INTELLIGENT PROJECT COLLABORATION: Smartsheet and The Quest for Tool Simplicity

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INTRODUCTION

There are two problems endemic in the knowledge economy. The first problem is the tools we use and how we use them. Enterprise software solutions are often unwieldy and complex, requiring significant effort on the part of the user to master the system. Anyone who has had the pleasure of using such a platform would probably agree that a simpler, more intuitive format would decrease frustration and increase productivity by lowering the technical bar for its use. The second problem is the tidal wave of information overload that occurs through unchecked and undisciplined use of these applications. Effectively managing information is crucial to remaining competitive and increasing productivity.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

Today, knowledge workers largely rely upon e-mail and spreadsheets to manage tasks and teams. Using e-mail to check the status of a project isn’t efficient and doesn’t track the progress of a team in real time. This leads to more time spent doing administrative work in order to manage a task. Spreadsheets are limited in utility and must be sent to team members and updated, then sent back. Not seeing changes in real time delays the decision making process and adds to the overall workload as time is spent checking to see if changes have been made.

Smartsheet is one product that offers a solution to this problem by reducing time spent on administrative tasks and task and team management.

WHAT IT DOES

Smartsheet attempts to simplify and standardize on-line task management by addressing the key barriers to team productivity, namely unproductive collaboration and information overload. Tasks and objectives are communicated to teams in a clear way. The format is compatible with all operating systems, and can be embedded in existing enterprise platforms.

The interface is meant to be simple and intuitive to cut into the time and effort required to adopt an enterprise software solution. Tracking changes
to documents and the progress of projects is customizable to fit users' needs.

**HOW IT WORKS**

By focusing on understanding the areas of on-line collaboration that are unproductive, such as endless circular discussions on message boards and IM or one word e-mail, Smartsheet cuts through the clutter to improve the areas of collaboration that actually increase productivity. By giving team members the ability to visualize where their work fits into and supports the work of others, Smartsheet helps workers understand the effect they have on the organization, increasing productivity.
In any organization that is active in the knowledge economy, there exist two tiers of knowledge workers, the small group of extremely active participants that drive projects forward, and the larger group of supporting team members who only contribute in certain areas. Identifying these key players and structuring the flow of information within the team to leverage their skills will maximize productivity by getting the right information to the right people. This is essentially an issue of establishing permissions and workflows that reflect the reality of the workforce – Smartsheet addresses this issue by routing information to the right place, at the right time.

Under the hood, Smartsheet is Ajax-based and is built using commercial-grade open source tools to ensure scalability and reliability. Security features include privacy settings, access controls, SSL encrypted user authentication, randomly generated session keys, data encryption, and a secure server location as well as redundant Web and application servers.
IS SMARTSHEET RIGHT FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION?

If the task managements systems that your organization has in place are overly complicated and have a negative impact on productivity, or if tools are misused and create unproductive habits, then Smartsheet may address these issues. Smartsheet attempts to target increasing productivity in the execution phase of a project; this is where they believe the majority of time is spent and where resources should be directed. If you agree, then not emphasizing the social applications such as chat and IM makes sense.

For an organization that wants to enjoy some of the benefits of a Collaborative Business Environment, but does not wish the make the sizable investment that adopting a full enterprise system entails, then Smartsheet could make for a suitable entry-level option. It is simple to use, caters to the low end of technical skill level, and is compatible with Windows, Mac OS X, and Linux. For convenience Smartsheet is Web accessible and updatable by e-mail.

If your existing system does not seem too complicated and you have a technically savvy workforce, then the simplicity that Smartsheet offers may not be enough of a selling point. Lowering the bar for technical skills and routing information away from marginal players in your organization may sound like a good idea; however, another solution might be to invest in training so as to maximize the existing system and target those marginal players to increase their productivity and not give them a free ride.

On the technical side, using a Web browser to access Smartsheet is a mixed bag. A lack of off-line capability that would enable working in-flight and in areas with poor internet access is problematic, although support for mobile devices is planned for the second half of 2008. The ability to work off-line from time to time is very important for most if not all enterprise applications, and this may hold back adoption of Smartsheet in some organizations.

There is the potential of integrating some functions of Smartsheet into an existing system. This may be a suitable compromise for those who want to keep their current systems while taking advantage of some of the features
in Smartsheet. For instance, a spread sheet to track the progress of a project could be embedded into the Lotus Notes working environment – supplementing the power of a large scale enterprise platform with a flexible, customizable, and integrated on-line task management tool.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Smartsheet tries to address two critical and related problems, overly complex enterprise solutions and information management.

Tools that are overly complicated and packed with unused features do not aid productivity; by the very nature of their complexity they actually decrease productivity. Finding the balance between deploying powerful tools and not overwhelming the knowledge worker is a tightrope walk.

Simply put, it is necessary to provide the right tools for the right job, anything less encourages misuse and is counter-productive. Misuse of tools directly affects information management. With the correct tools information can be routed to the proper users in an enterprise, increasing productivity by providing the right people with what they need to know to do their job – no more, no less.

While Smartsheet may not be the solution for every organization, it does attempt to tackle some challenges of the knowledge economy with a creative and fresh approach. Smartsheet and similar products are worth keeping an eye on as they develop, they are not perfect yet, but they might just be on the right track.
Cody Burke is a senior analyst at Basex. He conducts research and has co-authored reports on knowledge worker productivity, educational technologies, and information overload. He has done independent research on a variety of topics including open source intelligence, international affairs, and security issues. Mr. Burke received a M.A. in International Relations from Bond University in Australia.
ABOUT BASEX

Basex is a knowledge economy research firm that serves IT vendors and buyers with an expertise in knowledge worker management and productivity.

A trusted advisor to some of the world’s best-known companies, Basex provides holistic research and analysis across 22 market categories on leveraging Collaborative Business Environments, the workplace that supports new, organic ways for companies to conduct business.

With more than 24 years of trusted analysis and a range of time-tested offerings, Basex works to accomplish two simple, yet elusive goals: leverage knowledge assets and make the right IT decisions.