

From Talking to Transforming: Getting Real Value from Enterprise Collaboration Technology

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Companies need a workforce that works smarter, faster and more productively. To achieve it they need to embed social collaborative technology deep into processes, use the technology to shape collaborative behavior, and ultimately transform the way organizations find and allocate expertise. Companies don't need collaborative platforms that employees use to *talk about* their work, they need collaborative solutions that create new ways for employees *to do* their work.

Collaboration technology is like the Olympic competitor with a slew of silver medals: a high achiever that has yet to achieve its highest aspirations.

Executives are sold on the need for collaboration and the value of collaboration technology: Surveys of IT and business leaders show 77 percent of decision makers are using social collaboration technologies, and 82 percent of businesses which use them want to use more of them in the future.¹ The need is especially great in today's enormous global organizations.

Vendors have responded with a growing range of enterprise collaboration technologies, adding Facebook-like social platforms such as Salesforce.com, Inc.'s Chatter, Microsoft Corp.'s Yammer, and Jive Software's Jive and employee crowdsourcing tools like DZone, Inc.'s AnswerHub and Mindjet's Spigit to their portfolio of collaboration technologies.²

Some leading companies are seeing broad adoption and quick implementation. Yum! Brands, Inc.'s social collaboration platform achieved nearly 100 percent enterprise-wide adoption rate in less than a year.³

Companies are starting to realize measurable benefits too:

- A Nucleus Research Inc. study found adding social capabilities to CRM systems increases sales staff productivity an average of 11.8 percent—for example, by resolving customer queries faster without hiring more service staff.⁴

The question for leaders is how to pivot from collaborative platforms that employees use *to talk* about their work to collaborative solutions that create new ways for employees *to do* their work.

- Enterprise social platforms are enabling sales teams at General Electric Co.'s GE Aviation business to readily share documents and answer questions, completing in minutes work that had taken over a week.⁵
- By sharing practices and ideas through an online platform, CEMEX S.A.B. de C.V.'s Alternative Fuels employee community reduced CO2 emissions by 1.8 million metric tons per year, saving the company over US \$140 million while earning \$80 million in sales of CO2 credits.⁶

But not all companies can point to results like this from their use of collaboration tools. Employees often use these tools for spreading "nice to know" information, rather than the kind of "need to know" communication that systematically leads to better decisions and higher productivity. As one executive expressed the problem, "Collaboration tools cannot just be about more effective knowledge sharing, they need to improve the speed and effectiveness" of people's efforts. Data also support this concern. As a 2011 Forrester Research, Inc.

survey found, 64 percent of executives said their companies realized only a subset of potential benefits from collaboration technologies. For these companies, the goal of applying the best thinking, regardless of location, to any problem remains a long way off.

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Executives have long promoted collaboration tools by mandating their use, involving users in the vendor selection process, and being champions and users themselves. Those tactics make an impact in the short term, but they rarely bring sustained changes in attitude or behavior.

What's a better solution for the long term? Three strategies can help companies achieve the large gains in productivity, decision-making and innovation they seek.

Embed collaborative technologies into business processes

Companies need clear objectives in mind before collaborative technologies can become seamless – embedded in work processes, rather than left to people to figure out. Such objectives answer such critical questions as: Which specific tasks and processes will benefit most from collaborative technologies? Where is there the potential to create real, measurable gains? For example, “sharing knowledge” is not a clear objective; “improving the speed and effectiveness with which expert underwriters price an insurance policy” is better.

Clear objectives also make it possible to answer: How can new collaboration technologies enable the process changes needed to deliver those gains? Which technologies, if embedded in the new process, will not just enable them but feel seamless – inseparable from the work process, and helpful, integrated and easy for users? Collaboration can only feel seamless when it’s thoroughly integrated in people’s daily tasks.

For example, teams can use new technologies to create a project charter—the document that states the goals, deliverables and members of a project. Project managers often lack a consistent process for writing the charter. But a set of tools called a “social workflow platform” can guide authors through a standardized workplan, with roles, tasks and templates laid out in advance. Team members can 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.

