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Lucie Olejnikova
Pace Law School

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Recommended Citation

Lucie Olejnikova & Jessica de Perio Wittman, The Case for Collaborative Tools, AALL Spectrum, Dec. 2008 at 8, <http://digitalcommons.pace.edu/lawfaculty/534/>.

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The Case for Collaborative Tools

Long-distance teamwork
on a shoestring budget

by Lucie Olejnikova and Jessica de Perio Wittman

When we were both asked to present and talk about podcasts at the 2008 AALL Annual Meeting in Portland, Oregon, we were honored and excited at the same time. Yet, behind all the excitement, there was a problem—Jessica lives in Florida and Lucie lives in New York. How were we going to communicate, meet, plan, schedule, prepare, and review the program? Questions popped up left and right, and we quickly learned that we were not fully prepared for the obstacles ahead.

This article shares a bit of our experiences (the exciting and the frustrating moments), and outlines how we used free online collaborative tools to make the long distance seem short. This article also discusses the advantages and disadvantages of long-distance collaboration and how to apply the same tools and principles to a variety of work settings, such as law firms, firm libraries, court libraries, public libraries, and academic libraries. In addition, we mention the psycho-sociological aspects of a long-distance, Web-based communication, as well as its impact on project administration and budget.

As a result of our long-distance collaboration experience, we wanted to know if anyone else in our profession had the same or similar experiences. To gain some insight from other colleagues about their experiences with long-distance collaboration, we created a survey (via SurveyMonkey) and sent it to various AALL discussion lists, blogs, and social networking sites, such as Ning and Facebook.

About Our Respondents

We received 251 responses to our survey. The majority of responses (48 percent) came from those in an academic library setting. This was followed by law firm libraries (31.7 percent) and court libraries (11.2 percent). The remainder of the respondents (7.2 percent) reported to work in other settings, such as the federal government, consulting firms, advocacy groups, bar associations, corporations, investment firms, publishers, and contract libraries.

We hypothesized that there may be a connection between the number of project members and the type of experience that they had. Additionally, we felt that the amount of people involved in one project should make an impact on what tools they found to be the most helpful. More than 77 percent of all respondents stated they have been involved in at least one long distance collaboration project since 2000. The majority (59.7 percent) responded that they worked in a group of three to seven people; 22 percent of respondents worked in a group of two; and about 18.3 percent of respondents collaborated in groups of more than eight people.

Why Use Web-Based Collaborative Tools?

Using Web-based collaborative tools in the workplace is appealing to a wide variety of institutions, including, but not limited to, court, public, private, and academic libraries. The possibilities for communication are endless.

Collaboration tools can facilitate communication between law firms, libraries, librarians and patrons, and students and faculty members, just to name a few. And, there are potential uses for distance education and international collaboration.

But the obvious advantage is the cost. Freely available communication tools can potentially save a lot of money, and the budgetary savings will grow exponentially during a period of time. In fact, this article was written using a variety of free Web-based resources, including Skype, GoogleDocs, and Instant Messaging (IM).

Things to Consider before Using Web-Based Collaboration Tools...

- That the project is fitting for long-distance collaboration
- That project group members are comfortable with long-distance collaboration
- That the project is organized and timely outlined
- That all participants are on board and know how and where to get and submit information/materials
- That collaborative tools chosen are appropriate for the project
- That all collaborators are familiar and/or are willing to learn to use the chosen collaborative tools
- That the project does not pose a cost issue for anyone collaborating
- That if face-to-face communication is needed, you have a plan to establish it
- That all collaborators know that any criticism should be given and taken as constructive, so comments are not taken too personally

Settling On a Strategy on a Shoestring Budget

We faced a two-prong challenge. Not only did we have to overcome the distance, but we also needed to do all of our preparation at a low cost...no cost. Luckily, we felt fairly comfortable with many of the available free Web-based collaborative tools and were eager to explore other tools. Because of time

constraints, we found it necessary to set out a strategy—and expected to deviate from it and adapt as unexpected events came up.

Because our goal was to save time and money, we also set out a plan detailing the purpose of our project. We scheduled periodic meetings for decision making and reserved small chats to touch base. The online communication definitely helped to speed up the preparation process. Collaborators should not only be prepared to discuss ideas, but they should also make decisions on deliverables for future meetings.

