The Game Has Changed

Kablink: A Fresh Take on Collaboration

This article first appeared in the January 2009 issue of *Novell Connection* magazine.

Readers of *Novell Connection* magazine have seen several articles throughout 2007 and 2008 that discuss the team productivity benefits of Novell Teaming + Conferencing. This article focuses on Kablink, the Novell-sponsored open source project that forms the foundation for Novell Teaming + Conferencing.

Kablink and Novell Teaming + Conferencing are "game-changers" in enterprise collaboration and team productivity. Most software in this niche focuses on either building team Web pages (think SharePoint) or small pieces of the overall collaboration needs of an enterprise (think blogs, wikis, forums, etc.). Kablink recognized that each of these collaboration tools fulfilled a real need, but still fell short of a total collaboration offering that would unlock team productivity. Truly unlocking collaboration, team productivity and knowledge sharing across all types of projects in an enterprise—and not just fulfilling documentation or file sharing needs—was the goal of the Kablink project.

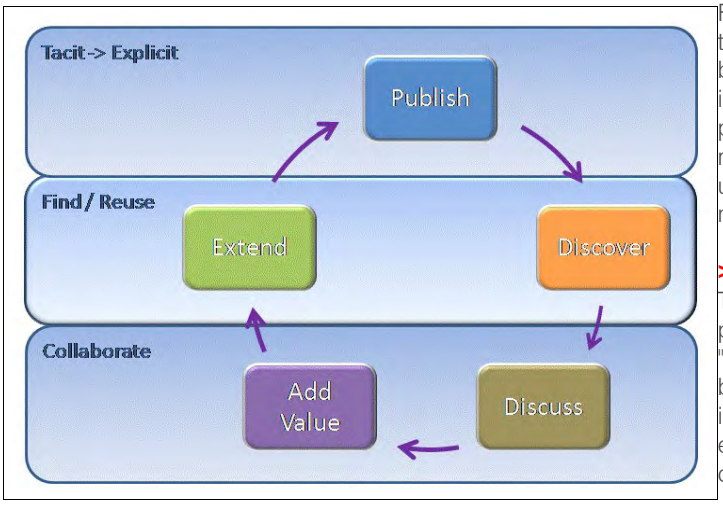
This goal led Novell to look for better ways to collaborate in the enterprise and to seek answers to the question, “How can collaboration add value to the bottom line of a business?” The short answer is that it doesn't, at least not in and of itself. But collaboration in the right context and under the right conditions can produce spectacular results in the form of faster customer response times, better organizational knowledge or quicker time to market. Each of these business metrics can be enhanced through the correct use of collaboration tools—but harmed if done incorrectly.

Imagine this common scenario: you thought you had addressed your organization's collaboration infrastructure needs, but things aren't looking so good. Your IT department has provided popular tools to assist knowledge workers, such as wikis, blogs, threaded discussions, e-mail, file shares and more. But users are now burdened with having to learn multiple applications with different user interfaces, data is often isolated in one application, users report that information is hard to find and sometimes gets lost, and none of these applications reflect your core business processes. Instead, you often bend your processes to cater to the way these tools work.

> The Kablink Way

This scenario, and others like it, led the Kablink community to look for new and better ways to facilitate knowledge transfer, sharing and collaboration within the enterprise. The process began with an exploration of the way knowledge is disseminated and used in an organization, which resulted in development of the Knowledge Cycle model. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1: *The Knowledge Cycle covers all stages of information creation and usage, from publishing and discovering content, to discussing and adding value, to extending information and ideas to other spheres.*



> Publish

The Knowledge Cycle represents how information flows through the process as it is consumed, beginning with the Publish phase. During this phase, knowledge is converted into something explicit and consumable by others. This phase represents the transfer of one person's understanding, education and wisdom into a tangible good. The publication format can be nearly anything, such as a blog, e-mail, document or anything else that is consumable by another person.

Kablink also offers features that allow organizations to build highly relevant applications that capture knowledge that is specific to their business processes. Using Kablink custom Web forms (See Figure 2), organizations may build custom forms that knowledge workers can use to capture specific business data such as market campaign information or help desk reports. The Kablink platform also allows organizations to capture all relevant publication events into one system so users always know where to go for their information needs.

> Discover

The next phase is the "Discover" phase. During this phase the output of the publication event is "discovered" by another person via search, browsing or document sharing. This is a particularly important phase: without discovery, the publication event is useless and inefficient discovery processes can lead to lost productivity. Because search is key

to avoiding these missteps, Kablink supports search across all types of data: attached documents, custom Web form data, blogs and wikis, all in one place. Even value-added information, such as user tags, are searchable in Kablink. These capabilities, as well as community reviews, dynamic data feeds and coming technological advancements, will support future innovations emphasizing *personal* relevance in this space.

Expert location is another important aspect of Discovery that Kablink has taken to a new level. When you perform a search in Kablink, you not only uncover documents that match your criteria, but you also reveal the experts in your organization that are driving innovation and productivity. Kablink even provides tools that allow users to monitor domain experts via Activity Feeds. (See Figure 3.) Imagine looking for information about some arcane topic. Kablink offers an expert ranking system to help you identify experts and then track those individuals so you can monitor their activities on your topic of interest, all without leaving your homepage.

