Global Teamwork Is Not an Oxymoron
Allow Dispersed Employees to Collaborate Effectively Using SAP NetWeaver

Companies no longer function entirely out of a single building. As businesses grow, so does their global presence, a phenomenon that forces organizations to constantly re-evaluate their employee-to-employee communication — or collaboration — capabilities, especially when it comes to managing global projects. Tasks that involve multiple workers simply cannot succeed without effective collaboration; only through teamwork — and the technology to support it — can companies unveil tacit knowledge and turn that knowledge into immediate business action.

Whereas email was once the primary communication channel for globally dispersed employees — and still may be for some companies today — increasingly complex projects have rendered email an inefficient and outdated collaboration tool. Important information gets lost in the email flood and little structure exists, making it especially painful for the individual who has to consolidate multiple document versions, reviews, and revisions. Instead, employees need a single meeting place, specifically tailored to their individual needs, for gathering, creating, fine-tuning, and sharing crucial information.

The Key? Build Collaboration into Business Processes
To address this challenge, SAP offers collaborative workspaces, working environments that allow individuals, teams, and project groups to collaborate easily and efficiently across time zones and between geographical locations. SAP delivers these collaborative workspaces as part of its User Productivity Enablement IT practice (see sidebar below).

But shared workspaces alone cannot fully enable effective collaboration. Collaboration must happen within the context of business processes, which means using collaboration technologies alongside

An Approach to SAP NetWeaver That’s Devoted to Improving User Productivity

IT practices, as SAP defines them, are the major challenges IT departments face when addressing a specific pain point. The User Productivity Enablement IT practice specifically addresses the need to improve personal and group productivity.

For individual users, this involves maximizing their ability to recognize and exploit productivity opportunities and to address problems through a personalized, actionable environment that delivers relevant, timely information. For the enterprise as a whole, it means getting more value from institutional knowledge and existing IT systems while optimizing ad hoc and distributed work processes.

To enable improved user productivity — both for individuals and the enterprise — SAP offers the following SAP NetWeaver IT scenarios:

- Enabling User Collaboration
- Running an Enterprise Portal
- Business Task Management
- Mobilizing Business Processes
- Enterprise Knowledge Management
- Enterprise Search

This article covers Enabling User Collaboration in detail. For more information about the other IT scenarios, please visit www.sdn.sap.com and click on the IT Practices and IT Scenarios link.

1 Collaborative workspaces are also called “virtual rooms.”

For an expanded definition of IT practices, and for a closer look at SAP’s IT scenarios that address them, see Claudia Weller’s article “IT Scenarios Provide a Guided, Business-Oriented Approach to Maximizing SAP NetWeaver Use” in the July-September 2005 issue of SAP Insider (www.SAPinsideronline.com).

frequently needed business data that resides in business applications like ERP.

Consider the budget planning process. Let’s say a business unit analyst starts a new round of budget planning, which includes cost-center-based annual budgeting and involves managers across the company. In the past, this analyst had to ask all managers to submit their budget data via email, wade through the disconnected financial and planning information, and then manually check it against actual enterprise data after entering it into the business application.

Through the IT scenario Enabling User Collaboration, SAP NetWeaver now delivers powerful collaboration capabilities and tools that allow users to interact from within their business processes. If needed, users can also harness the third-party groupware applications or synchronous collaboration services they already use by intelligently interweaving the various collaborative technologies.

Now, in our budget planning process scenario, all parties involved can “meet” together within a common workspace – one that’s also connected to the company’s actual financial data and applications – for the complete budget-planning round. The analyst just has to create a team workspace where he can offer access to a tool such as the SAP NetWeaver Business Intelligence (SAP NetWeaver BI) Integrated Planning tool. The analyst then invites all vested managers as “planners” to flesh out their respective budgets (see Figure 1). At any given time, the business unit analyst can access a complete overview of all the managers involved and where they stand in terms of task completion, with no more sorting through heaps of emails and document versions.

This is just one example of how collaborative technologies can bolster effective communication and improved processes (this article features several more!). Across the board, workspaces and collaboration services, together with the business context provided by integrated enterprise applications, will evolve into mission-critical tools for virtually any organization. Through the Enabling User Collaboration

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FIGURE 1 – Sample workspace where managers can enter budget planning information for their cost centers

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<sup>3</sup> SAP NetWeaver BI Integrated Planning is an example of a tool used for accessing business data through a collaborative workspace.
IT scenario, SAP NetWeaver provides these collaborative, connected capabilities.

**So How Does This IT Scenario Work?**

The Enabling User Collaboration scenario uses SAP NetWeaver’s portal and knowledge management capabilities to consolidate SAP NetWeaver applications, as well as third-party applications, into collaborative workspaces (see Figure 2). Delivered through a portal interface, each workspace is integrated with task management features, which are based on the Universal Worklist.  

Collaboration services, such as those from Microsoft or WebEx, can be launched from the collaboration launch pad in the portal and the member list within the workspace (see sidebar below). Accordingly, users can share relevant information, communicate online in real time, plan with the help of a team calendar, and access business-relevant information and applications — all from a single UI and without any knowledge of all the collaborative technologies working behind the scenes. And, because SAP NetWeaver’s collaboration capabilities are tightly integrated with knowledge management, users can access standard document-handling features (such as check in, check out, locking, and versioning) in a collaborative workspace.

By promoting the use of collaborative technologies, companies can unveil tacit knowledge and turn that knowledge into business action.

