I'll Meet You On The Web

Written by Terrence O'Hanlon, ReliabilityWeb.com
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Numerologists report that 2002 is the year of partnership and collaboration. As you begin new initiatives and improvement programs, you may want to ask yourself how you can approach these goals as part of a team rather than alone.

There may be many resources available locally; however, there is a world full of useful information and you may need to draw on the knowledge and experience of people in distant locations. As travel has become more difficult in recent months, it may be time to consider other methods of sharing expertise and experience.

The Internet provides a host of tools for collaboration ranging from simple instant messaging (IM) and e-mail based discussion groups to more advanced virtual conference services where slide presentations, software applications, and web tours may be presented.

E-mail
With all the talk about broadband, video-conferencing, and other high-tech collaboration tools, e-mail is still the killer application for collaboration. You may want to consider using a public e-mail address such as Hotmail or Yahoo! for privacy protection and to avoid letting your company e-mail address end up on spam or "junk" e-mail lists.

Instant messaging
IM is simple to use, but often is overlooked as a powerful business communication mechanism. With IM, you can quickly see if any of the people on your list are online. If so, you can quickly send them a text message that will pop up on top of whatever application they are working in. They can respond quickly without having to stop working on the program they have open at that moment.

Free IM software is offered by MSN , AOL , and Yahoo! . Unfortunately, they do not interface with each other so you may have to download all three. A better method would be to simply ask your key advisers if they already use an IM service and sign up for that one.

E-mail discussion lists
These are group discussions that take place via e-mail. You can send a question to the entire

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list and anyone on the list can answer. Often you will receive several answers from various experts around the world. Usually the answers are offered within a few hours.

When the issues are not clear-cut or the group's opinions diverge, ongoing and interesting e-mail discussions often follow. These lists are noncommercial and vendors should be forewarned to keep the sales pitch down to a minimum or r.isk alienating the list members.

Virtual meetings

PlaceWare , WebEx , and Centra offer virtual meeting centers (and free trials) on the web. They are easy to set up and do not require the involvement of your IT department. The services are used for delivering presentations, demonstrating software, and allowing anyone in a meeting to view, annotate, and edit any document electronically. Workgroups can collaborate on projects, any time, from anywhere.

All you need to attend or conduct a meeting is a telephone and an Internet browser. The use of a standard telephone for two people or telephone conference call for multiple attendees is recommended.

Don't overlook the people in your workplace, especially the ones directly involved with the operation, maintenance, or repair of equipment. They have a wealth of information and experience that is often overlooked while management searches for the next "silver bullet" improvement program.

Feedback

We hope you continue to find this column useful and that you provide feedback on what you want us to cover in the future including any web sites or special areas that would be of benefit to our readers. **MT**