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MANAGEMENT VER 2.0

Building Online Office Space



Has your company started work on its virtual office yet? This isn't about e-mailing memos to employees, or giving them the key to the executive database. Think of it as an online space where your employees do all the stuff they usually do offline — without any mind-numbing, technology-gearred differences. It may sound simple, but simulating the processes, habits, and work patterns of a department or organisation into virtual practices turns out to be quite a challenge. Instead of getting people to change the way they do things to accommodate technology, you modify technology to fit into the current work-habits of people. In a sense, it means building a virtual extension to your office building — right from the foundations to the roof in such a way that the information pipes seamlessly flow from offline spaces into online spaces. Not surprisingly, building virtual offices requires virtual architects.

I found one such company called Collaboration Architects, which is based in Virginia, USA. I use the term “based” loosely because its two founding partners, John Darling and Bill Bruck, have the American continent between them, with Darling being based in California and Bruck in Virginia. Their virtual head-office is, obviously, www.collaborationarchitects.com.

I asked Darling to define the term virtual workplace. “Its basically an online work environment that is designed to configure to the ‘work’ that goes on in an office. It includes project and team work spaces, discussion tools, and document-sharing tools.” How was this virtual office any different from a sophisticated intranet or knowledge management system? Darling's answer was simple and comforting: “Virtual offices mirror the way people do things.”

So, while a virtual office echoes the

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bells-and-whistles of an efficient intranet, it also consists of a foundation that is well-entrenched, and scaffolding that is raised higher than the present structure of a networked corporation. One sample of the difference in scope: while a good knowledge management system would provide employees access to documents and data, a virtual office would seamlessly offer discussion tools woven into the knowledge tools.

“A virtual office would use synchronous tools, like web conferencing, as well as asynchronous tools, like message boards and file storage arenas, in such a way that an employee can go in and out of one space to another. This is quite unlike intranets, which are primarily informational in nature and data-driven. The idea of a virtual office is to take data to another level so that it becomes knowledge. For that, you need online spaces like discussion rooms,” explains Darling.

Of course, the human element is critical for a virtual offices success (or failure). Darling and Bruck stress making the online spaces as personal and human as possible in order to match the comfort-level of offline spaces. They make sure pictures of people on the team or project are incorporated as well as their profiles so that everyone knows who is online at any point of time, what they look like, and, thanks to audio and video tools, what they even sound like. What’s a good place to start breaking ground for a virtual office? Says Darling: “Start with something small. It should be a real work situation, like a project. And it should be work that requires the involvement of a dispersed set of people.” Interestingly, size does not matter; you don’t need to be a million-dollar transnational with offices across the globe to justify a virtual office. “You could have people in one location, but in a 40-story building, or spread across a town. The size of the organisation is not a determining factor.”

There is one human benefit, though, that makes a virtual office a great democratic space to work in. “Let’s say a company holds a brainstorming session,” say the virtual architects. “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, 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 equaliser.” Taking human interaction online, it would appear, is one humane solution to level workplace inequalities.



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