An Online Workplace for Businesses on the Go

A Review of HyperOffice by Small Business Computing.com

By Jamie Bsales
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The workplace isn't what it used to be. Between work-related travel, telecommuting, contract workers and consultants — not to mention clients and suppliers — a business owner is rarely likely to find everyone associated with a project in a single location at the same time. So how does one manage projects and keep all parties in sync and connected when the only commonly accessible application is a Web browser? Via the Internet, of course.

HyperOffice.com has collected a suite of communication and collaboration tools into a slick portal that is both easy to use and highly customizable. Need a central repository for documents that your employees and clients can share? It's here. Want a way to centralize contacts among a group of field salespeople? You can. Looking for a master calendar to help manage employees' time and coordinate meetings? HyperOffice has it, along with shared to-do lists, links, reminders, forms and more. And each of these public components has a private counterpart, so each employee has personal folders, to-do lists — and so on — that only they can see.

One-Stop Shopping
Unlike other Web solutions that focus on one piece of the puzzle (say, document management or group calendaring), HyperOffice has packaged it all together — which means just one login for users and one monthly bill for you. And with plans starting at $17.99 a month, it's cheaper than buying a server dedicated to the tasks and deploying Microsoft Exchange. Not to mention easier.

That's what attracted Carroll Ross, president of Collaborative Solutions, LLC, to HyperOffice. This McLean, Virginia-based consulting and outsourcing firm helps clients identify and implement large-scale IT projects, from rolling out ERP and CRM applications to guiding major organizational-transformation programs. The three-year-old firm has 32 employees, most of who are on location at customer sites at any given time.

"I wanted to establish a consistent Internet portal to connect my employees," recalls Ross. "Something more comprehensive than just Web-based e-mail."

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Ross and his crew certainly had the expertise to set up and manage a custom remote collaboration/communication system using Microsoft Exchange servers on the back end and a Sharepoint Portal Server. "But for a business our size, that kind of investment didn't make sense," he says. Ross thought about building his own custom portal, but then he read about HyperOffice and realized they had already built it for him. "It was a perfect solution for us, because HyperOffice had all the pieces we were looking for," he says.

Complex Feature Set Made Simple
Working with HyperOffice is simple. After you sign up for a plan, you can pick your unique login URL (typically *yourbusinessname.hyperoffice.com*) and password. At least one person needs to be designated as the administrator, to add users, set permissions, change default settings (if needed) and so on. But don't be put off by that moniker: No previous IT or Web-coding experience is necessary. HyperOffice has done all the heavy lifting for you, and straightforward dialogs walk you through the steps.

You can leave your portal's home page as is, but most businesses will want to customize it a bit (with your company logo, welcome statement or what have you), especially if clients and customers will be given access. And thanks to the customizable nature, different types of visitors to your portal can have different views. So, for example, your employees might have access to all online modules (documents, tasks, calendar and so on), but a particular customer might only be able to see and access the folder where his project documents reside.

That's one of the features Collaborative Solutions likes best about HyperOffice. Ross needed a portal that clients and consultants could use on a per-project basis. "This way, we can let customers see project schedules, documentation, and tasks," says Ross, "without giving them access to our company portal and its e-mail and what not."

**E-Mail, Documents, Calendars and More**
The individual components in HyperOffice are surprisingly full-featured. The Web-based, business-class e-mail features virus checking, spam blocking and POP and IMAP support. The Calendar module mimics Outlook's fairly closely. You can choose among daily, weekly and monthly views, overlap shared calendars of different users or groups, schedule meetings via pop-up invites sent to prospective attendees and set reminders.

The document-sharing features will be a real boon to businesses that have employees scattered across locations, or that need to get documents approved by outside clients. You can drag-and-drop files from your local drive to the online My Documents folder for others to see and (if you so choose) edit. Each of your registered users gets a 100MB online HyperDrive for storing files on HyperOffice's servers (additional space is available at a nominal cost).

The personal and group Contacts areas can be used as a light CRM application, thanks to what HyperOffice calls "Interlinking." You can associate a given contact with particular tasks, documents, meetings and so on. The Tasks module lets you assign tasks to group members (and notify them that you've done so), and you can view tasks by assigner, due date or status. There's even a handy Gantt chart so a manger can see where tasks overlap.

One handy feature not typically found in other solutions is Voting. You can poll a group of employees about a particular subject (say, where the next sales meeting should be) by giving them choices; HyperOffice tallies the results. A Links section lets individuals collect often-used URLs, while a Notes section lets you post random information that others might need to see.

If all this sounds like a lot for your employees and clients to learn, don't be put off. The interface is self-explanatory. And you get access to free online training modules that walk you through the various features. There's also live (by phone) group training available for $110 an hour.
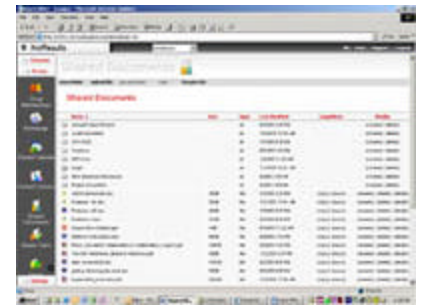
Click here for a larger image.

In his nearly two years of using HyperOffice, Ross reports he's had no technical issues with the service. And the one or two times his group has needed help, they simply clicked on the support link on their home page. "The turnaround time for support was amazing," he says.

Of course, HyperOffice isn't perfect. It doesn't yet offer videoconferencing, so businesses that do a lot of virtual meetings will need a separate provider for that. And like all online applications, performance is dependent upon your connection speed.

So if all you need is group e-mail or a shared, online calendar, HyperOffice is probably overkill. But if you need any two (or more) of its modules, HyperOffice starts to make sense. It gives your employees and clients a single point of entry to all their communication and collaboration needs, while simplifying the administration of a suite of apps for you.

Jamie Bsales is an award-winning technology writer and editor with nearly 14 years of experience covering the latest hardware, software and Internet products and services.

For more information on HyperOffice, visit www.HyperOffice.com or call 1-800-434-5136.

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