

**A Fool with a Tool is Still a Fool:
Overcoming Possible Pitfalls of Introducing Collaboration Tools
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Abstract

Collaboration is and always has been a central factor for project success. In times of international projects and virtual team environments collaboration is more important than ever. Technology can help overcome geographical boundaries to achieve collaboration. Indeed, technology has become an enabler of communication and collaboration. And yet collaboration is not about technology. It is about people and human interactions. Technology can enable, facilitate and promote collaboration. Provided we are aware of the limitations and possible pitfalls of introducing collaboration tools. This paper identifies possible pitfalls. And it lays out a roadmap how to overcome them and successfully introduce collaboration tools - without becoming slaves of our own collaboration tools.

Introduction: A call for collaboration

It is a truism: the world of projects has become bigger and more complex. It has become common to talk about international projects. Teams are distributed all over the world, depending on the needs of the project and the availability of people. It is not unusual that software is being built in Asia while the customer is sitting far away in Western Europe or North America. The world has become our playground so to say. But even in the smaller environment of projects, it seems that virtual teams are no longer a foreign term. It appears that it has become easier to communicate with people all over the place. It started with the phone, and then we had the fax. The advent of email revolutionized the way we communicated with peers. Everything has become closer together and faster. Where in the past it took days or weeks for a letter to reach the recipient it now takes only milli-seconds for an email message to be delivered and of course, we are expecting a response from the other side not within days or weeks but within hours or even within minutes. What a fast world it has become!

There is no end in sight. Communication becomes faster and faster. Every day we can witness the introduction of new tools and applications which promise to facilitate and improve collaboration. We have application and screen sharing, telephone conferencing, blogs, document/file sharing, email, fax, instant messenger, podcasts, RSS, shared workspace, surveys, video conferencing, virtual whiteboard, Wiki, and many others. Web 2.0 social networking tools such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Skype, twitter, etc. show us that people obviously have a desire to interact with each other. They want to share information, sometimes even very private data they would never share with their neighbor or even closest friend. What a wonderful world. Technology has become an enabler of communication and collaboration. It doesn't really matter that teams no longer work in one room or location. They can be anywhere around the globe. Thanks to Web 2.0 we are all closer.

Technology has increased productivity in our workforce. A 2009 McKinsey study shows that technology and especially Web 2.0 have contributed to a significant increase in productivity. "69 percent of respondents report that their companies have gained measurable business benefits, including more innovative products and services, more effective marketing, better access to knowledge, lower cost of doing business, and higher revenues" (McKinsey Business Technology Office, 2009, p.1). The use of technology has become a comparative advantage to those companies which know how to utilize it. Technology has helped reduce endless meetings, reduced time between messages sent, transition time is shorter. Information is available at our fingertip; Wikis allow us to learn from others' experiences. Collaboration has become easier thanks to technology. This is good news.

At first sight that is. The question is whether this picture may not be too rosy after all. Is it really the case that technology is the enabler of collaboration? Is it a given that collaboration tools inevitably result in greater productivity? What about the millions and millions of emails being sent every day? How many emails a day do we receive and how many of these contain really helpful content which helps you in your work? To which extent do they help save time and to which extent do they hold us back from other, more important things? Fact is that emails cost billions of dollars every day in lost productivity for organizing and filing emails.

In many cases we have become addicted to these little collaboration tools. We may even be at a point where we believe that the right tool is the most important element in collaboration. We may be able to phrase an email, know how to use the fancy collaboration tool in our company, are capable of uploading our latest status report to a website – but we have a hard time communicating with our co-worker next door.

If this sounds too familiar it may well be that we have become slaves of our own tools. Instead of tools helping us we work for them. We have become fools of collaboration tools. Unfortunately we may have not even recognized it. Instead we are convinced that all these fancy collaboration tools are the only way and means to facilitate, improve and enable collaboration.

However, collaboration is not about technology and the right collaboration tool. Collaboration is a human and social issue. It is about people. Unless we understand the foundation and critical success factors of collaboration, live and nurture collaboration in our daily project life, we remain fools. Until then the saying “a fool with a tool is still a fool” holds true.

This paper intends to warn us not become fools and slaves of tools. In the next section it reveals basic elements of collaboration contributing to project success. It then looks at a number of possible pitfalls of collaboration tools. In the last section it discusses how to overcome these pitfalls and outlines a roadmap to successfully introducing collaboration tools - without becoming a fool.

