

Web Collaboration

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By [Greg Alwang](#)

The expanding mobile workforce and need for virtual teams make collaboration more difficult but more important. Web-based collaboration provides a cost-effective solution without the headaches inherent with supporting complex in-house systems. The downside of Web-based solutions is whether or not they'll be around tomorrow: Read any given tech news and you hear of another ASP closing. Still, Web-based collaboration solutions can provide short-term relief during suddenly expanding projects or long-term relief to geographically dispersed teams.

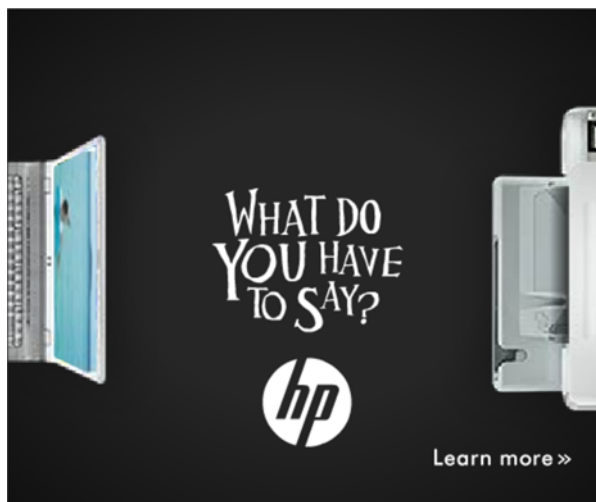
Web-based collaboration solutions can provide a lot of bang for the buck, though most take very different approaches. Some lean toward specific tasks, such as sharing documents, while others provide a mix of features for bringing disparate groups together (see the sidebar "Other Platforms").

Here we focus on three products for sharing or managing documents over the Web: NetDocuments Enterprise, Punch Web- Groups 3.0, and TeamDrive 3.0. All provide secure access to Web-based files without the complexity of VPN hardware and software. With these tools, you can set access levels, track versions, and check files in or out for editing.

Users don't like to lock and download files manually in order to work on them locally. NetDocuments and TeamDrive automate most of these steps for you. There is also a push in the industry for WebDAV support (WebDAV, short for Web-based Distributed Authoring and Versioning, is the Worldwide Web Consortium's initiative to support standards in distributed authoring and versioning). As more Web servers support WebDAV, more document management capabilities will become ubiquitous, such as Microsoft's support of Web Folders from within Windows Explorer.

As with any ASP endeavor, there are risks to placing important documents on the Web. You should get information about the vendor's data center, backup and redundancy policies, and security model, and do your own research on the stability of the ASP. In view of the volatility of ASPs, you should have a backup plan, as well as store important documents off-line.

Read on to find out how these Web-based solutions offer some intriguing features for sharing and managing Web-based documents.



NetDocuments Enterprise

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SPEC DATA

- Product: NetDocuments Enterprise
- Direct price: For 10 users, \$9,500 (volume discounts available).
- Requires: Microsoft Windows 95, 98, 2000, Me, or NT; IE 5.0 or later.
- Company Info: NetDocuments, Orem, UT; 801-226-6882 ; www.netdocuments.com

EDITOR RATING: ●●●●○

Aimed at the legal, accounting, and real estate markets, NetDocuments Enterprise (\$9,500 per year for ten users) offers advanced document management in the form of document profiling, digital signing, echoed

storage, inbound and outbound security, and one-click document upload and download.

NetDocuments Enterprise includes a 5GB Cabinet for any number of folders, subfolders, and files. You can import, scan, fax, or e-mail documents directly into a Cabinet folder. Web Folders are supported, so you can access NetDocuments directly in Windows Explorer. Administrators can set access rights based on users or groups. A special shared-folder option lets you share files with users outside your immediate workgroup. These "invited" users get access to the designated shared folder and their own free 3MB personal Cabinet.

With one click, you can check out a file, download it to your local hard drive, and bring it up in its native application—a process similar to TeamDrive's in-place editing. If you don't have the application, the file is viewed using HTML. When you save changes, the file is transferred back to the Cabinet folder and checked back in with the updated information. With WebGroups, you have to upload modified files from your local hard drive as an extra step.

