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## Vendor Snapshot: Boardwalktech Applies Collaboration And Controls To Spreadsheets

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As collaboration and enterprise 2.0 vendors promote the latest must-have innovations to improve information worker productivity, Silicon Valley startup Boardwalktech turned its focus to something a little more commonplace: spreadsheets. Boardwalktech's founders felt there was a big gap in how people work with spreadsheets and the collaboration capabilities provided by vendors like Microsoft. By creating its own platform for spreadsheet collaboration, Boardwalktech enables cell-level sharing and access control, change management, and integration with enterprise resource planning (ERP), customer relationship management (CRM), and legacy databases. This additional level of collaboration functionality lets people work with their familiar spreadsheets and processes while improving spreadsheet controls.

### KEY IDEA: CELL-LEVEL VERSUS DOCUMENT-LEVEL COLLABORATION

Despite enterprise applications designed to analyze data, crunch numbers, and manage information, spreadsheets remain a top choice of information workers for business intelligence (BI), financial budgeting and accounting, sales forecasting, and myriad other tasks that lend themselves to an analytical application.<sup>1</sup>

Large systems have been customized to provide access to data, but nothing outperforms spreadsheets in flexibility, ease of use, and ubiquity. No matter how much data resides in a BI, CRM, or ERP system, information workers usually first export data into Microsoft Excel and then build ad hoc processes that are shared via email with others. But enterprises often do not have controls in place to mitigate risks associated with using spreadsheets for mission-critical functions or compliance, and challenges with version control and data integration persist.<sup>2</sup> New approaches to this dilemma offer much more powerful and infinitely more scalable options that Forrester defines as "BI workspaces."<sup>3</sup>

Excel 2007, used in tandem with SharePoint Server 2007 Excel Services, allows enterprises to publish and share spreadsheets.<sup>4</sup> SharePoint lets users navigate, sort, filter, and analyze shared spreadsheet data through check-in and check-out support, but offers no access control, no cell-level change tracking, and doesn't support multiple people working on a spreadsheet at the same time. Enabling access to change data in a cell, tracking the history of those changes, and integrating with enterprise applications to support two-way cell data sharing makes spreadsheets more effective for processes and compliance.

## WHAT'S DIFFERENT: AD-HOC BUSINESS MODELING FOR SPREADSHEETS

Recognizing the opportunity of providing spreadsheet cell-level control and collaboration, Boardwalktech set out to bridge the collaboration gap between the desktop and back-end transactional environments. The Boardwalk Collaboration Platform (BCP) provides a plug-in to the local version of Excel, which acts as communication and security manager from the worker's spreadsheet to the BCP server.

While other vendors offer spreadsheet control support — Actuate, Cincom Systems, ClusterSeven, Compassoft, Lyquidity Solutions, and Prodiance — Boardwalktech takes a different approach by:

- **Embracing a key tenet of the Information Workplace.** An Information Workplace provides tools supporting people in the way they want to work.<sup>5</sup> Boardwalktech's BCP plugs into existing spreadsheets, requiring little change to existing processes. This ability enables businesses to take their existing spreadsheet-based processes and link them into BCP or create a new template to solve a given business challenge like supply chain planning. Rather than trying to force a business into a best practice application, Boardwalktech sought to provide the tools to modify existing spreadsheets to fit a company's own custom — and sometimes unique — process requirements.
- **Providing cell-level controls within spreadsheets.** In 2008, Boardwalktech received a patent on its tabular persistent database, the BCP platform's core new technology, which provides collaboration and change management support at the cell level. Traditional spreadsheet management approaches handle versioning at the file level, taking a snapshot of each version but providing little visibility into cell-level changes. BCP keeps all changes at the cell level, helping enterprises retrieve a historical record of who made a change, why a change was made, and comments about the change. Users can also embed documents and links at the cell level, further extending the historical view of content related to a given spreadsheet process.
- **Offering collaboration support with discrete access controls beyond Excel.** BCP supports Excel as well as other spreadsheet applications from IBM and Novell. The initial load of the spreadsheet in BCP creates a single version of "the truth." Information workers can then assign access control to a range of data. When the user hits a submit button, the changes go to the server and become visible to everyone sharing that data. This facilitates connecting the flexible, ad-hoc business-modeling capabilities of spreadsheets into a scalable, enterprise-quality secure back-end database without diminishing the capabilities of each environment. Numerous enterprises connect BCP with enterprise applications from i2, Oracle, and SAP.

