

June 2018

## AN ORGANIC APPROACH TO STREAMLINING COLLABORATION TOOLS

### Eliminating the confusion in real-time communications and collaboration

The collaboration market has exploded in recent years: Skype, Workplace, Chatter, Microsoft Teams and Cisco's Webex Teams, plus more niche tools such as Slack and Google Hangouts. This has given users a lot of choice and functionality, but has also brought confusion and fragmentation – defeating the purpose for which such services are introduced. With Microsoft merging its Skype for Business app into its new collaboration platform, Teams, there may be some signs of rationalisation in the market, but there are still myriad options. So how do you get the most out of what's on offer and what's already being used in your business?

In this white paper, we explain how an organisation can take its first steps in trying to eliminate the confusion and embark on a path towards effective collaboration.

'Collaboration' can be described as people working with each other to perform tasks, share ideas and gain knowledge in order to achieve business goals and create value. Technology plays a crucial role in enabling collaboration, by supporting geographic expansion, flexible working, and inter-organisation relationships.

Different users within the organisation place value on different elements of tools based on their use case for collaboration.

- **Office-based knowledge workers** seem to benefit from tools that enable parallel use of applications and help promote multi-tasking. These users appreciate apps where they can share visual information effectively at the same time as a voice or video session.
- **Mobile workers** expect rich collaboration tools that have minimum or low degradation of service. They prefer having these tools on their mobile devices while they are on the move.
- **Application development and delivery (AD&D) professionals** want dynamic group collaboration tools that helps them make decisions more quickly and within an integrated development process – boosting their productivity levels and delivery of new apps or enhancements.

To meet these varying requirements, organisations tend to provide a core service that meets a reasonable level of user expectations. Most requirements are met through email, telephony, audio and videoconferencing, shared drives or SharePoint along with some additional services for specific use cases:

- broadcast email services for sending specialised messages (marketing, customer notifications etc.)
- traditional analogue PBXs supporting small offices and complex implementations that have remained untouched
- stand-alone or integrated dial-in audioconferencing services for scheduled meetings with dial-in or operator-assisted dial-out facility
- IP telephony with some unified communications functionality such as unified messaging
- Microsoft's Skype for Business or Cisco Jabber for instant messaging and internal audio/video/application sharing
- Web conferencing services for broadcast meetings, webinars and training

- multiple document management platforms allowing users to create, share review and tag documents – editing of documents can be sequential (one editor at a time), or parallel (several users editing a document simultaneously) with varying support for access control, versioning and rollback
- room-based videoconferencing/ telepresence solutions for board room video and shared whiteboards.

## So, what are the challenges?

**Shadow collaboration tools.** In some organisations, IT doesn't keep pace with user needs, resulting in 'shadow' tools that aren't managed by IT but are being used by certain business units, user groups or geographies. For example, we see the AD&D community using team collaboration tools such as Slack and conferencing services such as Google Hangouts; individual user groups buying Web conferencing service subscriptions using their corporate credit cards; and senior management using specific applications on their tablets to read content.

**Duplicate services.** Applications and services are often implemented in silos, and when vendors expand their features and functionality

– conferencing, video, instant messaging and presence – most organisations end up having multiple services that do many of the same things (see Figure 1). While today's deployments may appear manageable, the problems are likely to increase as software businesses extend their reach. The result is that users aren't clear about which services they should be using or what services are formally supported by the organisation.

