THE IMPORTANCE OF ENTERPRISE COLLABORATION SYSTEMS DURING A PANDEMIC

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Abstract

The coronavirus hasn't just changed where people work, it's also had a significant impact on how they work. Companies and individuals used (and are still using) various Enterprise Collaboration Systems (ECS) to facilitate online communication and productivity. This allowed organisations to expand and source experts and professionals from anywhere around the world. They were no longer limited by physical boundaries and could keep projects going. Some useful features of ECS include document management, task management, project management, team communications, workflows etc. The primary benefit of these applications is that they provide real-time, transparent access to an organization's workflow, allowing users to set, follow up on and complete projects and tasks from any online device.

Although a significant contribution has been made towards raising corporate awareness of ECS use, an overview of the challenges and benefits of ECS, such as this one, is always welcome.

INTRODUCTION

To fight the threat of Coronavirus, a number of companies have rolled out work-from-home policies for their employees. Business trips were cancelled, and corporations were forced to take a critical look at their business continuity plans, making difficult, fast-paced decisions in order to support their workforce while also satisfying their customers. New collaboration technologies were needed in order to help organizations to solve these problems, boosts productivity, improves communication, and promotes collaboration.

Enterprise collaboration systems (ECS) are cross-functional informational systems that enhance communication, coordination and collaboration among the members of teams and workgroups to achieve common objective. ECS provide tools that help every individual in an organization to manage the documents, to share information and knowledge with each other, and to work together cooperatively on joint projects and assignments. They combine the Enterprise Social Systems components with traditional

groupware components (Schubert and Williams, 2013; Leonardi, Huysman and Steinfield, 2013; McAfee, 2006) in order to support business and communication, collaboration, content and knowledge sharing within organizations.

ECS includes hardware, software, and internal and external networks, as well as people, processes, and organizational aspects. They help people to work more efficiently (Joseph Katie, 2013), working together, in real time, using the Internet network. Various enterprise collaboration systems exist on the market today. However, a good ECS should have three basic concepts: communication, coordination, and collaboration (Ellis et all. 1991; O'Brien and Marakas, 2005; Fuks, Raposo and Gerosa, 2008).

The objective of this paper is to show the importance of ECS, identifying the benefits as well as challenges, of using these systems.

Enterprise collaboration systems (ECS) - challenges

As COVID-19 forced entire companies to operate from home, it was essential for employees to adapt to new challenges and embrace the new way of working from home. If previously employees could choose whether and how to use the technology, now its use has become mandatory. This particularly affected employees with less IT background, who stick to traditions and old work practices. They needed to adapt quickly to non-conducive working spaces and unfamiliar digital systems. This created additional pressure on the employees, who already had difficulties dealing with the new pandemic situation, that negatively affect their wellbeing. The enforced working from home creates various challenges for employees since they have to combine home and work demands in order to achieve a work-life fusion (Haeger & Lingham, 2014). The employees often share their new work-home space with other members of their household that leads to various distractions. The blurred boundary between home and work causes additional pressure for employees regarding constant connectivity and responsiveness, which leads to fatigue and negative emotions. Some find that virtual meetings and check-ins are too frequent and unnecessary, affecting their productivity. They suggest new patterns of communications in terms of frequency and length (Waizenegger et al. 2020). The hybridity of work and home activities affect the wellbeing of employees and indirectly affect the effectiveness and efficiency of teamwork.

But not only employees, the companies also faced new challenges related to the changed work environment, while trying to maintain business activities as usual. Companies' main challenges were not only to implement new solutions, but also to choose from a wide range of existing digital systems on the market. Literally thousands of collaboration tools are available on the market, some designed for specific use cases, but many of which

