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The Role of Social Software in Knowledge Management

When describing the value of social software in the enterprise, Headshift's John Mell asks the question, "Do you believe that there is business value in who you know as well as what you know?" (Mell, 2008). Today's businesses are learning the value of knowledge management, but previous top-down paradigms have failed to achieve their goals. The development of social software tools such as wikis, blogs, social tagging, and social-networking tools are offering enterprises a new opportunity to get on the knowledge management bandwagon. Social software in the workplace is changing the paradigm of employee interactions and offering new opportunities for knowledge management.

Social software has been described as, "the use of computing tools to support, extend, or derive added value from social activity" (Avram, 2006). Conventionally this has included such traditional communication tools as email and instant messaging. These traditional communications are typically short-lived and aimed at a known audience while the content of social software leaves a permanent presence and is available to anybody who might look for it. Furthermore, while traditional communication software is social to a certain degree, there is a large distinction between traditional communications software and social software. Email and instant messaging form people into groups with a top-down approach of assigning members while social software uses a bottom-up approach that allows people to organize themselves into organic networks based on their individual preferences (Avram, 2006). Tools such as blogs and social networks allow people to form

their own groups and freely join new groups as they see fit. It is this ability to shape a network from the bottom-up versus the top-down that is the real difference between social software and traditional communication software.

Social software is making its way into the workplace and is transforming the way groups of people interact. Social software provides people with their own voice within the business and creates a diverse body of thought and opinion to stimulate knowledge sharing and idea generation. More than that, it involves a degree of social interaction and has a fun-factor that makes it more appealing to use than previous approaches have been (Avram, 2006). As IBM's Luis Suarez remarked, "This is what is going to bring KM back into the spotlight because it allows businesses to place their focus where it should have been from the beginning - not on the tools, not on the processes, but on the people" (International Business Machines, 2007).

The old paradigm of knowledge management was a top-down model that commonly exhibited aspects of what Davenport, Eccles, and Prusak called the Monarchy model of information politics. Under the old paradigm it was common for upper management to dictate what information would be collected, how it would be collected, and who would have access to it, which closely matches the Monarchy model (1992). As Suarez noted, "KM was pushed down on people by management intent on amassing intellectual capital, and it was an extra job" (International Business Machines, 2007).

Furthermore, the old approach to knowledge management focused on documenting explicit knowledge and amassing it as intellectual capital (International Business Machines, 2007). Little attention was spent on tacit knowledge. Boyd stated that, "Until recently, most of the KM efforts were focused on the creation of central knowledge repositories,

encouraging knowledge reuse and collaboration based on these repositories, in a typical top-down approach where knowledge was seen as a separate entity” (Boyd, 2005). Social software takes a dramatically different approach by connecting people to other people with the expertise they need at the moment. Ten years ago, IBM created a new type of internal directory they called “Blue Pages”. Now known as Profiles and part of the Lotus Connections suite, it lets employees create rich personal profiles containing information on each person’s skills, interests, and more. By allowing users to search the directory by the type of knowledge they are seeking, IBM has created a social software system that empowers employees to rapidly find subject matter experts and tap into their tacit-knowledge. As one IBMer put it, “One thing I really like is that I can find all these people without having to know which teams or groups they're in. To me this 300,000+ person organization feels like a small company” (International Business Machines, 2007).

Blogs and social networks are excellent tools for allowing people to quickly find the knowledge they need. As Avram said, “Weblogs, wikis and social networking sites have as core purpose knowledge sharing” (Avram, 2006). Blogs allow users to document their knowledge or experience on a particular matter in a format that is easy and fun for them to use. These blogs can then be accessed again by the author or found by others within the organization for their own use. Furthermore, blogs promote conversations across divisions and can serve as a starting point for new networks based on mutual interest. Speaking of their internal blogging system, IBM claimed that such widespread interaction on focused topics increased knowledge sharing, idea generation, and collaboration throughout the enterprise (International Business Machines, 2007). When speaking about his experiences blogging at IBM, Suarez said the following, “In the almost four years I've been using blogs

I've gotten to know two to three times the number of people I knew in the six years when I wasn't blogging, even though I've gone from working in the office surrounded by colleagues to working at home in the middle of nowhere" (International Business Machines, 2007). This social phenomenon can be leveraged within a business organization to breakdown barriers between different divisions and enhance collaboration and communication throughout the entire enterprise.

Social tagging is presenting itself as another useful tool for finding and sharing knowledge throughout an organization. Traditional intranets and knowledge management systems rely on massive document archives that often lack an easy method for finding specific content. Social tagging software like Del.icio.us or IBM's Dogear, part of the Lotus Connections suite, can help make content easier to find by empowering users to categorize content themselves. More than that, social tagging promotes the sharing of knowledge and exploration of new ideas. By associating tags with the person who made them, employees can make connections to other employees who share similar interests (International Business Machines, 2007). Furthermore, by following the tags of employees with similar interests this type of social software promotes the dissemination of new knowledge throughout a network of peers with like interests.

While social software is already offering many promising opportunities for today's enterprises, it is still a relatively new and rapidly evolving field with many new innovations and potential pitfalls. One of the best features of this new field is the ease with which users can develop new uses and new models for the various social software packages (Avram, 2006). However, that also raises a potential problem in that the plethora of new features threatens to overwhelm users. Ease of use is one of the key factors that has made social

software so popular. Organizations must be careful with the features they choose to use in order to avoid overwhelming their users with features and consequently reducing the usefulness of the social software.

One potential source of resistance to this emerging trend may be managers and executives entrenched in the concept of top-down hierarchical structures of knowledge management. Such managers who have yet to come around to this new way of thinking may resist giving over such a high degree of control of the organization's knowledge content to others. Another challenge to overcome with social software is the urge for management to force its use upon the firm's employees. Often times, executives will be faced with the desire to make the use of such systems mandatory in order to capture as much value out of the new systems as possible. However, it is important not to force the use of such systems upon employees. Avram noted that, "Making the use of this kind of tools(sic) compulsory in companies will probably take the fun factor away" (Avram, 2006). Eliminating the fun and social factors from such systems defeats the entire purpose. Making the use of these systems mandatory changes the fundamental experience from one of fun and social interaction to just another required job function. Reducing the very activities that capture and generate knowledge to a common job function eliminates much of the spontaneity and creativity that give these social systems their value in the first place.

Human beings are social creatures, and as such it, only makes sense that the best way to capture and preserve their knowledge is to use a social system. The bottom-up approach to knowledge management enabled by social software offers a completely new paradigm for managing the highly valuable tacit knowledge resources in today's organizations. While many organizations still resist giving over the type of content control

to employees required by social software systems, the bottom-line is that these systems and methods offer today's organizations the best chances of preserving and perpetuating the knowledge they have today into the future.

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