In their book, *The Lawyer's Guide to Collaboration Tools and Technologies*, Dennis Kennedy and Tom Mighell point out that choosing the right collaboration tool often depends on the type of collaboration required, the context for the collaboration, and the timing. They also point out that the collaboration tool must either (a) improve an existing system or (b) implement a new system that is measurably better than the system it replaces.

Over time, we learned when phone conversations may be more appropriate than chat clients, Webcams, Skype, or e-mail. But, when phone conversations were not convenient, we relied on IM and GoogleDocs. We felt comfortable leaving messages and storing online documents, knowing that the other could get back to it when she came back from assisting a patron at the reference desk or checking back in after a meeting across campus.

Kennedy and Mighell also found IMing to be a helpful collaboration tool in the creation of their book. What they found especially intriguing about instant messaging is the way it straddles the line of asynchronous and synchronous communication. People can carry on an instant messaging conversation in real time, or they can send each other messages that can wait until the other is available to respond to them.

If used properly, the use of collaborative tools can decrease the cost of daily operations. For example, it can increase work efficiency while reducing transportation costs and unnecessary communication. The number of e-mails piling up in one's inbox could be drastically reduced with short chats over a chat client or posting on a blog or wiki.

In a world where time means money, institutions and companies can save money by incorporating collaborative tools to increase efficiency, promote teamwork, and network on a domestic and an international level at a minimal cost. Using Web-based tools also means

that institutions can still promote an environmentally-friendly message by reducing the amount of paper waste and pollution associated with unnecessary transportation.

Technical and Personal Considerations

Collaborative tools are not built alike. It is important to be aware of the positive, as well as negative, aspects of each collaborative tool. Not everything

can and should be used in all situations. But, a good collaboration tool will make documents and data available to your users when and how they need it, and it will enable users to move documents and data from one device, location, or platform to another, according to Kennedy and Mighell.

But, the most important cultural element to consider when implementing new technology is tolerance for change, write Kennedy and Mighell. It is important to consider the level of computer literacy of all collaborators and the collaborators' levels of comfort when using these tools. One of our respondents reported that e-mail was the best tool to use for her project because there was no learning curve.

Kennedy and Mighell assert that part of the strategic planning should be based on your understanding of what your likely collaborators are using and may use in the future. After all, the success of knowledge management, social networking, and other collaborative projects largely depend on the culture of an organization and whether it will support or reject the proposed tool.

In our survey, we asked our participants to share with us some of the tools that beneficially impacted their workflows and performances. More than half (54.2 percent) responded to this question with the following list of tools:

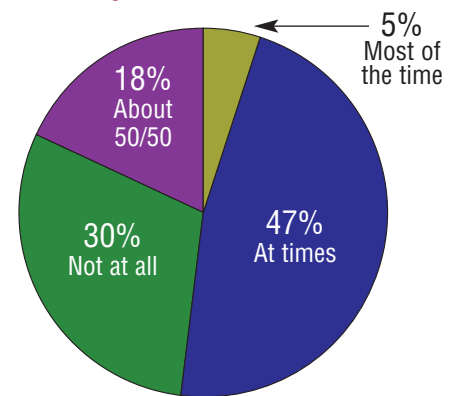
1. **E-mail**—77 respondents mentioned e-mail as their primary tool of collaboration
2. **Phone**—the good old phone came in handy for 43 people
3. **Teleconferencing/Phone Conferences**—22 responses
4. **Google Document and Wikis**—tied at 18 responses each
5. **Instant Messaging and Skype**—both mentioned by 10 people
6. **Blogs**—received a respectable eight votes
7. **Document Management Tool**—used by five respondents
8. **Blackboard, Fax, and Web Sites**—all three tools were voted for three times
9. **Second Life**—the two respondents who mentioned Second Life emphasized that it was simple, efficient, and easy to use for their long-distance project
10. **Slide Share, U.S. Postal Service, Shared Computer Network Drive, Extranet, Shared Server, TWEN, Text Messaging, and E-Room for Storage**—all hold the 10th place with one vote each.

Missing Human Contact

A common argument made by those against Web-based communication is that electronic communication is very

different from communicating face to face. Unless using a Webcam, computers cannot transmit one's body language, facial expressions, gestures, and the tone of one's voice. We may even miss the face-to-face contact.

How much did you miss "in-person" contact?



