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Social Collaboration Platforms:
Why Some Initiatives Fail and Others Flourish

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Summary

Issue

In today's corporate environment, employees have vast networks of colleagues and contributors, some of which they have never physically met. Furthermore, many of today's businesses are constrained by physical location, excessively formal reporting structures, and ineffective means of communicating. Many organizations are turning towards social collaboration platforms as an effective means to increase employee productivity and improve the overall performance of their businesses. Such platforms reach out beyond the confines of traditional tools (i.e., e-mail, instant messaging, and conferencing), encompass others (i.e., corporate blogs, wikis, and intranet sites), and encourage the sharing of content and ideas in an easy and social way. Harnessing the collective knowledge of contributors (without creating another collaborative silo or causing information overload), social collaboration also provides the capability for people to filter through the traditional overwhelming sources of communication, turning information into meaningful insight and action. Specifically, such platforms offer HPR professionals an ideal tool for the clear communication of workplace policies and a means of reinforcing organizational values. However, although the choice of technology platform is extremely important, this alone will not bring about the necessary changes to make an organization agile and responsive to ever-changing demands. The value of social collaboration is directly linked to its level of adoption, coupled with the right style of corporate culture.

Key Takeways

> Organizations looking to achieve a competitive advantage utilize social collaboration to connect people effectively and efficiently, capitalizing on the wisdom of the collective business.

> Social collaboration has the potential to radically modify traditional communications by improving an organization's ability to search for, discover, and promote content, knowledge, and information.

> To achieve and sustain a successful deployment and subsequent adoption, social collaboration tools require a cultural commitment, cross-organizational participation, and top-down executive sponsorship.

Perspective

Current Perspective

Social collaboration has the potential to radically modify traditional communications by improving an organization's ability to search for, discover, and promote content, knowledge, and information. This is further enhanced by harnessing the complex network of relationships that employees, contingency staff, partners, and customers develop during their daily interaction. Recognizing that an organization's greatest asset is its people, there has been a renewed focus on placing more value on human capital; indeed, this is paramount, as decreased birth rates in industrialized countries and the retiring baby boomer generation have led to a potential labor shortage for qualified workers. Consequently, companies are looking to social collaboration platforms as a means to capture institutional knowledge; furthermore, as recruitment and retention have both a practical and financial impact to businesses, organizations are also looking to measure the effectiveness of employee on-boarding, training programs, and employee contribution. Utilizing analytics and tools such as 'gamification' (motivating participation through the reward of points or badges) and social graphs (mapping people and their relationships with others), organizations can measure progress, take corrective action, and drive greater engagement.

Corporate intranets oftentimes fall short in terms of their effectiveness, as access, control, and management have notoriously made them frustrating to use and typically inaccessible via devices such as smartphones and tablets. Indeed, intranets typically become the domain of a limited number of experts, while a silent majority of disengaged employees fail to share their content either due to the shortcomings of the technology or because it becomes yet another information silo to check.

Consequently, organizations are deprecating features (while retaining and integrating functionality such as file storage), or replacing intranets in favor of social collaboration platforms. Although social collaboration is sometimes purchased to address specific needs of departments or for particular use cases, its greatest value is realized when there is cross-organizational participation, alongside executive sponsorship and IT guidance. Specifically, HR can benefit from social collaboration in the following way:

Examples Use Cases

Posting of corporate policies and vacancies.

Identifying and recognizing employee contribution.

Employee on-boarding.

Managing training assets.

Reshaping of corporate culture.

Communicating and encouraging change in employees.

Potential Benefits

New hires can self-serve and become more productive quickly (i.e., faster on-boarding).

Employees can provide and receive direct feedback; HR can readily assess the impact of their departmental initiatives.

The introduction of new engagement and motivation techniques to work towards organizational goals.

Recognizing that social collaboration tools need to be usable in ways that cause minimal disruption to people, processes, and existing solutions, there are other areas to consider when looking to drive successful enterprise social adoption:

