creates new hurdles, like learning the software and adapting to a different way of organization and operation. The decision to adopt online collaborative software can be seen as a decision to disrupt a company's employees. But, if a construction company is willing to face the "people problem" head on, the shift to online collaboration can lead to several benefits.

In the late 1990s, the construction industry first saw network-based collaboration tools that created a new way to manage the teamwork necessary to complete a project.

Nearly a decade later, technology continues to advance, with building information modeling (BIM) receiving considerable attention in the industry. BIM utilizes 3-D design tools to create a virtual build-

ing that drives collaboration, the procurement supply chain, scheduling and construction techniques. This technology has the potential to bolster more efficiency, as well as create more disruption.

But, why would a firm immersed in the business of construction, not technology, want to add disruption to the process?

In 2006, two comparable studies examined this question, asking if and how project manage-

ment software has helped companies. The two studies were conducted by the Harvard Graduate School of Design and the Network for Construction Collaboration Technology Providers (NCCTP) in the United Kingdom. The studies determined collaboration technology provides tangible benefits, such as staff and time savings, as well as intangible benefits, such as better information control.

The Harvard study conducted 102 interviews with 81 industry stakeholders. One tangible benefit stakeholders reported was the average request for information (RFI) turnaround decreased from 14 days using traditional means, to five days using collaboration software. The time it took a staff member to complete an RFI decreased from 45 minutes to five minutes, and savings from copying and mailing fewer documents increased.

Other benefits that ranked highly in the study (close to or above a four out of five rating) included: improved data availability, a complete audit trail, improved information management, faster reporting and feedback, accurate and timely information, and improved information con-

trol. Some respondents noted other benefits, such as improved company image, improved customer relations and increased negotiating power.

The NCCTP found similar responses in its interviews with 272 end-users of collaboration technology. In the study, 96 percent of respondents using collaboration technology said it benefited their business, and all were likely to re-use the technology on future projects. Of the respondents, 52 percent were highly committed to using the technology and planned to make significant use of it on most, if not all, future projects.

Study respondents also recognized the people problem, with 73 percent noting "getting everyone to agree to use the technology" as a barrier to implementation. Why are some people unwilling to adopt the technology? Reasons include doubts regarding its practical usefulness, concerns about implementation and skepticism about actual improvements.

This people problem is the most likely hurdle a construction company can expect to face when implementing project management software and online collaboration. Technology vendors and construction firms can work together to identify and overcome this hurdle. Vendors must make their tools easy to use and transparent to the user. For this partnership to work, vendors also must accept feedback from their customers in order to learn from the industry.

In addition, construction executives must impress on their employees that technology is an important tool for remaining competitive.

Gould is director of marketing for Avolve Software, a subsidiary of Informative Graphics Corporation (IGC). For more information, visit www.projectdox.com.