

Special Report

A New Way to Collaborate

Interactive whiteboards can help enhance
workplace efficiency and productivity

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Collaboration is a cornerstone of business

Collaboration is a daily part of life in business. It's virtually impossible for any organization to function without working relationships – with colleagues, customers and suppliers. And like any other aspect of doing business, it's crucial to find ways to make the most of those relationships so both parties can benefit mutually. This is especially important as more and more business is done on a global scale and opportunities arise to take advantage of resources, markets, expertise and operations located around the world.

One way to maximize those opportunities is to streamline how teams share and work with digital information. Interactive whiteboards can provide a way to collaborate quickly and effectively, with people in the same room or in other locations, by enabling all participants to share, discuss, mark up and update files and documents in real time. Because they allow people to share information and demonstrate ideas visually, interactive whiteboards can help overcome barriers of language, distance and technology that can often lead to costly misunderstandings and delays.

What is an interactive whiteboard?

Almost everyone is familiar with the dry-erase whiteboard, the successor to the chalkboard in school classrooms. Ask people how they brainstorm and many will say, "Get people around a whiteboard and starting sketching out ideas."

An interactive whiteboard takes this concept further. It's a large, touch-enabled surface connected to a computer to show the computer desktop and allow users to open software applications and other files like drawings, plans, schedules or spreadsheets. Interactive whiteboards also enable writing in digital ink, so meeting participants can sketch out ideas, make and save notes, or annotate over applications and save those notes as part of the original files. And by sharing screens, participants in remote locations can see and contribute to the work in real time. Any notes, diagrams or files created or updated can be instantly distributed.

Because interactive whiteboards and displays provide real-time interaction with software applications and data, they facilitate brainstorming and collaboration and can help reduce the risk of misunderstandings by helping users easily create accessible records of decisions and action items.

Advances in technology facilitate distance collaboration

Company

DPR Construction

Project

University of California
San Francisco Medical Center

Problem

Engaging teams to design
the building virtually

Solution

Conference center equipped
with SMART Board™
interactive whiteboards

Results

Collaboration helps
streamline communication,
decision making and
problem solving

"This opportunity to
explore and resolve
pain points ahead
of time will have a
direct impact on how
smoothly construction
will go."

Atul Khanzode

Director of Virtual Building

As communication technology has progressed from telephone to video to Internet, each innovation has added a new aspect of richness to the transmission – first voice, then images, then data. Each has unique characteristics that are useful for various collaborative scenarios, but they all provide powerful means for people to stay connected and work together. When you add the ability of interactive whiteboards to tie them all together, and enrich the experience by enabling people to interact with digital content during the work session, you give teams the means to overcome barriers of language and distance to truly collaborate.

Interactive whiteboards and displays add shared real-time access to software applications and data. They can also be used along with video or voice conferencing to combine the interaction of a live meeting with the capacity to access, open and update files.

Having a shared graphical representation of information and ideas in the form of documents displayed on an interactive whiteboard can help ensure everyone can see what is being discussed and contribute to the work. Sharing screens enables the inclusion of remote participants. Being able to mark up and edit documents during meetings can help ensure feedback is captured and next steps are clear. And being able to save and distribute updated documents instantly when the meeting ends can help ensure all participants have a record of what was discussed and decided.

By reducing the amount of time spent seeking clarification on requirements, traveling to meetings or repeating work due to errors caused by misunderstandings, teams can boost efficiency and productivity.

Reducing travel can help control costs and enhance productivity

Business travel is costly and time consuming, and those costs are rising steadily. In fact, according to the American Express Global Business Travel Forecast 2011 (2010), travel costs are expected to increase as much as 10 percent by the end of 2011. And though face-to-face meetings can be valuable for building relationships and gaining client approval at key project milestones, many times it can be just as effective to share and discuss documents and reach consensus via distance collaboration sessions.

Businesses that can reduce the need for travel can not only ease budget pressures, they can increase productivity. When team members reduce their time in transit from one location to another, they can spend more time performing their jobs and adding value to their companies. As a report on technology trends in business from the McKinsey Global Institute puts it, “Knowledge workers typically are paid more than others, so increasing their productivity is critical. There is a broad interest in collaboration technologies that promise to improve these workers’ efficiency and effectiveness” (Bughin, et al., 2010).

