



## A Shot of eXpresso for Spreadsheets

SaaS application is designed for collaboration

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### Summary

Tools to make spreadsheets more useful continue to appear. Desktop spreadsheets were designed to be individual productivity tools for ad-hoc analysis, and they work well when used this way. However, most companies also use them for a variety of collaborative, repetitive corporate functions, and in this role their disadvantages appear and quickly multiply. People may be so used to dealing with the difficulties that spreadsheets pose that they are oblivious to the time and money they are wasting by misusing the technology and also may overlook the process limitations desktop spreadsheets impose. Smart DB Corporation's eXpresso offers a means by which people can collaborate using spreadsheets that eliminates most of the headaches and at a price that most companies (even small ones) will find affordable.

### Assessment

Desktop spreadsheets have presented users with a can't-live-with-them/can't-live-without-them dilemma. They are so easy to work with and so versatile that people have been misusing them almost from the start to manage or support a variety of corporate — as opposed to individual — tasks. But spreadsheets have inherent technological characteristics that make them ill-suited for ongoing collaborative activities. These shortcomings manifest themselves in time wasted pulling together data from multiple spreadsheets and checking to ensure that the data is accurate, that formulas have not been altered and that everyone is using the latest version of a file. Another problem is that typically people distribute spreadsheets through e-mail. While handy for ad-hoc exchanges, e-mail presents difficulties for ongoing collaboration because it is always at least one step removed from direct interaction. Consequently, some people who need notification may not be copied, threads may not be complete, corporate retention policies may routinely eliminate e-mail messages and so on.

eXpresso now offers a spreadsheet collaboration facility in a software-as-a-service (SaaS) mode that addresses many of the above shortcomings. To begin collaborating, people create communities and upload spreadsheets via the Web to a server. The owner of the community selects members and designates which of them have access to all or just parts of a spreadsheet. Members exchange information, questions and comments through a built-in chat feature, and the software saves these chat messages with the spreadsheet so that even months later it is easy to see why some data changed. If a specific cell or cells change, eXpresso alerts designated users of that spreadsheet. It offers native Excel capabilities but stores data in an SQL database, which makes rolling up data from multiple spreadsheets into a consolidated view considerably easier. In a collaborative session, anyone with the appropriate editing rights can establish a breakpoint to which it is possible to return quickly after doing what-if analysis. People also can work with the spreadsheet offline when they're unable to remain connected and then upload the changes when they reconnect to the system.

Since people use spreadsheets collaboratively in almost every aspect of a business, there are various potential uses of eXpresso. Moreover, since SaaS applications are hosted on the Internet (and therefore reside outside the firewall), companies can use it to collaborate comfortably with suppliers (such as for tracking production schedules and shipments), customers (such as accountants) and partners (about leads and marketing programs, for instance). The software is priced so that most small businesses can take advantage of its capabilities and departments, and business units of larger corporations can support wide deployments.

### Market Impact

The list of alternatives to the traditional desktop spreadsheet is growing. eXpresso will be going up against Microsoft's Groove as well as Microsoft PerformancePoint, a server-based spreadsheet alternative. While not nearly as functionally rich as the latter, eXpresso is a quick, inexpensive alternative that is easy to set up and use. Since it is a SaaS application, no IT infrastructure is required. In this respect, it reminds us of the original Groove, which Microsoft acquired in 2005. We expect this application and others like it that follow will gain considerable market traction for this reason. To a limited degree, because it takes away some (but not all) of the routine pain points, this software is a challenge to dedicated applications designed to replace spreadsheet-supported processes such as budgeting and planning or compensation management.

### Recommendation

Ventana Research has been advising companies to limit their use of desktop spreadsheets in collaborative, repetitive enterprise tasks. Until recently, this has been all but impossible because the alternatives have been too difficult and/or expensive. Today, there is a growing list of alternatives that are easy (or easy enough) to use and affordable. We recommend that anyone using spreadsheets in any collaborative process look at eXpresso as an alternative to desktop spreadsheets and e-mail.

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