Critical Success Factors for Effective Collaboration

Project success is not about individual accomplishments. It is a joint effort; the project team delivers the project. Corollary, the team is the heart and soul of the project. Effective project managers understand the value and huge potential of teamwork. This is why they actively nurture collaboration. They serve as role models and are part of the team. They actively participate and contribute to teamwork. Collaboration is the juice of teamwork; it is what makes teamwork possible in the first place. It encompasses communication, individual and joint execution, as well as the delivery of results on both the individual and team level.

There is nothing about collaboration which calls for the use of any tools even less technology. Collaboration is about people, and working together. An individual team member may be an expert. But without the help of the rest of the team can hardly achieve the project vision alone. It takes a team and it requires collaboration. It is one of the cornerstones of projects. At the same time we need to see the value of collaboration. Effective collaboration can create and unravel team synergy effects. It leads to greater team productivity which is greater than the sum of the productivity of the individuals in the team.

Effective collaboration doesn't fall from heaven. It takes discipline to evolve. We need to know who is working on what, what roles need to be filled, who is responsible for what. We want to identify the strengths and weaknesses of our team members. Not to abuse this knowledge but to better utilize the strengths and overcome the weaknesses. In addition we want to know what drives individuals and the group in daily project life. Is it the project vision and objectives we follow or are we driven by other factors?

A successful project calls for active and effective collaboration. It requires the willingness and discipline of every single individual and the unity of the group to achieve it together. This open attitude is a critical success factor for effective collaboration. It is a state of mind and is based on a set of shared values (Denning, 2005). It requires the mutual understanding of everyone involved – from executive management to the project manager to the team member – about the need, the value and the benefits of collaboration.

Effective collaboration does not need exquisite or lengthy, highly complex rules. The true spirit of complexity rests in simple rules. What a team needs to become a performing team is simple yet powerful guidelines for collaboration. Such guidelines offer direction which have to be distinguished from which may lead to micromanagement, administrative overhead without adding any value to the project.

Effective collaboration and achieving project objectives go hand in hand. As a matter of fact, collaboration is a means to achieve the project objectives and thus to come closer to achieving the project vision. It is a central

element in project success. Corollary, you cannot achieve project objectives without effective collaboration. On the other hand, collaboration without a common cause leads nowhere. This is why collaboration needs to be results-oriented. The same applies to the right use of collaboration tools. It has to fulfill the purpose of facilitating results-oriented collaboration.

Possible Pitfalls of Introducing Collaboration Tools

The first and possibly the most fatal pitfall of introducing collaboration tools is the lack of the insights about the critical success factors for effective collaboration as outlined in the last section. A tool is a tool is a tool; no more, no less. The purpose of a collaboration tool is to enable, facilitate, and/or promote collaboration. However, if we don't understand the drivers of collaboration in the first place, chances are that a tool by itself will not inevitably lead to effective collaboration. It may, but it is not a given. In other words, using a collaboration tool does not make us great communicators. It takes more than the use of a tool. Hence, the saying "a fool with a tool is still a fool".

Another pitfall of introducing collaboration tools is the lack of executive support. This is a situation where the project manager understands the need and value of a collaboration tool. Unfortunately management doesn't. It may undermine your well intended effort of introducing a collaboration tool. For example, it may not use the tool or may not release the requested budget to purchase a certain technical tool. Consequently you lack the necessary organizational leverage to introduce the tool.

And even you enjoy executive support it is no guarantee for a successful introduction of the much needed collaboration tool. Another obstacle you may face is individuals in your own team. This may not necessarily be the case with a common collaboration tool such as email. But you could face opposition when you need to or want to use other tools such as instant messaging, a shared workspace or maybe even a collaboration platform such as SharePoint or Google Wave.

Individual opposition may be caused by a number of factors. They may be overwhelmed by the new technology. They may even be afraid of trying to or having to use anything new. Or they may just not be willing to try anything new. They want to stick to their regular, well-known tools. They may acknowledge that they don't work, but at least they know how they function. And they are willing to accept the limitations. They feel comfortable in their own environment. It is cozy and warm. Why try something else and lose the security of the known?!

Collaboration tools may create the much needed project transparency. Ironically, this is exactly what some individuals do not like. They don't want things to be transparent. Maybe it is because they are afraid that other people find mistakes and shortcomings. Maybe it is because they don't want to reveal or even given up collaboration waste such as endless meetings.