partially overlap each other in terms of the functionality they offer and use cases they can be applied to. To provide you with some options, we've put together a short overview of the different types of collaboration tools, as well as popular choices within each tool category.
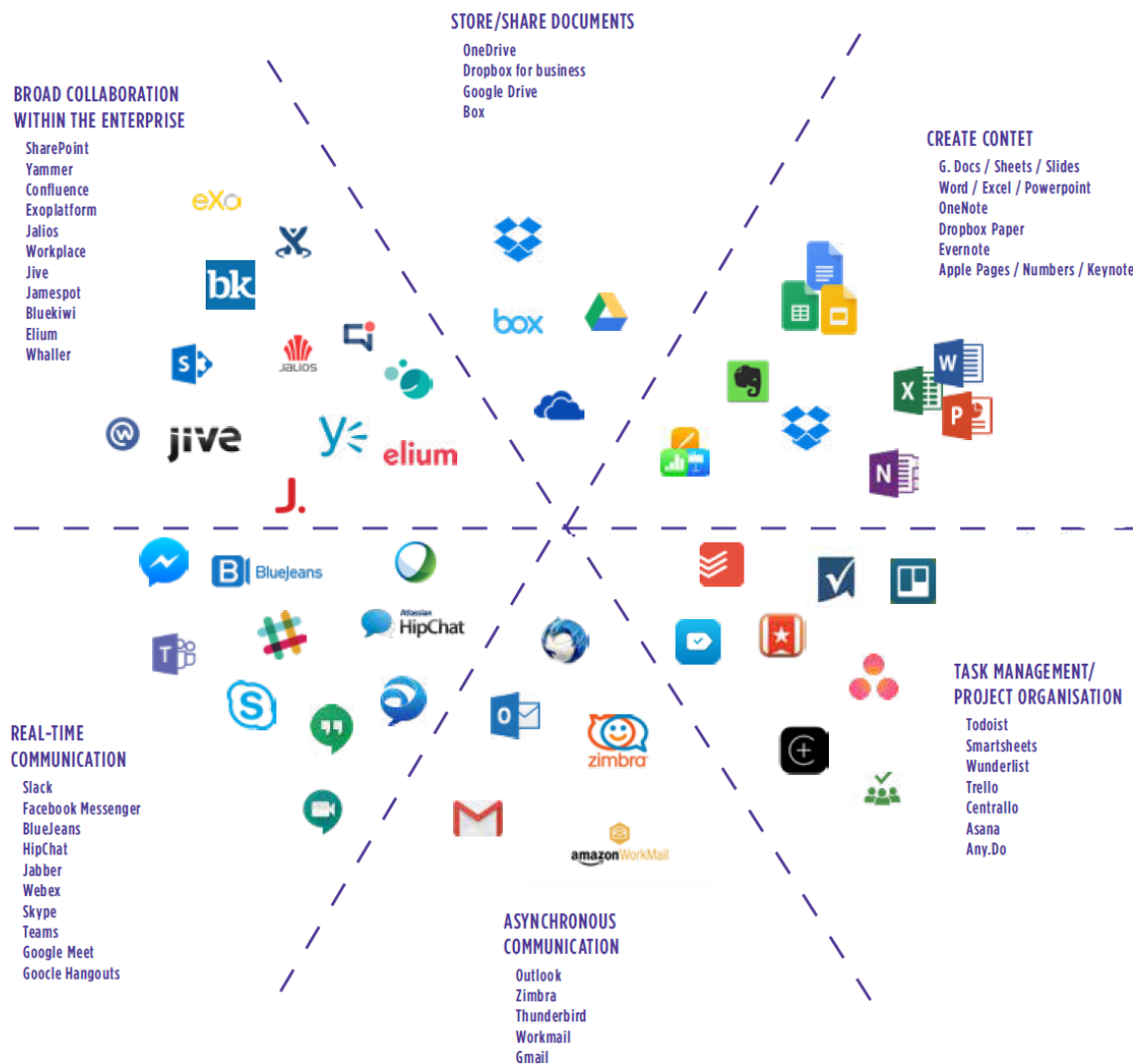

Fig.1. Different types of collaboration tools (Cascarino et al. 2018)

Communication tools

These include video conferencing, email, voice mail, instant messaging etc. Among these, the real-time audio and video conferencing systems are most popular nowadays (Zoom,

Teams, Google Meet, Skype etc). They contain features that allow rich collaboration experience within the project members, clients, business partners and other stakeholders. By using the webcams, the meeting participants create human connections without exposing themselves to any health risk. Video conferencing software enables participants to share screens, stream presentations, send files from a meeting library, and record real-time conversations for future reference. Due to the social affordances offered by video conferencing software, team leaders could better allocate work tasks to their team members without overloading.

