

case study Atkins

Working Together since 1998

Atkins is a large Business Services company. The company offers a wide range of consultancy, management and technical services to clients around the world, in the public sector, industry and commerce. It has expanded from its historical roots in engineering and management consultancy and property services into related technological consultancy and the management of outsourced facilities.

Atkins have long been sensitive to the issues of managing a team of people from different disciplines, in different parts of the company (throughout the UK and overseas), enabling them to work together on a common project. In 1998 they discovered an ideal tool for such co-operative projects - Business Collaborator.

Projects

Atkins' clients are predominantly in property, transportation, management and industry. A typical project would be the design of a building with a specialist function such as a hospital, followed by the management of the building's construction. For this, Atkins may use a team comprising architects, structural engineers, engineers specialising in heating, ventilation and electrics, experts in IT, systems management and similar business services, facilities management specialists, etc. These are people who tend to be focused on specialist tasks that require their unique expertise. So gathering and distributing their contributions to a common project, and enabling them to share in each other's work, is not a simple job!

Co-ordination

Project Managers usually tackle the co-ordination of a project by first getting each contributor to present their ideas for meeting the defined client need. Then, the project participants enter into an open discussion to refine and qualify all these ideas and develop them to a design that can be quantified, costed and presented to the client. The design work can then be taken forward into construction with the same team and Project Manager. Getting a project team round a table for open, inter-active discussion may sound easy, but what if the team members are spread all over the world? The company's strength lies in its 10,000 strong staff, from diverse disciplines, with a spread of local knowledge, and a fund of technical expertise. Such a rich diversity is not found concentrated in one place!

Current Processes

The company already has a computer network to link its systems and its people, and e-mail has been used extensively between team members, but this has not provided all the support that was needed. In particular maintaining control of design functions has been difficult. One individual must collate all incoming documents and control their version histories. Project Managers, and indeed some external partners, have requested better IT tools to assist in collaboration by team members, for use in both the design and the implementation phases of projects.

New Technology

Mike Russell, IT Systems Manager for Atkins, could see that the need was not simply for additional technology - that would be the easy part! Processes and procedures to make the most of any technology adopted would also be required. Any changes in procedures should be easy to include in the company's existing Quality Assurance programme, provided the chosen technology was flexible, with an easy user interface. What he saw as most difficult would be to achieve a change in culture among the users of a new system. True collaboration includes sharing documents, drawings and designs, and even allowing other team members to modify them. WS Atkins also had to be confident that any new tool would give sufficient control to ensure that such openness was always beneficial.

Mike Russell needed to find an application which would be simple to implement, easy to use, flexible and would co-exist with the IT tools with which employees were already familiar.

business collaborator case study

The Options

There were several candidate packages on the market. One collaboration tool, which was initially quite attractive, would have required a complete migration from the software currently used throughout Atkins to an alternative platform! Many of the tools investigated would have provided good management of a construction process but would not have been suited to the needs of the design phase. Others would have been complex and difficult to implement, which would have discouraged users from making use of them. Some of the applications investigated required considerable investment in client software that would have been costly and disruptive and time-consuming to install. A key bid, for the design of a school, provided a trial project against which to test the various technical options.

Business Collaborator

The one product that stood out because it met all the requirements identified was Business Collaborator. It can be used for both design and construction phases, with a smooth transition from one to the other. Its user interface is simple and easily learned. It provides shared folders with the level of nesting defined by the users. Documents can easily be stored under version control and all changes made to documents (whenever they are read, modified, moved or deleted) are tracked. It is easy to implement, requiring no additional hardware and only a web browser for every remote user to be able to access the information they need on the system. What's more, Business Collaborator could be used in a trial with the schools project at minimal cost, because the trial could be conducted using Atkins' existing IT system and procedures!

The trial went very well, convincing Mike Russell that Business Collaborator is definitely the tool to meet Atkins' needs!

So, how was it introduced into Atkins, ensuring that the necessary cultural changes took place? How is it being used? How does it work? What immediate and long-term benefits were gained? How will it continue to be used in the future?

Roll Out

Business Collaborator, or ProNET as the implementation at Atkins has been called, was initially publicised widely within the company as a tool to help every member of staff do what they are good at. An article in the company's technology magazine described its benefits. Presentations and demonstrations generated further interest. Before anyone used the system, introductory training courses were run, not because the software is difficult to use (it isn't!), but to engender confidence in the system. Confident, trained users are far more likely to make good use of the software and recognise the benefits they gain from it - quicker access to better quality information - rather than worrying about whether they are losing ownership of hard won knowledge.

Adoption

The enthusiastic support of the manager of the business stream responsible for the schools projects was key in persuading team members that they would gain, gain, gain by changing their approach to take full advantage of the system. Within 2 months, 70 people were using the system, and reflecting their manager's enthusiasm with comments like "Fantastic - I want more of it!", and "Don't you dare take this away". What a refreshing change from the usual reaction to new IT tools...

How It Works

Business Collaborator runs on a central server, with team members accessing the data via the web browser that they use for normal Internet access. Maintaining a central store of project documentation reduces delays in exchanging project information. If the opinion of an additional technical expert is needed, it can be sought without delay. External partners can be involved immediately and can be given access to only the information that is relevant to them.

Business Collaborator has been developed on top of Internet technology and so harnesses all of the benefits that this offers - accessibility from any computer platform and any location. It produces HTML pages which can be viewed directly by web browsers and so did not require Atkins to change its IT infrastructure. Security is ensured through individual password-protected accounts, entry to workspaces is by invitation only and further access rights can be set for individual folders or documents.

Practical Improvements

Atkins are developing practices to provide a formal set of protocols for using the software to maximise efficiency gains. For example, a simple "review and approval" mechanism has been set up. Any document or design must be approved at an appropriate management level before being released. When the draft of any document has been completed, its author passes the document to the reviewer. If the reviewer requires further modifications, he adds his comments to the draft or revises the original, leaving the initial version intact. When it is approved, the reviewer moves the document to an "Approvals Folder" where he is permitted to add documents but where the original author and the rest of the team may only read the contents.

An additional benefit was that staff found that co-location was unnecessary for co-operation. The number of face-to-face meetings was cut drastically, thus reducing costs and travel time, although working relationships developed more readily than before. New team members could quickly be introduced to the project because the learning curve was not steep and the potential reward was access to all of the project documentation.

Business Collaborator's flexibility ensures that it can be used all the way from the proposal phase, through design and implementation to hand-over, satisfying one of Atkins' key requirements.

The hand-over process is much easier when the client has been involved throughout a project. Business Collaborator enables Atkins to share key information with clients by allowing them access to the relevant workspaces. This builds confidence that work is being completed according to plan and thus establishes good relationships.

As Mike Russell says, **"At Atkins we believe that successful client relationships are founded on communication and trust. Business Collaborator provides a mechanism for us to share information with our clients (and other partners). We are sure that collaborative technology provides the right tools for this type of business."**