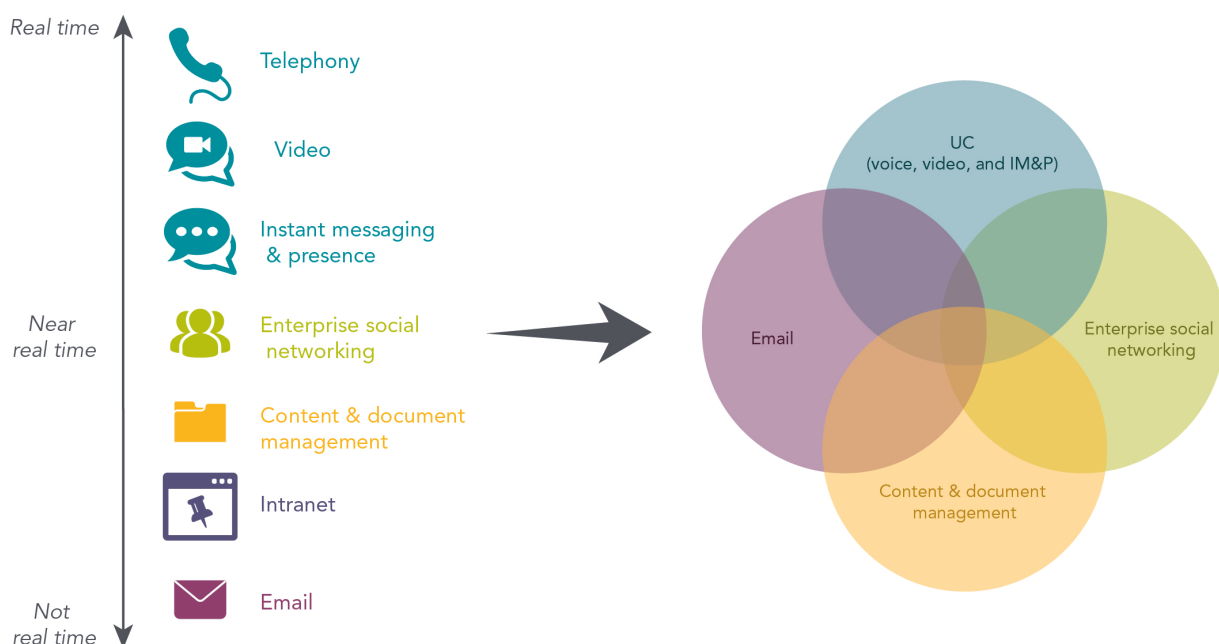
**Consumer as corporate.** Consumer tools and devices are evolving at a rapid pace with a plethora of options being available to users today – most of them offered in the cloud using a 'freemium' model. People have started using commercially available tools such as WhatsApp and WeChat and have deeply ingrained these in a business workflow, often without the knowledge of IT.

Early adopters/power users of technologies continue to introduce tools to their sphere of influence within the organisation without fully understanding service management, performance or information security implications.

### Superseded platforms not withdrawn.

Organisations continue to use and support legacy systems and failed pilot schemes even after new methods of collaboration are

**Figure 1: Shift in functionality.** Where there was previously a clear delineation between services, there is now significant crossover in functionality as providers develop their propositions [Source: Mason Advisory]



launched due to resistance to change. Over time this can lead to a complex environment of legacy and new systems each with different user communities.

This issue is further compounded by isolated implementations, lack of user training, and lack of awareness. The overall impact is a fragmented experience for users who have varying levels of understanding and adoption. This means that it is difficult to realise the efficiency gains that such technology promises to deliver, as well as making it difficult for IT to support users and ensure the security of business data.

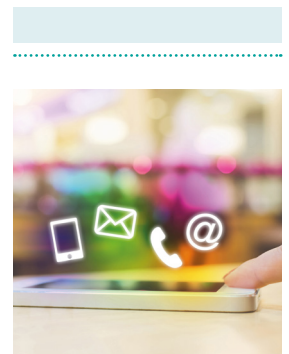
## Evolution of collaboration tools

To address these challenges, organisations on the leading edge of collaboration have embarked on a journey to transform from traditional silos of collaboration tools to a homogeneous set of services that meet the full range of business needs. This usually follows the pattern previously shown in Figure 1, for example:

- real-time collaboration tools get integrated into a unified communications offering
- social and group collaboration get consolidated into an enterprise social networking (ESN) or team collaboration tool
- file sharing and document exchange gets consolidated into a document management and storage solution.

For most organisations, this is a continuous journey and some aspects will continue to lag behind the stated outcomes.

In the marketplace, suppliers often launch independent products and tools that meet specific needs of users. As the product matures and gains traction within organisations, these tools are often bundled into existing services or the functionality is added to an existing tool. Even within organisations, services move from introductory stages where a select few users use the tool to a consolidated enterprise-wide service. In general, we can classify current collaboration services at various stages of this journey as shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2: Collaboration maturity.** Services will go through different stages of maturity (variability between organisations is shown by the dotted lines) before achieving a truly converged solution [Source: Mason Advisory]



## So, how do you prepare for the future?

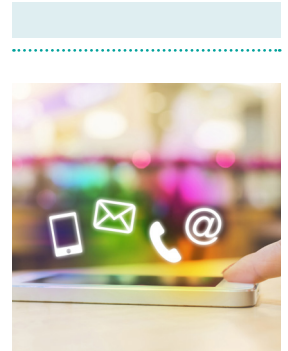
To help organisations get the best from collaboration, services must be allowed to move through the four phases of maturity – only when they reach maximum evolution and convergence can the most appropriate and highest value tools be unlocked. To allow this process to happen, organisations should follow the seven tips for success outlined below.