> Discuss

The next area of the cycle is the Discuss phase. During this phase, the information found and consumed may not be fully understood by the consumer. Within Kablink, Discussion is a core feature that is associated with all other aspects in the cycle. You can have a discussion formed around each piece of information, whether it be a blog, a wiki article or a Microsoft Word document. You can even discuss the data captured in custom Web forms within your teams. When you use this feature in public forums that can be cataloged and searched, it facilitates the understanding that is required for information to be fully used (and reused) in your organization.

Kablink also supports real-time meetings so users can get immediate feedback on information contained within Kablink. Using Kablink Conferencing, users can identify meeting participants and start a meeting in real-time that can includes voice and data. Imagine needing an explanation of some document and having the owner of the document start up OpenOffice and share their OpenOffice session while you discuss the document's content. Now that is the power of real-time. Kablink not only allows you to conduct meetings in real-time, but it also allows you to record and save those meetings so others can review the discussion and its outcome. These real-time features give you more power to conduct meetings the way you want, when you want.

Figure 2: *With Kablink, organizations can build custom Web forms to capture specific business data, such as restaurant inspection information.*

> Add Value

Add Value is the phase of the cycle where the information you discovered and discussed is now incorporated into your understanding of a topic. At this point in the process, the information is fully appreciated and its implications are understood. The collaboration events in this phase focus on your ability to add value to the initial publication event so others in your network can more quickly find and assimilate the same information. This involves adding public tags, reviewing content, adding ratings or annotating the publication so others can better evaluate its meaning from their perspective. This phase adds a new, contextual dimension to the original content that is extremely useful.

Kablink again provides tools that help users add their own unique value to knowledge assets. As mentioned previously, all information in Kablink can be discussed using comments and replies, but Kablink also supports other forms of value creation. Using Kablink, users can tag anything using community or personal tags. (Think

Figure 3: *Kablink allows users to locate not only content related to a given topic, but people in the organization that can provide needed expertise.*

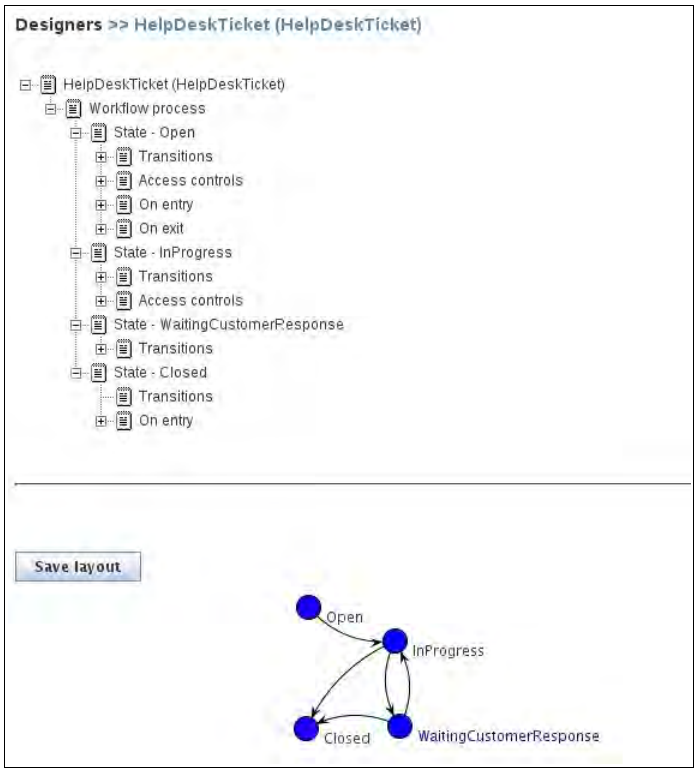
del.icio.us) In addition, Kablink includes a ratings feature that lets users identify the most significant information in your organization and rate it, so others can quickly find and use the same information.

> Extend

During the Extend phase, we apply the knowledge, wisdom and education that was distilled in the original document into scenarios that we own and are a part of. Knowledge originating from someone else has been transferred and used in totally new ways. The context of the original information might only remotely apply to these new scenarios, if at all. A great example of the extension of knowledge and process into new areas is the way principles of harmony and reuse in architecture were transferred to construction processes and, later, computer science. This example clearly demonstrates the Extend principle that allows knowledge designed for one audience and context to be discovered, discussed and transformed into another entirely different area of study.

We've already mentioned the way Kablink can be customized via Web forms, but Kablink also offers workflow capabilities that let your users capture data *and* process. This functionality allows the most important business rules or processes in your organization to be identified so efficiencies can be recognized and reused.

Figure 4: *Kablink offers unique and powerful workflow capabilities to help organizations capture data and ensure consistent processes.*



Once pathways of knowledge transfer are uncovered and distilled into workflow processes, you can then extend those best practices to all the data types in Kablink. (See Figure 4.)

> Open Collaboration

Underpinning all of these efforts and spearheading innovations in each area of the Knowledge Cycle is the Kablink Open Collaboration project. Sponsored by Novell, kablink.org was created to help advance the state of enterprise collaboration and team productivity in an open and communicative way. The Kablink community is providing tools that enable partners and developers from around the world to build applications that drive productivity and knowledge reuse throughout the enterprise. By joining the Kablink community, you can voice your opinions on team productivity. Whether you ultimately plan to use the open source version or the enterprise-class Novell product it feeds, Kablink actively seeks ideas and contributions from our community members to help drive the next generation in collaboration and team productivity. Join kablink.org today and help shape the future! N