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Seven Solid Reasons To Invest In A Virtual Workplace

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FALLS CHURCH, Va. -- You've pondered the concept of the "virtual workplace" for a while. Perhaps yours is a global corporation whose myriad of managers need to coordinate their efforts -- or a company trying to evolve from a "silo" structure to a "cross-functional" one. Or, maybe you have a business with a lot of telecommuters in different locations, or a consulting firm dependent on a loosely organized network of independent partners.

The point is, you know your employees and/or affiliates need an "online workplace" of some sort; you just aren't sure how to go about it.

Besides, your track record in this sort of thing isn't so hot. When you think of all the software you've tried that is now gathering dust on a shelf -- and the change initiatives you've tried to implement that have gone nowhere -- it fills you with a sense of dread. But with air travel looking less appealing every day, you're feeling the pressure to do something. *Fast.*

Indeed, now is the time to establish your online workplace, says Bill Bruck, co-founder of Virginia's Collaboration Architects Inc. He and his business partner John Darling specialize in designing, constructing and implementing online work environments that enable people and organizations to collaborate via the Web.

"In the 21st century work world, many organizations need an 'online office' in which meetings of the mind can take place," says Bruck. "Those minds may be managers of the same company in different geographic locations or telecommuters or freelancers or even members of different corporations collaborating on projects. Fact is, the world is changing, and so is the way we think about work. And although most people realize this in a vague way, they may not understand the real benefits of the virtual workplace-and they certainly don't know to go about building one."

Decisions today, Bruck notes, are much more complex, have to be made more quickly, and tend to involve a lot more people and cross functional teams and organizational boundaries. "And not everyone contributing to getting the job done is located in the same building or even the same state or even the same *country*," he says. "In

some major corporations, 50% of the employees are not co-located with their managers. Basically, the days of everyone arriving at the same building at 8:30 a.m., working together all day, and leaving at 5 p.m. are over. A virtual workplace gives team members a place to "go" and way to communicate and share information when they get there.

So why should *your* company establish and use a virtual workplace? Bruck offers the following seven solid reasons to invest in one:

Work-place boundaries are expanding and decision-making is more complex. You've heard about the shrinking global economy, the paradoxes that come with it and the increasingly distributed work force for years. Surprise -- it's all here! Now, you are faced with the realities of managers managing from a distance, projects becoming dauntingly complex, and decisions that demand ever-more-rapid answers from ever-larger numbers of people. No question, it's time for team members to put their collective heads together in a big way. An online office lets you do just that.

Ongoing collaborations are inherently superior to fragmented meetings. How often have you sat in a long, boring meeting in which very little got accomplished, and within two days you'd forgotten what was decided? Probably more times than you care to count! The same tends to be true in terms of voice conferences and web-based meetings. That's why online environments -- which allow you to collaborate over long periods of time, keep central repositories of documents and even review prior "discussions" word for word -- tend to be far more productive and successful.

For most business teams, e-mail just isn't enough anymore. You write an e-mail. You send it to 10 people. You get eight different responses. Now what do you do? Do you send eight different replies? Do you copy each reply to all 10 people? And if someone replies to *your* reply, should they copy it to everyone on the list? Auggghhh! It's enough to give anyone a raging headache. A well-designed virtual office eliminates the frustrating e-mail trail by giving everyone a single location to make comments and respond to them. It's a nearly foolproof way to ensure that no one gets left "out of the loop." Also, it documents every word that's exchanged. When you need to look back and confirm something, you'll find the entire "conversation" recorded in one place, rather than having to open six months' worth of e-mails.

A virtual workplace creates a "living archive" of documents. Memos, progress reports, schedules, budgets, press releases -- all documents pertinent to your project can be archived in your online environment. Obviously, every team member benefits from having access to such materials. If someone misses an important meeting, he or she can go to the archive and review the notes. Successive drafts of documents can be posted so that the "history" of the project may be easily reconstructed. Decisions are recorded for posterity.

Asynchronous work environments give everyone an equal voice. "Synchronous describes a one-hour meeting," explains Bruck. "Asynchronous refers to what happens between that meeting and next meeting. Let's say a company holds a brainstorming meeting. We all know the ideas that are put on the table come from those people that are the quickest and the loudest. But suppose the company recorded these ideas in an asynchronous online environment and told everyone they had a week to review them and add others? Quieter folks, or those that prefer to mull things over, or those that just had a bad breakfast that morning would be much more inclined to post their ideas. In this way, a virtual workplace is a great equalizer."

It's cost-effective over the long haul. Yes, an online work environment will require an initial outlay of cash to get up and running. But think of it as an investment that will pay off "big-time." In the long run, this type of cohesive, ongoing, goal-directed interaction is simply a more efficient and effective way of working. It saves time, it eliminates redundancies, it builds strong alliances, and it fosters teamwork. Ultimately, all of this means it can save your company money. In fact, it could be just the competitive advantage you need right now!

Post-9/11 travel apprehension has "upped the ante" for many companies. "I don't mean to imply that this is a major reason to establish a virtual workplace, but it is uppermost in many people's minds," admits Bruck. "Executives are more reluctant to fly and many companies are cutting back on their travel, but the fact remains that work still has to get done! There must be a viable alternative to face to-face meetings-and a cohesive, company-specific online work space designed to facilitate the right type of interaction is a great one."

Perhaps the biggest and most compelling reason to establish an online work environment, says Bruck, is simply this: it's nothing less than an inevitability for corporations destined to survive and thrive in the Information Age.

"Today's business leaders have a simple choice: they can quickly learn how to use online collaboration technology or they can bury their heads in the sand," he asserts. "Those who choose to learn increase their chances of staying competitive. For those who don't, it's just a matter of time before they are out of the game altogether. And in today's world we are talking about months, not years, to experience competitive degeneration.

"The electronic workplace is the workplace of the future," he adds. "Fifty years from now we'll be holding long-distance meetings in front of life-size video screens just as a matter of course. But it has to begin somewhere, and that somewhere is finding better, more efficient ways to share information. The corporation that learns how to compete globally -- and manage the attendant wealth of information effectively -- ultimately will come out on top."

Collaboration Architects Inc. designs, constructs and implements

online work environments that enable people and organizations to collaborate via the Web. The firm offers a wide variety of services, including evaluation processes, implementation plans, customized virtual work spaces, training workshops, change management consulting, and hosting.

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