

Happy together: Knowledge management and collaboration work hand-in-hand to satisfy the thirst for information.

- [Kim Ann Zimmerman](#) of KMWorld Magazine

By Kim Ann Zimmermann

Knowledge management tools are the workhorses of structured data management, enabling such functions as routing a document through a predetermined workflow for approval or processing a transaction. On the flip side, true collaboration requires freestyle communication—such as an exchange of e-mails, an online meeting with a virtual whiteboard or a Word document with comments from several people.

If the information communicated during an online meeting or e-mail exchange is going to be put to work, there needs to be some structure to how the knowledge is stored and shared. The job of collaboration tools is to marry the need for freeform communication and structured knowledge gathering and storage.

For example, what good is a group of people getting together to toss around ideas for the next project if that information just disappears into the ether when the meeting is over? Collaboration tools look for elements of KM to put all of the seemingly disjointed information into a database that can be searched, archived and retrieved as the project moves forward.

“What we’ve found is that there is a lot of work being done through e-meetings and other online collaboration tools, but there was no way to make that information readily available and accessible as the project moved forward,” says Jim Shelhamer, director of consulting services for [SiteScape](#). “Collaboration systems provide a place to bring together people to communicate and share information. What KM brings is the ability to capture the knowledge that is shared in an e-meeting, for example, and manage it along with comments on document.”

One of the major points of pain in collaboration is that the experts within an organization are often bombarded with requests for help. By sharing knowledge with their colleagues individually, rather than in a more structured way, they create a bottleneck.

“What we had were people circling the experts wanting information like airplanes stacked up at a busy airport,” says Chip Yonkee, e-business manager for [Siemens Energy & Automation](#). Siemens uses SiteScape technology for collaboration and KM. “We’re a technical engineering company. People get together and say, ‘Oh, I can make that better,’ and they add a bit of code. The final documentation doesn’t reflect that, and the next person who embarks on a similar project doesn’t have that information unless we make it shareable.”

The challenge, he says, is managing the people who manage the knowledge. "You have to make it easy for them to share, or they won't." Siemens takes collaborative efforts and turns them into "repeatable" knowledge. The process entails just a short application note, that is "scrubbed" by a knowledge manager and put into a template that is searchable and standardized. That captures the knowledge without hampering collaboration, Yonkee says.

"A perfect example of the value [collaboration and knowledge management] bring to Siemens is when I had to institute a cross-functional team of 18 to 20 people spread across the United States and Germany," says Yonkee. "We needed a communication channel that would be up 24/7. Because of the six-hour time difference, we set 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. as the push time. People were able to discuss ideas and share Web-enabled documents. Many people travel and this is great for working out of a hotel room."

Since there are people accessing the knowledge database and sharing information from all parts of the company all over the world, Siemens had to provide easy access while ensuring security.

"[SiteScape] lets you see through a firewall, and because the information is easily searchable, everyone can find what they need. We reduce our administrative efforts by 30%," explains Yonkee.

SiteScape's Shelhamer points to an oil company the vendor has worked with as another example of an organization that evolved its collaboration system from being a place where people get together to discuss ideas to an environment that includes structured ways to make that knowledge available to the larger community.

"They have communities of practice on all different topics across departmental and geographical boundaries," he says. "They started off using a collaboration tool to discuss various issues and work on projects. But they have now taken that free-form approach and formalized their knowledge management so that the information exchanged can be shared and is searchable and available for other people in the company facing these issues or working on similar projects," Shelhamer says.

One of the biggest hurdles in putting a formalized knowledge management structure to collaborative systems is making the structure as seamless as possible, says Terry Jordan, VP of marketing for [Hyperwave](#).

"You really have to make the process painless, or you lose all of the knowledge that you are trying to capture because people don't want to have to go through an enormous number of steps," Jordan says. Earlier this year, Hyperwave introduced features to its Web-based e-conferencing tool to collect and store conference content in the Hyperwave databank for retrieval at a later date.

By employing some knowledge management to its collaborative interactions, Jordan says, a Hyperwave customer like [McCann-Erickson](#), a large advertising and marketing agency, can leverage its large database of campaigns when working on new projects. McCann has many offices around the world, so it is often difficult to collaborate with others in the company.

"What started out as a way to be able to store and retrieve their previous campaigns has blossomed into a true collaborative effort," says Jordan. "Different people from all parts of the company can work as virtual teams to win new business. They can look at what has worked for similar clients in the past and build on those successful campaigns in a collaborative environment."

McCann even takes the collaboration and knowledge sharing a step further by bringing its clients into the mix. "Instead of having a lot of face-to-face meetings with clients to share new designs, the clients can access those designs online and then have a dialog with the team at McCann," Jordan says, with all the knowledge being captured and stored for later reference.

A substantial knowledge sharing and collaborative effort is going on in the Army. Army Knowledge Online (AKO), the military's online portal, uses tools from [Appian Corp.](#) to provide customizable workspaces, called Knowledge Centers, and a structure for knowledge management and information reuse. The collaboration tool provides virtual workspace for every AKO user.

An unusual aspect of the collaboration and KM effort is that each user is allocated 50 MB of storage space to store files and choose who may have access to them. AKO currently contains close to 150,000 documents in approximately 300,000 Knowledge Centers. Almost 10,000 documents are downloaded daily.

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