

Online collaboration with built-in clarity

November 6 2009



(PhysOrg.com) -- Software packages that interoperate while providing online users with an overview of their colleagues' work may finally threaten the dominance of email as the world's premier collaboration tool.

One of the biggest barriers to effective online group working has been the need for everyone to work on the same [software package](#). Often many in the group have to acquire and learn new software. That complicates the creation of online work groups and slows collaboration.

Emailing large attachments to a distribution list is a pretty crude form of collaboration when compared to the application features on offer from major software vendors. But email has two great strengths. It is standardised and it is universal. The adoption of ECOSPACE standards might finally threaten the dominance of email in online collaborations.

Researchers on ECOSPACE, a Europe-wide project with funding from the EU, sought a solution to the standardisation problem. They analysed collaboration applications from companies such as SAP and Microsoft to establish what is common and what is essential in the software.

Next, they used their findings to develop a standardised architecture with software building blocks - or basic collaboration services - that would allow the collaboration applications to interoperate. The architecture draws on a semantic ontology - rigorous organisation of information based on semantics, or its meaning - that has to define and correlate the concepts and terms used by the applications.

Working prototypes enable users of Microsoft Sharepoint, Business Collaborator (BC), BSCW and SAP NetWeaver collaboration tools, to work simultaneously on documents and projects.

Seeing the big picture

ECOSPACE also developed a series of tools to break down another major barrier to remote collaboration - understanding who is available for collaboration, what their role is, and how well they are progressing.

There are a number of ECOSPACE tools that use visuals to show who is online and how accessible they are for collaborations.

One of ECOSPACE's most innovative developments is its 'expectation awareness' tool. "Very often you have an expectation from a collaboration," explains Wolfgang Prinz of the Fraunhofer Institute FhG, in Germany, and coordinator of ECOSPACE. "[For example] that you will be telephoned at a certain time or that ten people will deliver responses to a report from you."

The expectation awareness tool automatically tracks your expectations. It

prompts you before deadlines expire and informs you when they have been missed. The tool helps make goals and expectations explicit right upfront, and eliminates a lot of time-consuming progress monitoring.

Prinz suggests collaborative working tends to focus too much on the past. But with ECOSPACE's expectation awareness tool, the future becomes more the focus. "We say what should happen and then look to see what did happen," says Prinz.

A second new tool oversees the project's progression. The 'collaboration mining' tool keeps track of who is making changes or involved in an online project. "Normally, this is not visible," says Prinz. "It means that if you want to propose a change, you can address it directly to the people who are working on that part of the project."

Winning a world audience

All ECOSPACE developments are tested in real-life environments. Three working groups act as 'living labs' and use the collaboration tools in their daily work. More than 50 public administrators, together with smaller groups in Italy and Switzerland, are networking, forming groups and professional virtual communities, and attempting to undertake creative work in more productive ways. They provide feedback on their efforts to the ECOSPACE researchers.

The ECOSPACE tools and services are also winning fans in wider communities. The basic collaboration services are also grouped in 'composite collaboration services' to make it easier for developers to use them when creating new applications. "A lot of students are using these services to develop their own applications," says Prinz. Little applications using ECOSPACE services have been created for iPhone users, for instance.

Commercial companies have already implemented ECOSPACE services in their latest versions. The UK-based manufacturer of BC has done so, as has a toolbar developer in the Netherlands. The BSCW platform has incorporated a lot of features that were developed in ECOSPACE. They are made available to the more than 100,000 users of BSCW on its public server.

More information: [ECOSPACE project](#)

Provided by [ICT Results](#)

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