To that end, there has been rapid growth in demand for technology products that enable conference calls, video conferences, web conferences, webinars and even virtual trade shows that attendees can visit online without leaving their desks. Early reports suggest adopting these technologies can be successful in significantly reducing travel costs, with one study finding an average savings of almost US\$300 in travel expenses for each conference held via Web, video or phone (James, 2007). Interactive whiteboards have a significant role to play both in augmenting and providing an alternative to these technologies.

Interactive whiteboards in key collaboration scenarios

Business meetings can have many possible goals, but they are mainly a means to building relationships, sharing information or solving problems. They can take place with all participants in the same room or with one or more participants in other locations and connected via phone, video or Internet.

Not all meetings require collaboration. Some meetings are simply intended to develop rapport, provide direction or keep participants updated on status.

But in meetings where working together is required or desired, interactive whiteboards can provide a way to present and discuss information, capture feedback and document decisions, helping to keep participants focused and engaged. In these types of meetings, participants have easy access to documents and files and a visual, interactive way of working with them, so meetings become opportunities for productive working sessions.

Here are some of the ways in which interactive whiteboards can facilitate collaboration in common meeting scenarios:

Company

Computacenter

Team

190-member sales team in eight locations

Problem

Excessive travel for Internal Sales Director Chris Hanson

Solution

Three SMART Board interactive whiteboards and SMART Bridgit™ conferencing software

Results

Travel time and distance reduced by two-thirds

"It takes less than 20 seconds to create and start a conference. Issues that once took hours to resolve now only take minutes."

Chris Hanson

Internal Sales Director

In-room collaboration

When a team gathers to work on a project, it's crucial to capture key thoughts and guide conversation. With an interactive whiteboard, participants can access their digital resources, display them, mark them up, edit them and save them instantly. This can help keep participants engaged by providing a focal point for discussions and a visual, interactive way of working with files and documents. And because marked-up files can be saved and distributed instantly, meeting participants can have the most recent files, complete with notes, changes and action items.

Room-to-room collaboration

Teams don't always work in the same location. As discussed above, businesses have long used communications technology to connect without having to travel. While phones, video conferences and web conferences have proven useful, interactive whiteboards can add another dimension of collaboration that makes working together over distances even more effective and productive.

By sharing interactive whiteboards or displays, teams in different locations can work on the same documents and notes together. Any changes, edits and markups made by one team can be seen by the other in real time.

Room-to-desktop collaboration

Businesses with field locations or remote workers need the flexibility to communicate with those employees quickly and clearly, especially when problems need to be resolved on the fly to meet project deadlines or avoid disrupting operations.

With Interactive whiteboards and displays, teams can share screens in real time with remote stakeholders, subject experts, customers and clients and work toward issue resolution or consensus. So when one team is working on documents, images, maps, diagrams or plans, they can mark them up to highlight key information, action plans or next steps, and remote participants can see and contribute to the work in real time.

A new way to collaborate

Interactive whiteboards can help businesses enhance productivity, control travel costs and reduce delays. They can augment or provide an alternative to other collaboration technologies like telephone, video and web conferencing. By enabling participants to access digital resources, mark up and edit files and save and distribute the results immediately, interactive whiteboards and displays can provide a way for teams to work together more effectively. And because they enable collaboration in real time with participants in virtually any location, they can help reduce travel costs and streamline processes.

For more information about interactive whiteboards and displays, please visit smarttech.com/business.

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About SMART Technologies

SMART Technologies is a leading provider of collaboration solutions that transform the way the world works and learns. We believe that collaboration and interaction should be easy. As the global leader in interactive whiteboards, we bring more than two decades of collaboration research and development to a broad range of easy-to-use, integrated solutions that free people from their desks and computer screens, so collaborating and learning with digital resources are more natural.

For more information, visit smarttech.com/Business.

SMART Technologies

3636 Research Road NW
Calgary, Alberta T2L 1Y1
Canada

Phone +1.403.245.0333

Fax +1.403.228.2500

Toll free 1.866.518.6791 (U.S./Canada)

info@smarttech.com

www.smarttech.com