

Collaboration, the ‘Big Society’ and a new way of doing business

Recent advances in collaboration technology can bring about big changes in the way organisations communicate both internally and externally – and the timing couldn’t be any better, says NIGEL MOULTON.

Collaboration is a term that is often overcomplicated, so let’s keep things simple. What we are referring to is the technology that pulls together all the communication methods that people use today – including email, instant messaging, voice, video and social media – to help them work together more effectively.

The question is: why should the detail of how people communicate in their day-to-day operations matter to the board? A recent news story helps make the discussion relevant. Francis Maude, the Minister for the Cabinet office in the UK Government, announced that he is investigating the idea of giving public sector workers the right to set-up co-operatives within their departments and effectively run services themselves. It is an extension of the UK Government’s Big Society idea, which aims to take authority away from politicians and give it back to communities and other stakeholders.

For Maude’s idea to be a success, it will require motivation and goodwill from employees. But more than that, I believe it will also require a new approach to the way communications are organised within the proposed ‘co-operative’ style structures – and specifically an approach that inspires greater creativity and collaboration.

Fortunately, this is one of those times when developments in technology are meeting new expectations and requirements. Recent advancement in unified communications, led by the new Avaya Flare Experience platform, are delivering groundbreaking, next-generation workspaces that deliver a compelling unified collaboration experience. Flare, for example, breaks down the barriers between today’s communications tools through a unique user interface, offering quick and easy access to tools like high definition desktop video, social media, multimedia conferencing, directories, IM and contextual history all in one place. In short, this kind of unified solution is no longer a ‘nice to have’: it is absolutely vital to the facilitation of new ways of working.

This was something identified in recent years by business strategist and author Professor Richard Scase, who argued in his *Global Remix* book that we are already seeing the breakup of traditional workplace structures and the growth of a new, collaborative ‘café culture’ in its place. “Businesses have to encourage flexible, remote and other working practices that are appropriate to colleagues, according to their individual preferences and needs,” says Scase. “But, alongside this provision, corporations have to redesign

their workplaces as cafés to encourage the exchange of ideas and informal collaboration in the development of projects, products and services.”

Scase also makes the point frequently in his book that these restructured workplaces need to be extended to include virtual workspaces that encourage companies to leverage their global talent to maximum effect. And Scase’s overall argument is that if large organisations don’t follow this path, focused on creativity and collaboration, they risk losing their best people to smaller and more entrepreneurial organisations that offer greater freedom and flexibility.

Speaking as someone in the communications industry, the conclusion I draw from this is that we need to focus on the application of collaboration technology today as a way of fostering innovation – allowing companies to react more quickly to changes in the market, and capitalise on new opportunities as they arise.

It is also important to remember that collaboration has a significant role to play in improving customer service in the digital age. Give customers a good experience in today’s market – with all other things such as pricing and features remaining equal – and they will stay loyal for the long term. But give them a bad experience, and the news will quickly spread far and wide through online social networks. So as well as using collaboration tools internally to improve communication, the most forward-thinking businesses are also transforming their customer service operations into multimedia ‘interaction’ centres – allowing customers to contact them through whichever form of media they choose. Unified communications is the technology that is enabling organisations to fight these battles on all fronts, bringing forward a new spirit of collaboration that is not only vital to commercial success, but is attuned to the way working and social cultures are changing. More than ever, the time to start thinking about adoption is now. ■



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