

# Successful document collaboration in a virtual team

Kris Sæther

Xait, Stavanger, Norway

## Correspondence to:

Kris Sæther  
Xait, Stavanger  
Norway  
kris.saether@xait.com

## Abstract

When several contributors are working on the same document, challenges are often created for both managers and contributors. This article discusses how technology can be used to help produce documents in collaboration.

**Keywords:** Document collaboration, Simultaneous co-editing solutions, Virtual teams

Today's working environment is rapidly changing. Many international organisations have a large part of their workforce working in alternative workplaces, and the workforce often expects flexibility. Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer recently created an outburst with her 'no-work-from-home' memo for remote workers<sup>1</sup> in which she stated her belief that working from home has an adverse impact on her employees' work performance.

Major factors behind people working from non-co-located sites include mobile technological developments and online collaboration solutions, in addition to the globalisation of organisations. The need for sustainable operation costs and access to knowledge workers is further increasing the demand for working in a virtual team environment. A virtual team consists of participants that primarily interact through mobile devices. Virtual team members may be in the same office or across continents.<sup>2</sup>

Producing documents in a virtual team environment carries many challenges, including communicating effectively, keeping track of people, building a team rapport, working towards common goals, and dealing with language and cultural differences as well as technology barriers. Working virtually can also allow some to avoid completing jobs and can lead to feelings of disconnectedness. With an increasingly flexible workforce that often works in different cities, countries, and regions, maintaining control of document production often becomes a challenge for the principal company. The pressure to deliver high-quality business-critical documents on time is vital for winning new and retaining

existing clients. This article focuses on having the right document collaboration and production tools for a flexible workforce.

## Traditional word processors are essentially advanced typewriters

The word processor descended from the typewriter and early text formatting tools. Probably as a result of its heritage, the word processor was created from the perspective of a single writer and the need to make frequent edits to a document as it is developed without the need for correction fluid. Although a major efficiency improvement, the word processor was never intended as solution to collaborative challenges.

## Document management systems are essentially sharing and collation software

Document management system (DMS) providers often claim that their software is a collaborative application. In reality, DMSs are *sharing and collation software* that cannot change the fact that information is stored in files. They simply add an extra layer of information (metadata) and provide a control mechanism for accessing these files.

With a DMS, as with Microsoft Word, organisations need to break the document into sub-documents, assigning responsibility for each part. This leads to a fragmented and serial production process. This is exactly the point where the project managers lose control. Then, towards the end of the process, the person responsible for compiling the document needs to collate a variety of files, generate the document, and ensure that the formatting and layout are consistent.

## The solution: Document collaboration solutions

Document collaboration solutions allow documents to be edited simultaneously by multiple contributors.

