

Tool talk blog#10

Collaboration and personal interaction

We love collaboration, don't we?

Society is embracing new technology, but as we do so social interaction is gradually changing. Recently I have taken notice of a couple of examples:

- My teenage children's reluctance to pick up the phone and talk to their friends, they would much rather sms or Facebook
- Couples sitting together at a restaurant, both playing with their phones instead of talking to each other
- People delivering difficult news (I'm sick, I cant go, you're dumped) by SMS rather than face to face or a phone call
- Chasing up late RSVPs to events I was organising, not provided by people as they wanted to keep their options open
- Standing at on a magnificent remote national park lookout and seeing the excitement of friends that they could finally "connect" their mobile phone

In the Project Management space, professional interaction is also changing. Bad news is more likely to come in the written/messaging form rather than in person. As more and more collaboration tools are rolled out, it is getting easier for people to deliver bad news in a "safe" way, which is a way that avoids immediate personal pain or conflict. Professional norms and manners are changing too. More and more people think it is acceptable to be late to meetings, not RSVP to an invite, ignore a request to review a document, not return a phone call – ironically to not collaborate.

Most EPM tools have a degree of collaboration built in. EPM tools are typically driven by the PMO, Finance or IT however. For that reason they reflect the priorities of those groups, collaboration is considered a "nice to have". Other organisations, through HR or IT, are rolling out dedicated collaborative tools such as Sharepoint. In some organisations there will be an overlap, particularly around:

- Document management/sharing
- Announcements/Wikis/Noticeboards
- Discussion forums/Blogs/Chat rooms
- List based functions, e.g. Risks

Meanwhile people, in their private lives, are adopting collaborative tools at a rapid rate, examples include:

- Google suite of apps (inc Google docs, blogs, site, shared calendars etc) for web publishing
- Dropbox specifically for document sharing
- Skype for messaging and phone calls
- Facebook for messaging and photo sharing

Where it gets interesting is that organisations are blocking personal collaboration tools via their firewall but are promoting their internal collaboration tools. But can people really be locked out of their personal lives? Are personal and work lives really that disconnected? As people are supplied laptops, PDAs and encouraged to always be on line at home, can they then be expected not to connect to their personal network using those same devices? Businesses are happy to use Facebook to market their business but at the same time stop their staff using it. An interesting inconsistency.

Another interesting aspect is the disconnect between collaboration and commercial security. How does secure information stay secure when organisations are adopting collaboration and on line information systems? In previous times secure firewalls tried to ring fence the secure information. Software as a service (SAAS) applications have challenged that notion and have emphasised the question, how do you keep off site data secure? In terms of collaboration, can you ever really stop people "chatting"?

So what will the future look like for professional interaction on projects? Access to information will grow. Access to analytical information will need to keep pace. Knowledge and wisdom will remain outside of the tools. The fundamental question of security will need to be resolved in the broader context. Hopefully we will see a convergence of private and professional collaboration tools but with closed access to certain information. Hopefully we will also see emerge new "manners" to suit professional and personal collaboration but maybe that's too much to hope for.

martin.vaughan@coreconsulting.com.au