

# Electronic Collaboration and Records Management

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## IMERGE Consulting, Inc

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*Jesse Wilkins*

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*Jesse.wilkins@imergeconsult.com*

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*www.imergeconsult.com*

Imagine. A brave new world with employees interacting in real time—sharing and commenting on documents, even having an interactive discussion. Of course, we call these meetings, and we've been doing (too many of) them since the day after the office was invented. This type of collaboration is comfortable (excepting the length of the meetings), but meetings suffer from a couple of flaws. It's difficult to get the right people into the same room at the same time. There is always a risk that discussions will break down into monologues, arguments, or diatribes. And perhaps the biggest problem from an organizational perspective is the quality of the notes and action items that typically comes out of a meeting—thereby requiring another meeting to clarify those notes and items.

A number of solutions have cropped up to address these various issues. These solutions are being used by a number of organizations to conduct business. For example, numerous organizations, including Microsoft, use instant messaging, webconferencing, and shared desktops to provide real-time customer support; while Texas Instruments and Yahoo both use wikis for project management and product design. In fact, wikis provide an excellent basis for internal collaboration on document creation, revision, and publication. Instead of sending an email with attachment for comment and then receiving, aggregating, and addressing comments in a series of messages, a document such as the corporate records policy could be posted to a wiki, where users could make their changes directly and see what the resulting document looks like. A recent BusinessWeek article quoted Gartner as predicting that wikis would become mainstream collaborative tools in at least 50% of companies by 2009.

### The Record Within

There are two fundamental tenets of records management: first, records are anything that document a transaction or inform a business decision; and second, records are saved regardless of media. Collaborative tools are no exceptions, but they do pose unique challenges to an effective records management program:

- \* Proprietary tools and approaches. Even the tools that use standard protocols can't interact with each other. As one commenter recently noted on the CentralDesktop blog, email doesn't care whether you use Outlook, Gmail, Lotus, or Thunderbird to create a message. If one department or organization uses Webex, and another uses EMC's eRoom, there is no easy way for them to collaborate across application boundaries.

- \* Lack of organizational awareness. Many of these collaborative tools are introduced without the knowledge of the organization or its IT staff. This has been a key concern regarding instant messaging, as most commercial clients provide minimal capability to archive conversations and result in numerous silos of information between users and even between applications on the same machine. This may result in undocumented decisions, on the one hand, and information being stored that IT, records, and legal are unaware of on the other hand, creating significant discovery issues either way.

- \* Lack of organizational control. Because the organization doesn't know about the tools or the extent of their use, there are limited policies, procedures, and training in place. Users create their own IDs in instant messaging ("BigBossInTX") and don't properly manage potential business records. Similarly, email and distributed collaborative tools may allow users to access them using free email accounts from Hotmail, Yahoo!, Google, AOL, and others, bypassing internal controls and processes.

### Managing Your Collaborative Records

Most of the information created and stored during a collaborative interaction does not rise to the level of a record for most organizations. Think about it like this: When you have a scheduled staff meeting, what are the records?

Typically there's an agenda, and at the end of the meeting there may be minutes that need to be kept, at least for a while. If the meeting regards a deliverable, there may be changes required to the deliverable—but once the revised deliverable is published, the requested changes may only be kept for a short period of time or not at all. And very few companies would attempt to make, much less keep, a verbatim transcript of what was said.

Now compare this to an electronic collaboration. The agenda might still be published, either prior to the collaborative session (perhaps via email) or during the session through a shared application. We already have the original agenda—so the copy stored within the collaborative session is superfluous. Next, the session commences, and as it progresses, comments are made within the document using markup and/or annotations, and some textual chat takes place as well. The changes we'll need to keep, using the native tools (if sharing the application) or the collaborative tool's technology. A wiki will track all its changes natively, while a web conferencing application should provide a mechanism for rolling up the changes and comments until they can be incorporated into the original document. And the chat? Some applications have a mechanism for effectively storing and managing all the chat—assuming the organization needs to do that. Most organizations will choose to discard it, perhaps summarizing it first into meeting minutes.

So what's the record here? For most organizations, it's the same in the collaborative world as it is in the document-oriented world. In the example above, that means the deliverable and perhaps meeting minutes around major decisions and comments. For organizations that are highly regulated or in litigious industries, it might make sense to use a solution that provides a mechanism for storing comments, attachments, chat, and the like. Some of the solutions available today do this by "rolling up" the entire session into a single package, which is effective for managing all of the disparate pieces. But it's more of a short term solution: as applications change, vendors get acquired, etc. it will quickly become a significant challenge to unwrap these proprietary packages. A better approach would be to store the data in some kind of an industry standard wrapper, most likely using XML as the container. This type of functionality is not available today but must become a baseline sooner than later if the vendors are serious about collaboration and compliance.

#### Taking Control of Collaborative Tools

The first step is to take control through organizational policies indicating what technologies are allowed and the procedures for using them effectively and appropriately. Users then have to be trained on the policies and procedures.

Before you choose the tools, think more strategically about the use of these types of tools in your organization. Does the culture support collaboration, or will this be an expensive white elephant that never gets used? Is your IT staff prepared to support users using these decentralized tools, and if not, what would it take? If you are a user, have you considered the possibility that your collaborative tools/sessions might be discoverable, and are you using them appropriately?

Choose collaborative tools that support, at a minimum, the ability to archive and subsequently retrieve the information generated during the collaborative session. Many collaborative tools have production or enterprise versions that support these requirements. Turn archiving and audit trails on, and review periodically to ensure the tools are being used and managed effectively.

Jesse Wilkins is a principal with IMERGE Consulting and writes and speaks frequently on electronic records management issues.

#### SIDEBAR

##### Collaborative Tools in 25 Words or Less

\* Email. 'Nuff said – for more information on effectively managing email see the 2004 and 2005 September/October issues of AIIM E-DOC Magazine (accessible in the Archives section of [www.edocmagazine.com](http://www.edocmagazine.com)).

\* Discussion forums. These include threaded discussions that group postings according to topic as well as real time chat sessions with many users.

\* Instant messaging. Allows 2 (or more) users to hold "chat" sessions in realtime. Commercial examples include Yahoo, AOL, MSN, ICQ, and GoogleTalk.

\* Wikis. Web-based authoring applications that allow multiple users to edit the same document using a simple interface. Wikipedia ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)) is a well-known example.

- \* Shared whiteboards, applications, desktops. Tools that allow multiple users to see the same workspace (“whiteboard”), application, or the entire desktop. Typically one person controls the workspace while others view.
- \* Webconferencing. Combines application sharing with audio and/or video.
- \* Presence tools. Originally found in instant messaging clients (“buddy lists”), these are increasingly found in desktop applications and can be used to start ad hoc collaborative sessions.
- \* Calendaring and scheduling. The ability to see someone else’s calendar and schedule meetings based on availability of people and resources.

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