

Collaboration from the Virtual Office

Nicole C. Engard, MLIS, Director of Open Source Education, ByWater Solutions
(nengard@gmail.com)

For the last three years I have been working for companies that don't have physical buildings. This means that we have to learn to effectively collaborate without being in the same physical location. While most librarians do have an office (or library) to go to, more and more of us find ourselves working with fellow librarians in different physical locations. Collaborating without being face-to-face with your colleagues comes with its own challenges, but using technology can help make the process a bit easier.

Voice Over IP

Working in a virtual office means that I don't need to be tethered to any specific location. As long as I have access to the Internet I'm set to go. When it comes to conference calls I often find myself communicating with Voice Over IP (VOIP), which means I'm using my computer and my Internet connection to make phone calls. Like many people, I have only a cell phone, no landline. Trying to hold a cell phone on your ear while taking notes or navigating around the computer can be difficult. I could use a headset instead, but then I'd have to use my minutes in order to conduct calls. Instead I use Skype (<http://skype.com>).

Skype is a VOIP client that you install on your computer so that you can make free or cheap phone calls over your computer. Most of the time conference lines I need to call into are toll free, but from a cell phone even toll free numbers cost minutes, so I instead connect a headset to my computer and dial in using Skype. This allows me to communicate with my colleagues worldwide without any extra costs or wasted minutes.

I mention this technology not just because it's useful, but also because it's one that is often overlooked when collaborating with colleagues across borders. Let's say, for example, you're working on a committee for your favorite library association. Wouldn't it be easier if you took the time to have a regular phone call rather than passing emails back and forth? Of course this means you all have to call into the same number and that might cost money that you don't have. So instead you all install Skype and sign up for accounts. Now you can call into a conference using VOIP for free and talk about your plans for the next association event.

Collaborative Online Offices

I can take that example one step further. You now have your committee phone calls, but you need to work on fliers, presentations and maybe even registration forms. Why not sign up for yet another free service to help you collaborate effectively without adding any extra costs? In my virtual office I use Google Office (<http://docs.google.com>), but there is also Zoho Office (<http://zoho.com>), which has even more collaboration options than Google.

Tools like Google Office and Zoho Office put commonly used office applications online for access by multiple people. This means you could start a word processing document to promote the upcoming event and share it with your fellow association members to edit, improve upon, or just to read. You can then start working on some slides for the presentation that will take place at the event, and while you're adding slides your colleagues can make comments and suggestions using the integrated chat, or simply edit your work as you move

through the presentation. Finally, you need a registration form, so why not use a web form that puts all your registrants into a spreadsheet for easy sorting, printing and merging with form letters.

Instant Messages

Finally, don't overlook instant messaging tools like Meebo (<http://meebo.com>) and Pidgin (<http://pidgin.im>). Instant messaging is not a new tool by any means – in fact I had my first account on AIM (<http://www.aim.com>) over ten years ago – but this is a new tool in libraries. Libraries have been exploring instant messaging as a way to receive and answer reference questions, but it can also be used as yet another communication and collaboration tool.

Some of the colleagues I work with the most are often in other states or countries. Instant messaging allows us to communicate on projects in real time without having to depend on emails (which can often get too wordy and be misunderstood) sent during

various times of the day. With a login to at least one instant messaging client you can easily work with colleagues by sending short messages back and forth as you make changes to documents or presentations.

Collaborating Virtually

I often hear from colleagues at conferences that they miss working in teams when they work from home, but it doesn't have to be that way. With all of the amazing social tools on the web these days we can easily work in teams without being in the same physical space. The tools in this column are just a small selection of the things available to help you collaborate with your colleagues across the country or the world. It's important to not let working in a virtual office isolate you from other librarians; instead of running from collaboration opportunities, try using online collaboration tools to make the project easier for you and your partners.

I am a very collaborative person and I make it work simply by using all of the tools available on the web.