

The contribution internet platforms make to good collaboration

For decades, companies have been optimising their own business processes and developing sophisticated IT strategies. However, many questions often remain unanswered: How have my business processes changed? Which activities should I perform internally and which should I buy in? What level of quality should I expect from our supplier and what role does information play in all this? It is worth revisiting these questions in the light of today's technical possibilities.

The idea that there should be a common 'pot', from which to share data in project work is not new. Today, however, fewer and fewer companies are satisfied with this approach and more are looking for new ways to optimise processes which extend beyond their own company boundaries.

The two dimensions of collaboration

In addition to a shared storage area for all information and data, there are the transactions, namely the processes via which information and data is exchanged between the parties involved. This can be illustrated using the example of online banking. You can call up your bank statement, which is located in a shared storage area. You can also perform a bank transfer, by completing an online form according to the bank's instructions, authorising the operation and submitting the form. The transfer is executed via a predefined process – a structured transaction. The main advantage for the bank is that all relevant customer information is received in a format that can be immediately processed by the bank. At the same time, the entire operation is documented, so both the customer and the bank can track the transaction at a later date. Efficient collaboration in building projects is based on the same principle.

Collaboration beyond company boundaries

This form-based, process-oriented method of collaboration is widespread throughout the world. Companies are increasingly faced with the question of which services and skills are available internally and which need to be procured externally. In construction departments, it is common to outsource project control and planning work and other delivery services to external companies. This means every project needs to consider by what means, and to what level of quality, this service should be obtained. This is where internet-based project platforms reveal their potential. They bring structure, and above all quality, to transactions between the client and general contractor, or designers and subcontractors. The information and documents are not just 'submitted'; it is also possible to connect all the data relating to the service with the corresponding processes, such as release, approval, shipping processes and so on, and to document



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and make this data available in a structured form for all participants. One advantage for clients is that they do not have to prepare work that has been submitted, such as planning documents or notifications of supplements, before processing it further, because it is already delivered in the required format.

Establishing the rules

Clear structuring of communication is essential for efficient collaboration with numerous, frequently-changing project partners. This means that clear rules must be defined at the start of collaboration, including the release processes, who is authorised to perform what, how individual participants receive their information, and so on. These rules, preferably drawn up in consultation with the contracting parties, are mapped on the platform as the project structure. It makes sense to start with the most important rules and to modify or add to them over the course of the project, as new requirements often only become clear – and new ideas emerge – as the result of experience. This makes it important for the project platform to be flexibly designed to cope with such eventualities. In think project!, for example, all the elements needed for structured collaboration – such as forms, reports and workflows – are based on the same software and can be modified or changed on a project-specific basis without the need for programming.

A win-win situation ensures acceptance

Structured communication offers both parties more quality and clarity in their collaboration. For the ordering party – the client or general contractor – project-wide processes can be evaluated and tracked at all times using the platform. External service providers such as designers or subcontractors are connected to the project and can track status – for example in approval or payment runs – at any time. It also means they are communicating more efficiently and directly with their client. Because contractors also benefit from this type of integration, there is broad acceptance of the platform. However, it is necessary to create an awareness of why certain rules need to be defined for collaboration from the outset. Acceptance is only possible when the added value of this type of collaboration is clear to both sides.

Creating value beyond company boundaries

Most companies optimise their internal project processes as a matter of course. However, there is frequently a lack of awareness that value creation in dealing with external contracting parties is equally in need of optimisation, and few internal IT systems are effectively set up for collaboration with third parties. This is where project platforms come in. They make it possible for internal departments to be integrated with subcontractors on a shared platform.

Benefiting from integration

The next step is to integrate with internal systems. When work is created within internal software, it has to be exchanged with other company locations, the construction site and external contracting parties via the platform. This means working with two



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isolated systems, leading to extra costs. For example, if an employee creates a document using an internal system and requires an up-to-date document ID that can only be found on the project platform, the work process is interrupted. Greater integration between the project platform and internal systems can simplify work and lead to higher quality. In the above example, the employee can adhere to the project rules without additional work, because the platform automatically accesses and inserts the correct document ID. In this way, errors can be avoided, and higher quality achieved.

Open project platforms such as think project! offer interfaces such as SOAP/web services that enable this type of integration in a relatively straightforward way and without incurring security risks. Internet-based project platforms close the gap between internal IT systems and external project structures. By offering structured transactions between the parties to a project, they provide a way of optimising collaboration, and are the way of the future for creating value beyond a company's own boundaries.

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The online project collaboration and document control system think project! is used in 40 countries by well-known clients, investors, project developers, project controllers, architecture and engineering firms, and construction companies – in more than 5,000 projects to date by over 90,000 users.

think project! simplifies cooperation in projects, provides seamless documentation and can be accessed directly via the Internet. think project! supports efficient project, information and risk management – saving time and reducing costs.

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