



## Asynchronous Work Spaces

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Traditionally group work or teamwork has been thought of as a synchronous, face-to-face activity, with perhaps some individual or small group work conducted between face-to-face sessions. Increasingly, work tools available in the cloud are changing the conception of how teamwork or group work can be accomplished.

For purposes of illustration, think of three common scenarios for group work. First, consider traditional team or group work, where the bulk of the activity is scheduled in a face-to-face environment, with the possibility of “homework” between face-to-face sessions. Second, consider a mixed face-to-face and online environment for group work, where a significant amount of the work is done while not meeting face-

to-face. Third, consider an all-online environment, where the work is done with no face-to-face meetings at all.

There are many online tools to assist in all three scenarios. Perhaps most useful are comprehensive group workspaces (e.g., Central Desktop or Share Point), mind-mapping tools (e.g., MindMeister or FreeMind), online survey tools (e.g., Survey Monkey or Zoomerang), and web video tools (e.g., WebEx or Skype).

Comprehensive work spaces offer an array of functions, including calendars, task managers, document sharing, and discussion forums. In my work in Online Dispute Resolution (ODR), I refer to them as “virtual table” applications because they offer the capability to do asynchronously most or all of the things one can do around a conference table. For dispersed groups who have to make a great effort to meet, using a comprehensive work site allows scheduling, discussing agendas, and sharing information in advance of face-to-face meetings, so that all of the face-to-face time is spent in real work, not in administrative work that can easily be done online ahead of time. Between sessions, the workspace can be used to codify decisions made during face-to-face work, to extend the work and prepare for the next face-to-face session, or to begin work that can be concluded in the next face-to-face session. For groups who may never be able to meet in person (i.e., groups with international members or members scattered geographically within one country) the comprehensive workspace forum can be used to discuss items posted in the workspace, and other online tools can be linked to allow for a full group work experience.

Mind maps, surveys, and web video sites can be linked from the comprehensive work spaces as noted above, or they can be used as stand-alone applications to assist with work in primarily face-to-face processes. In mixed face-to-face and online work, group workspaces are particularly useful for distributing information and furnishing the entire team the same information in preparation for discussions. Group workspaces are also very helpful at the end of work sessions when single-text

editing capabilities can be used to draft agreements or to draft information that the work group wants to share with its constituents at large.

Mind maps, as noted elsewhere in this book, allow groups to generate and visually manipulate ideas. Online mind maps allow for the process to extend over time, with group members accessing the mind map multiple times over an extended period. The primary advantage of mind maps is for the members of the working group who are offering ideas and trying to make sense of multiple options. However, it is possible to open the finished or near-finished mind maps for viewing by larger constituent groups as a way to forecast potential organizational changes.

Online surveys allow for collecting detailed information from group members, conducting multi-votes, and for rating and ranking ideas generated by the group. It is usually assumed that surveys are a way of assessing agreement with or support of items by members of a large group, or by constituents of work groups. That certainly is a common use of surveys, both internally and externally by work groups. But it is also possible to use online surveys alone or in combination with “view only” mind maps to push information to constituent groups at the same time that work groups are getting real-time feedback on potential organizational changes.

Web video programs, particularly those that offer document sharing, allow for group members to “meet,” discuss, and share documents as if they were together face-to-face. Applications like WebEx that allow for the sharing of e-documents in a real-time format come as close as possible to the dynamics of a face-to-face meeting.

All of these tools - group work spaces, online surveys, online mind maps, and web video and audio sites - can be obtained either free or at very low cost, and all are password protected so that only those group members invited into the work can access the online information.

## GENERAL ADVANTAGES

- Cost: use of online tools can eliminate or greatly reduce the cost of travel and lodging for dispersed groups and can eliminate or limit the need for time away from the office.
- Convenience: All of the tools mentioned are easily accessible from any Internet-capable computer, and all allow for group members to work at any time that is convenient.
- Increased Processing Time: Use of online tools, alone or in conjunction with face-to-face meetings, allow for group members to consider ideas, and consider their responses, in a way that is not possible in an immediate, face-to-face environment.

#### INTERCULTURAL ADVANTAGES

- Translation: In situations where multiple languages are used, or where some of the participants may feel disadvantaged by the use of a dominant language, using online tools allows for time to process information, seek clarification, and consult translators in a way not possible in face-to-face environments.
- Anonymity: One of the major differences between face-to-face work and online work is the ability for participants to be truly anonymous when offering ideas, seeking clarification, or responding to ideas. In many cultures, the “normal” North American approach to problem solving (naming the problem as the first step) is very uncomfortable. Using online tools allows for direct input, but allows for it in a way that reduces the discomfort of direct confrontation.
- Expanding the “Table”: Although generalizations are dangerous, in individualist cultures like the United States, we tend to expect that the individuals “at the table” should have the authority to discuss issues and

make decisions. In most collectivist cultures, the individuals at the table feel an obligation to include members of a family, community, or organization in a way that is not expected in individualist cultures. Using online tools in an asynchronous or partially asynchronous environment allows for group members to take time to consult with others in their community who are, really, extended participants in the decision-making process.

## TOOLS AND RESOURCES

### Comprehensive Group Work Spaces

- Central Desktop – [www.centraldesktop.com](http://www.centraldesktop.com) - Central Desktop offers calendars, task managers, discussion forums, document sharing, and single text editing in an easy to use package. Discussion administrators control access by inviting group members into the site, and by setting and monitoring levels of access and security. Central Desktop is available in a free version without encryption and with a cap on the number of workspaces that can be set up simultaneously, or in a paid version with full encryption and virtually unlimited workspaces.
- Share Point – [www.microsoft.com/sharepoint](http://www.microsoft.com/sharepoint) - Share Point operates much as does Central Desktop, and it can be bundled into the Microsoft Office suite. There is no free version of Share Point.

### Mind Maps

- MindMeister – [www.mindmeister.com](http://www.mindmeister.com) - MindMeister is a web based application with a free version that limits the number of simultaneous mind maps that can be open, and an inexpensive paid version that offers essentially unlimited open maps.
- FreeMind – <http://sourceforge.net/projects/freemind> - FreeMind is a free download that is resident on a desktop or laptop, not in the cloud.

## Surveys

- Survey Monkey – [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com) - Survey Monkey is available in a free version with a limited number of surveys that can be open at once, and with limits on the reporting capability, or in an inexpensive paid version with unlimited simultaneous surveys and robust reporting.
- Zoomerang – [www.zoomerang.com](http://www.zoomerang.com) - Zoomerang also offers a “downsized” free version, and a paid version that has a remarkable array of tools in addition to pure surveys.

## Web Video and Audio Conferencing

- WebEx – [www.webex.com](http://www.webex.com) - WebEx is a subscription application that can be purchased by the year, month, day, or project. It is a secure application, used by security conscious organizations like the Department of Defense, with full real-time document sharing, application sharing, and screen sharing capabilities.
- Skype – [www.skype.com](http://www.skype.com) - Skype is a free service when used computer-to-computer, with voice and video, and in paid version with add-on’s that allow for document sharing. Skype also offers “Skype Out,” a paid service that allows for very inexpensive calls from a computer to land line or cell phones anywhere in the world.

[NOTE: there are an amazing number of applications in each of the categories mentioned above – the list of examples does not constitute an endorsement of any particular application. Sites are accurate as of July, 2011.]