Serious Insights

By Daniel W. Rasmus

Areas Where Collaboration Vendors Need to Collaborate With Themselves

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The enterprise collaboration market, the once stalwart purview of IBM and Microsoft and Novell, is finding itself exposed to a wide range of issues that question the relevancy and completeness of high-priced enterprise vendors.

From assaults basic value propositions by a number of web-based start-ups, to leaps in analysis that demonstrate where enterprise collaboration should be leading, emerging features point out weaknesses in a market grown largely satisfied with incrementalism over radical new values driven by communications, data and analytical innovations.

Here are four areas where enterprise vendors need to concentrate their own strategic and innovative collaborative efforts over the next year:

The consumerization of IT People already know how to collaborate. Many enterprise platforms get in the way of services like Facebook that offer more fluid functionality, albeit with big concerns over the control of intellectual property assets.

Analytics The next big boom in collaboration, as the consumer world has already figured out, is social network analysis. This proves how far behind the enterprise vendors are because this isn't really on their radar. If it were, their thought leadership would be radically different than it is today. Imagine looking at influence and reputation through content understanding and analysis of online behavior (who contributes, who doesn't—whose content is read—who always cancels meetings at the last minute—who invites a bunch of people to meetings that few attend?). Think Klout (www.klout.com) for the enterprise. This burgeoning field is being driven by marketing and advertising on the consumer side, and like search, it is likely that Google and Microsoft will tackle this from that perspective as well, leaving enterprise customers as poor-step-children with second class tools, and little insight into how those tools are being used. Marketing departments at large companies will know more about the online behavior of their customers than enterprises know about the work of their employees.

Services not platforms It strikes me that too much of collaboration is about a vendor trying to over engineer a solution based on the experience of a few companies, or generalizations about many companies. Neither approach works. Practices are emergent, and once something emerges, it arrives with momentum. I think the vendors that understand the emergent nature of practice and choose to approach the market with micro-services that can be cobbled together easily by their customers will push the needle forward on how collaboration tools deliver value to enterprises. This will also result in smaller, more manageable feature-sets and perhaps lower prices because firms will only pay for the features they use, not the entire suite of features that vendors bundle to scale their revenue vs. scaling their value.

Adoption Isn't about technology For collaboration technology to work, organizations do need to change. The way they work with tools is different than the way they work without tools. Most collaboration vendors drop the tools and offer precious little help in the work practice changes that need to accompany those. IBM will sell consulting services, but most of its competitors, from Microsoft to Cisco, offer adoption and implementation assistance primarily through partners, which results in disconnects between user implementation experience and product feedback. The experience of customers should be tightly woven into the product roadmaps and visions so vendors concentrate R&D investments attainable value. At minimum, all vendors should be learning from their customers, documenting that learning and sharing it with their customer community—and even in this age of self-service and self-search, just putting a community together to share practices isn't enough. The vendor needs to invest in helping rationalize customer feedback, identify innovations and disruptions, and enhance value through their superior familiarity with the tools they design, build and deliver.

Mind Map:
Collaboration Market Features, Concepts and Players

Here is a mind map that represents the current state of my personal collaboration space model. It isn't complete, but I find it a useful tool for my own analysis of the collaboration's market and its future direction.