Larger groups and even more complex processes can also embed social collaboration platforms into their work. Consider the Unilever Group’s global “Brands for Life” marketing strategy. These campaigns turn consumers into advocates for the company’s brands through social media. Dove personal care products’ Self Esteem Project uses Facebook to promote its confidence-boosting message to girls and women; home cooks can touch up and show off photos of their creations with the Knorr FLAVOR mobile app. It takes plenty of coordination between central marketing staff, local teams and external creative talent to manage these campaigns. Brand teams use Unilever’s digital platform for social marketing to create their own hubs, internal sites where marketers and their partners converse and access marketing materials. Marketers in headquarters also use the platform to share best practices for social campaigns, and track and discuss their online customer interactions.⁷

Shape collaborative behavior through technology

Collaborative behavior is driven at least as much by mindset and training as by technology. With the right tools, companies can gain insights into how the workforce is collaborating and identify effective and ineffective practices. Social network analysis tools identify personal connections and their strength, providing insights into who interacts with whom. “Workstream analytics” bring to light how collaborative processes are actually being executed, so analysts can identify where these tools are thriving or struggling. Executives can use these techniques to learn: How tight-knit is each team? How seamlessly do work groups interact with each other? Which collaborative patterns bring the most success?⁸

But understanding collaborative behavior is only useful when combined with techniques that successfully change behavior. Turning peer pressure in favor of collaboration, and participation into a game with winners and awards, are emerging as ways to successfully encourage employees to use collaboration tools. Consider EMC Corp., a leading hardware and cloud-based computing company. 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 hoped. EMC implemented a gamification approach powered by Badgeville's technology to develop its Recognition, Awards and Motivation Program. Employees win points for completing tasks, answering questions or doing other work on its social network. Employees who complete "missions" – a sequence of relevant achievements—receive awards and social recognition for their expertise. The result: a 21 percent increase in total activity.⁹

Rethink the universe of talent

New technologies do more than just accelerate old ways of doing things; they make new ways of doing things possible. Over time, collaborative technologies are set to create entirely new ways of sourcing and using talent. People tend to be affixed to particular departments, and regarded as the assets of a particular local group. But collaboration technologies open up the possibility of applying expertise wherever needed.

Consider how crowdsourcing and the social web are already enabling firms to hand off simple, well-defined tasks to workers outside the enterprise. Twitter, Inc. instantly sources thousands of Amazon.com, Inc. Mechanical Turk users from around the world on a pay-per-task basis to improve how it targets advertising based on trending hash tags.¹⁰ Companies can use LiveOps, Inc.'s "cloud contact center" to deliver global customer support services, using independent

contractors who set their own hours and work from home. The platform tracks performance, and rewards high performers with both recognition and more work (and more pay). One advantage of this approach: it allows organizations to scale the customer-contact needs very quickly when there are sudden spikes in demand.¹¹

In the future, these same concepts and technologies will be applied to more kinds of knowledge work. For example, an automotive engineer in Germany who needs help creating engineering drawings could post a request in a company's internal community site. A retired engineer in Michigan or a young engineer in Europe could offer to help, and receive not just pay but a reputation-enhancing public review for completing the job well. Mechanisms like these can help companies seamlessly plug skill gaps or enable the otherwise unemployed, the retired, and others to contribute their talent.

Cultivating collaboration

Moving from collaborative talk to collaborative work will require other changes in how organizations operate – in particular, changes to their management and human resource practices.

- Organizations will need to give employees the time to collaborate, and create incentives to help others. Managers will need to be effective at tracking, crediting and rewarding seemingly small contributions, not just big ones.

- Collaborative technologies can raise employee expectations that decision making will be conducted in a more transparent manner, since they encourage people to share ideas and information and can open up decision making to large groups. They also provide channels for employees to express frustration. Executives should be prepared to justify themselves when they limit decision-making and information sharing to a small circle of top managers.
- In time, companies will need to adjust to a more transient workforce. Employees will be less hesitant to switch jobs when it is easier to find interesting short-term assignments inside or outside their current company. Managers will rely more on their own personal networks and those of their employees to quickly staff short-term projects with trusted professionals. More teams will be a mix of long-term members, short-term assignees, and external contractors. Internal contractor management and recruiting groups will have to accommodate these trends, or risk becoming an obstacle to obtaining the talent they need.

Executives are right to expect more from the new wave of collaborative technologies in return for all this effort. Adding social networking and crowdsourcing to collaborative tools provides new potential to add flexibility, improve productivity, and aid decision making and 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, using new technologies to encourage collaborative behavior, and rethinking how organizations take advantage of talent.

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Notes

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