Yet another reason for people not using a collaboration tool may be because is being forced onto them. They have to use it regardless if they like it, understand it, or need it. They are expected to use but they are unwilling to do so. They have not been asked if the tools made sense, if they could use it. Nobody asked if the tool is in sync with their daily routines and workflow. Depending on the project environment this may be a complete showstopper – both for the tool and collaboration in general.

Having formally introduced a central collaboration tool, say a collaboration platform such as SharePoint, may be quite an accomplishment. Alas, it is no guarantee that this introduction yields the desired results and hence can be called a successful introduction. Modern tools such as SharePoint are very powerful. If set up and used right they can create immense value to a project. On the other hand you can easily over-engineer it. There are so many functionalities that team members lose sight of what they can, should, or have to do. You can create an information overflow. A tool which intends to be easy to use can quickly become too complicate to operate. A good intention can easily end up in disaster. The tool by itself develops a life of its own. The administrative overhead to keep the tool up to date is immense. Potential time savers are eaten up by administrative duties and information overflow. The tool may have eliminated some collaboration waste whilst creating new one elsewhere. Clearly not a situation you want to create or be in.

Last but not least a tool may become too central in your daily project life. In other words, the tool itself is at the center of all collaboration. Other means to promote and nurture collaboration are neglected. Take for example the

team member who is writing a lengthy email to his or her coworker instead of just speaking to the co-worker who is sitting across the table or next door. This is an example where technology has basically killed the human element of collaboration. The tool is no longer a tool. It is the epitome of collaboration in that specific project. This may work for some time. Nonetheless, it is no foundation for lasting project success because it ignores one of the most important elements in a project: people. We have become slaves of the collaboration tool. We have become a fool with tools.

Roadmap for a Successful Introduction of Collaboration Tools

As frustrating as these possible pitfalls are, there are remedies to overcome them and avoid them in the first place. Let's have a look at a roadmap for successfully introducing collaboration tools.

Step 1: Assess the collaboration requirements

The very first thing you have to do is understand the present situation you are operating in. In other words you have to understand the collaboration needs in your project. Is your team collocated or are you dealing with a virtual team? What kind of project are you dealing with in the first place? How long is the project? Where will it be located, who will be involved?

You also want to have a look at past projects and find out how people in those projects worked. Were they successful, if so, what drove collaboration? What impediments to effective collaboration did the teams face? Were they able to overcome them or were they trapped? Have there been areas where people did work together but collaboration has been ineffective and actually resulted in wasted effort? On this token, Manyika et al (2009) have identified ten forms of wasted effort in collaboration. They are:

1. Divergence = wasted effort due to politics, mismatch of goals
2. Misunderstanding = disconnect in understanding
3. Undercommunicating = excess or not enough time spent in communication
4. Interpreting = time spent interpreting communication or artifacts
5. Searching = time spent searching for information, relationships
6. Motion = handoff of artifacts or communications
7. Extra processing = excess creation of artifacts or information
8. Translation = time spent conforming objects to new outputs
9. Waiting = delays due to reviews, approvals, and bottlenecks
10. Misapplication = incorrect use of methods and technologies

In short, once you have assessed collaboration requirements in your project environment you want to know whether you need collaboration tools to enable collaboration or to improve an already existing strong collaboration culture.

Step 2: Select the right tool(s) – with your team

Just because we are talking about collaboration tools we are not automatically speaking of technology. Put things into perspective. If you and your team are collocated, i.e., working in the same location, chances are that you may need less technical tools than in a virtual team environment.

Michele Sliger and Stacy Broderick (2008) sorted the various forms of communication with respect to their effectiveness (Sliger & Broderick, 2008, p. 164):



Exhibit 1 - Pyramid of effective communication

Accordingly the most effective communication is at the top of this pyramid. It starts with face-to-face communication, followed by phone, IM, and chats and only in third place comes the popular email.

Collaboration is useless if it is not aimed in a certain direction. The same applies to collaboration tools. Collaboration has to be results driven. Keep the project vision in mind. A project is not a loose work group, it follows the purpose to deliver the project. Pick those tools which enhance project outcomes, which benefit the project and the project team.

Collaboration is about teamwork. On this token, involve as many team members in selecting the right tool as possible. They usually know their own workflows best. Choose tools which help team members in their daily routines. Different project roles require and use different collaboration tools. Classify the various roles and the respective workflows. Then match collaboration tools to these workflows. Make sure that the tool supports and facilitates the workflows and “do not allow the process to become tool-driven” (Hillson, 2009, p. 17).

