

Chapter 1.3

Prerequisites for the Implementation of E–Collaboration

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INTRODUCTION

E-collaboration refers to a task-oriented co-operation between individuals by using electronic technologies. In the company's practice, e-collaboration mainly describes each form of collaboration between two or more locations and/or organizations via electronic channels in order to support electronic commerce and supply chain transactions.

However, a successful e-collaboration can be achieved only if many requirements are satisfied. We distinguish between three main fields that should be addressed in order to benefit of this concept. The advances in information and communication technology (ICT) are the core of e-collaboration since they make up the 'e' in e-collaboration. However, technology alone is not sufficient to make e-collaboration work. The sec-

ond requirement is the appropriate organizational integration that supports the implementation of e-collaboration in practice. As a third requirement, we discuss human resource management and leadership. Employees should be capable of using e-technologies and cooperating via the electronic channel to carry out common tasks.

BACKGROUND

Understanding e-collaboration requires clarifying two components: the term "collaboration" and the prefix "e-." The term "collaboration" here is understood in a very traditional manner. By analogy to the *Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2004) we define collaboration as working together, especially in a joint intellectual effort. In today's high competitive processes

this means that two or more people are sharing complex information on an ongoing basis for a specific goal or purpose. As customary for many current concepts companies often use ICT for an efficient and effective implementation of the necessary information sharing and information processing. On the one hand the application of ICT enables personal communication such as e-mail, video-conferences and chats. On the other hand ICT is often a necessary precondition to get access to common information or rather to allow people to interactively share information at a distance which is used in and arise during the collaboration process. Therefore we call this type of collaboration e-collaboration as it is facilitated by ICT.

In the technical literature, there are many definitions of e-collaboration. A widely accepted definition was provided in one of the first special issues on e-collaboration published by the *Journal of Systems and Information Technology*: E-collaboration is collaborating “among individuals engaged in a common task using electronic technologies” (Kock et al., 2001). Furthermore, beside others Monplaisier/Haji (2002) delineate an enabling function of ICT for collaboration and concentrate on its efficient use to support interaction too. Yet e-collaboration does not mean that all processes are based on the application of ICT. E-Collaboration today entails conventional ways of working such as meetings, phone and fax to facilitate information sharing, discussion and agreement as well as new services and technologies such as project collaboration, workflow tools, and e-conferencing.

Main purposes of applying ICT in collaboration are increasing productivity and efficiency by reducing unproductive travel time, creating shorter and more structured meetings, and providing faster exchange of information for an increased number of participants. In detail, companies strive for:

- Accessing and combining distributed assets and resources
- Reducing travel, project management, and administrative costs
- Speeding up product-development cycle time
- Reducing supply lead times
- Gaining real-time pricing and availability information, real-time order management, continuous demand management
- Improving agility, flexibility and speed of strategic relevant action across locations and company boundaries
- Synchronizing activities across teams leading to efficient coordination within an entire supply chain
- Reducing inventory-carrying costs and logistics costs
- Intensifying collaboration with suppliers, customers and partners
- Improving the supplier visibility

In spite of the multitude of benefits and the promising concepts developed over the last years, there are quite a number of problems to be solved in order to successfully implement e-collaboration in practice. For example Ackermann (2001) argues that in the last years researchers have “identified a base set of findings [to which] human activity is highly flexible, nuanced, and contextualized and that computational entities such as information transfer, roles, and policies need to be similarly flexible, nuanced, and contextualized ... (but) we do not know how to build systems that fully support the social world uncovered by these findings ... (this is) the social-technical gap ... the divide between what we know we must support socially and what we can support technically.” Therefore beside the well known and often discussed technological challenges of e-collaboration companies have to concentrate the more “hidden challenges” such as social and cultural structures.

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