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### How a virtual office works

By Meredith B. Derby, *assistant news editor*  
07 Jan 2002 | [SearchWindowsManageability](#)



*E-mail collaboration, intranets, and conference calls are yesterday's technologies. "The time is now for the virtual workplace to take off," Bill Bruck predicted.*

*Today's distributed workforces can benefit from the person-to-person interaction a virtual office creates. E-mail initially created that person-to-person interface, he said, but now an even greater community-like feel is needed.*

*Bruck and John Darling are the founders of Falls Church, Va.-based Collaboration Architects, Inc. The company builds online work environments, or "virtual offices," where workers can meet to collaborate and access task-related tools. SearchWindowsManageability recently asked Bruck how virtual workplaces are implemented, what challenges the technology poses for early adopters, and if they're really needed.*

#### **sWM: Can you define exactly what a virtual workplace entails?**

**Bruck:** A virtual workplace is an electronic office that a group of people go to. It has all the tools they need and provides a sense of place. It also provides a sense of being on a team. The virtual workplace facilitates the interactions required to support the nature of work to be done. If I go everyday to a Web site that has pictures of my team, links to instant messaging, a link to asynchronous discussion boards and has all the documents and database links I need, then I feel like I've gone somewhere -- like I'm in an office.

**sWM: What do you see when you enter a virtual workplace?**

**Bruck:** You would see a little thumbnail picture of everybody on your team when you come into the workplace. When you read a discussion item, as the team manager, you can see who's actually read it and whether or not they've posted a response. If you're really trying to work virtually that's the sort of power you need to be able to coordinate the work.

**sWM: What are the top two reasons why companies should create a virtual workplace?**

**Bruck:** The first reason is that we are working distributed. Virtually everybody is working with people who are geographically distributed and cross-functional. Quite often, people are located in and out of the enterprise, such as vendors and consultants. The second reason is that e-mail and same-time virtual meetings don't support the complexity of ongoing work processes. The work is too complicated for the current tools.

**sWM: What are the inherent challenges in setting up virtual workplaces in enterprise-sized companies?**

**Bruck:** The biggest challenge is that the people charged with the task quite often misunderstand this as a technology deployment problem, and it's not. Remember, a significant number of people did not like e-mail at first. Frankly, deploying Outlook was not nearly as tough as getting people to use it. The nature of the problem here is change management. Often, especially at an enterprise level, we think of this as deploying the technology and then a year later blaming the user community for not using it. You actually have to change your business processes to take advantage of the technology. Lastly, people have to be trained and motivated.

**sWM: Are there any specific challenges to using virtual workplaces in Windows settings?**

**Bruck:** Authentication and firewalls are two challenges. It could be you have a person working from home or a hotel that needs to access the corporate data. Authentication from one application to another and the IT requirement for data security versus a manager's requirement that distributed workers be able to access the workplace must be balanced.

**sWM: Can you describe the process of implementing an electronic office for an average company?**

**Bruck:** The most common company wants a pilot project for a virtual team. We take them through a preliminary needs analysis. At the end of that, they know the specific work needed to be done, the type of technology they would need, and whether they have the adequate resources. Then, we come up with a set of specifications and design the environment, the training and consulting process to match those specs. We then develop, implement and host the solution. Our experience is that a bottom-up deployment tends to work better than a bottom-down deployment. We start with the business process owner, such as someone in marketing that has to do a product rollout. We obviously coordinate with the IT folks. We start with the specific business unit that has the specific problem. Then it's a viral type of growth.


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