

# Collaboration

According to Evan Rosen, author of *The Culture Of Collaboration*, the process of collaboration can be defined as “working together to create value while sharing virtual or physical space.”<sup>1</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary Online defines *collaboration* as “the process of working jointly on an activity or project.”<sup>2</sup> Engaging in collaboration, then, requires only a couple of people and a plan to work on something of value.

The act of collaboration itself doesn’t require any technology at all; collaboration can take place between two coworkers using paper and pens in an office or using instant messaging and a digital whiteboard online. Collaboration can easily occur between two or more people who have never met face-to-face. The act of collaborating does not need to be based on technology to be effective, and even technological solutions won’t work if a culture of sharing and working together is not in place to begin with. Most of this report will focus on introducing new ways to collaborate by using technology—but it will not do any good if the team you are collaborating with is not prepared to share information and work together. A “culture of collaboration” must be in place in order to benefit from the information in this report.

If the staff at an organization is prepared to share information, work together on projects (and this sometimes means giving up personal credit for shared credit), and truly collaborate on projects together, the advice in this report will help to support those collaborative projects. Just throwing technology at a culture of individuals, however, will not change the way things work. To create a culture of collaboration, policies have to be in place so that collaborating is easy and desirable. Traditional organizations reward the individual; organizations that have a culture of collaboration reward the team. One can throw at anyone technology that makes working together in

teams possible, but supporting that technology with policies and top-down encouragement is important. Creating a culture that is truly collaborative is a bit beyond the scope of this report, but the resources section can help to ensure that the soft skills of collaboration are in place before rolling out the tools.

## Synchronous vs. Asynchronous Work

Collaboration can happen with everyone working together at the same time—synchronous collaboration—or in stages, with some people working at different times—asynchronous collaboration. Technology helps with asynchronous work—forums and message boards are great ways to communicate when people are working at different times of the day, due to either time zone or scheduling issues. Tools like instant messaging, Web conferencing, and whiteboard sharing are more appropriate for synchronous work, as they allow fast communication for participants in the same virtual location. Time zones and work schedules will dictate whether a team relies mostly on synchronous or asynchronous tools to use in a project. While most of the tools in this report have the ability to support both types of communication, some are better suited for one type of collaboration than the other. This report will help to clarify which tools work best for a given type of collaboration.

## Platforms

Before the work can start and the collaboration can begin, all participants must agree to work on the same technological platform—in other words, all must be using the same tool in order to collaborate. If some people are posting

information and images to Facebook and others are keeping all of their images in Flickr, there will be issues when it comes time to put all the data together. Ensuring that everyone is on the same page and is using the same tool (or tools) is actually one of the trickiest parts of technological collaboration solutions. In the past, an organization using collaborative tools would purchase something that would work for it, and it was usually unable to work with another organization that used a different tool. While to some extent, this is still an issue with 2.0-style collaboration, the fact that use of these technologies is often free or low-cost gives libraries a degree of flexibility that was unimaginable in previous decades. The cost of the tools described in this report is in time—the time it takes to decide on a platform that everyone feels comfortable with and the time it takes for employees to become proficient with the technology.

The issue of cost-effectiveness in employee work hours illustrates one way that these tools truly are a breakthrough for libraries. So many people have a Facebook or Flickr account already in their personal lives that, in many cases, they don't have to learn a whole new skill set to be able to use these tools to collaborate at work. According to Facebook, there are more than 150 million active users as of the beginning of 2009<sup>3</sup>—and that number gets bigger every day. Wikipedia—one of the better-known wikis in use today—claims 153,000 active users in a single thirty-day period.<sup>4</sup> When you combine numbers like these with the ever-increasing tech-savviness of modern librarians, it is quite likely that librarians on a given collaborative team will already be familiar with the tools they are being asked to use. With these tools, the cost of training in employee hours is likely to be significantly less than it has been in previous years.

A report released in early 2009 by Compass Intelligence details the number of business users that are regularly using social networks.<sup>5</sup> Of more than 10,000 working Americans surveyed in late 2008, nearly 60 percent said that they were active on a social networking site. Almost 35 percent of the respondents said that they were registered with Facebook, the most popular site according to the research. The conclusion of the report discusses the fact that, for the most part, the business world is not yet taking advantage of these tools for marketing or sales. This situation is already starting to change: commercial use of social networking is likely to continue as companies decide to take advantage of tools that their employees are already using (see figure 1).

The good news for staff members who do not already have an account is that the learning curve for most of these tools is shallow. Millions of people have already learned how to use most of the tools discussed in this report with little or no assistance. Since these tools are

designed to be used by the general public, and have been in great numbers, they have been tested and refined to make their user interfaces as easy to learn as possible. The chances that a librarian in a given organization has already used one of these tools are very good. If this is the case, that librarian can serve as the library's knowledge base and help to bring new users along quickly without the library resorting to requests for outside help.

In chapter 6, readers will find a conceptual discussion describing the inner workings of these tools and their uses as collaborative platforms. Each tool has its strengths and weaknesses and may be more appropriate for one type of collaboration than for another. This information should help librarians evaluate the tools that their staff are already using for collaborative purposes, thus making the process of picking a common platform much easier. Please note that while many tools will work for the same kind of job, the circumstances of a particular organization will be the key factor in determining which kind of site or tool to use for a given project. Familiarity with the site, as well as its functionality, will likely play the crucial role in deciding which social networking site (or sites) to use for collaborative work.



**Figure 1** There are hundreds of platforms for online collaboration, and new ones are popping up every day. [Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial ShareAlike 2.0 Germany / Ludwig Gatzke / <http://flickr.com/photos/stabilo-boss/>]

## Notes

1. Evan Rosen, *The Culture of Collaboration* (San Francisco: Red Ape Publishing, 2007), 9.
2. Oxford English Dictionary Online, [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com) (accessed Nov. 1, 2008).
3. "Statistics," Facebook, [www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics](http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics) (accessed March 17, 2009).
4. "Statistics," Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special:Statistics> (accessed March 17, 2009).
5. Amy Cravens, "Social Science: The Business Side of Social Networking," Compass Intelligence, Jan. 27, 2009, <http://blog.compassintelligence.com>, <http://blog.compassintelligence.com/post/2009/01/27/Social-Science-The-Business-Side-of-Social-Networking.aspx> (accessed March 17, 2009).