Software
Collaborative Intranets

Collaboration & Intranets

white paper

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Introduction

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Many organizations have avoided discussion of collaboration solutions, primarily because the subject has so far only been poorly defined. Instead, they tend to use tools like ERP, office tools or design-authoring tools to provide limited, structured solutions.

Over the last five years, two approaches to enhancing collaboration have gained momentum: Groupware and Knowledge Management.

Groupware is a term that was coined by Lotus to describe their workgroup productivity software package, Lotus Notes. Other suites that fall into the same category include Novell's GroupWise and Microsoft's Exchange.

Knowledge Management (KM), a major buzzword among IT professionals and researchers, represents a further step (beyond groupware) in organizational interaction. Knowledge Management is still a highly theoretical approach, and many organizations in search of more practical solutions have been watching the rapid emergence of Intranet models with interest.

In the wake of the explosion in popularity of the Internet, the groundwork has been laid for channeling the energy of the Internet community, particularly in the fields of Intranet creation and eBusiness.

Both of these arenas provide the IT world and its customers something they can build upon: clear, proven models that avoid the complications of open standards technology, new development or commercial paradigms.

Intranets build directly upon the proven Internet model, and thus benefit from years of amassed experience and development. An additional advantage is that the model allows access from anywhere. Unlike the Internet, however, Intranets provide the added feature of compartmentalizing access to an organization's Knowledge Base.

We believe that the increased popularity of Intranets will push collaboration issues to the forefront.

From Intranet to Collaboration

When developers construct an Intranet, they rarely deal directly with the thorny issues of collaboration. System requirements are more typically assessed through the broader question of how to ensure that the Intranet is an attractive resource to users.

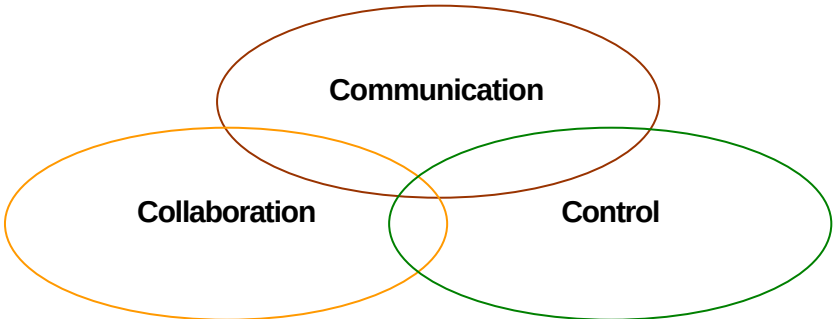
Intranet development strategies typically focus on three requirements:

- Personalization: one lesson learned from the Internet is that cluttering a site with too much information is a mistake. The best approach is to provide users with only what they need and avoid deluging the interface with excess tools.
- Communication: new forms of communication, such as chat rooms and forums have proven extremely effective in disseminating information.
- Publication: i.e. the creation and maintenance of internal newsletters, and how to maintain interest.

Once these requirements are defined, Intranet developers consult market studies, and look to Internet companies for workable models.

Collaboration: Where Do We Stand?

Three overlapping and competing requirements lie at the core of any discussion of collaboration tools: communication, control and collaboration. This model, illustrated below, identifies both the potential -- and the drawbacks – facing IT professionals wrestling with collaboration issues.



3 overlapping paths to organizing generic process support

Communication

Email systems demonstrate that simple software tools can dramatically affect the communication process within an organization. They remind us of the power of technology and its ability to change behavior and enhance productivity.

The judicious use of chat rooms and forums also provides opportunities for useful information exchange.

This can be seen as the core support for human-to-human collaboration.

Control

Workflow systems allow a 'process,' once defined, to be streamlined, reinforced and controlled.

Collaboration

Collaboration assumes that these same processes are difficult to define, since they change over time: hence the need for a more unstructured approach.

Attempting to build upon a shifting set of organizational or user requirements can be costly, time-consuming and wasteful. Many Lotus Notes users, intent upon developing a Notes solution to their collaboration issues, have discovered this to their chagrin.

Whether through shifting requirements or changes in user perception of the product, the results are often the same:

- User dissatisfaction
- Unfulfilled expectations/demands
- Skyrocketing costs
- The wrong tool for the job

Microsoft is encountering similar difficulties, but with a major difference: Microsoft recognized the difficulty and backed away from making grandiose product claims. Microsoft Exchange's sales line has shifted from "The Lotus Notes Killer" to the more modest "Best Email Platform," deferring any coherent solution to the collaboration problem until some vague future date (it is claimed that

their Tahoe effort will magically resolve all this). Millions of users have opted for the ad hoc solution of using the collaborative features of Outlook and Explorer in tandem. Microsoft may be distracted from tackling the issue for some time to come, as it pours resources into its .Net initiative.

For the moment, collaboration by common users takes the form of documents shared via LANs and emails. This may not be a satisfactory or a solid solution.

New Experiments

Thankfully, competition has given rise to two new tools for resolving the inherent complexities posed by collaboration: the semi-suite approach and the do-it-yourself (DIY) approach.

The Semi-Suite Approach

Some developers have taken a pragmatic tack. They market applications that provide focused solutions to specific requirements, rather than attempting a more ambitious, full-featured suite. Typically, these utilities address:

- Document sharing (eRoom and LiveLINK are two examples)
- Project management (i.e. specialized software for handling legal cases)
- Communications (i.e. forums or chat rooms)

One newcomer, Groove.net, turns the Internet paradigm on its head by using a Napster-like peer-to-peer model.

