

Collaboration & Productivity 101

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A. Introduction

Dispersed and remote teams are a growing part of the modern workforce. Deploying and maintaining secure, accessible productivity tools for these employees is vital to their success and the success of your business. Using ill-suited or multiple, poorly integrated tools can negatively impact your ability to compete.

New technology solutions have evolved to help you boost your employees' productivity and streamline their collaboration. These solutions come in many shapes and sizes. Picking the one that's right for you depends on your current situation and long-term goals.

We've prepared this paper to help you evaluate the current state of your productivity tools, how you might improve them, and how making the right choice today can lead to real business benefits tomorrow.

B. What Are Collaboration and Productivity Tools?

Collaboration tools are designed to help people work together toward a common goal — which is more important than ever as we move toward a distributed and mobile workforce. These tools are designed to maximize overall productivity regardless of location or device.

Popular collaboration platforms include Microsoft SharePoint® (for document sharing and management) and electronic voice or video conferencing applications like Google Hangouts™ and Skype® for Business.

Productivity suites consist of tools that help enable your employees to produce and work with information that's central to your business. These platforms are often delivered as an integrated suite of applications, with functions like word processing, spreadsheets, presentation software and databases, along with integrated collaboration tools like instant messaging, chat and video conferencing.

Examples of productivity suites in use today include cloud-based Microsoft Office 365® (which includes products such as Exchange, Office SharePoint and Skype for Business) and Google Apps™ for Work (with Gmail, Docs, Sheets, Forms, Slides and more).

C. More Productivity = Improved Bottom Line

Software that enables your employees to work more efficiently and communicate seamlessly helps save money by reducing the wasted time associated with outdated methods and overlapping systems. Employees also enjoy increased job satisfaction when they see themselves accomplishing more with less effort.

Streamlined business activities. Fewer and fewer employees share the same physical workspace with all of their colleagues these days. As a result, they often conduct tasks like document review across multiple offices and time zones via email. It can be a time-consuming and error-prone process. By replacing this fragmented approach with a more efficient solution (like real-time online document collaboration), employees get more things done faster, with less version-chaos and error.

- Fact: According to a recent survey conducted by Harris, 92% of knowledge workers in the US and UK conduct document review via email.
- Fact: 47% of employees have emailed the wrong version of a document to a boss, client or co-worker.
- Fact: 83% of employees waste time every day because of document collaboration issues.

Mobile-ready. Today's distributed workforce is driving the adoption of collaboration and productivity suites that enable employees to edit and share documents from anywhere using their mobile devices and tablets. This functionality allows team members across the entire spectrum to see and respond to ongoing updates, provide suggested changes to documentation, or deliver vital, last-minute information. The ability to meet face-to-face via mobile devices from anywhere at any time — even while traveling — raises the overall level of professionalism, leads to improved customer experience, and allows everyone to stay in alignment.

Savings over traditional practices. When employees are able to meet and collaborate online, businesses can reduce or even eliminate the need for more expensive and time-consuming travel. And as more companies adopt sustainability policies, web-based collaboration solutions can also reduce the waste and environmental impact associated with printing, copying and distributing hard-copy documents.

Improved employee experience. According to the Harris survey cited above, few things are more frustrating to knowledge workers than lost time and wasted effort. For example, 81% of those surveyed have found themselves working on the wrong version of a file at some point. Modern collaboration tools help coworkers control versioning and work efficiently — reducing effort, increasing engagement and boosting morale.

D. Possible Pitfalls

Putting improved productivity tools to work for your company makes good business sense. But how easy is it to make the move? With the right research, careful planning and a trusted hosting partner, you can make the transition with minimal disruption. Here are some things you'll want to avoid moving forward:

Multiple applications serving the same purpose. As businesses grow, different groups within a company sometimes adopt their own approaches to collaboration — a chat app here, a video conferencing tool there. Without a clear, company-wide strategy, your business can end up with a patchwork of software that not only costs more, but also makes it more difficult to unite under one banner when the time comes.

Software that doesn't integrate. As you'd expect, when the tools your employees use integrate effectively with one another, work gets done more efficiently. For example, if employees use four different applications to 1) update their calendars, 2) send emails, 3) manage to-do lists and 4) chat online with colleagues, they could benefit from a single solution that combines many different functions into one familiar toolset.

Creating more management burdens for IT. While adopting new productivity-boosting business software can provide significant long-term benefits for information workers, managing it can put an additional burden on IT. Choosing a third-party provider to host these new services is one way to minimize time, money and labor costs.

Learning curve for employees. With any new technology comes a learning curve, and some are steeper than others. With the decision to add new applications to your portfolio comes the responsibility to train and support the employees who will use them. It's a good idea to consider factors like ease-of-use and familiarity when shopping for solutions — especially if you're considering upgrading to newer versions of tools that your employees already know and use.

