Outlook
Point of View
December 2013, No. 2

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Companies need their critical workforces to perform smarter, faster and more productively. Achieving that goal requires embedding collaborative technologies deep into processes and incentivizing collaborative behaviors—ultimately transforming the way organizations turn knowledge into action. Collaboration platforms should do more than help employees *talk about* their work; they should create new ways for employees to *do* their work.

Information Technology | Enterprise Collaboration

How collaboration technologies are improving process, workforce and business performance

By Mary Hamilton, Alex Kass and Allan E. Alter

Although collaborative technology solutions have been around for many years they are kind of like Olympic competitors with a slew of silver medals but no golds: high achievers that have yet to achieve their highest aspirations.

Certainly there is no lack of collaboration technologies in the marketplace. Vendors are offering businesses a growing range of these tools, including Facebook-like social platforms such as Chatter, Yammer and Jive, as well as employee crowdsourcing tools such as AnswerHub and Spigit, to the list of collaboration technologies.

And executives are sold on the need for enterprise social technologies to improve collaboration, especially in supporting the work of today's enormous global organizations. A 2013 Avanade survey found that 77 percent of decision makers are using such technologies, and 82 percent of businesses that use collaboration tools want to use even more in the future.

Successful and innovative collaboration solutions are already in place at many companies. Consider consumer products giant Unilever's "Creating Brands for Life" social

media marketing strategy, which aims to turn customers into advocates for the company's brands. Making campaigns like this work requires plenty of coordination between central marketing staff, local teams and external creative talent. That coordination is provided through Unilever's digital platform for social marketing, which enables teams to create their own internal sites where marketers and their partners converse and access marketing materials.

Yet many executives sense they should be getting more value from these tools. According to a 2011 Forrester Research report, 64 percent of executives surveyed said their companies were realizing only a subset of potential benefits from collaboration technologies.

Why have these solutions advanced only to silver-medal status instead of the gold? One sticking point is that they need to do more than just make it easier for employees to share knowledge and communicate; collaboration technologies must help shape how work is performed and enable teamwork that leads to better results, greater innovation and higher productivity. After all, collaboration literally means "working together"—co-laboring, not

just co-talking. As one executive said in the course of our research, "Collaboration tools cannot just be about better knowledge sharing; they need to improve the speed and effectiveness of people's efforts."

How can executives use collaboration tools to truly transform workplace performance? Three strategies can help companies achieve the large gains in productivity, decision making and innovation they seek from these technologies.

1. Embed collaboration technologies within business processes

New collaboration technologies do more than just digitize old ways of doing things; they make new ways of doing things possible. This is accomplished in part by embedding the technologies into the way work is performed so that using them becomes a natural and accepted part of the job. It's also important to set objectives in specific terms related to an industry and to job roles, and to measure results. For example, for an insurance company, the goal of "increasing knowledge sharing" is noble but vague. A better goal would be, "improving underwriters' speed and effectiveness in pricing insurance policies."

Through the use of collaboration technologies that improve the manner in which work is done, companies have achieved impressive results. For example, by sharing experiences and ideas via an online platform, employees in CEMEX's alternative fuels program reduced CO_2 emissions by 1.8 million metric tons per year, saving the company more than $140 million while earning $80 million in sales of CO_2 credits. By more readily sharing documents and quickly locating experts to answer questions, sales teams at GE Aviation were able to complete in minutes work that had previously taken more than one week.

Collaboration technologies can also provide guidance about how particular processes can be optimally performed to improve quality and increase productivity. For example, "social workflow platforms" provide a collaborative environment that can guide groups through an optimized and standardized workplan, with roles, tasks and templates laid out in advance. Team members can then use the platform to hand off work, conduct discussions, share updates, review checklists and obtain approvals. The platform's tagging, searching and messaging features make it easier to ask for help, locate documents that can be reused and share best practices.

Executives can then use workstream analytics to study how effectively processes are being performed and where they can be improved, and also how well teams are collaborating.

2. Shape the collaborative behaviors that drive results

Simply making collaboration technologies available is not enough. Equally important is engaging in the change management activities that shape, encourage and incentivize desired collaborative behaviors.

Early approaches to incentivizing participation in knowledge sharing often focused on quantity of postings, not quality. Looking for a better way to encourage the use of collaboration tools, EMC Corp., a leading hardware and cloud-based computing company, decided to turn collaborative participation into a game with winners and awards. The company's Jive-powered enterprise social network had grown to 240,000 users within four years, but customers, employees and partners were not using the network as much as expected. EMC implemented a gamification approach to support its Recognition, Awards and Motivation program. Employees win points for completing tasks, answering questions or doing other work on the social network. Employees who complete "missions"—a sequence of relevant achievements—receive awards and corporate recognition for their expertise. The result: a 21 percent increase in total activity, helping to shape behaviors that actually support timely business outcomes.

3. Unleash the full power of enterprise talent

Effective collaboration technologies support not only how people work today but how they will need to work in the future. Increasingly, companies are embracing new operating models in which multiple organizations—the company, its vendors, its outsourcers, its partners and others—work together toward a unified goal. Such an operating model will be successful only if people from the different organizations collaborate effectively.

A related trend has to do with how talent is sourced and deployed. Just as companies' operating models are increasingly built on combinations of organizations, so workforces are becoming combinations of internal, external and contingent employees.

Consider how crowdsourcing and the social web are already enabling firms to hand off some tasks to workers outside the enterprise. Salesforce.com uses LiveOps' "cloud contact center" to deliver global customer support services, which involves tapping contractors who work from home and set their own hours. The platform tracks performance and rewards high performers with recognition, more work and better pay. One advantage of this approach: It allows organizations to scale their customer contact needs quickly to respond to sudden spikes in demand.

In the future, these same concepts and technologies are likely to be applied to more kinds of knowledge work. Take, for example, an automotive engineer in Germany who needs help creating engineering drawings. That engineer could use enterprise collaboration technologies to route a request for help to the company's most relevant intranet sites. A retired engineer in Michigan or a young engineer in Europe could offer to assist, and receive not just pay but a reputation-enhancing public review for completing the job well. Mechanisms like these could help companies quickly and seamlessly plug their skills gaps.

Conclusion: Expecting more

Executives are right to expect more from the new wave of collaborative technologies. Adding social networking and crowdsourcing to collaborative tools provides new potential to improve organizational agility, increase productivity, aid decision making and spark idea generation. Rather than accept just modest improvements from these technologies, executives should aim high and pursue the greater gains that can come by embedding collaboration into specific processes, incentivizing collaborative behaviors and thinking more strategically about these important technologies.

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