Adoption is higher in organizations that demonstrate a culture of trust, where decisionmaking is distributed (as opposed to hierarchical), where there is a shared sense of purpose, and where people can act on their own initiative.
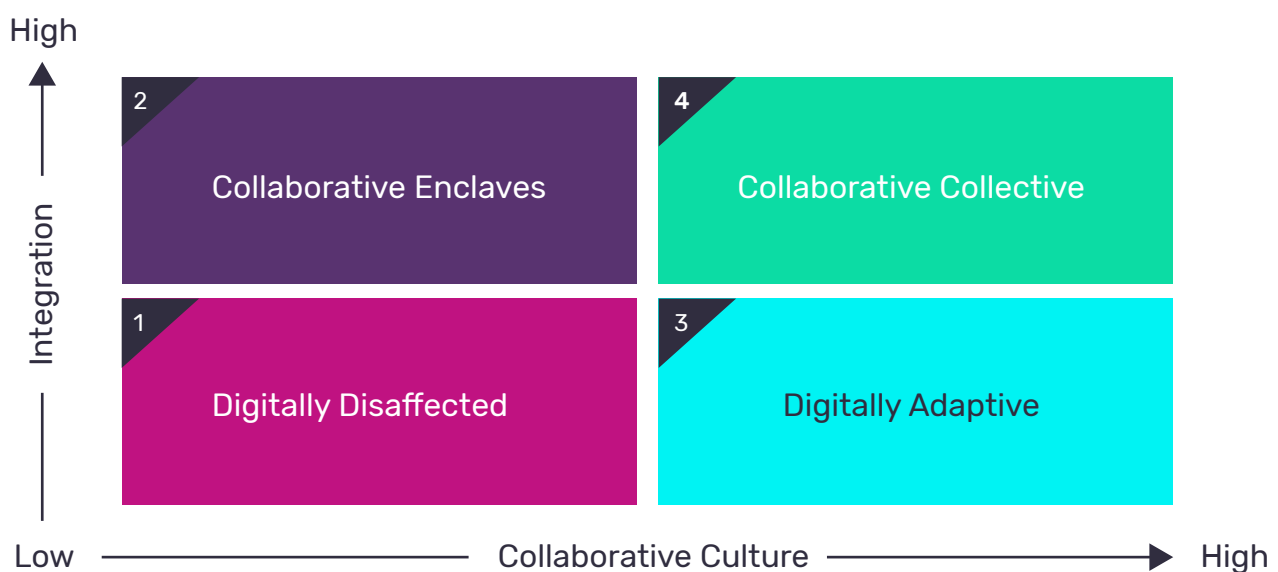
Executive co-sponsorship from different parts of the organization helps to circumvent internal politics as well as accelerate adoption by having the buy-in of key personnel from the beginning. Such executives can motivate the organization, encouraging engagement through the platform by regularly interacting with employees.

Technology can help people collaborate, but only when people adopt it based on their terms.
Social collaboration can provide better options for communication; however, they need to be usable in ways that cause minimal disruption to the way staff choose to work.

The Importance of Integration

Social collaboration serves to unify existing applications, turning them from disparate and isolated silos into a network of socially enabled sources that can be utilized and shared across the organization.

Where integration capabilities meet or clash with corporate culture, a variety of employee dynamics occur that will lead towards either the successful adoption or failure of social collaboration initiatives. These dynamics are highlighted in the framework below:

High

Integration

| 2 Collaborative Enclaves | 4 Collaborative Collective |
| 1 Digitally Disaffected | 3 Digitally Adaptive |

Low ——— **Collaborative Culture** ———▶ **High**

1. Digitally Disaffected

Highly structured organizations (where employees have specific authority and collaboration is controlled by rules and procedures) are unlikely to benefit from the deployment of enterprise social tools, as such tools aim to flatten hierarchies. Hierarchical bureaucracy leads to an organization that is typically slow in recognizing the need for change and in which employees become disengaged. Such disaffection is likely to result in an uptake of shadow IT adoption (unsanctioned use of applications and cloud-based services) and/or issues in employee retention.

2. Collaborative Enclaves

As previously suggested, bottom-up adoption is typically born out of frustration when the culture of the company stymies collaboration. When freemium or low-cost services are adopted in an organization, collaborative enclaves are formed. While social technologies provide organizations with a new approach to identifying, utilizing, and sharing information, they also need to respect corporate requirements, such as management, security, and compliance considerations. Once enclaves exist, it becomes difficult for organizations to regain governance.

3. Digitally Adaptive

Where integration options are lacking and an individual's work preference is not respected, social collaboration initiatives will need to focus on changing an employee's established behavior and retooling. In a digitally adaptive environment, the culture of the company is supportive of open communication and collaboration, but the chosen platform forces employees to change their existing way of working and relearn new ways of engaging with the organization. Such an approach may overwhelm some employees or cause consternation as the platform is seen as yet another place to communicate in isolation.

4. Collaborative Collective

In organizations where rules and bureaucracies are kept to a minimum (specifically, where the emphasis is on 'getting the job done'), social collaboration platforms provide a central hub where collaboration and communication can easily flow from the top-down, bottom-up, and horizontally across the organization. Such collaboration is greatly enhanced when contributors are able to utilize the tools and applications with which they are familiar through integration. By honoring an individual's set of preferences for how they chose to work, it is less likely to disrupt workflow and the subsequent productivity of an employee.

In summary, traditional communication silos are increasingly transforming into horizontally integrated layers through the adoption of social collaboration platforms. Organizations that collaborate more effectively are more likely to achieve competitive advantages over those companies that do not have the right corporate culture or technology platform. The right platform investment (properly implemented) will provide the opportunity to create and share actionable insights in the right business context quickly and efficiently.

Recommended Actions

User Actions

Buyers should assess where they are likely to fit within the collaboration framework and select solutions based on their employees' preferred work styles; consequently, companies with a high culture of collaboration should ascertain the degree of integration potential solutions support to ensure widespread adoption within the organization.

To support an increasingly mobile workforce, buyers should consider solutions that offer the ability to stay informed and collaborate via an employee's device of choice; furthermore, buyers should look for platforms that support the broadest range of operating systems and endpoints.

Buyers should consider their favored deployment method: premises-based, private cloud, or public cloud. Those organizations with concerns over data security, privacy, and sovereignty should seek assurances from prospective vendors or consider a premises- based implementation.

Cloud-based services provide a low barrier to adoption and, in most cases, can be simply deployed with minimal involvement from IT and at low cost. Organizations should look to vendors that offer trials ensuring that a specific use-case is identified and a wide variety of personnel included in the pilot stage.

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