A unique Breakout Session feature lets two users take a copy of a file to a private, shared folder for collaboration and revision—without the knowledge of other users—then replace the updated file and even maintain the original version number. High-end features, such as digitally signing documents or checking out documents to handhelds, are well integrated and intuitive. High-speed metasearching is due by the time you read this.


SSL connections are used throughout, and optional file echoing mirrors Web-based documents to your local LAN when they are saved. A data center makes online and off-line backups nightly.

A scaled-down Professional version provides 1GB of space, forgoes advanced features, and costs about \$12 per user per month. For next-generation document management at an affordable price, NetDocuments Enterprise is the ticket.

Punch WebGroups 3.0

REVIEW DATE: 10.30.01

SPEC DATA

- Product: Punch WebGroups 3.0
- Direct price: \$99 per user per year (volume discounts available).
- Requires: Microsoft Internet Explorer 4.01 or later or Netscape Navigator 4.7 or later.
- Company Info: Punch Networks Corp., Seattle;  206-343-7661 ; www.punchnetworks.com

EDITOR RATING: ●●●○○

For business professionals who need to collaborate with remote colleagues on a mix of Microsoft Windows and Mac machines (no formal support for Linux), Punch WebGroups 3.0 ups efficiency by sending only changes during transfers. WebGroups (\$99 per user per year) supports version tracking, check-in/-out, change notification, and user-based access rights.

You can set up WebGroups in minutes using the free 30-day trial option (which allows 10MB of storage), and you can then upload files or entire folders using straight HTML or a Java plug-in. The full version includes 100MB of online storage and allows multiple WebGroups (teams) with any number of shared folders.

Along with file attributes, WebGroups shows each file's creator, the current version, whether you have the current version, and where it is stored locally. You can lock files for editing and view files from within your browser, but you won't want to edit this way, because WebGroups doesn't track the file version and location. The preferred method is to lock, download, and edit files locally, then use Upload to replace the files with the revised versions. This process is not as elegant as that in NetDocuments or TeamDrive but works fine for basic sharing and version control.

When you're modifying existing files, WebGroups does a binary comparison and transfers only the changed portion of the files, so upload/download times are shortened. Locked files are automatically unlocked when you upload new versions.

For users with multiple locations and PCs, WebGroups lets you synchronize documents at each location with the server, so all are current. This feature is ideal for business professionals who, in addition to collaborating with colleagues, work from several locations.

As with NetDocuments, WebGroups lets you view a complete version history and load previous versions of a file. If you're not up to date, one button lets you synchronize to the latest version. You can trigger e-mail notifications when certain files change (IM and pager notifications are in the works).

WebGroups doesn't have the breadth of features found in NetDocuments, but it offers capable file-sharing, versioning, and synchronization features at the right price.

TeamDrive 3.0

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SPEC DATA

- Product: TeamDrive 3.0
- Direct price: For 5 clients, \$200; for 1 server and 5 clients, \$325; annual maintenance fee, 15 percent.
- Requires: 32MB RAM; 10MB hard drive space; Microsoft Windows 95, 98, 2000, Me, or NT 4.0 (server also runs on Linux).
- Company Info: TeamStream Inc., San Jose, CA;  408-260-2600 ; www.teamstream.com

EDITOR RATING: ●●●●○

TeamStream's TeamDrive lets you access your Web server as a secure, virtual hard drive. Using a small (800K) client applet, TeamDrive (\$200 for five users) maps drive letters to Web-based folders—allowing instant access to files from any Microsoft Windows application. Its TeamLinks tool lets you send links to colleagues for accessing files on the virtual drive. Mobile users can access shared files off-line and synchronize changes the next time they connect. For distributed teams that need to share server-based files, TeamDrive offers a powerful solution.

The TeamDrive client will work with any existing FTP, HTTP, or WebDAV server, but unless the server is completely WebDAV-compliant, you won't benefit from all the advanced features. The optional TeamDrive server component (\$325 for five users) or a WebDAV server offers file-locking and access-control features. For users on public computers restricted from loading the TeamDrive client, the TeamDrive server allows browser-based access to shared files.

