

Enterprise Social Media – What's in Your Toolbox?



The era of social business is here. Traditional collaborative technologies that are document- and text-centric are no longer sufficient to drive innovation and productivity. Today, leading organisations are making **enterprise social software** – a strategic part of their IT investments to **improve business collaboration**.

Over the past decade, a number of perceptible shifts in the workplace have made the benefits of enterprise social media tools too compelling for businesses today to ignore. First, expectations have evolved. Employees, customers, and partners exist in the world of instant, real-time communications, where immediate access to people and information is the norm. Today’s employees also create and receive information from a host of different sources and formats. While corporate intranets typically house the data that people require, these networks’ search capabilities often fall short in properly connecting the right individuals with the right information. The composition and behaviour of organisational teams are also not what they used to be. Ten to fifteen years ago, teams were largely predefined, based on organisational structure and location. With the rise of globalisation, employees now routinely work with people outside their teams, or from completely different business units, oftentimes on other continents.

All this means that, today, new ways of finding and acting on business-relevant information are essential if businesses hope to keep their employees focused and productive. Many traditional collaboration tools often fall short in adequately supporting new work environments and working styles.

The good news is that technology has risen to the occasion: a new breed of enterprise social software has the potential to revolutionise how people, information, and communities relate to and interact with one another in the workplace.

Mitchell Hershkowitz, Dimension Data’s Americas Practice Manager, Consulting Services, believes that these tools have two key sets of characteristics. The first type aims to replicate the functionality and user experience offered by social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, but affords the

business a degree of control by limiting access to and participation in these forums to employees and perhaps a select handful of partners. The appeal of applications like Yammer lies in their ability to provide users with access to the tools and experiences they’ve become accustomed to, and enjoy, in their personal lives, while retaining a level of privacy and governance. They’re particularly attractive to organisations, which by virtue of regional or national regulations, or industry-specific compliance requirements (for example, financial services and healthcare organisations) are not willing or able to allow access to or participation in public social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter.

Another breed of enterprise social media tool focuses on leveraging public social network in an enterprise-focused manner. Applications such as Cisco’s SocialMiner enable organisations to monitor what’s being said about them in the public domain and respond swiftly to negative commentary or feedback. Organisations can reach customers in real time through the same social network customers themselves are using to communicate, thus improving customer service and loyalty. These tools can help impress customers with responses to concerns or questions, or manage a product problem that could potentially damage the organisation’s brand.

Hershkowitz believes that the value of enterprise social media tools lies in their ability to provide employees with an alternative communications channel, one which most ‘Generation Y’ professionals entering the workplace are familiar with and partial to. While lack of access to social media tools in a business context may not yet be deemed a ‘deal-breaker’ for young professionals evaluating prospective employees, it’s undeniably part of the trend towards expecting more flexible working models and access to consumer tools and technologies in the workplace.

Until they’ve seen social media tools in action, many business decision-makers may be sceptical of claims that these tools can result in productivity gains. However, Hershkowitz believes that when used appropriately, the productivity benefits are compelling.

“Traditionally, your efforts to obtain insight, information or feedback from colleagues or business associates were limited to people you knew. That’s all changed. The ‘power of the masses’

means you have access to individuals beyond your immediate team,”

he says.

“The bigger or more distributed the organisation, the more the value this brings. Employees can share content and experiences, swiftly locate expertise and share their own knowledge and experiences with their peers elsewhere within the business. The most pertinent and up-to-date information is positioned within people’s reach, thanks to the ability to publish, share, rate, search and edit content. The risk of unnecessarily ‘reinventing the wheel’ – recreating content that already exists elsewhere in the organisation – is reduced. The ability to subscribe to activity feeds keeps workers connected to the information and content that they want and need, and filter out what’s irrelevant.”

A word of caution, however: while organisations have an increasingly wide array of enterprise social media tools from which to choose, they need to ensure **thought** and **focus** goes into ensuring they’re effectively deployed and swiftly adopted. That’s because – as with other collaborative tools – employees expect enterprise social media tools to perform at the same level as the consumer social spaces in which they participate. Bear in mind that social media in business extends beyond just blogs and wikis; it includes video streaming and conferencing, team spaces and web conferencing.

