



## Collaborative Workflow: Social Software on a Mission

We examine the rise of enterprise collaboration and what characteristics you should expect in a collaborative workflow platform.

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*Collaborative workflow* is a hybrid system produced by the confluence of two previously separate software models: social software (such as chat, instant messaging, and document collaboration) and service management (workflow) software.

There is a natural synergy between the two paradigms: service and project management (which gives social software structure and measurable goals) and social software (which removes the barriers to communication that create information silos in many organizations).

### Origins: The IT Revolution

From its early beginnings in data center management, collaborative workflow has travelled a long and winding road. Prior to the 1980s, enterprise IT was centered in a remote facility. The data center was management-oriented, removed from the daily work-lives of most employees, and was often a cumbersome leviathan containing corporate information silos.

The introduction of the IBM PC in the early 1980s marked the beginning of a computing revolution. It catalyzed a familiar pattern consisting of the decline of a structure that results in a vacuum, followed by mayhem, leading to a process of stabilization and restoring equilibrium.

The proliferation of PCs in organizations pierced the hegemony of the IT department over corporate computing resources. Computing balance of power shifted from the data center towards the knowledge workers -- the service providers throughout the company who deliver a significant part of the value-add.

PCs initially made their way into the corporate environment through the "back door," often by individual initiative. For example, a senior consultant demanded a micro-computer to run his Visicalc models, generate his proposals with WordStar and keep his records with dBase. The chaotic environment that ultimately resulted was unanticipated and initially not even noticed.

Soon, it was evident that the new computing democracy standards were fraught with trial and error and required an ever-increasing level of technical support. This support came not only from the newly minted "computer department" but increasingly from team members. The work hours devoted to peer support led to an alarming drop in worker productivity.

By the early 1990s, well-respected consulting groups were advising their clients that organizations spent roughly three times the amount of money on peer and informal technical support as they did on hardware. This represented a significant expense, considering that a typical IBM PC cost about \$5,000 at the time. The PC revolution was close to spinning out of control. The only saving grace was that the world of mainframe computing was even more inefficient.

It was against this backdrop that the modern help desk was born. The data center had lost its monopoly on computing, creating a power vacuum that cried out for efficient problem-solving and delivery of IT resources. Some organizations created customized solutions for standardizing and automating processes. For example, the United Kingdom's Office of Government Commerce created the Information Technology Infrastructure Library (ITIL) to promote standard practices in the deployment and management of IT resources.

Workflows supported by early help desks of the 1990s were relatively simple: problems were reported, dispatched, routed to a technician, resolved, and closed. As decentralized computing matured, customized workflow solutions

(such as change management, configuration management, and problem management) were developed. IT was increasingly able to resolve problems and roll out new applications faster, reliably, and with greater ease.

Today, a reasonably mature help desk also incorporates business rules to automate workflow and issue alerts to warn of impending failures and breaches in levels of service.

### **The Rise of Social Software**

When a revolutionary technology is introduced, it often forges its own unpredictable path.

In the late 70s and early 80s, Digital Equipment Corporation was the most successful manufacturer of minicomputers in the world. In 1977, its founder, Ken Olson, declared that "there is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home." Less than a decade had passed before multitudes were hanging out in chat rooms and sharing interests in the privacy of their own home.

Today, an entire generation has grown up embracing social software tools such as chat, bulletin boards, and wikis. As this generation worked its way into the corporate boardrooms, organizations began to recognize the inherent value of online interactions and have begun to implement social software within their IT infrastructure.

### **Social Software in Search of Purpose**

Because social software is not structured or goal-oriented, simple social tools may fail to produce real, tangible results. When goals, commitments, timelines, and performance measurements do not exist, social media tools are unable to meet productivity objectives. Their benefits are not measured, and are the realm of folklore.

There are examples of initiative that have produced tangible results, such as open software or Wikipedia. These, however, are exceptions that met with success due to the internal motivation of volunteers. This dynamic is not prevalent in the workplace, hence the need for measurement and management.

As compared to simple social software tools, collaborative workflow is able to structure online social interaction into tasks that are goal-oriented, defined and measured. Blue-sky collaboration is best used for unstructured pure-play idea formation, whereas collaborative workflow is carried out according to a set project framework with specific objectives.

### **Service or Product -- A Gradual Shift**

In the early days of the 20th century, more than 40 percent of the U.S. population was employed in farming. Today's figure is less than 2 percent.

The manufacturing sector has also seen a significant decline in relative employment. As the list of *Fortune* 500 companies is churned over time, service-based companies replace manufacturing operations with increasing frequency.

Paradoxically, it is precisely because productivity of manufacturing has grown so dramatically in the last 50 years that its relative value of the economic pie has dropped equally as dramatically. There is a limit to how many low-cost manufactured goods we can stuff our homes with. A manufacturing-based economy makes sense where wages are low relative to the value of the product -- that is in economies where wages are low or where the value of the product is high (such as precision manufacturing). Today, most industrialized economies are service based; the manufacturing of the physical product is generally outsourced to developing economies.

### **Effective Enterprise Collaboration**

Generally speaking, everyone in an organization is providing a service to someone else. To maintain a competitive edge in a services-based economy, it is important to provide superior quality and cost-effective deliverables and to minimize communications friction points. In the modern enterprise, this includes both collaboration tools and requisite infrastructure.

An effective enterprise collaborative workflow platform should support:

- A work breakdown structure (WBS): a goal-oriented project/task framework for deliverables.
  - Security: a role-based access control (RBAC) to provide security and confidentiality, while enabling team members to access specific tasks, documents and calendar items. RBAC also allows collaborating professionals to work across organizational boundaries, reducing information silos.
  - Social tools that enable linking of collaboration and communication activities to specific elements of the WBS, including communication (online chat, instant messages, and alerts), collaboration (structured document management including content indexing), and synchronization (such as calendaring tools).
  - Mobility: access from any mobile browser without requiring installation of an application.
- The integration of collaboration and communication tools with workflow software enables increased service efficiency by reducing information silos and the conventional business friction points of time, space, and organizational structure.

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