## HOW IT'S BEING USED: MAKING MANUAL SPREADSHEET EFFORTS DYNAMIC

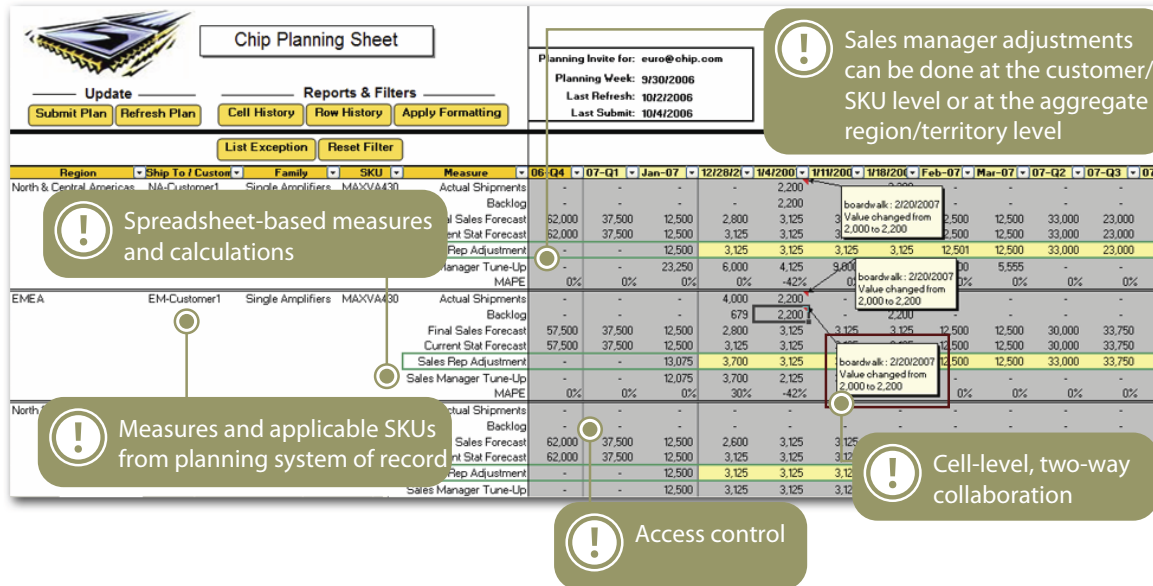
Today, Boardwalktech's customers use BCP across functional business units to support sales and operations planning, enterprise report management, supply and demand planning, sales and revenue forecasting, partner performance management, treasury and cash management, Restriction

of Hazardous Substances Directive (RoHS) and Sarbanes-Oxley Act (SOX) compliance, financial budgeting and planning, and project and portfolio management. Examples of problems addressed with BCP include:

- **Managing distribution channels.** A large technology provider was having trouble managing its distribution channel. The business couldn't recognize revenue until its product was sold through distributors, and it didn't know how much inventory was held by each distributor. After trying several approaches to move off spreadsheets, including a browser front-end application, the company implemented BCP. In seven weeks, it was able to connect the distributors' inventory data to the manufacturer for sales forecasting. Another technology device manufacturer was able to gain more timely visibility into changes in the unit forecast pipeline. The implementation improved forecast accuracy by 13%, allowed the manufacturer to drop inventory levels by 25%, and increased customer satisfaction by 33%.
- **Allocating resources.** A large chip manufacturer was having a challenge with resource allocation. With 10 different groups around the world working on different projects, people were waiting days for their assignments. The allocation was managed manually in spreadsheets. By automating the system using BCP, the company was able to drastically improve its resource allocation management and save money that was being lost as people were idle waiting for assignments.
- **Planning for demand.** A mobile phone manufacturer that uses SAP had a problem with its sales planners who didn't want to use the SAP front end because it was inflexible and too complex. With the sales mix of phones rapidly changing — upward of 60 SKUs at a time — BCP allowed the company to use spreadsheets and support leaf-level sales forecasting at the unit level.

