

A number of articles have recently been published on collaboration. Focusing on collaboration tools, these articles have explored when they work, the challenges involved and how to avoid these problems in practice.

In many ways, these articles have taken for granted the central aspect of collaboration: the people involved. This article will explore the human face of collaboration, touching upon a range of enterprise considerations.

Collaboration can't be forced

It make no sense to 'roll out' collaboration tools to the whole organisation. Collaboration takes place between people, and can't be forced or created through the use of technology.

While it is possible to create new opportunities for collaboration using online tools, this is slow and hard, and not the best approach when implementing collaboration tools for the first time.

Instead, collaboration tools work best when they support existing collaboration taking place between individuals or groups within the organisation.

For example, regular meetings may be held between line managers to discuss quality assurance problems. A collaboration space can be a valuable support for discussions that are held during these regular (face-to-face) meetings.

Pilot collaboration projects should therefore seek out areas where there is a demand for tools to support existing groups or communities.

There must also be a clear purpose and common community for the use of collaboration tools, otherwise they will be little used.

The spread of collaboration tools must be allowed to occur at a 'natural' pace, with education and success stories generating further interest from across the organisation.

Provide opportunities for collaboration

Collaboration tools will fail when there is no opportunity for staff to actually collaborate. For these approaches to succeed, managers must recognise the value of communication and collaboration within (and between) business units.

There must also be a culture of collaboration at least partially in place for any new technologies to have an impact.

Address these business and cultural aspects first, before deploying new collaboration tools.

For example, there is a desire to have specialist doctors from across the region collaborate on new clinical guidelines. While this is a relatively straightforward use for collaboration tools, the organisational culture is one of 'silos', with every hospital working independently on clinical practices.

While this existing culture can be overcome, it would necessitate one or more face-to-face workshops, with facilitated discussions to build consensus. Time and resources would have to be allocated to this process by the various clinical managers from across the region.

Only once these steps have been taken will there be a strong enough community (and common understanding) for the work to be continued via collaboration tools.

While collaboration projects must spend much of their time building real-world interaction and culture, this is where many of the benefits are delivered.

Build social networks

Collaboration spaces are not just about collecting documents within teams and business units. To avoid the issues outlined in the article *Collaboration tools are anti knowledge sharing?*, the tools should also help to build social networks within the organisation.

Collaboration tools should indicate who the experts are, as well as key contact people within business areas. This allows staff to search not just for content and documents, but for people as well.

This can be seen in the success of Facebook in the wider world, and this type of networks can be replicated within organisations. This recognises that much of the work is done via the web of relationships between staff.

New staff also only become fully productive when they have built their own social networks. Collaboration tools can help with this process.