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# The Next Big Thing: Contextual Collaboration

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## Catalyst

Research collaboration

## Question

What is the next big thing in the collaboration space?

## Answer

The next big thing in collaboration is called “contextual collaboration.” This term means collaboration embedded in business processes and applications, rather than sitting beside them in a monolithic horizontal collaborative infrastructure. Collaboration will be available as a service or as components that can be called upon to provide discussion threads. It will mean real-time chat or electronic meetings, with some underlying repository that makes the data universally available. Contextual collaboration will extend into the mobile space, so that untethered members of a process can engage in collaboration from a variety of devices.

The benefit of contextual collaboration will come from the reduced time required to engage in collaboration and the increased opportunity for collaboration, as awareness of content and collaborative partners becomes a normal part of an application. In a customer relationship management (CRM) application, for instance, the customer record might be augmented with awareness information, so that not only does it show who the last people were that talked to this customer, but if they are currently online. Content is also a key driver of collaboration; so unstructured correspondence and other documents might also be visible. Staff engaged with a customer could quickly click on a related document to see who was involved with it and then quickly engage those parties in a dialog to support the current situation. At the end of the discussion, if the conversation ended with lessons-learned information, the lesson could be easily captured from within the client care system by engaging a dialog box, rather than switching to another system and creating a new record there.

In terms of the market space, **IBM’s Lotus Software** and **Microsoft** own the collaborative space with several challenges currently underway, including the idea of lightweight team environments and components products. For contextual collaboration to take place, all of the functions of a product like Exchange or Domino would need to be available as a component or service. IBM will remain strong in this area because it has a good underlying repository that can accommodate this kind of component model. IBM has already made indications it will move in this direction, with discussions centering around a move toward a more Java-enabled future for its products. IBM will be challenged to execute on its vision and provide enough marketing support to move aggressively into this new opportunity area. Microsoft, on the other hand, will remain strong in messaging but has not made overtures at this point about breaking up the Exchange model into a component or service model.

Any fundamental shift creates opportunities for disruptive entries, so it is conceivable that other collaboration vendors will seize this opportunity, but it is too early to speculate on important entrants. Other client/server and Web-based companies with significant market presence that will need to find a place in the new model are **eRoom** and **Intraspect**. This kind of shift will continue to erode the presence of **Netscape** and **Novell**, which will not be able to undertake radical re-architecture of their products to compete, which will leave

them as legacy environments.

This market will develop during the next two to three years, with announcements from enterprise software vendors around the intention to embed collaboration beginning to arrive in early 2003.

In the worst-case scenario, contextual collaboration will evolve as a set of proprietary components delivered by enterprise vendors and not leveraging existing technology, methods and repositories. This development would further fragment the collaborative space, and although collaboration would be highly visible and available, it would be nearly impossible to leverage connections across systems. Giga highly suggests that the vendor community resist this approach and partner with established vendors to bring these features to the products. Enterprise customers should begin pressuring their enterprise resource planning (ERP), CRM, supply chain and other enterprise vendors to make rational choices when enabling collaboration in applications, not just add technology that gives them an unqualified check on an evaluation.