Our respondents did let us know how much they missed the ability to communicate in person when working on their long-distance projects. Out of the 147 respondents to this question, 71 (48.3 percent) shared that they did miss face-to-face contact; 45 didn't miss it at all; 27 respondents missed it in about half the situations; and seven respondents felt the project probably shouldn't have been done long distance.

Inevitably, the psycho-sociological aspect of long-distance communication plays a role. To a certain extent, we are all used to non-verbal communication, and sometimes it is all we rely on. While we may be used to reading between the lines, being over-analytical via electronic communication can create more trouble than efficiency.

Changes for Next Time

We also asked our respondents to share with us the one or few things they would have liked to change and/or see done differently in the future. Nearly 130 respondents shared their criticisms and concerns about their long-distance collaborative experiences. Although the number one complaint about long distance collaboration was the lack of face-to-face communication and/or interaction when collaborating (26 respondents), other shared concerns were:

2. Time difference (15 responses)
3. Lack of efficient scheduling (12 responses)
4. Misunderstanding/miscommunication (9 responses)
5. Slow progress and delays (6 responses)
6. Technical difficulties and glitches (5 responses)

Free Tools for Long-Distance Collaboration

AirSet: a great project management tool for organizing, scheduling, and communicating
www.airset.com/AirSet.jsp#app.Home

Basecamp
www.basecamp.com

E-mail

GoogleDocs and Google Sites
www.google.com/google-d-s/intl/en/tour1.html

Instant Messaging
 AOL, MSN, Yahoo, Jabber, G-talk, Meebo, PalTalk

Interwoven: a document management tool
www.interwoven.com

Ning
www.ning.com

Pbwiki
<http://pbwiki.com>

Phone

Sendspace
www.sendspace.com

Skype: voice over Internet phone (VOIP) with optional face-to-face conversation with a Webcam
www.skype.com

SlideShare
www.slideshare.net

WebEx
www.webex.com

7. Difficulty keeping everyone informed and motivated or “on board”; a lack of immediate feedback when people took too much time to respond (4 responses)
8. Learning curve when using new technology tools (3 responses)
9. Slow decision making, unequal distribution of work, no social time, no group brainstorming opportunity, lack of proper record keeping, and design issues (2 responses)
10. Cost, duplication of effort, hard to keep everyone on task, wasted time to clarify points, typing being time consuming, hard to tell who’s talking on a phone, and no room for jokes (1 response).

No Time for Small Talk

Naturally, we encountered some of these issues when working on our own project. But we learned that in order to combat this, we should learn to communicate both directly and concisely.

One should understand that long-distance (and Web-based) planning often means sacrificing personal niceties. It may come as a bit of a surprise that there is no time or room for sugar-coated or diplomatic expressions, but collaborators should learn not to take things too personally and not get offended.

Some of our colleagues would be surprised at our interaction during the making of our podcast presentation—to them, it may have seemed as if we were sparring instead of collaborating. But, with all projects, each collaborator wants to produce the best product possible—so any criticism should be seen as constructive criticism. No harm is meant. Also, to alleviate miscommunication, all one needs to say is: “What did you mean by that, I don’t think I follow.”

Can these same rules apply to our future collaboration projects? Sure they can. But, can these rules be followed to conduct national and international meetings? Only time, willingness, and patience can tell.

Can Web-Based Collaboration Replace Face-to-Face Communication?

Based on our experiences and our survey responses, the simple answer to this question is no...or at least, not yet. While collaboration tools provide a venue for long-distance communication, there isn’t a tool in the market now that could absolutely replace face-to-face interaction. And that is fine.

When properly used, Web-based collaborative tools complement and

supplement our everyday communication. Instead of focusing on Web-based communication being a deterrent to efficient work flow, we should look for more ways where Web-based and face-to-face communication can co-exist and improve work and communication efficiency. ■

Lucie Olejnikova
(lolejnikova@law.pace.edu) is the reference/electronic services librarian at Pace University Law Library in White Plains, New York. **Jessica de Perio Wittman** (wittmanj@law.ufl.edu) is the instructional services reference librarian at the University of Florida Lawton Chiles Legal Information Center in Gainesville.

For Further Reading

Kennedy, Dennis M., and Tom Mighell. 2008. *The lawyer’s guide to collaboration tools and technologies: smart ways to work together*. Chicago: ABA, Law Practice Management Section.