- Device-agnostic collaboration.** The devices users choose to collaborate with today might be a thing of the past soon. Therefore, organisations should specifically ensure that no tools being offered to users today are locked into a specific user device, e.g. desk phones, videoconferencing units, and digital screens. Better still, organisations can aim to move users away from desk phones by introducing strong change management, communications and awareness programmes.
- Encourage mobility.** Where this aligns with their culture, organisations should use the prevalence of laptops, smartphones and tablets in the corporate environment and use the often high spend on mobile services (either with or without devices) and extend collaboration tools to users' mobile devices by default. Providing collaboration tools on users' mobile devices can help with remote and flexible working, but also fits in with today's workplace design, where users are prone to work away from their desk, be it within the campus (e.g. cafeteria, huddle rooms, quiet rooms etc.).
- Cost-conscious transport.** Organisations should move away from using expensive (and sometimes limited capacity) transport mechanisms to support collaboration services. Users have accepted the new standard of collaboration quality with the growth of consumer collaboration services, and organisations should follow the path of using cheaper alternatives such as Internet and SIP to provide communications transport services. Recognising that the workforce, partners and external collaborators are consistently working outside the corporate domain further emphasises the need to think about the Internet first.
- Consolidation of processing entities.** To break the constant cycle of being stuck within silos of communication stacks, organisations should start focusing on consolidation of the services that process these stacks. Unifying processing services will go a long way to consolidating collaboration tools in the future. Communications platforms as a service (CPaaS) or comms APIs are a great upcoming example of unifying the processing entity and extending collaboration services to multiple communication stacks (for example, cloud PBX services such as Twilio, Avaya-Zang, Cisco Tropo or Mitel CloudLink).
- Integrating support services.** Organisations should encourage and deploy service-agnostic support structures which will allow internal and external service management teams to share the load across platforms and services based on demand and actual use. A common first step is to bring together the fixed voice, mobility and collaboration teams from different parts of the organisation, and to integrate them into a single entity with IT.
- Analytics and tracking.** Today's communication and collaboration tools provide a large amount of data regarding performance, usage, behaviours, trends and service costs. Standardising these tools or consolidating data provided by them allows businesses to identify organisational shifts in collaboration technology. This is key to understanding the maturity and evolution of services within the organisation.
- Promotion of preferred platforms.** Retiring older platforms and standardising on preferred ones is essential to achieve a tidy and maintainable estate. Older unsupported platforms that are not patched and maintained become a security and data loss risk. Any initiative to launch new collaboration platforms should not be considered complete until the relevant legacy system is decommissioned.

## Conclusion

No combination of collaboration tools trumps the advantage of face-to-face interaction. However, in today's digital age, people have accepted technology as a necessity and a means of collaboration in a global workplace.

It's now a question of how we can make this digital workplace experience far richer, more personalised, more effective and more rewarding for users. Regardless of what platforms you're using, businesses need to make sure that collaboration follows the same best practice as any other technology solution.



### *Collaboration – the basics still apply*

Collaboration may have its own considerations, but when looking at these platforms, IT teams should still make sure they're delivering the basics.

- **Solve business problems.** IT departments can often be drawn into deploying new tools or functionality by the latest offerings from vendors. It's important to remember that new solutions should solve a business problem – the business should be a key stakeholder in the decision-making process.
- **Improve adoption by providing training and incentives.** Collaboration only works if everyone is on the same page. Training is crucial to adoption, and this can be supported by incentives for users. Key stakeholders should be used to communicate the benefits of collaboration tools.
- **Keep it simple and user friendly.** Users prefer simple, easy-to-use tools that meet performance expectations, rather than complicated, high-functionality tools that are sluggish or provide a poor experience.

### About Mason Advisory

A simple approach to complex challenges: Mason Advisory is an IT consultancy that does things differently. That's because we provide experts in IT who match technology know-how with commercial and business sense.

Businesses come to us because we solve complex business challenges through intelligent use of IT. We're here to help clients set their strategy and then deliver on those decisions.

And because we're independent, you know you can have confidence that our conclusions meet your needs.

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### Contact us

If you would like to discuss how we can support you please email [contact@masonadvisory.com](mailto:contact@masonadvisory.com) or call +44 333 301 0093.

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