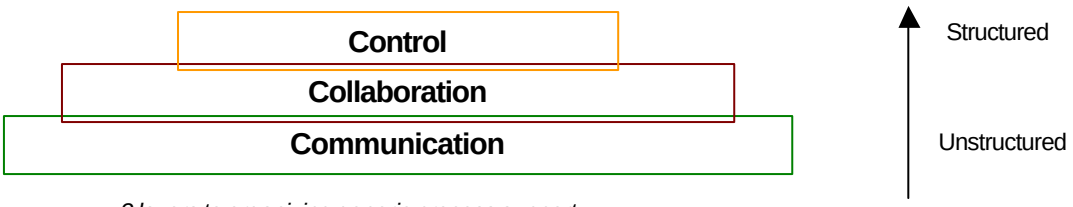
An organization might effectively satisfy the requirements discussed above by knitting together several applications and backing it all with an Intranet Portal Offering that acts as a data gatherer.

The Do-It-Yourself Approach

Internet development tools such as ColdFusion, WebSphere and SilverStream can be used to build ad hoc collaborative applications that challenge Notes and often provide better solutions from a technical standpoint (greater openness, RDBMS[1] back-ends, etc.). They represent an alternative balance of productivity, programming flexibility, and openness.

The eLINK Proposition

Link Software's eLINK solution differs from the traditional model because its offerings are based on a tiered approach to Communication, Collaboration and Control. It is flexible enough to allow either a semi-suite or an unstructured approach to building a collaborative mechanism.



3 layers to organizing generic process support.

[1] Relational Database Management System

The baseline provides the user with building blocks for a basic information structure: Companies, Contacts, Projects, Actions, Documents and Emails. All of these building blocks can be linked together. For example, an action can be linked to multiple contacts and projects.

The eLINK interface is simple enough to enable a user to link elements and retrieve information using these links via seven data gateways. All of these pieces of information can be linked to one or multiple users and centralized in a knowledge base (RDBMS).

Unstructured Collaboration

To support unstructured collaboration, eLINK offers a framework where information is minimally organized. It is split into logical pieces, which are linked together as needed. For example, an email can be transformed into an Action or Document and contextually linked to persons, companies, or projects.

To structure some of the activities of a user or a group of users, eLINK uses normalized lookup tables. An example of how this might work follows:

ample: minar ganization

Let's say you needed to organize a seminar.

Using eLINK, your first step would be to create a folder, e.g. Seminar 12/12/2001.

To invite participants, you would create an Action linked to each person you intend to invite, then link the Action to your secretary. The secretary could then change the mode of the action in order to sort responses and plan follow-up – some options might include First Call, Accept Invitation, Confirmed Presence or Invitation Declined.

In executing the telemarketing campaign, he or she will change the Action mode to simplify the process of sorting responses.

More Structure

Any entity can be configured as a Form to collect information (a form seen as a group of custom fields is called a type). To collect different types of information (examples might include marketing and financial information, work estimates or registration forms on documents), eLINK can be configured to handle multiple types.

The next step is to use the underlying database capabilities through the query wizard to encapsulate the data collection process.

An Active List produced by the queries can then feed into follow-on steps in the process.

Underlying Advantage

The key element in eLINK's methodology is a simple model that allows its user to quickly learn and take full advantage of its capabilities.

Once eLINK users master the process of mapping their requirements into a workflow of Actions or Documents in projects, linked to companies and persons, they (managers and employees alike) have a system in place for analyzing, implementing and reinforcing the best practices needed for effective collaboration.

The process of migrating to such a system, like any major organizational change, has a political element that should not be underestimated. The success of any collaborative system relies upon user interaction, motivation and basic respect for a certain set of rules.

The eLINK solution has unequalled flexibility. It relies not on IT development, but on placing personalized, visual configuration tools in the hands of individual power users. The end users or managers can also configure the product to some extent, depending on the access rights assigned by power users.

This combination ensures that an eLINK system can be rapidly deployed and quickly adapted to meet changing needs, new requirements or new interpretations of existing needs.

The 80%-20% Rule Applied to Specific Business Processes

Our software in its generic form is intended to fulfill about 80 % of a typical end user's daily work requirements. An example of this would be the requirement for properly archived and shared email. Whereas one user might see this as unimportant, another might see the requirement as critical. The remaining 20% are specific business demands, defined by the person's job, department or company.

eLINK's framework can also be used to build Intranet applications to solve these requirements.

For example, an insurance company offers its affiliates a subscription to a newsletter. Five people are in charge of collecting subscriptions and inputting them into the system for transmission to the Accounting Department for invoicing.

The collection of data in this case creates a requirement for optional invoicing/delivery addresses and a choice of three types of subscriptions.

The user interface to support this application is simple. The problem is how to integrate new input with an existing company address book, maintained by the sales representatives and connected to the accounting department.

The eLINK Subscription application solves this by providing a simple login/form-validate-next/logout. This can be built in less than a day.

Conclusion

eLINK offers organizations that require multi-dimensional collaboration a simple, flexible., and easy-to-implement solution for sharing information.

eLINK's adaptability allows a single set of tools to be used to tackle problems in unrelated departments -- from HR to Marketing – and is scaleable enough to be used for something as simple as creating a vacation request submission form, or as complex as Project Management Analysis follow-up.

It is straightforward enough to be structured by the people who use it to meet their requirements at a specific level or at a given time.

It can be reconfigured at any time to meet emerging requirements without compromising the simplicity and clarity of the structure of its underlying knowledge base.

If a do-it-yourself approach is desired, eLINK can be set up with no to little programming; if necessary, user representatives or users may also retain responsibility for analyzing, delivering and reinforcing the system.

If a semi-suite approach is preferred, eLINK can be easily integrated through simple HTML derivation.

eLINK provides a very favorable effort-to-benefit ratio for organizations interested in developing more effective Intranet collaboration.