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A Guide to Online Collaboration Software  
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## Working @ Home

There are close to 25 million small businesses in the U.S. alone, and that group is extraordinarily diverse in terms of industries, numbers of employees and their day-to-day activities. There is a common thread, however. "The one thing everybody in every small business does all day is collaborate," said small business technology analyst Laurie McCabe of the SMB Group.

It's true. We all spend our days talking to and working with colleagues, suppliers, partners, customers. "If you can streamline that process, make it easier for people to collaborate, that's obviously a good thing," said McCabe.

Which is why the SMB Group believes small businesses should consider using low-cost online collaboration products and services, especially integrated collaboration suites such as those from Zoho, IBM (LotusLive), and most recently, Microsoft (Office 365 – currently in public beta).

Online collaboration is by no means a new concept, but it has been evolving rapidly in the last few years, with new products and services popping up on a regular basis and new features continually being added to established products.

### Heavy Hitters Finally Get Collaboration

Big-league players such as IBM, Microsoft, VMware with its Zimbra internal collaboration server product and Cisco, with a similarly architectural approach to collaboration in the enterprise, are all relative late-comers to this market.

Online collaboration software was pioneered by smaller start-ups such as Zoho and BaseCamp, which makes a project management-oriented collaboration suite, and by pure Internet companies such as Google (Google Apps, Google Cloud Connect). And the products initially appealed mainly to small and medium businesses.

"There was a time when those big players were not that

interested in the cloud," noted Jacqueline Lawson, a small business consultant with Cozzas.com, a Zoho specialist. Those days are clearly long gone.

As Lawson pointed out, 500 million Facebook users, a growing number of them businesses looking to make connections with customers, have helped make the cloud the place to be, and they attract big players.



HyperOffice online collaboration software

### Social and Mobile Trends in Online Collaboration

One key online collaboration trend in recent months is the integration of social media - either by importing streams from existing social media services such as Facebook and Twitter, or by adding social media-like features.

SalesForce.com, for example, previously known mainly as an online customer relationship management (CRM) service but now increasingly positioning itself as a collaboration vendor, last year introduced Chatter, a collaboration tool with social media features.

LotusLive also has a social media "look and feel," McCabe noted. IBM refers to LotusLive Symphony as "a set of social collaboration tools in the cloud." (Symphony

LotusLive Symphony as a set of social collaboration tools in the cloud. (Symphony lets distributed teams work together online on documents, spreadsheets and presentations.)

The other key trend is the extension of online collaboration into the mobile realm. Chatter, Zoho and LotusLive, for example, all offer mobile apps that let iPhone, iPad and other tablet and smartphone users participate in meetings and projects.

### Expanding and Securing Collaboration

Many online collaboration tools have also gradually improved by adding features that small businesses said they needed. More of these tools now make it easy to include outside participants -- partners, suppliers, contractors -- in the collaboration process.

Last year when the SMB Group looked at online collaboration service providers, only a couple had that mechanism in place, McCabe said. Now several do. "It's really important for small businesses because, for a lot of what they do, they need to collaborate with others outside their firm."

Making it easier to bring on temporary team members to help with projects may even be a key driver for adopting online collaboration, Lawson suggested.

"Now you can have qualified team members anywhere in the world, and all they need is a laptop, an Internet connection, a user ID and password, and they can collaborate with you on a project," she said.

Another area where small businesses have concerns about online collaboration services is security, Lawson said. Some vendors have beefed up security while others, she said, have made it easier for users to back up cloud data to their own premises or with a third-party online storage provider.

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