E. Ask the Right Question

Before you start shopping for new productivity tools, evaluate your current practices. Use this checklist to help inform your decision making.

- 1. Hardware and software.** What types of hardware and software are your employees currently using? Are they mostly using a single platform (Windows or Mac), or is it a mix? Not all toolsets work the same on all devices, and different platforms and applications will require different types of support — both now and as your business grows. Now is the time to take an up-to-date inventory of devices, the apps they're running, and how they're running them.
- 2. Remote or mobile workforce.** If the majority of your employees work outside of the office or on the road, this can have a significant bearing on the technology you choose. Determine how many of them need secure, real-time, anywhere information access, and evaluate the nature of the information they're seeking or sending. Gaining visibility into these factors can help you quickly eliminate options that don't map to your business processes.
- 3. Employee needs and preferences.** Ask your employees what features they would like to see in their productivity apps, and what things they don't like about the tools they're using now. Remember that they're on the front lines of your company's efforts; they know better than anyone how to get their jobs done. Listening to these and other stakeholders early in the process can help you avoid resistance to adoption later.
- 4. Duplicate applications.** If your software inventory turns up more than one application performing the same function — such as scheduling, project management, calendar, etc. — then you should plan to decommission the duplicate applications as you deploy new ones. Otherwise, you're wasting valuable resources maintaining and paying for software you no longer need.
- 5. Budget and resource constraints.** One of the most important questions to ask up front is also one of the simplest: How much can we spend? In your planning, be sure to account for hiring specialized staff or re-training existing staff to properly run the new platform and its underlying infrastructure. Carefully consider how you'll budget for and absorb the costs of deployment, ongoing licensing and upward scaling as you grow.

F. Cloud or On-Premises Deployment?

Taking advantage of new productivity and collaboration tools has a significant upside. But there can also be hidden costs in the form of management burdens on your IT team. In fact, it could prove to be a more complex and costly undertaking than your business can tolerate.

It's not surprising that cloud-hosted solutions are in a boom cycle, as more and more companies come to understand and capitalize on the cloud's inherent business value. While it's true that there are still cases where an on-premises deployment is preferable or even required (for regulatory compliance), the affordability, reliability, availability and security of off-site IT options are hard to ignore.

With the cloud, you gain all the benefits of the latest technologies without having to deploy and manage them yourself. For this reason, it's worth taking a good look at the cloud-based options available to you. With a proven and trusted provider at your side, the transition can take place smoothly and efficiently, with minimal downtime and disruption.

Agility and innovation. [As Forbes reports](#) in a recent Cisco-sponsored survey, 82% of C-level corporate leaders report that cloud-based collaboration tools help businesses execute faster, shorten time to market, quicken product upgrade cycles, and respond faster to challenges. "The ability to collaborate in the cloud is becoming a key driver of competitive advantage," says Bruce Rogers, chief insights officer at Forbes Media.

In the same study, 93% of C-level corporate leaders agree that cloud-based collaboration stimulates innovation. "Enhanced innovation is an almost unavoidable consequence of providing more executives and employees with new and more effective ways of sharing information," the report concludes.

Outsourcing of required expertise. Deploying and provisioning new applications on premise may require some very specific skills that your IT team doesn't currently possess. Meanwhile, finding qualified technical people can be difficult and costly. (In fact, according to a [Brookings Institution report](#), the average tech position takes 19 days longer to fill than the average office administrative job within the same business establishment.) By outsourcing these IT functions you shift the expertise burden to the cloud services provider and their staff of specialists, including their certified professionals.

Time to deployment. The configuration and testing needed before an application is ready for deployment can require months of IT time. By contrast, a cloud-based application can be deployed very quickly, especially since the provider already has the necessary app environments up and running in its data centers. Cloud-based apps can also be scaled up or down almost instantaneously, meaning that you can respond quickly to a changing business climate.

Day-to-day management. As we've already discussed, another cost of the DIY approach is the management and maintenance overhead. IT must continually monitor demand for these services to make sure it's not exceeding the server resources and storage capacity within your data center, not to mention that these resources need updating almost constantly. When glitches arise, it falls on IT to troubleshoot them, sometimes resulting in downtime that can bring your business to a halt.

When you take on the burden of running an application, you're also responsible for ensuring that the new deployment doesn't expose your proprietary data (including customer information) to cyber attacks that can pose a critical threat to your business.

A full-service cloud provider is prepared to take on the day-to-day management of your new applications — guaranteeing their performance, security and availability through clearly defined service level agreements.

Cloud-based software applications have the added benefit of being “evergreen” — that is, they are constantly being updated with the latest enhancements. Since this version management is handled by the provider, it is virtually transparent to the end user with little or no impact on your IT resources.