Opening files from the mapped virtual drive is transparent to your Windows applications, similar to NetDocuments' Web folder support. Behind the scenes, files are downloaded to your local cache, so subsequent loads are much faster. Saved files are first saved to the local cache and uploaded in the background, so you can continue working normally.

TeamLinks lets you share files securely with partners or customers who don't already use TeamDrive. Rather than inefficiently e-mailing an entire file to several people, TeamLinks provides encapsulated e-mail links that connect people to the shared file on the virtual drive. The link optionally downloads and installs the TeamDrive client and opens the specified shared file using a temporary TeamDrive account and password. You can also restrict access using TeamLinks.


Users can lock files for editing and choose a time-out, after which files are automatically unlocked. This way, forgotten files get put back into circulation after the lock expires. Files selected for off-line access are copied to a cache on the local drive. Files in the local cache are synchronized with copies on the virtual drive when users reconnect to TeamDrive, similar to WebGroups' synchronization.

By the time you read this, TeamDrive 3.5 will be available with advanced WebDAV features such as automated check-in/-out, enhanced versioning, and improved access control.

eReview 3.6

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SPEC DATA

- Category: Other Platforms
- Product: eReview 3.6
- Direct price: 10 users, \$500 per user.
- Requires: For client, Microsoft Windows 95, 98, NT 4.0, or later; Sun Solaris 2.6 or later; Internet Explorer 4.0 or Netscape Navigator 4.5 or later. For server, Pentium III, 128MB RAM, 50MB hard drive space, Microsoft Windows NT 4 or later.
- Company Info: Web4 Inc., a subsidiary of netGuru Inc., Yorba Linda, CA;  714-974-2670 ; www.ereviewonline.com

EDITOR RATING: ●●●●○

A specialized, real-time document review and markup tool that allows all participating users to interact, eReview 3.6 is built on a sophisticated viewer that supports over 150 file formats, including 3-D images,

without requiring native applications. With support for Microsoft Windows, Unix/Linux, Solaris, and Mac OS X, eReview is ideal for designers who need speedier document review sessions.

eReview has a Windows 2000/NT server component for hosting shared documents, and it uses Java plug-ins on the client. Users in or outside the firewall can be invited to join in a document review session, and parts of documents can be protected or hidden from view. Users can chat publicly or "whisper" to select others, and a roaming mode lets select users view images privately from the rest of the review group, much like NetDocuments' Breakout Sessions.


Multiple documents can be opened in the viewer for simultaneous review, and there is support for unlimited markup layers. Entire meetings can be saved and played back using an optional Meeting Management component.

Advanced features such as side-by-side document comparisons, attendee polling, and remote desktop control using VNC (www.uk.research.att.com/vnc) are all supported.

WebWorkZone

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SPEC DATA

- Category: Other Platforms
- Product: WebWorkZone
- Direct price: For 10 users, \$14.95 per user per month; more than 10, \$12 per user per month.
- Requires: Microsoft IE 4.0 or later or Netscape Navigator 4.0 or later.
- Company Info: SiteScape Inc., Maynard, MA;  978-461-9959 ; www.sitescape.com

EDITOR RATING: ●●●○○

SiteScape's WebWorkZone is a collaboration platform offering shared calendars, discussions, file sharing, chatting, instant messaging, and specialized solutions for areas like contact management and help desk support. A slick Workflow tool lets you define and automate business processes. With WWZ, a company can enforce these processes and strengthen relationships with its customers and suppliers at a fraction of the cost of in-house collaboration solutions like Lotus Notes.

WWZ, the online equivalent of SiteScape's Enterprise Forum collaboration software, is pure HTML and runs on any device with a standard browser.

With WWZ, you get 10MB of storage (an additional 50MB costs \$25 per month). Businesses that outgrow WWZ can upgrade to the Forum product and import all existing WWZ data.

Embedded searching capabilities (based on AltaVista) let you easily find information, but the Web File system is not as intuitive or as automated as with NetDocuments or TeamDrive.

Prebuilt applications can be fully customized using Workflow tools. You define various stages in a business process and impose filters and directives on the data. For instance, you can automate and track the transition of contacts from prospect to customer or track support calls from new call to resolution. Portal support for Oracle's e-Business Portal and Citrix Systems' XPS, among others, lets you tie these custom applications into your portal strategy.

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