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### Top 10 virtual office mistakes

By Meredith B. Derby, *assistant news editor*  
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Imagine if instead of driving to the office each day, you could surf there. New technologies can make the dream of online workplaces a reality. But if the technologies aren't implemented well, the reality could seem like a bad dream.

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Collaboration Architects, Inc. builds online work environments, or "virtual offices," where workers can meet to collaborate and access task-related tools. They provide a sense of place and a sense of team, said Bill Bruck, co-founder of the Falls Church, Va.-based company.

While the virtual office seems similar to a corporate Intranet, it is much more integrated and interactive, Bruck said. Intranets merely provide information, but virtual workplaces are online destinations where employees working remotely or in-house go, stay and collaborate to complete a day's work. "It feels like an office with file cabinets and all," he said.

When pioneering any new technology, it's easy for early adopters to make mistakes. In this story, Bruck and Collaboration Architect's other founder, John Darling, outlined ten mistakes organizations can make when dabbling in the virtual office world.

1. **Tasks are not clear.** You can ensure failure by not providing clear direction and expectations of the work to be done. Avoid this by:
  - Stating a clear purpose/business reason for the task at hand.
  - Defining standards for the outputs/deliverables required.
  - Clarify timeframes.
  - Agree on and identify roles and responsibilities.
 Experience tells us that "loosey-goosey" expectations, such as creating an online environment so that "people can communicate better" or "form a sense of community," don't work.
2. **"Build it and they will come."** Don't think your people will welcome new online collaboration tools with open arms. People resist change. Think back to the introduction of voice mail and e-mail, for example. When people are asked to do work differently, you have a change management process on your hands. By making the extra effort to thoughtfully and systematically introduce people to the online collaboration tools, you will greatly increase your chances of success.
3. **Not understanding the problem before buying the technology.** Organizations, in their exuberance to get people collaborating online, often rush out and buy software before grasping what tools will be needed to get the job done. Unfortunately, the adage, "It is easier to get into something than to get out of something," is very true. To avoid getting stuck with technology that is not optimized for your type of online collaboration needs, make sure you invest time and effort up front. Clearly define your online collaboration requirements before spending money on technology.
4. **Automating "bogus" work processes.** Employing online collaboration technology can speed up faulty work processes. Worse yet, automating bad ideas gives the organization an air of legitimacy because they are "computerized." For instance, if an organization employs a "top-down" senior management "tell and sell" approach to decision making, switching to Web-based meetings will only exacerbate the one-way nature of communication.
5. **Failure to effectively "market" the new system.** As part of the change management process, a communications plan must be developed which will clearly explain how the new electronic workplace will work. It will explain the benefits to the individual and the organization.
6. **Not training the leaders.** If people are expected to lead, they must have the skills. Team and project leaders must be very comfortable in using the collaboration environment and tools. At a minimum, they must know how to effectively accomplish standard tasks such as using application sharing programs, brainstorming, alternative analysis, task coordination, and document review.
7. **Ignoring stakeholders.** IT and business management must work together in online collaboration solutions. Otherwise, business process owners may contract for ASP solutions that don't require IT approval, but also don't fit into the strategic technology plan. Or, IT departments may roll out collaboration technologies that are not a "good fit" with the best practices and workflow processes within the business.
8. **"If you only have a hammer?"** the whole world looks like a bunch of nails. Sometimes organizations implement one type of collaboration technology, such as video conferencing. Each type of online collaboration tool -- application sharing, document management, Web conferencing, bulletin boards -- is a good fit for some situations, and a bad fit for others. It's important to have a full range of tools for your online workplace: conferencing, asynchronous discussions, instant messaging, e-mail, decision support, document sharing, etc.
9. **Invoking the security god.** There is an inherent conflict between protecting intellectual property by restricting access to it and leveraging that intellectual property by collaborating around it. This conflict comes into high relief with the advent of virtual teams and computer-mediated communication, around such issues as instant messaging and hosted service providers. It's vital to include stakeholders from the user community in security decisions, so that interests can be balanced.



10. **Forgetting that "people pay attention to what the boss pays attention to."** People take their lead from the boss. If the boss uses the collaboration tools, monitors others uses of the tools, communicates expectations and appropriately reinforces the behavior he/she wants to see the team exhibit using online technology, the team will quickly adopt the new way of working.

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