

## INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

**Caveat Emptor: Get IT Involved in Board Communication Systems**

The schedules of boards and senior leadership teams are often driven by M&A discussions, reviews of the company's top line, and other highly confidential matters. But the means at their disposal to conduct these communications outside the boardroom are often less than satisfactory. Email is the usual default, but although email offers the benefit of immediacy, the medium is crippled by notoriously weak security, and the fact that email clients were not designed for downloading and organizing large files and other high volumes of information. It's not surprising, therefore, that so many management teams are now looking at the range of web-based collaboration systems now available.

When it comes to hosted services, there is a huge spectrum of capability, yet hidden behind glitzy websites, it can be hard to discern the wheat from the chaff. This is made worse by the fact that many hosted service providers actively try to cut IT from the decision process by appealing directly to the business users. In doing so, critical IT functions, such as ensuring security and system reliability, are short-circuited.

Many vendors adopt this stance because IT staff can make life difficult by asking pesky questions about security, often requiring proof or even visiting the vendors' data centers or insisting on an ethical hack demonstration. Procedures like these are time-consuming and expensive, but they are effective in rooting out the dogs, so they serve a purpose.

When it comes to evaluating board portals, the corporate secretary's office almost always engages IT, since no one can afford to make a mistake in front of the chairman. However, lower down the organization, junior staff might access the confidential sales projections and product plans meant for the board, and see no harm in putting that content up on a free service. Needless to say this presents a real security vulnerability.

Unfortunately some vendors border on the unethical by inviting free sign-ups from corporate email addresses to set up a company account for the sole purpose of encouraging further company staff to join under the mistaken impression this is an authorized

trial. This practice lends an aura of respectability to the trial, and can lead customers to put confidential content on these systems.

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It's fair to say there is still a perception that IT and the business are not aligned. Nicholas Carr's (in)famous 2003 *Harvard Business Review* article "IT Doesn't Matter" simply put into words what many in the business had been thinking for years about the value of IT. But whatever shortcoming IT has in relation to serving the business, it's important to realize IT personnel do have specialist skills, and by cutting them out of the evaluation process for a hosted service provider, you are essentially denying yourself important insurance against making the wrong choice. You can't do due diligence by surfing the Internet or skimming a PowerPoint. Do you know what Systrust is, or the difference between level 1 and level 2 SAS 70 compliance? How do you know the vendor really has backup systems they claim in place? These though, are precisely the sorts of questions that your IT department can help answer.

Buyer beware means get IT involved first. Don't just sign up blind.



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