Avoid collaboration waste: When you assess available tools ensure that they don’t create new collaboration waste. Some collaboration tools may be great in one to one situations such as email; on the other side they are insufficient and can even be disablers to effective collaboration and community building in a project setting which calls for many to many communication channels such as chat groups, polling, groupware, etc. (Comment by Pete DeLisi in Manyika et al, 2009).

In case you are considering a more complex technical tool setting up an assessment matrix is a valuable approach. Things to account for are technical integration effort with other possibly existing tools, maintenance needs, scalability, growth potential, training needs, license fees, hardware requirements (Hillson, 2009). It may be a tedious analysis. And it pays off; it reveals and compares the strengths and weaknesses of the various tools available – important information especially when you need to ensure a budget for the tool.

This brings us to the next point: secure the necessary executive support: It is great if you and your core project team have chosen the right collaboration tool. This is a first important step. It doesn’t stop there. Collaboration goes beyond the boundaries of the core project team. The extended project team includes stakeholders and the project sponsor. If they are the people who allocate and release the budget you need their support, too. Don’t try to convince them of the selected tool. *Show* them the need and the added value of the tool.

Step 3: Know how to use the tool(s)

There are endless collaboration tools. One promises more than the other. Keep the purpose of collaboration in mind. Don’t over-engineer the tool and don’t become a slave of the tool. The purpose of a tool is to help you, and not the other way around. Less is more. Keep it simple. Make sure that the tool is easy to use and easy to understand by everyone involved using it. You may not have to introduce all available features at once. Instead you may be able to gradually introduce features needed for the respective project phases you are in. Introduce those features first which add the most value to them and help produce actual results which benefit the whole team.

Beware of those team members who may be less technology zealous than you. Plan in and conduct end user training. Also, there is no rule that introducing a collaboration tool is the sole responsibility of a project manager. Involve the team. Let team members introduce and explain new tools to the rest of the team. Chances are greater that the complete team will be actually using it. It shows that they introduced the tool and that it is not forced upon them.

Step 4: Keep the tool(s) aligned with the project purpose

Projects are dynamic, project environments and collaboration requirements change. Corollary, collaboration tools have to be adjusted to the changing environment. Check regularly with your team if your collaboration tools still fulfill their purposes, i.e., facilitate and promote collaboration in order to meet the project objectives. If necessary make necessary changes. The same applies if initially a team agreed on the use of a collaboration tool, for example a WIKI, and as time passes neglect the tool and fall back to old habits.

If the team does not see or want to see the value of a collaboration tool which is deemed valuable for the purpose of the project, you have to seriously consider making the use of the tool mandatory. Nurturing collaboration is not a question of forcing the use of a tool, it is a question of leadership. “Only a good leader of the team can break down the barriers of communication and motivate the team members to communicate open and frank by using a collaboration tool” (Comment by Rainer in Manyika et al, 2009).

Conclusion

Collaboration is and always has been a central factor for project success. In times of international projects and virtual team environments collaboration is more important than ever. Technology can help overcome geographical boundaries to active collaboration. Indeed, technology has become an enabler of communication and collaboration. This is no call for the introduction of more technology in our projects. Technology can enable, facilitate and promote collaboration. However, collaboration is not about technology. It is first and foremost about people and human interaction. Effective collaboration in a project setting serves the purpose of the project; it is results-driven. Hence, the key to successfully introducing collaboration tools is not the understanding of technology. It is understanding the critical factors for project success of which collaboration is one element. Collaboration is a means to achieve project objectives. This is why we have to nurture collaboration.

The good news is that collaboration tools can help us achieve this. Provided we are aware of the many possible pitfalls of introducing collaboration tools. This is how we can overcome them: First, we need to have a good understanding of the real collaboration requirements in our project. Second, we have to select the right tools which help enable, facilitate and promote collaboration. Third, we have to know how to use the tools effectively and efficiently. Last but not least, we have to align all collaboration tools with the project objectives and keep them aligned throughout the project life cycle. Changing project environments require us to adjust our tools accordingly.

We must never forget that a tool is always a tool and remains a tool. We must not let technology dictate our workflows and become an end in itself. If it does, we have become slaves to our own tools. Then, we have become fools with tools. It is up to us to change it and overcome the obvious limitations.

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