By implementing BCP, these businesses were able to automate and integrate their spreadsheets with back-end transactional system data. For the first time, these information workers had a tool allowing them to change a data structure on the fly, assign versions of data, and manipulate data in a spreadsheet user interface (see Figure 1). They can work concurrently offline, and everyone who requires it can see the changes at the cell level. Additionally, the associated pivots and other reports are all updated automatically.

**Figure 1** Boardwalktech Features Cell-Level Control



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Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

**WHAT'S NEXT: BECOMING PART OF THE IT TOOL KIT**

Profitable by its second year in business, Boardwalktech's client list includes Fortune 1000 companies across industries, with a heavy emphasis on business users instead of IT. Boardwalktech now wants to become part of the IT tool kit.

Today, when a spreadsheet-related pain exists in the business, IT often responds by extending a module of a given enterprise application, implementing a point solution that changes the way people work, or building out a custom application. All of these alternatives take time and expensive resources, and none guarantees that users will embrace it. Boardwalktech believes that its platform can work as a tool kit within enterprises to allow IT to build applications that solve these discrete business problems quickly within existing spreadsheets. As a case in point, a \$14 billion company's IT organization embraced BCP as a collaborative technology platform in the middle of 2008 and is already on its third application.

## WHAT IT MEANS

### GET RID OF YOUR SPREADSHEET GUILT

Companies rely on spreadsheets across functions to manage their business, but not without some level of guilt and worry. IT knows that sensitive information contained in spreadsheets could pose a compliance risk, but that information workers will not want to give them up. Organizations should recognize that document-level collaboration fails to solve these challenges. Boardwalktech, and other spreadsheet management solutions, seek to tap into a core tenet of the Information Workplace and improve spreadsheet-based processes while solving the problem of historical access and control of cell-level data. IT no longer needs to turn a blind eye to information workers who love their spreadsheets, but should instead focus on how to make their use even better.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Spreadsheets' role in BI is no longer limited to simple import/export mechanisms; they now play an integral role in all layers of the BI stack. See the April 2, 2007, "[Ouch! Get Ready — Spreadsheets Are Here To Stay For Business Intelligence](#)" report.
- <sup>2</sup> Financial business processes run on spreadsheets. The widespread use of spreadsheets should cause concern for all enterprises. The ability to discover, assess, and control spreadsheets, however, greatly mitigates their risk and drives enterprises to consider one of several IT solutions for this problem. Effective processes associated with spreadsheet control and risk mitigation need to cross all financial functions and address auditors' concerns. Implementing the correct procedures around spreadsheet controls will create the necessary working framework to allow the continued usage of spreadsheets while lessening audit issues and financial compliance requirements. See the December 22, 2008, "[Controls To Mitigate Spreadsheet Risk](#)" report.
- <sup>3</sup> Forrester recognizes an emergence of newer technologies and approaches to analyzing data. One such approach is the "BI workspace," in which power users, especially power analysts, can explore data without their IT departments imposing any limitations or constraints, such as fixed-data models, security, and production environment schedules. See the June 23, 2008, "[BI Workspaces: BI Without Borders](#)" report.
- <sup>4</sup> Excel 2007 users can create massive spreadsheets of up to 1 million rows and 16,000 columns, a blessing for many people who use Excel for BI. Excel 2007 also includes new data analysis and visualization capabilities, such as conditional formatting to help create heat maps to identify problems quickly, multiselect autofilters and an ability to filter by color, 3D charting capabilities; and an improved ability to create PivotTables or PivotCharts via a drag-and-drop UI. See the July 17, 2007, "[A Look At The Improvements And Shortcomings Of Microsoft Office 2007 Desktop Applications](#)" report.
- <sup>5</sup> While Information Workplaces (IWs) must be role based at their core to deliver relevant, contextual tools and information to workers, role based is just the start of putting workers at the center of their IW. Thanks to enterprise Web 2.0, IWs will move beyond just being role based to become individualized. See the November 26, 2007, "[The Seven Tenets Of The Information Workplace](#)" report.

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