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FINDING NEW WAYS TO SHARE

Collaboration Solutions Enable Better Communication and Teamwork

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When considering software these days, it seems that virtually everywhere we turn we find a new collaboration solution. Some of these applications are designed to address specific functional areas such as product development, planning & forecasting, or supply chain management, while others are marketed as broad solutions for the entire product lifecycle process. In any case, it is clear that a new and improved version of technology-enabled collaboration is emerging.

Of course, apparel, footwear, and other sewn-products companies for years have utilized common business tools such as phone, fax, courier, and e-mail to address their need to share information with employees, suppliers, partners, and customers. But this new breed of collaboration software promises to change the way people accomplish everyday business tasks such as designing, developing, purchasing, producing, and tracking products. By leveraging the Internet, these solutions apply new communication and information sharing techniques to meet today's rapidly changing business needs.

The same top-line issues that drive many of today's business decisions also fuel the demand for improved collaboration. As sewn-products companies have extended their supply chains around the globe, the ability to work in teams is strained by the barriers of time, distance, and language. Moreover, they face increasing pressure to deliver greater product variety at more competitive prices while relying on fewer direct employees. All too often the result is errors, rework, lost time, and missed business opportunities.

Ironically, the urgency to adopt new collaboration methods often surfaces when workers create their own solution after companies fail to offer one. Case in point is the widespread use of standard e-mail and spreadsheet programs in the highly collaborative product development process. While e-mail systems are adept at point-to-point communication, they are not reliable and flexible enough to support designers' needs to share and collaborate around pictures and images. In the color approval process, e-mail systems fail to provide the necessary visibility and control to manage lab dip requests and submissions that require coordination across a host of buyers, sellers, and middlemen. Product specifications created on spreadsheets lack the accessibility and synchronization that fast-paced and dispersed teams need.

Even as these new technologies promise improved communication and collaboration, they also face a number of obstacles. While old methods may not be ideal, it is often difficult to change. It may also be challenging for companies to pinpoint the right tools in this emerging space, where the number of unfamiliar products continues to grow. Fortunately, most companies that have adopted these new technologies report that they are worth the effort, often saving considerable time, cost, and frustration in their processes. In fact, many consider the benefits so strategic and obvious that they do not bother to conduct a hard return-on-investment analysis.

As these solutions range from simple to sophisticated, buyers are advised to carefully match the software to their specific needs. As always, one of the best ways to leverage full use and benefit from these tools is to show users how they place value on their expertise.

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