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Three Steps That Take Collaboration From Talking to Doing

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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 value of collaboration technology. A 2013 Avanade survey of 1,000 IT and business leaders shows 77% of decision makers are using social collaboration technologies.

And companies are starting to realize measurable benefits from these new tools. For example, enterprise social platforms are enabling sales teams at General Electric Co.'s GE Aviation business to share documents and answer questions, completing in minutes work that had taken over a week.

But not all companies can point to results like this. Employees often use these tools to spread "nice to know" information, rather than the "need to know" communication that systematically leads to better decisions and higher productivity. As one executive told us, "Collaboration tools cannot just be about more effective knowledge sharing, they need to improve the speed and effectiveness" of people's efforts.

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 before collaborative technologies can become seamless –embedded in work processes and helpful, integrated and easy to use. Such objectives answer critical questions as: Which specific tasks and processes will benefit most from collaborative technologies? Where is there the potential to create real gains?

For example, teams can use new technologies to create a project charter—the document that states the goals, deliverables and members of a project. A "social workflow platform" can guide authors through a standardized workplan, with roles, tasks and templates laid out in advance.

Larger groups can also embed social collaboration platforms into their work processes. Consider the Unilever Group's global "Brands for Life" marketing strategy. These campaigns,

such as Dove personal care product's Self Esteem Project, turn consumers into advocates for the company's brands through social media. 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 and discuss their online customer interactions.

Shape collaborative behavior through technology. Collaborative behavior is driven as much by mindset as by technology. With the right tools, companies can see how the workforce is collaborating and identify effective and ineffective practices. Social network analysis tools provide insights into who interacts with whom. Workstream analytics reveals how collaborative processes are being executed, so analysts can identify where these tools are thriving or struggling.

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.: its enterprise social network had grown to 240,000 users, but customers, employees and partners were not using the network as much as hoped. EMC implemented a program where employees win points for completing tasks, answering questions or doing other work on its social network. Employees receive awards and social recognition for their expertise. The result: a 21% increase in total activity.

Rethink the universe of talent. New technologies do more than accelerate old ways of doing things; they make new ways of doing things possible. Over time, collaborative technologies will create new ways of sourcing and using talent. People tend to be regarded as the assets of a department or local group. But collaboration technologies open up the possibility of applying expertise wherever needed.

Crowdsourcing and the social web already enable firms to hand off simple, well-defined tasks to workers outside the enterprise. Twitter Inc. sources thousands of Amazon.com Inc.'s Mechanical Turk users from around the world on a pay-per-task basis to improve how it targets advertising based on trending hash tags.

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 plug skill gaps and enable unemployed or retired professionals to contribute their

talents.

Moving from collaborative talk to collaborative work will require other changes in how organizations operate.

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. 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. Managers will rely more on their own personal networks and those of their employees to staff short-term projects. 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. Rather than accept just modest improvements from these technologies, executives should aim high, and pursue the greater gains that can come from seamless collaboration, using new technologies to encourage collaborative behavior, and rethinking how organizations take advantage of talent.

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