

GroupWare

What it is and what it can do

GroupWare is an umbrella term covering any kind of technology that helps groups of people work together. However nowadays it is generally accepted to mean a tailored package of software that will help a specific group of people improve the efficiency with which they manage the information that they need to share, schedule their time, co-ordinate their actions, and work independently of time and space.

Key messages for SMEs

- GroupWare can give you great flexibility in where your staff are located.
- Basic GroupWare tools exist in the office suites that you probably already have.
- Advanced GroupWare use needs good support.

Many familiar applications contain features that support group working.

- **E-mail** can create group mailing lists, and automatically sort and file messages from group members.
- **Diaries and calendars** can co-ordinate the schedules of group members to arrange meetings automatically and optimise the use of other project resources (e.g. major items of equipment).
- **Word Processors, spreadsheets etc.** can identify authors, track changes and capture comments from group members on jointly authored documents.
- **Conferencing (audio or video)** can reduce the number of physical meetings and hence the amount of time group members spend travelling. **Shared whiteboards** or other facilities that allow group members to view and amend a common set of documents during a meeting can greatly enhance the value of conferencing.
- **Newsgroups and chatrooms** can allow group members to keep up to date with the latest information whenever it is convenient for them.
- **Hyperlinks** can not only be used to link between the documents shared by a group but also to track who is using those links to move between documents.

However, true GroupWare will stitch all these features together into an integrated system supporting the specific tasks of the group. It may also include:

- **Workflow systems** that automatically route information through the group's business processes.
- **Decision support systems** that provide tools for brainstorming, evaluating ideas and voting on the alternatives.
- **Multi-player games** that allow the group to act out alternative business strategies and scenarios.

Software packages specifically targeted on this type of dispersed group working include Lotus Notes, Microsoft BizTalk and Novell GroupWise. . They all allow information such as documents, calendars, task management etc to be shared amongst a defined group of people and synchronised with data on devices such as laptop PCs or Personal Digital Assistants They provide a much more comprehensive solution than the collaborative working features found in office suites, but it takes some skill to configure them to meet the specific needs of a particular group of users.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Groupware offers significant advantages over single-user systems. These include

- Speeding up problem solving
- Cutting travel costs
- Making communication faster, clearer and more persuasive
- Making communication independent of time and space
- Forming groups where it wouldn't be possible get the right people together face-to-face

However, it is much harder to get groupware right than it is with traditional single-user software. For example, everybody uses an application such as 'Word' in a personal way. You may be totally unaware of features that could help you do a particular task more efficiently but, as they might only save you a few minutes per week, it isn't worth spending time to learn about them. With groupware, all of the target group must be willing to adopt the system and learn how to use it. Groupware design therefore involves understanding how people behave in groups and coming up with a solution that not only matches the dynamics of that particular group but is also a 'natural' way for group members to use it

To get the full benefit from GroupWare, good service and support is needed – for instance, the central store of data must always be available and must be well maintained.

What to buy

There are some software suites specifically targeted on this type of dispersed group working, such as Lotus Notes, Microsoft BizTalk and Novell GroupWise. Their websites are:

<http://www.lotus.com/home.nsf/welcome/messaginghome>

<http://www.novell.com/products/groupwise>

<http://www.microsoft.com/biztalk/default.asp>

A site such as <http://www.usabilityfirst.com/groupware/cscw.txt> can provide you with more general information about GroupWare and a list of suppliers of specialist products. However the products are evolving rapidly so it is also worth using a search engine such as Yahoo to look for 'GroupWare'.

For all but the simplest of group working situations you will probably need help in configuring the software to achieve maximum benefit. Suppliers will almost certainly offer advice on how to adapt their products to your business situation, but you may prefer to seek independent advice from a specialist ICT consultant.

Proper GroupWare tools are complex and need to be tailored to each company's needs. You need to discuss your needs with potential suppliers and see which tools can best meet those needs. When you install a system it is very important to arrange suitable training for the staff who are to use it. You also need to understand clearly how the system will be supported and maintained because, if it is worth using, it will be handling activities that are critical to the future success of your company.

Questions to ask suppliers

Apart from price and functionality, you will also want to know:

- What discounts are available for a licence covering all members of my group?
- Can you offer advice on configuring your product to the needs of my group?
- Can you identify some local companies who are expert in configuring your product?
- What effort is involved in installing and maintaining the software and can you do this for us?
- Does the package come with inbuilt help and/or paper reference manuals?
- What training courses are available for helping our employees learn to use it effectively?
- Is there a telephone or web-based helpdesk where we can get advice on problems?