



Comparative Features Analysis of Leading Collaboration Software

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by

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Executive Summary

Several hundred players are currently struggling to grab market share in the dynamic, rapidly evolving world of virtual collaboration software (VCS). For years, our company, FutureU, has been helping organizations not only control costs but actually improve communication and training by adding a virtual component to their interactions.

However, the choices of software for this purpose are so unproven, so varied in their design and pricing structure, and so frequently updated that even experienced technology decision makers hesitate to move forward. We help them clarify what they really need, navigate the many choices, minimize resistance and instill best practices among the people who will be using the software. In short, we help them make the most of what is often a major investment.

During 2002, FutureU completed a research study of virtual collaboration software products. Our goals were threefold: 1) to help software buyers make *informed* decisions when they purchase this kind of software, 2) to provide collaborative software developers with insight into both their competition and their customer base, so they can make informed decisions around product enhancement and market positioning, and 3) to improve communications between vendors and users.

In our most recent study, we started by identifying the type of applications most often named by our clients and industry pundits as the those they most sought:

1. real-time web-based meetings
2. data and file sharing
3. knowledge management
4. online collaborative workspaces.

Then we developed a list of the generic features that might best serve virtual communications and collaboration efforts through these applications. After completing this features list, we searched the market place for all truly viable collaborative software products that supported the robust set of desirable features we had developed. To qualify for further inquiry in our study, a product had to meet two essential criteria. Every contender had to excel in all four application areas. And, it had to allow the user to integrate two or more applications; for example, participants in a Web-based meeting had to be able to share files on their screens. After carefully eliminating any product that did not meet these standards, we compared the handful that did make the cut.

We identified several software packages that allow the user to integrate all four applications into a single environment. Upon close examination, however, we discovered that none of these packages provided as strong an environment for real-time meetings as the two real-time meeting packages which did not offer the other three features (data/file sharing, knowledge management, or collaborative work space). This led us to create two comparison sets of features: real-time meeting software, on the one hand, and collaboration/knowledge management (including data/file sharing) software on the other. Our research identified a total of 52 important features for real-time meeting software and 51 features for collaboration/knowledge management software.

Perhaps the most vital selection criterion was cross-platform compatibility; for a product to make it into our final comparison group it had to support Windows, Macintosh, and either Unix or Linux. Such compatibility is especially important to any loosely integrated organization where members bring their own computer equipment to the table or where technology capabilities have grown piecemeal, but even the most uniform group is likely to have visitors—customers, for example—who ought not to be excluded out of hand. Therefore, any package that did not support all three platforms was automatically dropped from consideration. A product was also disqualified if it required the latest versions of these operating systems and did not support recent legacy versions, such as Windows 95/98 or Macintosh System 8/9.

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(a sampling of the hundreds of products available)

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