Enabling Collaboration in the Pharmaceutical Industry

by Francois Gossieaux

Globalization of the world’s economy and workforce make time zones and distances key factors affecting communication in drug development. To allay those difficulties when working jointly, many biopharmaceutical companies rely on traditional communication tools (phone, fax, or email). The limited functionality of those methods, however, makes them increasingly less effective in bridging gaps. As collaboration increases, biopharmaceutical companies need technologies that can help each company, its research and development teams, its suppliers, and its laboratories prioritize information efficiently, make informed decisions, and track progress and results.

Working Effectively
Companies involved in shepherding drugs to market face challenges that are not encountered in other industries. They need to capture, organize, and share the vast amounts of knowledge emerging from the human genome project, from internal discovery initiatives, and from preclinical and clinical trials — a truly daunting task.

Another imperative for drug manufacturers is overseeing collaboration with outside companies, agencies, and organizations. No other industry depends as heavily on so many external organizations to provide everything from access to enabling technologies, to sales, to marketing support. Pharmaceutical companies must maximize their return on investments (ROIs), and that requires seamless communication between internal and external teams, diligent project management, and efficient information sharing of mission-critical data bidirectionally to relevant players.

Cross-functional communication. Biopharmaceutical companies must streamline data and manage the cooperative efforts of internal teams, whether those teams are in the same building or on different continents. The need for collaboration spans both organizational and functional matrices. For example, managers need to track relevant information from project teams. Those data then need to be analyzed, condensed, and relayed up the organizational hierarchy so that the CEO can make decisions based on real-time facts rather than dated speculation. Because project teams tend to be developed across functional needs, they do not — and should not — need to be constrained by organizational boundaries. Collaboration must be flexible enough to move along and between structures.

Increased pressure. The pharmaceutical industry faces mounting pressure to deliver increased revenues despite growing research and development costs, heightened regulatory oversight, patent expiry, competition from generic offerings, market segmentation, reimbursement issues, and pricing pressures.

To maintain a 10% average annual growth rate, which is the industry’s target, each pharmaceutical company must launch, on average, four new chemical entities (NCEs) per year, which is far more than the current level of one NCE per year. The inherent nature of the drug discovery and development processes — with abundant external collaboration, project team members dispersed around the globe, and competitive pressures — creates barriers to the pharmaceutical executive’s primary objective: enhancing shareholder value through increased revenues and decreased costs. In other words, optimizing ROI.

These are some reasons the movement toward virtual working environments has already begun in the pharmaceutical community.

A Virtual Necessity
Companies such as Bausch & Lomb (www.bausch.com), Pfizer Inc. (www.pfizer.com), and IMS Health (www.imshealth.com) have taken decisive action to expand beyond the use of traditional communication tools. They are now focusing on transforming the workplace while maintaining their cost structures and operational efficiencies by creating more value from fewer resources.

Bausch & Lomb is the world leader in optical health care. It operates on every continent, so it had to cope with the challenge of communicating about products in development for worldwide introduction. With that in mind, Bausch & Lomb created a digital workplace for project team members at more than 10 global sites. Now every team member has immediate access to all documents and information from a common workplace accessed through the Web, saving the costs associated with face-to-face meetings and travel.

Saving time and money. One of the world’s largest manufacturers of health care products for the consumer market wanted to help its information technology (IT) employees follow the appropriate processes during systems development. After looking at several types of collaborative solutions, the company chose to manage its IT projects more effectively and post issues, resolutions, project...
information, and deliverables in a digital workplace. The shared work space became a searchable project knowledge center for the organization.

That secure, Web-based, digital workplace allows the company to use project teams (in research and development, sales and logistics, global transportation, human resources, and many other departments) around the world to share information, capture and preserve knowledge, brainstorm, resolve issues, and work more efficiently than they had with traditional means of communication. The digital workplace alone decreased spending by 20–25% on the team’s business process redesign project, which involved rethinking unnecessary process steps. That savings showed that even minor improvements could yield dramatic benefits.

**New Web Workplaces**

With the Internet now an integral business tool, companies can easily implement Web-based workplaces. Such an environment can be quickly tailored for specific business initiatives and can provide selected project team members with immediate access to all documents and information in a common workplace.

Because the Internet is a flexible technology, companies are finding that it has the infrastructure on which to build virtual or digital workplaces. It allows for access to documents to be tightly controlled by coordinators who decide which team members have the right to view an item and which have the ability to make changes to it. By using the Web, a company can create a digital workplace that can accomplish many tasks and functions. In addition, a Web-based workplace offers tracking of document versions, allowing staff to work with the most recently updated information going through the review process. Discussion features associated with a document enable free-flowing communication and issue tracking.

**A flexible tool.** Although the Web is a flexible and comfortable tool, an effective digital workplace must be comprehensible with a minimal learning curve, it must be contagious (or fun to use), and it must offer clear benefits to the extended enterprise. It must integrate with all the tools already present on one’s desktop. Cross-enterprise functioning should span the company and its geographic boundaries. The digital workplace must be comprehensive, allowing all communication, document sharing, issue tracking, and decision making to be captured and stored in one place; and it should be customizable, allowing users to shape it to fit their particular needs. Enabling a collaborative environment for teams composed of members both inside and outside the company offers a new way of working faster, being more creative, and meeting higher expectations in cooperation with teammates, customers, and partners sitting in offices around the world.

**The future** evolution of the Internet and its ever-increasing bandwidth will accelerate already lightning-quick product life cycles, making the digital workplace a necessary rather than a novel tool. The traditional four “brick-and-mortar” walls simply cannot support a virtual workforce. Companies that break down those walls quickest will find themselves ahead of the curve. BP