Proactive training and support for users. A good cloud-services provider typically offers the IT support services you'll need to get your people up to speed, allowing you to devote more resources to key business functions.

Choosing a provider. Once you start looking into cloud-based IT services, you'll find no end of potential providers. Carefully evaluate their track records and capabilities before moving any of your business productivity functions to the cloud.

G. Migration Considerations

When the time comes to deploy the tools you've chosen, you need to consider which steps you'll take and in what order. The process of migration to a new solution depends on a lot of variables — like whether you're moving to a new platform or just upgrading to the latest version of existing software.

Obviously, a full data migration to an entirely new platform has technical implications that, if ignored, can lead to trouble down the line for your end users. Keep in mind that if you choose to go the route of the cloud, a good provider will offer the right mix of tools, resources and support to guide you successfully through the migration process.

Keep the following in mind as you prepare your migration to-do list:

Plan your training needs. Introducing new productivity tools into your organization will place new demands on your IT staff, demands that you must anticipate and plan for. Similarly, a certain amount of training will be required to help end users get comfortable with the new tools and capabilities.

Prepare data for migration. File stores and databases can become corrupted with duplicate data, bad formatting and other factors that must be dealt with when moving that data into a new tool. Your IT staff will need to put in some time preparing the data files in advance, possibly by moving them into a separate environment for processing.

Set a realistic migration timetable. Any software migration takes time. You'll want to work closely with IT to anticipate the challenges and set realistic expectations for the move. You should also involve other business stakeholders in the discussions — major business initiatives like marketing campaigns or the launch of a new website shouldn't overlap with a migration.

Anticipate the impacts. It's important to look beyond the deployment of the new applications to understand their potential impacts on other aspects of your IT service commitments, such as your CRM system, website functionality, or accounting and billing systems. Ideally, you will minimize these impacts through careful planning and/or expert technical support from an experienced third-party provider.

H. Conclusion: Maximizing the Full Potential of Your Workforce

Adopting new productivity and collaboration tools can prove advantageous for any business, as employees are able to work more effectively when and where they need to. More efficient work habits bring greater opportunity to achieve key business objectives — like better customer retention, new business acquisition, more efficient product rollouts and expansion into new markets.

As you assess these tools, one of your key decisions will be whether or not to take on the burdens of deploying new on-premises applications yourself. You may find instead that it makes more sense to outsource these functions to a reputable hosted-services provider, enabling you to focus more of your time and energy on driving business initiatives and less on managing IT.

I. About the Rackspace® Collaboration & Productivity Portfolio

Rackspace offers cloud-based productivity and collaboration solutions for business with more choices and more flexibility than any other provider. With Rackspace, you have 24x7x365 access to a team of specialists you can trust to help you choose, deploy and manage the best solution to meet your unique needs. And each of our solutions is backed by award-winning **Fanatical Support**® that you can only get from Rackspace.

J. Collaboration Tools

Power your team's communication and collaboration with fully managed SharePoint and Skype for Business in the cloud — from the Leading SharePoint Hosting Provider and five-time Microsoft Hosting Partner of the Year.

SHAREPOINT

Whether you're working as a team or as an individual, SharePoint helps you organize information, people and projects across your organization. Use SharePoint to engage with people, build websites, share ideas and reinvent the way you work together.

SKYPE FOR BUSINESS

Skype for Business enables your team to work better together, wherever they are. Get everything you need for conversing within one app — IM, audio and video calls, online meetings and sharing. And because Skype for Business and Office work together, it's simple to collaborate right from your Office apps.

K. Productivity Suites

Choose from Office 365 or Google Apps for Work.

OFFICE 365

Microsoft Office 365 — including Exchange, Outlook, SharePoint, Skype and Office — has become a go-to collaboration tool for organizations that need to get work done. The combination of functionality across all of these products and the ability to collaborate seamlessly across different platforms and devices from anywhere is changing the way companies do business.

GOOGLE APPS FOR WORK

Google Apps for Work provides businesses with a portfolio of professional tools that enables them to communicate, store, collaborate and manage — all of it available in the cloud. It includes apps for email, online storage, shared calendars, video meetings and more. Google Apps for Work is built for business and designed to enhance teamwork.

For more information, please visit us at:

[http://www.rackspace.com/productivity-collaboration.](http://www.rackspace.com/productivity-collaboration)

About Rackspace

Rackspace® (NYSE: RAX) is the #1 managed cloud company. Its technical expertise and **Fanatical Support**® allow companies to tap the power of the cloud without the pain of hiring experts in dozens of complex technologies. Rackspace is also the leader in hybrid cloud, giving each customer the best fit for its unique needs — whether on single- or multi-tenant servers, or a combination of those platforms. Rackspace is the founder of OpenStack®, the open-source operating system for the cloud. Based in San Antonio, Rackspace serves more than 300,000 business customers from data centers on four continents.

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