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**Using Microsoft for Collaboration? Add It (or Tools from Other Providers) to Your Portal**

To accommodate SAP customers who may be employing collaboration tools from other vendors, the open integration capabilities of SAP NetWeaver offer several options for integrating third-party tools into collaborative workspaces. These options include:

- **Integrating functions from third-party collaboration UIs** — for example, Microsoft Outlook’s “Send Email” or WebEx Meeting Center’s “Start Online Meeting” functions — into the portal. Some functions can be integrated out of the box, and some require coding. Either way, nearly every third-party collaboration service can be integrated with SAP NetWeaver’s portal, and using the code samples from SAP will reduce the integration effort considerably.

- **Integrating an existing groupware server**, such as Microsoft Exchange, so that project teams or departments can access — through the portal — a team calendar that’s in sync with their personal Microsoft Outlook calendar.
Let’s walk through a handful of examples to see how SAP NetWeaver’s collaborative technologies — delivered through what SAP terms scenario variants — translate into improved business communication and teamwork for your company.

What Collaboration in the Context of Processes Might Mean for Your Business: Variants and Example Scenarios
To help address user's various process collaboration needs, SAP's Enabling User Collaboration IT scenario addresses two scenario variants.

Scenario Variant #1: Ad Hoc Collaboration
Some business processes require users to interact on the fly to quickly and efficiently discuss and solve business issues online. Accordingly, the ad hoc collaboration variant comprises the search for the right communication partners and the use of collaboration services in a portal.

Let's say a customer service representative receives a call from a customer about a product's special feature, but the representative does not have the knowledge to fully answer the customer's question on the spot. Using synchronous communication services through the portal, the rep can search for experts who can help and immediately interact with them using integrated, synchronous communication services. An appropriate expert can then use his know-how to answer the customer's question efficiently through the portal's integrated groupware and instant-messaging tools.

Scenario Variant #2: Collaboration in Virtual Rooms
Other business processes require users and administrators to create virtual workspaces for team members or project groups to collaborate efficiently across time zones and locations. The collaboration in virtual rooms variant addresses this precise challenge.

Consider Susan Summer, an event manager at a company named iTelO. Susan, who belongs to the event marketing department, is busy preparing for Xbit 2007, a large technology event where iTelO plans to present its new laptop suite. Susan sets up a collaborative workspace called “Event Organization: Xbit 2007” through iTelO's corporate portal, which is based on SAP NetWeaver. Here she can find and maintain all project-related information, including documents, meetings, and tasks, as well as content coming from business applications, all in one workspace. SAP NetWeaver workspaces can comprise public areas, which are available to anyone who can access the portal, or internal areas, which are available only to those whom the workspace manager selects. Susan uses the workspace's public pages to publish content produced by the project team to all employees to keep them abreast of event information (see Figure 3).

Take another example of this variant, in which learners can come together from anywhere in the world. SAP Learning Solution's Learning Portal uses the very same workspaces, so organizations can set them up as virtual learner communities for trainees to quickly and efficiently exchange information with
one another. The training administrator can provide one or more workspaces for each course, and learners can be automatically registered as workspace members when they sign up for a course in the Learning Portal. The SAP Learning Solution supports functions for booking participants, canceling bookings, and following up on courses.

These variants depict just a few examples of how evolving collaboration technologies can change the face of enterprise communication and improve business processes. So what can SAP customers expect next?

New Forums Will Take Business Collaboration to the Next Level

Many businesses have already discovered the value of online communities in driving communication and interaction with customers and partners. Just look at MySpace and you’ll see that the newest generation of Web sites and applications support virtual communities, particularly by integrating collaboration and community-oriented services. SAP is also exploring the use of online communities, and believes forum functionality will be its linchpin for a vibrant, knowledge-sharing business community.

Due to the enormous success of SAP Developer Network (SDN) forums, which have attracted more than 700,000 users to date, SAP will be integrating SDN-like forums into the collaboration capabilities of SAP NetWeaver (see Figure 4). The new forums are designed with intuitive user interfaces that enable users to discuss common issues and topics, post questions to the community, escalate questions to experts, and get updates on posted comments. These forums will also allow employees, customers, suppliers, and partners to view up-to-date information, share knowledge, and proactively deliver relevant information to people with similar projects in the pipeline.

The forums will be able to fully integrate with your existing authentication mechanisms to enhance site security. They will include extensive and easy-to-use moderation features, such as message screening and batch processing.

The forums will also allow teams to:

- Reward the most active users and experts
- Locate experts in the community
- Contribute to forums through email
- Improve performance, even in high-traffic or mission-critical environments, with features like server clustering and performance tuning
- Ban malicious users by username, email, or IP address, either permanently or for a period of time

SAP’s new forums are currently in the beta shipment phase with SAP NetWeaver 2004 SPS 19; the first phase of these features is planned to be rolled
out to all customers in SAP NetWeaver 2004 SPS 20 and SAP NetWeaver 2004s SPS 12.

Summary
As company processes become more complex and corporations continue to stretch their global arms, businesses simply cannot function without internal collaboration capabilities. SAP NetWeaver’s knowledge management and collaboration tools provide the functionality for effectively creating team-oriented workspaces. Through the Enabling User Collaboration IT scenario, companies have the tools they need to integrate both SAP’s collaborative capabilities and third-party offerings into a company-wide portal that provides employees with all the information they need to work together efficiently. These employees can also access crucial enterprise data coming from business applications to drive processes and manage information.

Collaborative capabilities will remain a high priority during SAP’s development activities throughout the coming year; we aim to create a new generation of faster workspaces that will include improved UI usability, a comprehensive point system to reward contributors who share their knowledge in forums, wiki support, team workspaces, and enhanced integration with third-party collaboration services. As a result, the team play between staff members, partners, and customers will continue to become more interwoven, more flexible, and more independent of organizational structures.

Additional Resources
- [www.sdn.sap.com](http://www.sdn.sap.com) → IT Practices and IT Scenarios → Enabling User Collaboration
- [https://service.sap.com/nw-collaboration](https://service.sap.com/nw-collaboration)