Online collaboration tools

HyperOffice provides a comprehensive collaboration environment

By James E. Gaskin, Network World, 04/27/06

Collaboration, a term usurped and mangled by marketing groups everywhere, ultimately means working together. Since the P in PC means "personal," working together can be tough. But online services like HyperOffice make it simple for groups to quickly and inexpensively share calendars, files, task lists, contacts and more.

Using a hosted application like HyperOffice solves three problems small companies struggle with every day. First, all data lives offsite and therefore doesn't need to be backed up locally. If your computer dies, your data is safe. Second, you can get to your data from any computer with Internet access, such as from home or when traveling. Finally, the standard sharing tools, like group calendars, contact lists and shared document folders come standard in the package.

The folks at HyperOffice set up an evaluation account for me several months ago, and I've tested the service both as my complete work environment and as an occasional user, like a member of a temporary group such as a PTA committee. The flexibility and depth of the product makes HyperOffice a complete company desktop and the starting and ending point of all company communications. I've seen high dollar corporate portal projects that didn't have all the bells and whistles HyperOffice provides for as little as $40 per month for five users. Pricing drops per user down to $5.48 per user for 250 users. Two user plans start at $17.99 per month. Some competitors offer one user prices starting under $8 per month.

Can you financially justify spending $170 per month for 25 users on HyperOffice instead of buying the more traditional Microsoft Small Business Server 2003 package? Absolutely. HyperOffice provides all the standard benefits of the Microsoft server suite, including shared calendars and task lists provided by Exchange. Prices for Microsoft, as close as I can tell with the company's confusing licensing terms, is about $550 for the operating system and first five clients, then around $1,900 for 20 extra licenses (for both the device and the user, remember). But the ballpark total for Microsoft is about the same as 15 months of HyperOffice.

Oops, we forget to add the server hardware for Microsoft. Add at least $750. Want support for your 25 Microsoft users? As close as I can figure that's about $40 per user per

year. That's another $2,750, of which $1,000 will be due next year, and the next, for support. HyperOffice support comes in the standard monthly rates, and its new service can replace your Exchange Server from Microsoft with the HyperOffice hosted application completely (check the Web site for details).

Some demanding users may think they need features only Microsoft offers. In my experience, 25 user companies who think they need to customize software for their particular needs tend to run up huge programming bills before they learn the folly of this approach.

HyperOffice response times pleasantly surprised me. Some Web e-mail interfaces can be clunky or slow, but I timed HyperOffice as faster than my Comcast Web e-mail, and Comcast is my ISP. Calendar changes, to either individual or group calendars, updated immediately. Deleting e-mail was slightly slower than the Thunderbird client on my computer, but e-mails went out faster. All the same spam controls and filters in Thunderbird (and Outlook) are in HyperOffice.

It took two steps to upload my 800 contacts in Thunderbird to HyperOffice (the company has a one step option for Outlook). First I exported the contacts into an Excel spreadsheet provided by HyperOffice. Then I rearranged the columns to match the HyperOffice layout, and uploaded the file. Next click of the HyperOffice contact list showed my 800 contacts.

HyperOffice provides a generalized collaboration tool set, as does InfoStreet, which jumped on my earlier mention of HyperOffice and wants me to use its offering next. Other services, such as eAgency mentioned back in March, focus on vertical teams such as sales, marketing or tasks like project management. A quick check of Yahoo's Directory found 51 hosted collaboration providers in one category alone.

Every hosted service offers free trials, so try out two or five. You'll be amazed at how much power collaboration service providers deliver within any browser on any operating system.

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To learn more about HyperOffice please visit www.HyperOffice.com or call 1.800.434.5136