ABSTRACT

In a world of information overload, digital collaboration provides the means to spew out more and more content. Mass does not equal class. Simply adding data to a “knowledge base” does not make it better, just as adding “eyeballs” to a web site does not make it more significant. In this chapter, Dr. Heuer explores how to unleash the undernourished “dark side” of collaboration: Listening. As a seasoned practitioner of online collaboration, he argues from the lead user’s perspective. His objective: to propose enhancements to a hypothetical system, increasing the amount of “Listening” (that is content consumption rather than production) in online collaboration. This should help transform a band of content junkies into true participants in a discussion rather than folks on soapboxes.

INTRODUCTION

In a world where content is created and published at the drop of a hat (and a very small one for all that matters), digital collaboration has become a quest for relevance. How many times have you started a new knowledge base for a project with high hopes, only to see it decay into a cluttered mess of unrelated pontifications, untraceable decisions, and irrelevance? Why is that so? Can it be avoided? Potentially, answers wait at the fundamental levels of interaction: Listening, Talking, and Observing.

In the age of Twitter, Facebook, and Microsoft SharePoint, “Talking” is available in abundance. Since “Observing” (including facial expressions, body language, etc.) is rather difficult to achieve in the asynchronous, dispersed, and overloaded context of today’s workplace, the key to improving collaborative systems could be “Listening”.

Listening is in short supply. Experience shows that the more folks listen to each other, the better the results. “Listen before you Speak” is true in the world of online work, even more so than in the real world, as the online medium is less forgiving,
does not forget easily, and lowers the barriers of talking.

In this article, we will explore some of the basic tenants of system-supported collaboration, especially the encouragement of listening to others. We envision the necessary expansions to the available toolsets to increase relevance, to reduce re-work and throw away, and to make working together remotely more fun than fad.

**BACKGROUND**

Online collaboration has come a long way. Starting with simple email and chat, we soon matured into document sharing (remember when Netscape added the [input type=”file”] capability in 1995 in Navigator 2.0). From there, we moved on to the world of Content Management Systems, including Wikis and other publishing approaches. The journey has taken us now to Web2.0- style “collaborative” systems like YouTube, where users add content and then respond to it.

In his book “Success Factor Innovation”, Wahren published the list of “Internal Barriers to Innovation” (Figure 1) (Wahren 2003). Communication-related issues are at the core of many of the issues. In the corporate world, online collaboration has become increasingly important, bridging the divides of space (geography) and time (availability of data or talent). Not surprisingly, systems managing basic ingredients of collaboration like documents, calendars, and task lists receive a lot of attention, though the initial forays have been disappointing from a usability standpoint. Enhanced tools for online collaboration will receive a warm welcome if they drive simplicity and reduce the load.

In short: **better system design is not optional, it is essential for corporate success.**

The Economist Intelligence Unit conducted a study in 2007 on the Risks and Opportunities of the Knowledge Worker (Economist 2007). It states the main issues around inadequate access to information are:

- 54% experience lost productivity
- 47% mention bad decision making
- 45% observe a loss of agility or competitive responsiveness

Current systems are great soapboxes to speak from, but they lack mechanisms to draw a crowd of listeners. SharePoint, Media Wiki, Joomla and the likes are miles ahead of the crude beginnings in 1995. However, they still lack a compelling...