





It's tough getting employees to work in tandem. Web conferencing and IM are affordable and can help.

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FOR A 100-PERSON company, StarCite Inc. is quite geographically dispersed. Only 45 employees work out of the firm's Philadelphia headquarters—the rest are spread across six more U.S. cities. So how does the firm, a managed service provider to the meetings and events industry, keep its far-flung staffers rowing in the same direction? StarCite's recipe for successful collaboration is now a mix of useful tools, including Web conferencing, instant messaging (IM), and wireless e-mail.

That's a big difference from five years ago when the company was founded. Then, StarCite relied on a tedious regimen of e-mailing presentations, requiring everyone to follow along on their PC during lengthy conference calls. Sales meetings and town hall-style employee gatherings were staples for getting people to work together more effectively, but they required travel, which was costly. Since IM and other communications technologies were not yet mainstream, touching base with colleagues meant sending an e-mail or picking up the telephone. Interacting with customers was done largely through traditional channels of phone and fax.

The result was a lot of labor-intensive communications that often misfired. "Sometimes we literally were not on the same page," says Mark Phillips, vice president of strategy for StarCite. Meeting Center from WebEx Communications Inc. revolutionized the way StarCite operates, both internally and externally. Since meeting

ALLTOGETHERNOW

In 2003:

\$472 million

In 2010 (projected):

\$3 billion

SOURCE: Frost & Sullivan

participants receive documents and presentations via e-mail well in advance, meetings are much more efficient. The sales team has significantly cut back on its travel. And being able to interact more efficiently as a team allows StarCite to serve its Fortune 500 customers as if it were a much bigger player.

Collaboratively speaking, it's a good time to be a small-to-midsize business (SMB). Today, you don't need more people, just the latest tools, to go after the biggest accounts. Web conferencing, IM, and wireless e-mail greatly streamline both internal communications among dispersed employees as well as external interactions with key customers and suppliers. There's more good news: These new-generation collaboration products are priced well within the reach of the average SMB. And IM, which has changed the way many SMBs work, is even free.

Minimal up-front investment

For Industrial Developments International Inc. (IDI), an Atlanta industrial developer, WebEx has made an enormous difference in the way the company interacts with its customers. It used to be that every Monday, the company would conduct a two-hour conference call with its largest client. It was all the participants could do to stay awake during the review of current projects. Now, with WebEx, the participants can collectively work on documents. "The meetings are much shorter. They share pictures, and they can actually draw on the site plans," says Cindy Bordas, IDI business systems group manager. "The real estate business is so visual. It means a lot for people to be able to see the document."

Other e-collaboration platforms aimed at SMB customers take a different approach. For example, Beverly, MA-based Groove Networks Inc. offers Virtual Office, "workspace" software that allows teams of people to work together over a network as if they were in the same location. This gives colleagues who work in different locations the luxury of a data network without the need to install one.

Collaboration technology is even easier to swallow when it is free. No longer just for the preteen set, IM has evolved into an indispensable

business tool for people like Evan Schuman. Principal of The Content Firm, a Whippany, NJ-based publishing concern, Schuman started using AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) more than four years ago to interact with his 20-plus clients. "The single most valuable thing about IM is instant file transfer," he says. "Even if the person doesn't have IM, I can walk them through downloading it in five minutes and they can get the file instantly."

IM is another of the new collaboration technologies StarCite is harnessing, this one to allow its IT staff to interact with contract developers in India. All of the collaboration tools make life easier, says Phillips. "We love technology," he explains. "We are early adopters if it makes good business sense, and these tools do."

Lauren Gibbons Paul has more than 15 years of experience as a writer for such publications as *eWEEK*, *CIO*, *Managing Automations*, and *Network World*.

TOP DO'S AND DON'TS OF BUSINESS IM

1. **DO** enact an IM user policy. Your employees need to know whether IM is an appropriate vehicle for communications.
2. **DON'T** use IM to communicate confidential information.
3. **DO** separate your business associates from family and friends.
4. **DON'T** allow excessive personal messaging at work.
5. **DON'T** compromise your company's reputation—or your own. IMing arguably libelous statements could damage your reputation or credibility or your company's.
6. **DO** be aware of viruses. When you transfer files in IM, be aware that they could carry viruses onto your PC or network.
7. **DON'T** share personal data. Enough said.
8. **DON'T** let your user name confuse or embarrass your contacts. IM user names, like e-mail user names, should be consistent.