Project/Task management tools

Collaborative project/task management software (Asana, Smartsheets, Trello etc.) makes it possible to plan, coordinate, monitor and manage complex projects carried out by teams. It allows users to create projects (and tasks within that projects), set project permissions, add users' teammates to tasks and projects, share projects or tasks with other team members, get reminders and notification, set due etc. These tools accelerate business execution and address the volume and velocity of today's collaborative work.

Tools for sharing resources

These enterprise tools offer the ability to manipulate documents online so that all employees have access to information. Team members can work on the same document, remotely and online or even on the same system. It's possible to modify documents at any time and for several collaborators to update a file simultaneously. Some examples of these tools are OneDrive, Google Drive, Box etc.

Document management tools

Document management is about effective control of documents, from their conception to their destruction. To this end, document management includes document indexing, document revision tracking, document security, workflow management etc. These features are important for the companies because sometimes critical information within the documents should be indexed and saved, so that, it can be searched and retrieved, if necessary. Security is another important factor while using collaboration and sharing systems. The document management system can encrypt the documents while they are being stored and transmitted via the web, which significantly reduces the chances of someone to steal the data. In addition to protecting the data, a good document management system will also expand its accessibility for authorized personnel. Some of

the most used document management systems are: Microsoft SharePoint, M-Files, DocuWare, Templafy etc.

Enterprise collaboration systems (ECS) - benefits

Collaboration is essential for successful business. Internal collaboration increase productivity, while external collaboration with customers, partners, and vendors, provides important feedback that increases innovation, profitability and trust in the company. We can say that cross-functional team collaboration as well as external collaboration with stakeholders improves efficiency and effectiveness. When communication channels are open, it's easier to find the information you need or turn to colleagues and customers for feedback and assistance.

But collaborating is far easier said than done. Fortunately, ECS can help facilitate enterprise collaboration. There are many reasons for using ECS. The most compelling ones are:

- **to remove physical barriers** – since many enterprise collaboration tools are cloud-based, they can be used from anywhere (the users only need an Internet connection), thus providing a way for team members to regularly interact despite geographical distance. In this way the companies reduce travel costs and minimize expenses, while workers save travel time.
- **to keep everyone in the know** - ECS can be used to ensures more people know about important happenings, keep everyone informed and record the team's progress.
- **to improve team agility** - ECS provides more flexibility in how members work together to achieve business goals. This is especially true for smaller teams that are accustomed to adaptability and aren't bogged down by organizational bureaucracy.
- **to attract and retain talent** - employees value flexible workplaces that encourage the sharing and development of skills and teamwork. By using effective communication systems, companies can better retain their employees with the best skills and talents. Satisfied and motivated employees are the best company's advocates and help in attracting more top talent.
- **to make better decisions** - ECS keeps all documents and pertinent information in a centralized location, making it easier for decision makers to inform themselves. In addition, collaboration tools make updating documents easy, and typically

have notification features a decision maker can use to always have the latest knowledge about organizational activities.

- **to drive innovation** - with easier access to additional know-how and resources, companies will have the foundation to develop innovative products, processes or services. Collaborative research is naturally fostered and developed faster and cost-effectively.
- **to increase competitive advantage** - co-operative intelligence in all business departments, will increase competitive advantage of the company, by imbuing complementary strengths, capabilities and best practices in company's offer. Enhanced collaboration enables companies who complement each other to work on joint projects and compete in markets usually beyond their individual reach, be it through geographic, scale or expertise.

With these benefits, ECS are becoming a norm. Businesses that proactively invest in enterprise collaboration tools can now future-proof their operations and increase their revenue and investments.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has compelled businesses to embrace new ways of communication and collaboration, and to accelerate their shift towards remote work. This has led to an increase in the adoption of ECS across enterprises. The advantages that ECS offers to companies are huge: ECS facilitates seamless connectivity between their workforce, increases productivity, fosters creativity, and at the same time gives companies a competitive edge over their peers.

The increased demand of ECS had led to significant growth in the collaborative software market. While the ECS market was valued at USD 9.5 billion in 2019, in 2020 it grew to USD 10, 5 billion. Between 2020 and 2025 it is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 12.7%, reaching USD 45 billion in 2025.

If anything, the COVID-19 pandemic has only expedited the adoption of new-age tools and will define how workplaces of the future will evolve.

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