

Remote Working: The Truth About Collaboration Tools

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This is the first in a series of columns based on the premise that how we manage people has changed forever and we need to take a good look at what we're going to do about it. I'll be asking for your input because, heaven knows, if we wait for others to come up with solutions, we'll be in for a world of hurt.

Managing a team may be as it ever was, but what's changed is that the person you rely on for help on that project is probably not sitting in the next cube, or within shouting distance.

They could be on the other side of the planet, or at home, or in some airport (assuming your business still pays for people to get on airplanes). "Management by walking around" is all well and good, but it's a heck of a long walk to Bangalore.

So technology tries to fill the gap. From the look of my inbox, new "collaboration tools" and "enterprise knowledge capture and management systems" are popping up like meerkats after the lion leaves.

But what are we supposed to do with them all? How can we tell what's right for our team, our business and our sanity?

Over the coming months we'll take a look at how we manage virtually, what tools work, what best practices are emerging and who has it figured out so we can learn from them.

Part of that, of course is that we want to hear from you — what's working for you and what isn't?

One quick word about technology (and all you vendors out there please take note when you call so I don't have to explain it to you): tech rarely solves a business problem by itself.

How people use it determines its success or failure. After all, fire is a technology — you could use it to become a chef or an arsonist.

So let's look at two of the most common tools being used and what helps managers be effective with them.

Web meeting tools

What's on offer: WebEx, LiveMeeting, Dimdim, iLinc and approximately 125 others

What they're supposed to do: Save travel costs and help speed collaboration.

What they do well: Used correctly, these tools are powerful, interactive, engaging ways to share information in multiple ways. If you're a skilled user, you can share documents, assess your learners, train just in time, see each other via Webcam and do most things you can do in a real face to face meeting with a lot less wasted time and fewer calories. They also allow bored attendees to catch up on emails while the meeting drones on. That may qualify as something they don't do well, come to think of it.

What they don't do well: Create automatically skilled users or fast adoption. The dirty little secret of this world is that over half the people who are "licensed" to use the technology don't use it — ever. This is partly good old technophobia, but mostly it's because using this stuff takes practice and feedback which many people don't get. The tools are most effective in the hands of someone who's comfortable and practiced with the platform so they think about their content and the meeting's goal — not which button to push. Most companies don't build that into the learning curve. No-one knows this stuff instinctively and, until they invent an implant for everyone, lots of managers just won't use it.

Knowledge capture and group collaboration tools

What's on offer: Google groups, Ning, SharePoint, dozens of others, ranging from the insanely expensive to the free.

What they're supposed to do: Does everyone on the team know what everyone else knows? Instead of emailing, why not put it up on a shared file system that notifies the whole team via email or IM when new information is posted. Ask and answer questions, give everyone the latest version of what you're working on, and overcome time zones and distance. Oh, and when you lose that attachment you thought you'd saved, you can find it without having to ask the sender and admitting you've lost their hard work.

What they do well: When used properly, these become the life blood of a team's communication. If you need a question answered in a hurry, post it. If you want to know you're working with the latest data, there it is. People can build critical trust in each other's competency and rely on each other to work as a team even across continents.

What they don't do well: Fill themselves with data. These systems are only as good as the human input. If people are taught/ encouraged to use the system properly and the right measures are in place to reinforce that message — like when you get an email with an attachment, send it back and tell them to put it on the group page — they can boost productivity. Otherwise one or two of your

early adopters use it, everyone else pretends it will go away (because such initiatives usually do) and critical information goes there to die.

So let's hear it what have you experienced? Does your company help you use these tools or are you left to your own devices?

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