
Collaboration Tools

A summary of collaboration tools you can use to coordinate activities in your business.

Chapter 1

As you look to either expand your business or streamline your operations, you will likely begin to work with business partners from other companies or you may delegate processes to virtual assistants.

In today's interconnected world, you are no longer confined to only working with people that reside in your local community. You can now partner with companies or delegate processes to people located all across the globe. The internet, and more specifically the variety of collaboration tools available on the Internet have made this possible. If you're not using these tools already, you need to start investigating these tools - especially because a number of these tools are available for FREE!

The following is a brief summary of collaboration tools that I use in my business to coordinate activities with business partners, such as my Livin' The Dream co-hosts, as well as virtual assistants that work for me.

Google Documents

Google now offers a number of other tools in addition to their search engine. Google Documents is a free Internet set of tools that allows you to share word processing documents, spreadsheets and presentations with anyone.

You can either create new word processing documents, spreadsheets and presentations in Google Documents or you can upload existing Excel, Word and PowerPoint documents into Google Documents.

Sharing Google Documents is easy. People you collaborate with first need to sign up for a Google account - which is free. Once they are signed up, you can give access to specific people. Access can be limited to view only through full editing access.

One of the most powerful features is that multiple people can be editing a document simultaneously.

Lastly, and probably most importantly, all of your documents are automatically backed up by Google each night. Therefore, you can rest assured that you will not lose all of your work.

Google Calendar

Another great service that is available for free through Google is Google Calendar.

As you might expect, this is a calendaring facility. You can create online calendars that are available to other Google Calendar users that you designate. If you already have an Outlook calendar filled with appointments, you can synchronize your Outlook calendar with Google Calendar and vice versa. You can even synchronize your Google Calendar with mobile devices such as a Blackberry phone.

You can create multiple calendars for different activities. One of the most powerful features is that you can combine views across multiple calendars. For example, in our Great Clips business we have one calendar for our corporate marketing that will be done across all of our salons. We then also have a separate calendar for each of our salons. Therefore, we can view our corporate calendar with the calendar for one of our salons to see if there is any overlap or conflict in the marketing plans.

Keeping others informed of calendar activities is easy. All you do is create an event and then add these people as invitees to the event. They do not need to have a Google Gmail account. They will get an easy-to-read meeting notice in their inbox. If they do have Outlook, the meeting details will automatically be added to the calendar.

Lastly, if you have an existing website and want to provide a calendaring facility, you can add the Google calendar to your website.

Mail Street – Hosted Exchange

If you are an Outlook user and you are looking to share information such as your calendar with business partners or virtual assistants, you may want to consider using Mail Street.

Mail Street is a company that provides hosting for Microsoft Exchange. If you are not familiar with Microsoft Exchange, this is the database that larger corporations use to store Outlook mail, calendars and other information.

The main advantage of using Mail Street is that you do not need to buy any hardware or software. They even provide Microsoft Outlook software as part of their price.

Just as Google does with their documents and calendaring facilities, Mail Street also takes care of backing up all of your information automatically. Therefore, if you ever lose your computer or need to reformat the information, all you do is reload Outlook and point it to Mail Street and all of your information will get transferred back down to your computer!

I use Mail Street to share my calendar with my virtual assistants. Therefore, they now have real-time access to my schedule.

Mail Street also allows you to synchronize your calendar and e-mail with your Blackberry, iPhone and Windows Mobile phones.

Gone are the days of having an out of the calendar!

Windows Remote Desktop Connection

If you have software on your computer that you cannot easily share with others via the Internet, there is a built-in solution with Windows. It's called Windows Remote Desktop Connection (WRDC).

The WRDC software is already a part of the Windows operating system. It allows others you designate to connect into your computer using the Internet. For example, I have a client who lives in upper Wisconsin that runs his own business. His father, who lives about 200 miles away, helps him in the business by keeping his QuickBooks accounts up to date. His father connects into his son's PC using WRDC.

The WRDC software is actually very fast because it runs the applications on the host PC. Using the example from above, when my client's father connects into his son's PC, the QuickBooks software is running on the son's PC. The only information that is transmitted over the Internet is the image of what's being displayed on the screen. While this makes the connection run quickly, be sure that you have a high-speed Internet connection when using WRDC.

Others cannot connect into your computer unless you provide access to them. In addition, if you connect to the Internet via a router, which is very common these days, you also need to set up a "public" IP address for the person looking to connect to your computer.

If you are interested in more information about this topic, please contact Leo Wisniewski at esource@wisnfamily.com or 877-389-0434.

ACT! Synchronization

ACT! is a very popular software program for storing information about contacts which might be customers, vendors, business partners etc.

As your business grows or if you delegate tasks to a virtual assistant, you may have a need to allow multiple people to be updating the database simultaneously. For example, during the day I am making updates to my ACT! database while my virtual assistant is also making updates as they schedule meetings and make contacts with new clients looking to meet with me.

In the old days, this used to be a problem because only one person could be in the ACT! database at a time. In addition, people needed to be at the same physical location to share the files. This is no longer a constraint. You can now create copies of the database so that each of you can be making an update to a copy of the same database. You can then use the ACT! synchronization facility, which is already built into ACT!, to synchronize your changes between all of the copies.