
Social computing - start small, think big

It doesn't have to be a dirty word

By David Tebbutt, September 2009

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Don't be afraid of social networking collaboration tools in the office. Your staff will use them at home, if not in the office, whether you like it or not. Here's how you can make them work for you.

Most people have an opinion about social computing - a term I use to refer to social networking as well as web 2.0 communication tools such as blogging and wikis. 'Dangerous', 'liberating' and 'time-wasting' are three of the most common reactions to using these technologies within businesses.

The problem with such blanket reactions is that they inhibit adoption. If the boss says a technology is a waste of people's time, IT has no choice but to disregard it. Unfortunately, users that want it have no such inhibitions. They will still find ways of introducing it, usually by subscribing to web-based third-party services which cheerfully tunnel through the firewall.

It's better by far for management to give the green light to social computing in principle, allowing IT to exercise a measure of control over the proceedings and, perhaps, limiting its use to certain members of staff.

The main issue behind the decision to adopt social computing technologies is that of command-and-control versus self-organisation. And hidden behind this is the issue of trust.

The workforce and management are moving from command-and-control to self-organisation at different speeds and it will be a source of tension for many years to come. Wholesale change will, in the main, come about slowly. Some say 10 years, some say 50. This week I even heard a podcast in which one pundit - Euan Semple - said it could take as long as a 100 years for the transition to be complete.

Social computing is not just an IT issue, though - it's a behavioural issue as well. If a company decides at a high level that some kind of collaborative computing is required, then certain people within the organisation will respond positively to this. As they infect others, so the culture will shift as a result.

This reminds me of a book called *Viral Change*, in which author Dr Leandro Herrero explains how ideas spread within organisations - and, more importantly, how to make them spread rapidly. Because he has a background in psychiatry and business management, he focuses more on human processes than any IT that underpins them. Yet the book resonates well with social computing, although it owes little, if anything, to the subject.

Herrero presents the idea that it is a small minority of people who bring about change and innovation in organisations. These individuals discuss and champion new behaviours - the only things which actually result in new organisational outputs. These people need to walk the talk as well, otherwise others have no behaviours to mimic. They also engage with visible sceptics - if they get them to change, then it gives permission to all their followers to change as well.

Social computing tools such as blogs, wikis, virtual workspaces and instant messaging are an excellent way to support these 'change agents'. They provide both a base for accumulating 'tribal knowledge' and a means of staying closely in touch with each other and others in the organisation. This is particularly valuable in a larger organisation where the champions are separated in time or by geography.

IBM is a case in point. You may have heard about its social networking activities. It embarked on encouraging this kind of technology partly because it thought the company would run better but also as a live test bed for potential products.

It had a bit of a head start with its company directory which already contained staff details. This was migrated into its social networking 'bluepages' profiles. The company has about 515,000 profiles but not all of them engage in social networking activities. As of October 2008, 147,000 people belonged to more than 1,800 communities, more than 320,000 readers visited 25,000 wikis, 62,000 people 'used' 260,000 blogs and more than four million instant messages are written each day.

It's clear that not everyone in IBM is avidly involved in social computing. But the number of participants is certainly large. This is partly because 'recruitment' of new users is the work of a 600-strong team of volunteer champions who, outside their day jobs, encourage and help new users. These volunteers are in turn supported by a paid team of half a dozen or so full time social computing evangelists.

IBM provides a good illustration about Herrero's principles about small numbers of people having a disproportionate effect on other employees' behaviour.

So, rather than having a black and white view of social computing, it would pay organisations to think more in terms of evolution. Start small and perhaps in a high value area and see where it all leads.

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