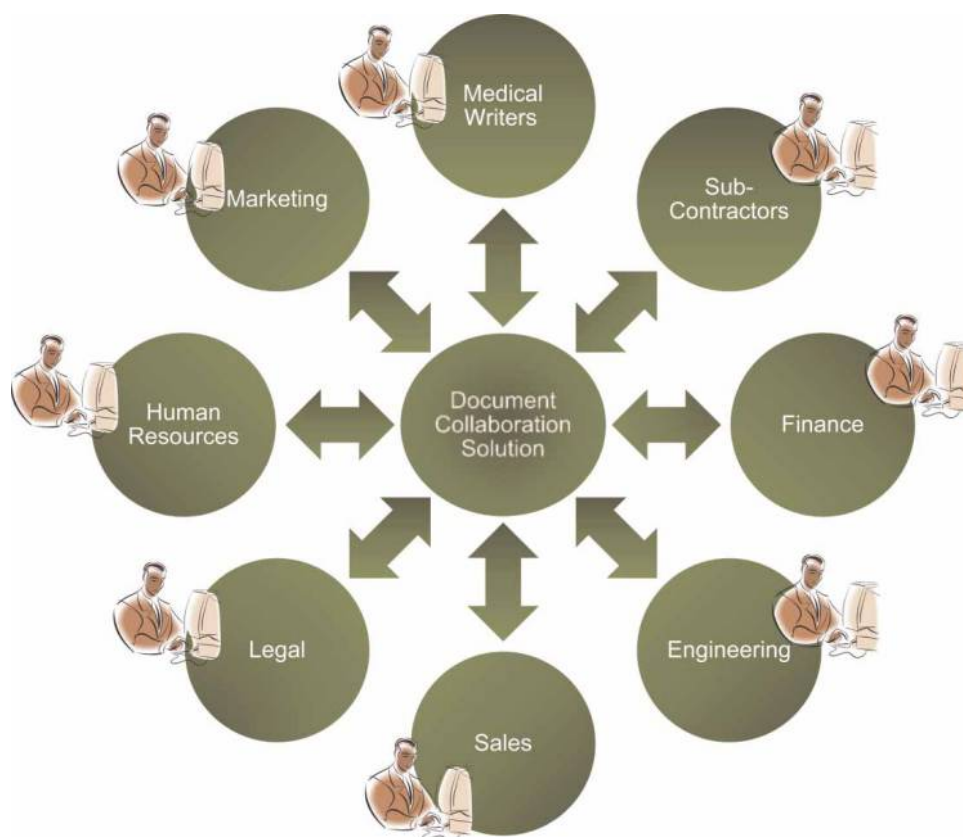


Figure 1: True document collaboration solutions enable teams to work simultaneously on the same document at the same time.

True collaborative solutions are built on databases, and allow for different sub-sections of a document to be edited in parallel. Basically, everyone can work on the same document at the same time, while management has complete control of the process (Figure 1). Automatic formatting, layout, and numbering ensure that writers focus solely on content. Web-native solutions (solutions that are accessed via the web and are not locally installed) enable contributions from multiple locations and organisations, and managers have complete control of the production process from day one. This helps organisations to increase the quality of their content.

Document collaboration solutions also often come with the added benefit of features such as master data management (MDM, authoritative management of single-source content) and composite content management (ability to use the same content automatically in many variations and documents). This means that end users can easily keep their data in a single-source repository, maintain consistency, and update all live documents at the same time, while using the content dynamically for various types of documents.

Single-source authoring allows the same content to be used in different documents or in various

formats. It is a broad approach to content aimed at enabling creation of information products targeted to specific audiences, automatically – and without manual intervention or reworking. Use of this content can be increased mechanistically, by automated tools.<sup>3</sup>

According to Menon, the interest in composite content applications has increased over recent years due to the rising need for business process improvements and ways to address challenges around requirements for rapid and flexible changes.<sup>4</sup> Such applications can deliver substantial value by leveraging both content and process services for the better orchestration of people and processes, and can empower organisations to automate routine tasks and aggregate information from multiple sources in a collaborative work environment that enables rapid decision making.

MDM is a comprehensive method of enabling an enterprise to link all of its critical data to one file, a master file, which provides a common point of reference. When properly done, MDM streamlines data sharing among personnel and departments.<sup>5</sup>

Master content management is the ‘workflow process in which business and IT work together to ensure the uniformity, accuracy, stewardship and

accountability of the enterprise's official, shared information assets; in this case, content assets, such as employee, supplier and customer contracts, new customer intake forms and other content types that must be managed as enterprise information.<sup>6</sup>

Combining single-source authoring with composite content management and master content management can provide a very powerful solution for organisations. Organisations that master this can ensure that global virtual teams work with consistent content across all documents when their output is used in a wide variety of documents. The result is increased control of content provided by virtual teams, and reduced costs to make it happen.

### **When organisations deliver the 'same' service, effective communication is key**

Knowledge organisations are often not willing to embrace new technology that seems to replace something they already manage in some way or other. Senior management often believes that Word solves all document challenges, as that is what they use and have used in the past. They may not fully understand that they need to embrace change to compete effectively. However, with an increasingly mobile workforce and virtual document production becoming almost the norm, traditional tools are just not adequate.

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### **Author information**

**Kris Sæther** is a sales director and member of the Executive Management team at Xait. For more than 15 years, he has helped corporations deal with their document collaboration and team productivity challenges. Xait is behind XaitPorter, an online document collaboration solution used globally. Xait was named a Cool Vendor in Content Management by Gartner in 2013.

### **Conclusion**

With knowledge workers working globally in virtual teams, one would not rely on typewriters, so why rely on a word processor that is descended from the typewriter? There are many solutions that can assist your organisation in overcoming the challenges inherent to working in virtual teams. Start your research today.

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