“If you’re serious about enterprise social media tools, you need to take a long, hard look at your legacy infrastructure and consider whether it’s geared to meet the needs of advanced collaboration,”

notes Hershkowitz.

“Traditional network infrastructure wasn’t designed to run complex, social networking and real-time applications, and standard management tools weren’t developed to withstand the bandwidth requirements that rich collaboration applications demand.”

Organisations therefore need to adopt a proactive, architectural approach to enterprise social software deployments. It’s also critical, that the initial business decision to make social media tools available within an organisation is one that’s made in fierce alignment with IT. This

will ensure that a technical foundation is laid to support the business requirements and realise the anticipated outcomes of a social media solution.

According to Jeremy Horey, Dimension Data’s Global Consulting Manager for Unified Communications and Collaboration, integration of social media tools into ERP and CRM applications will certainly have bandwidth implications.

“IT managers should look closely at WAN optimisation and bandwidth management when deploying a social media platform. This will ensure that traffic is appropriately prioritised, allowing the most important applications and users priority access to the network’s resources. To do this effectively, you need an understanding of who’s using social media, how often, and from which locations and devices. Attention should also be paid to application monitoring and load balancing.”

Horey believes that identity management also requires a sharp focus. This, combined with an active user education programme, will ensure that any confidential content is protected and not allowed to spill beyond the organisational boundaries.

Regular reviews are also key to ensure that the underlying infrastructure continues to support social media tools which, along with user behaviour, change quickly. Fortunately, many of the more popular enterprise tools on the market feature advanced reporting capabilities which provide IT leaders with visibility regarding

which employees are using social media tools, and insight into which aspects of the solution are most popular or least favoured. This puts IT in a position to plan for network enhancements in a proactive manner.

Failure to prepare for the introduction of social media tools to the enterprise will ultimately erode usage. If social media tools aren’t fast and dependable, employees will simply stop using them – they’ll fall back on traditional communications technologies that perform consistently, but don’t necessarily offer the business benefits associated with social media. User adoption also depends on providing appropriate training and support. If employees are unfamiliar with the interface or lack confidence on how to access and participate in these networks, they’ll be reluctant to interact with them, and adoption will falter.

The collaboration imperative

Enabling rich, fluid collaboration is not only a business objective, it’s also becoming imperative to remain competitive. Today, leadership teams have the opportunity to move toward a more agile and networked organisation by embracing enterprise social media tools that enable an integrated workspace and foster effective collaboration, free of geographic constraints. And while traditional collaborative technologies such as e-mail and the telephone are not going to fall away any time soon, those businesses who believe these tools still suffice are ignoring a persuasive trend – and a wealth of opportunity.

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Popular items inside the enterprise social media toolbox include:

Cisco SocialMiner allows organisations to proactively respond to customers and prospects that use public social media networks, such as Twitter, Facebook, or other forum or blogging sites. It searches multiple social networks to capture public customer postings about a business, organises this content and presents it to the customer care team.

Cisco Quad is named after a college quad – a place of learning – Quad is an enterprise collaboration platform designed to appeal to today’s workforce: social, mobile, visual, and virtual. Quad connects people to the information and expertise they need, knowledge and ideas may be easily shared across the business, and teams collaborate across geographic and organisational boundaries. Quad is designed to work with other collaboration platforms and document management systems that are already on the market, thereby allowing customers to leverage their existing investments.

Yammer is an enterprise social network service used for private communication within organisations or between organisational members and pre-designated groups. Yammer originally launched as an enterprise microblogging service and has evolved to become a full-fledged enterprise social network. Access to a Yammer network is determined by a user’s Internet domain, so only those with appropriate e-mail addresses may join their respective networks.

Microsoft Office SharePoint Server is a web application platform developed in 2001. SharePoint is typically associated with web content management and document management systems, but in fact comprises a much broader platform of web technologies, capable of being configured into a wide range of solution areas.

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