Managing Technology No Boundaries

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Getting collaborative systems to walk the talk.

Staffers at the Army Research Lab in Adelphi, Md., must share information and work together on new develop- ments in high-tech areas such as sensors and robotics. For years, researchers relied on the telephone and face-to-face meetings to collaborate. Once communication technology began to mature, they shifted to e-mail and videoconferencing. Secure Web collaboration came next. Still searching for a more efficient and effective way to work together, research teams began using emerging collaborative technologies, among them, Documentum Inc.'s eRoom, to manage and modify project information shared among widely dispersed team members. Teams throughout the lab use a variety of other commercial and homegrown collaboration tools; it still is rare for more than one group at the lab to use the same tool.

In the past, leaders at the lab's Collaborative Technology Alliances program encouraged research teams to use whichever technologies they believed worked best. But increasing cross-team and cross-agency collaboration has led to a more centralized approach. "Collaboration is more important than ever before simply because of the diverse and multidisciplinary nature of many of the problems we're trying to solve today," says the lab's acting director, John Miller. He expects the organization soon will choose a single collaborative technology to use across the lab.

Like the Army lab, other agencies increasingly are using feature-rich collaborative tools to share information and improve the security of their communications. Such tools speed communication by providing features such as text chat, instant messaging and real-time online collaboration.

Vendors have gotten the message: More collaborative tools with more features are available than ever before. From the fairly simple, such as secure e-mail and instant messaging, to Web-based tools, to specialized technology for real-time collaboration or identifying experts in various fields across an organization, government agencies can take their pick.

PULLING TOGETHER

The Federal Emergency Management Agency runs several collaborative disaster management efforts and uses technology to increase efficiency and create teams of collaborators in disparate locations. "Disasters don't respect boundaries," notes Mark Zimmerman, program manager for FEMA's disaster management e-gov initiative. FEMA needs to help first responders across the country share maps and communicate securely in real time. To manage a variety of collaborative programs, including disasterhelp.gov, the e-gov disaster Web portal, FEMA adopted one commercial tool directly off the shelf and has reworked another to fit its unique needs. For first responder communications, FEMA uses Bantu Instant Messaging from Washington-based Bantu Inc. For its other requirements, FEMA customized the AppianCollaboration tool from Appian Corp. of Vienna, Va.

The frustrations involved with sending large attachments via e-mail led the F-15 Systems Program Office at Warner Robins Air Logistics Center at Robins Air Force Base, Ga., to try LiveLink collaborative technology from OpenText Corp. of Waterloo, Ontario. "We needed some way to get rid of the huge attachments and centralize them so people could simply get a one-line e-mail notifying them that a document was available for them to review," says Greg Lewis, integrated data manager for the F-15 program's systems integration division. As collaborators become more familiar with the technology, Lewis expects they'll begin using its white board, instant messaging and electronic signature features.

Among the most popular features of collaborative technologies is the ability to change and add to documents online in real time, while several people are working on them. "It creates a slice of time where you are all working together on a specific area, and it can consolidate the process, which creates efficiency," says Stephen Davis, who heads MTG Management Consultants LLC, located in Seattle. MTG recently recommended Groove Workspace, a real-time collaborative tool from Groove Networks Inc. of Beverly, Mass., for the Kansas Public Employees Retirement System. The MTG staffers and Kansas government employees working together on the retirement system use Groove to track information, set up meetings and keep notes and revise documents in real time.

Collaborative features such as improved audio and video, as well as the ability to see multiple people in a conference, each in separate on-screen windows, are popular among employee