

Benefits of Using Online Collaborative Tools for Project Teams

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How do project teams collaborate? They meet, communicate, develop a plan, share ideas, and make decisions.

Unfortunately, canceled meetings due to calendar conflicts, missed calls and unreturned emails, unorganized tasks and de-centralized documents, and so on can all throw a wrench in this process.

Depending on the size and complexity of your team, some or all of these challenges may apply to you. Each of these challenges can be managed using web-based tools that have been developed specifically for better collaboration among teams.

Collaboration Challenge #1: Meetings

Whether your project team spans geographical borders or floors within the same building, getting a group of people in the same room at the same time is a luxury of the past. Most teams have adopted teleconferencing to bridge the distance, with a growing trend in web conferencing. **Web conferencing** enables a group of people to "meet" via an internet connection allowing all meeting participants to login to a common meeting space where documents can be presented and shared in a live setting.



Benefits of Using this Online Collaborative Tool:

- ◆ **Reduced costs.** Eliminating the need for your team to travel to a common meeting location can deliver moderate to significant cost savings to your project.
- ◆ **Increased working hours.** Eliminating travel gives that time back to your team to work on other important tasks, and ultimately get more work out of the workday.
- ◆ **Improved meeting quality.** Greater interactivity in a webconference means less "tune-out" among your team. Keeping everyone on the same virtual page allows your team to focus and eliminates distractions.

Collaboration Challenge #2: One on one communication

Phone calls always seem to go to voicemail and important emails get buried in all the other electronic communication your teams receive on a daily basis. **Instant messaging** (or IM) gained popularity as a

means of personal communication, and it also has meaningful application in the workplace. IM enables team members to communicate in real time, either through an add-in to your current email system, or another online provider. Team members can “chat” with one or more members at a time, restrict the members of a conversation, and indicate when they are “busy” or offline.

Benefits of Using this Online

Collaborative Tool:

- ◆ **Quick questions, quick answers.** Instantly connecting with the right person saves time and simplifies tasks for your team.
- ◆ **More manageable inbox.** Connecting your team through IM can significantly reduce the ongoing conversations that typically occur via email. Give your team the ability to manage their inbox, rather than having sizable email inboxes manage your team.

Collaboration Challenge #3: Project Management

Tracking resources, managing tasks, sharing documentation and coordinating schedules...each of these aspects of managing your project requires frequent and consistent connections with your team. Developing a *web-based workspace* to manage your project gives your team all the resources it needs in one central location.

Benefits of Using this Online Collaborative Tool:

- ◆ **Centralization.** Common repositories are critical to project management – a one-stop shop for your project.
- ◆ **Increased awareness.** It’s easy for your team members to only focus on their piece of the puzzle; creating an online project workspace gives the team access to and a greater understanding of the larger team effort.
- ◆ **Encouraged ownership.** An online project workspace is very visible, and hard to ignore. Your team will be much more likely to embrace the project and embrace its role in it.

Collaboration Challenge #4: Mind Mapping

Mind mapping an idea or a plan with a group of people requires a level of synergy that typically only occurs in person. One thought generates another and people “feed” off each other’s ideas. That synergy can be difficult to replicate with a virtual team that does not have the advantage of physical proximity.

Using *web-based mind mapping applications* can re-energize the virtual team’s creative strength. These applications rely on individuals participating in a real-time online environment, tracking input and changes.



Benefits of Using this Online Collaborative Tool:

- ◆ **Real-time brainstorming.** Multiple users or team members can create maps and make changes simultaneously to the same maps.
- ◆ **Sharing of ideas.** Web-based mind mapping tools are very user-friendly, even for people who are new to mind mapping. Team members will be able to share ideas and express complex concepts.

Collaboration Challenge #5: Decision Making

Making decisions within a team can present a number of challenges. Driving a group of people to provide input, weigh benefits and costs, identify risks and ultimately make progress towards a goal can bring any project or team to a standstill. Enlisting the help of a *web-based decision making tool* can streamline these challenges for any project team.

Benefits of Using this Online Collaborative

Tool:

- ◆ **Broad-based input.** Web-based applications enable teams to reach out to a large set of stakeholders to provide input into decision-making.
- ◆ **Reduced costs.** Online decision-making tools allow teams to optimize time and resources.
- ◆ **Increased awareness.** Enlisting a large group of team members or stakeholders in your decision-making process helps to build a common understanding for your team's goals and objectives.

Consistent and Frequent Communications

Keep in mind that none of the tools in this article is a one-size-fits-all solution for your collaboration challenges. Think about the areas that present you the greatest strife in bringing your team together, and focus on implementing solutions that will drive benefits.

Consistent and frequent communication is an element of success for any project team, especially virtual teams or teams relying heavily on web-based solutions. Beware of creating too much “virtual distance” with your team, a concept that describes the risks faced when the “primary method of communication and coordination is not face-to-face.”¹

¹ From www.virtualdistance.com, Virtual Distance International

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